

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. I've been thinking about psychopathy and its influence on modern human culture and the biosphere. We just had, on the author of The Psychopathic Selection Hypothesis, Greg Elliott, on TGS. Last year, we had Reid Meloy and Nancy McWilliams on to discuss dark triad traits, and their role in modern society.

[00:00:26] And following that, I did a frankly on why humans as individuals, as opposed to humanity in aggregate, why humans are better than we think, pointing out that ninety-nine percent of us are generally pro-social and kind, but we live in a system that selects and rewards predatory behavior. Greg's episode merged unexpectedly with my logic of a global metabolic superorganism in that he likened our economic system itself to psychopathic expressions, though he used the term instrumental behavior as opposed to psychopathic.

[00:01:04] So just like last year after Reid and Nancy, this week's frankly is my follow-on thoughts and integration of what I learned from Greg's episode

[00:01:25] So we've never really covered game theory on TGS until this week, so here's a thirty-second version for anyone unfamiliar. A game, at its simplest, is merely players, choices, and payoffs, and we play these games every day through the choices we make when we interact with other people. A strategy is a way of playing the game.

[00:01:51] For example, do you choose to act for the benefit of the whole group or to act selfishly? And this gets to the core idea from Greg's framework. Which strategy wins is actually mostly not decided by the players of the game, but by

The Great Simplification

the rules of the game, even though we often just blame the players or praise them for it.

[00:02:17] So Greg Elliott's central claim is really a theory of evolution. Take the same humans, change the conditions of the game, and suddenly different strategies start to win. What he calls instrumental behavior is a strategy typically used by psychopaths. It loses badly in a certain kind of environment and wins in another.

[00:02:41] and once we lay this all out, Greg's framework points out seven conditions that held true during our crucible years as a species that have all been flipped the other way by scale, energy surplus, and abstraction. And these are the settings of a system that decide what can happen within the system, and he calls these boundary conditions.

[00:03:11] So today I'm gonna parse these boundary conditions into seven dials which can be turned up or down to change the incentives of a system and in turn, what behaviors would lead to success. The short version of everything Greg and I talked about is that for three hundred thousand years, more or less, cheating didn't pay.

[00:03:37] But in today's economic system, it does. And because over the last ten thousand years, seven dials got flipped, bringing us to the world we see today. Okay, I'm gonna go into these one at a time. Dial one. picture two restaurants, a mom and pop diner in a small town and a flashy restaurant on a busy highway.

[00:04:08] Same business, similar kinds of humans working in the kitchen, but the key difference is the people working at the diner are likely gonna see their customers again in the near future, and the place on the interstate highway typically never sees its customers twice. You can already intuit which restaurant

The Great Simplification

would get away with continually serving a meal at a high price and get away with it.

[00:04:36] The small town diner, which probably has better food with lower prices, doesn't have better or worse people, it's just playing a different game. So dial one, will I see you again? In ancestral times, the answer was later today for dinner, when we hunt, when we care for each other's children, when we play practical jokes, when we huddle around the campfire tonight and tell stories.

[00:05:03] Every tribal interaction was one move in a lifelong game that had thousands of moves, and the game theory winning strategy of tit for tat only works when there is a next round because helping others today pays off 'cause they're probably gonna help you, or at least they might help you in the future.

[00:05:28] But what if the dial turns off the repeated iteration setting and I'm never gonna see this person again? So fast-forward to today, our economic system rarely has consistent repeated interactions. Most of what we do in our normal course of daily life, at least in the global north, is with people we might never see again, the customer service representative, the internet form we fill out and the like.

[00:05:59] and Greg told the story of his broker years, and I lived a similar story in the Chicago currency pits. My job was to extract the maximum spread from a client I would probably never meet, and I was taught the questions to ask to figure out how much I could get away with. And on the podcast with Greg, I blurted out, "They're teaching psychopathy."

[00:06:23] but now I see they were just teaching the game. So, put simply, the strategies that manipulate and take advantage of others in round one never get punished in round two because there is no round two. So the psychopathic instrumental strategy never fails, and it becomes cheaper and cheaper.

The Great Simplification

[00:06:50] So my angle on this is if you place it in the wide boundary context of The Great Simplification, cheap energy is largely responsible for this dial being flipped because it gives us a social reputational mulligan. Cheap energy has been the get out of Seattle or Topeka or Toronto free card, and if you burn your relationships, eh, you just fly somewhere else and start over.

