

The Great Simplification Animated Movie Transcript Part 3:

The superorganism is an emergent phenomenon of the animals that comprise it. Us.

Human beings are related to ALL other creatures on Earth. We are the product of an unbroken chain connecting to the first life, which means that hidden beneath our stated motivations of what we do every day in industrial society, we are driven to pursue the same neurochemical brain rewards our ancestors pursued. This has huge implications for our behaviors, our economies and our futures.

Reaching for our phone to see if someone liked our Facebook post or to see if Bitcoin is up or down aren't really our goals. We are in reality just seeking the same brain rewards that led to success for our hunter-gatherer ancestors.

Dopamine is a molecule that in animals - and humans - leads to motivation and action.

In a materially rich modern world, the habituation to the action of "consumption" leads to the WANTING of things - culture wide - being stronger than the reward we get from HAVING them. This is a fundamental problem for an economic system that's turning billions of barrels of oil into microliters of dopamine.

As a carryover from ancestral tribal life, we are highly tuned to social signals, comparing ourselves to others, seeking approval, acceptance and jockeying for status. With material - and now digital - wealth as today's primary status signal, consumerism is now largely based on having as much - or more - than those around us, rather than focusing on what we may actually need.

Modern humans are still tribal beings. We staunchly support those in our ingroups and easily ostracize outgroups -from trivial divisions like sports teams, to political affiliation, race or nationality. Our evolution has primed us to blame other humans for situations we don't like or understand.

We have rich, creative and colorful imaginations that reside in the virtual worlds of our minds. The human brain can imagine – and verbalize – limitless combinations of physical impossibilities - sustainable outposts on Mars, self-perpetuating energy machines, and an economy based on physical consumption growing continually for centuries.

In ancestral times these virtual worlds overlapped with the physical world we inhabited, making us more content and effective as a tribal unit.

But in a culture of vast material wealth, information overload and social media, it's increasingly difficult for us to separate fantasy from reality.

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When these individual virtual worlds connect with the virtual worlds of others, the result is widespread shared beliefs - that money is real, that our current wealth is due mostly to our cleverness, and that technology will lead to limitless growth.

When we look to others to try and understand our complex modern world, as social beings 'who said it' becomes more important than logic or the quality of the evidence. Celebrity and group affiliation now matter more than truth.

Our stone age brains are no match for the social media algorithms that now constantly hijack our attention. Modern media outlets prey on our evolutionary inclinations for novelty and in-group defense via capturing our attention and turning clicks and shares into consumption:

Computer algorithms - optimized for profit - are splintering our society by reducing attention spans, accelerating addiction, polarization, apathy, and mistrust in science. A metaphorical technology 'worm' driven by exponentially improving artificial intelligence is silently-eating our minds.

Humans are creatures with finite lifespans. The future isn't a priority to us emotionally - instead we're focused on the very short term: this weekend's plans, this quarter's earnings, this term's election, the next set of compelling images we're urged to scroll to.

We often promise to make big 'changes' starting tomorrow, until tomorrow becomes today, and the cycle repeats, delaying any actual change.

Like other biological organisms, humans seek gains and are averse to losses. We look for undervalued stocks to invest in, sales on new shoes, or 2 for 1 cocktails at happy hour. Unlike squirrels or cheetahs, we are an extremely social species. We coordinate as families, small businesses, corporations and nation states to maximize our virtual surplus - dollars - which we then spend on real things.

Our core economic and environmental challenges stem from a mismatch of hunter gatherer minds inhabiting a competitive consumer growth culture. Together, these human universals have led to incentives and behaviors which have created a metabolic superorganism, whose objective is disconnected from the well-being of its parts (us).

It is tempting to look at how we live today and conclude that this is how humans are. But modern society is only a single brief example out of thousands of successful arrangements in human history. Humans alive today don't "choose" to be hierarchical or greedy - many of our choices are constrained by the economic system we were born into.

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Our current high consumption, high inequality, high technological distractions and low levels of daily human connection are a direct product of the carbon pulse.

Though human brains don't change quickly, under the right circumstances, our behaviors and cultural norms can move at lightning speed. Our species is incredibly adaptive when we're challenged.

The way we've been living is an anomaly. But we take it for granted, because as individuals it's all we've ever known.

Going forward, a lifestyle adapted to lower energy use will reconnect our virtual and physical worlds. By necessity our lives will become less global, more interpersonally engaged, and more tethered to natural flows.

As a species, a global superorganism is not our destiny. Who we are has brought us to this precipice. Who we are capable of becoming, as individuals and as a society, will be the question of our time.