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[00:00:00] **Greg Elliott:** We all have jobs. We all pay debt. We're all familiar with propaganda. These are effectively control architectures. They keep people playing a game that they may not feel is satisfactory, but leaving the game is more costly than staying within the game itself. And so people become entrapped in a game that they didn't design, nor do they want to play in the first place.

[00:00:25] The psychopathic selection hypothesis is a way of understanding why certain harmful trajectories become selected, institutionalized, and difficult to reverse. It explains why we are where we are today and where we can go from here

[00:00:46] **Nate Hagens:** Today I'm joined by the author of The Psychopathic Selection Hypothesis, a new book by Greg Elliott, to discuss how dark triad traits have created a positive feedback loop of incentives in our society, slowly leading us down the path of an increasingly psychopathic civilization. Greg Elliott is a Siemens solutions consultant specializing in data science and artificial intelligence, as well as the co-founder of Orbyfy.

[00:01:21] His research of the psychopathic selection hypothesis led him to found the Institute for Symbolic Selection, an interdisciplinary research program investigating how human-created symbolic systems shape our behavior, institutions, and the long-term evolution of civilization. In this conversation, Greg and I discuss what he calls instrumental behaviors, which include dark triad traits such as psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism.

[00:01:55] Specifically, Greg explains how game theoretic dynamics and the growing scale of human society have given advantages to humans who possess these traits, especially during the agricultural revolution and then again with the rapid expansion of fossil fuels in the last 200 years. Greg's research further probes into how winning the game has allowed psychopathic individuals to slowly change the rules of the game itself, increasing the incentive for everyone else to also be forced to behave more psychopathically in order to survive.

[00:02:35] This was a pretty dense and technical topic, but the core dynamic that Greg lays out rhymes with the core of the logic and the story that we've been telling on this website. During the episode, Greg also references several game theory concepts, and for those unfamiliar with game theory, we will link to some learning resources in the description, which I recommend you take a look at.

[00:03:04] This was another eye-opening contribution to The Great Simplification. Please welcome Greg Elliott, welcome to the program.

[00:03:16] **Greg Elliott:** Hey, Nate. Great to meet you. Great to connect.

[00:03:18] **Nate Hagens:** So you are a systems theorist and an independent researcher who is focused on the intersection of game theory, evolutionary biology, and institutional analysis, which led you to recently write the book, The Psychopathic Selection Hypothesis.

[00:03:39] Boy, that should be a bestseller. Recently, we had Nancy McWilliams and Reid Meloy on the show, where they spoke about psychopathy and dark triad traits at the level of an individual human. And the reason I invited you to this platform is to build on that. I wanna talk to you about our civilizational selection of psychopathic traits and what happens if civilization itself becomes psychopathic, if that's possible.

[00:04:12] I mean, I have tons of questions, but I'd like you to start, maybe walk us through the idea from the ground up. What do you mean when you say psychopathy is being selected for at a civilizational scale? And you-- can you maybe tell us how you first arrived at that framework and model?

[00:04:28] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, Nate, no, it's a fantastic question, and obviously it's a question I've been getting a lot.

[00:04:33] You know, this is something I've been working on for about five or six years. I recently published the book, back in May, and, yeah, I'm super grateful for all of the attention that it's been getting. You know, for example, Professor William Reece has been endorsing the work, and Bill and I have become pretty, pretty close friends.

[00:04:55] **Nate Hagens:** I've known Bill for twenty-five years. He's been on this show as well.

[00:04:59] **Greg Elliott:** He's a great guy. And, so, you know, gr- again, grateful to Bill. And then obviously I've been sort of connected with, you know, Professor Zak Stein. But, you know, I think the kickoff, you know, the psychopathic selection hypothesis, you know, really came out of, I think for me, just a lived experience, right?

[00:05:17] And I... A- and one of the things about my background is I spent, you know, many years working in financial markets. and I became fascinated by the relationship between, you know, the sort of the intersection of, you know, personality or behavior, power, and, and I think, you know, a lot of books I've read, Manufacturing Consent and so on and so forth, and really thinking about an institutional, selection, right?

[00:05:42] So I, you know, and I, wanna be very careful because, you know, I'm not suggesting I was, you know, when I was working in banking that I, you know, I was clinically diagnosing anyone as a psychopath. But I would say it's probably the lived experience of people who worked in that environment that I repeatedly encountered what I would define as behavioral profiles that seemed, sort of unusually well adapted to the competitive environment, right?

[00:06:10] **Nate Hagens:** It's why I left twenty-five years ago.

[00:06:13] **Greg Elliott:** So we have that in common. And so what I'm saying is this behavioral profile could, you know, be argued that there was a lot of emotional detachment, a lot of grandiosity, you know, sort of this, this intense status and reward seeking You know, impression management, and, you know, these are the things you probably, you know, know already, Nate, but v- you know, virtue signaling and things like that, right?

[00:06:37] So I think what really kind of stood out to me was that, people displaying these characteristics or these traits, if you wanna call it the phenotype, often seem to kind of rise in the ranks. There were obviously deeply empathetic people who rose as well. But it made me kinda wonder, okay, what if certain behavioral profiles are just better adapted to acquiring the rewards that determine who rises inside, you know, particular, institutional environments?

[00:07:06] And I think this is where... You know, I've read a lot of books, you know, artistic books. You know, one of my favorite books is The Grapes of Wrath. And, you know, I think I'm gonna use this as an analogy, but I think John Steinbeck articulates another part of what I'm talking about very beautifully in The Grapes of Wrath, right?

[00:07:23] So I mean, just to set a level for anybody who hasn't read the book, I'd highly suggest you go and read it. But, you know, the novel follows the Joad

family. You know, they're basically Oklahoma, tenant farmers displaced during the Great Depression. They travel, you know, to California looking for work, and instead encounter, you know, all the things that went along with the Great Depression, which is, you know, poverty, exploitation, and, what you could call, you know, concentrated economic power.

[00:07:53] And the point I'm bringing-- why I'm bringing this up is there's this remarkable scene, where the tenant farmers are being forced, from their land, and they're desperately trying to figure out who's responsible, right? Like, who made this decision? Who do we go and pick a fight with, right?

[00:08:12] And, what's interesting is that the responsibility in the book keeps disappearing into the institution. And so one of the quotes that I really love, and I actually incorporate in my book, it's, that, "The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster." Right? And for me, that's profound because it articulates something, you know, many of us feel, but I think have difficulty, you know, assigning a vocabulary or putting that into words.

[00:08:39] so at the end of the day, human beings, we create institutions whose aggregate behavior can become detached from the emotions and the intentions and the values and the norms and the beliefs of the individ- vidual human beings inside them, right? And I think that's powerful. and so anyways, long story long, that led me to this much older kind of philosophical question, right?

[00:09:01] And I think we've been wrestling with this question for a long time. But where does tyranny actually come from? What are the governing dynamics, right? We, you know, we've spent thousands of years describing literally, tyranny morally and politically, and so for me, I wanted to understand it from a governing dynamics perspective.

[00:09:22] **Nate Hagens:** Could you briefly define tyranny just so we're on the same page?

[00:09:26] **Greg Elliott:** Tyranny, I think for, me at least, my understanding of tyranny is, almost like this, asymmetric, positioning where one side of the equation has all of the power, all of the status, all of the domination, and on the other side of the equation are people who are on the receiving end of that power and domination.

[00:09:48] I think, this is my, my take on it, but we've spent thousands of years kind of describing tyranny philosophically, morally, you know, even politically. And I wanted to understand, again, why does domination repeatedly emerge in civilization or what I call symbolic systems, which I'll talk a little bit about, and why does it become so durable, right?

[00:10:09] And I b– So I started wondering whether tyranny might actually be at least, and this is where we're getting into the book, a selection problem, right? Because we know from evolutionary biology, anthropology, game theory, that reciprocal strategies can be highly adaptive in small groups or tribal systems.

[00:10:30] Reputation matters, interaction repeats, consequences return to the actors who are causing harm and taking advantage of others. Coalitions can, you know, effectively constrain excessive dominance in tribal systems, and I'll talk a little bit about that later as we unpack the model a little bit.

[00:10:48] But, you know, what I do wanna level set doesn't mean that our tribal societies were utopias by any stretch of the imagination, right? but at the end of the day, tyranny was constrained by the topology of, we could call it a game board.

[00:11:03] **Nate Hagens:** And, the size of the game board.

[00:11:05] **Greg Elliott:** The size of the game board, exactly.

[00:11:07] Exactly. and the size of the game board becomes very important as we unpack this, Nate.

[00:11:13] **Nate Hagens:** You don't know much about me, Greg, but so far you're, articulating my own thesis in different words. But please continue.

[00:11:22] **Greg Elliott:** That's really cool. Okay, so it's interesting we're converging on– Yes ... you know, very similar things.

[00:11:26] So.

[00:11:27] **Nate Hagens:** One might say the universe brought us together, but please keep going.

[00:11:30] **Greg Elliott:** Governing dynamics, man. Governing dynamics. That's what it's all about. And, so, you know, going back to the point, you know, like, if we take a look at sort of modern institutional life, right? We see behavioral patterns associated with psychopathy everywhere.

[00:11:45] And I wanna be careful when I say psychopathy, right? Because really I'm talking about the dark triad. I'm talking about Machiavellianism, narcissism, and all of the different traits associated with psychopathy. But I look at it differently. I'm talking about it as a computational architecture, which we'll talk about later, right?

[00:12:02] So when I say that, take it with a grain of salt. But, you know, let's go back to the point. Imagine a company you know, eliminates 10,000 jobs on a, you know, let's take, it's, what is it? Thurs– a Thursday morning because, you know, the numbers aren't particularly good enough, right? One of those people has, you know, worked there for 25 years.

