

1-25 Awakening from the Meaning Crisis, Book One: Origins

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1-50 YouTube lecture playlist

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26 The Clash - Cognitive Science and Synoptic Integration

John Vervaeke's "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis" (0:00) episode 26, delves into the **meaning crisis** that humanity faces, stemming from historical trauma and the limitations of both pseudo-religious ideologies and nostalgic returns to traditional religion (1:53). He argues that political solutions are insufficient to address this crisis, as they miss the crucial **participatory and perspectival knowing** essential for regenerating meaning (3:30).

Vervaeke proposes a scientific approach to understanding the "meaning machinery" of cognition (4:23). He introduces **cognitive science** as the discipline capable of providing a scientific understanding of how meaning is realized (5:10). He explains that cognitive science, despite its contributions, has also contributed to a personal meaning crisis by fragmenting our understanding of the mind (6:06).

He highlights the **equivocation of the term "mind,"** pointing out how different disciplines (neuroscience, AI, psychology, linguistics, anthropology) study mind at different levels, leading to confusion and fragmentation (6:31). Vervaeke uses an analogy of equivocation with the word "nothing" to illustrate how using the same term with different meanings can lead to ridiculous conclusions (10:25).

To overcome this fragmentation and ignorance, Vervaeke emphasizes the need for **philosophically astute integration** between these disciplines (14:40). He argues that cognitive science, by its very nature, is designed to bring about this integration, avoiding equivocation and dealing with fragmentation (15:54).

He discusses three ways of understanding cognitive science (17:38):

1. **Generic nominalism:** Viewing "cognitive sciences" as just a name for various disciplines, which he rejects as useless for addressing the meaning crisis (18:04).
2. **Interdisciplinary eclecticism:** Where disciplines exchange ideas without radical transformation, which he sees as too weak to capture significant theoretical relationships (19:06).
3. **Synoptic integration:** The preferred vision, where cognitive science builds bridges between disciplines to address equivocation, fragmentation, and ignorance of causal relationships between levels of reality (22:15).

Vervaeke then introduces the concept of **aptness in metaphor** as a way to understand synoptic integration (23:40). He explains that a good metaphor balances difference and identity, allowing for insightful understanding across domains (25:02). He seeks theoretical constructs in cognitive science that achieve this "apt balance" (27:41).

He further elaborates on the concept of **plausibility** as a normative theory for making good sense (30:47). He argues that a plausible construct is not just **multi-apt** (elegant, bridging many domains) but also **trustworthy** (produced by many convergent, independent lines of investigation), leading to bias reduction (31:52). He warns against "bullshitting" ourselves with conspiracy theories (high elegance, low trustworthiness) or trivialities (high trustworthiness, low elegance) (36:02). He describes **profundity** as the balance of high convergence and high elegance (42:48).

Finally, Vervaeke defines **cognitive science** as the discipline aiming for profound synoptic integration to address equivocation, fragmentation, and ignorance regarding the levels of reality designated by "mind" (44:15). He reiterates its relevance to the meaning crisis by dealing with fragmentation, the meaning-making machinery, and our propensity for self-deception (45:22).

He concludes by shifting the metaphor from "meaning-making" or "meaning-seeking" to **meaning cultivation**, suggesting that meaning is something co-created between us and the world (46:00). He then begins to delve into the cognitive science of meaning cultivation by analyzing **intelligence as a general problem solver** (48:25), and how problems involve a difference between an initial state and a goal state, requiring operations to bridge that difference (55:32).

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis: Cognitive Science and Synoptic Integration

The historical landscape of the post-Hegelian era in Germany represents an intellectual and existential cul-de-sac that serves as the crucible for the modern meaning crisis. Following the collapse of the totalizing systems proposed by Hegel, the German cultural milieu became a site where historical trauma and the disintegration of utopian visions ignited a profound meta-crisis. This void was filled by the rise of titanic pseudo-religious ideologies—most notably Nazism and Stalinist Marxism—which were not merely political movements but catastrophic attempts to re-engineer a totalizing sense of purpose. In the autodidactic myopia of figures like Adolf Hitler, the inherent machinery of meaning was distorted into a gnostic nightmare, leading to the visceral collision of these ideologies at the Eastern Front, exemplified by the devastation of the Battle of Kursk. For the modern subject, the resulting trauma has rendered a nostalgic return to traditional religion—a fundamentalism that attempts to bypass centuries of scientific and historical development—an impossible path. We find ourselves suspended between the failure of secular utopianism and the unviability of religious revivalism.

This impasse exposes a fundamental insufficiency in our contemporary habit of framing the meaning crisis as a primarily political problem. To do so constitutes a radical category error. As thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Marx, and Schopenhauer articulated, the crisis pertains to the participatory and perspectival dimensions of knowing—the immediate, lived engagement with reality that allows for the regeneration of meaning. Political frameworks, by their nature, ignore these deep-seated cognitive structures, focusing instead on propositional and ideological clashes. Consequently, political solutions cannot address the core machinery of meaning realization. This fragmentation demands a move toward a scientific worldview that can account for the cognitive processes of "meaning cultivation" without succumbing to the simplistic dichotomies of romanticism or empiricism. To achieve this, we must turn to cognitive science, yet we must do so with the awareness that the current scientific study of the mind is itself fractured by a crisis of equivocation.

In the current intellectual climate, the term "mind" has become radically equivocal, as various disciplines operate at disparate levels of reality without a unifying framework. Neuroscience investigates patterns of neural activity through fMRI; artificial intelligence focuses on algorithms and heuristics to create artefactual intelligence; psychology examines behavior and working memory through experimentation; linguistics analyzes sentence structures and rules of transformation; and anthropology explores the participatory networking of minds through ethnography. Each discipline possesses its own ontology and methodology, leading to a state of fragmentation where we remain ignorant of the causal constraints and relationships between these levels. The danger of such equivocation is illustrated by the fallacious reasoning that "nothing is better than a long life, and a peanut butter sandwich is better than nothing, therefore a sandwich is better than a long life." This absurdity arises because the word "nothing" shifts its meaning between the absence of any thing and a specific set of desirable things. When we use the term "mind" or "self" across fragmented disciplines without conceptual care, our reasoning becomes similarly ridiculous, and we effectively bullshit ourselves. This fragmentation demands a synoptic vision, positioning philosophy in its vital role of providing the conceptual care necessary to bridge these vocabularies and articulate the causal constraints between levels.

This necessity informs three distinct visions for the practice of cognitive science. The first, generic nominalism, treats "the cognitive sciences" as a mere collective noun for unrelated disciplines, a stance that fails to mitigate fragmentation. The second, interdisciplinary eclecticism, functions like an interfaith dialogue; while it fosters mutual respect and the borrowing of interesting ideas, it lacks the power to provoke a transformative transfer of insight that creates something greater than the sum of its parts. The third and preferred vision is synoptic integration. This approach seeks to construct a bridging vocabulary that addresses the ignorance of causal relationships between levels. This integration is achieved through the cognitive mechanism of metaphor, which balances identity and difference to provoke insightful transformation. In a metaphor such as "Sam is a pig," we look through the "pig" lens to perceive a relevant identity in Sam's behavior, such as gluttony, while maintaining the distance of difference. A metaphor is "apt" when it achieves this balance. In cognitive science, we seek theoretical constructs that possess "multi-aptness," meaning they can bridge multiple domains and provide an overarching integration across disparate disciplines.

This pursuit leads to a normative theory of plausibility, which serves as the standard for evaluating these integrative constructs. Plausibility in this context does not denote high probability, but rather the quality of being reasonable and deserving of being taken seriously. A plausible construct rests on two pillars: elegance and trustworthiness. Elegance is defined as multi-aptness—the power of a construct to provide an insightful pattern of intelligibility across many domains. Trustworthiness is derived from convergence, where independent lines of investigation lead to the same conclusion. This convergence functions as an essential form of bias reduction; by integrating information from multiple independent channels, the distortions inherent in any single channel are canceled out. Science favors metrics and numbers precisely because they afford this convergence, boosting trustworthiness and reducing the deceptive power of mere salience.

The failures of this plausibility machinery manifest as specific cognitive distortions. A conspiracy theory possesses high elegance but lacks trustworthiness; it can explain a vast array of facts through a single radical lens, such as the existence of reptilian aliens, but it lacks independent, convergent evidence. Conversely, a triviality possesses high trustworthiness—being undeniably true—but offers no elegance or transformative insight. We must also be wary of the "deepity," a form of equivocation where a statement like "Love is a four-letter word" sounds profound because it oscillates between a trivial truth about a word and an elegant, though unearned, claim about the concept of love. Similarly, the "Motte-and-Bailey" strategy involves presenting a radical, elegant claim to gain status, only to retreat to a trivial, defensible position when challenged, pretending the two positions are identical. True profundity, the goal of synoptic integration, is achieved only when a construct maintains a balance of high convergence and high elegance, providing a trustworthy and powerful new pattern of intelligibility.

Applying this rigorous framework to the meaning crisis allows for a strategic shift in terminology from "meaning-making" or "meaning-seeking" to "meaning cultivation." Meaning is not a willful romantic imposition, nor is it an empirical object found in the world; rather, it is a participatory and co-creative process that occurs between the agent and the world. The core cognitive capacity for this cultivation is intelligence, defined within psychometrics and artificial intelligence as the capacity of a "General Problem Solver" (GPS). Crucially, intelligence must be distinguished from knowledge or rationality. While knowledge is the product, intelligence is the process of problem-solving. Rationality is further distinguished as the capacity to value the process of problem-solving over the specific product or belief.

To deconstruct this process, we turn to the seminal work of Newell and Simon, who analyzed the "problem space" or "search space" into four features: the initial state, the goal state, the operators that transform states, and the path constraints. Within this framework, solving a problem is the act of finding a sequence of operations that bridges the gap between the initial and goal states while obeying constraints that preserve the agent as a general problem solver. Path constraints are not mere rules; they are essential limitations that ensure a local solution does not devastate the agent's overall adaptivity. Burning down one's house to cook lunch is a failure of intelligence because it solves a local problem at the expense of the agent's capacity to solve future problems across other domains. This analysis of the search space provides the foundation for a profound synoptic integration, allowing us to scientifically address the very machinery that enables the cultivation of meaning in the world.

27 Problem Formulation — Intelligence, Problem Solving, and the Nature of Insight

In this episode, John Vervaeke continues the discussion on **Awakening from the Meaning Crisis**, focusing on **problem formulation** within cognitive science.

He begins by reiterating the need for **synoptic integration** in cognitive science to address issues of equivocation, fragmentation, and the ignorance of causal relationships (0:20-0:40). He proposes studying cognitive machinery responsible for **meaning cultivation** and exemplifying synoptic integration through plausible and profound constructs (0:50-1:20).

Vervaeke emphasizes that **intelligence** is a crucial capacity for a cognitive agent and a central concept explored across neuroscience, AI, and psychology (1:24-2:07). He warns against equivocating on the term "intelligence" and suggests focusing on the **process of acquiring knowledge** rather than just the results or products of intelligence (2:10-2:56).

Drawing on the work of **Newell and Simon**, he introduces the idea of intelligence as the capacity for **general problem-solving** (2:58-3:22). A problem is analyzed as a transition from an **initial state to a goal state** through a sequence of **operations** while adhering to **path constraints** (3:48-4:35). The explication of the **problem space** is highlighted as a profound contribution of Newell and Simon's work (4:41-4:58).

A key challenge in problem-solving is **combinatorial explosion**, where the number of possible pathways in a problem space (like chess) is astronomically large, making it impossible to search the entire space (7:33-9:50). Vervaeke explains that human intelligence excels at **relevance realization**, zeroing in on a small, relevant subsection of the problem space to find solutions (10:10-11:01). This process is linked to the **generation of obviousness** and **salience** in cognition (12:01-12:37). The ability to **dynamically restructure** what is considered relevant and salient is crucial for problem-solving (12:41-13:14).

He then introduces the distinction between **heuristics and algorithms** (15:09-15:11), noting that an **algorithm** guarantees a solution but requires searching the entire, often combinatorially explosive, problem space, which leads to **cognitive suicide** if applied comprehensively (15:46-17:55). This explains why equating rationality solely with being logical is absurd, as logic is algorithmic and certainty-based (18:11-19:27). Instead, **being rational means knowing when, where, how much, and to what degree to be logical** (19:36-19:46).

Heuristics, on the other hand, are problem-solving methods that are not guaranteed to find a solution but are reliable for increasing chances of success by **limiting the search space** (20:44-21:40). Heuristics are biases, and the **"no free lunch theorem"** states that avoiding combinatorial explosion inherently means falling prey to bias (22:40-22:54).

Vervaeke praises Newell and Simon for their understanding of heuristics and their approach to cognitive science through **analyzing, formalizing, and mechanizing** explanations to avoid circular reasoning (24:16-29:22). This approach allows for a scientific explanation of human intelligence and our capacity to generate scientific explanations, filling a "hole" in the naturalistic worldview (30:20-32:40).

However, Vervaeke then criticizes Newell and Simon for their **assumption of essentialism** regarding problems, believing all problems are fundamentally the same (33:33-38:50). This led them to trivialize **problem formulation**, which is crucial for dealing with **ill-defined problems** (39:02-42:26). Most real-world problems are ill-defined, meaning the initial state, goal state, and relevant operations/constraints are unclear (42:28-46:02).

He illustrates the power of problem formulation with the **mutilated chessboard example** (47:08-47:43). If formulated as a covering problem, it leads to combinatorial explosion (48:38-49:17). However, by **re-formulating it using a parity strategy** (focusing on the colors of the squares), the problem space collapses, and the solution becomes obvious (50:06-52:20). This demonstrates that **insight** is the process by which bad problem formulation is converted into good problem formulation (52:48-53:08). Therefore, **insight is central to**

rationality alongside logic, and psycho-technologies like **mindfulness** can improve insight by restructuring the problem landscape (53:11-54:00).

1. Introduction to Synoptic Integration and Cognitive Machinery

In the contemporary landscape of cognitive science, the pursuit of "synoptic integration" is not merely an academic exercise but a strategic necessity. It serves as a vital tool to combat the fragmentation and the chronic equivocation that plague our understanding of the mind. By bridging disparate levels of analysis—neuroscientific, psychological, linguistic, and computational—we can address our profound ignorance regarding the causal relations between the mind's various functions. Without such integration, we risk "bullshitting ourselves," falling into self-deception by using terms like "intelligence" or "meaning" without understanding the underlying cognitive machinery that makes them possible.

To address the "meaning crisis," we must shift our investigation from intelligence as a product—such as accumulated knowledge or external technology—to intelligence as a process. By viewing intelligence through the lens of knowledge acquisition rather than static results, it transforms from a mystery to be explained into a powerful explanatory tool itself. Understanding the process of how we engage with the world allows us to demystify the engine of meaning cultivation. This shift necessitates a move toward formal models of problem-solving, where the fundamental mechanics of cognitive agency are most rigorously articulated.

2. The Formal Analysis of General Problem Solving

The foundational framework for this investigation is the formal analysis provided by Allen Newell and Herbert Simon, who defined intelligence as "general problem solving." This is the capacity of an agent to navigate a wide variety of problems across disparate domains. Their work deconstructs the act of problem-solving into a "problem space" comprised of four essential components:

1. **The Initial State:** The agent's representation of their current situation.
2. **The Goal State:** The desired state the agent wishes to achieve.
3. **Operators:** The specific actions or transformations available to the agent (e.g., the physical movements required to raise a hand and grasp a cup).
4. **Path Constraints:** The rules or limitations that govern the process, ensuring that the solution to a specific problem does not undermine the agent's general intelligence or broader goals.

While pedagogical diagrams often present these spaces from a "God's eye point of view"—where every pathway is visible and the solution is apparent—this perspective is misleading. In reality, the agent is situated *within* the problem space at the initial state. The agent's predicament is defined by inherent ignorance; from their perspective, they cannot see which specific sequence of operators will lead to the goal while respecting the constraints. Intelligence, therefore, is the method of discovering these transformations within an environment of radical uncertainty.

3. Combinatorial Explosion and the Necessity of Relevance Realization

The primary obstacle for any intelligent system, biological or artificial, is the mathematical reality of "Combinatorial Explosion." As noted by psychologist Keith Holyoke, the number of potential pathways in a problem space grows exponentially relative to the number of possible moves and the depth of the search. This is expressed by the formula F^D , where F represents the number of operators and D the number of stages or turns. In a standard game of chess, with an average of 30 legal moves and 60 turns, the problem space contains approximately 4.29×10^{88} potential pathways.

To grasp the scale of this explosion, 4.29×10^{88} is a number that exceeds the estimated total of atomic particles in the known universe. Standard biological processing is fundamentally insufficient to search this

space; even with 10^{15} synaptic connections, the human brain is overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the possibilities. As researchers like Stanovich and Cherniak have argued, what we are actually measuring when we test intelligence is an agent's ability to deal with these computational limitations. Intelligence is not the ability to search the whole space, but rather the ability to "zero in" on a tiny, relevant subsection.

This function is known as **Relevance Realization**. It is the cognitive process by which an agent ignores the astronomical noise of the universe to find a solution. In our experience, this manifests as "obviousness"—a phenomenological state where certain actions and information become salient while others simply disappear. Scientifically, however, "obviousness" is not what explains our behavior; it is the very thing we must explain. We must understand how the brain dynamically self-organizes its attention to make the relevant world stand out.

4. The Critique of Algorithmic Certainty and the Ratio of Rationality

A common strategic error in cognitive science is equating rationality with the strict application of logic and the pursuit of certainty. To understand the flaw in this "Mr. Spock" or Cartesian ideal, we must distinguish between algorithms and heuristics. An **algorithm** is a problem-solving technique guaranteed to find a solution or prove one does not exist. However, because algorithms generally require an exhaustive search of the problem space to maintain that guarantee, pursuing algorithmic certainty in a combinatorially explosive world is "cognitive suicide."

Deductive logic and mathematics are tools of certainty, but they cannot manage the explosive nature of the real world. Consequently, we must redefine **rationality**. Being rational is not synonymous with being "logical"; rather, it is the "ratio" or "rationing" of cognitive resources. Rationality is the higher-order ability to know when, where, how much, and to what degree to be logical. It is the management of psycho-technologies to overcome self-deception, recognizing that we must always navigate a trade-off between the certainty of a solution and the findability of a solution.

5. Heuristics, Bias, and the "No Free Lunch" Theorem

Because algorithms are often computationally impossible, intelligent agents must rely on **heuristics**. A heuristic is a "rule of thumb" that increases the odds of success without offering a guarantee. In chess, heuristics like "control the center board" or "don't lose your queen" function by pre-judging relevance and limiting the search space before the search even begins.

While heuristics make us adaptive, they come with an unavoidable price: **bias**. By their very nature, heuristics are "prejudicial"—they instruct the agent on what to ignore based on prior patterns or prototypes. This leads to the "No Free Lunch" theorem: the very mechanisms that allow us to avoid combinatorial explosion and act effectively are the same mechanisms that make us prone to systematic error and self-deception. Our intelligence and our capacity for "bullshit" are essentially two sides of the same cognitive coin.

6. The Naturalistic Imperative and the Avoidance of Circularity

A primary goal of cognitive science is to satisfy the **Naturalistic Imperative**: the requirement to explain mental terms using non-mental terms. This is essential to avoid the "Homunculus Fallacy"—the circular explanation of the mind that posits a "little man" inside the head to explain how we think or see. If we explain vision by saying there is an internal observer, we create an infinite regress that explains nothing.

To avoid this, Newell and Simon followed a three-step scientific process:

1. **Analyze:** Deconstruct complex mental phenomena into basic components.
2. **Formalize:** Create a mathematical or graphical representation (such as the problem space).
3. **Mechanize:** Demonstrate that a non-intelligent machine can execute these formalized steps.

By mechanizing intelligence, we ensure that no "mental magic" has been smuggled into the theory. This project is a profound attempt to bridge the "hole" in the naturalistic worldview created by the Scientific Revolution. While

science has been remarkably successful at explaining the external world, it has historically struggled to explain the *generator* of science—human intelligence. Newell and Simon's work aims to integrate the scientist back into the scientific worldview.

7. Ill-Defined Problems and the Power of Problem Formulation

Despite their brilliance, Newell and Simon relied on a "heuristic of essentialism"—the assumption that all problems share a core essence and can be solved with a single general strategy. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously challenged such essentialism, showing that categories like "games" share only a "family resemblance" rather than a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions. We use the essentialist heuristic because it is adaptive—it allows for generalization and prediction—but we err when we apply it algorithmically to categories that lack a core essence.

This realization reveals the distinction between **well-defined** and **ill-defined** problems:

- **Well-Defined Problems:** The initial state, goal state, and operators are clearly provided (e.g., a standardized math problem).
- **Ill-Defined Problems:** These represent the vast majority of real-world challenges, such as "taking good notes," "following a conversation," or "going on a date."

In these "phenomenological instances of ill-definedness," the primary cognitive work is not the search for a solution, but **Problem Formulation**. To solve such problems, the agent must first determine what information is relevant and how to represent the problem so that it becomes solvable. The core of real-world intelligence is the relevance realization required to turn an ill-defined mess into a well-defined search.

8. Insight and the Mutilated Chessboard

Insight is the strategic process of converting a bad problem formulation into a good one. This is elegantly illustrated by the "Mutilated Chessboard" experiment by Kaplan and Simon. Participants are shown a board with two opposite corners removed (leaving 62 squares) and asked if 31 dominoes can cover it.

Most participants adopt a "covering strategy," attempting to mentally visualize the dominoes. This approach is combinatorially explosive and leads to failure; the source describes a mathematician who spent 16 to 18 hours on the problem, filling 81 pages of a "Hillary notebook" with topographical calculations, only to come to grief. The problem is logically impossible because each domino must cover exactly one white and one black square. Since the two removed corners were of the same color (parity), the board is left with an unequal number of black and white squares.

When a participant realizes this "parity strategy," the relevant information (color) becomes salient, and the solution—that the task is impossible—becomes "obvious." The search space collapses instantly. This capacity for insight—restructuring the **Salience Landscape** to make a solution apparent—is central to rationality. It shares deep connections with mindfulness, as both involve the ability to dynamically self-organize our cognition to fit the world. Future discussions will continue to investigate the role of relevance realization in categorization, action, and communication.

28 Convergence To Relevance Realization

In this episode of "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis," John Vervaeke continues his discussion on the cognitive science of intelligence, focusing on the concept of **relevance realization** (0:19). He emphasizes how Newell and Simon's work, despite its shortcomings, highlights the crucial role of relevance realization in general problem-solving (1:19).

Vervaeke explains that intelligence is not merely about logical processing but also involves **heuristic processing** (1:55), which allows us to deal with the overwhelming amount of information available by ignoring irrelevant data. However, this also makes cognition susceptible to bias and self-deception (2:14).

A significant part of the discussion revolves around the **frame problem** (29:17), which illustrates the difficulty of computationally determining what information is relevant in a given situation. Vervaeke uses the example of a robot trying to retrieve a battery from a wagon with a lit bomb (21:12) to demonstrate that the number of potential side effects and irrelevant details is combinatorially explosive, making it impossible for a machine to logically process everything. This leads to the conclusion that relevance realization isn't about applying a definition but rather about intelligently ignoring irrelevance (28:40).

Vervaeke extends the concept of relevance realization to **communication** (30:26), drawing on Grice's work on implicature (31:31). He argues that successful communication relies on conveying more than what is explicitly said, and this ability to "read between the lines" (36:41) is a form of relevance realization. He cites Sperber and Wilson's argument that all Gricean maxims (quantity, manner, quality) reduce to the single maxim of **being relevant** (39:53).

The video concludes by proposing that relevance realization is central to understanding **wisdom, self-transcendence, spirituality, and meaning** (48:14). Vervaeke suggests that the meaning crisis stems from a fragmentation of connections—between mind and body, mind and world, and parts of the mind to itself (51:06). He posits that relevance realization is the ability to make these crucial connections, and by understanding its machinery, we can develop new psycho-technologies to regenerate these fraying connections, leading to the cultivation of wisdom and a sense of connectedness (52:36).

Convergence to Relevance Realization: A Formal Reconstruction of the Cognitive Science of Intelligence

1. The Foundations of General Problem Solving and the Naturalistic Imperative

The birth of modern cognitive science was fundamentally catalyzed by the work of Allen Newell and Herbert Simon, who sought to construct a plausible framework for understanding intelligence as a "general problem solver." Their project was driven by the "naturalistic imperative"—a strategic effort to resituate the human mind within the scientific worldview by explaining mental processes in non-mental, mechanical terms. By formalizing intelligence as a series of logical operations, they aimed to avoid the "homuncular fallacy," the circular trap of explaining the mind by positing a smaller, intelligent agent within it. This attempt to demystify cognition through mechanization was not merely a theoretical exercise; it was a foundational effort to prove that intelligence is, at its core, formal rule-following.

However, the very process of formalization revealed a profound structural limitation that has since defined the field: the combinatorial explosive nature of problem spaces. As Newell and Simon attempted to mechanize even simple tasks, they discovered that the sheer number of possible moves and logical permutations in any given environment expands exponentially. This discovery was transformative, as it proved that a purely algorithmic search through every possibility is computationally impossible for any finite agent. Consequently, the discovery of combinatorial explosion shifted the focus of cognitive science from the mere application of rules to the deeper mystery of how a system determines which rules and paths are worth following.

2. Heuristics, Algorithms, and the Inevitability of Cognitive Bias

In response to the threat of combinatorial explosion, cognitive science established a critical distinction between algorithmic and heuristic processing. An algorithm represents the Cartesian ideal of certainty—a step-by-step procedure that guarantees a correct result. Yet, because algorithms are exhaustive, they are frequently paralyzed by the vastness of real-world problem spaces. Human intelligence, therefore, must rely on heuristics: cognitive shortcuts that allow an agent to "zero in" on promising information while ignoring the overwhelming majority of available data. This is not merely a convenience but a structural necessity. Without the ability to ignore most of the world, we could not act within it.

There is a profound irony in this "two-edged sword" of heuristic processing. The very mechanism that makes us intelligently adaptive—our ability to filter out the irrelevant—is the direct cause of our capacity for self-deception. By their nature, heuristics function by prejudicing and biasing our cognition, making us vulnerable to being misled by the very shortcuts that save us from calculation. Our greatest cognitive strength is inextricably linked to our structural vulnerability to bias. While Newell and Simon's work exemplified the power of the naturalistic imperative, their early models were limited by their own cognitive heuristics, particularly regarding how problems are formulated.

3. Problem Formulation, Insight, and the Critique of Essentialism

A central shortcoming in early cognitive models was the overuse of the "essentialist heuristic." This cognitive tendency assumes that all members of a category share a single, underlying essence, which is vital for making rapid predictions and generalizations. However, as Ludwig Wittgenstein famously observed with categories like "games," many groupings do not possess an essence. Newell and Simon fell prey to this heuristic, assuming that all problems were essentially the same. This led them to treat "problem formulation"—or "problem framing"—as a trivial matter, overlooking the essential differences between "well-defined" and "ill-defined" problems.

The importance of framing is illuminated by the "mutilated chessboard" problem. When formulated as a "covering strategy," the problem presents a combinatorial explosive search; however, when reframed through a "parity strategy"—noticing that the two removed squares are the same color—the solution becomes trivial. This shift is the essence of "insight," which the source defines as the recursively self-organizing restructuring of problem framing. Insight is a self-corrective mechanism for our relevance realization machinery, allowing us to break out of inappropriate cognitive boxes and reframe what is salient. This capacity for dynamic reframing is a cornerstone of rationality, extending beyond problem-solving into the basic cognitive function of categorization.

4. The Psychological Construction of Categories and the Limits of Similarity

Categorization is fundamental to intelligence, facilitating prediction, abstraction, and the communication of complex ideas. However, the mechanism of categorization cannot be explained by "logical similarity." Philosopher Nelson Goodman demonstrated that any two objects, such as a bison and a lawnmower, share an indefinitely large number of "true" properties—both contain carbon, both weigh less than a ton, neither existed 300 million years ago. Because the list of shared properties is combinatorially explosive, truth and relevance are not the same; the list is logically true but psychologically irrelevant.

Instead, categorization relies on a psychological account of similarity driven by relevance realization. A category is a set of things we "sense belong together" based on what is salient in a specific context. This is best illustrated by the seemingly nonsensical grouping of "works of art, your children, your spouse, gasoline, and explosive material." These items share no logical essence until the context of a house fire is introduced, at which point the relevance realization machinery instantly groups them as "things to save" or "dangers to avoid." This highlights that intelligence is not about cataloging infinite logical truths, but about zeroing in on the relevant features required for action.

5. The Frame Problem and the Mechanics of Intelligent Ignorance

The "Frame Problem" represents a pivotal challenge in artificial intelligence, focusing on how an agent tracks the consequences of its actions. Daniel Dennett's thought experiment involving a robot retrieving a battery from a wagon illustrates three levels of failure: first, ignoring a side effect (a bomb); second, attempting to calculate all

possible side effects (the squeaking of wheels, the position of Mars), which leads to a combinatorial explosion; and third, the "Zen-like" paradox of the third robot, which attempted to make an exhaustive list of irrelevant things to ignore. This third failure proves that you cannot check a list of irrelevant things to ignore them, because the very act of checking is an act of attention that consumes the agent.

This suggests that relevance realization is not the application of a definition, but the act of "intelligently ignoring" the irrelevant. As researchers like Murray Shanahan have noted, while technical versions of the Frame Problem may be solved, the deeper "relevance problem" remains. This is increasingly seen as the primary function of consciousness and working memory: to screen off the irrelevant and make the relevant salient to the agent. This ability to "frame" our interaction with the world is the prerequisite for agency and, by extension, the foundation of all communication.

6. Linguistic Communication as Relevance Realization

Communication is a strategic pillar of intelligence, allowing for the coordination of behavior through the etymological root of intelligence: *inter-ledger*, or "reading between the lines." H.P. Grice's work on "implicature" demonstrates that we always convey much more than we explicitly state. In the anecdote of the driver who is "out of gas" and the pedestrian who points to a "gas station at the corner," both rely on a massive amount of unspoken, relevant information—that the station is open, sells fuel, and is nearby.

Sperber and Wilson refined Grice's maxims by arguing that they all reduce to the single principle of Relevance. They provocatively argue that we do not actually want "truth" in communication, as the total truth is combinatorially explosive. Instead, we want "sincerity" or "honesty." To be a "sincere" communicator is to select only what is relevant to the context. A person who tells you every true thing in their mind—the "horrible" party guest who traps you for hours with irrelevant details of their failing marriage—is being "truthful" but failing at the fundamental intelligence of communication. Language, therefore, is the sharing of relevant implications.

7. Synthesis: Relevance Realization and the Meaning Crisis

A synoptic integration reveals that selective attention, working memory, long-term memory, and problem-solving all converge on the foundational process of relevance realization. As evidenced by the work of Lin Hasher, working memory is less about storage and more about the ability to screen off irrelevant information. This machinery is the "salience landscaping" engine of the mind, determining what attracts our attention and motivates our energy. It is the machinery of wisdom, insight, and self-transcendence, allowing us to overcome the self-deception inherent in our cognitive shortcuts.

The contemporary "meaning crisis" can be understood as a fragmentation of the connections that afford a sense of belonging: the Nomological, Narrative, and Normative orders. If "meaning" is a metaphor for connection, then relevance realization is the process that makes those connections possible—connecting mind to body, mind to world, and mind to self. Following Plato's vision of the parts of the soul being "together in the right way," relevance realization establishes the optimal relations of relevance between the self and reality. To address this crisis, we must develop and regenerate "psycho-technologies" designed to refine this machinery, cultivating the wisdom and self-transcendence necessary to restore our fraying connections to the world.

29 Getting to the Depths of Relevance Realization

John Vervaeke's "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis" (0:14) discusses the centrality of **relevance realization** as a key to understanding human cognition, intelligence, and spirituality.

Here's a breakdown of the key arguments:

- **The Problem of Relevance (0:27):** Vervaeke reviews how relevance realization is crucial for various cognitive functions:
 - **Problem-solving:** It helps avoid combinatorial explosion by framing problems and identifying relevant information (1:59). Insight (3:16), which involves re-framing problems, also highlights the role of relevance.
 - **Categorization:** Our ability to categorize relies on judging relevant similarities between objects (3:34).
 - **Communication:** Effective communication depends on conveying more than what is explicitly said, with relevance being the guiding principle (5:22).
 - **Robotics/Agency:** Robots (and agents) must discern relevant side effects to act intelligently, avoiding the "proliferation of side effects" problem (6:00).
- **Relevance and Consciousness (6:43):** Consciousness itself is deeply intertwined with relevance realization, especially in complex and ill-defined situations where our agency is involved (6:54). Working memory acts as a "relevance filter" (7:17), screening out irrelevant information, which is also linked to general intelligence (7:37).
- **Relevance and Meaning (8:18):** Vervaeke proposes that relevance realization might explain the fundamental aspect of meaning that was lost in the "meaning crisis" – a sense of **connectedness** (8:43) and how meaning, relevance, and agency are deeply interconnected (9:02).
- **Challenges in Explaining Relevance (10:08):** Vervaeke then explores why it's difficult to provide a scientific explanation of relevance without falling into circular reasoning.
 - **Avoiding the Homunculus Fallacy:** Any explanation of relevance must not itself presuppose relevance in the explanatory mechanisms (11:14).
 - **Critique of Representational Accounts:** Representations are inherently "aspectual" (15:52), meaning they already zero in on relevant properties, thus they cannot be the *source* of relevance (18:08). This suggests that the **locus of meaning and spirituality might be found at a sub-representational level** (28:32). He uses the example of "multiple object tracking" and "fingers of instantiation" (19:41) to illustrate a pre-conceptual, pre-categorical way the mind interacts with the world through "salience tagging" (23:30) of "hereness and nowness" (23:51).
 - **Critique of Computational Accounts:** Computation, based on implication and inference, also presupposes relevance (33:01). Inferences require selecting *relevant* implications out of a combinatorially explosive number (35:44). Rules also require interpretation and specification in their application, which relies on the **skill of judgment** (42:27) – essentially, the skill of relevance realization.
 - **Critique of Modularity:** Attributing relevance realization to a "central executive" (48:09) or specific brain area is a homunculus fallacy (48:41) and ignores the fact that relevance operates simultaneously across multiple levels of cognition (49:33).
- **Towards a Theory of Relevance Realization (50:09):** Vervaeke suggests that a viable account of relevance realization must be:
 - **Internal (Autopoietic):** It must operate based on goals that are constitutive and internal to the system, much like living (autopoietic) systems aim to preserve their own self-organization (51:41). This connects relevance realization deeply to being a living thing (52:51).
 - **Scale-Invariant and Self-Organizing:** Relevance must act simultaneously at multiple levels, local and global, in a self-organizing fashion, allowing for insight and self-correction (53:14).

- **The Future of the Argument:** Vervaeke concludes by stating that a scientific theory of *relevance itself* might be impossible, but a scientific theory of **relevance realization** is achievable and sufficient for understanding meaning-making capacities (54:36).

The Depths of Relevance Realization: A Formal Reconstruction of Episode 29

1. Introduction and the Convergence of Relevance

Within the strategic progression of the "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis" series, Episode 29 functions as a critical synthesis, formalizing the "convergence argument" that identifies relevance realization as the primary engine of human cognition. This lecture represents the culmination of extensive collaborative efforts, incorporating insights from Tim Lillicrap, Blake Richards, Leo Ferraro, Anderson Todd, Richard Wu, Christopher Mastropietro, and Zachary Irving. The central thesis posits that relevance realization is not merely a peripheral cognitive task but is constitutive of intelligence and cognitive agency.

This functional necessity is most starkly revealed in the mechanics of problem-solving. Following the classic Newell and Simon model, problem-solving involves navigating a "search space." However, most real-world environments are "ill-defined," presenting a combinatorial explosion of possible data points and logical moves. Intelligent systems do not solve problems through exhaustive search—which is computationally impossible—but through "problem framing." This framing is the essential response to ill-definedness; it is the process of zeroing in on a relevant subset of information to transform an unmanageable search space into a structured, solvable domain.

The necessity of relevance is equally apparent in the logic of categorization. A persistent error in cognitive science is the equivocation between logical and psychological similarity. Logically, any two objects share an infinite number of properties, making them indefinitely similar or dissimilar. Therefore, categorization cannot rely on a purely logical comparison. It requires an "aspectual" judgment—the selection of a set of features that cohere and are relevant to the agent's specific projects. This functional convergence reaches a crescendo in the domain of human communication and robotics. In linguistic exchange, the Gricean Maxims reveal that communication is essentially an exercise in mutual relevance; we convey more than we say by assuming our interlocutors will filter for what matters. Similarly, the "proliferation of side effects" problem in robotics demonstrates that an agent must constantly and actively ignore the irrelevant to avoid the paralysis of checking every potential consequence of an action. Thus, relevance realization serves as the specific functional bridge connecting broad cognitive agency to the structural dynamics of consciousness.

2. Relevance, Consciousness, and the Meaning Crisis

Linking relevance realization to the functional aspects of consciousness and working memory is a strategic requirement for diagnosing the modern "meaning crisis." Consciousness is not a passive theater but a systemic process that becomes most salient in complex, ill-defined situations where agency is at stake. Current research suggests that working memory functions as a "relevance filter," screening off the noise of the environment to permit deeper processing of information critical to the agent's goals. This capacity for filtration is not a minor skill; it is fundamentally linked to measures of general intelligence. To be highly intelligent is to be a master of realizing relevance.

The "meaning crisis"—the pervasive loss of coherence, significance, and purpose—is at its core a breakdown in "connectedness." This sense of being "in touch" with reality is synonymous with the ongoing, successful process of relevance realization. Meaning is not an abstract property of objects but is grounded in the "agent-arena" relationship. This relationship provides the "meta-meaning" for all human projects, as the agent must calibrate their internal state to the environmental "arena" through the constant realization of what is relevant for survival and action. However, establishing relevance as the engine of meaning presents a scientific challenge: we must explain this process naturalistically without falling into the trap of circularity.

3. The Methodological Challenge: Avoiding the Homunculus Fallacy

To construct a robust theory of relevance, we must adhere to a strict methodological principle: a naturalistic explanation must break down intelligent processes into non-intelligent, "mindless" components. This is the only way to avoid the **Homunculus Fallacy**. If we attempt to explain a cognitive function like vision by positing an internal "little man" who sees, we have merely deferred the explanation.

The challenge for a theory of relevance is to ensure that the explanatory machinery—the process we call "X"—does not itself require relevance to function. If X must already determine what is relevant in order to produce relevance realization, the theory is circular. We must find the "parts" of the mind that do not "care" or "judge" but whose collective, mindless interactions result in the emergence of relevance. This guiding principle demands a rigorous critique of the dominant paradigms in cognitive science: representations and computation.

4. The Critique of Representational and Computational Accounts

Traditional cognitive science often locates the mind at the "semantic" (representational) or "syntactic" (computational) levels. However, these levels presuppose relevance rather than explaining it.

- **The Aspectual Nature of Representations:** Every representation—whether a mental image or a proposition—is inherently "aspectual." It does not capture the totality of an object's properties, as those are combinatorially explosive. Instead, a representation selects a relevant subset of properties. Because the act of representation *already* relies on a prior selection of relevant features, representation itself cannot be the causal origin of relevance realization.
- **Sub-Representational Contact (FINSTing):** Zenon Pylyshyn's research on Multiple Object Tracking demonstrates a sub-conceptual layer of cognition. Subjects can track moving targets while losing their categorical features, such as color or shape, maintaining only the "hereness and nowness" of the objects. Pylyshyn identifies this as "FINSTing" (Fingers of Instantiation)—a form of **inactive demonstrative reference**. This is a pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic contact with reality. Before we can categorize an object as a "cat," we must first enact a "salience tagging" that points to a "this" in the environment. This suggests that our primary contact with the world is not representational but participatory.
- **Computation and Inference:** Computation is defined by "implication" (logical rules), but human cognition is characterized by "inference" (the commitment to belief change). Because any single proposition has an infinite number of logical implications, a purely computational system faces immediate combinatorial explosion. We only expend our precious and limited resources—attention, memory, and metabolic energy—on *relevant* inferences. Thus, the computational level relies on a prior sense of relevance that it lacks the syntactic machinery to generate.

The failure of fixed rules and logic to account for relevance reveals that the propositional layer of the mind is not foundational; it depends on the procedural and perspectival.

5. The Primacy of the Procedural and Perspectival

There exists an **asymmetric dependence** in the hierarchy of knowing: the propositional layer (facts and rules) fundamentally rests upon deeper, non-propositional layers. Rules are insufficient for intelligence because they cannot specify their own application without triggering an infinite regress.

Consider the moral rule "be kind." The application of kindness toward a child differs fundamentally from kindness toward a student or a stranger. To follow the rule, one must already possess the **procedural skill of judgment** to determine what "fits" the context. This procedural skill (knowing *how*) further depends on **perspectival knowing**—situational awareness or "salience landscaping." In this layer, we foreground what is important and background what is not. This perspectival landscape is rooted in the **participatory** fit between the agent and the arena.

This is the essence of Ludwig Wittgenstein's "form of life" argument. He famously remarked that if a lion could talk, we could not understand him. This is because the lion's "form of life"—its biological needs and environmental interactions—creates a landscape of relevance so alien to our own that even shared vocabulary would fail to bridge the gap. Our propositional knowledge is merely the tip of an iceberg that is supported by how we participate in the world.

6. Conclusion: Towards an Autopoietic Theory of Relevance Realization

Relevance realization cannot be localized to a single brain "module" or a "Central Executive." To use the term "Central Executive" is merely to dress the homunculus in business terminology. Instead, relevance must be understood as a systemic, self-organizing process that operates simultaneously at the featural and Gestalt levels.

A viable theory of relevance realization must satisfy two primary conditions. First, it must be **scale-invariant**, operating across the entire cognitive architecture from basic perception to high-level reasoning. Second, it must be **autopoietic**. Like a living cell, a cognitive system is self-organizing and self-constituting. Its "goals" are not merely external representations but are internal and constitutive; the system's primary "goal" is to preserve the very organization that allows it to continue realizing relevance.

Relevance realization is therefore a survival necessity for any autopoietic being. We must expend metabolic energy and precious resources only on what matters to our continued existence. Finally, we must distinguish between a "theory of relevance"—which is likely impossible because relevance is a dynamic, shifting relationship—and a **theory of relevance realization**, which explains the underlying process. This leads to the profound realization that the capacity to realize relevance is inextricably linked to being a living thing. We do not merely "calculate" relevance; we embody it through our existence as self-organizing agents in an ever-changing arena.

