

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. I have learned a lot these past few weeks, especially from the podcast, from, Luke Kemp this week, and, Reed Meloy and Nancy McWilliams on Psychopathy. And I want to kind of integrate that into something that I didn't understand about what I refer to as the global human economic Superorganism.

[00:00:27] If you're like me. And if you follow this channel, many of you probably are, you often, or constantly, experience some cognitive dissonance, looking at your friends and your own values and your community and your feelings and the things you care about. And contrast that with the headlines of our crazy polarized, dystopian functional, dysfunctional world.

[00:00:57] headed for all the things that we imagine there is a delta between who we are as individual humans and who we're expressing ourselves as a global species. So today I want to talk about the median human, the mean human, and the predators, and. My thesis, on its surface, is depressing, but just underneath the surface is actually quite hopeful.

[00:01:32] At least I found it. So, I'm going to start with some definitions. Give a little background and set up my thesis and offer some brief. Conclusions on the logic underpinning the economic Superorganism.

[00:02:01] Okay, first with definitions, from the podcast last week. Psychopathy, on Wikipedia is defined by a personality construct, characterized by impaired empathy and remorse, persistent antisocial behavior, along with bold, disinhibited and egocentric. Traits. These traits are often masked by superficial charm and immunity to stress, which create an outward appearance of apparent normalcy.

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[00:02:33] Another definition is predator. An organism that preys on and eats other animals, and a big old asterisk there. This channel is known for its wide boundary perspective. We think of predators as a bad thing with respect to human on human predation, which I'm gonna talk about. But from a wide-boundary ecological sense, everyone watching this podcast is a predator.

[00:03:03] Humans are apex predators. at least writ large and historically, but today we're talking about interspecies predation. The last definitional term is median versus mean. The median is the middle of a distribution of people, or things. And the mean also known as average is you take all the number of people, and divide by.

[00:03:37] the thing, so let's talk about income. In 2022, the median income in the United States was \$40,000. And the mean, or the average was \$60,000. so the media meant that half the people. made more than 40 K, and half the people made less than 40 K, but the mean was much higher because there were some outliers that made 10 million or a hundred million dollars a year that made the mean incomes 50% higher than the median.

[00:04:12] and as you might be thinking ahead, I'm going to apply this same stretching of the tails on. Our behavioral characteristics. Okay. some background and setup, from the Crucible, in the, in Tanzania, the old Divine Gorge, where we all came from, was the environment of ancestral adaptation where for.

[00:04:42] Millions of years, pre homo sapiens and hundreds of thousands of years for our species homo sapiens. We evolved in small bands of hunter gatherers and recent biological research. Highlights the importance of both competition and cooperation in the selection of what traits survived. This is called multilevel selection.

[00:05:13] A famous example, which I've talked about before. David Sloan Wilson was on this show explaining it is, a popular egg sales company in the United

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States hired some evolutionary biologists, to have more eggs laid per cage, and they did this experiment. And they selected the hens that laid the most eggs and then put them all together thinking they would increase their egg production.

[00:05:42] But what ended up happening is the average egg production went down because what they had done was actually selected for aggression. Another variety of that experiment is they combined cooperative chickens together in the same cage and the production per cage went up. So this is an example of switching birds.

[00:06:08] the game theory of hawk-dove, multi-level selection where hawks will outcompete doves. but a group of doves will outcompete a group of hawks. And this explains why in our ancestral time, both competition and cooperation were hardwired. Now with respect to antisocial traits like psychopathy, we learned from last week's episode that around 1% of adult human males are clinical psychopaths, and around one fifth of 1% of adult females. so 1% of adult males is around 30 million. Humans are clinical psychopaths, much, much more than that have traits that lean, psychopathic, or dark triad, but those are subclinical.

[00:07:08] So historically, in bands and villages of our ancestors, face-to-face ties, immediate feedback and kinship curbed, exploiters and psychopaths and callous and high risk strategies were checked by reputation and exclusion and sometimes, banishment. So, what I learned from Luke Kemp's episode, which I had kind of missed, I had talked about the birth of the economic Superorganism is when humans, 10 or 12,000 years ago switched to agriculture and this created storable surplus and Luke.