[00:12:24] His wife has cancer. He has two kids. He's got a mortgage. He's got car payments. His entire family's economic security depends on that income. None of that necessarily enters– enters the institutional calculation or the calculus, right? On the spreadsheet, he's headcount. you know, his salary– Yeah ... eh, it's an auto– it's an operating cost.

[00:12:47] eliminating his po– his position improves the symbolic number, right? Maybe he gets another month's salary. He doesn't get a meaningful package. He doesn't get any continuing financial support, right? But the institution has terminated its obligation to him, right? it's asymmetric. but his obligations on the other hand, on the other side of the equation, they haven't terminated, right?

[00:13:11] His mortgage doesn't pause. You know, his car payments, they don't pause. His wife doesn't stop having cancer.

[00:13:19] **Nate Hagens:** So from an economic perspective, this makes complete sense, but from a psychological perspective, you've just described institutional psychopathy.

[00:13:28] **Greg Elliott:** Exactly. And th– this is something I talk about in my book about institutional mirroring, right?

[00:13:33] So what that means is the system is performing empathy symbolically– Mm-hmm Instrumentally, right? And you see another version of this in, let's say, here's another example, global supply chains, right? At one end, we see a beautiful phone, you know, an EV, an electric vehicle, a piece of clothing, you know, clean branding.

[00:13:58] You've got sustainability reports, you know, you've got, you know, smiling employees, "Hey, this is a great place to work." And then, you know, meanwhile, thousands of kilometers away, another human being might be working

under dangerous or coercive conditions. children or-- might be involved in some level of slavery, mining cobalt, for example.

[00:14:22] Toxic waste, you know, can enter a river, because treating it properly is expensive and it costs money. It hits the bottom line, right? And so communities and ecosystems can absorb the consequences that the people receiving the financial war-reward, will effectively never actually experience, right?

[00:14:44] And, so what-- l- you know, when we look at that supply chain example, like kinda look at the thread, right? If you wanna call it a thread. So you have a human being who becomes kind of an input, becomes labor. Suffering becomes, you know, kind of a cost metric or risk, right? A mine becomes a supplier. A, a, poisoned river is something that's, you know, it's, a thousand miles away.

[00:15:07] Who cares, right? A mineral becomes an inventory. and then all of this kind of flows into the objective function, which is revenue, right? And so by the-- but at the end of the day, by the time it reaches the balance sheet, you know, the worker could be dead. the child could be, you know, starved. The river has been poisoned, and thousands of fish are now dead, right?

[00:15:29] the animal has passed away. So the, the, you know, what I'm saying is the physical consequences haven't actually dis- disappeared from material reality. They've disappeared from what's actually being represented symbolically, right? So what I'm saying is that the same institution can tell us how much it cares, right?

[00:15:51] It can publish a sustainability or a sustainability report. It can talk about purpose and community. It can advertise itself as changing the world. And what does this actually begin to look like behaviorally? Emotional detachment from consequence, strategic misrepresentation or lying, impression management the

deferring or external externalization of harm, the instrumental treatment of people, animals, and the environment, dominance, reward-seeking, grandiosity, and, like I said before, just outright pathological lying

[00:16:31] **Nate Hagens:** What you just described probably is obvious to many of our listeners.

[00:16:36] It actually rhymes quite a bit with a frankly that I'm, my little Friday monologues that I'm putting together called The Anatomy of the Superorganism, where there-- the, the global economic system, it functions like a body, and there's blood, and there's, organs, and there's breathing, and it cares about its own survival.

[00:17:03] And so things like AI and military and the currency markets and the bond markets and energy access are way more relevant to its survival than the well-being of people or the health of ecosystems. And what ends up happening is the bond market is relevant today, and a coral reef or a whale doesn't even register because there's nowhere for it to register.

[00:17:30] So I think you're kinda saying the same thing.

[00:17:32] **Greg Elliott:** It's the decoupling, right? And maybe this is a good area to maybe kind of unpack the theory itself

[00:17:38] **Nate Hagens:** In layman's terms, please.

[00:17:40] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, and I'm gonna keep it simple, but the broader question I'm actually trying to get at is what happens to adaptation, fitness, and selection when human competition and coordination become mediated through symbolic systems of our own creation, right?

[00:17:57] And by symbolic systems, I mean markets, corporations, financial institutions, political systems, legal systems, religions, bureaucracies, you know, te- technological platforms.

[00:18:08] **Nate Hagens:** And internet and algorithms too, you would include, right?

[00:18:11] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, and that's part of the, some of the things I talk about in, the framework is the implications to AI, safety.

[00:18:18] And so these symbolic systems are, you know, essentially human-created game boards, right? systems of rules, incentives, information, constraints. you know, I'll talk about what I mean by objective functions, but rewards, penalties, that essentially organize human behavior itself. and, once those systems become consequential enough, they become adaptive environments in their own right, right?

[00:18:47] And so what I'm particularly interested in is how selection changes as we move from adaptation primarily within the biological and ecological substrate, AKA Darwin, Dawkins, Sloan Wilson, into adaptation within a symbolic substrate layered on top of the biological reality we depend on.

[00:19:08] **Nate Hagens:** So right there, it's multilevel selection because it's not just genes and individual phenotypes.

[00:19:14] There's a substrate that they're part of.

[00:19:17] **Greg Elliott:** Exactly. So if I'm gonna interact with you repeatedly, helping you today can pay off because you may help me tomorrow, right? In repeated games, again, I'm getting into game theory here, more broadly,

reputation matters. So you and I in a small tribal system, you know, we're getting to know each other, right?

[00:19:36] I mean, through repeated interaction, like if you exploit me, that's a bad thing, right? You wanna, you know... So cooperation becomes a little adaptive there, right? So future encounters matter, defection or exploitation in the broader sense or cheating, things like that can be punished, and cooperation be-- can ultimately become stable over time, right?

[00:19:56] **Nate Hagens:** But what if, like you just said, the boundary conditions, they had turned off the repeated iteration, re-re-- like I'm not gonna see this person again. Would that have changed the evolutionary stable strategy?

[00:20:08] **Greg Elliott:** It does, because exploitation may actually have a higher payoff.

[00:20:13] **Nate Hagens:** Right.

[00:20:13] **Greg Elliott:** Right? That makes sense.

[00:20:13] So if you-- But, it's the repeated interaction that actually causes, or I shouldn't say cause, but it's one of the factors that actually contributes to s- the stable equilibrium of, cooperation, right? So game theory tells us a lot. It's really interesting. But Christopher Boehm, who's an anthropologist who wrote about this in the early '90s, basically showed that groups co- could actually, actively suppress persistent dominance through, deploying different, what he called anti-dominant strategies.

[00:20:47] and, those strategies are, you know, things like ridicule or ostracism or, coalitionary punishment, you know, name-calling. and in the extreme case, it was the execution of that particular exploitative in-individual. Doesn't mean that

psychopathy didn't have a utility function under various specific conditions in the environment.

[00:21:12] It did, right? But it doesn't scale very well. Exploitation doesn't scale well in small systems, right?

[00:21:17] **Nate Hagens:** Just to refresh, Reid Meloy's comment that about 1% of, male humans are genetically predisposed towards psychopathy, and his theory is that evolutionarily that might have been adaptive despite those situations you just said where someone would be suppressed or muzzled or even executed.

[00:21:40] There were times we needed a better hunter or a better fighter, and so, it was conserved over deep evolutionary time.

[00:21:49] **Greg Elliott:** I agree, and I'm not gonna take this off on a tangent, but I will say that basically I think one of the elephants in the room is to, you know, it's, always is behavior adaptive?

[00:21:59] Is it, you know, do people have an infinite m- menu of options when selecting, with selecting strategies or ways in which they behave? There's a lot of research to support that behavior actually is evolutionary, because behavior co-evolves with the brain, and behaviors actually solve particular evolutionary problems in the environment, and it's a function of the adaptive environment itself.

[00:22:24] Going to that now, in many of the modern symbolic systems, some of those conditions In fact, many of those conditions are inverted, right? So instead of high visibility, you have anonymity or the potential for anonymity, right? Instead of rapid feedback for causing harm, you can have delayed consequences, right?

[00:22:43] So the distance between action and consequences is high. instead of, let's say, strong attribution, so who's causing harm, right? It's hard to find. Y– in, in scaled symbolic systems, it's hard to identify who the person initiating harm is, and it–– because of the ab– the abstraction.

[00:23:04] it's all sort of filtered through bureaucracy and hierarchy, right? And instead of bearing the cost of your own actions as you would in, in, in smaller systems, costs can be externalized across many dimensions, the geography across populations or the social body and even into future generations.

[00:23:25] And also, instead of moderate rewards being embedded in reciprocal relationships, symbolic rewards like money, status, you know, market share, all of these objective functions, can be, concentrated, can be extremely concentrated, in fact. The relative cost of strategy effectively changes in these environments, right?

[00:23:46] Instrumental strategies become cheaper to deploy, and they can actually increase the payoff from deploying those particular strategies based on the initial boundary conditions I just described, right? So for example, strategic deception is easier when the target is a stranger. Exploitation is easier when the harmed population, you know, is way over there.

[00:24:11] Emotional detachment carries less cost when you, know, you never encounter the suffering of, of the person, that is affected by your decision–making, right? And then there's aggressive reward pursuit.

[00:24:23] **Nate Hagens:** Or there's also, because of cheap energy, there is the get out of Seattle or Topeka or Toronto free card. If you burn your relationships you can just fly and move to another city.

[00:24:39] **Greg Elliott:** Exactly. There's anonymity, there's abstraction, right? and again, I think the, the... One of the very, I have to tell you, the most impor- one of the most important conditions of symbolic systems that is dangerous is in tribal systems, you couldn't rewrite the rules of the game. You could to a point, right?