30 Relevance Realization Meets Dynamical Systems Theory

In this episode, John Vervaeke continues his exploration of **relevance realization**, building upon previous discussions by asserting the necessity of explaining this fundamental cognitive process without circular reasoning (0:23-0:42). He meticulously lays out several arguments against common cognitive explanations:

- **Representations:** Vervaeke argues that representations presuppose the very capacity to realize relevance, making them unsuitable as foundational explanations (0:46-0:56). Empirical evidence like the Fens ting effect and salience tagging supports this view, highlighting how immediate "hereness and nowness" precedes representational understanding (0:57-1:14).
- **Syntactic Level (Inference and Rules):** He further dismisses computational approaches, stating that neither inference nor rules can explain the generation of relevance, as they also rely on it (1:53-2:08).
- **Internal Modules:** The idea of a dedicated internal module for relevance is rejected as a "homunculus" problem, implying a smaller, unexplained agent within the system (2:11-2:18).

Vervaeke then outlines key criteria for a robust theory of relevance realization (2:18-3:57):

- It must be **scale-invariant or multi-scale**, operating simultaneously at local and global levels (2:18-2:30).
- It must account for the **self-organization of relevance**, as demonstrated in phenomena like insight (2:36-2:44).
- Explanatory ideas must be **internal to the relevance-realizing system**, meaning the goals governing relevance realization are constitutive, not built upon external representations (2:48-3:21). This draws a deep connection between relevance realization and **autopoiesis**, a system's self-organization to preserve, protect, and promote itself (3:25-3:39).
- The process must be capable of **developmental self-transcendence and self-correction** (3:51-3:57).

A pivotal distinction is introduced: **between a theory of relevance and a theory of relevance realization** (4:20-4:30). Vervaeke emphatically argues that a scientific theory of *relevance* is impossible (4:34-4:53). He bases this on the philosophical insights of J.S. Mill and Willard Van Orman Quine, highlighting that science operates through **inductive generalization**, requiring categories that possess "systemic import" (5:44-6:44). This means categories must be:

- **Homogeneous:** Members must share important properties to allow for generalization (8:59-9:36).
- **Stable:** The category membership should not be constantly shifting (17:55-19:19).
- **Intrinsic/Inherent:** Properties should belong to the object itself, not merely attributed to it by human interaction (19:26-21:48).

Vervaeke illustrates this by comparing categories like "gold" and "triangles" (which have inductive or deductive essences) to "white things" or "things that happen on Tuesday" (which lack systemic import and therefore cannot be scientifically explained) (9:39-16:07, 21:55-23:46). He then applies this to relevance (24:10-27:22):

- The class of things we find relevant is **not homogeneous** (24:28-25:03).
- Relevance is **not stable**; what is relevant one minute may be irrelevant the next (25:07-26:11).
- Relevance is **not intrinsic** to an object; it is always "relevant to someone or something," specifically an autopoietic system with needs (26:17-27:22).

To circumvent the impossibility of a theory of relevance, Vervaeke proposes an analogy with **Darwinian evolution** (29:53-30:06). Darwin, he explains, didn't provide a theory of "essential design" or "fitness" but rather a theory of how **fittedness evolves** through a dynamic, self-organizing process (31:00-34:50).

Similarly, Vervaeke suggests that **relevance** should be understood as "**cognitive interactional fitness**," and what is needed is a theory of how this fitness **evolves** (37:03-37:40). This involves a **virtual engine** that regulates the **sensory-motor loop** (38:46-39:00), allowing the cognitive system to constantly evolve its fittedness to the environment without needing a final, essential framework (39:00-39:30).

This "evolution" of cognitive interactional fitness would be based on **bio-economic properties** (41:43-43:49), which are sub-semantic and sub-syntactic, dealing with the allocation and use of resources like time, metabolic energy, and processing power (42:35-43:49). These bio-economic processes are governed by **logistical norms**, particularly **efficiency and resiliency** (44:25-45:16).

Vervaeke explains that efficiency and resiliency are in an **opponent relationship** (52:43-53:05), much like the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems (48:51-51:47). Maximizing efficiency (e.g., downsizing a business) often reduces resiliency (the capacity to adapt to unexpected changes or repair) (54:01-56:58). The idea is that the brain sets up a **virtual engine** that leverages this trade-off, creating a self-organizing dynamical system that constantly optimizes cognitive interactional fittedness to the environment (57:15-57:47). He promises to delve deeper into how this might be realized in the brain in the next lecture (57:49-57:53).

The central issue in understanding cognition is the problem of realizing what is relevant. To construct a viable theory of this capacity, we must adhere to a crucial methodological principle: we cannot presuppose the ability to determine relevance in any process that we use to explain it. Previous arguments have demonstrated the failure of several common explanatory frameworks on these grounds. We cannot use representations as the originary explanation for relevance, as the very act of forming a representation presupposes that some features have already been identified as salient and worthy of being represented. This conceptual point is well supported by empirical evidence on salience tagging, which demonstrates the pre-representational capacity to make the here-and-now stand out. While representations can certainly alter or transform what we find relevant, they cannot be the foundational explanation for the phenomenon itself.

Likewise, syntactic or computational processes, such as inference and rule-following, cannot generate relevance because they too depend upon it. An inferential system must be guided toward relevant premises and rules from a combinatorially explosive set of possibilities, a guidance that the system itself cannot provide without presupposing the very capacity it is meant to explain.

The idea of an internal, dedicated "relevance module" is also untenable. The phenomenon of insight reveals that relevance realization is not a localized function but a self-organizing process that operates across multiple scales simultaneously, integrating both local details and the global context. No fixed, dedicated module could account for this multi-scalar, self-organizing, and developmentally transcendent capacity for self-correction.

This leads to the conclusion that any explanatory processes must be constitutively internal to the relevance-realizing system itself. The goals that govern relevance realization cannot be representational goals about the environment; instead, they must be the constitutive goals of an autopoietic system—a system that is self-organized for the primary purpose of preserving, protecting, and promoting its own self-organization. This insight draws a deep connection between relevance realization, life, and the nature of being a self-creating entity. Such a system grounds our understanding in a conceptual hierarchy where the propositional depends on the procedural, which depends on the perspectival, which is ultimately grounded in the participatory. Yet, to move forward, we must make a pivotal distinction between a theory of *relevance* and a theory of *relevance realization*. It is the argument here that a scientific theory of relevance is impossible, and understanding why is the key to reframing the entire problem.

A scientific theory of relevance cannot exist because of the very nature of science itself. While the philosophy of science is rife with debate, a constitutive practice of science is the generation of powerful inductive generalizations. Scientists study a sample of things, identify a set of features or properties, and then seek to generalize those findings to all other instances of that type. The broader and more reliable these generalizations, the more powerful the scientific theory. For a category to support such generalizations, it must possess what the philosopher J.S. Mill called “systematic import.” To have systematic import, a category must be formed in such a way that it supports broad and reliable inductive predictions.

Reverse-engineering this requirement reveals a set of necessary conditions. First, the members of a scientific category must be homogeneous; they must share a core set of important, generalizable properties. It is this shared set of properties that allows for the inductive leap from a studied sample to the entire class. If the members are heterogeneous, no common set of properties exists to be generalized, and the scientific endeavor fails. This points toward the idea of an essence, a concept that has become philosophically fraught.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously pointed out that many of our everyday categories, like “game,” do not have a classical deductive essence—a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that picks out all and only members of that class. This has led some to mistakenly conclude that no categories have essences. Triangles, however, have a clear deductive essence. Expanding on this, the philosopher W.V.O. Quine argued that science discovers *inductive* essences. When science generates a powerful inductive generalization for a category like “gold,” it has, in effect, discovered the set of properties that applies to all and only instances of gold. Essentialism, then, is not inherently flawed; it is the mistake of treating a category *as if* it has an essence when it does not. The critical point is that a scientific explanation is only possible for categories that are homogeneous enough to possess an inductive essence.

Beyond homogeneity and the possession of an inductive essence, a category must meet further criteria to support robust scientific theorizing. The membership of the category must be stable. If the kind of thing that belongs to a category is constantly shifting, any attempt at inductive generalization will be corrupted by the logical fallacy of equivocation. For instance, the word “gravity” originally referred to seriousness and a disposition toward the grave. Its modern scientific usage refers to a fundamental physical force. If we failed to distinguish between these meanings and tried to form inductive generalizations about “gravity,” our arguments would become invalid and ridiculous. Stability of meaning is a prerequisite for scientific inquiry.

Furthermore, as argued by John Searle, science requires categories whose members have intrinsic properties, not merely attributed ones that arise from their relationship to us. Gold possesses intrinsic properties like its mass and atomic number, which we cannot alter by collective agreement. Money, by contrast, is not an intrinsic property of a coin or a piece of paper; it is an attributed property that exists only because we collectively agree to treat it as such. If that agreement dissolves, the money vanishes, whereas the gold remains gold. Many properties we take to be intrinsic, such as an object being a “bottle,” are in fact attributed and relational, dependent on our use for them. This does not make relational things unreal—money and bottles are certainly real in their effects—but it does mean that categories defined by such attributed properties are unsuited for the kind of inductive generalization that constitutes science.

To form a scientific theory, we need categories whose members are homogeneous, stable, and defined by intrinsic properties. A category like “white things,” to use Mill's example, fails because its members are heterogeneous; one can make true statements about its members, but one cannot form a science of them. By contrast, a category like “horses” does support inductive generalization, because what we learn about one horse largely generalizes to others. A category like “Tuesday events” fails on all counts because its members are heterogeneous, unstable, and defined by an attributed, non-intrinsic property. While we can make true statements about members of these failed categories, we cannot build a science of them.

When we apply these criteria to the concept of “relevance,” we find that it fails every test for systematic import. Consequently, we cannot have a scientific theory of relevance.

First, the class of things we find relevant is not homogeneous. A pen, a knee, the air, and a particular day in May might all be found relevant at different times, yet they share no common properties other than having been found relevant. The category is as heterogeneous as “white things,” supporting no inductive generalizations beyond the trivial fact of its members having been deemed relevant at some point.

Nor is relevance a stable property. What is critically relevant in one moment becomes utterly irrelevant in the next. While one might suggest that something like oxygen is stably relevant, this is only true contingent on the desire to live; for someone choosing to end their life by suffocation, its relevance ceases. Relevance is dynamic and transient, not a stable feature upon which a science could be built.

Finally, relevance is not an intrinsic property of any object. An object cannot possess relevance in the absence of a sentient being for which things can matter. Relevance is always relational: it is relevant *to* an autopoietic agent, a self-organizing system with needs. Things can only matter when there is a system for which their existence matters in the service of its own continuation.

Because the category of relevance lacks an essence, stability, and intrinsicness, any attempt to build a theory of “relevance detection” is fundamentally misguided, as it presupposes that relevance is a stable, intrinsic property of the world waiting to be found. This impasse demands a conceptual shift. We must move away from a theory *of* relevance and toward a theory *of* relevance *realization*. The key to this shift lies in an analogy to one of the most powerful ideas in science: Darwinian evolution. Before Darwin, naturalists studied the “design” of organisms, seeking to understand the essence of how things were fitted to their environment as a window into the mind of God. Darwin’s central insight was to realize that there is no *essential design* or *essence of fittedness*. Biological fitness is not a single, definable property. Some organisms are fit because they are big, others because they are small; some are fast, others slow; some are complex, others simple. The environment is so complex and dynamic that there are innumerable and ever-changing ways to fit within it.

Darwin understood that he did not need a theory *of* fitness. Instead, he developed a theory of *how fittedness* evolves—a theory of how it is constantly being realized, redefined, and redesigned through a dynamic, self-organizing process. The theory of evolution by natural selection is a theory of how fittedness is continuously realized, not a definition of what fitness is. It describes a dynamical system—a virtual engine of variation and selection operating on reproduction—that allows the fittedness of organisms to constantly evolve. This process is self-organizing, requiring no intelligent designer.

Herein lies the proposed solution. We can treat relevance as analogous to biological fitness, defining it as cognitive interactional fitness. This refers to how well an agent’s cognition and problem-solving are fitted to its environment. Just as with biological fitness, we do not need a theory *of* this cognitive fitness, for it has no essence and is not stable. What we need is a theory of how this fitness evolves, how it is constantly being realized. The research program, therefore, is to identify the dynamical system—the virtual engine—that regulates the sensorimotor loop between agent and environment, allowing the agent’s cognitive interactional fitness to continuously self-organize and evolve.

This virtual engine must operate on a level below semantics and syntax, grounded in the autopoietic nature of the organism. It must be based on bio-economic properties. An organism can be understood as a bio-economy, a self-organizing system that manages the allocation of valuable but limited resources like time, metabolic energy, and cognitive processing power. This distribution of resources is organized to serve the constitutive goal of preserving the bio-economy itself. Such a system is regulated not by logical or semantic norms, but by logistical norms—principles governing the proper disposition and use of resources.

The two core, opposing logistical norms that regulate this bio-economy are efficiency and resiliency. Efficiency is a selective constraint that seeks to maximize the ratio of output to cost. A business, for example, might increase efficiency by downsizing, maximizing profit for labor costs. The drawback of pure efficiency, however, is fragility. A system cut to the bone has no slack to handle unexpected events, such as a sick employee or a new market opportunity. It lacks the resources to repair, restructure, or adapt. Resiliency, by contrast, is an enabling constraint. It is the capacity to deal with novelty, damage, and opportunity by restructuring, repairing, and

adapting. This requires redundancy and slack in the system, which is directly at odds with the demands of pure efficiency.

The dynamic between these opposing forces can be understood through the principle of opponent processing. Consider the autonomic nervous system, which regulates arousal. The sympathetic system is biased to find evidence to increase arousal, while the parasympathetic system is biased to find evidence to decrease it. These two systems are opposed in their goals but integrated in their function. Their constant tug-of-war creates a dynamic process that continuously evolves and optimizes the level of arousal to fit the changing demands of the environment. This opponent processing is a powerful mechanism for self-organizing optimization.

The final proposal is that relevance realization functions as a virtual engine created by the opponent processing of the logistical norms of efficiency and resiliency. This dynamic trade-off between the selective constraints of efficiency and the enabling constraints of resiliency regulates the organism's bio-economy. This bio-economic regulation, in turn, shapes and constrains the sensorimotor loop through which the agent interacts with its environment. In this way, the agent's cognitive interactional fitness is constantly being optimized and evolved in a self-organizing fashion, allowing relevance to be continuously realized without ever being represented or detected as a fixed property of the world. The next step is to explore how such a process might be realized in the brain.

31 Embodied-Embedded RR as Dynamical-Developmental GI

In this episode, Dr. John Vervaeke continues his discussion on **relevance realization (RR)**, proposing a scientific theory for how humans zero in on relevant information in a constantly changing environment.

Here's a more detailed summary of the key points:

- **Theory of Relevance vs. Relevance Realization (0:40):** Vervaeke distinguishes between a theory of relevance, which he argues is impossible to have scientifically due to a lack of "systematic import," and a theory of **relevance realization**, which focuses on the process of how relevance is achieved.
- **Darwinian Analogy (1:00-1:59):** He draws an analogy to Darwin's theory of evolution, suggesting that just as natural selection is a "virtual engine" that regulates the reproductive cycle to evolve biological fitness, there is a similar **virtual engine in the embodied-embedded brain** that regulates the sensory-motor loop. This engine constantly shapes and evolves our "cognitive interactional fitness" to deal with a dynamic environment through a system of selective and enabling constraints.
- **Logistical Normativity: Efficiency and Resiliency (3:00-4:07):** The theory is pitched at the level of "bio-economic properties" operating according to **logistical normativity**, not logical normativity. The two most crucial logistical norms are **efficiency** and **resiliency**, which are in a trade-off relationship and subject to "opponent processing." The cognitive virtual engine plays these off against each other to explain the "cognitive evolution within individuals' cognition of their cognitive interactional fittedness."
- **Embodied and Embedded Brain (4:57-8:53):** Vervaeke emphasizes why the brain is considered **embodied and embedded**.
 - **Embodied:** The body is not merely a vehicle but an **auto-poetic bio-economy** that is constitutive of cognitive agency. Without this, the machinery for ongoing relevance realization is impossible.
 - **Embedded:** Just as a great white shark's adaptivity is a "real relation" between the creature and its environment, **relevance is not an intrinsic property** of an object or solely a subjective projection.
- **Relevance as Transjective Realization (9:17-10:41):** He rejects both empiricist (relevance detection) and romantic (relevance projection) notions. Instead, he proposes that relevance is **transjective**, meaning it is **co-created** by how the environment and the embodied brain fit together in a dynamic, evolving fashion. The term "realization" is used to capture both the objective sense of "making real" and the subjective sense of "coming into awareness," triangulating to this transjective nature.
- **Internal Bio-Economic Properties (16:38-17:15):** The internal machinery of relevance realization operates through internal bio-economic logistical norms, driving "external interactional properties" like general and special-purpose problem-solving.
- **Generalization (Compression) vs. Particularization (22:34-29:46):**
 - **Generalization (Data Compression):** This makes information processing more **efficient** and creates a "general-purpose machine" (like a human hand). It involves picking up on **invariants** in information, allowing the system to interpolate and extrapolate, similar to a "line of best fit" in data analysis.
 - **Particularization:** This makes information processing more **resilient** and creates "special-purpose machines" (like a hammer). It involves keeping more detail and "overfitting" to specific data, allowing the system to pick up on more **variations**. He credits Tim Littlejohn for the insight that these strategies are already being implemented in cutting-edge AI, particularly in deep learning algorithms like the wake-sleep algorithm.

- **Exploitation vs. Exploration (Cognitive Tempering)** (32:50-36:43): This trade-off relates to the timing of cognitive processes.
 - **Exploiting:** Being efficient by staying with known patterns or resources.
 - **Exploring:** Being resilient by seeking out new information and potential resources, even if it requires more energy. The system constantly trades between these, reflecting how reality itself shifts between invariance and change.
- **Cognitive Prioritization** (37:54-39:18): This involves playing off different "cost functions" (e.g., focusing vs. diversifying) to achieve flexible gambling in decision-making.
- **Dynamic and Developmental Nature (Piaget)** (40:51-46:48): Relevance realization is inherently **dynamic and developmental**. Vervaeke links the internal processes of compression and particularization to Piaget's fundamental processes of cognitive development:
 - **Assimilation:** Integrating new information into existing cognitive schemas (like compression). This provides efficiency.
 - **Accommodation:** Changing existing schemas to respond to new information (like particularization). This provides resiliency and introduces variation, preventing the system from becoming brittle.
 - This dynamic interplay leads to **complexification**, where the system becomes both highly differentiated and highly integrated, leading to **emergent abilities** and **self-transcendence** (e.g., a zygote developing into a human with complex abilities).
- **Relevance Realization as General Intelligence (g-factor)** (47:08-54:07): Vervaeke argues that relevance realization is the underlying ability of **general intelligence (g-factor)**, a robust finding in psychology (Spearman, 1920s). Psychometric tests for intelligence, which show a "strong positive manifold" (inter-predictability across diverse tasks like math, English, sports), measure abilities like problem formulation, similarity judgments, pattern finding, and adapting to ill-defined, dynamic, complex environments—all directly tied to relevance realization.
- **Future Implications** (54:34-57:04): This comprehensive model of relevance realization, integrating insights from psychology, AI, biology, and neuroscience, serves as the "linchpin argument" for the series. It provides a plausible naturalistic explanation that can further explain human spirituality, wisdom, consciousness, and address the meaning crisis.

The Architecture of Intelligence: A Theory of Relevance Realization

A scientific theory of *relevance* is an impossibility, as relevance itself lacks the systematic import required for scientific formulation. A theory of *relevance realization* (RR)—the process by which we continually determine what is relevant—is, however, not only possible but essential for understanding cognition. This endeavor is analogous to Darwin's theory of evolution. Just as natural selection provides a "virtual engine" that regulates the reproductive cycle to constantly evolve the *biological fitness* of organisms in a changing environment, a similar virtual engine is proposed to exist within the embodied and embedded brain. This cognitive engine regulates the sensory-motor loop, constantly evolving an individual's *cognitive-interactional fitness* to adaptively meet the goals of a dynamic world.

The proposed virtual engine for relevance realization operates through a system of opponent processing. This system is governed not by logical norms like truth or validity, but by what can be termed **logistical normativity**. The two most crucial logistical norms are *efficiency* and *resiliency*. The engine functions by continuously managing the trade-off between these competing demands through selective **logistical economic** constraints on efficiency and enabling **economic** constraints on resiliency. This dynamic is comparable to the way the autonomic nervous system constantly recalibrates our level of arousal, using opponent processes (the

sympathetic and parasympathetic systems) to evolve our physiological state to fit the environment. It is a constant, adaptive balancing act, not a static average.

This cognitive framework is defined by two essential characteristics, the first of which is **embodiment**. In a direct challenge to Cartesian dualism, this view posits a deep, constitutive dependency of cognitive agency on the physical body. The body is not a mere vehicle or appendage for an immaterial mind; it is an *autopoietic bio-economy*—a self-making and self-maintaining biological system—that provides the very machinery necessary for the ongoing evolution of relevance realization. Our capacity for intelligent, general problem-solving is made possible by, and is inseparable from, our nature as living, embodied beings.

The second defining characteristic is **embeddedness**. A creature's adaptivity is not an intrinsic property but a *real relation* between the organism and its environment. A great white shark, for example, is an apex predator in the ocean but perishes within minutes in the Sahara Desert. Its fitness is not a feature it possesses in isolation but a property of its relationship with a specific context. Similarly, relevance is not an objective property of an object (as an empiricist might claim) nor a subjective property projected by the mind (as a romantic might argue). Instead, relevance is a real relation of "fittedness" that emerges between the agent and the world.

This relational quality necessitates a new vocabulary. Relevance is neither subjective nor objective but **transjective** (that is, a property existing *across* the subjective and objective domains). It is co-created and co-determined by the dynamic, evolving fit between the embodied brain and the environment. This is analogous to the "graspableness" of a bottle, which is not a property of the bottle alone, nor of the hand alone, but of the real, functional relation that can exist between them. Relevance is not detected in the world or projected from the mind; it is realized through this interdependent coupling.

The choice of the term "relevance *realization*" is deliberate and multifaceted. The word "realization" uniquely combines two distinct meanings that help triangulate the transjective nature of the phenomenon:

1. **Objective Sense:** To *make real*, implying an active process of bringing something into being in the world.
2. **Subjective Sense:** To *come into awareness*, implying a phenomenological process of understanding or grasping.

By using a single term that holds both of these senses, the theory emphasizes that relevance is simultaneously a process of embodied action and embedded awareness, bridging the traditional gap between the internal world of the mind and the external world of objects.

This transjective framework has profound philosophical implications. It demands that we transcend the conventional grammar of subjective versus objective, which reifies relevance as a "thing" that must exist either *in the mind* or *in the world*. This standard grammar and the adversarial debates it fosters are insufficient for describing the co-determined, co-evolving nature of our fittedness to reality. Fundamentally shifting this understanding is proposed to have a significant impact on how we interpret spirituality, understood here as a functional sense of connectedness that affords wisdom and self-transcendence.

To understand the internal workings of this system, we can reverse-engineer from its interactional goals. A key trade-off for any adaptive agent is that between being a *general-purpose machine* and a *special-purpose machine*. The human hand is a general-purpose tool capable of performing countless tasks, making it highly efficient. However, it is a "master of none" and is outperformed by special-purpose tools like a hammer for specific tasks. While it is a joke to say, "when all you have is a hammer everything looks like a nail," it is not so much a joke to observe that "when all you have is a hand everything looks graspable." An agent that relied only on a toolbox of specialized instruments would gain resilience against specific problems but would be highly inefficient, bearing the cost of carrying tools it is not using. An adaptive agent must constantly and dynamically trade between these two modes of operating.

The logic of this external trade-off finds a direct analog in the brain's internal, bio-economic processes.

- **Data Compression:** This process corresponds to the drive for efficiency and generalization. By seeking what is **invariant** in a set of data—much like drawing a "line of best fit" on a scatter plot—the brain can create a function that generalizes. This compression makes a system more **cross-contextual**, allowing it to apply a function across many situations for greater efficiency.
- **Particularization:** Developed in collaboration with Tim Lillicrap, this process corresponds to the drive for resiliency and specialization. It involves "overfitting" to data and getting the system to pick up on more **variations** and specific details. This makes the system highly **context-sensitive** and able to respond effectively to novel situations that defy generalization.

This theoretical model finds convergent support in cutting-edge artificial intelligence. The opponent processes of data compression and particularization are not merely abstract concepts; they are strategies already being implemented in advanced AI systems. The work of deep learning pioneers like Geoffrey Hinton and Tim Lillicrap, for example, utilizes algorithms that dynamically balance these competing demands, providing independent evidence for the validity and power of this framework.

The compression-particularization trade-off is just one example of the opponent processes at play. Other exemplary—though not exhaustive—trade-offs contribute to the virtual engine of relevance realization:

- **Cognitive Tempering:** This involves the trade-off between **exploiting** known resources and **exploring** for new ones. Exploiting is *efficient* because it has a low energy cost and relies on environmental stability. Exploring promotes *resiliency* by discovering new opportunities, despite being energetically costly and dependent on finding difference in the environment.
- **Cognitive Prioritization:** This involves flexibly gambling on how to allocate cognitive resources, trading off between focusing intensely on a single function and diversifying processing across many.

Together, these and other opponent processes create a dynamic, multi-dimensional "state space" through which our cognitive system constantly moves, continuously recalibrating its focus to realize relevance.

This dynamic system is also inherently developmental. The opponent process of data compression versus particularization maps directly onto Jean Piaget's foundational concepts of cognitive development:

- **Assimilation:** The integration of new information into existing cognitive schemas (a form of compression).
- **Accommodation:** The modification of those schemas to fit new, challenging information (a form of particularization).

Just as Piaget argued that the interplay between assimilation and accommodation drives cognitive growth, the opponent processes of relevance realization ensure that the system is not only dynamic in the moment but also developmental over time.

The continuous interplay between integration (assimilation) and differentiation (accommodation) drives a process of **complexification**. A system becomes more complex as it becomes both more differentiated (capable of more distinct functions) and more integrated (able to maintain coherence as a whole). This is analogous to the biological development of a single zygote into a highly complex organism with specialized but integrated organs. As a system complexifies, new, emergent abilities appear. A system undergoing relevance realization is therefore inherently dynamic, developmental, and self-transcending, constantly evolving new capacities to interact with the world.

While acknowledging that intelligence involves a vast array of heuristics and trade-offs between them, the central claim presented here is that RR is nevertheless a unified phenomenon that forms the foundation of **general intelligence**, often referred to as the **g factor**. First identified by Charles Spearman, the g factor refers to the "strong positive manifold" observed in psychometric testing, where performance on diverse cognitive

tasks (e.g., mathematical, verbal, spatial) is highly inter-predictive. This suggests a single, underlying general ability.

The tasks used to measure general intelligence provide strong evidence for this link. Psychometric tests invariably assess abilities such as making similarity judgments, identifying latent patterns, formulating problems, and adapting to ill-defined, dynamic situations. These are precisely the functions that depend fundamentally on the capacity for relevance realization. The *g* factor is one of the most robust and reliable findings in psychology, with powerful predictive value for life outcomes ranging from academic success to health and longevity. The fact that its measurement relies on RR-dependent tasks lends significant weight to the claim that relevance realization is the real, unified mechanism underlying general intelligence.

In summary, the theory posits that general intelligence *is* relevance realization. This capacity is the dynamic, developmental evolution of our sensory-motor "fittedness" to the world, regulated by cognitive virtual engines governed by the logistical trade-off between efficiency and resiliency. This comprehensive framework, which unifies insights from psychometrics (*g* factor), developmental psychology (Piaget), biology (autopoiesis), and artificial intelligence (deep learning), serves as the cognitive science "linchpin" for a broader project: to provide a plausible, naturalistic account of processes central to wisdom and spirituality. The next step is to explore how this theoretical model might be realized in the dynamical processes of the brain, with the ultimate goal of integrating cognitive science and human spirituality to powerfully address the modern meaning crisis.

32 RR in the Brain, Insight, and Consciousness

This video, "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis - RR in the Brain, Insight, and Consciousness," delves into the concept of **Relevance Realization (RR)** and its crucial role in intelligence and the functionality of consciousness (0:21-0:38). Dr. John Vervaeke aims to provide a naturalistic account of RR, exploring how it can explain core aspects of human spirituality and self-transcendence (1:10-2:25).

The lecture proposes that RR can be understood through two key brain processes:

- **Firing (Self-Organizing Criticality):** The synchronization and desynchronization of neurons, described as "neural avalanches," are suggested to implement data compression and introduce variation, allowing new structures to reconfigure (5:38-12:16). This process is **scale-invariant**, meaning it occurs at various levels in the brain, from individual neurons to the whole brain (6:32-6:59). Research, such as that by Thatcher et al. (13:11-14:14) and Hess and Gross (14:42-15:05), suggests a strong correlation between the flexibility and evolvability of self-organizing criticality and general intelligence.
- **Wiring (Small World Networks):** The video introduces three types of networks: regular, random, and small world (17:25-19:21). Regular networks are highly resilient but inefficient, while random networks are efficient but lack resiliency. **Small world networks** are presented as optimal, balancing both efficiency and resiliency (21:13-23:00). Evidence indicates that the human brain tends to wire itself as a small world network, and this configuration is associated with higher functionality and intelligence (23:04-23:51), particularly within the salience network, which is responsible for making things stand out and grab attention (25:09-25:38).

The discussion then extends to the relationship between RR, consciousness, and insight:

- **Consciousness and RR:** There's a suggestive link between consciousness and self-organizing criticality. Experiments like binocular rivalry show areas of the brain going into synchrony or asynchrony as conscious perception shifts (31:12-32:55). Similarly, studies on general anesthesia demonstrate that as the brain loses consciousness, its overall small world network structure breaks down, and it reforms upon regaining consciousness (33:50-34:20).
- **Machinery of Insight:** Insight is presented as a concrete instance where intelligence, consciousness, and dynamic self-organization converge (34:40-34:52). Building on the work of Stefan and Dixon (35:01-35:47), insight is linked to an increase in entropy (neural avalanche) followed by a drop and a more organized behavior, allowing for restructuring and problem-solving. Shilling's mathematical model (36:32-37:07) further connects insight to the conversion of a regular network into a small world network, leading to a sudden enhancement and optimization of relevance realization (37:52-39:09).

Dr. Vervaeke explains how RR creates a **tremendously textured dynamically flowing salience landscape** (40:49-42:10). This landscape involves multiple interacting levels: **featurization**, where basic features are picked up; **foregrounding**, where certain information becomes prominent; **figuration**, where elements are configured into a coherent structure; and **framing**, where problems are understood within a specific context (41:26-42:10).

This dynamic salience landscape is central to different types of knowing:

- **Participatory knowing:** How individuals are coupled to the world (42:36-42:48).
- **Perspectival knowing:** The dynamic situational awareness that arises from the salience landscape (43:08-43:16).
- **Procedural knowing:** The basis for knowing how to interact and train skills, as it highlights affordances (43:36-44:00).

The salience landscape, and thus perspectival knowing, is characterized by three dimensions (46:07-46:21):

- **Aspectuality:** Everything is aspectualized, meaning only certain properties are captured (46:28-46:57).
- **Centrality:** The relevance of things is centered on the individual, indicating importance and inherent value (47:02-47:53).
- **Temporality:** The dynamic, ongoing evolution of the process, where small differences in timing can have significant impacts (47:57-48:33).

These three dimensions (Act: Aspectuality, Centrality, Temporality) lead to the **phenomenology of consciousness**, explaining its "hereness," "now-ness," and "togetherness" (49:22-50:28).

Finally, the video emphasizes that **relevance realization is not cold calculation but is deeply intertwined with caring** (51:36-52:20). It involves risky, affect-laden choices about how to allocate limited cognitive, metabolic, and temporal resources. This "caring" aspect is fundamental to our information processing and is a core part of what makes us different from computers (52:21-53:04), linking to philosophical ideas about the foundational nature of caring in our being in the world.

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis: The Neuroscience of Relevance Realization

I. Introduction and Recap of Relevance Realization (RR)

The cognitive process of Relevance Realization (RR) is central to human intelligence and the functionality of consciousness. Many of the mind's most critical functions—from problem-solving to perception—presuppose and depend upon this ability to continuously determine what is relevant from an inexhaustible field of information. This underlying process appears to be a unified phenomenon, an argument that aligns with the robust and reliable scientific finding of a general factor of intelligence (g) in human beings.

This discussion pursues two primary objectives. The first is to propose a plausible naturalistic account of Relevance Realization, grounding this abstract cognitive function in the biological machinery of the brain. The goal is not to offer definitive proof, which would require a highly technical and exhaustive treatment, but to present an exemplary argument that demonstrates a viable path toward a scientific explanation. The second objective is to leverage this naturalistic framework to explain, in an elegant manner, many of the central features of human spirituality.

The foundation for this exploration lies in understanding self-transcendence as an emergent property of our cognitive architecture. Self-transcendence arises from the ongoing complexification of the sensory-motor loop through which we engage with the world. This dynamic process is driven by the opponent processing of two bioeconomic constraints: the push for *efficiency*, which compresses, integrates, and assimilates information, and the counterbalancing push for *resiliency*, which particularizes, differentiates, and accommodates new data. As these forces interact in a dynamically coupled system, they produce a continuous, evolving fittedness to the environment, giving rise to complex emergent properties like self-transcendence. To fully grasp its implications, however, a deeper, naturalistic account of the underlying mechanism is required.

II. Proposing a Naturalistic Account of RR in the Brain

To understand how the brain might implement Relevance Realization, it is crucial to move beyond simplistic reductionism and appreciate the brain as an incredibly complex, dynamic, plastic, and self-creating system. The following account is intended as a plausible and exemplary argument, demonstrating how the core trade-offs of RR could be realized through the brain's neural activity.

The "Firing" of Neurons: Self-Organizing Criticality

The process of Relevance Realization involves a constant trade-off between generalization (data compression) and specialization (contextual particularization). There is increasing evidence that this trade-off is reflected in the way neurons fire. When neurons fire in synchrony, they perform a type of data compression; a phenomenon observable during moments of insight (often called "aha!" moments) when an individual suddenly makes sense of an ambiguous stimulus, causing large areas of the brain to synchronize their firing patterns. This principle

extends beyond the individual; there is increasing evidence that the brains of human beings engaged in cooperative activity also enter into patterns of synchrony, suggesting a neural basis for distributed cognition.

This dynamic cycling between synchrony and asynchrony is an instance of a process known as **Self-Organizing Criticality (SOC)**. The phenomenon can be illustrated with the analogy of a sandpile:

1. **Order and Synchrony:** As grains of sand fall, they self-organize into a mound. This ordered state is like neural synchrony, where the position of one grain provides information about the others.
2. **Criticality and Asynchrony:** At a certain point, the mound reaches a critical state where adding a single grain can trigger an avalanche. This breakdown of order is akin to a "neural avalanche," where synchronized firing gives way to asynchrony, introducing variation into the system.
3. **Reconfiguration and Complexity:** The avalanche spreads the sand, creating a wider base that allows a new, larger, and more complex mound to form. Similarly, the neural avalanche breaks up an existing cognitive structure, allowing the brain to reconfigure into a new, more complex state of synchrony that is better fitted to the current situation.

The brain appears to be in a constant, millisecond-by-millisecond cycle of SOC—compressing data through synchrony, introducing variation through a neural avalanche, and reconfiguring into a new, more adapted state. This moment-by-moment evolution of its structural-functional organization is a powerful mechanism for achieving the evolving sensory-motor fittedness that defines Relevance Realization. This process is also **scale-invariant**, meaning it occurs at myriad levels of organization simultaneously, explaining how RR can operate both locally and globally throughout all cognitive processing.

Evidence and Implications

This theoretical link between SOC and intelligence is supported by empirical evidence. Research by Thatcher et al. (2008, 2009) found a strong relationship between measures of the brain's self-organizing processes and psychometric measures of general intelligence. Specifically, they discovered that greater flexibility in these dynamic cycles correlated with higher intelligence. While the field is still developing, a comprehensive 2014 review by Hess and Gross reinforces the plausibility of SOC as a fundamental property of neural systems. This convergence suggests that the brain's "firing" patterns provide a direct window into the machinery of intelligence.

The "Wiring" of the Brain: Network Theory

Beyond instantaneous firing patterns, RR must also be reflected in the brain's structural organization, or its "wiring." Network theory provides a powerful vocabulary for understanding this structure, identifying three basic types of networks:

- **Regular Networks:** Characterized by many short-distance, redundant connections. They are highly **resilient** to damage but very **inefficient** at transmitting information over long distances.
- **Random Networks:** Characterized by a mix of short- and long-distance connections. They are highly **efficient** but lack redundancy, making them **not resilient**.
- **Small-World Networks (SWNs):** A hybrid structure that is mostly clustered like a regular network but includes a few long-distance connections. This configuration is **optimal**, balancing the trade-off to achieve high levels of both efficiency and resiliency.

If the brain performs Relevance Realization by optimizing the trade-off between efficiency and resiliency, then it should naturally self-organize into Small-World Networks. This is precisely what the evidence suggests.

Evidence and Synthesis

A growing body of research connects SWNs to higher cognitive function.

- Langer et al. (2012) found that brains more structurally wired as SWNs correlated with higher measures of intelligence.
- A follow-up study in 2013 showed that as cognitive demands on working memory increase, its functional network becomes *even more* like a SWN.
- Research by van den Heuvel et al. (2016) identified that "efficient hubs" within the brain's salience network—a specific type of SWN—were strongly correlated with general intelligence.

Crucially, the brain's firing and wiring are not independent but mutually reinforcing. Firing in a pattern of Self-Organizing Criticality tends to wire the brain into a Small-World Network, and a SWN structure, in turn, makes SOC firing more likely. This pervasively scale-invariant, massively recursive, and complex self-organizing process engineers our evolving fittedness to the world, offering a powerful and plausible naturalistic account of Relevance Realization.

III. Connecting Relevance Realization to Consciousness

Extending this framework to consciousness is a more controversial but logical step. There are already well-established functional overlaps between general intelligence, working memory, and consciousness (as described by Global Workspace Theory). All three appear to be performing the core function of Relevance Realization, suggesting their underlying neural mechanisms should be deeply integrated.

Consciousness and Neural Firing (SOC)

Experiments in binocular rivalry provide evidence linking conscious experience to the brain's firing patterns. In these studies, subjects are shown two different images simultaneously, one to each eye, causing their conscious perception to flip back and forth between them. Research by Cosmelli et al. (2004) demonstrated that as a subject's conscious experience flips, the corresponding areas of the brain cycle between states of synchrony and asynchrony. This suggests a direct correlation between the dynamics of SOC and the contents of conscious awareness.

Consciousness and Neural Wiring (SWN)

The connection to wiring is supported by studies using general anesthesia. Research by Monti et al. (2013) observed the brain as patients lost and regained consciousness. They found that as consciousness faded, the brain's overall structure as a Small-World Network broke down into more localized, disconnected networks. As consciousness returned, the global SWN structure re-formed. This indicates that the integrated, optimal wiring of a SWN may be a prerequisite for the unified state of consciousness.

A Unifying Example: The "Aha!" Moment of Insight

The phenomenon of insight offers a compelling synthesis of these concepts. Insight represents a sudden optimization of Relevance Realization that is experienced as a flash of salience—a distinct alteration of consciousness.

- **Insight as Self-Organizing Criticality:** Work by Stefan and Dixon on problem-solving shows that just before an "aha!" moment, cognitive processing entropy increases significantly. This corresponds to a neural avalanche (SOC) that "breaks" a faulty problem frame. Immediately after the insight, entropy drops as the brain settles into a new, more organized, and effective frame.
- **Insight as Network Reconfiguration:** A mathematical model by Schilling (2005) frames insight as a structural change in how information is organized. A problem solver's knowledge may initially be a *regular network*—highly clustered but inefficient. An insight occurs when a novel, long-distance connection forms, instantly transforming this inefficient structure into an optimal *Small-World Network*, resulting in a massive spike in processing efficiency.

Unifying these perspectives, an insight can be described as a moment when **self-organizing criticality (the firing) breaks up a rigid regular network and reconfigures it into an optimal Small-World Network (the wiring)**. This sudden optimization of relevance realization manifests phenomenologically as a flash of insight, directly linking the neural machinery of RR to a change in conscious experience.

IV. The Phenomenology of Consciousness as a Salience Landscape

The neural machinery of Relevance Realization does not just perform a function; it generates the very texture of our subjective experience. Operating at multiple, recursive levels—from the **featurization** of raw stimuli, to the **foregrounding** of important objects, the **figuration** of those objects into coherent wholes, and the **framing** of entire situations—RR produces a dynamic and textured **salience landscape**. This landscape is the moment-by-moment field of what stands out to us and what fades into the background.

This salience landscape serves as the nexus for our different ways of knowing. It is grounded in our fundamental **Participatory Knowing**—the dynamic coupling between our sensory-motor system and the environment. From this emerges our **Perspectival Knowing**, or situational awareness. This, in turn, opens up an "affordance landscape," making obvious the possibilities for action and thereby enabling our **Procedural Knowing**, or skilled interaction with the world.

The Dimensions of the Salience Landscape

Our conscious, perspectival knowing has three core dimensions. These three core dimensions can be remembered by the acronym ACT: **A**spectuality, **C**entrality, and **T**emporality.

1. **Aspectuality:** Our perception never grasps a thing in its totality but always captures a particular *aspect* that is relevant to the current context. The salience landscape is inherently aspectual.
2. **Centrality:** The landscape is not neutral; it is always centered on and relevant *to you*. It is vectored toward the self's biological and cognitive needs, grounded in the organism's fundamental need to *import* resources—first materially, for survival, and then informationally, to construct a coherent cognitive model of the world. This dimension gives rise to the fundamental "hereness" of consciousness—the sense that my experience is located *here*, where I am.
3. **Temporality:** Because Relevance Realization is a dynamic, evolving process, timing is crucial. In such a massively recursive system, small differences in when an action is taken can have disproportionately large effects. This critical sense of opportune timing (*kairos*) generates the "nowness" of consciousness—the feeling of experience unfolding in the present moment.

Together, these dimensions account for the core phenomenology of consciousness. The ACT of the salience landscape provides the **hereness** (centrality), the **nowness** (temporality), and the **togetherness** (the unified, integrated aspectuality) that characterize our subjective experience.

V. Conclusion: From Cold Calculation to Affective Caring

This neurocognitive framework provides a powerful account for why altering states of consciousness through practices like meditation or flow can so profoundly affect our sense of identity, agency, and insight. These experiences are not mystical anomalies but direct modulations of the fundamental machinery that generates our sense of self and world.