[00:07:56] Taught me that it wasn't only storable that was important, it was loot. And if it was loot that changed the game theory where psychopaths or very aggressive humans could, make a hawkish choice and steal other people's surplus and hire warriors and shaman and accountants and other occupations.

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[00:08:22] And from that. Hierarchy and the roots of the economic Superorganism were born. I wish my podcast with Reed and Nancy could have been three hours because I had a ton of questions. But I've done some research about what typically happens when you drop one psychopathic actor into a group of humans.

[00:08:46] and, there's a number of things that happen. And then in aggregate, I'm gonna suggest what I think has happened. And number one is that cooperation unravels, I mean, humans are great. Imitators, and most people give as long as others give. This is called, in biology, conditional cooperators.

[00:09:09] And when cheating becomes visible and also goes unpunished, we pull back from this conditional cooperation effort and generosity, and altruism and honesty, ratchet down because of a visible free rider or rule breaker. Disincentivizes Pro-social behavior and the group contributions slide over time.

[00:09:34] This is a well replicated pattern in public goods experiments. The second thing that happens is trust falls and costs go up. So when trust drops, people substitute what once was, reciprocal altruism, with contracts and surveillance and watching their back, which raises transaction and coordination costs in the whole system.

[00:10:02] And Eleanor Ostrom's work. Nobel Prize winning work and ecological economics shows that communities need monitoring and fair sanctioning to keep cooperation afloat. And when those weaken the free rider problem, AKA, the aggressive chicken, increases. Number three is that norms drift via a bad apple dynamic.

[00:10:28] A single persistently negative member in a group can degrade the morale, distract attention, and reduce performance. Kind of like the classic bad apple spoils the barrel, dynamic. Another thing that happens when we drop a psychopath into a group is misconduct can spread by example. Seeing an

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in-group member cheat and get away with it increases others' willingness to bend the rules, and steer towards the competition dynamic of our behavioral repertoire away from cooperation and trust.

[00:11:07] Furthermore, if the person gains authority, and this is widespread in our current, global economic system, the harm intensifies if psychopaths are in leadership positions. Abusive supervision has been linked to lower employee wellbeing, higher burnout, and more conflict because of the toxic triangle of the.

[00:11:30] Dark triad explains how destructive leaders flourish when followers are susceptible, in a conducive environment. And lastly. Something I'm kind of familiar with is there's punisher fatigue and moral injury because a few fair-minded sheriffs step up to confront the behavior, but when they get little backing, they burn out.

[00:11:58] And eventually disengage. We can see this happening in real time, in the United States, and around the world. The group loses its antibodies against the aggressive chicken. so you add a persistent predator to a healthy group. Of humans and two things happen. The average behavioral traits shift because outcomes get pulled by the tail and the median.

[00:12:27] The midpoint slides towards less pro-social behavior because decent people then adapt with less trust, more guarding, fewer contributions, and this is happening now. So, humans are not angels, nor are we devils. But in large numbers, our personalities and traits form a distribution and most people cluster around reciprocity and fairness.

[00:13:01] Last night I was driving home and I had my brights on and I forgot about it and someone flashed their bright lights at me. I will never know who that person is, but there are these shared social agreements that we generally trust and are kind to other people. Reid said that 1% of adult males are.

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[00:13:21] Psychopaths because in our history, there were times in the evolutionary bottleneck that we needed predatory expertise, that there was no empathy, and they were good at hunting and Machiavellian, and it's been in the gene pool, but at small population sizes. It was. Managed. So now there's this thin tail of our modern population that is comfortable with deception, low empathy for outgroups and ruthless reward seeking.

[00:13:53] And this has had an enormous impact on our structures, incentives, and social organization. The good news, if you're waiting, at least it's, I perceive it as good news, is our baseline as human individuals. Is better than our current headlines. As a culture suggests the norm for most people, the world over is still reciprocity.

[00:14:21] We returned lost wallets. I was in Helsinki a few years ago and I left my wallet at a chicken sandwich shop in a giant mall. I left my wallet with like several hundred dollars, my passport, my credit cards and everything. Someone from that restaurant tracked me down in the shopping mall and said, sir, you lost your wallet.