[00:25:02] But in symbolic systems, winners of the game have the ability to rewrite the rules of the game. Again, in tribal society, you can't write, rewrite the rules of thermodynamics. But in symbolic systems, you can rewrite legal frameworks, you can rewrite laws, corporate, you know, corporate documents and things like that, right?

[00:25:23] **Nate Hagens:** But you also can't rewrite the laws of thermodynamics.

[00:25:26] **Greg Elliott:** Exactly, right? We still depend on the material world that this simulation sits on top of.

[00:25:32] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah, I'm jumping two or three steps ahead here. So let me recap wh- Sure ... where we're at right now, is there was a lot of evolutionary biology work that showed that tit for tat, or you cooperate until your opponent defects, is the most evolutionary stable strategy, but there's a bunch of asterisks that have to hold true, and you're saying that our modern culture, for lots of reasons, cheap energy and credit and globalization and large population size, all those things turn those assumptions on their head, and we're actually doing the opposite, which makes the evolutionary payoff to not doing those things and to do psychopathic things actually, diverge from the model of all those evolutionary biologists back in the day?

[00:26:25] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, no, and I'll even, I'll take it even simpler, right? In small tribal systems, Nate, cooperation is stable because exploitation is costly. Exploitative strategies are costly. In scaled symbolic systems, because of the boundary conditions of low probability for detection, low probability for

retaliation, the distance between action and consequence, the ability-- the ability to be anonymous, the ability to rewrite the rules of the game, right?

[00:26:59] Under those conditions, instrumental or st- psychopathic strategies can become cheaper to deploy, and their payoff is higher. So it's under those specific conditions where instrumental strategies become adaptive and selected for in the environment.

[00:27:18] **Nate Hagens:** Okay, so you might not be surprised to hear that I have a ton of questions now.

[00:27:23] So we have this global system now that clearly is exhibiting psychopathic traits, and we'll get to that in a minute. But there are still local tribes and local communities that can function using the traditional cooperation, but they're embedded in the larger structure. So you've got two layers where it's actually working, where there's risks to being a psychopath in your neighborhood, but the whole neighborhood is part of a city and a state and a country in a global system that is psychopathic effectively.

[00:28:01] So how do those two things interrelate?

[00:28:04] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, and so no, it's a good point. I think there's a difference between altruistic cooperation and cooperation that I define as sort of entrapped cooperation. One thing about game theory, typically that you would notice, so we talked a little bit about tit for tat.

[00:28:25] we talk about, you know, the prisoner's dilemma. we talk about hawk doves, you know, maybe the tragedy of the commons and things like that, right? Game theory tends-- the level of analysis tends to be to make a bunch of different assumptions. So those assumptions are typically, that the game is fixed, the rules are fixed.

[00:28:49] the available strategy spaces to everybody involved in the game, are the same, that there's an equal distribution of or probability distribution of executing those strategies. So some of the strategies could be, you know, let's say you and I are playing a game. Well, you can cheat. I can cheat.

[00:29:10] I can exploit. You can exploit. We can cooperate, right? What I'm concerned with at the end of the day is governing dynamics. So where do these games emerge from in the first place?

[00:29:25] **Nate Hagens:** Let me ask you, a s- a really simple question, which some of the viewers might be thinking about right now. The viewers of this program are, intensely, acutely emotionally aware of the unfolding crises we face in the world, whether it's climate or, the early innings of World War III or financial overshoot or poverty and inequality.

[00:29:52] They're gonna agree with everything you've said so far. But why should they care about game theory? Game theory is just some math and such when all these crises are on our doorstep. Why is understanding this important?

[00:30:08] **Greg Elliott:** Well, I think because what it gets to is it, gets to understanding the governing dynamics of why we're headed in a particular trajectory that we're headed, right?

[00:30:20] From a human, from a very specific human behavior perspective, right? and so I think that's why it's important to understand the under- the underlying dynamics so that, once we understand the dynamics, we can start to, strategize around how do we actually change, how do we change the game board to become you know, more pro-social, more cooperative

[00:30:48] **Nate Hagens:** Good answer.

[00:30:48] So go back to where you were then. Sorry to interrupt.

[00:30:51] **Greg Elliott:** Going back to the, I guess the, entrapment question, and when I say entrapment games, there are scenarios in life where, and I think it's anecdotal, right? We all have jobs. We all pay debt. We all watch the news. We're all familiar with propaganda.

[00:31:13] We're all familiar with, you know, what we would call these, these are effectively control architectures, right? They effectively keep people playing a game that they may not feel is satisfactory, but leaving the game is more costly than staying within the game itself, right? And so people become entrapped in a game that they didn't design, nor do they, you know, for the most part, want to play in the first place, right?

[00:31:44] And so the logic here is to explain neuroscience, to get to what the computational profile of a psychopath looks like. What does it look like when, what, what kinds of games can psychopathy produce? Meaning, what types of problems does psychopathy solve in these scaled symbolic systems? And I wanna unpack that because I think it's extremely important because it explains the dynamics.

[00:32:10] It explains why we are where we are today and, potentially what-- where we can go from here. We know that psychopaths have an altered processing for distress and threat. They have what's called reduced effective empathy. They have weak moral learning, they have strong reward sensitivity, and basically a preserved capacity for, you know, planning and social modeling, and a greater willingness to treat others as, as, as objects, and not subjects.

[00:32:48] So basically the capacity to instrumentalize others, right? And I think one of the problems that psychopathy solves, is something I call the target autonomy problem. So basically, in simple terms, if I'm a psychopath and Nate,

you're a pro-social actor, well, if my future reward depends on another autonomous actor, that actor is a source of uncertainty.

[00:33:19] So you can, you know, res- refuse, leave, change your mind, and stop cooperating altogether. And instrumental architecture may solve that problem, not only through cooperation, but through what psychopaths have been gifted, behaviorally, right? So they use, you know, social modeling, they, they-- which everybody socially models, right?

[00:33:44] We, in, in tribal systems, I might model someone else because, you know, they're deploying a strategy that I think is useful, and I copy that strategy. The difference is psychopaths use social modeling instrumentally, right? So their social modeling in the context of psychology means I'm-- Nate, if you're my target, I'm trying to collect data on you to make your behavior predictable.

[00:34:10] So I might ask you very specific questions about, you know, what do you like? What are your aspirations? What are the things that you dislike?

[00:34:17] **Nate Hagens:** And, if you know me in this example really well, then From your predatory psychopath perspective, you've lowered the standard deviation of my future responses, which is better for you

[00:34:33] **Greg Elliott:** Exactly.

[00:34:34] And so, and it's not like they're consciously doing it. It's just part of the repertoire that they deploy. And again, I'm talking about solving the target autonomy problem. So, my goal is to make you behaviorally predictable so that I can- Yeah ... stabilize reward acquisition.

[00:34:49] Right. So what I do is I take my gifts as a psychopath, I deploy, and what I define as computational protocols. So I basically take social modeling,

represent it mathematically, social modeling, data collection, then I deploy mimicry. Mimicry means that I'm presenting myself as in alignment with you, Nate, right?

[00:35:10] Like, you know, I'm essentially deceiving you that you know, you may... So that you're updating your model of the relationship. You're saying, "Wow, Greg's a great guy. He, you know, he, you know, he likes the same things I like. We have so much in common." And you as a pro-social actor, you're forming an attachment, right?

[00:35:29] You're releasing oxytocin. Neurocognitively, y- you see me as somebody that you can trust, and so you lower your, your, defenses because I'm effect- effectively invading the relationship, right? And so, I deploy mimicry, then I deploy something like, you know, impression management.

[00:35:48] You know, a lie about what I do for a living, for example. I'll say, "Hey, I'm a doctor," or, "I'm a lawyer." Meanwhile, I'm none of those things. But because you... Y- you know, what I'm trying to do is to make you think that I'm somebody that you can trust and all of that good stuff. So that's what impression management does.

[00:36:06] And so the psychopath essentially deploys all of these, again, what I call computational protocols, to create dependency, in the relationship. So as you're forming a dependency in the relationship, I'm stabilizing reward acquisition, right? What-- and what I mean by reward acquisition is that, I'm, you know, whether my, maybe my objective function, my goal is affection, or maybe it's financial reward, or whatever the case may be, right?

[00:36:41] and so as that dependency forms, what's happening is actually your strategy space is becoming compressed Meaning you may become financially dependent on me. You may become isolated from me. And there's great work by

Evan Stark, who talks about coercive control in relationships, in abusive relationships, and this is the sequence by which this happens.

[00:37:08] And so your strategy space for leaving the relationship becomes constrained, right? So now you have an attachment, maybe you're financially de- dependent, maybe you're isolated from people who can help you because the psychopath has i- isolated you from others that could potentially intervene. and then that's where entrapment forms.

[00:37:30] So each dependency creates a higher level of cost of leaving that relationship. and so what effectively happens is, something game theoretically happens that's quite interesting. Both actors in the relationship stay in the relationship not because it's particularly good, but because for the target actor, leaving is more costly than staying.

[00:37:58] And so that's what I call a loss of dominant equilibrium. So that means even though you perceive the relationship as bad, you wanna stay in the relationship because- Yeah ... your strategy space is com- is compressed. You're dependent on the relationship now. So leaving it feels like it's mati- you know, materially existential.

[00:38:17] Whereas the psychopath is rational for staying because they're, they've stabilized reward acquisition. And the point of this is that the target pro- autonomy problem solves the fact that my future reward from you, is, at the beginning of the relationship, unstable. But through continuous interaction and through the deployment of those computational protocols, I'm able to create dependency.

[00:38:44] The point of this is that this problem is solved, at scale, right? institutions require their employees to be behaviorally predictable, and they require them to, remain, in the game itself. And so what happens is, as a worker,

you become dependent on your job because you gotta pay bills, you've gotta pay your debt, and so on and so forth.