Critically, it is a mistake to view Relevance Realization as a form of cold, dispassionate calculation. It is an inherently affective process of **caring**. At every moment, the body makes risky, affect-laden choices about how to invest its precious and limited metabolic, temporal, and cognitive resources. This process of caring is not abstract; it is the affective expression of the bioeconomic constraints driving Relevance Realization. Things become salient because they arouse us, motivate us, and move us emotionally toward action, reflecting the organism's constant, embodied calculation of how to invest its finite resources. As neuroscientist Read

Montague argues, this capacity for caring is what fundamentally separates human intelligence from that of computers.

This scientific account finds a striking parallel in philosophy. The neuroscientific concept of "caring" as the engine of relevance echoes Martin Heidegger's claim that a foundational *caring* is at the core of our "being-in-the-world." Indeed, as Hubert Dreyfus noted in his work on Heidegger and artificial intelligence, the very problem computers cannot solve is the problem of determining relevance—a capacity rooted in this embodied, existential caring. This entire machinery is inherently *transjective*: it is a process through which we and our intelligible world co-emerge. We do not make it; we participate in it. The spiritual implications of participating in this profound, self-organizing process of co-creation will be the subject of the next discussion.

33 The Spirituality of RR: Wonder/Awe/Mystery/Sacredness

In this episode of "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis," John Vervaeke continues his exploration of relevance realization, linking it to the concept of human spirituality and the experience of "religio" (0:14). He argues that relevance realization is a pre-conceptual, pre-propositional, pre-experiential, and pre-egoic process that fundamentally grounds our being and connectedness to the world (9:51).

Vervaeke emphasizes that relevance realization is not something we can focalize or objectify (36:24). Instead, it is a phenomenological mystery that we experience through non-focal states like **wonder and awe**, which are crucial for disclosing its spiritual significance (24:22). He draws on Paul Cilliers' concept of an "atmosphere of significance" to explain how we are immersed in meaning (20:51) and Robert Fuller's work on wonder, highlighting that wonder is about understanding the "gestalt" or the whole, rather than solving specific problems (28:49).

The discussion then shifts to the concept of **sacredness** (43:00), distinguishing between its metaphysical and psycho-existential aspects. Vervaeke introduces Clifford Geertz's idea of religion as a "meta-meaning system" (51:16) that protects us from "domicide" (49:57), which is the loss of our sense of home in the world, leading to feelings of alienation and absurdity. He argues that the sacred functions to "home" us against horror (53:01).

However, Vervaeke criticizes Geertz's view as insufficient, stating that sacredness cannot be reduced solely to worldview attunement. He introduces the concept of the **numinous** from Rudolf Otto (58:43), suggesting that it points to the transgressive side of sacredness—how it opens us up in wonder and awe, even to the point of horror (59:07). This experience of the numinous is ultimately about confronting the profoundly mysterious and transformative aspects of reality.

Lecture Transcript: The Phenomenology of Relevance Realization and the Nature of "Religio"

Last time, I suppose I probably taxed your attention quite a bit, because while I tried to keep it as accessible and jargon-free as possible, we got into some of the nitty-gritty of a potential naturalistic explanation for relevance realization. We explored how this fundamental cognitive process might be implemented in the brain through self-organizing criticality and the formation of small-world networks. This machinery, I argued, helps us understand not only general intelligence and the nature of insight but also many of the functional and phenomenological aspects of consciousness itself. This gives us good reason to believe that this framework can elegantly explain many central features of human spirituality. We have already seen that relevance realization is transjective; it is about our fundamental connectedness to the world and the connectedness of mind and body. At its core is a deep sense of caring, integral to the cognitive commitment of our precious metabolic and temporal resources, which resonates with what Heidegger was attempting to articulate about a primordial sense of meaning. I now want to move beyond these suggestive connections and undertake a more thorough exploration of what I will call the phenomenology of relevance realization, specifically in terms of the kind of meaning-making we gather together under the term spirituality.

Let us begin by gathering together what we have established. We have discussed an array of cognitive functions—problem-solving, insight, categorization, demonstrative reference, salience landscaping, working memory, inference, and communication—all of which feed into the central process of relevance realization. We have a plausible naturalistic, structural-functional account for this in terms of self-organizing criticality and small-world networks. This entire system is inherently transjective, involving an evolving process of caring and participation. Our procedural know-how is grounded in the situational awareness of perspectival knowing, which is itself grounded in our participatory, transactive coupling to the world. It is an evolving, optimizing process of your fittedness—to yourself, to the world, and to others.

From this machinery, several crucial capacities emerge. Through a process of complexification, it gives us an account of our capacity for self-transcendence, which is the ability to produce emergent functions; the capacity for self-transcendence *through which we can overcome* self-deception is endemic to our meaning-making machinery. Inextricably linked to this, of course, is our tremendous capacity for self-deception, for bullshitting ourselves. This entire framework gives us a robust account of both perspectival and participatory knowing and how they come together in procedural knowing. It explains the creation of affordances, the transjective relationship within which our skills can be reliably trained and developed. It has an aspect of deep caring at its core, giving rise to our sense of significance and what we commit ourselves to. And, as I suggested previously, this account of insight can help explain what occurs in altered and higher states of consciousness, where we experience fundamental changes in our salience landscaping and relevance realization machinery.

I now want to highlight other aspects of this process that I believe contribute to it being understood and experienced as spiritual in nature. I would argue this is a way of interpreting what Heidegger means by the primordially of what he was talking about. Consider the profound fundamentality of relevance realization. This process is ultimately pre-conceptual. It has to be, because in order to form concepts, one must first categorize; in order to categorize, one must have relevance realization. This also means it is pre-propositional; if belief is understood as the assertion of propositions, then relevance realization takes place at a level fundamentally deeper than belief. Of course, our concepts and beliefs feed back and affect this process, but they are ultimately an effect of it. For the same reasons, this fundamental framing is pre-inferential. It is also pre-communication; while we can refine this ability through interaction with others, we cannot ultimately learn it from them, because the very act of learning presupposes it. Furthermore, it is pre-experiential—not in the sense of a previous life, but in that our meaningfully structured, common-sense world is a result of it, not the cause. It is pre-egoic, as our agency and the world as an arena for our actions co-emerge out of relevance realization. Finally, it is pre-normative, in the sense that it is our primordial normativity. Before you can assess truth, goodness, or beauty, things must first be meaningful and salient to you. This machinery makes our normative judgments possible, though it is not reducible to them.

This inherent fundamentality helps to explain many aspects of human spirituality. It accounts for our capacity for both self-transcendence and foolishness, our deep sense of connectedness, the co-creation of the agent and the arena, and the core binding of agency, caring, and cognition. It helps explain the association of altered states of consciousness with spiritual experience. Notice how the common metaphors of spirituality—of depth and profundity—map directly onto these qualities. This machinery feels deep because it is deeper than our ego, deeper than our judgments of truth and beauty, deeper than our propositional thinking, deeper than our conceptualization. It is a fundamental grounding of your being and your being-connected, which I argue are ultimately one and the same. Much of what is captured by our spirituality is captured by the way this machinery unfolds phenomenologically, perspectively, and in a participatory fashion.

To speak of this entire dynamic system—all the machinery we have been mapping out—without repeatedly gesturing and flinging my arms in a semi-organized fashion at the board, I want to introduce a specific term: *religio*. I use this word deliberately. While you may hear "religion," I am using *religio*, one of the purported etymological origins of the modern word. It comes from *religare*, meaning "to bind together," which clearly points to the theme of connectedness. However, it also carries with it the primordially and the fundamental framing of relevance realization and all the associated machinery. When I invoke *religio*, I am basically invoking the right-hand side of the diagram we have been building. I am using the term in a spiritual sense, to mean a pre-egoic, and ultimately post-egoic, binding that simultaneously grounds the self and its world.

To elaborate on this, I want to draw upon the work of Paul Acosta. In his article "A Secular Wonder," he describes the very ordinary fact that things always matter to us in some way, and that we cannot help but be affected by them "as if we were immersed in a sort of bubble of meaningfulness." He suggests it is better understood as an "atmosphere of significance" and import. This is something we do not create from scratch but are absorbed by. The metaphor of the atmospheric exerts not only the image of a global container but also of a **rhythm of breathing** and of a **light refraction... structuring the intelligibility** to which a living being must attune or adjust herself. Acosta argues that the experience of having a world has its roots not in a focal relationship with an

object, but in the emergence of this bubble of significance, which plays the same role for a sentient being as the atmosphere does for the Earth. You participate in it, contribute to it, emerge from it, but you did not make it. It is the primordial ground that makes crucial distinctions like inside and outside possible for us. The transjectivity of *religio* is deeper than our subjectivity and objectivity, because their very constitution requires this machinery.

Because we are not aware of this "atmosphere" in a focal, objectified way, Acosta argues that we experience it through non-focal states such as wonder and awe—or their opposites, absurdity and horror. Wonder is that state in which we become aware, in a participatory and perspectival way, of the atmosphere of relevance realization—our involvement in it, our indebtedness to it, and our commitment to it. Here, one is tempted to draw an analogy, and I use it with caution, to St. Paul's statement that God is that "in whom we live and move and have our being." I am not claiming that relevance realization is God; that would be ridiculous. Rather, I am suggesting that states like wonder and awe, which are often directed toward a divine reality, are ways in which we disclose the spiritual significance of *religio*—the medium within which we live and move and have our being.

The masterful work of Robert Fuller on wonder aligns with this perspective. Fuller argues that wonder is responsible for some of our deepest spiritual experiences—our deepest experiences of what I am calling *religio*. He draws a crucial distinction between curiosity and wonder. Curiosity is in the "having mode": it is problem-solving, it is focused, it has a focal object. Wonder, by contrast, is in the "being mode": it is non-focal, an opening up, a perspectival and participatory sense of awe. While curiosity gets you to focus on specific features of the world, wonder pushes you to participate in the gestalt, the whole, and how it all fits together. Wonder pushes you towards an **ongoing accommodation**, a sense of the inexhaustible, combinatorially explosive nature of reality and the ongoing, evolving adaptability of your relevance realization to that potential. Wonder is not about solving a problem; it is about remembering your being by putting you deeply in touch with *religio*.

This brings us to another crucial aspect of *religio*: its inherent mystery. In the being mode, we are not solving a problem but confronting a mystery. Think of the trajectory of insight: we begin by trying to solve a focal problem, then have an insight that our framing is inadequate, leading us to a more encompassing frame. But as we open up further, our insight shifts from a reframing to a *trans-framing*. We stop having insights about the focal problem and start gaining insight into the style of our framing itself. This trajectory of trans-framing does not land on a new, stable object; instead, it discloses the machinery of *religio* itself. We find this process deeply meaningful, like a flow state, though if pushed too far, it can become deeply meaningful in the negative sense of horror.

When I speak of the mystery of *religio*, it is essential to distinguish between a phenomenological mystery and something that is theoretically inexplicable. To equate them is to equivocate between perspectival and propositional knowing. For example, it is phenomenologically impossible for me to know perspectivally what it is like to be dead. Any frame I conjure—a dark room, a void—still contains my presence as the observer. This inability to frame my own non-existence, however, is not proof of my immortality. It is a phenomenological limitation, not a theoretical one. The mystery of *religio* is of this phenomenological kind.

The core of this mystery lies in the fact that I can never make the framing process itself a focal object within the frame. Whatever I am thinking of is inside the frame, but what is necessarily not inside the frame is the process of framing. If I try to frame the frame, a new, encompassing frame is generated, and its framing remains outside. William James pointed to this with his distinction between the "I" and the "me." The "me" encompasses all the aspects of yourself you can bring into view—your name, your image, your thoughts. But the "I"—the seer, the generator of that view—can never be fully seen. It is phenomenologically mysterious. This does not mean we are unaware of it. We have a subsidiary awareness; we are always aware *through* the "I" of the "me," just as we are aware *through* our framing of what is framed. The machinery of relevance realization is therefore deeply phenomenologically mysterious, but this does not prevent us from talking about it theoretically.

We can use the grammar of subjects and objects to point toward this transjective process, but we cannot exemplify it using those categories, precisely because it is what makes those categories possible. A theory of vagueness does not itself have to be vague; a theory of war is not itself an instance of war. So, while my theory of *religio* is not itself mysterious, it points to something that is. In this mystery lies an affordance for a trajectory of trans-framing that allows us to participate in the wonder and awe of *religio*. We can enter a transjective flow

state in which we celebrate our participation in this process. We do this, I would argue, for a very good reason: to make significant, to reflect upon, to celebrate, and to enact *religio* is to fundamentally enhance our agency, the disclosure of the world, and our connectedness to it. And what else could be more valuable to us? What else could be more valuable to us?

At this point, a major objection could be leveled against the argument I am building, and I take it very seriously. One might grant that this account captures much of what we consider spiritual—mystery, self-transcendence, connectedness, even our capacity for self-deception—but still argue that something central is missing. What is missing from *religio*, but found in religion, is the concept of "the sacred." I am trying to use this term as neutrally as possible because it is unclear if we should apply the term "divinity," for example, to the Buddhist notion of *Shunyata* or the Taoist notion of the *Dao*. I do not think calling the *Dao* divine is a plausible interpretation, but it is clearly sacred in an important way, as is *Shunyata* for many versions of Buddhism.

To address this, we must carefully distinguish between two related ideas. "The sacred" is typically a metaphysical proposal about what grounds our experience—for instance, the standard Western proposal that it is grounded in the supernatural. "Sacredness," on the other hand, is a psycho-existential proposal about what it is like to *experience* this quality. This distinction came to the fore historically in the work of thinkers like Schleiermacher, who, in the face of the Scientific Revolution, shifted focus from metaphysical claims about the sacred to the psychological experience of sacredness. My argument has been operating at this psycho-existential level, so it is here that I must begin. By analyzing the experience of sacredness, we might discover what constraints this places on any subsequent metaphysical proposals.

Let's begin, then, with the psycho-existential functions of sacredness, starting with the agent-arena relationship. Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz, and recalling our discussion of "domicide," we can see that a central function of sacredness is to "home" us. When we experience deep culture shock, solitary confinement, or profound homesickness, the agent-arena relationship breaks down, and our meaning systems cease to function. Geertz argues that religion provides a "meta-meaning" system. It is not just one meaning system among others, like law or fashion, but the underlying system that makes all others possible by securing the agent-arena relationship. The experience of sacredness, therefore, gives us the meta-meaning system that protects us from the horror and absurdity of domicile. One of the functions of sacredness is this process of homing us against horror, which manifests as overwhelming loneliness, alienation, and anxiety.

This function of "worldview attunement" is undeniably important. The reliable finding that people in spiritual communities are more resilient to life's tragedies speaks to its power. However, while this homing function may be a necessary feature of sacredness, I do not believe it is sufficient. We must also consider the Gnostics, who understood the trajectory of trans-framing not as a homing mechanism but as something deeply transgressive, aimed at overturning the very grammar of a worldview.

This points to another, equally vital function of sacredness, which was explored by Rudolf Otto. In his work on "the idea of the holy," Otto sought to uncover the primordial experience of the sacred before it became conflated with moral concepts of righteousness. He coined the term "the numinous" to describe this core experience. He argued that the word "holy" is plausibly related to notions of wholeness and health, but also, weirdly, to glory—a term that is not primarily moral. What Otto sought to capture with "the numinous" was the fundamental experience that underlies our later interpretations. As we will explore next time, the experience of the numinous is ultimately the experience of the transgressive side of sacredness—how it opens us up in wonder and awe, and takes us to the very horizon of horror.

34 Sacredness: Horror, Music, and the Symbol

This video, part of the "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis" series, delves into the concept of **sacredness** (1:10) and its intricate relationship with **horror, music, and symbols** (2:55). John Vervaeke distinguishes between "religio," aspects of spirituality explained by relevance realization, and "sacredness," which encompasses the experience of the numinous.

Here's a breakdown of the key points:

- **Sacredness as Meta-Meaning System** (2:18): Vervaeke revisits the idea that sacredness functions as a meta-meaning system, helping to establish a worldview attunement that *homes us against horror* (2:21-2:29). This is contrasted with the "transgressive response" (2:47) found in Gnosticism.
- **The Numinous Experience** (3:17): Drawing on Otto's work, Vervaeke explains the "numinous" as a pre-moral aspect of sacredness, characterized by a sense of glory, overwhelming power, and a lack of moral interpretation (3:40-3:54). This is illustrated with the book of Job, where God's glory is contrasted with Job's moral arguments.
- **Three Aspects of the Numinous** (5:03):
 - **Mystery** (5:10): Similar to Marcel's idea of something that brings about *sensibility transcendence* (5:17-5:24).
 - **Fascination** (5:37): It's super salient, compelling attention, and *drawing you in* (5:41-5:53).
 - **Horror** (5:59): Vervaeke distinguishes his use of "horror" from "terror," emphasizing that true horror involves a challenge to one's *sense of contact with reality* (8:44-8:55), often associated with insanity rather than mere fear (9:05-9:13). He uses the example of Kubrick's *The Shining* (15:14) to illustrate profound horror as a loss of grip on reality.
- **Intercategorical Monsters and Horror** (9:21): Drawing on Mary Douglas, Vervaeke explains that "intercategorical" things—those that don't fit into our established categories—are often perceived as monstrous or unclean (9:24-10:07). This can range from "yucky" (12:40) to profoundly horrifying when they challenge core categories and threaten our grasp on the world (12:47-13:00). Examples include the *Wolfman*, *ghost*, and *vampire* (13:10-13:30).
- **Sacredness and Higher Order Relevance Realization** (31:07): Sacredness is presented as a powerful process of *meta-accommodation* (30:57), pushing the machinery of relevance realization to its limits (31:17-31:25) to optimize our connection to the world, ourselves, and each other (33:34-33:37).
- **Music and Sacredness** (33:42): Music is deeply associated with sacredness because it plays with the *machinery of salience landscaping* (34:07-34:10) for its own sake, creating flow states and transforming our agency and perception of the world (34:49-34:59). Vervaeke laments the trivialization of music in modern culture, which he sees as contributing to the meaning crisis (35:04-35:19).
- **Symbols and Sacredness** (36:08): Vervaeke emphasizes the role of symbols in activating and playing with this machinery. He distinguishes between *signs* (37:21), which refer to something, and *symbols* (38:12), which involve participation and exemplify what they refer to (38:15-38:21). *Kissing* (38:40) is used as an example of a symbolic act that seriously plays with the agent-arena relationship.
- **Metaphor and Cognition** (39:31): Symbols are built on profound metaphors that structure our cognition (41:22-41:27). Vervaeke argues that metaphors are not merely ornamental (41:00) but are fundamental to how we think and interact with the world (41:41-41:47). He critiques the simplistic "projection" model (44:03) of metaphor, suggesting a more dynamic interplay where both bottom-up emergence and top-down emanation occur (48:50-49:05).

- **Exaptation and Symbols (52:07):** Vervaeke introduces the concept of *exaptation* (52:16) (drawing on Michael Anderson's work) where existing neural circuits are reused and reconfigured for new purposes. He uses the example of the *cerebellum* (53:47), originally for physical balance, being exapted to find deeper coordination between different brain areas (54:41-54:47). This mechanism allows symbols, like the scales for *justice* (55:09), to activate deep cognitive machinery, enabling participatory and perspectival insight (56:05-56:06). Symbols allow us to "hold in mind" (57:48) abstract concepts by tapping into these exapted capacities.

Rewritten Lecture on Sacredness, the Numinous, and Symbols

In a previous discussion, an argument was developed for explaining central features of human spirituality through the machinery of relevance realization, a process termed *religio*. This account, however, left a significant lacuna: the experience of the sacred. To address this, a crucial distinction must be made between metaphysical proposals concerning the ground of sacredness and the psycho-existential machinery that produces the experience itself. It is this latter machinery—the psychological and existential processes—that will be the focus of the current examination.

The experience of sacredness can function in two opposing ways. On one hand, drawing from the work of Gerrits, the sacred can operate as a meta-meaning system that affords “worldview attunement,” a process that homes us and protects us from the experience of horror. This aligns with a Hellenistic impulse to find a place of belonging in a chaotic world. Yet, the Hellenistic period also produced an alternative, transgressive response, exemplified by the Gnostics, which sought not to re-home but to break free. This transgressive aspect provides an entry point into the work of Rudolf Otto and his exploration of another dimension of sacredness: the numinous.

Otto proposed that before holiness was interpreted through a moral lens, there existed a pre-moral experience of the sacred, which he termed the “numinous.” This concept is closely related to the adjective most frequently applied to God in the Old Testament: glorious. Glory signifies something shining, overwhelming, and powerful, yet it carries no inherent moral sense. The Book of Job illustrates this distinction through the conflict between Job’s moral arguments and God’s response, which is not a moral justification but a presentation of his own numinous glory. The numinous, therefore, functions as a transgressive aspect of sacredness. Rather than homing us against horror, as worldview attunement does, it takes us directly into its heart.

According to Otto, the numinous experience has three central aspects. First, it is a mystery in the Marcellian sense, something that invites sensibility transcendence and a trajectory of profound personal change. Second, it is deeply fascinating, compelling our attention in a way that could be described as super salient. Third, it is simultaneously terrifying or horrifying. It is crucial, however, to clarify the meaning of “horror” in this context. Much like most mystery movies are not truly mysterious but are merely difficult problems, most horror movies do not actually expose viewers to horror. Instead, they prey on our ancestral fear of predation, using startling moments to evoke fear. True horror is not about being startled; it is the experience of having one’s fundamental contact with reality challenged or undermined. It is the feeling that one’s grasp on the world is slipping, an experience more closely associated with the primordial fear of insanity than with any physical threat.

This connection between horror and a dissolving grip on reality is illuminated by the work of Mary Douglas on “inter-categorical” beings. Things that defy our established categories are often perceived as weird, unclean, or monstrous because they challenge the very structure of our world. The unclean animals in Leviticus, for example, are those that break expected patterns linking morphology, locomotion, and location. This is not merely an archaic feature of thought; modern purity codes function similarly, as evidenced by the disgust felt when spit, once it has left the body, becomes inter-categorical—both “me” and “not me.” When an inter-categorical being crosses fundamental boundaries, like that between beast and person (the Wolfman), the living and the dead (the ghost), or the consumer and the non-producer (the vampire), it moves from being merely unclean to being monstrous and invoking horror.

A personal anecdote involving Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* illustrates this experience of true horror. Initially, the film was being interpreted through an intellectually controlled framework as an extended metaphor for the descent into madness through alcoholism. This interpretive lens provided a sense of mastery over the film's content. However, a pivotal scene shatters this framework. The protagonist is locked in a pantry, and while he hears voices in his head—a detail that fits neatly into the “madness” interpretation—those same internal voices proceed to open the locked door from the outside. This moment produced a profound chill of horror, not because of a startling action, but because it completely destroyed the established interpretive reality. The viewer was forced to abandon the role of a detached observer and instead participate in the character's madness, losing their own grip on the situation and confronting forces beyond their comprehension.

Wonder, awe, and horror can be understood as existing on a continuum of engagement with mystery. The common yet dangerous phenomenon of drivers slowing at a highway accident demonstrates how people are drawn to brush up against the numinous, fascinated by the horrifying mystery of death that could sever their grip on reality. Wonder opens us to mystery, and awe is a liminal state on its edge. Horror occurs when the mystery becomes so overwhelming that it forces accommodation to occur faster than we can manage, causing us to lose our grip entirely. It is like the all absolute worst culture shock, where the world expands too quickly to comprehend.

This experience of the numinous can be described as a “shadow of flow.” In this state, the cognitive machinery for flow—the accelerating loop of salience and coupling—is fully engaged, but the object of engagement is a mystery so profound that stable coupling is impossible. Instead of finding deep engagement, the machinery of coupling speeds up but cannot find purchase. This failure is what transforms the potentially awesome into the awful, generating horror instead of flow. This duality is reflected in the word “awe,” which serves as the linguistic root for both “awesome” and “awful.”

The existential function of the numinous is to take us to the very horizon of our intelligibility, to the precipice of our ability to make sense of the world. The experience is terrifically real precisely because it places a non-negotiable demand upon the individual for profound change, for a trans-framing of their being. The horror component is the very mechanism that makes this demand absolute. It instills a technical form of humiliation—a deep, sober humility that comes from recognizing one's ultimate limitations as a finite being. This realization serves as a crucial corrective to cognitive and spiritual “inflation,” the temptation to believe one can encompass all mystery, by placing one in a confrontation with something undeniably greater than oneself.

Sacredness, then, operates as a form of higher-order opponent processing. On one side, worldview attunement functions as *meta-assimilation*, a process that homes us against horror by making everything fit together. On the other, the numinous functions as *meta-accommodation*, a process that exposes us to horror to force growth and humility. Together, they constitute a powerful system for higher-order relevance realization. By seriously playing with this machinery at the deepest existential level, sacredness pushes us to optimize our connectedness to the world, ourselves, and each other.

This understanding helps explain why music is so deeply associated with the sacred. Music is a form of seriously playing with the machinery of salience landscaping for its own sake, which is why it so powerfully induces flow-like states. It is a pivotal means of conveying the sacred because it bypasses conceptual reference and engages us in a participatory way; it insinuates its way into our perspectival and participatory knowing, transforming how the world is disclosed to us and how our agency is structured. A great tragedy of modern culture, and a contributor to the meaning crisis, is the degree to which music has been trivialized and severed from its connection to this profound machinery.

The role of music points toward the broader function of symbols in activating this machinery. It is important to distinguish between a *sign* and a *symbol*. A sign merely refers to something else; we look through it to think of something else. A symbol, however, exemplifies what it refers to and, crucially, invites us to participate in

it. A heart shape might be a sign for love, but a kiss is a symbolic act that allows one to *participate* in love. Symbols achieve this participatory quality because, at their core, they are built upon profound metaphors that structure our very cognition.

A common model of metaphor, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, views it as a simple, one-way projection from an embodied, physical domain onto an abstract one, as when we “attack an argument.” This model, however, is too simplistic. First, the relationship is more complex, as demonstrated by the fact that near-synonyms do not always transfer; one can “assault a castle” but to “assault an argument” sounds odd. Second, and more significantly, the process is not merely bottom-up. Multiple, distinct embodied concepts—such as seeing, grasping, or getting a point—all converge on the abstract idea of “intelligibility.” This suggests that a top-down organizing principle is also at work, selecting which embodied experiences are suitable for metaphorical use.

A more dynamic model for this process is the concept of “exaptation,” developed by Michael Anderson. Exaptation is the process by which a biological or cognitive circuit that evolved for one purpose is reused for another. For example, the tongue, evolved for tasting, has been exapted for speech. A key neurological example is the cerebellum, which evolved to manage physical balance by coordinating information from multiple sensory modalities. This same machinery has been exapted to coordinate complex variables in more abstract domains, such as integrating vision and working memory to create visual imagery.

This model explains how profound symbols work. Consider the symbol of Lady Justice holding scales. The scales, representing balance, allow us to hold the abstract concept of justice in mind so that we can reflect on it. Yet the symbol functions as more than a mere placeholder; it acts as a key. By invoking the metaphor of balance, it allows us to perform a “reverse exaptation”—to move from the abstract concept back through the metaphor to unlock and reactivate the cerebellum’s original, powerful machinery for coordinating complex variables. We can then apply that very sophisticated machinery to the abstract problem of justice, gaining an optimal grip on it.

Symbols, therefore, are deeply participatory. They are not a simple, one-way projection but rather facilitate a dynamic interaction between bottom-up emergence from our embodied experience and top-down emanation from our abstract concepts. They allow us to activate deep, primordial cognitive machinery to gain participatory and perspectival insight into the most important aspects of our lives. The relationship between symbols and the experience of sacredness will be the subject of further discussion.

35 The Symbol, Sacredness, and the Sacred

In this video, John Vervaeke continues his exploration of **sacredness**, proposing that it's a **serious play with the machinery of relevance realization** (2:21). He contrasts Geertz's idea of sacredness as "homing against horror" with Otto's concept of the "numinous," which exposes us to the horrifying limits of our being while also instilling awe and humility (0:30). Vervaeke explains how these two opposing aspects of sacredness—**meta-assimilation** (integration) and **meta-accommodation** (confronting the numinous)—are facilitated by relevance realization (1:34).

He introduces the **symbol** as a key component of this serious play (3:10), distinguishing it from a mere sign (3:48). Symbols, according to Vervaeke, don't just refer; they exemplify and have a **participatory aspect** (3:53). He ties symbols to metaphors, drawing on the work of Lakoff and Johnson, who argue that our cognition is largely metaphorical (4:40). Vervaeke then discusses how symbols allow us to hold complex ideas in mind and activate our executive machinery, using the example of a **scale as a symbol for justice** (6:19). He illustrates this with the "Bouba/Kiki" experiment, demonstrating how we instinctively assign meaning to shapes based on their symbolic resonance (9:35).

Vervaeke emphasizes that symbols are **deeply functional and active in us** (11:18), transforming us as we engage with them (12:01). He uses the example of **meditation and breath** (13:11), explaining how the breath can become a participatory symbol of impermanence and interconnectedness, allowing us to see reality more deeply and transform ourselves (15:02). He also uses the example of a **patriot looking at a flag** (16:20) to illustrate how symbols can integrate different aspects of ourselves, leading to a deeper participation in a concept like patriotism (18:59).

He further elaborates on the **anagogic capacity of symbols** (23:01)—their ability to facilitate inner optimization and deeper understanding of reality, creating a "symbolic resonance" (22:28). This process is seen in music, where sustained engagement with the symbol leads to deeper integration and new insights (25:00).

Vervaeke then connects symbols to the idea of **transgressing and expanding our worldview** (26:04). Symbols are "ecstatic" (27:55), helping us to "stand beyond ourselves" (28:00) and move towards more comprehensive worldviews. He discusses how symbols are **integrative** (29:06) and **multifaceted** (31:48), drawing together disparate ideas and reconfiguring our salience landscape to foster new insights (32:07).

Finally, Vervaeke proposes a refined understanding of sacredness and "the sacred" (34:39). He defines **mythos** as patterns of interaction deeply connected to **ritual** (34:52), which in turn activates the machinery of transformation. Sacredness, he argues, occurs when mythos is used to seriously play with and enhance *religio* (36:14), leading to deeper meaning and self-transformation (39:33). He challenges the traditional metaphysical notion of "the sacred" as something supernatural or having absolute value (43:52), arguing that there is no inherent "essence to relevance" (45:31). Instead, sacredness is an **experience of the inexhaustibility of reality** and our ongoing process of relevance realization (49:35). He uses the example of continually re-reading *Plato* to illustrate this inexhaustible and transformative relationship (49:58).

The video concludes by defining "the sacred" as the **transjected relationship between the combinatorially explosive nature of reality and the inexhaustibility of relevance realization** (53:42), a deep, participatory identification with this ongoing process (54:40).

Sacredness, Symbols, and the Inexhaustible Nature of Reality

1. Opening Recap: The Duality of Sacredness and Relevance Realization

In our continuing exploration of sacredness, we have identified a fundamental duality. On one hand, following Geertz, sacredness can be understood as a process that "homes us against horror," providing a stable

worldview. In contrast, Rudolf Otto's concept of the "numinous" suggests that sacredness exposes us to a horrifying awe—an experience that reveals our ultimate limitations and instills a profound sense of humility.

This apparent opposition can be understood through the cognitive machinery of relevance realization. The "homing" function, which creates an attuned worldview, represents a form of *meta-assimilation*—a process of compression and integration where everything fits together. Conversely, confronting the numinous affords *meta-accommodation*, forcing us to open up and adapt. Horror, in this framework, is the experience of confronting something that demands an unachievable accommodation, pushing our cognitive frames past their breaking point.

2. Core Thesis: Sacredness as "Serious Play" with Symbols

The central proposal is that sacredness is a form of "serious play" with the machinery of relevance realization, which constitutes the primordial aspects of what can be termed *religio*. Engaging in this play is deeply advantageous, as it is foundational to our agency, our capacity for self-transcendence, and our ability to perceive the world as an arena for meaningful action.

This serious play is most often conducted through symbolic behavior. A symbol, like a piece of music, has the capacity to function in both directions: it can bring about the openness of meta-accommodation while also affording the integration of meta-assimilation, bridging these two crucial cognitive processes.

3. Defining the Symbol: Participation over Reference

To understand this process, we must first distinguish a symbol from a mere sign. A sign simply refers to something else. A symbol, however, not only refers but also *exemplifies*. It has an inherently participatory aspect from the outset, engaging us at the fundamental level of the agent-arena relationship and the processes of relevance realization.

4. The Symbol as Profound Metaphor

At its core, a symbol is a metaphor. It is crucial to recognize, following the work of Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*, that such metaphors are not mere literary devices. They are profound, pervasive, and highly functional cognitive structures that shape our understanding of the world.

5. Critiquing Projection and Proposing Exaptation

However, the traditional model proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, which suggests a purely bottom-up, one-way projection from the physical sensory-motor domain to the conceptual domain, has been critiqued (by Vervaeke, Kennedy, and others) as incomplete. A more complex relationship is at play.

Instead of a one-way projection, the participatory nature of symbols reflects our capacity to play with *exaptation* in a bi-directional manner. Exaptation is the process by which a feature that evolved for one purpose is co-opted for a new function. With symbols, we can engage with this machinery in both directions.

6. The Mechanics of Symbolic Participation: Justice and the Cerebellum

A symbol is a metaphor that allows us to hold in mind something abstract that we cannot otherwise easily grasp, such as justice. Consider the scales of justice. By contemplating this symbol, one can prospectively engage with the physical act of balancing. This act allows one to tap back into the original machinery that was the subject of exaptation. Our capacity for physical balance—a process largely managed by the cerebellum—is exapted to find and make sense of complex contingency relationships between abstract variables. Holding the symbol in mind allows us to re-engage the machinery that was exapted from its original purpose.

7. Neuroscientific Underpinnings: The Cerebellum's Cognitive Role

This understanding is supported by a revolution in modern neuroscience. The cerebellum, once thought to be primarily for motor control and physical balance, is now understood to play a crucial role in higher-order

cognitive functions. It works to smooth out and identify patterns of contingency and dependency between different areas of the brain, making it essential for complex cognitive coordination.

8. The Transformative Power of Activation

By holding the symbol of the scales in mind, one "activates" the cerebellar machinery necessary to practice the *skill* of being just—the ability to sense, find, and coordinate complex contingencies. This process allows a person to deeply *participate* in justice. The symbol affords a way to literally reconfigure one's cognitive machinery, thereby cultivating the skills that make one more just and simultaneously grounding one's conceptual understanding of justice in lived experience.

9. An Experiential Example: The Bouba/Kiki Effect

This participatory symbolic cognition is more common than we might think, as demonstrated by the Bouba/Kiki effect. When shown a rounded, amoeba-like shape and a sharp, spiky one and asked to assign them the nonsense words "Bouba" and "Kiki," people overwhelmingly identify the rounded shape as Bouba and the spiky one as Kiki.

This immediate, intuitive association demonstrates a powerful bridging and cerebellar coordination between different sensory modalities—visual shape and auditory sound. It is a playful activation of the very machinery that allows us to connect disparate domains. While this experiment is playful, the same machinery can be activated and directed toward a profound purpose, as in the contemplation of the scales of justice.

10. Savoring the Symbolic World

To fully appreciate this, one must internalize and "savor" the symbol. The work of thinkers like Jonathan Pageau on the symbolic world encourages us to pay more attention to these aspects of our existence and to recognize how deeply functional and active the symbolic is within our cognitive lives.

11. The Anagogic Loop of Transformation

This participatory process creates a powerful transformative feedback loop. As the symbol of justice reconfigures your internal cognitive machinery, you become more capable of perceiving justice in the world. You begin to see *through* the symbol, by means of it but also beyond it, to realize and enact more justice. In turn, this new contact with justice discloses it in a new way, which feeds back to deepen the internal transformation.

12. A New Example: The Breath in Meditation

This dynamic can also be seen in a less conceptual practice: following the breath in meditation. Initially, as in Vipassanā practice, focusing on the breath serves to scale down one's attention, providing a single point of focus.

13. From Object to Process: Insights from Meditation

Over time, this scaled-down attention can increase one's sensitivity to the process-nature of the mind. An individual may shift from thinking of the mind as a container that holds "things"—like an object called "pain"—to realizing that the mind is a fine-grained process. Pain is no longer a noun, something one possesses, but a verb: "paining," a complex, unfolding set of events in which one participates.

14. The Breath as a Symbol of Impermanence

Through this shift, the breath evolves from a simple focal point into a participatory symbol of impermanence and interconnectedness. This symbolic understanding then scales back up, impacting one's sense of self. The meditator begins to see all of reality, including themselves, as fundamentally impermanent and interconnected, looking *through* the breath to perceive this deeper reality.

15. Polanyi's Framework: The Patriot and the Flag

Michael Polanyi's concepts of subsidiary and focal awareness provide another lens for understanding this. Consider a patriot contemplating an American flag—a more prototypical example of patriotic symbolism than a Canadian one, as the speaker notes, due to the different historical origins of the two nations. Polanyi argued that we integrate numerous subsidiary awarenesses—feelings, memories, associations—into a single focal awareness.

16. Symbolic Contemplation as a Process of Integration

In normal instrumental action, like grabbing a water bottle, our interest lies in the focal object. In symbolic contemplation, however, the interest shifts to the *process* of integration itself. The patriot focuses on the flag not to use it, but because the act of focusing integrates various subsidiary emotions and associations. By looking *through* these feelings at the flag, the patriot integrates disparate aspects of the self and, in doing so, participates in and becomes more patriotic.

17. The Dual Function of a Symbol

Connecting this back to the breath, we can see two symbolic functions at work. First, the breath can act as a focal point for the process of self-integration. Second, it can serve as a medium that suddenly discloses or reveals an aspect of reality, such as impermanence.

18. Symbolic Resonance and Anagoge

These two functions can enter into a dynamic interplay, or "symbolic resonance." The process unfolds in a cycle wherein focusing on the breath leads to greater self-integration; this enhanced processing power leads to a new insight or disclosure of reality; this new insight then deepens the subsequent reintegration when one refocuses on the breath. This upward, self-reinforcing cycle of transformation—where deeper insight affords more powerful integration, which in turn affords deeper insight—is known as **anagoge**.

19. Anagoge in Action

This anagogic process applies equally to the scales of justice. As contemplation sensitizes you to the symbol, you begin to see new aspects within it—for example, that balance is a dynamic process, not a static state. This new insight activates different aspects of the self, creating a bi-directional transformation reminiscent of sensibility transcendence, where one's perception of the world and one's perception of the self are transformed in a coupled fashion.

20. Music as a Purely Anagogic Experience

Music offers a quintessential example of a purely symbolic and anagogic process. When listening to music, one is not typically trying to identify the source of a sound for informational purposes. Instead, the listener focuses on the music because of the integration it affords. This integration, in turn, discloses new aspects of the music itself, which deepens the experience and draws the listener further in.

21. The Ecstatic Nature of Symbols

A symbol must also be "ecstatic," a term used here in its literal sense: to stand beyond oneself. To be transformative, a symbol must be able to reach into one's current worldview but not be fully captured by it. It must be transgressive, shaking things up in a way that drives the expansion toward a new, aspired-to worldview. The symbol activates us while simultaneously drawing us beyond ourselves.

22. Synthesizing the Properties of Symbols

In summary, symbols possess several key characteristics: they are **ecstatic**, enabling us to stand beyond our current frame; **participatory**, engaging us through our cognitive and sensory-motor machinery; and **integrative** in an anagogic fashion, creating a coupled transformation where the self and the world are reconfigured together.

23. The Christian Cross as a Case Study

The symbol of the Christian cross exemplifies this entire framework. It taps into exapted perceptual machinery (the vertical and horizontal axes). For a receptive individual, it initiates an interactive, anagogic process. Contemplation of the cross fosters personal integration, which in turn discloses profound aspects of reality—such as the relationship between suffering, time, and eternity. This disclosure draws the person further in, making the Christian worldview viable for them through a process of serious play.

24. The Complexity and Reconfiguring Power of Symbols

Symbols are often multifaceted. Athena, for instance, is a symbol of wisdom, but also of weaving and warfare. This complexity allows symbols to connect normally unconnected parts of our salience landscape, radically reconfiguring it and creating the potential for profound insight.

25. Symbols as Transjective and Transformative

Ultimately, symbols are inherently **transjective**—they form a bridge between the world we are in and the world we aspire to. They are transgressive and transformative, activating both the opening up of meta-accommodation and the drawing in of meta-assimilation to propel our development.

26. Defining Mythos, Ritual, and Story

This machinery is situated within what can be called a **mythos**. Distinct from the common meaning of "myth," a mythos is a pattern of interaction that is deeply enmeshed with ritual and story. Ritual is understood not as a neurotic routine but as "enacted analogy" or "enacted anagoge"—processes designed to activate transformation. The story element is crucial for enabling the participatory knowing required for the mythos to be enactable in ritual.

27. Defining Sacredness through Mythos and Religio

With these concepts in place, we can arrive at a formal definition: **Sacredness** is what occurs when a mythos is used to activate, accentuate, articulate, and seriously play with **religio**—the primordial machinery of relevance realization.

28. The Inherent Value of Sacredness

Humans find this process deeply valuable and meaningful because relevance realization, as a self-organizing and self-correcting process, is *constitutively interested in itself*. When we use a mythos to celebrate and enhance religio, we are tapping into this fundamental, built-in interest. Just as an insight or a flow state is intrinsically rewarding, this process is valuable because it engages the very machinery of meaning-making in a reflective celebration of itself.

29. Addressing the Metaphysical Objection

A primary counterargument to this model is that it misses the essence of sacredness, which lies not in a process but in the **sacred**—something with absolute, metaphysical value.

30. Articulating the Metaphysical Proposal

This metaphysical proposal posits the existence of something **supernatural** (literally, "above nature") that possesses absolute value. Translated into the language of this framework, it is the claim that there is an "essence to relevance"—a final, unchanging formula for what is relevant, which inheres in a particular object, entity, or place.

31. Critiquing the Metaphysical Proposal

This proposal, however, represents a **category mistake**. There is no static "essence" to relevance; there is only the ongoing, dynamic *process* of relevance realization. To claim otherwise is to confuse the products of our cognition with the process of cognition itself—a fixation that can lead to significant error.

32. An Alternative Historical Precedent: The Gnostics

As a historical precedent for a process-oriented view, we can look to the Gnostics. They were criticized by their apostolic contemporaries for constantly inventing new myths because they saw the relationship to sacredness as an evolving, transgressive process of continuous trans-framing.

