The Way Forward Beyond The Dysfunctions Of Modern Culture

Part 1: Savvy About Psychodynamics

Dr Robert Gilman – November 9, 2021
The Stoa’s Philosopher in Residence series

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Psychodynamics

“The conscious and subconscious mental and emotional forces that determine personality and motivation”
Being Savvy about Psychodynamics

Huge personal benefits

_and_

Huge benefits for the culture
Personal Benefits

• more ease, aliveness and agency
• easier, deeper relationships and more productive collaborations
• a stronger capacity to make a difference on big issues
The Cultural Context

- **Tribal**: Farming
  - 13,000 years ago

- **Empire**: Renaissance
  - 500 years ago

- **Planetary**: Now

5000 years ago:
- Cities
Empire-to-Planetary Transition

Reformation

Empire

Renaisance

Enlightenment

printing press, natural sciences, political revolutions, industrial revolution, market economy, representative government

But modern culture has now created a world beyond its capacity to cope
The Polycrisis
These are all human-created problems and signs of deep cultural dysfunction.
AoE/Modernist Dysfunctions

- Clueless about psychodynamics
- Narrow modes of cognition
- Outmoded strategy for success
The Way Forward with 3 New Capacities

• Savvy about psychodynamics
• Skillful with diverse modes of cognition
• Adept at the new strategy for success
Today is for
“Savvy about psychodynamics”
The others in the coming weeks
Keys to Becoming Savvy about Psychodynamics

Frameworks
Self-awareness
Practice
Savvy about Psychodynamics

Psychodynamics

Feeling

Thinking
- Conscious & Subconscious
- Fast & Slow
- Cognitive Biases

Acting
Conscious and Subconscious

conscious

↓

subconscious

(>90% of brain activity)
Subconscious

- Evolved for survival, not accuracy
- Contains many functions: some built-in, some learned
- Uses quick, usually-good-enough pattern-recognition that connects the present to past learnings
- Some of those learnings are rules or heuristics that guide action; many were learned in childhood
- It functions automatically, yet its learnings can be intentionally refreshed and updated
Thinking, Fast and Slow

- **Fast associational thinking**
  - Conscious
  - Subconscious (>90% of brain activity)
  - Process
  - Result

- **Slow reflective thinking**
  - Monitor & modify
  - Process & result
Cognitive Biases

Quick-but-sloppy subconscious in action
Systematically inaccurate thinking
Over 200 types in Wikipedia list
Confirmation Bias

Evidence we ignore

Facts and evidence

Our beliefs

Evidence we believe
Framing Effect

Consent Form

90% chance of success

Consent Form

10% chance of complications
• The assumption that *humans are reliably rational* badly misrepresents real behavior

• Yet that assumption is embedded in our political, economic and legal institutions, leaving them inept and open to manipulation – the Polycrisis is the result

• It also induces people to try to convince other people through “rational” argument rather than begin by understanding their psychodynamics – ineffective politics is the result
Savvy Take-aways

• We’re all dependent on error-prone fast-thinking and subconscious processes

• Compensate for it with self-awareness, humility and slow thinking

• Refresh/update your subconscious with new skills

• Give your subconscious a chance to do better
Savvy about Psychodynamics

Threat Detection & Response
Autonomic Nervous System
Optimal Zone
Trauma & Personality

Feeling

Thinking

Acting

Conscious & Subconscious
Fast & Slow
Cognitive Biases
Threat Detection & Response

- Part of our subconscious
- Evolved over hundreds of millions of years for **immediate physical threats**
- Uses fast, automatic pattern recognition
- Response involves many hormonal, nervous, brain, circulatory, etc. changes
Threat Detection & Response

Amygdala

Hippocampus

Neuroception
Autonomic Nervous System

Accelerator:
- Sympathetic
  - mobilize
  - fight or flight

Brake:
- Parasympathetic
  - connect
  - rest and rebuild
  - freeze

Ventral Vagus
- Sympathetic
- Dorsal Vagus

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Autonomic Nervous System

• **Dorsal vagus activation** – prepares the body for physical inaction

• **Sympathetic activation** – prepares the body for intense physical action

• **Ventral vagus activation** – creates a sense of safety, allows for positive social connections
What ANS states feel like

**Optimal Zone**
- flow/create
- connect
- mellow

**Defensive Zone**
- activate
- rest & digest
- worry
- freeze
- shutdown

**Sympathetic**
- dominant

**Dorsal Vagus**
- dominant
Optimal Zone

curious
calm
clear-headed
connected
confident
courageous
creative
compassionate

from Internal Family Systems
Optimal Zone

Where you are most useful to yourself and the world

Where you can have fun and get things done
Pathways to Safety

Optimal Zone

Defensive Zone

level of threat

ventral vagal activation

B

1

2

A
Neurological Reset

• Cross your hands over your upper chest in a gentle self-hug

• Tell your body, “In this moment, I am physically safe”

• Wiggle your nose and cheeks to stimulate your facial muscles and ventral vagus nerve

• Breathe in through your nose and, more slowly, out through your mouth

• Continue the self-hug
Do three cycles of wiggle and breathe
So why don’t we spend more time in the Optimal Zone?