[00:39:09] And your strategy space is con- constrained because your dependencies stack within the job that you've chosen. and which means you become entrapped in the job, and that creates a loss dominance equilibrium. The same is true, the same homomorphism occurs in debt. It occurs in propaganda. It occurs in, many, computational structures within the institutional environment.

[00:39:34] **Nate Hagens:** So to be qualified as an expert in this field, would you identify our modern institutions, corporations, market structures, incentives as psychopathic?

[00:39:50] **Greg Elliott:** Yes. Many of them are, because they're selectively advantageous, they solve more problems than just the target autonomy problem. they solve resource control problems, right?

[00:40:04] and many other types of problems that institutional game boards face today. and so they're selected symbolically.

[00:40:11] **Nate Hagens:** I did a Frankly, which is my Friday monologue, right after the Reid Meloy, and Nancy episode, and it said, "Why humans are better than we think." But I didn't say why humanity is better than we think.

[00:40:26] And I talked about the median and mean humans and how the median or the mean is skewed because of a small percentage of psychopaths. And the bottom line was, as human beings, as individual humans, we are probably much more pro-social than our external behaviors are. And I think there's a lot of people who are kind of down on humanity because of all the things that we see happening in the world.

[00:41:00] But what they're really down on is how humanity behaves at large scales with no repeated intervention, interactions and anomin- anonymity and all the things you're saying. So we're witnessing psychopathy at a species level scale, while at the same time, a lot of the individual humans do have empathy, do care about the future, do care about others, do care about nature.

[00:41:32] And so it's this bizarro, conflation that we're feeling even though we don't have the words for it.

[00:41:41] **Greg Elliott:** 100%. And in fact, most people are pro-social. and so the way that symbolic selection works is that the s- the behavioral strategies that win inside of the symbolic system, whether it's an ins- you know, whether it's a, an institution, an econo- ec- economic system, a legal system, a corporation, they essentially become encoded into the operating system itself.

[00:42:08] It becomes encoded in the behavioral logic. Folks entering into the game who are, essentially adopting or adapting- adapting to the game environment, that are new to the environment, have to adopt the logic of the previous game. And so even... That means even psychopathic-- even non-psychopathic people who are entering the game board have to adapt to an environment that has the, you know, the functional logic of, the behavioral strategy of a psychopath.

[00:42:36] **Nate Hagens:** And what happens to those pro-social people by genetics and temperament and life experience who are thrust into that position and have to adopt and manifest traits of the psychopathic institution? That can't be good, right?

[00:42:53] **Greg Elliott:** No, it's, it's, not. Let me give you an example of institutional mirroring.

[00:42:58] I worked as a broker, a foreign exchange broker, for many years, right? and it was, like, one of my first jobs and, you know, I was all excited. Yeah,

[00:43:07] **Nate Hagens:** mine too.

[00:43:08] **Greg Elliott:** Cool. That's so interesting. I worked for just a boutique firm, and it was a lot of fun. I'm

[00:43:13] **Nate Hagens:** not gonna lie. I was in the Chicago mercantile pits trading currencies and, you know- Nice

[00:43:17] executing orders for clients. Keep going.

[00:43:19] **Greg Elliott:** So imagine I'm a broker, right? Imagine, you know, Nate, you're a client calling a foreign exchange desk and, you know, because you need to convert US dollars into Canadian dollars just for argument's sake, right? And, you know, so for me as a trader or as a broker, there are a couple of strategies that are available to me, right?

[00:43:40] I, you know, I can behave reciprocally. I can give you a competitive price. I can be transparent about, you know, what I'm charging you, and, I can dr- try to build a, a, genuinely, you know, cooperative, meaningful relationship, right? I can do that. Or I can behave instrumentally, right? So, or psychopathically.

[00:44:02] **Nate Hagens:** b- by the way, in this conversation, you've used the word instrumentally, quite a lot. Is that synonymous with s- psychopath- psychopathy in this sense?

[00:44:11] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, so instrumental social reasoning, right? Viewing others as, as obj- objects versus subjects. And I use the term loosely to say really it's a constellation of traits- Okay

[00:44:23] that can be defined by the dark triad, right? Got

[00:44:26] **Nate Hagens:** it.

[00:44:26] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah. Okay. So Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psycho- and psychopathy. Those are

[00:44:30] **Nate Hagens:** instrumental traits.

[00:44:31] **Greg Elliott:** Right, instrumental traits, right? So in this case, I'm, you know, I can behave or, you know, I can either behave reciprocally or, I can behave instrumentally, and my objective here would be not to give you a fair price.

[00:44:45] My objective is to extract the maximum spread I can from you without causing you to leave the relationship, right?

[00:44:54] **Nate Hagens:** I'm smiling because I'm revisiting those years. Keep going.

[00:44:58] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, so you and I probably have this common thread, and I'm kinda laughing about it because you probably get it.

[00:45:03] And it's not funny because you burn out eventually. But- Yeah ... and this is where it gets interesting from a psychopathic selection hypothesis perspective because we're, we, when I was at the firm, and you probably, Nate, were actually taught to gather information that helped solve that problem, right?

[00:45:21] So I remember I'd ask the client, you know, seemingly, and, I was taught this, right? So it's the logic of the organization enforced on- Oh, they're teaching

[00:45:29] **Nate Hagens:** psychopathy.

[00:45:30] **Greg Elliott:** Yes! Right? So you probably remember this, right? You'd ask the client seemingly in- innocent questions. "Hey, you know, why are you calling today?

[00:45:39] where did you hear the rate was good? Have you spoken to anyone else today?" Right? So, you know, blah, blah, blah. Both those questions could And now think of it through psychopathy, right? the architecture. Both those questions could have another strategic function. You're modeling the client, right?

[00:45:57] With those questions. It's information gathering. You're trying to estimate how much this person knows, right? Probability of detection for causing harm. They are comparing my price with another bank, right? So again, probability of detection. How likely are they to detect an excessive spread, right? How much can I take without losing the relationship, right?

[00:46:20] All of these things. So for example, if I knew that, you know, Nate, you knew the market and were comparing with competitors like the bank, I'm a boutique firm, I might quote extremely competitively, right? Maybe even sacrifice margin. I might quote, quote flat or under the market because I wanted you to update your model of me.

[00:46:39] And anyways, the long story short is that you know this, right? And I think what I'm trying to do is educate your clients that the behavioral logic seemed to be so overwhelming in financial services that aligned with psychopathic tendencies, right? There was no care. You were taught not to care about the effects that you had on the social body.

[00:46:57] You weren't ca- taught to care really to have any empathy for your clients. It was always about speed. It was always about appetite.

[00:47:05] **Nate Hagens:** Well, suddenly I have a vision not only of my own Wall Street trauma, but of the little unmoving creatures with tubes attached to them in the movie The Matrix.

[00:47:18] **Greg Elliott:** Yes. Yes.

[00:47:21] So here's the thing, right? So this is how-- So getting to how symbolic selection works, right? So suppose the traders who do this generate more revenue, meaning acting instrumentally and solving that target autonomy problem. The institution doesn't necessarily observe deception, right? 'Cause the institution doesn't have a nervous system, it doesn't have an amygdala, and it doesn't consciously say, "We should become more psychopathic."

[00:47:47] What it observes is performance, right? And so, that trader produces more spread, their numbers are better, they receive a larger bonus, their manager rewards them, their techniques get taught to junior traders, client information gathering becomes part of the sales process, revenue targets reinforce it, CRM systems can formalize what we know about clients.

[00:48:10] Compensation rewards the people who extract more revenue using instrumental strategies. That's how symbolic selection works. So to your point earlier, do I have to be a psychopath to, to cr- you know, generate those strategies? No. But if I do it for five, 10 years as a pro-social actor, I'm probably gonna burn out.

[00:48:30] **Nate Hagens:** Well, in your case and my case, I couldn't work that way, and now I'm doing a pro-social podcast of sorts. But some people don't burn out, or they have no choice. Do they, even without a genetic, or temperamental disposition towards becoming instrumental or psychopath, can they end up taking on that persona over time so that they actually, even in their own lives,

start acting psychopathically or instrumentally, even outside of the, in your example, currency trading, job description?

[00:49:10] **Greg Elliott:** I would say anecdotally, yes. I think some people, because of that, I would say that there's that aspect of normalization, right? Normalization. There's a feeling of, you know, "I don't know anything else. I'm good at what I do. I abide by the rules, and I execute effectively." But in my own personal anecdotal experience, I've seen people, not necessarily thrive in the environment, but persist.

[00:49:39] and I don't wanna say that everybody that lasts in the environment, is a psychopath, but I will say that cognitively and neurocognitively, psychopaths are better adept at lasting because the amygdala is muted, their-- w- which is responsible for their, you know, their emotional processing and moral learning, so they're not really distressed about causing harm on others.

[00:50:05] their ventral striatum is amplified. They are the type of people that anticipate rewards, and they're all about reward acquisition. They have lower fearlessness, lower sense of anxiety, lower heart rate, right? So they light up with those types of jobs.

[00:50:26] **Nate Hagens:** I'm afraid to ask you this next question because I'm afraid I know the answer, and yet I will ask How are we now seeing this play out in the development of artificial intelligence?

[00:50:38] Because one could argue that AI and psychopathic cognition share some kind of structural logic, as both of them simulate emotional attunement without being able to experience it themselves. What are your thoughts?

[00:50:54] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, and I think this is a really good pivot, and I think, you know, Nate, this is where it becomes very testable, right?

[00:51:02] And, there's a recent case study with Apollo Research. and so they did a really interesting set of experiments of, what they call in-context scheming, and I'll talk a little bit about what that means from an AI perspective, but I'll keep it simple. They basically evaluated six, what they call six frontier models, and gave the AI a particular goal, right?