33. An Alternative Proposal: Sacredness as the Inexhaustible

This points toward an alternative proposal. Perhaps sacredness is not about finding a final, complete, and stabilized form. Instead, sacredness may be an experience of the **inexhaustibleness** of reality and of the relevance realization machinery in its coupled response to that reality.

34. A Personal Example: The Sacredness of Plato

This can be illustrated with a personal example. Plato's texts can be experienced as sacred, not because Plato is a supernatural authority with a final, absolute account of reality, but because of the inexhaustible anagogic process they afford. Reading Plato yields insights that transform the self. This transformation allows one to return to the texts and see things that were previously invisible. This, in turn, sparks a new round of transformation in a continuous, life-long developmental spiral. Plato becomes an inexhaustible fount of insight and trans-framing.

35. Distinction from Nietzsche

It is important to note that this proposal is not a simple inversion of Christianity in the manner of Nietzsche, who found a dark sacredness in staring into the abyss. This is a distinct alternative, not a mere opposition.

36. Final Definition: The Sacred as a Transjective Relationship

We can now articulate a final, comprehensive definition. The **sacred** is the **transjective relationship** between two forms of inexhaustibility: the combinatorial explosiveness and ultimate "no-thingness" of reality, which will always transcend any attempt to frame it completely; and the inexhaustible, ongoing process and "no-thingness" of relevance realization itself, which can never be fully captured within its own frame. This primordial coupling, a deep symbolic resonance and **non-logical identity**, between the inexhaustibleness of reality and the inexhaustibleness of our deepest cognitive machinery is what powers the profound, participatory experience of sacredness.

36 Religio/Perennial Problems/Reverse Eng. Enlightenment

In this video, John Vervaeke continues his examination of **sacredness**, defining symbols as a **participatory act** that reactivates cognitive processes to re-experience and understand reality (0:56). He argues that symbols, as *mythos* (3:29), activate and accelerate *religio*, which is the intrinsically valuable process of relevance realization. He proposes that *religio* involves self-correction and transcendence, leading to what he calls a "flow state" (4:50).

Vervaeke then shifts to discussing **the sacred**, suggesting it's not supernatural or absolute, citing concepts like the *Tao* and *Shunyata* (6:28). He critiques the idea of essentializing sacredness, stating that relevance doesn't have an essence but is an evolving process (8:31). He offers an alternative perspective: sacredness as the **inexhaustible aspects of reality**, where everything is "combinatorially explosive" (9:45). This inexhaustibility in reality is mirrored by the "no-thingness" of human processing, creating a deep participatory identification between the two (10:49).

The discussion moves to the **indispensability of certain symbols** or *mythos* for individuals and communities to activate and appreciate their *religio* (12:40). However, Vervaeke cautions against confusing this **psychocultural indispensability with metaphysical necessity** (15:21), using English as an example of something indispensable but not metaphysically necessary (15:44). He argues that if we give up the idea of sacredness as supernatural or metaphysically necessary, we can integrate it with a scientific worldview, grounded in a naturalistic interpretation of relevance realization (19:26).

Vervaeke then introduces the concept of **perennial problems** (25:19), which are inherent vulnerabilities in our meaning-making machinery (relevance realization) that can lead to meaninglessness, despair, and absurdity (26:34). These problems manifest as:

- **Parasitic processing** (35:00): Complex cycles of self-deception and self-destruction.
- **Modal confusion** (35:29): Problems with self-identification.
- **Reflectiveness gap** (38:53): The challenge of optimizing reflection for agency (e.g., Hamlet's paralysis by over-reflection) (39:02).
- **Meta-meaning problems** (42:02): Absurdity, anxiety, and alienation, where the agent-arena relationship is lost (42:23).
- **Existential inertia** (43:31) and **existential ignorance** (43:44): Being trapped in a worldview or being indecisive about transformation.

Vervaeke elaborates on **absurdity** (44:32), explaining that it's not a result of logical arguments but rather a clash of perspectives, as illustrated by Thomas Nagel's example of "everyday absurdity" (48:02). This clash, when unresolved with humor, leads to incoherency and a loss of connectedness (52:21).

Finally, Vervaeke proposes that **enlightenment** (54:57) can be understood as a developmental process that provides a reliable response to ameliorate and alleviate these perennial problems (54:14), rather than an unachievable superlative (55:01). He intends to show how this can be explained using the theoretical machinery of relevance realization and *religio* (55:40), ultimately offering a way to awaken from the meaning crisis (33:01).

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis: The Nature of the Sacred and the Perennial Problems of Meaning-Making

1.0 Introduction: Recapping the Role of Symbols in Experiencing Sacredness

This discourse builds upon a prior examination of sacredness, moving from its experiential dimension toward a naturalistic account of its source. It begins by recapping the crucial role of symbols, which function not as mere

signs but as profound participatory acts that facilitate a transformative connection with reality. Understanding this mechanism is foundational to appreciating how we might cultivate a sense of deep connectedness within a modern, scientific worldview.

A symbol, in this context, is a **participatory act** that leverages a kind of profound metaphor to reactivate our cognitive machinery. This process allows us to see more deeply into reality, re-appreciate its complexity, and re-experience our relationship with it. This engagement initiates what can be described as an "Anagogic flow"—a dynamic of mutual, reciprocal realization where the individual is transformed in order to see more deeply into the world, and reality, in turn, discloses itself more fully. This dynamic feels deeply like a love coupling to reality in a profound way, fostering a profound integration between self and world.

The ultimate purpose of symbols is to initiate a trajectory of transformation, a process of "trans-framing." They are designed to be ecstatic, participatory, and integrative tools that open us up to the world through wonder while simultaneously fostering our own growth to meet that expanded world. In doing so, symbols serve to complexify both the individual and their perception of reality in a coordinated, harmonious fashion.

This symbolic function is embedded within a **mythos**—the integration of a symbol with a story, which in turn points toward ritual. For a mythos to be effective, it must be enacted. It is through this enacted mythos that we can activate, accelerate, articulate, and appreciate religio: the deep, primordial sense of connectedness that we find inherently valuable. With the function of symbols in generating sacred experience established, the inquiry must now turn to a more fundamental question: What is the nature of the sacred itself?

2.0 A New Proposal for the Sacred: Beyond Essentialism to the Inexhaustible

Defining the source of sacredness is a critical strategic pivot. Traditional conceptions often ground the sacred in supernatural or absolute entities, a framework that is increasingly untenable within a scientific worldview. This section moves away from such definitions to articulate a new, naturalistic proposal that frames the sacred not as an essential property of a specific object or being, but as a relational quality of inexhaustibility.

A common approach is to essentialize the sacred, defining its source as something "essentially relevant"—an absolute that unquestionably commands our attention. This conception, however, represents a fundamental **category mistake**. The cognitive process of relevance realization, which underpins our ability to find anything meaningful, is not structured to detect a static, inherent property. Relevance realization is an intrinsically evolving process; it functions *by* evolving and evolves *in* its functioning. It has no essence.

This non-essentialist view of the sacred is not without precedent. When Prince Wu of Liang pressed the Buddhist patriarch Bodhidharma to define what was holy about his doctrine, Bodhidharma famously replied, "Nothing holy, vast emptiness." *Shunyata* is in that sense sacred, but it's not holy—at least not in the sense of a supernatural source of righteousness.

An alternative proposal defines the source of sacredness as **"the inexhaustible."** This concept operates on two parallel and deeply interconnected levels:

1. **The Inexhaustibility of Reality:** The world is "combinatorially explosive." Every object, every aspect of reality, contains a "no-thingness"—an unlimited potential for new patterns, new meanings, and new connections to be realized. This ensures that reality can always be a source of wonder and rediscovery, as it can never be fully captured or finalized by any single frame.
2. **The Inexhaustibility of the Self:** The internal process of relevance realization is likewise an ongoing, inexhaustible process. The "I" that frames experience can never be fully captured within any frame it creates. Like a shark that must keep swimming to breathe, the cognitive machinery of meaning-making cannot stop. This creates a parallel "no-thingness" within the self.

It is the **deep transactivity**—the participatory identification—between the inexhaustibility within the self and the inexhaustibility of reality that forms the basis for the repeatable experience of the sacred. This connection allows one to return again and again to the world and find the real potential for sacredness renewed. This revised understanding of the sacred allows us to explore how different traditions, through their unique systems, might connect individuals to this universal, inexhaustible source.

3.0 Distinguishing Psycho-Cultural Indispensability from Metaphysical Necessity

Reconciling the validity of diverse spiritual paths with a universal, non-supernatural understanding of the sacred requires a crucial distinction. We must separate the concept of something being *indispensable* for an individual's or a community's meaning-making from the idea that it is *metaphysically necessary* for all people at all times. This distinction helps to avoid theological absolutism while honoring the profound personal importance of specific traditions.

For a particular person or community, a specific symbol, mythos, or set of practices—be it Christian, Hindu, or otherwise—may be genuinely **indispensable**. Given an individual's unique personal history, their cultural context, and the particular way their sense of religio (connectedness) has unfolded, a certain framework may be the only viable pathway for them to activate and articulate their journey of meaning-making. These symbols may be indispensable because of the Kairos—the opportune, critical timing—that is always part of one's ongoing religio.

Indispensability, however, should not be confused with **metaphysical necessity**. An analogy can be made with language. For a speaker communicating these ideas in English, the language is indispensable for this context. Yet, English is not a final, absolute, or metaphysically necessary language. It did not always exist, it will one day cease to exist, and it is constantly evolving precisely to remain fitted to the world.

Confusing these two concepts leads to the erroneous conclusion that because a certain mythos is indispensable for one's own connection to the sacred, the sacred must therefore inhere in the supernatural entity or absolute truth claims of that mythos. This perpetuates a **"two worlds mythology,"** which posits a separate, supernatural realm as the source of meaning, a view that is fundamentally at odds with a scientific worldview. By rejecting this mythology, we can begin the project of resituating the human experience of sacredness within the world revealed by science, a crucial step in addressing the meaning crisis.

4.0 The Dual Analysis of the Meaning Crisis: Historical Factors and Perennial Problems

To adequately address the modern meaning crisis, a two-pronged analytical framework is required. It is not enough to examine only the historical forces that have disrupted traditional meaning systems; we must also conduct a scientific, structural-functional analysis of the cognitive machinery of meaning-making itself. Integrating these two perspectives provides a complete diagnosis of why so many people today experience a profound lack of connectedness.

The **historical analysis** reveals that various societal, cultural, and intellectual developments have effectively **"unhomed us."** These factors have thwarted our "worldview attunement," undermining the traditions and languages that once provided a reliable sense of religio—the deep connectedness that we experience as sacredness.

The **structural-functional (scientific) analysis** exposes a deeper issue: the very cognitive machinery of **relevance realization** that makes us intelligent and adaptive also makes us inherently vulnerable to self-deceptive and self-destructive processing. The same system that allows us to experience profound connectedness is also the system that can go horribly awry.

This inherent vulnerability gives rise to "**perennial problems**"—inescapable challenges rooted in the very structure of our cognitive machinery. They represent timeless ways in which our meaning-making processes can break down, driving us into states of meaninglessness, absurdity, and despair. The meaning crisis emerges with such force when the historical factors lead to the undermining of the whole ecology of practices, psycho-technologies, and cognitive cultural grammar that people have created in order to respond to these perennial problems. The examination of these problems in detail reveals the specific failure points in our quest for meaning.

5.0 A Taxonomy of Perennial Problems: How Meaning-Making Goes Awry

This section deconstructs the specific ways our cognitive machinery for meaning-making can fail, leading to the perennial problems that plague human existence. Each problem can be linked to a core functional aspect of relevance realization, demonstrating how the very system that makes us adaptive also makes us vulnerable to profound distress.

1. The Self-Organizing Aspect: Parasitic Processing

The self-organizing nature of relevance realization can malfunction, giving rise to **parasitic processing**. This refers to complex, self-perpetuating cycles of self-deception and self-destruction that become embedded in our cognition. These patterns effectively "take on a life of their own and take life from us," consuming cognitive and emotional resources while driving maladaptive behavior.

2. The Self-Identification Aspect: Modal Confusion

A second perennial problem is **modal confusion**. This arises from the self-identification aspect of our cognition and involves misidentifying one's mode of being, leading to significant internal conflict and suffering.

3. The Self-Reflection Aspect: The Reflectiveness Gap

Our capacity for self-reflection, while crucial for agency, creates a precarious balancing act known as the **reflectiveness gap**. This perennial problem manifests in two opposing failures:

- **The Wanton:** Drawing on Harry Frankfurt's work, the "wanton" is a being who acts on pure impulse. Lacking reflection, the wanton is awash in conflicting desires and loses agency. Self-reflection creates a "gap," allowing one to perform a transparency-opacity shift—to step back and observe one's motivations rather than being driven by them.
- **Hamlet:** The opposite danger is typified by Shakespeare's Hamlet, who engages in excessive reflection. He reflects on his reflections, perpetually stepping back until he becomes disconnected from his own motivational machinery. This paralysis of analysis also results in a complete loss of agency.

This creates a perennial optimization challenge: how to balance the immersive engagement of the wanton with the self-correcting flexibility of Hamlet. Finding the right balance is a continuous trade-off managed by relevance realization.

4. The Meta-Meaning Aspect: The Loss of the Agent-Arena Relationship

The most encompassing problems arise from a breakdown in the meta-meaning structure of the agent-arena relationship. This manifests in several distinct but related forms of disconnection:

- **Alienation:** The loss of connectedness to other people.
- **Anxiety:** The profound disconnection from oneself.
- **Absurdity:** The loss of connectedness to the world. This can intensify into **horror** when a particular absurdity becomes both deeply mysterious and sense-making is thwarted.

Related existential states include **existential inertia**, where one is trapped in a worldview and unable to transform, and **existential entrapment** or **ignorance**, which involves a paralyzing indecisiveness about whether or not to undergo personal transformation.

A Deeper Analysis of Absurdity

The feeling of absurdity is particularly central to the meaning crisis. As philosopher Thomas Nagel argues, this feeling is not generated by logical, propositional arguments (e.g., "I am small and the universe is vast"). Such arguments are often logically flawed, after-the-fact expressions of the feeling, not its cause.

Nagel's central thesis is that absurdity is experienced as a "**clash of perspectives**." A vivid example illustrates this: a man named Tom, after immense emotional turmoil, calls his friend Susan to declare his love, only to discover he is speaking to an answering machine.

Susan is not here right now please leave a message at the tone beep

From within Tom's perspective, his action is deeply meaningful, but the machine provides an impersonal, mechanical perspective in which his actions make no sense; they have no meaning. This clash is structurally similar to humor, where incongruous perspectives are suddenly shifted and resolved. In absurdity, however, the clash is raw and cannot be resolved. We are left with the sheer incoherence and the painful loss of connectedness. These interconnected problems are inherent, inescapable vulnerabilities in our cognitive architecture, demanding a robust and systematic response.

6.0 The Proposed Solution: Reverse-Engineering Enlightenment

The culmination of this analysis is not merely a diagnosis of the perennial problems that fuel the meaning crisis, but the articulation of a practical, non-mythological path toward resolving them. By understanding the structural-functional failures of our meaning-making machinery, we can begin to identify the processes that might systematically repair them.

The proposed solution begins with a stipulated, pragmatic definition of enlightenment. It is not framed as an unachievable, superhuman state reserved for historical sages. Instead, enlightenment is defined as "the developmental process that gives us reliable amelioration and alleviation of the perennial problems." This definition transforms enlightenment from a distant ideal into a tangible developmental goal focused on alleviating the universal forms of suffering that arise from our cognitive architecture.

The core project, therefore, is to "**reverse-engineer enlightenment**." The goal is to use the theoretical machinery of relevance realization, religio, and the taxonomy of perennial problems to identify the specific practices and psycho-technologies that can provide a comprehensive response to these inherent vulnerabilities. By understanding *how* our cognition breaks down, we can systematically determine *what* is needed to build it back up in a more wise, resilient, and connected way.

Ultimately, awakening from the meaning crisis requires more than a compelling theory. To have failed in this endeavor would be for this work not to ultimately lead to ways in which you, in your life, can respond to how the perennial problems might be gnawing away at the fabric of meaning. The ambition is to provide an understanding that affords and facilitates the process of transformation we need to undergo, a way of getting the process of awakening from the meaning crisis started.

37 Reverse Engineering Enlightenment: Part 2

In this video, John Vervaeke continues his "Reverse Engineering Enlightenment" series by discussing how the experience of sacredness helps address "perennial problems" arising from the very machinery of "religio" (0:14). These problems, he argues, make us vulnerable to self-deceptive and self-destructive behavior. He outlines various perennial problems and proposes psycho-technologies, or practices, to address them within a "wisdom framing."

The perennial problems and their proposed solutions are:

- **Parasitic Processing** (10:23): This refers to negative thought spirals that become self-sustaining. Vervaeke suggests cultivating a **counteractive dynamical system** (20:18), like the Buddhist Eightfold Path, which is a set of complementary practices working together (20:51).
- **Modal Confusion** (11:01): The inability to distinguish between "having" and "being" modes of existence. The solution lies in **sati practices** (21:32), which help remember and re-enter the "being" mode (33:09).
- **Reflectiveness Gap** (11:24): The struggle to find a balance between excessive reflection (leading to inaction) and impulsive action. Vervaeke proposes cultivating **flow states** (21:58) that dynamically integrate immersion and creative flexibility (34:24).
- **Absurdity (Clash of Perspectives)** (12:08): The feeling that life lacks inherent meaning due to conflicting perspectives. The solution is **ciencia intuitiva** (22:23) (Spinoza's concept) or **Praja** (22:29) (Buddhist wisdom), a state of deep intuitive knowing where individual and cosmic perspectives interpenetrate (39:21).
- **Anxiety (Inner Conflict)** (14:21): A nebulous sense of threat arising from internal psychological conflict. The remedy involves **internalizing the sage** (23:17) to create an inner dialogue that coordinates different aspects of the self, similar to Platonic dialogue or Jungian active imagination (45:27).
- **Alienation** (14:53): The inability to connect with others, often exacerbated by social media. Vervaeke suggests cultivating **communitas** (24:02) (a sense of shared spirit and connectedness) through practices like "authentic discourse" (24:17) and "circling" (53:54), which aim to foster real communication and collective flow.
- **Existential Inertia** (15:29): Difficulty moving between different worldviews or ways of being. This problem requires **anagoge** (15:55), a process of ascending or raising the mind from one worldview to another (15:55-16:01).
- **Existential Ignorance** (16:04): Lacking the propositional, perspectival, and participatory knowledge needed for self-cultivation. This leads to **gnosis** (24:48), a transformative, direct knowing connected to higher states of consciousness (24:54).

Vervaeke argues that addressing these perennial problems through a systematic and reliable ecology of psycho-technologies, framed by wisdom, constitutes a "reverse engineering of enlightenment" (26:23). He aims to provide a naturalistic and scientifically investigable account of enlightenment, emphasizing its value in ameliorating self-deception and affording self-optimization (25:53-28:21).

A Cognitive Science Framework for Addressing Perennial Problems

The experience of sacredness can be understood in terms of a transjective stability—a profound resonance, or *anagoge*, between the "no thickness" of an individual's ever-evolving relevance realization and its mysterious depths, and the "no thickness" of a reality that is ultimately combinatorially explosive. The symbolic plays a vital

role in this process, helping to activate the primordial aspects of our cognitive connectedness (*religio*) and facilitate processes of self-transcendence, whereby opening up to the world simultaneously opens us up to ourselves. It is crucial, however, to distinguish the psychological and cultural indispensability of the sacred from any claims of metaphysical necessity or a supernatural, absolute essence. The sacred is not an absolute form of relevance but a dynamic relationship that facilitates a higher-order relevance realization, helping us to balance the need for cognitive homing with the transformative confrontation with the numinous.

The contemporary meaning crisis has two core components: the historical factors that have been traced throughout this series, and a set of perennial problems that demand our focus. These problems are perennial because the very cognitive machinery of *religio* that makes us adaptive also leaves us perpetually vulnerable to self-deceptive and self-destructive behavior. While most cultures have historically cultivated an "ecology of psycho-technologies"—typically a religion—to address these vulnerabilities, modern historical factors have undermined this possibility. Without a worldview that legitimates and sustains such an ecology, individuals are now forced to cobble together their own personal responses in a dangerously autodidactic fashion, often bereft of tradition, guidance, or well-vetted practices.

Responding to the meaning crisis therefore requires a two-pronged approach. First, we must rearticulate a new worldview that legitimates and facilitates the project of enhancing *religio*—a project of meaning-making, self-transcendence, and the cultivation of wisdom. Second, we must understand and develop the specific ecology of practices that can effectively address the perennial problems. The linchpin of this entire endeavor is the proposal that relevance realization, the core of meaning-making, can be given a naturalistic, scientific explanation that still does full justice to the lived experience of sacredness. Ultimately, this project can only be considered a success if it provides a practical way for people to ameliorate and alleviate the perennial problems they face.

A systematic analysis of these problems can be framed by examining the functional, structural, and developmental features of *religio* and their corresponding vulnerabilities. Functionally, the self-organizing nature of our cognition makes us susceptible to **parasitic processing**, where negative thoughts spiral into complex systems that resist intervention. The process of self-identification leaves us vulnerable to **modal confusion**, the conflation of the "having mode" with the "being mode." The capacity for self-reflection creates the **reflectiveness gap**, where too much detachment can lead to a Hamlet-like paralysis of agency. Structurally, the agent-arena relationship gives rise to its own set of issues. The connection between self and world can break down into **absurdity**—not a logical conclusion, but an experiential clash of perspectives. The connection of the self to itself is vulnerable to **anxiety** and inner conflict. The connection of the self to others can result in **alienation**. Developmentally, the process of qualitative cognitive growth makes us susceptible to **existential inertia**, the difficulty of moving between worldviews, and **existential ignorance**, the inability to reason our way into new perspectival and participatory knowledge. Cumulatively, these interconnected problems can foster a Gnostic sense of **existential entrapment**, a feeling of being fundamentally trapped.

While acknowledging a degree of hubris in schematizing solutions to such profound issues, an ecology of psycho-technologies can be developed to address this systematic set of problems. To counter **parasitic processing**, one must cultivate a **Counteractive Dynamical System**—an integrated set of practices that can match the complexity of the problem. To address **modal confusion**, one can engage in **Sati** practices (mindfulness) designed to invoke a deep remembrance of the being mode. The **reflectiveness gap** can be bridged by cultivating the **Flow State**, which dynamically integrates deep immersion with creative flexibility. The experiential clash of **absurdity** is addressed by realizing a state of non-duality, known in the West as **Scientia Intuitiva** and in the East as **Prajñā**. Inner conflict and **anxiety** can be ameliorated by **Internalizing the Sage**, fostering a rich inner dialogue. **Alienation** is countered by cultivating **Communitas** through practices of authentic discourse. Finally, the feeling of **existential entrapment** can be overcome through **Gnosis**. This entire ecology of practices must be situated within an overarching **Wisdom Framing**, a cognitive style in which the amelioration of self-deception and the affordance of self-optimization are held paramount.

This framework amounts to a bold proposal: to reverse-engineer enlightenment. Instead of treating enlightenment as an obscure mystical state, we can redefine it practically as a reliable and systematic ecology of psycho-technologies that allows individuals and communities to address the perennial problems. Insofar as a naturalistic, scientific account can be given for how these practices function—drawing on our understanding of relevance realization, mindfulness, flow, and other cognitive processes—it will constitute a scientific theory of enlightenment, one that provides a powerful response to the meaning crisis.

To address the overarching problem of parasitic processing, one must cultivate a counteractive set of practices that become a self-organizing system in their own right. The Buddhist Eightfold Path, represented as a self-rolling wheel, is a prototypical example. Its components—right aspiration, right mindfulness, right concentration—are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Crucially, "right" in this context does not mean moral righteousness, but rather right-handedness or dexterity; it signifies "right fitness," an optimal fitness that enhances relevance realization. The goal is to internalize these practices so they form a complex dynamical system capable of responding effectively to the equally complex dynamics of parasitic thought patterns. The Buddha's parable of the goldsmith illustrates this integration perfectly. The mind is like valuable gold. Merely looking at it (reflection) changes nothing. Merely heating it (effort) causes it to melt away. Merely hammering it (shaping new skills) will smash it. Only by dynamically integrating the skills of looking, heating, and hammering does the goldsmith create a higher-order ability to shape the gold into something beautiful and useful. Likewise, an ecology of complementary psycho-technologies, each with strengths and weaknesses fitted together, builds a higher-order capacity to shape the mind.

The issues of modal confusion and the reflectiveness gap are addressed by mindfulness and flow, respectively. Practices drawn from traditions like Stoicism and Buddhism can help us remember *Sati*—the being mode—not as an idea to be believed, but as an existential state to be inhabited. The reflectiveness gap, which forces a choice between chaotic immersion and detached paralysis, is resolved in the flow state. Referencing Taoism as the "religion of flow," this state dynamically integrates deep engagement with creative flexibility, allowing for a fluid and responsive mode of being that is neither impulsive nor overwrought.

The experience of absurdity arises from a clash of perspectives. The arguments people use to justify this feeling—such as "what I do won't matter in a million years"—are, as Thomas Nagel pointed out, fallacious arguments. They are after-the-fact expressions of the feeling, not its generators. The problem is therefore addressed not by counter-argument, but by realizing a state of consciousness that overcomes the perspectival clash. This state, which Spinoza called *Scientia Intuitiva* and Buddhists call *Prajñā*, involves a profound interpenetration of the cosmic and the momentary. To achieve it requires dedicated practice; one must almost perform a *lectio Divina* with Spinoza's *Ethics*, letting it soak in to see the world from his perspective. Through such deep study, one learns to see the entire meta-argument of reality reflected in each individual premise. A parallel exists in Eastern traditions, where one practices simultaneously looking as deeply inward and as deeply outward as possible, realizing a state of non-duality. In this state, the opposition between the grand, scaled-up perspective and the immediate, scaled-down perspective dissolves, alleviating the very experiential conflict that generates the feeling of absurdity.

Anxiety and inner conflict stem from a sense of being at war with oneself. The traditional response is to internalize a sage figure—Socrates, Christ, the Buddha—to create a capacity for inner dialogue that can coordinate the psyche's various centers. This involves two complementary processes. First is **indwelling**, the practice of trying to see the world from the sage's perspective ("What would Socrates do?"). Second is **internalizing** that perspective so that it becomes part of one's own metacognitive machinery, affording the ability to enter into a rich, Socratic dialogue with oneself.

To combat alienation, we must cultivate *communitas*—a state of collective flow, shared attention, and communion that fosters a shared identity. This requires a renewed focus on authentic communication, moving beyond the adversarial exchanges that dominate modern culture. A growing movement of **authentic discourse**, involving practices like circling, seeks to achieve this. Individuals such as Peter Limberg are introducing people to these practices, while others like Jordan Hall are working to create what he calls "coherence" by freeing

communication from its current cultural grammar. The goal is to shift communication from a mere exchange of propositions to a practice that taps into deeper levels of knowing—procedural, perspectival, and participatory. By doing so, we can foster collective intelligence and create a sense of coherence that marshals our distributed cognition to solve complex problems together.

Finally, the Gnostic sense of existential entrapment is addressed through *gnosis*, a transformative insight connected to higher states of consciousness. As previously discussed, the cultivation of *gnosis* appears to require an open-ended and transgressive *mythos*—a symbolic framework that allows for ongoing development and the breaking of conceptual frames.

In the next discussion, the aim will be to integrate these distinct components, elaborating on the overarching wisdom framing required to cultivate this ecology of practices and constellate them into a coherent response to the perennial problems we face. Thank you for your time and attention.

38 Agape and 4E Cognitive Science

This video discusses the ongoing "meaning crisis" and proposes solutions through the cultivation of various psycho-technologies and a comprehensive worldview (0:14). The speaker, John Vervaeke, emphasizes that the same cognitive processes that enable human intelligence also make us vulnerable to self-deception and self-destructive behaviors (0:31).

Vervaeke outlines several "perennial problems" and their proposed counteractions:

- **Parasitic processing** can be addressed with a **counteractive dynamical system** (0:48).
- **Motor confusion** can be managed by cultivating **sati** (0:57).
- **Reflectiveness** can be overcome by cultivating **flow** (1:00).
- **Absurdity** can be addressed by cultivating **Praja** (1:05).
- **Anxiety** can be alleviated through **inner dialogue** and internalizing the "sage" (1:08).
- **Alienation** can be countered by cultivating **communitas**, including emerging "authentic relating" and "circling" practices (1:24).
- **Existential entrapment** can be responded to by cultivating **gnosis**, empowered by higher states of consciousness (2:04).

These practices, when integrated into a wisdom framework, lead to "enlightenment," defined as a reliable amelioration of perennial problems (3:32). Vervaeke highlights ongoing scientific work on wisdom and its cultivation (4:55), noting that many individuals are already developing ecologies of psycho-technologies (5:49), such as integrating parkour and martial arts with circling (6:10).

The video then delves into the **loss of the three orders** in the modern worldview, which exacerbates the meaning crisis (8:47):

- **Loss of the numerological order:** This has led to a diminished sense of coherence and connectedness (8:57).
- **Loss of the normative order:** This impacts our sense of significance and depth derived from self-transcendence (9:19).
- **Loss of the narrative order:** This has resulted in a loss of purpose and direction (9:32).

Vervaeke introduces *Susan Wolf's* work on "meaning in life," which posits that meaning comes from subjective attraction aligning with objective attractiveness (10:23). However, the Scientific Revolution has led to a belief that nothing is objectively attractive, creating a significant challenge (12:44).

To address this, Vervaeke proposes that **agape** (love for its own sake) can fill the void of objective value (18:45). Agape, in this context, means caring about the conditions that enable meaning-making itself, which are universal and independent of individual valuing (19:50). This understanding of agape is crucial for grounding the machinery crafted to address perennial problems (21:15).

The video also explores how **4E cognitive science** (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended, and emergence) can help restore the lost orders (24:11).

- **Embodiment:** Our intelligence is deeply rooted in our physical coping with the world, challenging the Cartesian mind-body separation (28:12).
- **Embeddedness:** We are deeply intertwined with our environment, constantly engaged in niche construction (33:09).

- **Emergence:** The mind emerges from the embodied and embedded brain, allowing for a vertical dimension to ontology through complexification and self-transcendence (36:35).
- **Emotion:** Emotions are integral to relevance realization and cognitive agency, guiding our attention and shaping our salience landscape (41:59). Emotions also coordinate attachment relationships, enabling distributed cognition within communities (45:47).
- **Excellence/Positive Psychology:** Studying how the mind excels and optimizes itself (wisdom) can provide deeper understanding beyond just its breakdowns (48:24).

These insights from 4E cognitive science help to restore the **normological order**, showing how we fit in and belong, and the **normative order**, illustrating how we can self-transcend and cultivate enlightenment (51:12). Vervaeke references *Ursula Goodenough's* concept of "transcendence into" the depths of nature and psyche, rather than "transcendence above," as a way to recover sacredness and wonder (52:27).

Finally, Vervaeke addresses the **narrative order**, acknowledging that 4E cognitive science doesn't provide a cosmic telos (54:11). Instead, he suggests a "post-narrative" way of being, focusing on open-ended optimization and the depth of living (56:20), which can be accessed through higher states of consciousness where traditional narratives drop away, yet a deep sense of connection and significance remains (57:08). He concludes by reiterating the need to integrate these insights into a "religion that is not a religion" and to further explore the cognitive science of wisdom (58:08).

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis

The perennial problems that are endemic to human existence arise from the very functioning, structure, and development of our adaptive intelligence. The cognitive processes that make us so intelligently adaptive are the same ones that render us vulnerable to self-deceptive and self-destructive behavior. It has been proposed that we can develop a systematic response to these challenges through an ecology of psycho-technologies. Parasitic processing can be addressed with a counteractive dynamical system; modal confusion with the cultivation of *sati*; the reflectiveness gap with the cultivation of flow; absurdity with the cultivation of *prajna*; anxiety with the development of an inner dialogue through internalizing the sage; alienation with the cultivation of *communitas*; and existential entrapment with the cultivation of *gnosis*, empowered by the capacity for realizing higher states of consciousness.

When this comprehensive set of practices is situated within a wisdom framing, it allows an individual to develop interlocking sets of virtues that simultaneously address self-deception and afford self-optimization. This entire project, aimed at providing a reliable amelioration of the perennial problems, constitutes what can be understood as a reverse-engineered model of enlightenment. The components of this model, I believe, can each ultimately be explained and understood by our best cognitive science. There is a growing and exciting body of scientific work on the nature of wisdom and its cultivation, offering rational hope for this endeavor.

However, creating such an ecology of psycho-technologies for addressing the perennial problems is a necessary but insufficient step in responding to the meaning crisis. This entire project can be delegitimized, undermined, and eroded if this collection of practices cannot be situated within an encompassing and welcoming worldview. I have been encouraged by encountering many individuals and groups, such as Rave Kelly and Michael Nathan, who are already actively creating these ecologies of practice by integrating disciplines like parkour, martial arts, and circling. My hope is that by articulating the theoretical underpinnings of this work, I can help facilitate communication, coordination, and communion among these various efforts in a mutually beneficial fashion. To move forward, it is now necessary to examine the interaction between these perennial problems and the historical forces that have shaped our modern context. We must explicitly address the loss of the "three orders" and our resulting worldly misattunement, exploring what a response might look like. This exploration points toward the potential emergence of a "religion that is not a religion," an idea that can be placed in a rich dialogue with thinkers like Tillich, Jung, Corbin, and Barfield, who engaged in similar projects.

The historical loss of the three orders is critical to understanding the depth of the meaning crisis. The nomological order provided a deep sense of coherence and connectedness, the loss of which creates a deficit that current research on meaning in life confirms is profoundly damaging. The normative order afforded a sense of significance and depth, a path to value achieved through the possibility of self-transcendence. Finally, the narrative order gave a sense of purpose and direction. The collapse of these frameworks has left us with a worldview in which we do not fundamentally belong and in which our projects lack an ultimate grounding. This cultural condition exacerbates any individual or group's attempt to address the perennial problems, causing the meaning crisis to bite deeply at both a personal and communal level.

This interaction brings a particular problem to the fore, which is powerfully articulated in Susan Wolf's work on meaning in life. She argues that meaning arises from a deep connectedness, which she formulates as the alignment of subjective attraction with objective attractiveness. We desire that what we are drawn to is, in itself, worthy of that attraction. The conflict, however, emerges from our modern scientific worldview, which has effectively nullified the concept of objective attractiveness. The prevailing grammar suggests that there is no inherent meaning or relevance in an object or state of affairs in itself. Wolf notes that we often attempt to circumvent this problem by pretending we have objective value, seeking validation from a group of people who agree to value the same things we do. This, however, is a form of bullshitting, as the salience of group consensus masks the absence of the very connection we seek.

To address this dilemma, we might ask if we truly need things to be objectively valuable in the first place—that is, to have value independent of any particular perspective. An alternative path is to focus not on objective attractiveness but on the transjectivity of the relationship between the agent and the arena. This points us back to the process of relevance realization, which is not a purely subjective phenomenon occurring within me, nor an objective one existing in the world. Instead, it emerges within the affordances co-created by the agent and the world in a bi-directional loop. Consequently, what we need to connect with are the very conditions that afford relevance realization itself. To care about the conditions that make meaning-making possible is to engage in what can be understood as *agape*.

Agape is the love of the process of meaning-making for its own sake, which is ultimately the process of being a person. This love is not subjective or arbitrary, nor is it objective in the traditional sense. It is transjective. Furthermore, it is transcendental in a Kantian sense, as it is directed toward the very conditions for the possibility of meaning-making itself—conditions that precede, permeate, and follow any individual's existence. Loving people agapically, therefore, is not just to be directed at their bodies and minds, but at the conditions that allow them to flourish: their community, environment, development, and education. It follows that any machinery we craft to address the perennial problems must be deeply integrated with and grounded in an agapic way of being. We must care about the conditions that make any caring possible. This is not a romantic notion dwelling in subjectivity, but a profound appreciation for something that has a value independent of my valuing of it. I emerge from it and participate in it; I am NOT the source or maker of it.

A scientific framework for rebuilding a worldview that can support such an orientation is emerging from 4E cognitive science. The late Francisco Varela, a founding figure in this field, noted a deep resonance between its core insights and the Dharma, the central teachings of Buddhism. As he worked to articulate the principles of this new science, he found he was simultaneously describing a path for cultivating wisdom and meaning. Four of these insights are particularly relevant for addressing the loss of the three orders.

The first of these insights is the principle of embodiment. This posits that the mind is not software or a system for rule-bound symbol manipulation, but rather arises through an organism's immediate coping with the world. This grounds our most abstract cognitive abilities in our most basic sensorimotor actions. The body is not mere clay we drag around; it is a bio-economy whose logistical norms of efficiency and resiliency constrain cognition. This creates a deep continuity between cognition and biology, and between the agent and the world through the process of niche construction, where organism and environment continuously co-shape each other. This perspective directly responds to the Cartesian severance of mind from body and mind from world.

The second insight is emergence, the idea that a self-organizing system can produce properties that its component parts do not possess. This restores a vertical dimension to our ontology, not as a two-worlds mythology, but as levels of complexification. Self-organizing physical processes, like a tornado, can give rise to self-making (autopoietic) systems like a biological organism, which actively seeks conditions to promote its own agency. These, in turn, can become self-identifying systems capable of reflective awareness and engaging with their own developmental processes. This provides a metaphysical backing for a normative order based on self-transcendence.

Third is emotion. Work by neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio has demonstrated that the traditional dichotomy between reason and emotion is false. Without emotion, which is integral to the caring that drives relevance realization, cognitive agency is incapacitated. Emotions shape and sculpt our salience landscape, making the agent-arena relationship apparent and guiding our coping. Emotion is how we coordinate the attachment relationships that create persons within communities, enabling the distributed cognition that allows us to co-create our worlds.

The fourth principle is excellence. Complementing standard psychology's focus on how the mind breaks down, positive psychology studies how the mind excels beyond the norm. It examines how all the parts fit together to allow the system to transcend itself. This approach is crucial for understanding wisdom, which can be defined as excellence in our cognitive capacities for coping and caring. Wisdom is precisely what is needed to respond to the perennial problems and to make the best use of the scientific knowledge we are acquiring.

Together, these principles from 4E cognitive science provide a powerful response to the loss of the nomological and normative orders. The principles of deep continuity and emergence show us how we fit into reality and how our meaning-making belongs. They restore a normative order by grounding our capacity for self-transcendence and development. This aligns with what the biologist Ursula Goodenough calls "transcendence into"—a transcendence not above to another world, but into the sacred depths of nature and the psyche.

The final challenge is the narrative order, which historically pointed toward a cosmic teleology. This is incompatible with non-teleological processes like evolution and relevance realization. We cannot simply resurrect a grand historical narrative. Instead, we can shift toward a post-narrative way of being. This would involve moving from a concern with our historical narrative or horizontal identity to a concern with the depths to which we are capable of living. This shift is exemplified in the experience of higher states of consciousness—such as flow and mystical experiences—where the personal narrative falls away, yet a profound sense of connection to reality remains. These states are not mysterious; they exist on a knowable cognitive continuum.

By drawing these threads together, we can begin to envision a "religion that is not a religion." The next step is to consolidate this vision, place it in dialogue with the profound work of thinkers such as Paul Tillich, Carl Jung, Henry Corbin, and Owen Barfield, and delve deeper into the cognitive science of wisdom, which frames this entire endeavor.

39 The Religion of No Religion

In this episode of "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis," John Vervaeke discusses the concept of a "religion of no religion" and begins to delve into the cognitive science of wisdom.

Addressing the "Religion of No Religion" (3:34) Vervaeke addresses the need for a "religion that's not a religion" (3:39), acknowledging that many people, even those who identify as non-religious, still experience spiritual hunger (5:41). He emphasizes that returning to organized religion or pursuing pseudo-religious political ideologies are not viable options due to historical trauma and the dangers of totalitarian regimes (5:48-6:27). Instead, he proposes the need for a comprehensive set of "psycho-technologies" within communities of practice (6:33-6:51) that can facilitate transformative changes in consciousness, cognition, character, and culture (6:52-7:00), similar to the functions of traditional religion.

He introduces the distinction between *religio* (the activation and appreciation of the sacred) and *credo* (a system of beliefs or propositions) (8:51). Vervaeke argues that while *credo* has often become dominant and associated with power and control (10:19-12:21), it can have a functional role as an "indispensable mythos" (12:59) that helps individuals and groups understand and relate to *religio*. The key is to avoid confusing indispensability with metaphysical necessity or need with authority (14:15-14:23).

Signal Detection Theory and the Setting of Criterion (14:50) Vervaeke introduces signal detection theory to explain the inherent risks in information processing, where we constantly face overwhelming, partial, and ambiguous information (15:11-15:45). He defines "signal" as desired information and "noise" as unwanted, distracting, or misleading information (15:57-16:23). The challenge lies in the significant overlap between signal and noise (16:39).

He uses the analogy of a gazelle hearing a noise in the bush (17:00) to illustrate how one must set a "criterion" or decision line (19:36) to distinguish between signal and noise. Setting this criterion too high can lead to mistaking a lot of noise for signal (20:13), while setting it too low can result in missing valuable signals (20:39). The optimal setting of this criterion is context-dependent and requires perspectival knowing (24:36-25:03).

Vervaeke links this to *credo*, suggesting that *credo* acts as a criterion for *religio*, determining what behaviors or experiences genuinely connect one to the sacred (26:05-26:26). He cautions against setting this criterion in an absolutist or final manner (26:44-27:20), as this misunderstands the dynamic nature of relevance realization. The goal is to continually reset the criterion optimally (27:58), ensuring that *credo* always serves *religio* (28:20).

Cultivating an Ecology of Psycho-technologies (35:49) A "religion of no religion" should cultivate an ecology of psycho-technologies (35:58) that are both top-down (from propositional to participatory knowing) and bottom-up (from participatory to propositional knowing) (36:01-36:22). This ecology should have complementary relationships, checks and balances, and continuously self-correct (36:40-37:00). He suggests the need for a "meta-cyclic technology" (37:13) to explicitly engineer these psycho-technologies and cultivate their ecology (37:39).

Vervaeke proposes a "credo wiki" (41:59) as an analogy, where groups can cooperatively create and revise a shared, evolving understanding, fostering communication and bridging insights (42:06-43:26). This collaborative approach leverages existing social media and cooperative organizational forms (44:09-44:21) to facilitate this "religion that's not a religion" (44:22).

Introduction to the Cognitive Science of Wisdom (48:05) The cultivation of wisdom is crucial for this project, as it is a "meta-virtue" (38:37) that resonates with the collective cultivation of meta-psycho-technology (47:50-47:58) and helps satisfy the deep human need for connectedness (48:21-48:33).