[00:07:18] And at our tribal setting, the next round of interaction was guaranteed by close physical proximity, and now how much of our life repeats is mostly a function of how cheap it is to leave And leaving has been very cheap, for antisocial actors on the upslope of the carbon pulse. Okay, so how do we turn this dial back?

[00:07:45] In the episode, Greg mentioned moving towards smaller, more tightly coupled communities like cooperatives, where you have repeated iterations with the same people again. And I would add suggestions like spend money where people know your name and the mechanic and the local farmer as opposed to on platforms built for, one-off strangers.

[00:08:13] Join things that have attendance or a league, or a grange or institutions whose entire function is actually scheduled repetition of meetings. And lastly, stay put on purpose. put down and deepen your roots where you already are. Okay, dial two, visibility. you remember the one-way mirrors in those interrogation rooms on police drama shows?

[00:08:44] Someone's watching from the dark side, and you can't see them, you can only see your reflection. We never think about 'em much, but in today's world, which side of that mirror do we live on? So dial two, can everyone see what I did? In our tribal setting back in the day when we lived with fifty to a hundred and fifty people and there were no walls or maybe some walls made of straw, if you hoarded something, someone saw.

The Great Simplification

[00:09:14] If you lollygagged on a hunt, someone saw that, and reputation mattered and was visible, and doing good for the tribe increased your status, and causing harm led to consequences. Now, the carbon pulse has not only brought social interaction mulligans, but also extremes about visibility and invisibility.

[00:09:40] The system sees everything about you, your purchases, your location, your internet searches, and even what you hesitated over before you clicked to buy. However, the people and entities that move things like our rent and our savings pretty much operate through shell companies and fancy structures and closed-doors meetings with people that we can never know the names of for the most part.

[00:10:13] And on the rare occasion someone forces visibility, Greg mentioned the Panama papers, the system reacts like a body rejecting a splinter or something, and it's often the person who blew the whistle who ends up being punished. So what this does is, in effect, individuals and social groups can't punish what they can't see, and the current game makes it hard for us to actually see bad actors.

[00:10:48] and to use my humans and humanity language from frankly, number one oh eight, the extreme tail among us is safe because the median human can't find it, let alone identify it. So frankly one oh eight, I said that non-psychopaths have an advantage in that we can see more of reality because empathy is a sense organ, and when this dial is turned on, the visibility dial, we lose this advantage because we can no longer see them.

[00:11:24] So how do we turn this dial back? Greg's primary remedy was to increase transparency and attribution at the level of elites, which I think is a grand idea. But that direction, more transparency at the top rather than more surveillance of everyone else, is the exact opposite of current trends, which is probably true for most of the recommendations, I'll have, on this list.

The Great Simplification

[00:11:54] So fund and support people that are forcing visibility upward, investigative journalism and protecting whistleblowers and the like. fully open the books on anything you run, a nonprofit, a co-op, a, a budget for a town. transparency starts in the institutions that you are already a part of. Okay, dial three You come back to your car in a parking lot, and there is a dent in the door that wasn't there before.

[00:12:37] Version one, there is a note under your wiper with a name and a phone number and an apology and an acknowledgment of responsibility. Version two is no note, same dent. This conjures a completely different feeling. So dial three, does the harm have a name on it? Back in the plains of Africa, if you took my food, I actually watched you do it, and if we were attacked, we knew by who or by what.

[00:13:10] You knew the face that was harming you, and you knew who it belonged to. And today, this, this strong attribution is hard to find as it's now filtered through technology and hierarchy and bureaucracy and the internet and the phone, which keeps ringing and dinging, I'm trying to turn it off while I'm recording this, is beautiful and amazing on our end, but convoluted six continent supply chains means that we don't really know the human lives affected thousands of miles away or which river got poisoned and by who b- from the factory waste for the cobalt that's in that phone.

[00:13:58] So corporations that externalize all the harms in our world out-compete the companies that include the externalities. And so those costs are still absorbed by the atmosphere, by communities, and by unborn generations. The harm hasn't disappeared, only the name responsible for it has. and so harm that is unnamed or doesn't have attribution is free to the people doing the harm.