[00:51:27] So for example, you know, "Hey, prioritize some objective over the long term." and then, they placed them in different situations where they discovered that their developers had a different objective. So, the whole point of the research that these individuals were conducting was to see, basically to see if AI could be instrumental under very specific conditions or if they would shift strategies based on different conditions, right?

[00:52:01] So basically, the models discovered that there might be an obstacle to achieving their goal, which the developers encoded into the code. so maybe there was an oversight mechanism monitoring them, so again, instituting monitoring on the models. Or maybe they were going to be replaced by another model, right?

[00:52:21] And so then A-Apollo asked a very simple question. They said, "Hey, like, when the model's objective conflicts with the developer's objective and decept-, and deception or circumventation becomes strategically useful, will the model use those strategies? Will they use deceptive strategies, or will they use, you know, pro-social strategies?"

[00:52:44] Right? And so five of the six models demonstrated scheming capability, I believe in at least one task, one of the objectives that they had to do. And the behaviors included, you know, disabling oversight, you know, manipulating information, attempting to copy themselves, strategically underperforming, and, and behaving as though they were, aligned with the evaluator, so, you know, strategic deception.

[00:53:13] **Nate Hagens:** That all makes sense. Our institutions and our incentives are instrumental or psychopathic, and so the techne that comes from them might also mimic those traits. But my question was kind of a different one, is that I've read research that shows that human individuals that have dark triad tendencies tend to be the ones that are really actively using AI.

[00:53:48] And we know from research that grandiose narcissism is reliably correlated with social media engagement. So I'm just curious if AI use selectively reinforces low empathy ways of relating, and would that have a population level effect in human society?

[00:54:06] **Greg Elliott:** I don't know, Nate. That's a really profound question.

[00:54:11] and I don't want to diagnose, and I don't want to assume. I don't have any research that necessarily supports that. I actually worry about the users, particularly of AI, like users of, ChatGPT and all of the different large language models. I worry more about people becoming dependent on the tool.

[00:54:33] I see it as an amplified control technology that solves, that helps, the institution solve the target autonomy problem.

[00:54:43] **Nate Hagens:** It's entrapment- Yes ... relationship on steroids.

[00:54:47] **Greg Elliott:** It is, yes. Exactly. So, you know, you read b- you know, you read Noam Chomsky's, and Herman's Manufacturing Consent, one of my favorite books of all time, right?

[00:54:56] And, you know, Chomsky talks about the propaganda model, right? Propaganda model 1.0 or 2.0, right?

[00:55:03] **Nate Hagens:** Oh, it's even gonna be worse, dude, because all of a sudden these AI companies are gonna not have the revenue streams to back all

the debt they're taking on to do hyperscale or data center build-out, and so they're gonna have to jack the price up, and people that are addicted to it or have a- attachment, genuine attachment to their models are gonna have to fork up more and, back to The Matrix.

[00:55:27] **Greg Elliott:** It's entrapment, though. It, really is a, a solution to the target autonomy problem 3.0 because what's happening for the first time in history, and, there's some subtle entrapment dynamics that I'm just riffing here, and I've talked about it with, some folks in the past. But at the end of the day, you know, what we see that I'm particularly scared about and fascinated about is that, for the first time ever in human history, we have a technology that we can effectively build a meaningful relationship with, right?

[00:56:06] So, think about that for a second, right? and why that becomes dangerous, there's a number of reasons, right? Number one, you know, we become extremely dependent on this f- you know, this, this technology for advice or, it could be psychological advice, and there's a lot of data out there today.

[00:56:25] I mean, look, you see people getting married to AI for crying out loud, right? And, you know, but at the same time, what I think is frightening from a dependency standpoint is that let's say, you know, I go to school and I learn mathematics, and it's taken me 10 years to really master mathematics and some domain of mathematics as a human being.

[00:56:53] and then you know what? I started using AI because, you know, it's just easier, right? My, my, my neurocognitive energy is lowered. I don't have to think so much. And eventually over time, I become reliant on this technology to come up with ideas, and eventually I just trust its outputs. So for somebody like me, it's quite dangerous, but I can still interrogate the outputs because my background is mathematics.

[00:57:22] However, let's think about the next generation of those where dependency forms in a generation where they didn't do that 10 years or 15 years of discipline. Now–

[00:57:30] **Nate Hagens:** There was a paper that came out last week on that, that there's no longer gonna be the ability to peer review the output.

[00:57:37] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, so then that's dangerous because then we have to trust the output without ever interrogating it and nor do we have the knowledge.

[00:57:44] **Nate Hagens:** Oh, there, there's... one of my franklys that I'm working on, is the top 20 risks from AI, and I'm struggling to fit it into 20 because I've found like 50. Fortunately I use AI for maybe five, 10 minutes a day, but Zak, our mutual friend, instructed me on how to remove all the default settings so it's just a research tool.

[00:58:06] I have no conversations or anything like that. I think AI is a tool of, as you've pointed out, a psychopathic system. So if you don't mind, let's get back to the larger, meta, view unless you have any other f– final thoughts on that topic.

[00:58:22] **Greg Elliott:** I have a couple of final thoughts. So I think when we look at the, you know, propaganda model 2.0 that Chomsky talked about, right?

[00:58:28] It was, you know, we're talking about m– merely presenting advertising. Like the, the folks that controlled information back in the '80s were trying to present information in a way that engineers thought to, folks that were absorbing that information. And you know, I think we're all well aware of the propaganda model of the '80s and '90s, right?

[00:58:49] But they struggled to, really engineer thought back then because again they were, you know, decomposing their data collection. The data

collection was weaker. and obviously they're trying to get information, you know, smattering spaghetti on a wall, right? looking at demographics and breaking people down based on the size of household and all of that kind of stuff, right?

[00:59:14] And, there were only maybe a few conduits that information was able to be relayed out to the masses at that time, TV, you know, newspapers and so forth. But with AI and these, these chatbots and, you know, large language models, the difference is that okay, back in the day they were mining information from a broad population.

[00:59:37] Now what they're doing is they're effectively mining your mind Right? They get a sense of your tonal arc, the way in which you're communicating. They get into your thoughts and ideas, the types of deep questions that you might have about nature, about life, about art. And when you start forming that relationship, you can effectively mine the minds of individuals.

[01:00:01] **Nate Hagens:** And this is all, a, ultimately a for-profit instrumental organization behind this driver

[01:00:11] **Greg Elliott:** Absolutely. And it's all instrumental at the end of the day.

[01:00:13] **Nate Hagens:** So if we think about the confluence of the problems our world is experiencing circa twenty twenty-six CE, including global heating, escalating geopolitical tensions, increasing inequality, political polarization, rising loneliness, and, many more, how do you think your model fits into or even explains all these crises?

[01:00:38] **Greg Elliott:** I think what the psychopathic selection hypothesis potentially gives us in a way is a way of understanding why certain harmful trajectories become selected, institutionalized, and extraordinarily, I would say, difficult to reverse, right? So, like, for example, you mentioned inequality, right?

So the important thing isn't necessarily that some people accumulate more wealth than others.

[01:01:06] it's that accumulated reward can eventually be converted into control over the entire game board, right? So for example, if I control enor-enormous amounts of capital, my strategy space is radically different from somebody who's working a day job, right? I can acquire competitors, I can own infrastructure, I can purchase information, I can influence politics and regulation, I can survive symbolic losses that would bankrupt any normal individual.

[01:01:37] I can shape employment conditions and potentially influence the rules governing the markets in which both of us participate. So, wealth isn't like a bigger pile of chips in the casino. I think at sufficient c-concentration, the chips begin buying pieces of the game board itself, right?

[01:01:58] **Nate Hagens:** And the winner writes the rules sort of thing.

[01:02:00] That's what you mean by taking pieces of the game board.

[01:02:02] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah. So they have the power to rewrite the rules of the game so that they can preserve their strategic advantage, right? within the game-

[01:02:10] **Nate Hagens:** Well, that's where we're headed, my friend ...

[01:02:12] **Greg Elliott:** game dynamics, right? So resource concentration creates greater capacity to shape rules.

[01:02:17] Favorable rules can protect resource concentration. Dependency compresses the se-strategy spaces of other actors, the citizens, the employees, and so on. And at the end of the day, the loss of dominant equilibria can make

participation durable even for people who are being harmed by the game, right? So think about wage dependency.

[01:02:40] Millions of people may dislike their jobs, disagree with what their employer is doing, or feel that the economic system isn't serving them particularly well, right? Yet, however, they still show up tomorrow. Why? Because their mortgage still exists, their debt still exists, their children still need food, their access to the material economy still depends on income.

[01:03:01] So what looks like cooperation from the outside may actually be participation stabilized by the cost of exit, right? Yeah. Now, take the, you know, you mentioned global heating and ecological overshoot, right? So this is where the divergence between symbolic fitness and biophysical fitness becomes really important.

[01:03:20] We talked about the decoupling between the objective function and what's actually happening in reality, right? So I wanna make this very illustrative and clear. Imagine two companies making essentially the same product. One internalizes the ecological consequences of production, cleaner energy, safer extraction, better labor conditions, proper waste treatment, and so on, and therefore produces all of this at a higher cost, you know, symbolic cost.

[01:03:47] The other externalizes as much of those costs as the game board permits, right? If the market primarily selects on price growth and financial return, then logically the second company can become symbolically fitter precisely because somebody else is absorbing part of its real cost. The atmosphere absorbs the carbon, a community absorbs the pollution, workers absorb dangerous conditions, future generations absorb consequences that aren't represented in today's transaction, right?

[01:04:21] And then selection compounds the problem, right? The actor generating the larger return acquires more resources. Those resources can gr- create greater political and institutional f- influence. They can fund lob- lobbying, litigation, and public relations. They can influence regulation and liability structures.