Vervaeke highlights the work of Robert Sternberg (49:45) in bringing wisdom back into psychological and cognitive science discussions. He then focuses on a 1999 article by McGee and Barber (50:40) which sought to find a convergent theme between philosophical and psychological theories of wisdom (51:15-52:00). Their powerful argument concludes that the core of wisdom is "seeing through illusion" (53:26), specifically cognitive

and existential illusions caused by self-deception (53:37-54:06). This "systematic seeing through illusion and into reality" (54:47-54:50) is a profound and pervasive systemic insight (55:08-55:10) that allows individuals to reframe and solve problems systematically (55:25-55:49).

A Framework for Responding to the Meaning Crisis

In our last discussion, I proposed a systematic framework for addressing the perennial problems of human existence. We explored how an integrated set of cultivated practices interacts with historical forces—forces that have given rise to the modern meaning crisis—and how a response could be formulated through the concept of *Agape*. From there, we turned to the historical forces themselves, seeking to recover the kind of ordering worldview that once grounded our ancestors. I suggested that 4E cognitive science, particularly the insights articulated by Francisco Varela, can provide a legitimating worldview that situates our meaning-making processes. We considered how this might allow for the recovery of a nomological and normative order, and perhaps even a move toward a post-narrative, open-ended optimization—a search for depth of realization rather than a historical culmination. This entire project was brought together under a new notion of transcendence: a "transcendence into" the world, rather than above or beyond it. Two central topics, however, remain to be addressed: a cognitive scientific account of wisdom, and the notion of a "religion that's not a religion." I will address the second point first, not because it is less important, but because my thoughts on it are more tentative and suggestive.

The need to explore what a "religion that's not a religion" might look like arises from a distinctively modern spiritual dilemma. Many people, particularly the growing demographic of the religiously unaffiliated or "nones," find themselves spiritually hungry yet unable to return to organized religion. At the same time, the pseudo-religious political ideologies and utopian visions that once offered an alternative have been rendered untenable by the trauma of the 20th century, which saw the world drenched in the blood and horror of their clashes. This exploration is part of an ongoing dialogue, with thinkers from John Kehr and Roberto Mangabeira Unger to Richard Dawkins all attempting to formulate a conceptual vocabulary for a way forward. What seems to be needed is a comprehensive set of psychotechnologies, situated within communities of practice, that can facilitate the profound transformations of consciousness, cognition, character, and culture that religion once provided. Such a transformation is necessary to address what Thomas Bjorkman calls the "meta-crisis"—the accelerating and interlocking series of crises we face both individually and collectively.

A crucial first step in this project is to distinguish between *religio* and *credo*. *Religio* refers to the core experience of connectedness—to oneself, to others, and to the world—that is central to a meaningful life. *Credo*, meaning "I believe," refers to a paradigmatic set of propositions that define a religion's truth content. Historically, with the ascendance of propositional knowing and the "having mode" of existence, *credo* has come to dominate our understanding of religion, which is now often seen merely as a system of beliefs to be asserted. This "creedal dominance" has been subject to a powerful postmodern critique, which rightly links it to power, control, and the creation of exclusionary identity boundaries.

However, *credo* also plays a legitimate and indispensable functional role. For any individual or group, there may be a particular mythos—a specific set of symbols, stories, and celebrations—that is indispensable for activating and appreciating the sacredness that arises from *religio*. While this function is legitimate, a critical philosophical error arises when we confuse this *indispensability* with metaphysical necessity, or confuse our *need* for a framework with its ultimate *authority*. To understand the indispensable yet perilous nature of this function, we can turn to Signal Detection Theory, an analytical framework from information processing that describes a fundamental challenge inherent in all acts of judgment under uncertainty.

Signal Detection Theory posits that in any act of information processing, we must distinguish between "signal"—the information we want or need—and "noise," which is any information that is distracting, misleading, or irrelevant. The fundamental problem is that there is always an inevitable overlap between the two. Imagine a gazelle that hears a rustle in the bush. This sound occupies a zone of ambiguity; it could be a signal (a leopard) or it could be noise (the wind). The gazelle faces a trade-off and must set a criterion for its decision. Consider two archetypes: "Bill" the happy gazelle sets his criterion very high, treating most ambiguous rustles as a leopard.

He is willing to accept many false alarms—running from the wind—to ensure he never misses the signal of a real threat. His peers may laugh at his constant anxiety, but he survives. In contrast, "Tom" the skeptical gazelle sets a very high threshold for evidence, demanding near certainty before acting. He laughs at Bill for fleeing from the wind, but by setting his standard so high to avoid false alarms, he risks a fatal miss. One day, while laughing at Bill, a leopard emerges from the bush, and Tom's skepticism costs him his life.

This analogy reveals that the costs of the two error types—mistaking noise for signal versus missing the signal entirely—are dramatically different and context-dependent. For the gazelle, missing the signal is infinitely worse than a false alarm. The process of flexibly setting this criterion, guided by deep, context-sensitive situational awareness, is the domain of perspectival knowing. Indeed, cognitive scientist Lau has argued that this is one of the primary functions of consciousness itself. This aligns with my own work, published with Richard Wu and Anderson Todd, which argues that a key function of consciousness is to perform relevance realization within perspectival knowing.

Applying this framework, we can understand *credo* as a way of setting a criterion on the experience of *religio*. Its function is to help distinguish authentic connection from delusion or malfunction. The problem, therefore, is not the act of setting a criterion—which is an inescapable part of cognition—but setting it in an absolute or final manner, as occurs in creedal dominance. The open-ended nature of relevance realization fundamentally undermines any attempt to fix the criterion once and for all. The point is not to find a conclusive solution, but to engage in a process of continually and optimally resetting the criterion. This leads to a core design principle for a "religion that's not a religion": **credo must always be in the service of religio.**

A functional mythos within this framework must acknowledge and serve the multi-layered structure of human cognition, operating across three distinct but interconnected levels. At the deepest, unconscious level is our *participatory knowing*, grounded in the core processes of relevance realization. Emerging from this is the conscious level of the salience landscape, where *perspectival knowing* (situational awareness) makes possible our *procedural knowing* (the cultivation of skills). Finally, at the cultural level of distributed cognition, connections are shared through mythos and *propositional knowing*. A functional mythos must facilitate a bi-directional flow, allowing for both "top-down" guidance from the propositional to the participatory, and "bottom-up" emergence from the participatory to the propositional. This requires the deliberate cultivation of an *ecology of psychotechnologies*—a dynamical system of practices with complementary relationships and checks and balances.

To construct such an ecology, we need what—in a term that emerged from a discussion with Jordan Hall—might be called a *meta-psychotechnology*: a higher-order, collective practice designed for the explicit creation, engineering, and ongoing cultivation of the entire system. This points to a profound reciprocity: the community's capacity to collectively develop this meta-psychotechnology is not merely related to, but is the direct cultural analogue of, the individual's cultivation of the meta-virtue of wisdom. The two are mutually constitutive and reinforcing.

While these principles are structural, we can also tentatively suggest some organizational models. The modern development of cyber-technologies offers potent analogies. An open-ended credo, for instance, could be modeled on Wikipedia—a "credo wiki" that is collectively generated, maintained, and revised. Such a system would allow for both reliable stability and continuous evolution. I have seen the power of this model firsthand in one of my university courses, where former students created a wiki of the course's main arguments, fostering a deeply participatory and evolving engagement with the material. This could be integrated into a "co-op" structure, where various communities of practice collaborate on a shared curriculum and vocabulary, affording synoptic integration and mutual development without imposing a rigid, top-down ideology. It is important to clarify that this is not a utopian vision. Rather, it is an analysis of and contribution to movements that are already underway, as people are actively using emerging cyber- and social technologies to create these ecologies of practice. My intention is simply to offer a framework that might help these efforts become more powerful and perspicacious.

This brings us back to the three interrelated responses to the meaning crisis. First, we can cultivate an ecology of practices to address the perennial problems. Second, we can ground these practices in a legitimating worldview provided by 4E cognitive science. Third, we can situate this entire project within the practical and ongoing creation of a "religion that's not a religion." Essential to this entire endeavor is the cultivation of wisdom. As a meta-virtue, wisdom is required to develop the meta-psychotechnology, to pursue the project of enlightenment, and to satisfy our deep need for the connectedness that makes life meaningful.

The cognitive science of wisdom is a vibrant and growing field, which began to take modern shape with Robert Sternberg's 1990 anthology. A pivotal 1999 article by Meacham and Barber sought to establish a "reflective equilibrium" between philosophical (*a priori*) and psychological (*empirical*) theories of wisdom. By searching for the convergent theme across these two domains, they arrived at a powerful conclusion: **the core of wisdom is the ability to systematically see through illusion.** This refers not merely to visual illusions, but to the deeper cognitive and existential illusions born of self-deception. This is a crucial implication that I, along with Leo Ferraro, explored in a 2013 publication: the process of seeing *through* illusion is simultaneously a process of seeing *into* what is more real. This is a profound and systemic form of insight, one that reframes and resolves multiple problems simultaneously by revealing the systematic patterns of misframing that link them together. It is this capacity that we are trying to cultivate, and we will continue to explore its nature in our next discussion.

40 Wisdom and Rationality

In this video, John Vervaeke continues his "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis" series, focusing on the intricate relationship between **meaning, wisdom, and rationality** (2:36). He begins by revisiting his previous discussion on a "religion that's not a religion," emphasizing the integration of an **ecology of psyche, technologies for perennial problems, and a cognitive-scientific worldview** (0:21).

Vervaeke then delves into the concept of wisdom, describing it as a **meta-virtue essential for individual development and collective meta-cycle creation** (2:49). He introduces the work of *Magee and Barber*, who identify a central feature of wisdom as the "systematic seeing through illusion and into reality" (3:55). This systemic insight is likened to *Piaget's* observations of children overcoming systematic errors through **qualitative developmental shifts** (5:45). This "sensitivity transcendence" (7:19) is a core aspect of wisdom, allowing individuals to systematically see through illusion, much like an adult compared to a child, or a sage compared to an adult (7:42).

A crucial distinction is made between **wisdom and knowledge** (8:48), highlighting that wisdom is about "how you know it" (9:00)—the process of knowing, rather than just the product (9:17). This links wisdom to rationality, as a rational person pays attention to the **processing of their cognition** (9:41). Vervaeke further differentiates between *descriptive knowledge* and *interpretive knowledge* (10:11), with wisdom aligning with interpretive knowledge—grasping the significance of what one knows (10:49), which he connects to relevance realization (11:03).

The video also explores the **perspectival and participatory aspects of wisdom** (12:01), illustrated through the concept of a "pragmatic self-contradiction" (12:16). The statement "I am wise" is presented as a pragmatic self-contradiction, echoing *Socrates'* humility and emphasizing that wisdom involves a **specific perspective and identity that is inherently humble** (14:01). This dynamic of "seeing through a misframing and going through trans-framing" (15:47) is central to developmental change and the experience of awe and wonder (15:52).

Vervaeke then transitions to the **cognitive science of rationality**, proposing that rationality is the "capacity to overcome self-deception in a reliable manner" (17:45). He distinguishes rationality from expertise (18:57), explaining that expertise is domain-specific and can even interfere with performance in similar domains (20:42), whereas **rationality is a domain-general notion** (23:52) that applies across various aspects of life.

The discussion moves into the **rationality debate** (25:40), which arose from experimental results suggesting that human beings are irrational. Vervaeke presents examples of these experiments, such as the lily pad problem (26:39) and the argument evaluation task (28:21), where people reliably fail to apply correct reasoning principles despite acknowledging them (31:14). Another example is **belief perseverance** (35:59), where individuals maintain beliefs even when the evidence supporting them is completely undermined.

Finally, Vervaeke introduces *Cohen's* response to the rationality debate (42:05), who argues that the errors observed in experiments are **performance errors, not competence errors** (48:52). Cohen posits that humans are the source of rational standards and are inherently capable of meeting them (51:00). He suggests that our normative theories are derived by **idealizing our performance and subtracting implementation errors** (52:18). This leads to the conclusion that human beings are fundamentally rational at the level of their competence (53:43). The video concludes by foreshadowing a deeper dive into the strengths and weaknesses of *Cohen's* argument in relation to *Stanovich's* work, reiterating that human rationality is a **comprehensive and existential overcoming of self-deception that deeply overlaps with wisdom** (54:10).

In the previous discussion, I offered tentative suggestions for what a "religion that is not a religion" might look like. Such a framework would integrate an ecology of psycho-technologies designed to address perennial problems with a cognitive scientific worldview capable of legitimating and situating those practices. I proposed a relationship between *credo*, or propositional knowing, and *religio*, or participatory knowing, in which the *credo* is always in service of the *religio*. This implies an open-ended, "gnostic" mythos where propositional beliefs are grounded in and emerge from participatory, perspectival, and procedural ways of knowing. To facilitate the

engineering of this credo, I suggested a distributed structure analogous to a wiki, coordinated through modern tools like the internet. My intention was not to offer a definitive system, but rather to help facilitate communication and coordination among the many people already engaged in this work, supporting their mutual development and growth.

I then turned to a culminating theme: the deep relationship between meaning and wisdom. An exploration of wisdom is necessary for several reasons. First, as the meta-virtue that organizes all other virtues, wisdom provides the grounding for the individual's relationship with the collective creation and cultivation of transformative psycho-technologies. Second, and more fundamentally, wisdom is essential to the quest for enlightenment and for developing a systematic and reliable response to the perennial problems that confront us.

To begin this exploration, I proposed we examine wisdom through the lens of cognitive science, starting with a significant article by Meacham and Barber. Their project sought to create a reflective equilibrium between the legacy of philosophical theories from the Axial Age and the psychological theories emerging at that time, setting them in dialogue to find a point of convergence. Their analysis concluded that a central feature of wisdom, common across these diverse traditions, is the systematic seeing through of illusion and into reality, at least comparatively so. This is not merely an insight into a single problem but a systemic insight that applies to an entire family of problems.

The concept of systemic insight can be clarified using Jean Piaget's work on child development as an analogy. Piaget observed that children exhibit systematic errors, such as failing conservation tasks, which reflect an over-constrained cognitive system. Development is not a linear accumulation of facts but a process of optimization and complexification. Eventually, a child gains a systemic insight—a "trans-framing insight"—that does not just reframe a particular problem but transforms their entire competence. This leap constitutes qualitative development, or what can be termed "sensitivity transcendence," as the child's very way of making sense of the world is transformed.

This Piagetian model provides a paradigmatic metaphor for understanding wisdom: as the child is to the adult, so the adult is to the sage. Just as an adult has undergone a systemic trans-framing to move beyond the illusions of childhood, the sage has undergone a similar developmental transformation to systematically see through the illusions that characterize the perspective of an ordinary adult. This capacity for trans-framing insight, for seeing through illusion and into reality in a fundamental way, is a core constitutive feature of what it means to be wise.

This brings us to an important distinction between wisdom and knowledge. Wisdom is not concerned with *what* you know, but with *how* you know it. This "how" can be understood in two senses. First, it refers to the *process* of cognition rather than the *product*. While knowledge is often equated with the products of thought—the facts and propositions one holds—wisdom is oriented toward the manner of knowing itself. This focus immediately links wisdom to rationality, as Keith Stanovich has argued that a key feature of a rational person is the ability to pay attention to and value the cognitive process, not just its outcomes.

The second sense of "how" is illuminated by philosopher John Kekes's distinction between descriptive knowledge and interpretive knowledge, though I often prefer the word "knowing" to "knowledge." Descriptive knowledge involves grasping facts, whereas interpretive knowledge involves understanding the *significance* of those facts. This act of grasping significance is a direct invocation of relevance realization, the cognitive process of discerning what is salient and meaningful within a given context. Wisdom, therefore, is deeply connected to understanding—to grasping the significance of facts—and to the cognitive processes that make this possible.

Meacham and Barber also point to the perspectival and participatory dimensions of wisdom, discussing what is called a "pragmatic self-contradiction." This is not a logical contradiction in the content of a statement, but rather a contradiction between the content and the perspective or identity one must assume to utter it. This highlights that knowing is not a detached observation but an embodied, engaged act.

A clear example of a pragmatic self-contradiction is the statement, "I am asleep." While there is no logical flaw in the proposition itself, uttering it requires the speaker to be awake, creating a contradiction between the statement and the state of the speaker. This is distinct from the experience of lucidity in a dream, where one can realize "I am dreaming" without any self-contradiction. The concept applies pointedly to the statement, "I am wise." There is a strong intuition that to claim wisdom is to demonstrate that one occupies a perspective that is precisely *not* that of a wise person.

This insight connects directly to the Socratic notion of wisdom as knowing what one does not know. It is also linked to the experience of awe, which instills a profound sense of humility. This reinforces the understanding that wisdom is not about possessing a set of true beliefs, but is instead deeply tied to the "how" of knowing—the perspectival and participatory process of trans-framing one's self and one's world.

The connection between wisdom and rationality can be made even more explicit by noting that a core capacity of wisdom is the ability to overcome self-deception. Stanovich uses the term "rationality" to describe this very capacity. Part of the project of rehabilitating wisdom requires a corresponding rehabilitation of what it means to be rational, moving beyond a narrow definition equated with facility in logic or syllogistic reasoning.

We can propose a broader definition of rationality as the capacity to reliably and systematically overcome self-deception in a way that affords flourishing, which is itself enabled by an optimization of cognitive processing. "Reliably" means functioning with a high probability of success, not with a standard of perfection or certainty. "Systematically" means being operational across multiple domains, not just in a single, narrow context.

The systematic nature of rationality becomes clear when contrasted with expertise. An expert in tennis or law acquires high proficiency in a set of skills within a bounded domain that has a reliable set of patterns. A key feature of such expertise is that it does not transfer well to other domains. In fact, expertise in one area can actively interfere with performance in a closely related field, such as the skills of a tennis player interfering with their ability to play squash.

This non-transferable nature of expertise can lead to significant errors in judgment. For example, a physicist may be an expert in their field, which deals with knowledge and reality. Because this seems similar to philosophy, they might feel qualified to make pronouncements about metaphysics, perhaps declaring philosophy to be dead or useless or some such thing. However, this is itself a philosophical statement and pragmatically self-contradictory. The similarity between the domains may be deceptive; the physicist's specific skills might actively interfere with their ability to reason philosophically, potentially making them the worst person to consult for philosophical advice.

In contrast to the domain-specific nature of expertise, rationality is understood as a domain-general capacity. It is meant to apply across the varied contexts of a person's life, including their professional work, friendships, and romantic relationships. Of course, achieving perfectly domain-general rationality is an aspirational goal, as individuals can often be rational in some areas of their lives while remaining irrational in others.

This concept has been described by Agnes Callard as "aspirational rationality." The process of optimizing one's cognition does not merely improve the pursuit of existing goals; it also tends to shift and revise the goals themselves. As we become more rational, the very ends we seek are subject to transformation.

This broader understanding of rationality is best situated within the context of the "rationality debate" in cognitive science. This debate was ignited by a large body of experimental results that appeared to demonstrate that human beings are fundamentally irrational.

One example is the lily pad problem. If a pond has lily pads that double in area each day and the pond is completely covered on day 20, on what day was it half-covered? Many people leap to the intuitive but incorrect answer of "day 10." The correct answer is day 19, as doubling a half-covered pond makes it fully covered. This experiment shows how the same cognitive machinery that often produces helpful insights can also cause us to jump to wrong conclusions.

Another set of experiments reveals biases in argument evaluation. Participants are given logically valid arguments for conclusions they disagree with, and logically invalid arguments for conclusions they agree with. People reliably judge the argument that supports their existing belief as the "good" one, demonstrating a failure of critical detachment. They are unable to separate the cognitive product (the conclusion) from the cognitive process (the reasoning), a capacity Stanovich identifies as central to rationality.

Across these experiments, a consistent pattern emerges: people know and acknowledge the correct principle of reasoning when it is presented to them abstractly, yet they reliably fail to apply it in practice. This gap between acknowledging a standard and enacting it reveals a form of systemic illusion or self-deception.

A third example is the phenomenon of belief perseverance. In one study, participants were tasked with distinguishing between authentic and fraudulent suicide notes. They were then given random feedback to make them believe they were either very good or very bad at this skill. Crucially, they were then debriefed and shown that the entire evidentiary basis for their new belief—the authenticity of the notes and the validity of the feedback—was completely fabricated. Despite this, the belief persevered. When later asked to assess their ability, those told they were good continued to rate themselves highly, and those told they were bad rated themselves poorly, even though the evidence had been completely undermined.

The collective weight of these numerous and robust experiments led many psychologists and philosophers to a troubling conclusion: human beings suffer from systemic illusion and self-deception. They acknowledge rational principles but reliably fail to enact them, suggesting that the classical view of humans as rational animals is fundamentally flawed.

Accepting this conclusion has profound and disturbing consequences. If humans are reliably irrational, the philosophical justification for democracy is severely weakened. Our legal system, which is predicated on the idea that people are reasonable and can be held responsible for their actions, loses its foundation. Furthermore, the Kantian basis for morality, which depends on rationality, is undermined; if people cannot reason to right action, it becomes difficult to deem them moral agents.

Rationality, therefore, is not merely a technical or academic issue; it is a deeply existential one. Our assessment of a person's rationality is inextricably tied to their identity and status—influencing judgments about their maturity and their standing as moral, legal, and political agents. This is why a debate over how to interpret the experimental results became so critical.

The first major response in this debate came from the philosopher L. Jonathan Cohen, who argued forcefully against the conclusion that the experiments prove humans are fundamentally irrational.

Cohen's first argument concerns the source of our normative standards of reasoning. Drawing on a Platonic line of reasoning from the *Euthyphro*, he argued that reason must be autonomous. If our standards for correct reasoning were given to us by an external authority, like a divine being, then following them would be an act of obedience, not rationality. To follow standards because we recognize them as *good* standards implies that we must already possess them internally. Reason must be the source of the very norms that constitute it.

Cohen's second key point is the principle that "ought implies can." It makes no sense to hold someone accountable to a standard that they do not possess the fundamental competence to fulfill. To obligate someone to speak only what is certainly and perfectly true is an impossible standard, as our beliefs are fallible. The standards of rationality must be ones we are capable of meeting.

To synthesize these points, Cohen deployed the Chomskyan distinction between competence and performance. Competence refers to one's underlying capability, such as the knowledge of a language, while performance refers to what one actually does, which can be affected by implementation errors like slips of the tongue when tired or distracted. We do not assume someone has lost their linguistic competence because of a performance error.

Cohen argued that our normative theories of reason are derived by observing our own cognitive performance and, through a process of idealization, abstracting away the implementation errors to create a purified account of our underlying competence. This idealized account then becomes the standard to which we hold ourselves. Therefore, he concluded, the systematic errors observed in the rationality experiments *must* be interpreted as performance errors, not as evidence of a fundamentally flawed competence.

According to Cohen's argument, at the level of our competence, human beings are fundamentally rational. The mistakes documented in the psychological literature are analogous to slips of the tongue; they are errors in the implementation of a sound underlying capacity, not proof of its absence. Thus, the experimental data does not disprove our fundamental rationality.

Next time, I will analyze what is both right and deeply wrong with Cohen's argument, introducing the powerful reply from Stanovich and others. This will further develop our understanding of human rationality as a much more comprehensive capacity—the reliable and systematic overcoming of self-deception. This broader notion of rationality deeply overlaps with, and is a core component of, wisdom. It is this capacity to systematically see through self-deception and into reality that, like wisdom, is essential for affording meaning in life.

41 What is Rationality?

This video, "Ep. 41 - Awakening from the Meaning Crisis - What is Rationality?", delves into the **cognitive science of wisdom** and its connection to rationality, particularly focusing on the debate surrounding human rationality. Dr. John Vervaeke explores various arguments and counter-arguments from prominent cognitive scientists like *Stanovich*, *Cohen*, *Cherniak*, and *Medlin*.

The video begins by linking wisdom to the **systematic overcoming of self-deception** and the emphasis on the *process of knowing* rather than just the products of cognition (1:45). This leads into a discussion of rationality, which *Stanovich* argues involves valuing the process in addition to the products of our cognition (2:00). Rationality is presented as a **deeply existential issue**, not just a theoretical one, with implications for moral, political, legal, and developmental status (4:29).

A central theme is the **rationality debate**, sparked by experimental results showing that people reliably fail to meet accepted standards of reasoning despite acknowledging them (3:41).

Key arguments and counter-arguments explored include:

- **Cohen's Argument (5:13):** *Cohen* argues that humans cannot be comprehensively irrational because the standards of rationality must originate from us. He suggests that errors observed in experiments are merely "performance errors" (6:03), similar to someone making a speech error but still possessing linguistic competence (6:51).
- **Stanovich and West's Reply (7:16):** *Stanovich* and *West* counter *Cohen's* argument by distinguishing between performance errors and "competence errors." They use *Piaget's* work on systematic errors in child development (8:41) to argue that the errors people make in rationality experiments are indeed **systematic** (11:33), indicating a deficit in competence rather than just performance (12:06). This leads to the crucial idea that we may have **multiple, potentially conflicting, competencies** (14:38) and that competence is not static but developmental (15:58).
- **Cherniak's Argument (17:53):** *Cherniak* emphasizes the "finitary predicament" (18:43), arguing that human cognition cannot be purely algorithmic or deductive due to combinatorial explosion (19:37). He contends that applying formal logic or probability theory as normative standards for everyday reasoning is inappropriate and leads to "cognitive suicide" (19:47). He suggests that humans use "relevance realization" to navigate the complexity of information (20:25).
- **Stanovich and West's Counter (23:38):** *Stanovich* and *West* acknowledge *Cherniak's* points about computational limitations but argue that these limitations relate to **intelligence, not rationality** (24:17). They present evidence that the correlation between intelligence (G) and performance on reasoning tasks is weak (0.3) (28:03), indicating that intelligence is necessary but not sufficient for rationality (28:24). This implies that being highly intelligent does not preclude being highly irrational (29:56).
- **Medlin's Argument and Construal (30:59):** *Medlin* introduces the distinction between a "fallacy" (incorrect reasoning despite correct understanding) and a "misunderstanding" (incorrect understanding leading to seemingly incorrect answers) (32:27). He argues that interpreting experimental results as showing human irrationality relies on assuming participants have correctly understood the problem (38:51), which can be a "pragmatic contradiction" (39:07). This leads to the idea that there's a **non-inferential aspect to rationality** (42:44) related to "construal" (how one interprets and formulates a problem) and the generation of insight (45:11).
- **The Missing Piece: Cognitive Style and Active Open-Mindedness (48:58):** *Stanovich* proposes that the "missing piece" for rationality lies in **cognitive style**, specifically "active open-mindedness" (50:51). This involves learning to identify and counteract cognitive biases like confirmation bias, essentialism bias, and availability bias (51:23). He emphasizes that this requires **sensitizing oneself to biases** and actively

counteracting them (52:46). The motivation for cultivating active open-mindedness is linked to a "need for cognition" (54:49), which involves a drive to problematize and learn.

The video concludes by highlighting that rationality is not merely about being logical or intelligent; it involves **multiple competencies, a non-inferential component, and the cultivation of specific cognitive styles** (46:02-47:41). This broader understanding of rationality, incorporating both inference and insight, increasingly overlaps with the concept of wisdom (46:22). The series aims to further explore *Stanovich's* theory of rationality and connect it to theories of wisdom and enlightenment (55:54).

On Rationality, Wisdom, and the Malleable Mind

Rationality is fundamentally an existential issue, intertwined with the cultivation of wisdom, enlightenment, and meaning. It is not merely a matter of how we process information but is something constitutive of our identity and our very mode of being in the world. Previous exploration of this topic has established that rationality is not equivalent to logic or intelligence. Instead, it comprises multiple competencies, requiring not only an inferential capacity but also an independent capacity for control. This control function is best understood through the lens of insight and the ability to achieve good problem formulation, which allows us to navigate the complexities of our cognitive landscape effectively.

Beyond raw intelligence, two additional components are necessary for achieving true rationality. The first is what Keith Stanovich calls "mindware," a concept that can be understood as psycho-technology. The second is a specific cognitive style known as "active open-mindedness," a term originated by Jonathan Barron. This style involves cultivating a continuous awareness of the influence of cognitive biases on our thoughts and behaviors and actively working to counteract them. However, a crucial caveat, emphasized more by Barron than by Stanovich, is that this practice must be optimal rather than maximal. An attempt to override too many biases would inadvertently disable their function as useful heuristics, which are essential for avoiding the combinatorial explosion of possibilities that would otherwise paralyze our decision-making.

To be precise, a psycho-technology can be defined as a socially generated and standardized method for formatting, manipulating, and enhancing information processing. For such a method to qualify as a psycho-technology, it must be readily internalizable into human cognition, applicable in a domain-general manner, and capable of reliably and extensively extending and empowering our cognitive abilities. The prototypical examples of such powerful tools are literacy, which restructures how we access and process language; numeracy, which allows for abstract quantification; and graphics, which enable the visualization of complex data and relationships. These are not just mental tricks but fundamental enhancements to our cognitive architecture.

The acquisition of these rational skills and psycho-technologies is predicted not by intelligence alone, but by a disposition known as the "need for cognition." This refers to the intrinsic motivation to seek out, formulate, and solve problems, a drive that actively generates opportunities for learning and development. This concept is deeply connected to the work of psychologist Arlynn, who identified "problem finding" as an essential feature not only of a high need for cognition but also of wisdom. Some have argued that this capacity is also central to creativity. In an attempt to extend and develop Arlynn's work, it is possible to propose that a good problem finder does not simply identify new, isolated issues, but rather generates what can be called a "problem nexus." This involves identifying a single, core problem whose solution would have a significant, cascading impact on a wide range of existing problems. Hubert Dreyfus's identification of "relevance realization" as the central problem of cognition serves as a powerful example of generating such a nexus. This art of problem finding, in turn, connects to emerging theories about the very nature of understanding.

The motivational drive behind the need for cognition has a significant affective dimension, which can be understood by distinguishing between curiosity and wonder. While the terms are often used interchangeably, they can represent polar opposites in our mode of engagement with the world. Curiosity often operates in a "having mode," focused on manipulation, control, and finding answers to resolve a specific uncertainty. Wonder,

in contrast, operates in a "being mode"; it is an encounter with mystery that calls our entire worldview and sense of self into question, and can deepen into a sense of awe. This distinction is captured in the Socratic maxim, "Wisdom begins in wonder," which has been interpreted in two divergent ways within the philosophical tradition. For Plato, the goal of philosophy was to deepen wonder into a transformative awe, a process of meta-accommodation that propels one's personal development. For Aristotle, philosophy's role was to shape wonder into curiosity, formulating questions that could then be systematically answered, a form of meta-assimilation that integrates the unknown into existing frameworks.

Stanovich's positive account of rationality is built upon a dual-processing theory of cognition, a convergent idea in modern psychology. This model posits multiple cognitive competencies that operate in different ways. To avoid the controversy over whether these are distinct systems or styles of processing, they are often simply referred to as S1 and S2. This terminology allows for a discussion of their characteristics without committing to a specific architectural claim, acknowledging that they may even represent polar positions on a single continuum of processing.

The two modes of processing have distinct characteristics. S1 processing is intuitive, highly associational, implicit, and fast. It is the cognitive mode we rely on for most of our daily "coping," allowing us to navigate our environment and make rapid judgments based on implicit patterns. S2 processing, by contrast, is deliberate, inferential, argumentative, explicit, and slow. A key differentiator is its significant reliance on working memory, making it a limited and demanding cognitive resource. A practical example illustrates their interplay: if a cashier at a grocery store presents a bill for a thousand dollars for a normal basket of items, S1 provides the immediate, intuitive reaction—"What? That's wrong!" To verify this intuition, however, S2 must be engaged. The cashier must deliberately, step-by-step, and explicitly review each item on the bill in a slow and conscious process of inference.

These two modes exist in a trade-off relationship. S2 processing is metabolically expensive and slow, making it impossible to rely on for the vast majority of our behavior without succumbing to combinatorial explosion. S1 allows for fast, efficient coping, but its speed can lead to errors. The two systems therefore function in an opponent relationship, both working toward the goal of making us adaptive, but doing so in opposite fashions. In this dynamic, S2 serves a crucial corrective function, capable of overriding the rapid, but sometimes faulty, judgments produced by S1.

From this dual-process model, Stanovich develops a theory of foolishness, or "dysrationalia." The heuristics and biases that lead to cognitive errors are located in S1, which causes us to "leap to conclusions." This is evident in classic puzzles like the lily pad problem, in which a pond is covered with lily pads that double in number daily, becoming fully covered on day 20. When asked on what day the pond was half-covered, S1 leaps to the intuitive answer of "ten days," while the correct answer is day 19. Dysrationalia occurs when S1's impulsive leaping interferes with the proper, deliberate functioning of S2. The conflict is almost Platonic, with the impulsive "monster" of S1 undermining the rational "man" of S2. Within this framework, the cognitive style of active open-mindedness serves as a protective mechanism that shields S2's careful processing from the interference of S1, thereby enabling a more comprehensive form of rationality.

While this model is elegant, it may be insufficient, as it raises a critical question: is leaping always a bad thing? Research on what can be termed "cognitive leaping" suggests it is not. The original researchers called this "inductive leaping," but this is a misnomer, as induction is an inferential procedure, whereas the process being described is explicitly non-inferential. Cognitive leaping is a process of pattern detection and completion, such as recognizing a sofa from a few scattered dots. Studies have shown that the ability to leap effectively—defined as using fewer cues to accurately identify a final pattern—is directly predictive of insight. This creates a fundamental tension. An attempt to suppress all of S1's "leaping to conclusions" in order to prevent errors risks shutting down the very cognitive machinery required for insight. This reveals that rationality is not a simple matter of one system suppressing another, but rather a complex optimization process involving intricate trade-offs.

A complete account of rationality must therefore include an opponent cognitive style to active open-mindedness, one suited to different existential contexts. For endeavors like academic "theorizing," where

Careful inference is paramount, active open-mindedness is crucial to protect S2 processing. However, in contexts of "therapy"—used in the broad sense of personal transformation—the goal is often the opposite. As argued by Jacobs in his book and by Teasdale, one frequently needs to constrain the inferential processing of S2 to allow for the transformative insights that arise from S1. The cognitive style that achieves this is mindfulness. Practices like meditation work precisely by reducing the inner speech and deliberate processing of S2, thereby creating an opening for insight from S1. Thus, active open-mindedness (for inference) and mindfulness (for insight) are opponent, not adversarial, cognitive styles. A central question for a comprehensive theory of wisdom, then, is to identify the cognitive function that coordinates these two styles and optimizes their dynamic interplay.

This expanded view of rationality, which incorporates the ability to overcome self-deception and afford personal development, is powerfully illustrated by the work of Carol Dweck on mindset. Her research demonstrates the degree to which we identify with our own cognitive processes. Dweck distinguishes between a "fixed view" of intelligence, which sees it as an unchangeable trait, and a "malleable view," which sees it as something that can be developed. These mindsets have profound consequences. Someone with a fixed view treats error as a permanent revelation of a defect and focuses on the product. Conversely, someone with a malleable view treats error as valuable feedback for improving skills or effort and focuses on the process. In one experiment, schoolchildren were randomly assigned to three groups. All groups solved a set of problems. Group A was praised for an innate trait ("you're so smart"), Group B was praised for their process ("you put in a lot of effort"), and Group C, a control, received neutral acknowledgment. The process-praised group subsequently showed a higher need for cognition, enjoyed new challenges more, performed better on later tasks, and was more honest. The trait-praised group showed the opposite, and when asked to report their performance to an anonymous peer, 40 percent of them lied. This reveals a crucial lesson: the way we frame and identify with our own cognition has a massive impact on our problem-solving ability, our proclivity for self-deception, and our motivation to learn.

While Dweck's work can create a potential confusion, as evidence suggests that general intelligence is a largely fixed trait, the insights from Stanovich provide a crucial clarification. Although intelligence may be relatively static, rationality is highly malleable. This leads to Stanovich's central point: we should care far less about our fixed intelligence and far more about cultivating our malleable rationality. The ability to enhance how we think is a skill that can be developed and refined throughout our lives.

Ultimately, wisdom involves more than just intelligence; it demands the cultivation of rationality as an existential commitment. This requires managing the processes by which we identify with our own minds and learning to coordinate opponent cognitive styles, like active open-mindedness and mindfulness, to recursively improve how we think. The next step in this inquiry is to turn to explicit psychological theories of wisdom, placing this framework into dialogue with them. This will involve proposing a new theory, based on work done with Leo Ferraro, and ultimately seeking to resituate the account of wisdom directly into its connection with the cultivation of meaning and the pursuit of enlightenment.

42 Intelligence, Rationality, and Wisdom

This video, "Intelligence, Rationality, and Wisdom" (0:00), the 42nd episode of Dr. John Vervaeke's *Awakening from the Meaning Crisis* series, delves into the intricate relationship between rationality, intelligence, and wisdom, building towards an understanding of enlightenment and meaning.

Rationality as an Existential Issue (0:41)

- Rationality is presented not merely as information processing, but as something constitutive of our identity and mode of being in the world.
- The rationality debate highlights that **rationality does not equal logic or intelligence** (1:16).
- Multiple competencies are needed for rationality: inferential and control (1:24). The latter is understood through insight and good problem formulation (1:40).

Missing Pieces for Rationality (1:51)

- Stanovich identifies two missing pieces if intelligence is insufficient for rationality: "mindware" (psychotechnology) and cognitive style (2:04).
- **Active open-mindedness** (2:16) is introduced as a cognitive style involving sensitivity to cognitive biases and actively counteracting them (2:25). An optimal, not maximal, form of active open-mindedness is crucial (3:11).
- **Psychotechnology** (3:40) is defined as a socially generated and standardized way of formatting, manipulating, and enhancing information processing that is readily internalizable, domain-general, extends cognition, and is generalizable among people (4:00). Prototypical instances include literacy, numeracy, and graphicacy (4:30).

Need for Cognition and Problem Finding (5:24)

- The "need for cognition" is an important predictor of acquiring psychotechnologies and cognitive styles, representing a motivation to find, formulate, and solve problems (5:32).
- **Problem-finding** (6:37) is highlighted as an essential feature of a high need for cognition, with Arlin arguing it's central to creativity and wisdom (7:04).
- Good problem finders can identify a "problem nexus" (8:57), a core problem whose solution significantly impacts existing related problems (9:06). This overlaps with theories of understanding and effective knowledge relation (10:07).

Wonder, Curiosity, and Wisdom (10:48)

- The discussion moves to the affective side of the need for cognition: wonder and curiosity (11:29).
- **Curiosity** is characterized as being in the "having mode," focused on manipulating and controlling (11:48).
- **Wonder** is in the "being mode," encountering mystery and questioning one's worldview and identity (11:51).
- Socrates' quote "wisdom begins in wonder" (12:20) is explored through Plato's and Aristotle's interpretations (12:42). Plato sees wonder deepening into awe for transformation (13:10), while Aristotle sees wonder leading to formulating and answering questions, akin to curiosity (13:45).

Dual Processing Theory (S1 and S2) (17:07)

- Stanovich's positive account of rationality aligns with the dual processing theory, involving S1 and S2 (17:26).
- **S1 processing** is intuitive, associational, implicit, and fast (18:25), used in everyday coping (18:54).
- **S2 processing** is deliberate, inferential, argumentative, explicit, and slow (20:04), relying heavily on working memory (21:37).
- S2 has a **corrective function for S1** (24:41), but its slowness and demands on working memory prevent constant reliance (23:41).

Dysrationalia and Cognitive Leaping (24:50)

- **Dysrationalia** (25:01), or foolishness, is defined as insufficient protection from S1's interference with S2 (27:01). S1's tendency to "leap to conclusions" (25:31) can lead to irrational behavior (27:39). Active open-mindedness protects S2 from this interference (27:43).
- **Cognitive leaping** (29:40) is the ability to accurately infer patterns from minimal cues, directly predicting insight (30:32).
- A **tension exists**: shutting off S1's "leaping to conclusions" too much also shuts off the machinery for insight (31:46). Rationality requires a complex optimization and trade-off relationship (32:22).

The Role of Context: Theory vs. Therapy (33:17)

- In academic contexts, rationality is often seen as theorizing, where active open-mindedness is crucial (33:34).
- In therapeutic contexts, often what's needed is transformative insight (35:12) that cannot be inferred (35:10). Here, the aim is to trigger S1 and shut down S2 (35:41).
- **Mindfulness** (36:56) is presented as a cognitive style that achieves this, foregrounding S1 and backgrounding S2 (37:08).
- Wisdom involves cultivating both active open-mindedness for inference and mindfulness for insight (38:53), requiring coordination between these opponent (not adversarial) processes (39:01).

Intelligence vs. Rationality: Dweck's Mindset Theory (43:07)

- Carol Dweck's work on **mindset** (43:41) explores how individuals perceive their traits, particularly intelligence, as fixed or malleable (44:46).
- A **fixed view** (45:12) of intelligence leads to seeing error as a permanent revelation of defect (46:18), focusing on the product (47:34).
- A **malleable view** (45:15) sees error as pointing to skills or effort needed for change (47:00), focusing on the process (47:50).
- Praise for trait triggers a fixed view, while praise for process triggers a malleable view (48:32).
- Experiments show that a malleable mindset encourages tackling challenging problems (50:02), leads to better performance (51:17), and reduces self-deception (51:25).
- The video concludes that while intelligence is largely fixed, **rationality is highly malleable** (53:45). We care too much about intelligence and not enough about rationality (54:19), as rationality is highly predictive of overcoming self-deception, enhancing development, and finding meaning in life (54:05).
- Wisdom is the cultivation of rationality to recursively improve itself and our identification with it (55:25). The discussion will continue with explicit psychological theories of wisdom (55:38).

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis: The Psychology of Wisdom

1.0 Recapping the Preceding Argument: Rationality and Its Cognitive Styles

A previous discussion laid the groundwork for understanding foolishness and wisdom by exploring Keith Stanovich's theory of *dysrationalia*. This theory posits that foolishness arises from a conflict between our two cognitive systems. System 1, which is fast, intuitive, and prone to "leaping" to conclusions, often interferes with the slower, more deliberate inferential processing of System 2. To counteract this, a cognitive style known as *active open-mindedness* is proposed, which functions to foreground System 2, protecting it from the undue influence and potential biases of System 1. This framework provides a robust model for understanding failures in theoretical reasoning.

However, the therapeutic context offers a compelling counterpoint. Citing the work of Jacobs and Teasdale, it was argued that insight—not inference—is required to break free from existential entrapment and personal inertia. Further empirical work by Baker, Senate, and Cece demonstrates that the very "cognitive leaping" function of System 1 is powerfully predictive of generating such insights. In situations requiring transformative change, the intuitive, associative leaps of System 1, which are a liability in formal reasoning, become an essential asset for personal transformation.