[00:14:46] We returned lost wallets. We. Coach, youth sports teams, we help after storms, we turn our brights off when we see a car come in, et cetera. The median behavioral traits of humanity have not vanished, but they've been outcompeted by structures that amplify the behaviors of the tail. And if rules and structures change, the mean could snap back quickly to the medium.

[00:15:18] So the thesis is this: combine large numbers of humans plus surplus, plus drop in 1% of adult males being psychopaths. And you get something that looks like. An economic Superorganism globally and in ultra social hierarchies, short time horizons, plus the hunger for status, plus low empathy, plus comfort with harming outgroups can be and has been adaptive for the actor, for the individual human especially, where there's been a delay in feedback.

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[00:15:56] Even if only a small minority behaves this way, selection and amplification means outsize influence at key choke points in our social systems like finance, media, politics, security, and on large tech platforms, moral, emotional, and novel content spreads. Faster, we're beginning to learn this falsehood, outruns truth and small numbers of manipulators behind those tech can enormously tilt the public narrative and the policy agendas away from the median human values.

[00:16:37] What we care about and how we express ourselves. And if you have iterations of this and time, we're off to the races. And what it ends up looking like is something like. Today's world. So a small percentage of psychopaths living in a modern world with porous and open borders for behavior, for money, for technology, and both the median and the mean of human behavior shift us away.

[00:17:08] Who. Most of us really are human behavioral traits that did not change overnight or even over centuries that much, but the context did scale. Energy surplus and speed of iterations shifted what has been selected for and amplified. So what to do? Well, of course, I don't know, but the very first thing we can do is not be naive about this dynamic.

[00:17:40] It's very interesting talking with experts about this. More of reality is perceived by non psychopaths. Then psychopaths because psychopaths miss everything. That requires empathy, kindness, and collaborative care because the closest, friendship and bonds a group of psychopaths could ever have is to be frenemies.

[00:18:06] So love makes no sense to a psychopath. They perceive it either as BS or that the person expressing love is an idiot. This, in my opinion, is the Achilles heel and the grand opening for some sort of pro-social future. and maybe an important recognition, for us as a species, because non psychopaths engaged in the human predicament can truly understand this.

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[00:18:32] It opens other important doors. I think I'll leave the solutions to this for another episode, or not at all. but here's some initial thoughts. We're not gonna delete the tails. 1% predatory psychopaths in adult males. that's been adaptive. That's pretty much who we are. What we can do is change the gradients and the guardrails so that the median can pull the mean back towards decency.

[00:19:08] So a few just brief suggestions on how we might do that. And again, I'm thinking about this and I would love to hear your thoughts, as I'm learning is I'm. Pulling away the layers of the Superorganism onion. First thing is, select at the right level. So we would have to design institutions to reward team level performance and long horizon stewardship, something that many of the viewers of this program care about, as opposed to just individual, quarterly wins.

[00:19:43] So we would have to start thinking more like the best cage. As opposed to best hen, which our culture currently rewards, leading to status reframing, we can't remove status drives from who we are. This is part of our revolutionary heritage, but we can point them at accuracy. In the service of life resilience, we can celebrate people who maintain systems, teach skills, reduce fragility, and have pro-social demeanors.

[00:20:16] Human traits are always gonna chase status. So we need to point out the status of our social system to what the future of humanity and the biosphere needs. I mean, what is the human version of more eggs per cage? So, In conclusion, I started out as a peak oil guy, and now I'm talking about psychopathy and chickens.

[00:20:43] but I keep delving deeper into what is driving us, what is happening in our system, and what might be some of the pathways that are better than the default. There is a huge difference between who we are. As individual humans and our aggregate human culture, and how it's expressing itself in the world, it may seem like where we are, where we've landed today was inevitable.



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[00:21:13] maybe not. But being aware of this and integrating into our model of reality, in my opinion, is a very important necessary first step towards more benign futures. Perhaps the most important question. Isn't who we are as humans, but rather who we are now today in 2025, doing what we're doing and knowing what we know.

[00:21:42] Lots more to say. Thank you. I'll talk to you next week.