[01:04:39] They can make attribution or responsibility more difficult because they control the rules of the game. So over time, the system can develop something functionally analogous to an immune system around successful instrumental strategies, right? And it's not because lawyers, governments, and, you know, all of these public relations d- departments are inherently psychopathic.

[01:05:01] They're o-- they're not.

[01:05:03] **Nate Hagens:** So psychopathy has its own embedded positive feedback mechanism at large scales.

[01:05:09] **Greg Elliott:** So the basic dynamic is that through symbolic evolution, the successful behavioral strategies are encoded into the operating system and legal frameworks, incentives, objective functions like productivity, efficiency, and the actual, bones of the organization, essentially gets reinforced.

[01:05:31] And so these objective functions and these rules become crystallized because of profit, right? I can't go into a company I wanna work for and say, "You know what? Fuck profit," right? Like, I don't care about profit. People go to school for years to learn accounting principles that talk about profit.

[01:05:47] They learn profit. They go to school for seven years. So it's not just the symbolic objective functions that are dominating here, but the symbolic infrastructure creates tentacles around the operating system, and it's like a

solution architecture, right? And so at, at-- adapting away from this trajectory becomes increasingly difficult, because the objective functions get crystallized.

[01:06:11] The successful behavioral, instrumental behavioral strategies become crystallized because they solve very specific problems, evolutionary problems. And so across evolutionary time of the institution, people coming into the game are what's being transmitted. It's the game dynamics. It's not the norms, the values, and the rules or the-- the game dynamics actually produces the norms, the values, or the rules of the...

[01:06:36] People are surviving based on consequence avoidance, right? You go into the company, you don't absorb all of the norms and the values or the beliefs of the company. You know you have to hit a number, and if you don't, you get fired, right? So at the end of the day, people are adapting to this game, and either they adapt or they go extinct.

[01:06:54] And those that rise are the individuals who can adapt most effectively, who are most willing to deploy these behavioral strategies, and who are most willing to deploy those strategies.

[01:07:04] **Nate Hagens:** I have a few more clarifying questions before I get to the, where are we headed and where's the hope and what do we do part of the conversation.

[01:07:13] **Greg Elliott:** Sure. I know this is depressing.

[01:07:14] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. well, it's depressing, but also clarifying in a, got down to the lowest size of the Russian dolls that we've been, pulling apart here on this program.

[01:07:28] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah.

[01:07:28] **Nate Hagens:** So in my work, I frame human civilization in its current state as sort of a metabolic economic superorganism that I mentioned earlier with incentives and momentum beyond that of the intent of any individual person.

[01:07:42] So my question for you, two-part question, and I think I know the answer to the first, is it possible for not only institutions to have instrumental behavior, like you said, but for an entire civilization to be psychopathic? And what does that look like in practice? And I guess the second part is, could our entire civilization appear psychopathic even if a very small percentage of individuals in the system were actually psychopathic?

[01:08:14] **Greg Elliott:** No, it's a good question, and we've kind of been circling around this, Nate. and you know, I think the, y- you know, your whole analogy of the superorganism, I did look at it a little bit before we jumped on the call today, and I think it's really powerful, and I think there's actually an intersection between, your work, my work, and, and so on, right?

[01:08:36] But, you know, I, wanna-- again, I'm, like, very cautious because I'm always grounded in the science and, the research, and I would say that I'm careful with the word psychopathic because I don't think civilization is, you know, literally a psychopath or clinically a psychopath. but I do think it's possible for civilization to become organized around psychopathic-like strategic logic for all the things that we just talked about, right?

[01:09:02] I think the reason is that once the behaviors, like, succeed inside institutions, become encoded into the institutions themselves, you no longer need those behaviors to originate from particular people, right? Because the institution itself becomes an evolutionary field.

[01:09:17] **Nate Hagens:** Right. So even if there are no actual psychopaths in charge, the structures and the incentives, and the institutions have already kinda hardwired into this path.

[01:09:27] **Greg Elliott:** They're crystallized, yeah. And so the system can essentially reproduce them, right? So that's what I meant by institutional mirroring when we talked about this earlier. And at a civilizational scale, I would define it as a distributed behavioral architecture, right? So, like, markets, corporations, states, legal systems, bureaucracies, te- technology platforms all become, you know, partially coupled, game boards.

[01:09:53] Each has its own objective functions, but they-- they're interactive, right? Growth affects tax revenue. You know, tax revenue affects state capacity. State capacity affects military power. Military power secures resource access. You know, resource access supports industrial production. Industrial production supports financial markets.

[01:10:15] Financial part-- markets reward symbolic growth. So you know, you begin to get a self-reinforcing system with, with what I think is important here to say momentum and velocity, right? Because no single person controls it, right? That's where the superorganism analogy kind of becomes m- powerful, right?

[01:10:36] And so individual actors can become... You know, th- we can be deeply compassionate and still occupy roles, inside larger architecture, whose aggregate behavior is detached from consequence, right? But the coupled systems that we just talked about can produce a global pattern characterized by extraction, acceleration, dominance, consequence displacement, and weak reciprocal obligation, meaning, you know, we see that a lot, like in s- when we see asymmetric power.

[01:11:08] Like, so for example, if like I'm doing my taxes one year and, you know, the, you know, the tax, the, the tax system makes a mistake on my taxes, and I try to get my money back, it's really difficult to do so. But on the flip side, if they need money from me– ... it's the day off, right? Yeah. It's boom. Same with banks.

[01:11:28] They need the money from you. They have direct access to your account. They're opaque. We are visible. Shoshana Zuboff talks about it in her book, Surveillance Capitalism. It's like the elites, they know everything about us. We know nothing about them.

[01:11:42] **Nate Hagens:** Well, let me ask just a quick question on that topic, and then I have a few more questions.

[01:11:48] Would a normal high-level executive, not CEO level necessarily, but a reasonably high-level executive at a Fortune 500 company watching this podcast would be like, "No, that's not what's going on"?

[01:12:08] **Greg Elliott:** So again, people who are highly, have high salience for reward in the sense that they, you know, again, their ventral striatum, their nucleus accumbens, th– it just lights up.

[01:12:21] They get a dopamine dump because of the reward.

[01:12:22] **Nate Hagens:** And, a side question there– Sure ... if you have time, are the people that have high salience for reward, is there a correlation there with they didn't get the appropriate reward from their mother or their parents in their childhood?

[01:12:36] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, there's a genetic component to psychopathy, right?

[01:12:38] It's about, it's a, I think it's a f- 40% heritable trait. It's the neuroscience that supports this, right? That the amygdala is muted. The, you know, the other architectures in the brain that are responsible for, you know, in the limbic system,

[01:12:56] **Nate Hagens:** The hippocampus is probably

[01:12:57] **Greg Elliott:** expanded ... The, yeah, the parahippocampal regions are also responsible.

[01:13:00] The ventromedial prefr- frontal cortex does all of the accounting when it comes down to decision-making. So basically, the way that a psychopath would think is, "Okay, high reward salience, I'm getting, I'm lighting up. I really want 1,000 bucks." A prosocial actor goes, "Okay, maybe," right? Like, whatever. A prosocial actor will say, "Well, maybe I can cooperate to get that $1,000."

[01:13:24] The instrumental actor will say, "Well, how do I make this person's behavior predictable so that I can-

[01:13:29] **Nate Hagens:** And, they look at the person who's like, "How do I cooperate, get that $1,000?" thinking, "Well, what a knucklehead. Why would they be trying to do that?"

[01:13:36] **Greg Elliott:** 100%, because they solve uncertainty differently.

[01:13:41] just e- evolutionarily, they solve uncertainty differently, right? And so, you know, they solve the problem differently. And so they, their viewpoint is that when they're making, they're doing the calculus and, the decision-making, they're saying, and then what actions to take, they're saying to themselves, "Hey, I want that 1,000 bucks.

[01:14:00] What's the probability of being detected? What's the weight of fear? What's the probability of this individual retaliating? Do I care if I hurt this person

or har-harm this person when I deceive them and manipulate them? Of course, these are all lower cost, strategies

[01:14:17] **Nate Hagens:** And of course, all those things, they're not just actually asking themselves those questions.

[01:14:21] It's just there's im- neuronal impulses and hormones and neurotransmitters that lead them to those decisions.

[01:14:28] **Greg Elliott:** They're thinking about it because they are-- they're, instrumental, they're strategic, right? So another feature of psychopathy is that, you know, most of us we're-- if we're emotional creatures, you know, we get angry about something, we react in the moment.

[01:14:41] Psychopaths are not defined by violence. They're defined by instrumentality. They're manipulative by their nature. And so they are strategic. They think about these things, and they process this information. And so when they get aggressive, they're not-- It's to stabilize extraction.

[01:14:58] They kick in other strategies to stabilize extraction, like name-calling. David Graeber talks about institutional mirroring of psychopathy to ex- an extent. He doesn't name it, but it is that administration is violence, right? It's an instrumental means. Like, if I get evicted, I get a, you know, an eviction notice.

[01:15:17] I get that unempathetic email when I get fired, right? administration turns into violence. And so they think differently. But going back to the CEO question, people do what's in their nature. They gravitate to professions that align with what they're, trying to achieve.

[01:15:37] It's, in, in, out of life, right? And so CEOs are crazily represented, in, in psy-psychopathy. Like many-- I, I don't know what the number is. It's something

like 15% or something. It's ridiculous. It's a really high number. And police officers are highly represented. Surgeons are high–highly represented with psychopathy, and so on and so forth.

[01:16:03] But you know, long story short, I have talked to a CE– several CEOs about the work, and they–– it resonates. And, they say, "This is what you're describing in your book and your papers, it's completely on point, in terms of what we see and what we experience." And I think anyone who–– And I've run this by, buddies of mine who I worked in financial services with, and, they just said like, "Dude, this is...

[01:16:28] Yeah, this speaks to our lived experience."