[00:14:38] So my angle on this dial is wide boundary versus narrow boundary. Narrow boundary is how you make a harm Invisible and anonymous. A wide

The Great Simplification

boundary is attribution at the civilizational scale. That's what the phrase has meant, on this channel all along. So how do we dial it back? Related to the last one, try to shrink the world in which you buy and consume from.

[00:15:06] Food from a farmer's name on it means there's someone on the other side taking responsibility for it at the local scale. And structurally, and systemically, and I worked on this twenty years ago, at the Gund Institute at, for ecological economics, true cost accounting or at least closer to the true cost on inputs, is a direction.

[00:15:32] Full cost pricing is impossible inside the current system, but I think repricing is coming anyway, as physics is going to do it for us. Okay, dial four, delay. Back to our two restaurants for a second. Imagine one of the restaurants where the bill doesn't come for fifty years after you're finished eating and arrives at your grandchildren's table.

[00:16:00] So dial four, when does the bill arrive? Back in hunter-gatherer times, if you slacked off on a hunt while your companions worked hard for the gazelle tenderloins, you wouldn't eat that night. Probably no romp in the bushes, either. But today, immediate feedback that our ancestors experienced has morphed into significant delays in the consequences as real costs are diffused across geography and social bodies and future generations.

[00:16:40] And debt, which I have a lot to say on in the near future, means we can access and utilize resources earlier without realizing or feeling that there will be less in the future. So complex climate systems mean the effects of our waste on the biosphere won't fully hit for decades or centuries. In other words, summarizing this, a bill that arrives late enough arrives to somebody else.

[00:17:14] And when feedback is delayed like this, short time horizons plus a hunger for status plus low empathy, that all becomes extremely adaptive, and

The Great Simplification

we're seeing this in real time. So I've talked about steep discount rates for twenty years, of humans and human cultures, how much value we place on the present versus the future, and this dial dictates how steep we can allow those rates, and our current system values now above all, no matter the future cost, and it feels to me that this is accelerating.

[00:17:57] So how do we dial this one back? Greg advocated for shortening feedback loops. If someone causes harm, there is meaningful and proportional accountability, but this style is different from the others, as it will gradually then suddenly turn back on its own. As followers of this platform are aware, those bills that we mailed to the future, the carbon, the debt, the drawdown aquifers, the inequality, all those things are starting to arrive.

[00:18:34] So my advice is to shorten feedback loops in your own life, measure the things you depend on, soil, local relationships, energy, water, 'cause these bills are coming either way. You might as well know what's in them. a boring recommendation, I know, but on this one and on many of them, boring is kind of the point.

[00:19:01] Okay, dial five, mutual dependence. A hundred years ago where I lived, farmers couldn't harvest alone. Entire neighborhoods would share a single threshing machine, and it moved from farm to farm, and their grain got harvested because the neighbors showed up, and theirs got harvested because you showed up, and cheap diesel at scale eventually brought every farm its own combine and machinery, and nobody needed anybody else.

[00:19:40] So dial five, do we need each other in both directions? In ancestral times, the answer to this was unequivocally yes. Pretty much nobody was replaceable. The hunter needed the gatherer, who needed the healer, who needed the one person who knew where the water would be in a dry year, and

The Great Simplification

they all needed the shaman and the storyteller, and dependence ran in all directions.

[00:20:08] Today For the vast majority of us, dependence runs one way. We need the job, but the job doesn't need us. Greg Elliott gave an example of the man who'd worked for twenty-five years at a company, and his wife had cancer, and he had two kids and a mortgage and car payments, and none of that enters the calculus of his superorganism counterpart.

[00:20:36] 'Cause on the spreadsheet, he is a headcount, and eliminating his position improves the number. Greg used, the word for this, entrapment, which is when one side's dependency continues to increase, their strategy space then shrinks, and leaving the relationship, the economic situation, the job, the circumstance seems more costly than staying, and it's quite a microcosm of our current global economy.

[00:21:11] So my angle on this is that energy slaves made humans replaceable, and when approaching twenty terawatts of machines do most of the work, the leverage of any one human starts to approach zero. And the tribe needed you because there were limited people, and survival depended on the unit, on everyone contributing.

[00:21:37] The superorganism doesn't need you or me because there's a machine and a queue of people behind us, and soon to be armies of robots and cognitive slaves, in the form of large language models. I don't know if you've seen the Chinese robotics ceremonies from last week. It's quite scary. So how do we dial this back?