As humans, we’re often triggered by imagined threats that are neither immediate nor physical.

We all carry unresolved trauma that keeps us on alert.
Do you sometimes feel...

fearful of life,
not seen,
not belonging,
no one cares,
you want to flee physically
or into an inner world?
Do you sometimes feel ... 

you aren’t good enough, 
you can’t do it, 
fearful of being alone, 
you’ll never get what you need/want?
Do you sometimes feel ...

heavy,
stuck,
overpowered,
easily humiliated,
not wanting to be seen,
compliant outside but raging inside?
Do you sometimes feel …

you can’t trust others,
you need to dominate or go it alone,
will-power is the answer,
“I’ll do it myself”?
Do you sometimes feel …

it’s better
to go by the rules,
to perform well,
to be orderly
than follow your own inner direction?
"I’m comfortable and safe in my body"
“I have enough and I am enough; I know how to be nourished and to nourish”
“I’m confident in my own creative capacity”
Developmental Tasks

“'I appropriately trust others and life’”
“I’m confident in my own inner direction”
Developmental Tasks

It’s rare for anyone to truly complete these tasks and we all get some wounds along the way

We all wind up with some developmental trauma
Pathways To Healing

Character Style

Defensive Patterns

- Triggered Defenses
- Anticipatory Defenses
- Workaround Behaviors

- Emotional Landmines
- Limiting Beliefs
- Missing Skills

Developmental Trauma
The failure to understand and support the psychodynamic development of children creates a culture full of traumatized adults.

The assumption that life is about dominance and power-struggles trains us for, and then keeps us in, the Defensive Zone.

The result is the Polycrisis.
Savvy Take-aways

• If it's not an immediate physical threat, calm yourself first

• Develop a good self-awareness of your own defenses, hold them with compassion, help them relax and heal what you can

• The place to intervene for healing is with emotional landmines, limiting beliefs and missing skills as a system
Savvy Take-aways

• Optimal Zone living is much more about inner safety than outer

• Develop the capacity for Optimal Zone resilience in increasingly challenging environments

• A vibrant, resilient culture of creative, compassionate Optimal Zone adults is entirely possible
Savvy about Psychodynamics

Psychodynamics

Feeling

Thinking

Conscious & Subconscious
Fast & Slow
Cognitive Biases

Acting

Motivation in the moment
Sustainable Motivation

Threat Detection & Response
Autonomic Nervous System
Optimal Zone
Trauma & Personality
Motivation in the moment

Maslow’s Hierarchy

- Physiological needs: food, water, warmth, rest
- Safety needs: security, safety
- Belongingness & love needs: intimate relationships, friends
- Esteem needs: prestige, feeling of accomplishment
- Self-actualisation: achieving one's full potential, including creative activities
Problems with Maslow’s Hierarchy

- Hierarchy is too rigid; “needs” overlap in dynamic ways
- Not culturally universal; too individualistic
- Not a complete inventory of “needs”
- “Needs” aren’t the only motivator
Motivation in the moment

Layers of Motivation

Bio-based
Defense-based
Relationship-based
Optimal Zone-based
Savvy Take-aways

• You need a good understanding of your own defense patterns and character styles to have a meaningful understanding of your own motivation

• Best to compassionately understand your own motivations before trying to understand others’

• An understanding of common patterns can help you respond constructively to others rather than react through your own defenses
Savvy Take-aways

If you’re making a significant choice:

• Move toward your Optimal Zone
• Meet your bio needs as best you can
• Scan to see how your defense patterns may be coloring your motivation
• Be conscious of any influences from your relationships
Sustainable Motivation

- The Polycrisis issues are long-arc urgencies, not emergencies; so are many personal issues.

- Long-term motivation via fear is counter-productive
  - The amygdala/sympathetic system is designed for split-second emergencies
  - Extended use leads to burnout and denial

- Optimal Zone motivation works for the long-haul
  - Tap into love, creativity and curiosity
  - Create future-pull with a clear sense of the opportunities
• Motivations based on fear, greed and the need for control are all exploitations of our traumas

• Dependence on such motivations keeps the culture dysfunctional and stunted

• The result is the Polycrisis
Savvy Take-aways

• Be motivated by what you want, not what you don’t want; the practical pathway can be the same, the framing is different

• Base your motivations, for yourself and others, in Optimal Zone qualities – love, creativity, curiosity and future-pull

• Learn to recognize trauma-based motivations, keep their insights, translate into Optimal Zone qualities

• Keep reframing and envisioning until you’ve replaced as many trauma-based motivations with Optimal Zone motivations as you can
• Skillful with diverse modes of cognition (Nov 16)
• Adept at the new strategy for success (Nov 23)
• Weaving the threads of the 3 capacities (Nov 30)
Want To Go Deeper?

*Bright Future Now Jan/Feb ‘22*

Community-building and self-study begin as soon as you register

Experientials and group interaction start Jan 8 ‘22

Early-Bird registration ends Nov 27

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