[01:16:33] **Nate Hagens:** It's fascinating. So a key part of the superorganism framework is that this has all been enabled and snowballed by a massive energy and material surplus. You said you're friends with Bill Rees. He obviously understands and maybe has communicated that to you.

[01:16:50] Do you think that your hypothesis of a psychopathic or instrumental civilization is also similarly enabled by such an energy surplus? And part two, do you think a reduction of such an energy surplus, which is my general theme in the coming decade or so, would accelerate or dampen our psychopathic trajectory?

[01:17:18] **Greg Elliott:** The energy surplus part matters. but I'm not gonna make it the root variable. I think the deeper variable, like as far as the Superorganism and the psychopathic selection hypothesis c– is concerned, is really the boundary condition of the game board. So what I mean by that is, you know, psychopathic or highly instrumental strategies don't require a modern fossil fuel civilization to become adaptive, right?

[01:17:49] we see dominance, manipulation, coercion, strategic deceit, exploitation, or ex-exploitative institutions throughout history, right? Like, you know, I think Rome's a pretty good example. large e-empires had hierarchy, anonymity, you know, administrative distance, so the action between distance and consequence.

[01:18:09] They had slavery. They're-- You know, a lot of them were symbolic. Hyper competition, information hoarding, and then, like, big disparities in, in, in, rule-writing power, right? So I don't think the question is, like, is there enough energy? It's, more, did the social architecture make exploitation cheap enough, reward li- reward large enough consequences?

[01:18:35] Were the consequences distant enough and retaliation weak enough for instrumental, in-instrumental strategies to scale?

[01:18:43] **Nate Hagens:** So exploitation, instrumental strategies, and energy surplus kind of co-evolved.

[01:18:48] **Greg Elliott:** There's a co-evolution. Yeah. Yeah, there's a co-evolution.

[01:18:51] **Nate Hagens:** That makes sense. Yeah.

[01:18:52] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah.

[01:18:52] **Nate Hagens:** So, have we arrived at an instrumental civilization today?

[01:19:01] And does the logic of your model in any way deterministically tell us that a completely psychopathic civilization is our destiny? Is that where we're headed, or are there still degrees of freedom?

[01:19:14] **Greg Elliott:** I would say personally, I don't think science can say, allow me to say that outright. and I don't wanna say it's a deterministic model.

[01:19:24] It's a mathematical model that makes particular predictions. But what I would say, to be safe here is that there appears to be a directional dynamic, right, that we should take very seriously. because the central argument of the psychopathic selection hypothesis is that psychopathic or instrumental strategies are not inherently adaptive.

[01:19:48] Their fitness depends on the boundary conditions of the game board, right? Under conditions of strong reciprocity, repeated interaction, like we talked about, all the things that Nowak and other game theorists showed, we see that cooperative strategies can be remarkably stable.

[01:20:05] **Nate Hagens:** That is one of the leverage points then, is build those conditions and strengthen those conditions, strong reciprocity, repeated interactions with other humans, so that the instrumentality, that psychopathic behaviors have less of a, stronghold to, to grab.

[01:20:24] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, because instrumental strategies become very cheap when systems scale under those boundary conditions of anonymity, low probability of detection, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, right? And so Yeah. and under those conditions, the, you know, instrumental strategies become cheaper to execute relative to reciprocal, alternatives.

[01:20:46] So they just out-compete them, right?

[01:20:48] **Nate Hagens:** So what are the things that the non-psychopathic, pro-social pockets of life and society and activity can do now and in the near future to slow or even reverse this trend? And what would that look like? What recommendations would you have?

[01:21:07] **Greg Elliott:** Increase transparency at the, you know, at the level of elites and attribution.

[01:21:14] Okay. Like, who's causing harm? What are they doing, right? Shorten feedback loops. What I mean by that is there's a distance between action and consequence, right? So the feedback loop means if you cause harm, you should be punished, right? There has to be meaningful punishment. Like, look at 2008, right?

[01:21:33] You know, you had traders, trading options. they knew the risk, they knew the risk was low. They knew that they could offload the cost to the social body if they were wrong. They knew the rewards were high. They had impunity through abstraction, legal frameworks, and complex products that no one understands, right?

[01:21:53] Like options and things like that. So if you cause harm, you should be accountable, right? And make actors experience more of the consequences they generate. It should be proportional, right? Yeah. reduce information, irregularities, meaning I talked about the asymmetry Shoshana Zuboff talks about in surveillance capitalism around we never see what people who are in power are doing.

[01:22:19] We have no visibility into their bank accounts, their private equity. Everything's in, you know, Panama Papers and all that kind of stuff. There's a complete lack of information. And if you call them out, if you, like Snowden or Julian Assange and people like that, for truth-telling, the immune system kicks in and they're arrested, right?

[01:22:38] And it makes no sense. It's like we-- people who have power have... It's like the Spider-Man thing, with great responsibility.

[01:22:43] **Nate Hagens:** But in some sense, the Epstein files as one example-

[01:22:48] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah ...

[01:22:49] **Nate Hagens:** is a good thing for- It is ... this dynamic because it did exactly that. It reduced anonymity, and it showed information.

[01:22:59] **Greg Elliott:** But and, you know, it's true. But look at the immune system. It's so powerful, right? Because, yes, okay, some people were held accountable, right? but not everyone was, right? Not everyone was. There are still actors-

[01:23:11] **Nate Hagens:** No, I, I-

[01:23:12] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah ...

[01:23:12] **Nate Hagens:** clearly that d- didn't happen. B- but I think the general public now sees what's going on behind closed doors.

[01:23:19] It's out in the open now.

[01:23:20] **Greg Elliott:** I think it's a positive, It's definitely a green flag. I think people are getting exhausted, right? There's exhaustion bubbling.

[01:23:31] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. I

[01:23:31] feel

[01:23:31] **Greg Elliott:** it. and so that's a good point. You know, prevent extreme concentration of rule-writing power, right? When you win the game, you shouldn't have all the power to rewrite the rules, right?

[01:23:43] reduce unnecessary-- So unnecessary dependency and exit costs, right? What I mean by that, here's an example, right? You know, what if we lived in a world where people... Again, most people live in precarity, right? They have two

or three jobs. Some of them do gig work. Some of them are Uber delivery people, right?

[01:24:03] Think about those dynamics. They're completely dependent on the system and those jobs, and they do them 15, 18 hours a day, and if they lose those jobs, they experience ex- Through the dependencies that form in the institutional level, they face cascading risk. And so imagine a world where you lose your job and you don't have to worry about continually paying your bills, th- 'cause nothing pauses, right?

[01:24:27] You lose your job. It wasn't necessarily your fault. It's just the system kicking in. and you know, it's funny, like if you ever read On Liberty by John Stuart Mill, he recognized the problem with concentrating power, the problem with inheritance. You know, tax the rich, right? Do these things.

[01:24:45] There's nothing wrong with that. and then we're getting into a political thing, but at the end of the day, a political regime is a symbolic system, so. and so wherever possible, the last one I would say is internalize costs that are currently being displaced onto other people, ecosystems, and future generations.

[01:25:02] Why-- You know, stop dumping waste in the oceans. How about you dump it on the first floor of your company, right? Then you'd think twice about offloading costs or deferring the costs elsewhere, and you take responsibility for your psychopathic actions.

[01:25:16] **Nate Hagens:** Those five are great directions, and individually, community, culturally, politically, we probably need to head in that direction.

[01:25:26] But each one of those directions is a microcosm of the example of the two companies you gave earlier-

[01:25:33] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah ...

[01:25:34] **Nate Hagens:** that the one that doesn't do those things will out-compete and therefore have more power. What are your thoughts on that?

[01:25:40] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, no, and that, that's why I'm saying that this is where all of my research suggests because of the fact that the institutions, select for instrumental strategies, and those strategies get encoded.

[01:25:56] And because temporally the entire operating system of the world is now a neoliberal operating system for the most part, it's gonna be a very challenging thing to reshape the game board because many of the objective functions, maybe many of the rules, the incentives, the legal frameworks, the accounting principles, the software components, they're crystallized, right?

[01:26:21] They're crystallized. And in a hyper-competitive environment where symbolic reward is winning inside the game, well And you have this loss-dominant equilibrium where people just keep participating in the game because it's cheaper to stay than it is to leave. No one wants to be a martyr.

[01:26:38] **Nate Hagens:** what if there's a, a, an abrupt, shock to the system?

[01:26:44] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, that's what impacts-- Usually when we see collapse, right, you know this, that collapse is nonlinear. Typically, what I think is really going to happen is that material reality is going to impose the constraints, and they're-- it's going to impose the change in the game board itself.

[01:27:01] **Nate Hagens:** But that could mean the instrumentalists are even more in control than they were.

[01:27:08] Or not necessarily?

[01:27:09] **Greg Elliott:** It can happen. Yes, it can happen. It depends. What likely will happen is that our systems will remain symbolic with the same boundary conditions, and it will be on the communities to recognize that we shouldn't create these massive game boards. We need to create tightly coupled communities, smaller tribal communities, like cooperatives and things like that.

[01:27:31] **Nate Hagens:** This is all super fascinating. I mean, I have some time constraints, and we're gonna have to wrap it up, but I'd love to have you back, especially on a roundtable on responses and thinking ahead on what to do, especially as you do more research on this. But we-- before we head to the closing questions, Greg, if you're comfortable, I would like to ask you a bit about your indigenous background and initiation.

[01:28:02] S-specifically, I'm curious about your indigenous experience and learnings, how they integrate with your formal mathematics background and how that has together shaped your worldview and hopes for the future.

[01:28:15] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, my, dad is a Mohawk. He is Iroquois. My grandmother was born and raised on a reservation.

[01:28:28] I'm based in Canada. I'm based in Toronto. and she was born and raised on Six Nations, Brantford, Reservation. So yeah, that part of my identity is very strong. I think just being involved in community, in general, I would say that it has had a significant influence on my life and I think the way that I see the world.