This leads to the proposal of a cognitive style that operates in opposition to active open-mindedness: mindfulness. Mindfulness is a practice that intentionally foregrounds the processes of System 1 while backgrounding the inferential machinery of System 2. By doing so, it creates a mental state conducive to triggering insights, enhancing cognitive flexibility, and fostering the kind of breakthroughs often sought in therapeutic settings. It is an opponent process, not an adversarial one, to the analytical style of active open-mindedness.

Ultimately, these two opposing but complementary cognitive styles—active open-mindedness and mindfulness—require a higher-order coordination. Rationality can be understood as the recursive application of intelligence to itself, a continuous effort to improve its own functioning. Taking this a step further, wisdom can be defined as the recursive application of *rationality* to enhance and optimize itself, partly by skillfully managing the relationship between these component styles. As Carol Dweck's research on mindset illustrates, the way we relate to our own cognitive capacities is not merely an intellectual exercise but a deeply existential one, with profound impacts on our problem-solving, behavior, and propensity for self-deception.

2.0 Introducing Psychological Theories of Wisdom: Schwartz and Sharpe

Building on this foundation, we can now critically engage with formal psychological theories of wisdom. This exploration is a direct extension of the work of McGee and Barber, who identified a core feature of wisdom as the ability to see through illusion and into reality. Our inquiry into rationality has been, in effect, an attempt to understand how one can systematically overcome self-deception. The first theory to consider is the work of Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, which, while not a comprehensive theory of wisdom, is invaluable for its exploration of the relationship between wisdom and virtue.

Schwartz and Sharpe begin by critiquing the approach taken by positive psychologists like Peterson and Seligman, who tended to present virtues as a simple "feature list"—a collection of desirable, logically independent traits such as honesty, courage, and kindness. This model implicitly suggests that the path to excellence involves maximizing each virtue independently.

The problem with this feature-list approach becomes immediately apparent when one considers the goal of maximization. If a person were to maximize honesty at all times, they would inevitably become cruel, sacrificing the virtue of kindness. The goal, therefore, is not to *maximize* individual virtues but to *optimize* the dynamic relationship between them. This insight echoes the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, which held that virtues are not isolated but are, in fact, significantly interdependent. This interdependence could be conceived in two

ways: either the virtues form an interdependent system, or they are all different versions of some core ability—namely, wisdom.

The inherent conflict between virtues is vividly illustrated in real-world dilemmas. Consider a bridesmaid asked for her honest opinion on a wedding dress when time is short. She is caught between the competing demands of honesty ("That dress is not flattering"), kindness ("You look wonderful!"), and helpfulness ("We need to make a decision now"). Similarly, a professor grading a student's paper faces a conflict. A brutally objective grade might halt the student's significant progress, whereas a more encouraging, slightly inflated grade might act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, lifting the student to a new level of achievement. In both cases, virtues pull in different directions, forcing a difficult judgment call.

These dilemmas reveal a set of interconnected challenges that arise when we try to apply virtues in complex situations. Schwartz and Sharpe identify three core problems, to which a fourth can be added. The first is the problem of **relevance**: determining which virtue is most applicable to a given situation. This leads directly to the problem of **conflict**, which involves balancing the competing demands of multiple relevant virtues that suggest different courses of action. The third is the problem of **specification**: understanding how to apply an abstract virtue like "be kind" in a concrete context, as kindness to a child is different from kindness to a colleague. Finally, there is the problem of **development**: realizing that a situation calls for a virtue one does not yet possess, creating an aspirational need to cultivate it. Fundamentally, these challenges are all problems of relevance realization. The problem of conflict is a problem of determining which virtue is more important in a context, and the problem of specification is a problem of determining what is relevant to the application of a general rule in a specific situation.

Schwartz and Sharpe's central argument is that wisdom is the higher-order ability required to navigate these challenges. They invoke Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, to describe this capacity. *Phronesis* is the context-sensitive judgment needed to perceive what a situation requires and to act virtuously. It is a form of know-how that cannot be reduced to a set of explicit rules. This stands in contrast to moral systems based on following a fixed set of commandments, which cannot account for the nuance and conflict inherent in lived experience.

This perspective carries significant societal implications. Schwartz argues against the modern illusion that we can legislate morality and replace the need for personal wisdom with an ever-expanding web of rules and regulations. While laws are necessary, an over-reliance on them can atrophy the very faculties of judgment and virtue they are meant to support. The challenge for society is to find a balance, creating a system of laws that reduces harm without discouraging the personal cultivation of wisdom and character.

3.0 A Critical Analysis of Schwartz and Sharpe's Theory

While Schwartz and Sharpe's core argument establishing the deep connection between wisdom and virtue is powerful, their framework can be refined in two key areas.

3.1 The Neglect of Theoretical Wisdom (*Sophia*)

The first critique concerns their focus on *phronesis* (practical wisdom) to the near exclusion of its counterpart, *sophia* (theoretical wisdom). Schwartz and Sharpe tend to reduce *sophia* to mere propositional knowledge—the possession of facts or rules. This is an unfairly narrow interpretation. A more complete account of wisdom requires a dynamic, opponent relationship between *phronesis* and *sophia*. We need to know how to put principles into processes, and we need to know how to regulate processes with principles. That is what it means to put a principle into practice and to practice in a principled manner. *Sophia* represents a kind of ontological depth perception, a cross-contextual sensitivity to the underlying patterns that generalize across situations.

3.2 The Problem of Equating *Phronesis* with Expertise

The second critique addresses their tendency to equate *phronesis* with expertise. While *phronesis* is a form of know-how, framing it as expertise is misleading. In psychology, expertise is a domain-specific ability. An expert

in tennis possesses exceptional skill, but this expertise can actively interfere with performance in the adjacent domain of squash. Foolishness, however, is not domain-specific; we are capable of being foolish in nearly every area of our lives. Therefore, the remedy for foolishness must also be domain-general. *Phronesis* is not expertise in one domain but the ability to be sensitive in *this* context, and sensitive in *this* context, and sensitive in *this* context. This domain-general capacity for contextual sensitivity is fundamentally different from expertise. A better model for understanding this ability is found in general cognitive functions like intelligence, rationality, or relevance realization, which allow for adaptive problem-solving across a wide array of situations.

4.0 The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm: Baltes and Staudinger

After establishing the vital link between wisdom and virtue, our focus shifts to the seminal work of Paul Baltes and Ursula Staudinger, whose **Berlin Wisdom Paradigm** was instrumental in turning the psychological study of wisdom into an empirical process.

The title of their key article is itself highly informative: "*Wisdom: A Metaheuristic (Pragmatic) to Orchestrate Mind and Virtue Towards Excellence.*" The phrase "orchestrate mind and virtue" signals their acceptance of the connection established by Schwartz and Sharpe. The terms "metaheuristic" (a heuristic for managing other heuristics) and "pragmatic" strongly suggest that the cognitive machinery of relevance realization is central to their theory.

The term "pragmatics" is used with a dual meaning. First, it refers to the linguistic sense, which involves understanding the meaning that goes beyond the literal propositional content of an utterance. Second, it draws from the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, particularly William James, who argued that knowledge should be evaluated by its *efficaciousness*—its ability to help an organism adapt and thrive. Both meanings point toward a model of cognition where propositional knowledge is grounded in procedural, perspectival, and participatory knowing.

To make their theory empirically testable, Baltes and Staudinger proposed five criteria for judging a person or a response as wise: rich factual knowledge about the fundamental pragmatics of life; rich procedural knowledge about the same; lifespan contextualism; relativism of values and priorities; and the recognition and management of uncertainty.

However, this model of knowledge is incomplete. While rich factual and procedural knowledge are necessary, they are insufficient without the other two kinds of knowing. The model is missing *perspectival knowing*, the situational awareness that connects procedural knowledge to a specific context. It also lacks *participatory knowing*, which is essential for explaining the qualitative, transformative development required to achieve wisdom. Without these, the account cannot fully explain how one applies knowledge effectively or undergoes the profound personal changes associated with becoming wise.

Furthermore, the criterion of "relativism of values" is problematic. Many of historical wisdom's greatest exemplars—such as Socrates, the Buddha, or Jesus of Nazareth—were not moral relativists. A more fitting and broadly applicable formulation might replace relativism with the concepts of **fallibilism** (the understanding that one's beliefs could be wrong) and **humility** (an appreciation of one's own cognitive and personal limits). These concepts capture the intended spirit of tolerance and open-mindedness without requiring adherence to a specific modern value system.

Based on these five criteria, the Berlin school developed an innovative experimental methodology. They presented subjects with difficult life dilemmas and had their responses evaluated by trained judges. These judges scored the responses based on how well they exemplified the five criteria, allowing for one of the first empirical measurements of wisdom.

5.0 Experimental Findings and the Solomon Effect

The empirical work of the Berlin school produced significant findings. In one key experiment, participants were asked to solve difficult problems under three conditions: discussing the problem with another person, imagining

a dialogue with another person, or simply being given more time to think alone. The results showed that participants in the first two conditions significantly outperformed those who were merely given more time, a testament to the Platonic insight that dialogue elevates us to a level of wisdom we cannot achieve alone. Crucially, there was no significant performance difference between those who had a real conversation and those who simply imagined one. This suggests that the ability to internalize another's perspective is a powerful metacognitive tool for overcoming personal bias.

This finding connects directly to the more recent work of psychologist Igor Grossman on the **"Solomon effect."** Named for the biblical figure of wisdom, this effect describes the phenomenon where people demonstrate greater wisdom when reasoning about their own problems from a third-person perspective rather than a first-person one. Shifting perspective from "Why am I feeling this way?" to "Why is [your name] feeling this way?" makes different information salient and relevant. It allows one to see the frame of the problem; from within the first-person view, one is often transparently "seeing through" the frame without being aware of it. This underscores the critical role of perspectival knowing in the exercise of wisdom.

6.0 Conclusion and Preview of the Next Discussion

In summary, these foundational psychological theories have provided critical insights into the nature of wisdom. The work of Schwartz and Sharpe powerfully established the inextricable link between wisdom and virtue, demonstrating that being good requires the practical judgment of *phronesis*. Building on this, Baltes and Staudinger's Berlin Wisdom Paradigm created a robust framework for investigating wisdom empirically, grounding it in measurable criteria and highlighting the importance of managing uncertainty, context, and perspective.

The exploration will continue by examining further critiques of these models, which will lead into the important work of Monica Ardelt and the theories of Robert Sternberg. Following this, a synthetic theory proposed by the speaker and Leo Ferraro will be presented, which aims to integrate these insights with the underlying machinery of relevance realization. This entire investigation serves the ultimate goal of the series: to reintegrate the accounts of wisdom and enlightenment in order to provide a robust response to the meaning crisis.

43 Wisdom and Virtue

The video, "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis - Wisdom and Virtue," explores the concepts of rationality, wisdom, and virtue, building on previous discussions about the meaning crisis and dual-processing theories (0:14). Dr. John Vervaeke critiques Stanovich's theory of foolishness, which attributes foolishness to System 1 (S1) interfering with System 2 (S2) processing (0:47). He argues that in therapeutic contexts, the ability of S1 to "leap to conclusions" is crucial for insight and transformative change, which cannot be achieved through inferential processing alone (1:37).

Mindfulness and Active Open-Mindedness: (2:25) Vervaeke proposes the need for a cognitive style that foregrounds S1, triggering insight and constraining S2 processing, which he identifies as **mindfulness** (2:25). He supports this with evidence that mindfulness facilitates insight and cognitive flexibility in therapeutic settings (2:38). He then suggests that both **active open-mindedness** (foregrounding S2) and **mindfulness** (foregrounding S1) are necessary and should be coordinated to optimize rationality and relevance realization, which is central to intelligence (3:03).

Wisdom and Intelligence: (3:33) Vervaeke defines **wisdom** as the recursive and reflective use of rationality to enhance and optimize one's own rationality, especially by improving the relationship between mindfulness and active open-mindedness (3:33). He references Dweck's work on "mindsetting" to emphasize the existential impact of how one relates to their own intelligence and problem-solving capacity (4:14).

Wisdom and Virtue (Schwartz and Sharpe): (6:08) The discussion shifts to existing theories of wisdom, particularly the work of *Schwartz and Sharpe* (6:48), who explore the relationship between wisdom and virtue. They critique the "feature list" approach to virtues (9:01), arguing that virtues are not logically independent and cannot be maximized individually (9:16). Instead, they propose that **wisdom** is needed to optimize the relationship between virtues, resolving conflicts between them (10:28). This is illustrated with dilemmas like balancing honesty and kindness (11:23) or objective grading with student encouragement (12:48).

Schwartz and Sharpe identify several problems with rules-based approaches to virtue:

- **Relevance:** Knowing which virtue is relevant in a given situation (15:01).
- **Conflict:** Virtues often pull in different directions (16:01).
- **Specification:** Rules for virtues do not specify their conditions of application (16:36). Vervaeke adds a fourth problem: the need for **development**, recognizing when one needs to cultivate a virtue they do not possess (17:50).

Sophia vs. Phronesis: (20:56) *Schwartz and Sharpe* distinguish between *Sophia* (theoretical wisdom) and *Phronesis* (practical wisdom), arguing that *Phronesis* is essential for virtue (21:42). *Phronesis* involves contextual sensitivity, good judgment, and knowing how to act in a situation, overlapping with procedural and prospective knowledge (21:56). They are critical of understanding *Phronesis* through rigid rules, as it's impossible to legislate every situation (23:34).

Critique of Expertise and Domain Specificity: (28:32) Vervaeke critiques *Schwartz and Sharpe's* framing of *Phronesis* as expertise. He argues that expertise is **domain-specific** (30:13) (e.g., tennis expertise doesn't transfer to squash), whereas *Phronesis* requires **domain-general** contextual sensitivity applicable across many situations (31:54). He suggests that concepts like intelligence, rationality, and relevance realization are better suited to describe this domain-general ability (32:51).

Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (Baltes and Staudinger): (35:31) The video then moves to the *Berlin Wisdom Paradigm* by *Baltes and Staudinger* (36:01), which introduced an empirical approach to studying wisdom. Their work, titled "Wisdom: A Metahuman to Orchestrate Mind and Virtue Towards Excellence" (37:09), explicitly links wisdom, virtue, and excellence, drawing on positive psychology and the concept of "meta-heuristics" and "pragmatics" (37:45). This connection highlights the role of relevance realization in wisdom (42:11).

The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm outlines five criteria for wisdom, which are empirically investigable:

1. **Rich Factual Knowledge:** Deep grasp of the fundamental pragmatics of life (43:49).
2. **Rich Procedural Knowledge:** Knowing how to put principles into practice (44:15).
3. **Lifespan Contextualism:** The ability to take a big-picture view and zoom in as needed, connecting to self-regulation (45:20).
4. **Relativism of Values and Priorities:** Vervaeke challenges this, suggesting it should be **fallibilism** (never asserting certainty) and **humility** (recognizing limits), rather than moral relativism (46:02).
5. **Recognition and Management of Uncertainty:** Acknowledging the finitary predicament and acting effectively despite unavoidable uncertainty (48:37).

Empirical Measurement of Wisdom: (50:44) Baltes and Staudinger's work involved training judges to evaluate these criteria in people's responses to moral dilemmas and practical challenges (50:44). This allowed for the first empirical attempts to measure wisdom (52:13). A key experimental finding was that **discussing problems with others** or **imagining an internal dialogue** led to wiser outcomes than simply having more time to think (54:13). This "Solomon effect," as *Igor Grossman* terms it, suggests that adopting a third-person perspective helps overcome biases and fosters insight (55:43).

The Psychology of Wisdom: From Rationality to Empirical Models

In our previous discussion, which culminated an exploration of the rationality debate, we examined Stanovich's work on foolishness, or *dysrationalia*, and identified a core tension between two distinct cognitive styles. On one hand, theoretical rationality requires an active open-mindedness that foregrounds System 2 processing, protecting it from the undue interference of System 1's tendency to leap to conclusions. In a therapeutic context, however, the work of Jacobs and Teasdale suggests the opposite is needed. Insight, which is crucial for breaking through existential entrapment and enabling transformative change, depends on the very cognitive leaping machinery that System 1 provides. Evidence from Baker and others confirms that this capacity for cognitive leaping is a powerful predictor of insight, leading to the proposition that we require a corresponding cognitive style—mindfulness—that foregrounds System 1 and facilitates the cognitive flexibility necessary for therapeutic progress.

Given that the relationship between System 1 and System 2 is opponent rather than adversarial, a higher-order coordination of these two cognitive styles—active open-mindedness and mindfulness—is necessary to optimize our rationality. We can understand rationality as the application of intelligence to itself: the degree to which one problematizes and seeks to improve one's own intelligence. Wisdom, then, emerges from the recursive and reflective use of rationality to enhance its own functioning, particularly by optimizing the relationship between its component styles of mindfulness and active open-mindedness. This process is not merely intellectual; it is deeply existential. As Carol Dweck's work on mindset demonstrates, the way we relate to our own higher cognitive processes profoundly impacts our need for cognition, our problem-solving abilities, and our proclivity toward self-deception.

This framework is guided by a central feature of wisdom identified earlier in the work of Meacham and Barber: the ability to see through illusion and into reality. This insight prompted our exploration of the rationality debate, framing the problem as a search for how one might become comprehensively, reliably, and systematically better at dealing with self-deception. The core of wisdom, therefore, is the systematic and reliable ability to overcome this self-deception. This understanding provides the necessary lens through which to evaluate the first major theory under consideration: the work of Schwartz and Sharpe on practical wisdom, which provides an exemplary discussion of the crucial relationship between wisdom and virtue before we proceed to more extensive models like the Berlin Paradigm.

In their 2006 article and subsequent book, *Practical Wisdom*, Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe connect Aristotelian philosophy with positive psychology, a field focused on studying human excellence to reveal the

mind's higher-level powers. They launch a crucial critique against the prevailing "feature list" approach to virtue, found in the work of researchers like Peterson and Seligman, who present virtues as logically independent traits. This model implicitly suggests that each virtue should simply be maximized. The inadequacy of this view becomes immediately apparent, for if one were to maximize honesty at all times, one would inevitably sacrifice kindness, devolving into cruelty. Telling someone, "you're looking uglier than you did yesterday," may be maximally honest, but it is not excellent. The goal, therefore, is not to maximize virtues but to achieve an optimal relationship between them, reflecting the ancient Greek view of virtues as interdependent. This interdependence can be understood in two ways: either the virtues form a complex, interlocking system, or, more profoundly, each virtue is simply the particular way wisdom manifests in a specific context—to be kind is to be wise in one situation, while to be honest is to be wise in another.

Schwartz and Sharpe illustrate this point with compelling dilemmas. Consider a bridesmaid whose friend, the bride, is trying on dresses under severe time pressure and asks, "How do I look?" The bridesmaid is caught between the virtues of honesty, kindness, and helpfulness. To be purely kind ("You look wonderful!") may not be helpful; to be brutally honest ("It's hideous!") is certainly not kind. She must somehow balance these competing demands. A similar conflict arises for a professor grading a student who has shown terrific progress, moving from a low C to a high B. The professor's dilemma is not merely about assigning a grade; it is a profound moral choice between the obligation to report what the student *has done* versus the opportunity to afford what the student *can become*, potentially lifting them into becoming an A-student through a self-fulfilling prophecy.

These dilemmas reveal systematic problems in applying virtues. Schwartz and Sharpe identify three: the problem of **relevance** (which virtue applies here?), the problem of **conflict** (how to act when virtues pull in different directions?), and the problem of **specification** (how does one apply a general rule like "be kind" across countless different contexts?). All three of these are, at their core, problems of relevance realization. The problem of relevance is self-evidently so; the problem of conflict requires determining which virtue is more important in a context; and the problem of specification, as argued previously, also depends on determining relevance for rule application. To this list, a fourth problem can be added: **development**. Sometimes a situation reveals not a conflict between existing virtues, but the need to cultivate a new one—an aspirational response that requires insight and transformative experience. Schwartz and Sharpe propose that we need a higher-order ability to navigate these interconnected challenges. This ability, they argue, is wisdom. Their model thus establishes a deep and necessary connection between the pursuit of a virtuous life and the cultivation of wisdom.

The speaker's engagement with Schwartz and Sharpe is not merely corrective but foundational, seeking to build a more robust understanding of wisdom by addressing two critical limitations in their model. First, while they rightly invoke Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*—the practical wisdom involving context-sensitive judgment and procedural know-how—they tend to neglect its counterpart, *sophia*. They unfairly characterize *sophia* as merely the possession of theoretical rules or propositions. This reflects their appropriate resistance to a rule-based morality, which can lead to the illusion that we can replace the cultivation of wisdom with legislation. This drive to legislate every behavior is not only impossible but can have the unintended consequence of making people less likely to pursue wisdom. We must therefore ask not only "will this legislation reduce harm?" but also "will it atrophy our capacity for wisdom?" However, a more accurate view conceives of *sophia* not as propositional rules, but as a form of "ontological depth perception"—an awareness of deep, cross-contextual principles. Wisdom requires an opponent relationship between the two: we need *sophia* to inform *phronesis*, enabling us to put principles into practice, and we need *phronesis* to be regulated by *sophia*, ensuring we practice in a principled manner.

The second issue is their flawed analogy between wisdom and expertise. They use the language of expertise to describe the "know-how" of *phronesis*, emphasizing procedural over theoretical knowledge. This analogy is misleading. In psychology, expertise is understood as a domain-specific ability. A tennis expert's highly refined skills, for example, do not transfer to the adjacent domain of squash; in fact, they often interfere with performance. *Phronesis*, and wisdom more broadly, is fundamentally different. It is a **domain-general** ability to be contextually sensitive across a vast array of different situations. Human foolishness is not domain-specific;

we have a marvelous capacity to be foolish in almost every area of our lives. Therefore, the remedy must also be domain-general. Models based on intelligence, rationality, or relevance realization—which account for the ability to be contextually sensitive across many domains—are far better suited to explaining *phronesis* than the narrow model of expertise. In summary, while Schwartz and Sharpe make a powerful case for the wisdom-virtue link and offer a compelling critique of rule-based morality, a complete account requires acknowledging the opponent relationship between *phronesis* and *sophia* and rejecting the misleading analogy of wisdom as expertise. With these refinements in mind, we can turn to one of the most seminal psychological theories of wisdom: the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm.

The work of Paul Baltes and Ursula Staudinger, known as the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, was pivotal in transforming the psychological investigation of wisdom into an empirical, experimental process. The title of their key article—"Wisdom: A Meta-heuristic (Pragmatic) to Orchestrate Mind and Virtue Toward Excellence"—is revealing. It immediately signals a connection to virtue, aligning with Schwartz and Sharpe; a link to positive psychology through its focus on "excellence"; and an implicit grounding in relevance realization through the terms "meta-heuristic" and "pragmatic."

The term "pragmatics" here carries two related meanings. The first, derived from linguistics, concerns the non-propositional context essential for communication, encompassing the vast, unstated information we convey and comprehend through relevance realization. The second, rooted in the philosophical pragmatism of William James, broadens this to evaluate knowledge claims by their efficacy in lived experience—that is, by grounding propositional knowing in procedural, perspectival, and ultimately participatory knowing. While philosophical pragmatism can sometimes risk confusing truth with relevance, its emphasis on grounding intellectual claims in a viable, lived ability to fit oneself to the world is crucial. This aligns perfectly with the concept of a "meta-heuristic," a heuristic for managing other heuristics, which points directly toward the machinery of relevance realization.

From this foundation, Baltes and Staudinger developed five core criteria for judging a person as wise, designed to be empirically investigated. The first two are **rich factual and procedural knowledge** about the fundamental pragmatics of life, reflecting the need for both principles (*sophia*) and the know-how to apply them (*phronesis*). While this is a good start, the model overlooks the essential roles of *perspectival* knowing—the situational awareness connecting procedural knowledge to specific contexts—and *participatory* knowing, which is necessary to explain the transformative developmental changes required for wisdom. The third criterion is **lifespan contextualism**, the ability to take a big-picture perspective and regulate oneself accordingly, which points toward perspectival knowing and the broader challenge of self-regulation over time. The fourth criterion they propose is **relativism of values and priorities**. This is a problematic claim, as it seems to mistake contemporary liberal values for timeless components of wisdom. Key exemplars like Socrates, the Buddha, and Jesus were not moral relativists. A more defensible formulation might be **fallibilism and humility**—a recognition of one's own limits and an aversion to self-righteous certainty. The fifth criterion is the **recognition and management of uncertainty**, a direct acknowledgment of the human finitary predicament, where we must act without algorithmic certainty. It is worth noting that Baltes and Staudinger at times fall into the same trap as Schwartz and Sharpe, tending to talk about their meta-heuristic as a form of expertise, a mistake that conflates context-sensitivity with domain-specificity. To measure these criteria, the paradigm uses a methodology in which trained judges evaluate individuals' spoken responses to complex life dilemmas, creating one of the first empirical measures of wisdom.

This empirical work has produced significant findings regarding the mechanisms that cultivate wisdom. In one key experiment, individuals were tasked with solving difficult problems under one of three conditions: discussing the problem with a significant other, imagining an internal dialogue with another person, or simply having more time to think alone. The results were clear: the two dialogue-based groups significantly outperformed the solo thinking group, demonstrating that wisdom is enhanced through dialogue. Crucially, there was no significant difference between actual and internalized dialogue, underscoring the power of internalizing others to achieve the metacognitive distance needed to overcome personal biases.

This finding connects directly to more recent research by Igor Grossman on the "Solomon effect." Named for the famously wise biblical king, this effect describes the insight gained when one shifts from a biased first-person perspective on a problem to a more objective third-person perspective. When we are locked in the first-person view, the framing of our problem is often transparent to us; we see *through* it, not *at* it. Describing the problem from a third-person vantage point makes new features salient and allows for novel insights, enhancing performance on wisdom-related tasks. This validates the implicit role of perspectival knowing in the Berlin Paradigm's experimental work.

We have now examined the connection between wisdom and virtue through the lens of Schwartz and Sharpe and explored the empirical foundations of wisdom research laid by Baltes and Staudinger. In our next discussion, we will offer further critiques of the Berlin model, which will lead us to the important work of Monica Ardelt and Robert Sternberg. Following this, I will present a theoretical proposal developed with Leo Ferraro that attempts to synthesize these insights. Then, after subjecting my own theory to pretty significant criticisms, we will reintegrate this account of wisdom with the concepts of enlightenment and awakening, returning us to the central theme of the meaning crisis.

44 Theories of Wisdom

This video, "Ep. 44 - Awakening from the Meaning Crisis - Theories of Wisdom," features *Dr. John Vervaeke* discussing various theories of wisdom, building on previous episodes and introducing new perspectives. He analyzes the **strengths and weaknesses** of different approaches, particularly focusing on their connection to **relevance realization** and the concept of a "meaning crisis."

Here's a breakdown of the key theories and criticisms:

- **Schwartz and Sharp's Theory (0:19-1:36):**
 - Vervaeke critiques this theory for primarily focusing on *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and not adequately incorporating *sophia* (theoretical wisdom), arguing that both are essential for virtue.
 - He also points out the lack of discussion on the **connection between wisdom and meaning in life**.
- **Baltes and Staudinger's Theory (1:37-7:49):**
 - This theory emphasizes **meta-heuristics pragmatics** and the **orchestration of mind and virtue**.
 - Vervaeke highlights its focus on **relevance realization**, generativity, flexibility, and efficiency in applying wisdom within the framework of **bounded rationality**.
 - He notes their operationalization of wisdom, where **cognitive style** and **interpersonal discussion** (or imagining such discussions) enhance wisdom, challenging individualistic notions of rationality.
 - A significant criticism is that it's primarily a "**product theory**" of wisdom, focusing on what wisdom *is* rather than how one *becomes* wise through **transformational change** (7:51).
- **Monica Ardelt's Criticisms and Theory (12:15-29:53):**
 - Ardelt criticizes Baltes and Staudinger for **confusing theoretical knowledge about wisdom with being a wise person**. She emphasizes that wise individuals undergo a process of **self-transformation** and **self-transcendence**, embodying truths rather than just possessing propositional knowledge.
 - She introduces the distinction between **descriptive knowledge** and **interpretive knowledge**, arguing that wisdom is more aligned with the latter, which involves **grasping the significance** of information and understanding.
 - Ardelt's theory identifies three crucial dimensions of a wise person: **cognitive, reflective** (multi-perspectival, self-examination, self-awareness), and **affective** (compassion, particularly *agape*). These dimensions are **mutually influential** and help overcome egocentrism.
 - Vervaeke notes that Ardelt's work offers a stronger potential to connect **wisdom to meaning in life** due to its focus on transformation and affective components (24:48).
- **Robert Sternberg's Balance Theory of Wisdom (30:13-51:41):**
 - Sternberg is presented as a pivotal figure who significantly contributed to the psychology of wisdom, particularly by connecting it to **pedagogy and education**.
 - His "Balance Theory" emphasizes **tacit understanding** and its role in guiding individuals to **adapt, shape, and select environments**. This process involves **balancing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extra-personal interests** (40:29).

- Vervaeke interprets Sternberg's concept of "balance" as **optimization**, aligning it closely with **relevance realization**.
- A key criticism is Sternberg's emphasis on the "**common good**" as a universal goal of wise people, which Vervaeke finds anachronistic and not universally applicable across cultures or historical periods (43:15).
- Similar to Baltes and Staudinger, Vervaeke notes that Sternberg's theory is still a "**product theory**" and lacks an independent "**process theory of foolishness**" that explains how self-deception operates and can be ameliorated (50:47).

In conclusion, Vervaeke aims to integrate these various theories, highlighting their points of convergence, especially concerning **relevance realization**, and identifying areas where a more comprehensive "**process theory of wisdom**" is needed to address the **meaning crisis** (51:45).

An Analysis of Contemporary Psychological Theories of Wisdom

This analysis follows a preceding discussion on the relationship between wisdom and virtue, now delving into a critical examination of several seminal psychological theories of wisdom. The starting point for this exploration is a critique of the theory proposed by Schwartz and Sharp. While their work is important for linking wisdom to positive psychology, it presents at least two significant shortcomings. First, their account prioritizes *phronesis* (practical wisdom) to the exclusion of *Sophia* (theoretical wisdom); a complete account, as Aristotle argued, requires both to achieve virtue. Second, the attempt to explain *phronesis* through the lens of expertise is a conceptually confused approach that should be set aside. From this critique, we turn to a theory that takes the connection between wisdom and virtue with the utmost seriousness: the foundational work of Baltes and Staudinger, whose model introduces powerful concepts and provides the framework for the first wave of experimental research into the nature of wisdom.

1. The Baltes and Staudinger Model: Wisdom as Expert Knowledge

The theory developed by Paul Baltes and Ursula Staudinger represents a landmark in the psychological study of wisdom. Its strategic importance lies in its introduction of concepts such as "meta-heuristics" and the "fundamental pragmatics of life," which frame wisdom as a form of expert knowledge for orchestrating the mind and virtue in the pursuit of excellence. At the heart of their model is a mechanism that can be understood as a capacity for relevance realization. The theory's use of terms like "meta-heuristics" and "pragmatics" points to a fundamental ability to efficiently zero in on what is significant and applicable in complex life situations. This interpretation forges an integral link between wisdom, intelligence, and rationality.

The model's coherence is built upon five criteria, which can be reinterpreted to highlight underlying cognitive mechanisms. The first two criteria rightly include both propositional knowledge (factual understanding of life) and procedural knowledge (strategies for dealing with life's problems). The third, "lifespan contextualism," is best understood as a form of perspectival knowing—the ability to grasp situations within their broader temporal and social contexts. It must be noted, however, that the model is not very clear on explicating the role of perspectival knowing, though this is perhaps an anachronistic criticism given the state of research at the time. The fourth criterion, "value relativism," must be challenged. As many of history's most revered wisdom figures were not relativists, this concept is more accurately replaced with an emphasis on humility and fallibilism. To be fair, calling the initial proposal problematic was, in the speaker's words, "maybe too harsh then," but the substitution of humility remains a necessary refinement. The final criterion is the ability to recognize and manage uncertainty, which is crucial as much of life involves navigating ill-defined problems characterized by combinatorial explosion—a domain where the capacity for relevance realization is strongly presupposed.

The argument that Baltes and Staudinger are directly invoking the machinery of relevance realization is substantiated by their own language. They describe wisdom as involving "generativity, flexibility, and efficiency

in application," concepts central to adaptive cognitive processing. They explicitly situate their model within the framework of "bounded rationality," acknowledging the cognitive constraints imposed by ill-defined problems. Most tellingly, they state that in wise judgment, "highly complex sets of information about the meaning and conduct of life... are reduced quickly to their essentials without being lost in the never-ending process of information search." This description directly addresses the challenge of combinatorial explosion and highlights an optimization process that is the functional core of relevance realization.

Early experimental work based on this model yielded significant findings. A cognitive style characterized by excellent judgment was found to be a strong predictor of wisdom. Furthermore, the studies revealed that discussing a problem with another person—or even imagining such a discussion—enhanced wisdom-related performance more than simply having more time for solitary reflection. This discovery aligns with the Socratic-Platonic method of dialogue, the Stoic practice of internalizing the sage, and Igor Grossman's contemporary research on the "Solomon effect," which demonstrates that adopting a third-person perspective helps overcome personal bias. Although the Baltes and Staudinger model provides an excellent foundation for the empirical study of wisdom, it is not without significant limitations, which subsequent theories have sought to address.

2. Critical Assessment of the Baltes and Staudinger Model

Critically assessing established models is essential for advancing our understanding of any complex phenomenon. While the Baltes and Staudinger model is foundational, it has several key limitations, particularly concerning the nature of wisdom and the process of its development. These critiques pave the way for more comprehensive and dynamic theories. The most significant criticism, advanced in collaboration with Leo Ferraro, is that the model offers a "product theory" of wisdom rather than a "process theory." A product theory attempts to define *what wisdom is* by creating a feature list derived from studying purportedly wise individuals or widely shared definitions. While valuable, this approach omits a crucial dimension that was central to ancient philosophies of wisdom.

What is needed is a complementary process theory—an account of *how one becomes wise*. Such a theory would begin with an independent account of foolishness and flourishing, and then explain the transformative practices required to overcome the former and afford the latter. A process theory offers two distinct advantages. First, it connects the psychological study of wisdom to its deep philosophical heritage. Second, and more importantly, it directly addresses the dynamic of "seeing through illusion and into reality," providing an account of self-deception and the means by which one can become better connected to oneself, others, and the world. Another crucial critical perspective comes from the work of Monika Ardelt, whose research addresses a fundamental "modal confusion" within the Baltes and Staudinger paradigm. Ardelt's work provides a vital bridge from theories of wise knowledge to theories of the wise person.

3. Monika Ardelt's Three-Dimensional Theory of Wisdom

Monika Ardelt's contribution marks a pivotal shift in the psychological study of wisdom by moving the focus from the mere possession of wisdom-related knowledge to the profound, transformative process of becoming a wise person. Her central critique is that the Baltes and Staudinger model conflates theoretical knowledge *about* wisdom with the state of *being* wise. As illustrated by the self-deprecating example of a scholar who has read the wisdom literature extensively but would not dare claim to be wise, possessing academic knowledge is necessary but far from sufficient. True wisdom requires a process of self-transformation and self-transcendence where truths are embodied and enacted, not merely held propositionally. To clarify this, Ardelt employs John Kekes' distinction between "descriptive knowledge" (factual information) and "interpretive knowledge," which is the ability to grasp the *significance* of those facts. This emphasis on interpretive knowledge highlights the centrality of understanding to wisdom, a capacity deeply intertwined with the relevance realization machinery that allows one to construe what truly matters.

Ardelt proposes that a wise person develops along three mutually influencing and causally interacting dimensions. The **cognitive dimension** is the ability to comprehend the significance of information for one's own development and self-transcendence. The **reflective dimension** is the capacity for being multi-perspectival,

engaging in rigorous self-examination, and achieving self-insight, thereby representing the reflective component of rationality. Finally, there is an **affective dimension**, which Ardeli terms "compassion." However, because of the models she invokes from Buddhism, the term *agape*—a selfless, unconditional care for the well-being of others—may better capture its essence. This affective orientation is crucial for overcoming egocentrism in one's core motivations and aligning one's caring with the flourishing of others.

A key strength of Ardeli's theory is that the inclusion of this affective dimension allows it to connect wisdom to meaning in life in a way previous theories did not. While models like Schwartz and Sharp's link wisdom to virtue, they do not fully account for meaning, which, as Susan Wolf argues, cannot be reduced to morality. Ardeli's framework fosters the deep sense of connectedness and caring foundational to a meaningful existence. Her work is a significant advancement, correctly pointing toward the necessity of a process theory and incorporating transformational and existential aspects. Yet, it does not provide a fully developed process theory, lacks an independent account of foolishness, and possesses untapped potential for more explicitly linking the cultivation of wisdom to the pursuit of meaning in life.

4. Robert Sternberg's Balance Theory of Wisdom

Robert Sternberg is a pivotal figure in the psychology of wisdom, whose tireless work has connected the field to pedagogy and pioneered the effort to engineer psycho-technologies for cultivating wisdom within education. To build his theory, Sternberg focuses on several core ideas. Critically, like Schwartz and Sharp, he zeroes in on *phronesis* (practical wisdom) to the neglect of the important role of *Sophia* (theoretical wisdom). A complete model would need to integrate the implicit, intuitive, S1 nature of *phronesis* with the more reflective, S2 nature of *Sophia*. To account for the procedural aspects of practical wisdom, Sternberg draws on Michael Polanyi's concept of "tacit knowledge"—the kind of knowing that guides goal attainment without being explicitly taught, thereby incorporating implicit learning and intuition into his model.

The central thesis of Sternberg's "Balance Theory" is that wisdom involves using tacit understanding to balance various factors. This process operates through adapting to existing environments, shaping environments to suit one's goals, and selecting new environments when necessary. This notion of "balance" is best interpreted not as a static equilibrium but as a dynamic process of optimization, directly linking it to the machinery of relevance realization. Sternberg specifies three types of interests that must be optimized: **intrapersonal** (interests within a person), **interpersonal** (interests between people), and **extrapersonal** (interests concerning the wider world). This tripartite structure powerfully addresses the core dimensions of connectedness—how you're connected to yourself, how you're connected to other people, and how you're connected to the world—that are foundational to meaning in life.

Sternberg's theory has powerful advantages. By grounding wisdom in optimization, it avoids the problematic equation of wisdom with expertise and clearly invokes a mechanism functionally equivalent to relevance realization. However, the model has weaknesses. Sternberg posits "the common good" as wisdom's ultimate goal, a value that may be anachronistic and culturally specific; broader, more consensus-based goals like the cultivation of virtue and meaning in life might provide a more robust framework. The role of "values" in his model is also unclear, representing either a trivial claim (wise action is normative) or an undefended controversial one (wise people hold specific values). Ultimately, Sternberg's model remains a product theory. It describes the components of wise judgment but lacks an independent, non-definitional theory of foolishness or the process by which one overcomes it. While a powerful framework, the Balance Theory contains identifiable gaps that a more integrated, process-oriented approach could fill.

5. Conclusion: Towards an Integrated Process Theory

The analysis of these contemporary psychological theories reveals both their individual strengths and their collective limitations. A powerful point of convergence emerges across the models of Baltes and Staudinger, Ardeli, and Sternberg: each theory, whether explicitly or implicitly, relies on a core cognitive machinery that can be best understood as relevance realization. This shared foundation suggests that the ability to dynamically optimize one's focus, filter for significance, and adaptively frame problems is central to the expression of

wisdom. However, each of these models functions primarily as a "product theory," describing what wisdom *is* rather than how one *becomes* wise.

The critiques offered throughout this analysis point toward a clear and necessary next step: the development of an integrated process theory. While proposing such a theory borders on the hubristic, it is a necessary intellectual endeavor. A theory grounded in the machinery of relevance realization would aim to explain the transformative journey from foolishness to wisdom, providing an independent account of self-deception and the psycho-technologies needed to overcome it. By synthesizing the insights of these preceding theories, it becomes possible to construct a more complete and dynamic account. The ultimate goal is to connect this integrated theory of wisdom back to the larger project of cultivating meaning in life, thereby providing a robust framework for responding to and awakening from the modern meaning crisis.

45 The Nature of Wisdom

In this video, John Vervaeke continues the discussion on the **nature of wisdom** (0:19), building upon previous critiques and theories. He begins by revisiting **Monica Ardelt's theory of wisdom** (0:42), highlighting its focus on the process of becoming a wise person and the integration of cognitive, reflective, and affective aspects. Vervaeke then critiques Ardelt's theory for lacking an independent account of foolishness and not fully incorporating the philosophical heritage of wisdom (2:00).

He moves on to **Sternberg's theory of wisdom** (2:30), acknowledging its insights into adapting, shaping, and selecting as forms of relevance realization and the balancing of interests. However, Vervaeke points out limitations, such as the idea that wisdom is solely directed towards the common good and the ambiguity surrounding the role of values (3:44). He also notes that Sternberg's theory is more of a product theory than a process theory and doesn't adequately address "seeing through illusion" (4:57).

Vervaeke then introduces a **proposal developed with Leo Ferraro** (5:33), which aims to integrate different competencies:

- **Inferential competence** (6:07) related to propositional knowing.
- **Insight competence** (6:13) related to procedural and perspectival knowing.

He discusses how **active open-mindedness** (6:41) and **mindfulness** (7:07) protect and develop these competencies. A criticism of their own theory is the **lack of clear discussion on participatory knowing** (12:18), which he argues is crucial for understanding transformative experience and modal change in becoming wise.

The video also delves into the concept of **Sophrosyne** (15:46), an ancient Greek cardinal virtue often translated as temperance or moderation. Vervaeke argues for a deeper understanding of Sophrosyne as a state where one is naturally "tempted to the good" (22:24) and not easily swayed by self-deception, much like an adult is not tempted by childish toys. This state, he explains, is achieved through internalizing the "sage" (14:14), such as *Socrates* or *Buddha*, which helps overcome egocentrism.

Finally, Vervaeke highlights **the missing element of understanding** (31:37) in their theory of wisdom. He emphasizes that profound understanding involves grasping significance, formulating problems effectively, and being contextually sensitive. He introduces the work of *Pritchard* and *Hannes Reijgersberg* (37:14) on the "standard of effectiveness" for understanding, where understanding is not solely tied to truth but to its effectiveness in helping to zero in on relevant information and make relevant connections. He also discusses **Agnes Callard's concept of "aspiration"** (50:50) as an incremental form of transformative knowing, distinct from sudden "inspiration," and introduces the idea of "proleptic rationality" (51:25) as a form of rationality appropriate for aspiring to new values and ways of being.