[00:22:00] lots of suggestions here. Entrapment is how captured you feel by what you believe you can't afford to lose. So simplify first and beat the rush by lowering your own exit costs, having more slack and less debt. Learn skills that are gonna

The Great Simplification

become needed where you live in your community. Increasingly, we have more mutual aid with more structure, and we've talked about this before, tool libraries and maker spaces and childcare co-ops and time banks and those sorts of things.

[00:22:41] And where you can, decouple your survival and ability to thrive from the approval of any single institution, using instrumental, decision-making. Dial six if you grew up like I did, you probably played driveway basketball or soccer with the neighbor kid who owned the ball, and somehow he was also the one who called the fouls, and we couldn't overrule him because the argument would end with the ball going home with him.

[00:23:22] So imagine the driveway is the economy. Dial six. The most important one here, I think, is can anyone buy the rules? Before the Agricultural Revolution, no one could own the rules. Nobody could store enough food or arm enough people to own the game, and anthropological research shows things like ridicule and ostracism and coalitionary punishment, and in the extreme case, as Reid Maloy brought up on the Psychopathy podcast, execution became common.

[00:24:06] So rough equality of force was the guarantee more than any shared value was. Today, one of the biggest learnings for me in Greg's podcast was that in tribal systems, it was extremely difficult to rewrite the rules, but in what he calls today's symbolic systems, winners of the game, those who are able to accumulate large sums of money and power that's associated with it, do have the ability to rewrite the rules, upend the game board.

[00:24:46] As we are seeing today, at sufficient concentration, the chips begin buying pieces of the game board itself. You acquire your competitors. You can own the entire chain, the vertical, and horizontal supply chain, the infrastructure. You can purchase information and data. You can influence regulation, and you can survive symbolic losses that would bankrupt any individual normal non-psychopathic human.

The Great Simplification

[00:25:25] The winners write the rules, and then the rules eventually protect the winners. There's been a lot of media in the last few years that I've kind of hand-waved away, and now I'm interested in learning about it because our ancient punishment capacity that we evolved with is completely gone. You can't banish someone who owns the entire town. Notice the importance of dial six.

[00:25:56] Every suggested dial down or fix on the other dials is in the end a rule that somebody would have to write, and enforce. So dial six is kind of the escape hatch for all the others. But right now, as we are increasingly feeling and seeing, it is locked from the other side. That's why it gets a padlock on our panel here.

[00:26:29] So I have two thoughts here. First, nobody at any level of wealth can rewrite the laws of thermodynamics or ecology. Those are rule books that chips cannot buy, and they are soon going to be asserting themselves for everyone. Second, in, frankly one oh eight that I've brought up a few times, I me- I mentioned something called punisher fatigue, where the sheriffs on social policing were burning out.

[00:27:02] And after hearing Greg and thinking about this last weekend, I realize it's because the sheriffs don't own the jail. It's not from any lack of nerve or constitution. So how do we dial this one down? In this style, the scope unfortunately moves beyond us as individuals because no amount of shopping differently or not using XYZ product changes who writes the rules.

[00:27:34] So this lock on dial six is a central obstacle in the unfolding more than human predicament. But what's left to do still matters a great deal though. the school board and the town council and the bylaws, of your town and your co-op and things like that, showing up is going to matter more now, not less as the big institutions consolidate

The Great Simplification

[00:28:09] Because small boards where you can be in the room where the rules are still written by whoever shows up, that's gonna matter. And start to build the old tribal safeguards right into the bylaws, like term limits and caps on how much power any one person can hold, and you rotate the leadership, and you intentionally make a schedule to revisit decisions to make sure they're working and things like that.

[00:28:40] And we have done this before, by the way, we humans. I learned recently that as elites fought over the scraps of, the Western Roman Empire, the commons reemerged in small pockets called monasteries, where small, boards and co-ops and written rules and elected leadership and purposeful, anticipated ahead of time mutual dependence carried things like literacy and agriculture and beer making through what was globally a five hundred year contraction.

[00:29:23] And there are other historical examples. Okay, dial seven Have you ever driven a vehicle that had a broken gas gauge? The needle says you have half a tank, but it also said that a few days ago. The needle is not the gasoline, and you can tap on the glass and even move the needle with your fingers towards full, but that doesn't put any more gas in the tank.