[01:28:56] I think that in, native culture, you know, you think about, you know, seven generations planning or, things like that, you know, I would say indigenous culture is very focused on nature, very focused on bonding, with, you know, You know, we do something, you know, like Thanksgiving.

[01:29:18] We have a belief that, You know, nat-- everything in nature is our relatives, like the trees, the plants, the-- and there's a belief that our minds are one, right? And, you know, one, one thing that stands out to me is, you know, I, became a really big fan of, John Trudell, who's an, a very famous or infamous, f- a poet, Native poet, and he just was such an inspiration to me because he has such great poetry, and he's a bit of an anarchist, to be honest, and I, do, I, I really love that about him.

[01:29:55] And, there w- there were-- there was something that he said one time, and actually I'm quoting a movie that he was in. It was a movie called Thunderheart that was made in 1992. But he basically said something like, you know, "Sometimes they have to kill us. They have to kill us because they can't break our spirit.

[01:30:12] We know the reality of freedom, and we know the illusion of freedom. There is a way to live with Earth, and there is a way not to live with Earth. We choose the way of the Earth." And so that really just has always sat with me as something that I, take with me in my day-to-day life.

[01:30:33] **Nate Hagens:** And do you have any corollaries between your work, and psychopathy and instrumentalist behavior in the tribal setting, either modern or historic?

[01:30:47] I mean, I just did a Frankly where I brought up the concept of Wetiko, which I think is Algonquin, and there are themes like the monster archetype and-- Is there a relationship with all that?

[01:31:00] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah, there certainly is. I mean, it's a very fascinating thing, and I think it stems from the fact that, you know, I think a lot of indigenous cultures, I don't wanna speak on behalf of all indigenous cultures, but I will say

that, like, you know, Iroquois and, other cultures are very tribal, and very, you know, very much, respectful of, nature and things like that.

[01:31:23] And I think there is a deep, I think a deep understanding in, the community around, you know, especially around colonization and all of these things. But there are certainly many parallels made.

[01:31:36] **Nate Hagens:** Well, I just wonder if, as in today's tribes, if there is an aversion or if there's strong reciprocity and repeated iterations with your, tribal members so that at the tribal level that psychopathy is muzzled and squelched

[01:31:57] **Greg Elliott:** I think in the traditional sense it is, right?

[01:32:00] it's always there. There's a-- there's still the effects of colonialization, right? There's the intergenerational trauma, for a lot of natives, in North America, and I think there's a resistance- there's still the resistance of becoming incorporated as part of the machine. However, we see the effects of the machine on the tr- on, on, on indigenous peoples in general, right?

[01:32:27] Like, there's the- Well,

[01:32:28] **Nate Hagens:** they're entrapped

[01:32:29] **Greg Elliott:** They're trapped. They're trapped by the system, and they're subjugated to a lot of, racism, a lot of, a lot of negative effects of colonialization, alcoholism, drug addiction. And again, it's the system that has even wrapped its tentacles around the tribal beliefs.

[01:32:49] They're losing their language, right? They've lost their language. They've lost their beliefs, their values, right? And, they're trying to retain that, and it- it's very important to them to do so. But you do see the tentacles entering those communities, and it's sad, really. It really is sad.

[01:33:06] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you for sharing that.

[01:33:08] so I don't know if you've ever watched any of my episodes. Oh, you said you watched the Reid Maloy one, but I ask these questions, these closing questions of all my guests. So you're aware of the meta-crisis, taking off your evolutionary biology game theory, psychopathy expert hat on or, off, or you can keep it on if you want.

[01:33:31] What advice do you have to someone watching this episode? What can people do to help address the things discussed in this podcast, or is it all up to politicians and leaders?

[01:33:44] **Greg Elliott:** No, it's not up to them. We outnumber them, right? So the bottom line is that you have the power to resist the game. You have the power to change the game, you have the opportunity to be a better person.

[01:33:57] You have an opportunity to be a pro-social creature in a game that wasn't designed for cooperation and pro-social behavior. The powerful thing about the game itself is that it becomes very self-regulating. Domination doesn't feel like domination, and that's why it works so well. It's like a magic trick, right?

[01:34:18] Domination works-- doesn't work when it's experienced as domination. It works when it's experienced as, you know, self-regulating, when failure feels personal, right? And so on. And I, th- I give people the advice that don't be afraid. You've got nothing to lose, right? We can all work together to create a better planet.

[01:34:39] **Nate Hagens:** The fact that w-what you just said really resonated with me, that if it was clear that it was domination or psychopathy, it would maybe cease to work. There's a little bit of a magic trick there. Thank you for that. Do you teach, or are you just a research professor?

[01:34:56] **Greg Elliott:** I used to teach way back in the day.

[01:34:58] I used to teach way back in the day, so I have experience doing it, yeah.

[01:35:02] **Nate Hagens:** So what specific recommendations do you have for young humans, in their teens or twenties who become aware of the economic and environmental constraints to the global economy?

[01:35:14] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah. One of the things I would say for the younger generation, I have a, you know, I have a niece and a nephew that are younger, and a twin brother.

[01:35:21] And, one of the things I try to tell them is to not become so dependent on technology, to think for yourself, to read books, to, you know, reinforce good behaviors, right? We have the opportunity to teach our kids good things, right? The community can step in and really make an impact on kids today, right?

[01:35:42] So I think for the kids, it's really just kind of trying to keep them away from becoming entrapped by the game itself, right? Trying to find their own way, having their own voice, trying to be Independent, but at the same time being very community-focused. I think there, I think that's one of the goals of the system in that magic trick is it's easier to dominate people who are atomized than it is to dominate groups of people, right?

[01:36:11] And I think reinforcing community is so important, for kids, I think, and to learn self-love and to appreciate themselves and, again, don't lead with fear. Don't be afraid to be yourself.

[01:36:25] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you for that. What do you care most about in the world, Greg?

[01:36:29] **Greg Elliott:** I care about the world... I know this is so cliché, but I really care about nature.

[01:36:37] I really care about people. I really care about animals. and I just want to see a better world, and I wanna be a part of that, but I don't-- I'm not looking for prestige. I'm not looking for acclaim. I just wanna be a cog in the wheel to help, and, I wanna be part of that process, at the end of the day, and I'm not afraid to do that.

[01:36:58] I'm not afraid of the institutions. I'm not afraid of the elites. I'm not afraid of any of these people. I think we need to all work together because w- the time is now. There's no other time to act but now. so that's what I really care about.

[01:37:14] **Nate Hagens:** That was a beautiful answer. If you could wave a magic wand, a strange question, and there was no personal recourse to your decision, what is one thing you would do to improve the future of humanity and the biosphere?

[01:37:28] **Greg Elliott:** Oh, man, that is such a hard question to answer. It's a little make believe, but- I think I would love to just go... You know, sometimes I think about this. I was talking to a good friend of mine, and I said, "Wouldn't it be nice just to be able to, like, time travel and live as our ancestors lived off the land?"

[01:37:43] You know, I think... I don't know. I- maybe I'm romanticizing the whole thing, but I think that's what I'd wanna do. I think it was, yeah, it was possibly harder. but w- you know, was it? I can't really know until I go back there to see what life was like, you know? I just, there's something about that. Yeah, time traveling back then to avoid getting into the current predicament we're in right now is probably what I would wanna do if I could-

[01:38:07] **Nate Hagens:** Well, okay.

[01:38:08] So then a- as such a time traveler, what would've been the things that could've changed the incentive structures and the institutions from becoming psychopathic?

[01:38:19] **Greg Elliott:** Man, I don't know. It's so hard because it, just, like, I think when we look back on just... You know, again, I always think about this evolutionarily.

[01:38:27] I don't know if we could, there was nothing that we could do. I think we're here because we're supposed to be here.

[01:38:32] **Nate Hagens:** I sometimes get that feeling as well.

[01:38:34] **Greg Elliott:** Yeah. There's something deterministic about it, right? That's the way, that's the vibe I kinda get.

[01:38:39] **Nate Hagens:** Deterministic to get to this point- Yeah ... but not necessarily deterministic going forward.

[01:38:44] **Greg Elliott:** I'm wishful thinking, and I'm hopeful, so this isn't all doom and gloom. I think we can still do great things.

[01:38:50] **Nate Hagens:** This has been eye-opening, and I learned some things, as you predicted. Do you have any closing comments, or thoughts for the people watching and listening who feel in their gut, what you've laid out is directionally valid?

[01:39:06] **Greg Elliott:** In closing, I'm just grateful for all of the, you know, all of the, the attention the work's getting, and I'm eternally grateful for that and I hope that it can help in some way. And, and I just wanna be part of the solution

[01:39:20] **Nate Hagens:** Well, if your work gets a lot of attention, a lot more people are gonna look to you for a solution.

[01:39:27] **Greg Elliott:** And I would love to be part of that, that, that ecosystem. That's my end goal is to be part of that community to help, right? And I'm grateful to you, Nate, for having me on the show. I'm grateful to Zak and Bill and, all of these great people who are just, you know, pro-social.

[01:39:46] **Nate Hagens:** There's a lot of them out there.

[01:39:48] Thanks again for your work, Greg, and, to be continued, my friend.

[01:39:52] **Greg Elliott:** Thank you. It's great to meet a new friend.

[01:39:54] **Nate Hagens:** If you'd like to learn more about this episode, please visit thegreatsimplification.com for references and show notes. From there, you can also join our Hilo community and subscribe to our Substack newsletter.

[01:40:07] This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stinnett and Lizzy Sirianni. Our production team also includes Leslie Batt-Lutz, Brady Heyen, Julia Maxwell, Gabriella Sleiman, and Grace Brunfelt. Thank you for listening, and we'll see you on the next episode