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis: A Discourse on the Nature of Wisdom

This discourse continues a deep exploration into the nature of wisdom, a subject that demands careful attention due to its crucial connection to the project of finding meaning in life. Building upon previous analyses, this text will first critique several prominent contemporary theories before proposing a synthetic framework that addresses their limitations and integrates insights from both modern psychology and classical philosophy.

A review of Monica Ardelt's theory reveals its significant contributions. Ardelt distinguishes between having a theory of wisdom and understanding the process of *becoming* a wise person, rightly emphasizing the features of the wise individual over abstract theoretical claims. Her framework insightfully integrates the cognitive, reflective, and affective domains. The cognitive component, through its invocation of understanding (as seen in the work of Keeks), is directly tied to relevance realization—the grasping of significance. This is also implicitly present in the reflective machinery, which connects to perspectival knowing and the cultivation of rationality. Finally, the affective domain, tied to *agape*, also has profound connections to relevance realization. This

synthesis affords Ardelt's theory a powerful way to link wisdom to meaning in life, distinct from its connection to virtue. However, the theory remains largely a "product theory" rather than a "process theory." It lacks an independent account of foolishness and does not fully incorporate the rich philosophical heritage from figures like Socrates and Plato, which conceives of wisdom as a dynamic practice.

Similarly, Robert Sternberg's work has been pivotal in the cognitive science of wisdom. His concepts of adopting, shaping, and selecting environments are clear articulations of relevance realization. He invokes implicit processing and tacit knowledge to explain the intuitive grasping of significance. Sternberg's model incorporates a balancing of intrapersonal (self), interpersonal (others), and extrapersonal (world) interests, which implicitly links wisdom to the search for meaning. This notion of "balance" is best understood as a form of optimization, directly connecting it to the optimization of cognitive processing inherent in relevance realization.

Despite its strengths, Sternberg's theory presents certain issues. The claim that a wise person's cognitive machinery is always directed toward the "common good" seems anachronistic; a less contentious formulation would be that it is directed toward virtue and meaning in life for oneself and others. Furthermore, his invocation of "values" as a constraining force is ambiguous. This could be the trivial definitional claim that wisdom, as a normative concept, is regulated by considerations of truth and goodness. Alternatively, if it refers to specific values, they are neither stated nor justified, and their precise impact on the cognitive machinery remains unexplained. Ultimately, Sternberg's framework is also a product theory. While it includes a theory of foolishness, it is not independently generated and fails to capture the essential wisdom-related task of seeing through illusion and into reality.

Introducing the Vervaeke-Ferraro Framework and its Components

Moving beyond the critique of existing theories, we can now draw upon both the psychological machinery already discussed and the philosophical work from the first half of this course to outline a new proposal, co-authored with Leo Ferraro. This framework, first developed in 2013, attempts to provide a more process-oriented account of wisdom.

The theory begins by positing two fundamental competencies. The first is an **inferential competence**, which corresponds to our propositional knowing (knowing *that*). The second is an **insight competence**, which relates more to procedural and perspectival knowing (knowing *how* and knowing *from a perspective*). The framework proposes that these competencies are regulated by distinct cognitive styles. Inferential competence is enhanced and protected from the undue influence of intuitive, System 1 processing by **active open-mindedness**. In contrast, insight competence, particularly in therapeutic or existential-developmental contexts, is best cultivated and protected by **mindfulness**. Here, mindfulness is understood not just as a single practice but as a coordinated style of psychotechnologies, including meditation, contemplation, and flow states.

This structure raises the question of how these two systems are coordinated. While they could function as self-organizing opponent processes, a more structured relationship was proposed. Propositional knowing, enhanced by active open-mindedness, yields knowledge of **facts**—understood as cross-contextual patterns or principles, akin to the classical notion of *sophia*. Procedural knowing, which involves cultivating skills of attention, yields knowledge of **events** or **processes**—things unfolding idiosyncratically in time and space, akin to *phronesis*. In addition to these, the framework explicitly invoked **perspectival knowing** as a third, crucial component managing the internalization of other viewpoints to achieve metacognitive effectiveness.

Self-Critique and Evolution: The Grounding of Knowing

A critical re-evaluation of this original Vervaeke-Ferraro theory reveals certain limitations, particularly concerning the relationship between the different kinds of knowing. The initial proposal suggested that perspectival knowing serves to integrate knowledge of facts (theories) with knowledge of events (skills), helping to put principles into process and have processes governed by principles. While this contains an element of truth, a more refined, hierarchical model now seems more accurate.

In this updated view, the different forms of knowing are grounded in one another:

- **Propositional knowing** (knowledge of principles) is grounded in and affected by...
- **Procedural knowing** (skills and how to interact with the world), which is itself grounded in...
- **Perspectival knowing** (the situational awareness needed to cultivate and apply skills), which is ultimately grounded in...
- **Participatory knowing** (the agent-arena attunement that affords our being-in-the-world and enables existential, modal transformation).

This revised structure exposes a significant lacuna in the original theory: the absence of **participatory knowing**. This omission has profound consequences. For all its claims to be a process theory, without an account of participatory knowing, the framework cannot adequately incorporate how one undergoes transformational experience or modal change (in the existential, not logical, sense). The crucial connections between wisdom, transformative experience, and altered states of consciousness are therefore missing, which significantly challenges the theory's adequacy as a process-oriented account. It also appears that the original formulation smuggled the process of identity creation, which is central to participatory knowing, into its description of perspectival knowing.

The Proposed Cognitive Style: Internalizing the Sage and *Sophrosyne*

The theory proposed a higher-order cognitive style designed to regulate the interplay between active open-mindedness and mindfulness. Drawing directly from philosophical tradition, this style centers on the practice of **internalizing the sage**—be it Socrates, the Buddha, or another exemplar of wisdom. This process of internalization serves as a powerful method for overcoming egocentrism, a primary mechanism of illusion and self-deception.

When one successfully internalizes a sage, the resulting metacognitive enhancement cultivates a particular classical virtue: **sophrosyne** (σοφροσύνη). As one of the four cardinal virtues of ancient Greece—alongside wisdom, justice, and courage—*sophrosyne* is often inadequately translated as "temperance" or "moderation." Its meaning is deeper, connected to the Delphic maxim "know thyself" and to Aristotle's concept of the Golden Mean, which describes virtue as an optimization between the vices of deficit and excess.

To grasp its nature, it is useful to contrast *sophrosyne* with **enkrateia** (ἐγκράτεια), or self-control. Consider two individuals, Tom and Susan, who are both striving to be honest.

- **Tom** practices honesty through *enkrateia*. When faced with an opportunity to lie for personal benefit, he feels a powerful temptation and impulse, which he then overcomes through an act of self-control. His honesty is commendable.
- **Susan**, however, embodies honesty as *sophrosyne*. She, too, clearly sees the opportunity to lie and the advantages it would bring, but the idea is, in a Frankfortian sense, unthinkable. It is not a viable option for her; she feels no temptation.

Most would agree with the ancient Greeks that Susan is more honest than Tom, because for her, honesty has become second nature. This state of being, where virtue flows naturally from one's character rather than being imposed by willpower, is an essential aspect of *sophrosyne*.

The Nature and Goal of *Sophrosyne*

The transformative nature of *sophrosyne* is further illuminated by the Pauline analogy of maturation: "When I was a child, I thought like a child... when I became a man, I put childish things behind me." A child's salience landscape is organized around toys, which exert a powerful pull. An adult can see those same toys but feels no temptation. The relationship between the ordinary adult and the sage is analogous; the sage possesses a salience landscape in which the pervasive forms of self-deception that tempt most people no longer have a hold.

Sophrosyne, therefore, represents a fundamental reversal of one's salience landscape. It is a deeply perspectival state where one sees through illusion and into reality. This state is echoed in Taoist ideals of effortless action after sufficient training and in Augustine's dictum, "Love God and then do what you want." The underlying principle is that with the right inner orientation—be it love for God or the flow of *agape*—one's desires align with the good. You become **tempted to the good**. Just as an ordinary person's salience landscape may naturally self-organize toward self-deception, the wise person's landscape naturally self-organizes toward seeing through illusion and zeroing in on what is relevant to living a virtuous and meaningful life.

The Vervaeke-Ferraro theory argued that internalizing the sage is the cognitive style that cultivates *sophrosyne*. This virtue represents an optimization of perspectival knowing, placed in service of the agent-arena relationship and the transformations necessary to become wise. The theory proposed that *sophrosyne* is directed toward what can be termed the "Three Ms." However, a contemporary re-evaluation of this original formulation reveals certain deficits, reflecting an evolution in the theoretical framework. The "Three Ms" were:

1. **Morality:** Construed not merely as adherence to rules but as the capacity for being virtuous.
2. **Meaning in life:** The theory's original reliance on Self-Determination Theory is now seen as a deficit requiring significant revision to incorporate more recent, robust work on the subject.
3. **Mastery:** This term, though now viewed as problematic due to its political connotations, was originally meant in an academic or artisanal sense, as in a "masterpiece." It signifies a profound capacity for caring and coping with reality through the skillful integration of rules (from propositional knowing), routines (from procedural knowing), and roles (from perspectival knowing), all under the regulating guidance of *sophrosyne*.

Recap of the Process and Identification of a New Lacuna: Understanding

The framework thus offers a process-oriented account of how one becomes wise: you cultivate active open-mindedness, mindfulness, and the practice of internalizing the sage (much as a master athlete internalizes their coach), all guided by the overarching aim of realizing *sophrosyne*.

Despite this process-oriented approach, a self-critique reveals several remaining deficits. The theory lacks a sufficiently developed account of transformational experience, its relationship to altered states of consciousness, and the role of participatory knowing. Consequently, the crucial connection between wisdom and *gnosis* (transformative knowing) is absent. Furthermore, the original model's conception of how the different kinds of knowing relate was overly simplistic.

However, a core argument of the theory remains central and robust: wisdom is a comprehensive optimization of cognition, consciousness, and character, achieved through the systematic enhancement of **relevance realization**. This principle serves as a point of convergence for many explicit psychological theories of wisdom. Yet, this very connection reveals another serious lacuna: the theory lacks a robust account of **understanding**. This absence is stark when considered rhetorically: to claim, "Oh, Bill is very wise; he's so insightful, so capable of self-transcendence, he believes things really well and isn't easily duped—but he doesn't have a deep or profound understanding of things," strikes one as a contradiction. No, that is not right. A wise person must *understand* things deeply. Any complete theory of wisdom must therefore articulate what it means to enhance understanding.

Developing a Theory of Understanding: Grasping Significance

To build a more complete account of wisdom, we must first develop a theory of understanding. Contemporary philosophy offers a powerful starting point, as many theorists are converging on the idea that understanding is distinct from, and goes beyond, mere knowledge or the possession of an explanation. Understanding is widely defined as **grasping the significance** of what is known. As we saw in the work associated with **Keeks**, this idea of grasping significance is central.

This concept connects directly to relevance realization and the process of construal. To grasp significance is to achieve an "optimal grip" on a situation by sizing it up well. This optimal grip, in turn, affords the ability to discern what is relevant. To this point, the work of **Smellin** emphasizes grasping the relevance of what one knows beyond just its logical implications. This capacity is also linked to problem-finding—the ability to identify important new questions and areas of inquiry. Recent work by figures such as **de Regt** has highlighted a "**standard of effectiveness**" for understanding. Rather than tying understanding tightly to truth—which would imply that most people in history have never understood anything, as most past beliefs were false—it is more plausibly tied to rationality and effectiveness.

This is evident in science, where models that are known to be literally false (like the planetary model of the atom) are used to generate understanding. These idealizations are not attempts at accurate representation; they are tools that are *effective* for helping us grasp the significance of a scientific theory, draw the right implications, and zero in on the relevant information. Effectiveness, not literal truth, is the hallmark of a tool that fosters understanding.

The Dimensions of Profound Understanding

Building on this foundation, we can further articulate the structure of understanding. Effectiveness is demonstrated by the ability to apply knowledge across new domains and to find and formulate new problems. This capacity for insightful transfer relies on the machinery of relevance realization. Furthermore, understanding is inherently **context-sensitive**; what a person understands depends on their skills and the specific situation.

A distinction can be made between basic understanding and *profound* understanding. Profound understanding appears to have two integrated dimensions:

- **The Horizontal Dimension: Generating Plausibility** This dimension involves taking basic understanding—the grasping of relevant connections—and using it to generate plausibility through convergence and elegance. It is the ability to bring disparate domains together into a single, well-formed construal (compression) and then apply that construal effectively across a wide variety of new contexts (variation). This process of achieving an optimal grip across contexts, backed by a law of convergence, ensures the construal is trustworthy and counteracts self-deception.
- **The Vertical Dimension: Aligning Kinds of Knowing** Profound understanding also involves the alignment and optimization of the relationships between the different kinds of knowing: propositional, procedural, perspectival, and participatory. Someone with a profound understanding of physics, for example, not only grasps the propositions but also possesses the skills to *do* physics, the situational awareness to apply those skills appropriately, and perhaps even a participatory identification with that worldview. The more deeply these levels are aligned, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing—with grounding flowing downward and emergence flowing upward—the more profound the understanding.

A complete theory of wisdom must integrate this two-dimensional account of understanding and, crucially, connect it to transformative experience, or *gnosis*.

Integrating Transformative Knowing: Aspiration and Proleptic Rationality

Transformative knowing, or *gnosis*, is the process wherein knowing the self and knowing the world are bound up with becoming a different agent in a different arena. While the seminal work of L.A. Paul focuses on sudden, insight-like transformative experiences, the more recent work of Agnes Callard in her book *Aspiration* addresses transformations that are incremental in nature.

Callard uses the example of joining a music appreciation class. The goal of the class is to come to value music for its own sake—to find it intrinsically valuable. Yet, this presents a paradox: if one already valued music for its own sake, one would not need the class. The initial motivations for joining (e.g., to earn a credit, to impress a friend) are extrinsic to the final goal. Callard agrees with Paul that this dilemma cannot be resolved through standard inferential reasoning or decision theory.

Instead, she argues that **aspiration**—the process of trying to acquire a value you do not yet have—must itself be a rational process. She terms this **proleptic rationality**. If the act of aspiring to become rational were itself irrational, it would amount to a performative contradiction. By extension, the loving of wisdom (*philo-sophia*), the aspiration to become wise, cannot be an irrational process. It must be a form of rationality, even if it is not inferential.

A Psychological Account of Aspiration

While Callard makes a compelling philosophical case for proleptic rationality, her work offers less on the psychology of aspiration. A psychological account can be sketched by considering the mechanism that allows this process to unfold. To bridge the gap between one's current self and a future, transformed self, one must engage with the process using a temporary, instrumental value.

Callard calls this a "**placeholder**"; it functions as a **symbol** that connects the present self to the future self. This symbol has a "double face": it is valuable to the current self while pointing toward the values of the future self. This is not duplicitous, because the aspirer is aware of the placeholder's temporary function, which is what makes the process rational. For instance, one might attend the music class motivated by the current value of "making myself do difficult things." This placeholder value gets one into the liminal space where it becomes possible to begin playing with and eventually adopting the new, intrinsic value of appreciating music.

This process is deeply connected to *gnosis* (the work of moving out of existential traps) and symbolic enactment. Furthermore, aspiration is likely fueled by **wonder**. Wonder functions like a Socratic *aporia*, opening one up to question their current worldview and sense of self, thereby motivating the desire for aspirational change. A psychological account of aspiration thus involves a synergy of wonder-driven *gnosis* and the strategic use of a placeholder symbol. This is essential for a theory of wisdom, because wisdom is something to which we must always aspire; to claim to have fully achieved it is a fundamental error.

Conclusion: A Synthetic Definition of Wisdom

Drawing these threads together, we can propose a comprehensive, synthetic definition. This account integrates the psychological machinery, philosophical virtues, and transformative processes discussed throughout this exploration.

Wisdom is an ecology of psychotechnologies and cognitive styles that dynamically and reciprocally constrain and optimize each other.

This ongoing, mutual optimization results in an overall enhancement of relevance realization across multiple, interdependent domains of human cognition and being. These domains include:

- **Inference** (rational belief formation)
- **Insight**
- **Intuition** (connection to implicit processing)
- **Internalization** (perspectival development)
- **Understanding** (grasping significance)
- **Gnosis** and **Transformation** (participatory knowing)
- **Aspiration** (proleptic rationality)

This ecology functions as a dynamical system that is fundamentally counteractive to the machinery of self-deception. By enhancing our ability to zero in on what is relevant in a deep and multifaceted way, it affords a self-organizing transformation toward a life of flourishing—a life that is, and is experienced as being, deeply meaningful.

46 Conclusion and the Prophets of the Meaning Crisis

In this video, John Vervaeke concludes the series "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis" by integrating various theories and philosophical concepts into a comprehensive account of wisdom. He emphasizes the need to transcend simplistic notions of meaning in life and to integrate psychological and philosophical insights into a coherent understanding of profound understanding, aspiration, and transformative experiences (1:52).

Vervaeke proposes that wisdom is an ecology of psycho-technologies and cognitive styles that dynamically enhance relevance realization, which is central to inference, insight, intuition, understanding, and gnosis (6:12). This concept of wisdom overlaps significantly with enlightenment, aiming to counteract parasitic processing and foolishness while enhancing flourishing and meaning in life (7:02). He argues that wisdom achieves this by enhancing "religio" and leading to an encounter with sacredness, which are crucial for addressing the meaning crisis (8:02).

He situates the "wise cultivation of enlightenment" within a scientific worldview, aligning it with third-generation cognitive science and its machinery of relevance realization (10:08). This approach is designed to be secular, respectful of religion without being dependent on it, and not tied to any political ideology (14:04).

The second half of the video introduces a "constructive dialogue" with "prophets of the meaning crisis" from the 20th and 21st centuries, whose work he will discuss in the remaining episodes (15:11). He outlines a network of influential thinkers, including *Heidegger*, *Husserl*, *Tillich*, *Corbin*, *Jung*, *Barfield*, *Derrida*, *Morton*, *Harman*, *Han*, and the *Kyoto School* (*Nishida* and *Nishitani*), prioritizing discussion on *Heidegger*, *Barfield*, *Jung*, *Corbin*, *Tillich*, and *Nishitani* (17:23).

Vervaeke then delves into *Husserl's* phenomenology as an attempt to regain "contact epistemology"—a deep connection with reality that he argues was lost through abstraction (30:09). He explains *Husserl's* concept of "intentionality" (mental directedness) and its reciprocal relationship with a "disclosed world" (meaningfully structured environment) (34:00).

Heidegger critiques *Husserl* for not fully developing participatory knowing and for remaining trapped within a "Cartesian cultural cognitive grammar," which *Heidegger* believes cuts us off from being (38:18). *Heidegger* introduces the concept of "Dasein" (being-there) to describe humans as beings whose "being is in question," which means our identity is not fixed but is a process of becoming (45:12). By exploring "Dasein," we can reconnect with our mortal existence, confront mystery, and engage in transformative experience, leading to a profound participatory knowing of ourselves and being itself (48:34).

The video concludes by foreshadowing *Heidegger's* argument that the history of metaphysics is actually the history of nihilism, which has driven humanity into the meaning crisis (53:15). *Heidegger's* proposed response involves a phenomenological investigation of *Dasein* to break free from the Cartesian grammar and re-establish a deep, existential contact with being (54:15).

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis: Synthesizing Wisdom and Charting the Path Forward

A previously presented model of wisdom, developed in 2013 with Leo Ferraro, proposed a method for enhancing inferential processing through active open-mindedness, insightful processing through mindfulness, and the capacity for internalization by embodying the archetype of the sage. By internalizing the sage, one cultivates a salience landscape that naturally organizes away from self-deception and tempts us towards what is true, good, and perhaps beautiful. This framework sought to coordinate the distinct faculties of propositional knowing (associated with inference), procedural knowing (associated with insight), and perspectival knowing (associated with internalization). The ultimate aim of this model was to guide an individual toward realizing "sovereign," cultivating a more moral existence, mastering the arts of coping and caring, and fostering meaning in life. However, a subsequent critique of this model acknowledged that its conception of "meaning in life" was overly simplistic and required integration with a more developed account.

Upon further reflection, it became clear that the 2013 model was missing several crucial components: participatory knowing, a robust concept of understanding, the role of transformative experience, aspiration, and gnosis. To rectify these deficiencies, the initial stages of a revised account were proposed. This new approach begins by elevating a basic understanding—the ability to grasp the relevance of one's knowledge—into a profound understanding. This is achieved by generating plausibility through a convergence onto a contextually sensitive "optimal grip" on a situation, an optimal grip that is itself transformatively transferable and highly effective across many different domains of problem-finding, formulation, and solving.

In addition to sudden, insight-laden transformative experiences, this expanded framework incorporates what Agnes Callard terms "aspiration"—a more incremental form of transformation that cannot be resolved through simple inferential or decision-theoretic means. It can be argued that aspiration must be considered a form of what Callard calls "proleptic rationality"; otherwise, one falls into a performative contradiction, for if the love of wisdom and the aspiration for rationality are not themselves considered rational processes, the entire model of rationality is imperiled. Given this philosophy, what is missing is a more extensive psychology of aspiration, and I know one of my colleagues, Jenson Kim, is working on exactly that problem. One way to conceptualize this process is through the creation of symbolic, double-faced placeholders that allow us to make the incremental leap from who we are now to a future self that has acquired a new value. Unlike Callard, I see this as inherently relying on our symbolic capacity—our ability for enacted symbolic behavior, or gnosis, as seen in serious play. Furthermore, it can be argued that aspiration likely has a significant affective component, with the state of wonder being most conducive to its progress, as it opens us up to the world and puts our participatory knowing onto a developmental trajectory.

Synthesizing these elements leads to a more comprehensive definition of wisdom. Wisdom can be understood as an ecology of psycho-technologies, or cognitive styles, that dynamically and reciprocally optimize the process of relevance realization. This dynamic system enhances a suite of interconnected faculties, including inference, insight, intuition, internalization, understanding, gnosis, and the relevance realization at work within both transformative experience and aspiration.

This refined conception of wisdom significantly overlaps with the previously discussed account of enlightenment. Just as enlightenment was described as a counteractive dynamical system that works against parasitic processing, wisdom can be seen as a similar system that counteracts self-deception and foolishness. Such a system would ameliorate foolishness and enhance flourishing by enabling an individual to become better connected to themselves, to others, and to the world. Crucially, I would argue that where wisdom overlaps with enlightenment, it enhances meaning in life by enhancing *religio*—the web of connections that bind one to reality. The enhancement of *religio* connects to agape, and through the cultivation of wonder, and potentially even awe, it opens a path to the experience of sacredness. I think it is plausible, therefore, to argue that I have explicated and explained the deep connections between wisdom, enlightenment, and the enhancement of *religio* and its relationship to sacredness. This entire process can be drawn together under the notion of the wise cultivation of enlightenment, a pursuit that carries with it the enhancement of meaning and the encounter with the sacred.

For this framework to be viable, it must be situated within two specific contexts. First, it requires an enabling worldview, one that is consistent with and afforded by a secular, scientific perspective. This has been a consistent goal throughout this exploration: grounding the entire account in the machinery of relevance realization, which can ultimately be given a naturalistic explanation through the lens of third-generation cognitive science. It should be emphasized that this is not a view that is in any way hostile to religion, but it is one that is not dependent on it. Second, this framework must be supported by a socio-cultural structure: a cooperative network of communities of practice. These communities would exist in a dynamic, ongoing reflective equilibrium with a "wisdom wiki." This wiki would serve a creedal function, being continuously informed by both top-down contributions from researchers and bottom-up insights from practitioners. The integration of this psychological and cognitive machinery with its corresponding socio-cultural framework offers a comprehensive proposal for how we can, individually and collectively, awaken from the meaning crisis.

Having articulated this comprehensive framework, the next step is to place it into a constructive dialogue with other major responders to the meaning crisis—thinkers who can be seen as prophets in the Old Testament sense of telling forth the crisis to awaken us and galvanize a response. It is inevitable that not every relevant figure can be addressed, due to limitations of both time and expertise; thinkers like Wittgenstein and Whitehead, though profoundly important, will not be central to the coming discussion. The figures who have been chosen were selected for two reasons: a degree of relevant expertise exists to discuss them, and they form an interconnected network, allowing for a coherent exploration of their relations of contrast, connection, and causal influence rather than a piecemeal presentation. The attempt is not to prove one account superior but to show that the framework developed here is deeply responsive and responsible to the work of these prophets.

The intellectual roadmap for this dialogue pivots around the controversial and ambivalent figure of Martin Heidegger. To understand him, one must first look to his predecessor, Edmund Husserl, and the tradition of phenomenology. Heidegger was also deeply influenced by the titanic influence of Immanuel Kant and the Gnostic undercurrent running through German thought, which came to him especially through the Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart. From Heidegger, lines of influence and dialogue extend in many directions. One connection is to Paul Tillich, a great writer on the meaning crisis who also has deep Gnostic elements in his thought. Another pivotal figure is Henry Corbin, whose work on the transjective and symbolism connects deeply to Heidegger. Corbin, in turn, shares important connections with Carl Jung, who was also directly influenced by the Gnostics and Kant. These shared Gnostic roots help explain the deep similarities between the work of Tillich and Jung, who, as one of their interpreters has noted, both viewed the psyche in a sacramental fashion. Owen Barfield, with his notions of participation, also fits within this network, influenced by Gnosticism and by Kant via the Romantics. A potential connection from Heidegger can be traced toward postmodernism and thinkers like Jacques Derrida, as well as to contemporary movements like speculative realism, represented by Graham Harman and Timothy Morton. Finally, the Kyoto School, founded by Kitaro Nishida and including Keiji Nishitani, also engages deeply with Heidegger alongside figures like William James and traditions like Buddhism. Of this complex network, the figures to be given the most extensive focus will be Heidegger, Barfield, Jung, Corbin, Tillich, and Nishitani.

Before approaching Heidegger, it is necessary to begin with his most significant influence, Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. Husserl's project was an attempt to re-establish a "contact epistemology," to get "back to the things themselves" after philosophy had become overly abstracted and removed from the world. Phenomenology is not mere introspection; it is a disciplined, reflective, and even experimental practice of paying probative attention to the structure of our experience and the way we are in contact with the world. At its core is the reciprocal relationship between *intentionality*—the directedness of the mind toward things—and the way a *world*, understood as a meaningfully structured environment, is disclosed to us. In the terminology developed throughout this series, phenomenology can be described as reflective attention paid to the perspectival knowing of the transjective relationship between agent and arena. However, as we will later see when looking at Sparrow's critique, it can be argued that this very structure ultimately fails as a form of realism, preventing phenomenology from achieving its goal.

Heidegger developed his own thought in response to what he saw as two critical failings in Husserl's project. First, he argued that Husserl's work failed to properly account for *participatory knowing*—the modal relationship between the agent and the arena—and therefore did not ground his phenomenology in a proper ontology. Without an account of our fundamental existential mode of being-in-the-world, we remain out of touch with our own being and, through it, with being itself. Second, Heidegger contended that Husserl remained trapped within the Cartesian cultural-cognitive grammar, a framework that inherently severs the self from the world and confines us within our own subjectivity. This perpetuates the very loss of contact that phenomenology was meant to overcome.

In response, Heidegger directed the phenomenological project inward, toward a direct investigation of our own being. This methodological turn is meant to produce a profound phenomenological and existential realization. It begins with the familiar existentialist idea that for human beings, your existence precedes your essence. Unlike a gazelle, whose identity is set from birth, who and what we are is not fixed but is a question we must confront.

This leads to the central Heideggerian insight: we are the beings whose being is in question. This is not a biological question about our species but a fundamental uncertainty about who and what we are as persons. This existential *aporia* is directly tied to the question of the meaning of life and opens us to the "being mode," where we cease trying to manipulate and solve and instead step back to confront mystery. To break free from the familiar terms of the Cartesian grammar, Heidegger coined the neologism *Dasein*, meaning "being-there," to refer to this being who is thrown into existence and whose being is a constant question to itself.

For Heidegger, this phenomenological exploration of *Dasein* provides the crucial link between participatory knowing and ontology. Because our own being—our groundedness in reality—is fundamentally in question, investigating it allows us to put the question of being itself into question. The upcoming exploration of Heidegger's thought, with the very tremendous help of Dreyfus's interpretations, will unpack his core argument through key quotes. This argument, in essence, is that the history of Western metaphysics is synonymous with the history of nihilism and is the direct cause of the meaning crisis. He proposes that by phenomenologically investigating *Dasein*, we can break free from this inherited cultural-cognitive grammar and re-establish a deep, existential contact with being, offering a profound response to our predicament.

47 Heidegger

This video, "Ep. 47 - Awakening from the Meaning Crisis - Heidegger," is part of a series by Dr. John Vervaeke. In this episode, Vervaeke connects his scientific model of spirituality to the ideas of Martin Heidegger, a central "prophet" of the meaning crisis (0:40). He addresses common criticisms of Heidegger's work and aims to highlight the philosopher's core insights.

Key Concepts and Arguments:

- **Heidegger's Critique of Husserl's Phenomenology** (4:35): Vervaeke explains that Heidegger believed Husserl's phenomenology, despite its aim to "return to the things themselves," remained trapped within a Cartesian, subjective framework (6:31-7:05). Heidegger argued that Husserl failed to adequately develop *participatory knowing* and integrate it with a deeper understanding of *being* as fundamental reality (5:11-6:17).
- **The Importance of Embodiment** (5:22): Vervaeke emphasizes that Merleau-Ponty, influenced by Heidegger, advanced the concept of embodiment as crucial for a return to contact epistemology, a point also taken up by cognitive science (5:28-5:46).
- **Questioning as Questing** (8:09): Heidegger proposed that to achieve deeper contact with being, one must engage in a specific kind of questioning—not for answers or control (the "having mode"), but as a "questing" that leads to participatory transformation (8:15-8:40).
- **Dasein and the Question of Being** (8:43): Central to Heidegger is the notion of *Dasein* ("being-there"), which refers to human being as the kind of being whose own being is in question (8:46-9:27). By existentially exploring Dasein, we can understand both our modal existence and the mystery of being itself (9:53-10:12).
- **Metaphysics as Nihilism** (10:27): Heidegger famously argued that the history of Western metaphysics (philosophical, existential, and religious responses to Dasein) is fundamentally a history of *nihilism*. He believed this history misconstrued our relationship to being, leading to a profound loss of contact with both our own being and being itself, which for Heidegger, is the meaning crisis (10:35-12:00). He distinguishes "metaphysics" (pejorative) from "ontology" (the project of understanding being) (12:06-12:35).
- **Truth as *Aletheia*** (32:34): Vervaeke delves into Heidegger's essay "On the Essence of Truth," where Heidegger argues that conventional notions of truth (correctness or correspondence) are grounded in a deeper relationship called "open comportment" or "attunement" (14:43-17:24). This attunement, for Vervaeke, aligns with *relevance realization* (17:50-18:10). Heidegger rejects a subjective interpretation of attunement, viewing it as what makes meaningful experience possible (18:22-20:00). Truth as *Aletheia* (unconcealment) signifies a deep remembering and disclosure of being, where things simultaneously shine into our subjectivity and withdraw into their objectivity (32:34-33:55).
- **The Thing Beyond Itself** (30:45): Drawing on speculative realism (e.g., Harman), Vervaeke introduces the concept of the "thing beyond itself," where objects are both disclosed to us and perpetually withdraw (conceal) from our complete grasp. This withdrawal contributes to the sense of an object's realness and inexhaustibility (28:57-31:12).
- **Modal Confusion and Onto-theology** (49:14): Vervaeke explains that forgetting the "being mode" and getting trapped in the "having mode" (conceptual manipulation, seeking control) leads to misunderstanding *Being* (capital B) as a particular *being* (lowercase b), even as a "Supreme Being" or "highest subject" (God) (49:57-51:20). Heidegger critiques this "onto-theology" as the ultimate modal confusion, fundamentally misframing our relationship to being and leading to nihilism (52:28-54:10).

- **Connecting Heidegger to Cognitive Science and Gnosis (34:31):** Vervaeke highlights the influence of Heidegger on cognitive science through figures like Hubert Dreyfus, who argued that facts and rules are meaningless without relevance, leading to combinatorial explosion in computational approaches (35:03-37:18). Dreyfus's work, particularly "What Computers Can't Do," emphasized the limitations of purely computational, Cartesian cognitive science (37:41-38:04). Vervaeke also connects Heidegger's participatory knowing to Henri Corbin's notion of *gnosis*, which is described as a "salvational or redemptive knowledge" that transforms the knowing subject and is crucial for responding to existential entrapment (41:11-42:55).
- **Awakening from the Meaning Crisis (44:47):** The episode concludes by integrating Heidegger's insights with Vervaeke's framework, showing how understanding the "being mode" (transformative participation in the mystery of being, leading to *Aletheia*, attunement, and an awareness of the "moreness" of being) can counter the "having mode" (modal confusion, onto-theology, nihilism) and help us awaken from the meaning crisis (45:18-54:10). Vervaeke also briefly touches on Heidegger's controversial involvement with the Nazi Party (54:47-55:14).

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis: An Exposition of Heidegger's Response

This inquiry has consistently returned to a central premise: that a viable response to the modern meaning crisis lies in the wise cultivation of enlightenment. Having established a scientific and philosophical framework for this pursuit, we now place it in direct dialogue with the key "prophets of the meaning crisis"—those seminal thinkers who articulated its advent and proposed a path toward its resolution. Among these figures, Martin Heidegger plays a central role. Before proceeding, two housekeeping matters are necessary. First, an apology is owed for a previous misspelling of Heidegger's name. Second, while the intellectual lineage under examination includes significant figures like Nishitani of the Kyoto School and Jacques Derrida, in-depth discussions of their work must be deferred. Their contributions, particularly regarding non-theistic thought and negative theology, will be more fully explored in a future series entitled *The God beyond God*.

Heidegger's revolutionary project is best understood against the philosophical backdrop of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, for it was in diagnosing the limitations of his predecessor's work that Heidegger charted his own course. Husserl's primary goal was to overcome the "loss of contact epistemology" that had plagued Western thought by returning "to the things themselves." He proposed to restore this contact not through abstract theory but through a reflective, experiential attention to the structures of consciousness. At the core of this project was the concept of intentionality, characterized by the deep correlation between *noesis*—the mind's directedness toward the world—and *noema*, the corresponding disclosure of the world to the mind. This dynamic is functionally equivalent to what we have termed the agent-arena relationship.

Heidegger's foundational critique was that Husserl's phenomenology, for all its rigor, had not truly restored the missing contact with reality. He argued that Husserl's method failed to adequately develop *participatory knowing*. While a later phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, would address this deficit in part through his work on embodiment, Heidegger identified a deeper problem. For Heidegger, participatory knowing was insufficient on its own; it had to be situated within an ontology, a more profound understanding of Being itself and our contact with its fundamental realness. Thinkers like Roberto Esposito have echoed this critique, arguing that Husserl remained ultimately trapped within the "Cartesian cultural cognitive grammar" of subjectivity. This diagnosis of phenomenology's residual subjectivism compelled Heidegger to forge an entirely new method, one that began not with consciousness, but with the concrete reality of human existence itself.

Heidegger's response to the shortcomings of phenomenology was to radically reorient philosophy around the unique mode of human existence, which he termed *Dasein* ("being-there"). This shift demanded a new form of inquiry, one that moved beyond detached intellectual analysis. It is worth noting that Heidegger's famously difficult works often possess an operatic structure, wrestling to break free of established cognitive grammars; yet this philosophical struggle was at times intertwined with a conscious effort to build a mystique

around himself. His proposed method distinguishes between mere "questioning," which operates in the "having mode" by seeking propositional answers to control a situation, and "questing," an engaged and existential pursuit that operates in the "being mode." This is not a search for an answer to possess but a participatory transformation undertaken through wonder.

At the heart of this project is the concept of *Dasein*. Following a core insight of existentialism—that humans are fundamentally without a fixed essence, that our "essence is to have no essence"—Heidegger understood us as the one being for whom its own being is a question. We are continually defining ourselves by how we confront and respond to the question of our own being. The profound implication is that by phenomenologically exploring our own existence—our *Dasein*—we gain unique access to the mystery of Being itself. This questing into our own being is simultaneously a path into contact with our modal existence and with Being.

This reorientation led Heidegger to a provocative and sweeping diagnosis: that the entire history of Western metaphysics has not been a search for Being, but a systematic forgetting of it. He used the term "metaphysics" pejoratively to describe this historical project, arguing that it has progressively deepened our loss of contact with both our own being and Being itself. In this view, the history of metaphysics is nothing less than the history of nihilism, the very unfolding of which has produced the modern meaning crisis. Heidegger distinguished this flawed metaphysical project from what he considered the legitimate task of philosophy: "ontology," the project of understanding our being, our relation to Being, and thereby Being itself. This ontological project required him to first deconstruct the very concept of truth.

The crux of Heidegger's argument lies in his deconstruction of the conventional notion of truth as mere "correctness" in order to uncover its forgotten, more fundamental existential ground. In his pivotal essay "On the Essence of Truth," Heidegger argues that the familiar idea of truth as correspondence—the notion that a statement is correct when it matches reality—misses a crucial precondition. This correspondence relationship is itself grounded in and sustained by a deeper relationship, which he calls an "openness of comportment." This open comportment is the pre-predicative condition that first makes it possible for reality to become a standard against which a statement can be measured.

This deeper, grounding relationship is defined by "attunement." Heidegger is adamant that attunement must not be misunderstood as a subjective experience or feeling, for to do so is to be deprived of its essence. It is not an experience but rather the pre-cognitive condition that makes meaningful experience possible. In this, it functions precisely as what we have called "relevance realization"—the agent-arena relationship that precedes and makes possible our cognitive appraisals.

The forgetting of this grounding attunement has severe consequences. It leads to a profound "modal confusion," trapping us in the propositional "having mode," where we cling to what is readily available and controllable. This mirrors Plato's distinction between *philosophia*, the transformative love of wisdom, and *philonikia*, the love of victory, which seeks only to possess correct propositions to defeat an opponent. For Heidegger, the history of metaphysics has become increasingly dominated by *philonikia*, a form of bullshitting that mimics reasoning but is merely the manipulation of propositions, forgetful of wisdom's existential project. He sees this propositional obsession as reaching its zenith in the metaphysical attempt to define God as a supreme proposition, a final correct answer to vanquish all doubt.

The work of speculative realists like Graham Harman helps to further illuminate this concept. Departing from the Kantian picture of an inaccessible "thing-in-itself" veiled by subjectivity, Harman proposes that an object is encountered in two simultaneous movements: it "shines into" our subjectivity, making itself phenomenologically available, while it also "withdraws from" our conceptual framing, asserting its independence. This dual nature generates the sense of realness, because the withdrawal is not a failure of perception but is, in a crucial paradox, "as much a contributor to the realness of things as their shining into your subjectivity." This inexhaustible depth, which can be described as "the thing beyond itself," is precisely what is missed by a phenomenology still bound to a subjective framework.

Synthesizing these points leads to Heidegger's reclamation of truth as *Aletheia*, a Greek term meaning "unconcealment" or "disclosure." Truth as *Aletheia* is not about correctness but about a form of deep existential "remembering" akin to the Buddhist concept of *sati*. It is the remembering of the "being mode," which attunes us to the reality of things as a dynamic interplay of shining forth (disclosure) and withdrawing (mystery). This recovery of a more primordial truth finds surprising and powerful resonances in both modern cognitive science and ancient Gnostic thought.

The enduring relevance of Heidegger's philosophy is demonstrated by its influence and conceptual parallels in two distinct modern domains: cognitive science and Gnostic spirituality. This shows how his ontological project speaks to both the machinery of the mind and its redemptive purpose.

The connection to cognitive science was forged primarily by Hubert Dreyfus, who interpreted Heidegger as a key forerunner of the critique against computational artificial intelligence. Dreyfus famously used Heidegger's thought to articulate the "frame problem," arguing that propositional facts and rules are meaningless until they are assigned relevance. This relevance, however, cannot be captured by adding more propositions, as doing so leads to a combinatorial explosion. Instead, Dreyfus argued that relevance is a pre-propositional form of "coping" or achieving an "optimal grip" on a situation. He saw Heidegger's work as the philosophical foundation for a non-computational, embodied understanding of cognition, thereby inspiring the development of third-generation cognitive science.

The connection to Gnosticism was articulated by thinkers like Henry Corbin, as described in Robert Avens's book *The New Gnosis*. This interpretation characterizes Heideggerian knowing as a form of "gnosis": a participatory and salvational knowledge that transforms the knower. Drawing on the Neoplatonic axiom that "like can only be known by like," this form of knowing is a dynamic coupling with reality, a deep conformity between the self and the world. Corbin explicitly identifies this salvational knowledge—which "changes and transforms the knowing subject"—as gnosis. It is precisely the kind of knowing needed to respond to the quest of *Dasein*, as it involves a mutually affording transformation of self-knowledge and world-knowledge.

These two interpretations, from Dreyfus and Corbin, are not contradictory but complementary. They are two sides of the same coin. Dreyfus articulates the *machinery* of Heidegger's thought—the non-propositional, non-computational process of relevance realization. Corbin, in turn, articulates its *redemptive purpose*—a transformative gnosis that offers a genuine response to the existential entrapment of the meaning crisis. This powerful framework culminates in a radical critique of traditional theology and its role in the forgetting of Being.

The climax of Heidegger's argument is his identification of the ultimate "modal confusion" at the heart of Western metaphysics: the problem of "onto-theology." By exposing this foundational error, Heidegger clears the ground for a new, non-idolatrous relationship to what is ultimate.

The entire project rests on the contrast between two fundamental modes of existence. The **being mode** is characterized by transformative participation in the mystery of Being. It is grounded in attunement and a resonant awareness of the "more-ness" or inexhaustible depth of reality—the way in which being simultaneously shines forth and withdraws. The **having mode**, by contrast, is characterized by the conceptual manipulation of objects and the solving of problems. It seeks to grasp, control, and use the world, reducing mysteries to be experienced into problems to be solved.

The central error of onto-theology is to misunderstand Being (with a capital 'B') as merely a being (with a lowercase 'b'), even if it is the Supreme Being, God. This is the ultimate expression of the having mode: an attempt to capture the inexhaustible mystery of Being and turn it into a defined, solvable problem through a propositional concept. While this claim may seem jarring to a religious sensibility, Heidegger implores his readers to see it not as an attack on faith, but as a diagnosis of a fundamental "modal confusion" at the heart of Western metaphysics. For Heidegger, this error is not merely a philosophical mistake; it is a deep forgetfulness that leaves us existentially adrift and is fundamentally connected to the rise of nihilism.