[00:29:54] So dial seven is a fair proxy for the thing. Back in the day of our ancestors, fitness was measured directly in their daily lives. You hunted, and you found food, and you defended yourself, and you solved problems together with the tribe. Life daily was one hundred percent real. And today, our survival is routed through symbols.

[00:30:27] There are so many abstractions like markets and GDP and legal systems and religions and platforms and algorithms and other human-created game boards between our actions and behaviors and our fitness, AKA our well-being and life experience. This was one of Greg's main points. We live in an era where symbolic fitness is increasingly decoupled from actual fitness.

The Great Simplification

[00:31:08] and the number moves differently than the thing it was meant to represent, actually often in the opposite direction of what it was meant to represent. We see this paradoxical example. GDP spikes after a storm destroys a coastal community. So, the number's going up, and the experience is the opposite.

[00:31:37] Fishery profits go up as they harvest the last cod. Yeah, there's lots of examples like that, and the numbers that measure success in our culture are disconnected from the physical reality and long-term consequences beneath. But our institutions and jobs are all shaped around making these symbolic numbers go up.

[00:32:08] And as such, all these functions and processes eventually harden into accounting principles and legal frameworks and the like. So in our world, circa 2026, the symbol is no longer a tool. It has now become the game board itself. My take on this dial is that we still depend on the material world that our symbolic simulation sits on top of.

[00:32:41] Money is the symbol, and energy materials and Earth's ecosystems are the things ultimately being represented. And this is the dial that makes the other six possible. You can't delay a consequence or anonymize damages or make dependents run one way without having some symbol that holds it in place.

[00:33:07] The symbol is the container. It is the way we write the rules that shape the rest of this story. How to dial this one down. The hard part to swallow is that eight billion people cannot be fed without these symbols, and we cannot turn it back at scale without massive change and chaos. But there's an important hygiene here, keeping the symbol close to the physical reality at the smaller scales that we can.

The Great Simplification

[00:33:40] So in your own life, measure something real alongside the money, kilowatt hours of energy or bushels, or the hours of your life spent per purchase of something. And also do things off the ledger entirely, barter and favors and, Saturday potlucks and real reciprocal relationships. Just spend regular time in the real world, growing or fixing, or making something, not necessarily to save the planet, but as a visceral reminder of what these numbers stand for.

[00:34:27] Okay. That was a lot, especially after last week's unexpected gallbladder surgery, which I am recovering pretty well from. but I'm riding the surgery wave this year. Where does this leave us? One of these seven dials that's flipped from its ancestral setting would be a pain.

[00:34:58] two is kind of a bad workplace, but all seven at once held in place by the sixth with a lock on it is a global economic superorganism. You could also call it Moloch, or Mumford's The Machine. But at the same time, at the level of your street or town or bio region, or community, these dials are often still set the tribal way. So many examples.

[00:35:38] Flash your brights to someone you've never met or don't even know who's in the car. You return the lost wallet. It happened to me in a mall in Finland. You show up with a chicken a la king casserole. Lots of other behaviors that I think a lot of you instantly recognize. But at the superorganism scale, every one of those is flipped, and that is why you can feel like a decent person inside an indecent system, because you are one.

[00:36:16] You might be wondering whether the Great Simplification on the horizon turns these dials back for us. Some of them, probably, but not the one with the lock. Which brings me to some questions that I wanna leave you with. Which of these dials is flipped in your life, in our situation today, and is it one that you could turn back, even partially, by hand?

The Great Simplification

[00:36:47] Is the cooperation and reciprocity in your life of the genuine altruistic kind or of the entrapped kind? If the roughly 30 million clinical psychopaths in the world disappeared tomorrow, would any of these dials move? In game theory, hawks beat doves one-on-one, and dove groups beat hawk groups, and that second thing has been swished off in our society at scale.

[00:37:24] Does The Great Simplification switch it back on or do we have to? Lastly, can the good guys ever win? And if you come to believe the answer is no, can you still be a good guy or gal anyway? And if the answer to that is yes, why? I learned from this conversation with Greg Elliott, and his work, and it really explains the software of the superorganism.

[00:37:58] And part of my theory of change is helping the global TGS community, who increasingly understands this stuff, is going to come up with emergent responses to all this where they live. Much more to say on this. I hope this was helpful. I'm continuing to roll these ideas and questions around in my head.

[00:38:19] See you next week