It is this profound critique that Paul Tillich would later adopt and reframe. Tillich was deeply influenced by Heidegger, but his own biography presents a stark contrast. An early and steadfast opponent of the Nazi regime, Tillich was persecuted and forced to leave Germany, unlike Heidegger, who joined the Nazi party. It is fair to bring this up because Heidegger presents his entire position as an existential one, not just a theoretical one; his political actions cannot be neatly severed from his philosophical project. Tillich takes up Heidegger's critique of onto-theology but does something remarkable with it: he uses it to reinterpret the traditional religious concept of idolatry.

This brings us to a culminating vision. Heidegger's philosophy challenges us to move beyond the very frameworks that have generated the meaning crisis. It poses a final, pressing question: What would it mean, experientially, to achieve this gnosis? What would it be like to remember Being through *Aletheia*, and in what way would this state of deep remembering constitute a true awakening from the meaning crisis?

48 Corbin and the Divine Double

This video, "Ep. 48 - Awakening from the Meaning Crisis - Corbin and the Divine Double," continues to explore the meaning crisis, building on Heidegger's work and introducing the ideas of Henry Corbin. Dr. John Vervaeke discusses how we can "remember being" by understanding truth not as correctness but as *Aletheia*, a simultaneous disclosure and withdrawal (0:47). He warns against the "having mode," where we get trapped in propositional truths and misunderstand being as a particular supreme being, leading to nihilism (1:10).

The discussion then moves to Corbin's concept of *gnosis*, which offers a way to remember the "being mode" and overcome nihilism (2:36). Vervaeke highlights Heidegger's commentary on the poem "The Rose is Without Why" by Angelus Silesius, illustrating how the rose's self-grounded blossoming reflects *phusis*—a pure emerging and shining that is simultaneously withdrawing (4:40). This connects to Eckhart's maxim "live without why," suggesting a non-teleological way of being that resonates with the universe's own self-grounded nature (7:26).

Vervaeke emphasizes that narratives provide practice in "non-logical identity," allowing us to recognize how we transform over time while still being ourselves (10:01). He contrasts this "horizontal narrative" with a "vertical ontology" where we connect to the depths of being in a non-teleological "being mode" (12:28). This deep connection to reality is what Vervaeke considers sacredness (15:56).

The video then transitions to Corbin, who expands on Heidegger's ideas, drawing heavily from Neoplatonism and Persian Sufism (18:41). Corbin introduces the crucial distinction between the "imaginary" and the "imaginal" (26:25). The imaginary refers to subjective mental imagery, while the **imaginal** is a vibrant, vital movement that mediates between the abstract intelligible world and the concrete sensible world (31:36).

Corbin's opposition to fundamentalism and literalism is highlighted, as these approaches staticize and fracture understanding, preventing access to the imaginal and thus to *gnosis* (32:26). Symbols, for Corbin, are translucent, trans-ejected, and trans-temporal/spatial, facilitating a transformative ontological shift (37:32).

A central and challenging symbol for Corbin is the **angel**, which Vervaeke reinterprets through the concept of the "divine double" found in Mediterranean spirituality (40:36). This "divine double" represents an archetypically more important version of oneself that one aspires to reunite with, challenging the modern notion of an inherent "true self" (45:10). This aspiration towards a better, more "angelic" self is connected to La Paul's work on transformative experience and Agnes Callard's concept of "aspiration" as a neglected form of rationality (49:33). Vervaeke concludes that the divine double acts as a symbol allowing us to move from our current self to a "better self" through an aspirational process, echoing the transformative nature of a liberal education (56:36).

The Gnosis of the Imaginal: From Heidegger's Rose to Corbin's Angel

Martin Heidegger's philosophy stands as a prophetic diagnosis of the modern meaning crisis, grounded in a re-examination of our most fundamental relationship with reality. He frames *realness* not as a static property of objects, but as a dynamic interplay between shining and withdrawing—a simultaneous disclosure into our awareness and a retreat beyond our conceptual grasp. This dynamic grounds the agent-arena relationship in a state of authentic attunement. The deepest form of truth, which Heidegger terms *aletheia* (unconcealment), is the very condition that makes this relationship possible. It is through attuning ourselves to this simultaneous revealing and concealing that we can begin the crucial work of remembering Being itself.

According to Heidegger, the history of Western metaphysics is a history of profound forgetfulness, marked by a critical "modal confusion." We have forgotten the *being mode*—an open, receptive, and ontological way of relating to the world—and become trapped in the *having mode*, a propositional project that seeks to possess and control reality through definitions and correctness. This confusion culminates in the project of *onto-theology*, which attempts to capture the unlimited nature of Being by reducing it to a particular, supreme being. This move, which conceives of God as a being at the limit of all other beings, is for Heidegger deeply enmeshed with the rise of nihilism. It institutionalizes a deep forgetfulness and cements the modal confusion that lies at the heart of the meaning crisis.

To counter this history of forgetting, we must find a way to remember the being mode. This path of remembrance is precisely what the philosopher Henry Corbin, deeply influenced by Heidegger, calls *gnosis*—a transformative, participatory knowing that reawakens our connection to Being.

To grasp the nature of this *gnosis*, Heidegger turns not to abstract philosophy but to the poetic-mystical tradition of Meister Eckhart, as rendered in the poetry of Angelus Silesius. This tradition provides a powerful lens for understanding a non-metaphysical approach to existence, one that alleviates nihilism by remembering the being mode in a manner appropriate to a sacred context. Silesius's most famous verse captures this orientation with profound simplicity:

The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms, It cares not for itself, asks not if it is seen.

Heidegger analyzes this poem through the ancient Greek concept of *phusis*, the root of our word "physics," which signifies a blossoming or springing forth from oneself. The rose exemplifies *phusis*; its blossoming is a pure, self-grounded emergence. Its "shining" into our perception is simultaneously a "withdrawal" into its own inexhaustible depths. As the rose presents itself to our phenomenological experience, we sense that it shines *out of* itself, out of a depth into which it simultaneously recedes. Far from a rejection of the physical world, Heidegger's project, through the lens of *phusis*, is an attempt to show how the physical can be more deeply remembered.

This poetic image illuminates Eckhart's corresponding maxim: "live without a why." This is not, as it might first appear, a call for a meaningless or purposeless existence. Rather, it is an invitation to shift our orientation from the teleological, narrative-driven 'having mode' to a non-teleological, ontological 'being mode.' The quest for a grand, culminating purpose is a product of the having mode's desire to possess a final answer. The rose, however, exists beyond narrative. In this, it may offer a model for the physical universe itself—a reality that blossoms from its own ground, continuously shining forth while withdrawing into its own inexhaustible mystery, without requiring a horizontal, teleological narrative to justify its existence.

While the teleological "horizontal narrative" may be a feature of the Axial Age that we must learn to move beyond, narrative itself serves a crucial cognitive function. It provides essential existential practice in grasping the concept of **non-logical identity**—the way in which something can undergo fundamental transformation while retaining a form of identity over time.

A personal example clarifies this concept. The individual born in 1961 as a nine-pound infant is, in nearly every measurable way, not identical to the adult who can now teach a philosophy course. Yet, in another, more profound sense, they are the same person. Narrative is the primary tool we use to trace this transformation, training our minds to comprehend this non-logical continuity through change. Crucially, this practice prepares us to understand the function of the symbol, which likewise mediates a non-logical identity between the self in its current frame and the self in a new, more encompassing one.

The pivotal move proposed by Eckhart and Heidegger is to redirect this capacity. Instead of applying the principle of non-logical identity horizontally across a narrative timeline, we can apply it vertically and ontologically. We can exempt this symbolic faculty from its temporal function and use it to connect the depths of our own being to the depths of reality itself. This vertical connection allows us to participate in the non-teleological 'being mode,' shifting from the pursuit of a story's end to a direct attunement with the ever-blossoming ground of existence.

This dynamic of pure shining and pure withdrawal can be understood in more contemporary terms. The "shining" corresponds to the process of relevance realization, where the world illuminates itself into an intelligible landscape for us. The "withdrawal" points to the independent, inexhaustible, and combinatorially explosive nature of reality—a depth we can never fully capture or "drink dry."

Together, these forces create the experience of *realness*, which is best understood not as a static tension but as a dynamic process: a trajectory of trans-framing that is always closing upon the relevant while always opening to the more-ness. This interplay between the confirming forces of coherence and the opening forces of wonder

and the numinous attunes us to reality. A world that offers only confirmation falls flat; it lacks the element of surprise and accommodation that signals true realness.

This dynamic finds a powerful symbolic expression in the Taoist concept of yin and yang. Yin represents the confirming, grounding force, while yang is the opening, expansive force. The classic symbol shows them not as separate, but as sinuously interpenetrating, each containing the seed of the other. This entire dance is the disclosure of the inexhaustible Tao, a serious play of Being. It is this path of "serious play" that leads us from Heidegger to the work of Henry Corbin, whose thought was shaped by three major currents: Heidegger's phenomenology, the Neoplatonic tradition, and most pivotally, Persian Sufism.

Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, took on a unique character in Persia. The Persian people were made Muslim through an Arab invasion that was nothing less than a genocide, a historical trauma remembered deeply to this day. This history fostered a profound resistance, leading Persian thinkers to embrace a mystical interpretation of Islam as a form of spiritual liberation from an oppressive empire. This gave Persian Sufism a unique flexibility and made it a central, though often overlooked, force in the history of world philosophy.

For Henry Corbin, the key to recovering *gnosis* lies in reclaiming the faculty of **imagination**. However, he immediately draws a critical distinction between what we commonly call the *imaginary* and a mediating reality he terms the *imaginal*.

The Imaginary is what we typically mean by imagination. It is the purely subjective, private, and controllable generation of inner mental imagery that we know is not "real." It is a faculty we command and direct at will.

The Imaginal, in stark contrast, is an objective, mediating reality. It is a transjective realm—neither purely subjective nor purely objective—that functions as a vital nexus. The imaginal is not a static place but a vibrant and vital process of ongoing transformation, serving two primary bridging functions: first, it mediates between the **abstract intelligible world** of the mind (pure concepts, formal structures) and the **concrete sensible world** of matter (sensory experience). Second, it bridges the divide between the **purely subjective** inner world of the individual and the **purely objective** outer world of external reality.

For Corbin, the catastrophe of modernity—driven by Cartesian dualism, religious fundamentalism, and scientific literalism—is precisely the loss of this mediating imaginal realm. By fracturing reality into mutually exclusive domains of mind/matter and subject/object, we have destroyed the very nexus that allows for *gnosis*. The antagonism of literalism, which collapses the symbol into a static fact, is the primary force that closes off our access to the being mode and the remembrance of Being.

Corbin's project seeks to restore the symbol to its rightful place, arguing that a dismissive attitude toward the symbolic is a primary symptom of the meaning crisis. To fail to engage with the symbol is to lose the capacity for *gnosis*. Through the lens of the imaginal, the symbol reveals itself not as a mere placeholder for a literal meaning but as a dynamic and multidimensional reality possessing five core properties.

A true symbol is first and foremost **translucent**; it is something one looks both *at* and *through*, simultaneously perceiving the image itself and seeing the deeper reality it discloses. This dual vision is crucial because it allows the symbol to help capture the non-logical identity between one's agent-arena relationship in the current frame and that in a more comprehensive, encompassing frame. The symbol is also **transjective**, existing beyond the simplistic binary of subjective feeling or objective fact; to force it into either category is to adopt the having mode and miss its transformative challenge. Furthermore, the symbol places one on a **trajectory** of transformation, acting not as a static object of contemplation but as a vehicle for movement. This leads to its most crucial property: it is **transformative**, capable of changing the self at a fundamental, ontological level. Finally, the work of the symbol is **trans-temporal and trans-spatial**. Its function is not to move a character through a narrative in time and space, but to facilitate an ontological shift between different worlds or frames of being.

Corbin's most challenging and central symbol is the **Angel**. This concept immediately provokes a modern, dismissive reaction, conjuring images of cherubs or New Age sentimentality. However, this is an *imaginary*

understanding that Corbin explicitly and repeatedly rejects. To grasp its true meaning, we must reframe it within a deeper historical and philosophical context.

The Angel, in Corbin's work, is a symbol for the **Divine Double**, a powerful motif from the Hellenistic and Mediterranean spirituality that pervaded Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and early Christianity. This ancient concept stands in stark opposition to the modern, Romantic notion of an innate "true self" that one possesses from birth and must simply express authentically. In the worldview of the Divine Double, one's true self is not an inner possession but an archetypal reality that exists *beyond* you. The spiritual path is not one of self-expression but of self-transcendence—a lifelong aspiration to reunite one's current self with this higher, divine counterpart.

The philosophical implications of this shift are profound. It reframes self-realization as an act of the *being mode* (aspiration and self-transcendence) rather than the *having mode* (inner possession and expression). The Divine Double is not something you *have*; it is something you strive *to be*. Understanding Corbin's Angel as a symbolic representation of this aspirational process is the first step toward unlocking its philosophical power.

This ancient mythos of the Divine Double finds a remarkable parallel in contemporary philosophy, particularly in L.A. Paul's work on *transformative experience* and Agnes Callard's on *aspiration*. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to define rationality as it is used here: not merely the logical management of arguments, but *any systematically reliable internalized psychotechnology that reliably and systematically affords one overcoming self-deception and cultivating enhanced connectedness and enhanced meaning in life*. Within this framework, Callard and Paul address the problem of qualitative development—the process of becoming a fundamentally different kind of person (moving from self S1 to self S2).

This transformation involves a "non-logical identity" and presents a profound challenge to conventional reasoning. One cannot deliberate or logically infer one's way into a new way of being, because the very values and preferences that would guide such a decision are what will be changed by the transformation. Callard argues that we navigate this process through **aspiration**, a neglected form of rationality. Her crucial insight is that the aspiration to *become* rational is a necessary and constitutive part of rationality itself. This re-integrates the Platonic vision of love (the aspiration for the good) and reason as an inseparable whole.

A concrete example illustrates this process perfectly: learning to **appreciate classical music**. A person may have an inkling—and it is significant that the literary group including Tolkien and C.S. Lewis called themselves "the Inklings"—that there is a richer world available to them if they could "get" classical music, but they do not currently enjoy it. They cannot simply *decide* to like it. Instead, they must embark on an aspirational journey—listening, learning, and exposing themselves to the music—in order to *become the kind of person* who genuinely understands and loves it. This is a model for all profound self-change, where one aspires toward a future self whose values are not yet one's own.

In conclusion, Henry Corbin's concept of the Angel is not a regression into superstition but a potent, imaginal symbol for the Divine Double. This symbolic framework provides a powerful mythos for understanding the very real process of **aspirational rationality** that contemporary philosophy is now exploring. The Divine Double gives us a language and a structure to grasp the journey from our current self to a better, wiser, more developed self. It recasts this journey not as a logical deduction but as a transformative project of self-transcendence. By engaging with such symbols through the imaginal realm, we can activate the process of aspiration that is central to the cultivation of wisdom and provides a profound and actionable response to the meaning crisis.

49 Corbin and Jung

This video, titled "*Awakening from the Meaning Crisis - Corbin and Jung*", delves into the philosophical concepts of Corbin and Jung, particularly their ideas surrounding **gnosis**, **the imaginal**, **the divine double**, and **individuation**.

The speaker, John Vervaeke, begins by revisiting Corbin's core argument that **gnosis** (transformative participatory knowing) is centrally related to the **imagination** (0:35). He differentiates Corbin's "imaginary" (subjective mental images) from the "imaginal" (a mediator between abstract intelligible and concrete sensible worlds, transcending subjective and objective realities) (0:52-1:20). The **symbol** is key to capturing this mediation and ongoing transformation (1:32).

Vervaeke then introduces Corbin's central symbol, the **angel**, which relates to gnosis and the idea of a "divine double" (2:03). This "divine double" is a concept of a **transgressive true self** that is superlative and something to aspire to, rather than an inherent self to simply express (3:01-4:05). This aspirational process is linked to La Paul's work on **transformative experience** and Agnes Callard's notion of **aspiration**, which views rationality itself as an aspirational process (4:52-7:13).

The video discusses the **paradox of self-creation**, where continuity and novelty are both required (10:39). Strawson argues this leads to a contradiction, but Callard (and Vervaeke) propose that the relationship between the current self (s1) and the aspired-to self (s2) is one of **non-logical identity**, where s1 participates in the emergence of s2 (16:35-18:47). The remaining problem is that while s1 causally precedes s2, s2 normatively justifies s1's actions (19:11). This normative authority of s2 is often captured by the mythos of the divine double (22:45).

Vervaeke then connects this to **Carl Gustav Jung**, specifically his concept of the "sacred second self" as a way of understanding the "soul" (38:03-38:24). He contrasts Jung's **organic model of the psyche** (self-organizing dynamical system) with Freud's hydraulic model (43:06-43:56). Jung's **archetypes** are presented as structural-functional organizations that regulate the psyche's self-organization, acting as "virtual engines" for transformation (44:01-47:11).

The **ego** (archetype of the conscious mind) and the **Self** (archetype of archetypes, principle of autopoeisis) are central to Jung's concept of **individuation** (47:20-49:13). Individuation involves a **dialogue between the ego and the Self** through the archetypes, leading to the ego's transformation and understanding (50:11-50:55). Vervaeke highlights Jung's criticism of literalism and fundamentalism, seeing them as a reduction of the imaginal to the imaginary (51:30-52:27).

Finally, Vervaeke offers a **critique of Jung from Corbin's perspective**, arguing that Jung's focus on intrapsychic processes reduces the imaginal to the imaginary and misses the mystical disclosure of the world's depths (53:02-54:39). Conversely, Jung would argue that Corbin lacks a psychology of internalization (54:49-55:36). Vervaeke proposes an **integration of Corbin, Jung, and Buber's ideas** for a more comprehensive understanding. (55:38-55:54).

From Heidegger to the Imaginal: A Re-examination of Aspiration and Self-Creation

Following our exploration of Martin Heidegger and Meister Eckhart, which centered on a non-teleological relationship to the "play of being," we turned to the work of Henry Corbin. Corbin offers a crucial distinction necessary for understanding this dynamic: the difference between the **imaginary** and the **imaginal**. The imaginary refers to the subjective mental images we typically associate with imagination—private constructs with no objective reality. The imaginal, conversely, is a mediating realm that exists between the abstract, intelligible world and the concrete, sensible world. This realm is not static; through a process of mutual affordance, it facilitates an ongoing, transformative "trance-framing" wherein a change in the self affords a new

way of seeing the world, which in turn affords further change in the self. The *symbol*, in Corbin's view, is what captures and enables this entire dynamic.

Corbin's Central Symbol: The Angel and the Divine Double

At the core of Corbin's framework is a central symbol: the angel. While potentially off-putting to a modern sensibility, this symbol is essential for understanding *gnosis*—a mode of transformative, participatory knowing. In gnosis, as in Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (the being whose being is in question), self-knowledge and world-knowledge are inextricably bound. To grasp how the angel functions as a symbol of this process, we must turn to the historical concept of the **divine double**. Drawing on "the work of first of all of staying," we find a long-standing tradition in the ancient Mediterranean world centered on the pursuit of this higher self. The divine double is the key to unlocking the mythological structure that underpins Corbin's thought.

The Transgressive Mythology of the Self

The concept of the divine double presents a mythology that is deeply transgressive to our modern, inherited cultural grammar. This modern view, a form of "decadent Romanticism" traceable to figures like Rousseau, posits that our "true self" is an innate entity we are born with. The primary virtue in this model is authenticity—the faithful expression of this pre-existing, possessed self.

This stands in stark contrast to the Socratic model, where the true self is not something one *has* but something one constantly *aspires* towards. The transgressive mythology of the divine double aligns with this aspirational view. It proposes that the self I am now is not my true self. My true self is my divine double—a superlative version that is intimately bound to me yet is ecstatically ahead of me. It is both "me and not me." The fundamental existential project, therefore, is not one of mere expression but of radical transcendence *towards* this future self.

Grounding the Mythos in Aspiration: Paul and Callard

While this mythology is powerful, its framing may be unpalatable to many. To understand the underlying process, we can turn to more contemporary analytical philosophy. The work of L.A. Paul on transformative experience and Agnes Callard on aspiration provides the tools to triangulate on the dynamic the divine double represents. Callard, in particular, offers a key insight not fully addressed by Paul: she argues that **rationality itself is an aspirational process**.

The Rationality of Aspiration

If the process by which we *become* rational is not itself considered rational, our entire concept of rationality becomes self-undermining. The same holds true for the cultivation of wisdom. The journey must, in some way, reflect the destination. Education, especially a liberal education, is a deeply aspirational process aimed at making us wiser and more rational. If this process is excluded from our definition of rationality, the concept becomes self-contradictory.

Callard terms the rationality that governs this journey "**proleptic rationality**"—the rationality of aspiration. This framework acknowledges the reason inherent in the process of becoming, effectively rejoining the love of wisdom with the practice of reason, a reunion that echoes the philosophy of Plato.

The Paradox of Self-Creation

The process of aspiration, however, presents a profound logical problem. Consider an individual (S1) who wishes to become someone who appreciates classical music (S2). The value system of S2—the deep, participatory knowing that constitutes genuine appreciation—is fundamentally inaccessible to S1. This discontinuity lies at the heart of what the philosopher Galen Strawson calls the "paradox of self-creation."

For an act to be one of genuine *self-creation*, it must satisfy two contradictory requirements:

1. **The Continuity Requirement:** For it to be *self-creation*, there must be a deep and unbroken continuity between the initial self (S1) and the future self (S2). They must be, in a fundamental sense, the same self.

2. **The Novelty Requirement:** For it to be *creation*, there must be a genuine, qualitative difference between S1 and S2. It cannot simply be the development of a pre-existing capacity; real novelty must be introduced.

Strawson's Dilemma and the Limits of Logic

Strawson concludes that because these two requirements are mutually exclusive, self-creation is logically impossible. This aligns with the Gödelian insight that you can't create a stronger logic by logically manipulating a weaker logic; new axioms must be introduced from outside the initial system. To achieve the novelty of S2, something must be introduced from outside the "logic" of S1's values and beliefs. But if this "something" is foreign, the act violates the continuity requirement and ceases to be *self-creation*. This is precisely Kierkegaard's point about the "leap of faith"—a developmental process that cannot be crossed by inference.

This dilemma forces a choice between two equally inadequate philosophical positions:

- **Empiricism**, which accepts novelty by positing that external forces write upon a blank slate, but denies the existence of a continuous, enduring self.
- **Romanticism**, which accepts the enduring self but denies real novelty, framing development as the mere expression of what was already latent within.

The Resolution: Participation and Non-Logical Identity

Both empiricism and romanticism fail to accurately describe the lived experience of developmental change. The resolution to Strawson's paradox lies in understanding the relationship between the initial self (S1) and the aspired-to self (S2) as one of **non-logical identity**—something we practice by engaging in narrative all the time, making ourselves into temporarily extended selves that have a non-logical identity through time and development. This relationship is neither one of pure passivity (being changed by external forces) nor pure activity (making the change oneself).

Instead, the process is best described as **participation**. The initial self, S1, *participates* in the *emergence* of S2. This reframes self-creation not as an act of making or receiving, but as an engagement with an emergent process in which S1 eventually disappears into, and becomes, S2.

The New Problem: Temporal vs. Normative Priority

This model of participation resolves one paradox only to reveal another, one that challenges our conventional cognitive grammar. The relationship between S1 and S2 involves a peculiar inversion:

- **Temporal Priority:** S1 is temporally prior and possesses the **causal power**. The actions of the current self set in motion the developmental course.
- **Normative Primacy:** S2 is normatively primary and holds the **authority for justification**. The actions of S1 can only be fully understood and justified from the perspective of S2, who is the only one who truly appreciates the value of classical music or the wisdom being sought.

This reversal is deeply counterintuitive, as "the state that justifies S1's action is the state of S1 having disappeared into and through the emergence of S2." We normally expect the cause of an action to also be the source of its justification. The mythos of the divine double attempts to solve this by positing a pre-existing S2 that teleologically guides S1, but such an explanation is overly simplistic and risks obscuring the participatory nature of the process.

The Role of the Imaginal Symbol

The central question then becomes: How does S1 relate to the not-yet-existent but authoritative S2? The connection cannot be purely logical or inferential. It is made through a **symbol** in the *imaginal* sense. This symbol must be capable of affording access to the non-logical identity between the current and future self, and it must

actively facilitate the transformation. It is a representation of the aspired-to self that is participatory—one that helps the aspirant actually undergo the process of becoming.

The Anagogic Loop of Internalization and Indwelling

The transformation unfolds through a dynamic, coupled loop. The aspirant internalizes a "symbolic self"—for instance, a Stoic internalizing the figure of Socrates. This internalization is an **anagogic** (upward-leading) process that reorganizes the aspirant's psyche, becoming part of "the very guts of the machinery of yourself." This internal reordering, in turn, changes how one perceives and acts in the world, creating a new way of **indwelling**.

This establishes a powerful feedback cycle: internalizing the symbol allows for a new way of indwelling the world, which then allows for a deeper and more profound internalization of the symbol. This process transcends the binary of passive receiving and active making; it is a clear example of participation.

The Divine Double as an Imaginal Mythos

With this framework in place, we can now reinterpret the divine double. It is a *mythos*—a narrative structure that captures this complex, dynamic, and participatory process of aspiration. As an imaginal symbol, it affords the "trance-framing" through which both agent and arena are transformed simultaneously. It allows the greater frame of the future self to "shine" into the current frame, an action that both illuminates one's present limitations and draws one out into the more encompassing world of the future self. This shining integrates the abstract ideal of the better self with the concrete, causal actions of the current self. The divine double is fundamentally *transjective*—neither purely subjective nor purely objective—and is the very engine of the being mode, which is not about having things but about becoming someone.

Critique and Reframing: "The Sacred Second Self"

Despite its utility, the term "divine double" carries limitations. It binds the concept too closely to a simplistic teleological narrative and, more significantly, to theism. Yet, this aspirational process is not exclusive to theistic traditions. We can clearly identify parallel concepts in non-theistic contexts, such as the **Buddha nature** in Buddhism or the identity between **Atman and Brahman** in Vedanta.

To separate the core process from these restrictive connotations, a new term is proposed for the symbolic self one internalizes: the **Sacred Second Self**. This term preserves the sense of a higher, authoritative selfhood while avoiding the theological and teleological baggage of the original.

The Bridge to Jung: The Soul as Aspiration

The concept of the Sacred Second Self opens a provocative line of inquiry. It offers a way to bring back the idea of "having a soul," but with a crucial reframing. The soul is not a static object one possesses, but rather the very thing one is *becoming* through the process of aspiration.

This re-conception provides a direct bridge to the work of **Carl Gustav Jung**. In his book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Jung identifies the loss of a relationship with this deeper self as central to the meaning crisis. The deep, mutual influence between Jung and Corbin is well-documented, and understanding the Sacred Second Self is the best way to approach Jung's core concept of individuation.

Jung's Model of the Psyche vs. Freud's

To understand Jung, it is useful to contrast his model of the psyche with that of his progenitor, Sigmund Freud. Freud's model is fundamentally **hydraulic**—a Newtonian machine driven by pressure and release. Jung rejects this mechanical metaphor in favor of an **organic** one. For Jung, the psyche is a self-organizing, autopoietic dynamical system. Individuation is the organic, self-organizing process that one participates in, rather than makes or receives.

Jung's Archetypes as Imaginal Engines

The foundational, formative patterns of this self-organization are what Jung called the **archetypes**. These are the psychological equivalents of Platonic Forms. Crucially, archetypes are *not* static, imaginary images in the mind. They are **imaginal**—virtual engines or systems of constraints that regulate the self-organization of what becomes salient to us. They are best understood **adverbially**, as a *way* in which you are anagogically coming to be, not a thing in you that you possess. An archetype is a path of development, a method of becoming.

The Ego, the Self, and Individuation

Within this psychic structure, the **Ego** is the archetype of the conscious mind. The **Self**, by contrast, is the "archetype of the archetypes"—the central organizing principle of the entire psyche. The Self is the Jungian equivalent of the Sacred Second Self.

The process of **individuation** is the ongoing, developmental dialogue between the Ego and the Self, mediated *through* the archetypes. The Ego interacts with these imaginal symbols, and that interaction is internalized, fundamentally altering the Ego's relationship to the Self. This explains Jung's fierce criticism of literalism and fundamentalism. To treat an archetype literally is to reduce its imaginal nature to the merely imaginary, replacing the "being mode" of becoming with the "having mode" of static identity.

A Two-Sided Critique: Jung and Corbin

Despite the power of his model, Jung's work faces a significant criticism, one leveled by both Corbin and the existentialist Martin Buber. They argue that Jung's framework is too **intrapsychic**; the entire process of individuation occurs within the subjective mind. This misses the transjective, existential relationship with the world. For Corbin, the mystical discloses the depths of the world, not just the depths of the psyche. The philosophical root of this disagreement is that Jung is fundamentally Kantian, framing reality through the structures of the mind, whereas Corbin is Neoplatonic, seeing the imaginal as a real, transjective order. For Corbin, Jung's Kantianism ultimately reduces the *imaginal* to the *imaginary*.

From a Jungian perspective, however, a counter-criticism can be leveled at Corbin and Heidegger. Their frameworks lack a developed **psychology**. They describe the ontological and existential dimensions of transformation but do not articulate the specific psychic mechanisms of *internalization*.

Conclusion and Forward Path

A more complete picture emerges not from choosing one perspective over the other, but from integrating them. By synthesizing Jung's deep psychology of internalization, Corbin's Neoplatonic vision of a transjective reality, and Buber's articulation of the existential modes, we can construct a more robust and comprehensive model of human development and meaning-making. This synthesis points toward the work of another thinker who engaged with these same influences: Paul Tillich, who will be the focus of our next inquiry.

50 Tillich and Barfield

This is the last episode of *Dr. John Vervaeke's "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis"* series. This episode ties together previous discussions on figures like *Corbin*, *Jung*, and *Heidegger*, focusing on the contributions of *Paul Tillich* and *Owen Barfield* to understanding and responding to the meaning crisis.

Tillich's Response to the Meaning Crisis (0:47-29:00)

- **Critique of Literalism and Fundamentalism** (1:21): *Tillich* views these as forms of idolatry, where people try to "have" rather than "become," trapping themselves in a limited understanding of reality and meaning.
- **Courage as an Existential Virtue** (3:06): For *Tillich*, courage is not just bravery but a form of wisdom that allows individuals to "see through illusion into reality" (3:54) and confront meaninglessness. This courage is essential for responding to perverted ideologies like Nazism.
- **Faith as Ultimate Concern** (5:06): *Tillich* defines faith not as a belief in propositions but as an "ultimate concern" (5:06) that is deeply participatory and aspirational. Idolatry, in this sense, is treating something symbolic as an object to be controlled, rather than a conduit for ultimate concern.
- **God as the Ground of Being** (6:56): *Tillich* understands God as an "imaginal symbol for the ground of being" (7:34), emphasizing that God is "no kind of being" (7:45) or "no kind of thing" (7:52). Any attempt to reify God into a "thing" is idolatry. God simultaneously grounds meaning-making, reality, and the relationship between them.
- **Method of Correlation** (9:19): *Tillich's* theological method involves a "polar tension" (9:54) between existential questioning and "revelation" (10:05), where the depths of reality reveal themselves. This is a dynamic, mutual fitting process, not a mere concordance of propositions.
- **Depths of Reason and Ecstasis** (12:01): *Tillich* speaks of the "depths of reason" (12:01) as that which makes reasoning possible. Through "exstasis" (12:30) or self-transcendence, humans resonate with the "shining" (13:54) (miracle) and "withdrawal" (14:04) (mystery) aspects of reality, leading to a profound transformation.
- **Symbolic Transformation** (17:20): The transformative power of symbols is realized in the relationship between the "existential self and the essential self" (17:46). The "essential self" (18:16) (or "sacred second self") normatively beckons the existential self towards fulfillment through an aspirational journey of "encouragement."
- **Overcoming Meaninglessness** (22:00): *Tillich* argues that confronting the "no-thingness of God" (22:11) allows one to overcome the "nothingness of meaninglessness" (22:42) and despair. This involves an "aspect identity shift" (23:35), where nothingness is re-experienced as an "inexhaustible fount of meaning cultivation" (23:54). This is related to the concept of "epictasis" (26:36), an infinite self-transcendence rather than a final resting in God.
- **Non-Theism of Tillich** (33:05): *Tillich's* understanding of God is "transgressive" (33:11) of classical theism, moving towards a "God beyond the god of theism" (32:23). This "non-theism" (33:11) rejects presuppositions shared by both classical theists and atheists, such as God being a "Supreme Being" (34:14) or accessed primarily through "belief" (34:31).

Barfield's Contribution: Poesis and Final Participation (37:00-1:00:50)

- **Influence of Gnosticism and Neoplatonism** (39:12): *Barfield* is influenced by *Rudolf Steiner* (39:19), who is seen as a modern Gnostic, and by *Coleridge* and *Schlegel* (40:07) through Romantic philosophy.
- **Inexhaustible Moreness and Poesis** (41:25): *Barfield* emphasizes the "infinity of reality" (40:53) and its "inexhaustible moreness" (41:34), which continually draws us into self-transcendence. This is

experienced through "creativity" (43:24) and "poesis" (44:05) (poetry), which involves "exstasis" (44:19) and a transformative shift in consciousness.

- **Etymology and Original Participation** (45:26): *Barfield* examines word etymologies, such as "pneuma" or "spiritus" (45:57), which originally held integrated meanings before the Cartesian division of inner and outer. He suggests that ancient peoples engaged in "original participation" (47:28), a more transjective and resonant relationship with reality.
- **Criticism of Barfield's Evolutionary Hypothesis** (51:17): While *Barfield* posits an evolution from original participation to a fragmented state and then to "final participation" (55:47), the speaker suggests that the pervasive dual meanings in modern language (e.g., "attack," "see," "understand") point to ongoing psychological development within individuals, rather than a lost evolutionary stage.
- **Final Participation** (54:45): This is *Barfield's* proposed response to the meaning crisis, aiming for a "recovery of participation integrated within the gains of the rational sciences" (55:53). This requires both the recovery of perspectival and participatory understanding and a "science of meaning cultivation" (56:28).
- **Barfield's Difference from Heidegger** (57:56): Unlike *Heidegger*, who emphasized "gelassenheit" (letting be) or deep passivity, *Barfield* highlights "durchbruch" (breakthrough) (58:58). *Poesis* is a synergistic process where humans actively contribute, working with the "non-theistic God" (59:52) in the making of history, echoing the original Hebrew insight of "da'at."

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis: The Wisdom of Tillich and Barfield

Following a deep exploration of Henry Corbin and Carl Jung, and the critical dialogue between their conceptions of the sacred second self, our attention now turns to Paul Tillich. His work holds a strategic importance in this discourse, as he too derives from Martin Heidegger but proceeds to integrate depth psychology and existential philosophy in a profoundly direct address to the meaning crisis. Tillich was deeply influenced and aware of what he called depth psychology, the tradition of which Jung is a preeminent figure, and like Jung, he was deeply aware of Heidegger. While it is unlikely Tillich was familiar with Corbin, his understanding of the symbol operates in a similarly *imaginal*—rather than merely imaginary—register. His masterpiece, *The Courage to Be*, stands as a direct response to the crisis of meaning. In it, he deepens the critique of literalism and fundamentalism by linking them to Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, ultimately defining them as forms of idolatry where the primary goal is "to have rather than to become." The scholarly work of John Doar Lee, particularly his books *The Psyche as Sacrament* and *Paul Tillich, Carl Jung, and the Recovery of Religion*, provides a comprehensive integration of their ideas, clarifying that this "recovery" is not a nostalgic retreat but a deliberate move beyond classical theism. This theoretical background sets the stage for understanding the practical, lived application of Tillich's philosophy, which finds its ultimate expression in the virtue of courage.

Tillich's analysis is not merely theoretical; it aims to provide guidance on how to live, a project that gains acute significance in the context of his resistance to Nazism, one of the most perverse reactions to the meaning crisis. In *The Courage to Be*, he focuses on a form of existential courage that allows one to confront and overcome meaninglessness. This courage is not simple bravery in the face of danger, nor is it mere fortitude, the capacity for endurance. For Tillich, as for Aristotle, courage is a virtue interwoven with wisdom. It involves the central feature of wisdom: the ability to see through the illusion and distortion of fear or distress to what is truly good and to act accordingly. This capacity for "seeing through" is intrinsically linked to his re-conception of faith. Here, Tillich circles back to the ancient Hebrew notion of *da'ath*—a participatory knowing—and reframes faith as an aspirational process of "ultimate concern." When one is concerned about something, one does not merely care about it; one is also coping with it, committed to it, and involved in it—it encompasses the self. Ultimate concern is a state of being that is deeply perspectival and participatory, an open-ended and aspirational orientation that points toward the "inexhaustibleness of being." Idolatry, in this view, is the act of taking a symbolic icon—a

potential vehicle for ultimate concern—and transforming it into an object to be possessed, controlled, and manipulated. It is a misapplication of the machinery of ultimate concern to something that is not, in itself, ultimate. This re-conception of faith leads directly to Tillich's radical re-conception of God.

Central to Tillich's entire project is a transgressive move beyond classical theism, intended to overcome the idolatry inherent in conceiving of God as a being among other beings. He proposes instead that God is an imaginal symbol for the "ground of being." God, therefore, has a "no thingness"; God is no kind of thing, and any attempt to reify God into an object is a form of idolatry. Diagrammatically, God is the simultaneous grounding of meaning, of reality, and of the relationship between them. To limit God to any single one of these components is to fall into a profound idolatry. This framework informs what Tillich calls his "method of correlation," an ongoing polar tension—a *tonos*—between existential questioning (or questing) and revelation, the way the depths of reality reveal themselves. This method has often been trivially misinterpreted as a merely propositional exercise of aligning theological statements with biblical texts. Such a reading misses the existential depths of the project. A deeper interpretation reveals the method of correlation as a form of *anagoge*—a resonant, mutual fitting between the "depths of reason" and the "depths of reality." These two poles exist in a dynamic where the revelation must fit the existential questioning, and crucially, the existential questioning must also fit itself, creating an ongoing, self-correcting process of mutual resonance.

The depths of reason are experienced as *ecstasis*, a state of self-transcendence where we stand beyond ourselves, while the depths of reality reveal themselves through what Tillich calls "miracle" and "mystery." Drawing on Heideggerian concepts, "miracle" can be understood as the "shining" aspect of being, and "mystery" as its "withdrawal into the more-ness." These two aspects are inter-affording in our sense of realness. Standing between these two depths is the symbol, understood in Corbin's imaginal sense. For Tillich, the symbol is participatory, opening up levels of reality and the self that would otherwise remain closed. Symbols are not made by us; they are self-organizing, growing out of the unconscious within and without, and they possess a life of their own—they can be born, live, and die. They carry a surplus of meaning, resonating with the "more-ness" of reality, and are therefore deeply transformative and translucent. This transformative power is not merely intellectual; it is actualized in the human person through a profound reorientation of the self.

Tillich's framework provides a pathway for this transformation, realized symbolically in the dynamic relationship with one's own potential. This relationship unfolds between the "existential self"—the self as it currently exists—and the "essential self," which can be identified with the sacred second self or the self in its "fullness of being" from Plato's allegory. This is an aspirational relationship; the essential self is normatively "ahead of" the existential self, beckoning it toward fulfillment and tempting it out of existential entrapment. This journey of "encouragement" confronts the historical evolution of meaninglessness, which Tillich traces through three stages in *The Courage to Be*. In the ancient world, it was confronted as finitude, eliciting the Stoic response. In the Christian and Reformation period, it was confronted as guilt. In the modern era, represented by the Existentialists, it is experienced as despair. Tillich's solution to this trajectory of despair is a "fundamental aspect identity shift." The encounter with the "no thingness" of God has the power to transform the "nothingness" of meaninglessness. This shift is from seeing nothingness as an abyss of despair to seeing "no thingness" as an inexhaustible fount of meaning cultivation that cannot be drained dry. Much like a Necker cube, where the same object can be seen in two different aspects, this shift alters not just one's perspective but one's very identity in relation to the world.

This concept finds a parallel in other philosophical traditions, such as Keiji Nishitani's work *Religion and Nothingness*, which argues that Nietzsche, in staring into the abyss, did not stare long enough. This fundamental shift, where the nothingness of despair is transformed into a revelation of inexhaustible being, aligns with a concept from the Eastern Orthodox Neoplatonic tradition, particularly from Gregory of Nyssa: *epectasis*. In contrast to a teleological model of salvation that aims for a final destination, *epectasis* describes a state of infinite, ongoing self-transcendence within the infinity of God. In this state, the process of trans-framing never ceases. This unending journey of transformation finds its grounding in a new form of ordered reality, which Tillich terms *theonomy*.

Tillich's ultimate theological position is a direct confrontation with the limitations of both traditional theism and its counterpart, atheism. His framework grounds the subjective and the objective through the symbol, which joins both realms in a manner reminiscent of Nietzsche's attempt to bridge the will and the world with the concept of "will to power." While Tillich's view of individuation is similar to Jung's, he insists on balancing this subjective process with a corresponding participation in Being. This balance is achieved through *theonomy*, a "third way" that transcends both the Enlightenment's autonomy of reason and the heteronomous imposition of external authority. *Theonomy* means to be "God-ordered," where "God" signifies the ground of being and the ongoing affordance of *epektasis*. This leads to Tillich's most transgressive statement: the call for a "God beyond the god of theism." This is a Gnostic-like move that identifies the conventional god of theism with a demiurge responsible for existential entrapment. This position is best described as non-theism, a stance that rejects the shared presuppositions of both classical theism and atheism. While not an exhaustive list, a preliminary starting point for these shared presuppositions includes: (1) that God is the Supreme Being; (2) that God is accessed primarily through belief; (3) that theology or anti-theology does not require personal transformation; and (4) that sacredness is either personal or impersonal. The non-theist rejects the underlying Cartesian grammar of these debates, and on the final point, clarifies that sacredness is *transjective* and *aspirational*. Here, there is a point of nuanced agreement with the atheist, who rightly rejects the theist's notion of sacredness as something fundamentally personal. The primary criticism of Tillich, however, is that while he provides a way to *live*—through courage and faith—that Heidegger lacks, he does not offer concrete *practices* of transformation in the way that Jung did with active imagination and dream interpretation. It is this absence of practice that Owen Barfield's work seeks to address.

Owen Barfield, a member of the Inklings alongside J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, is the figure who provides the practical, transformative methods missing in Tillich. His work is influenced by a unique confluence of Gnosticism (via Rudolf Steiner), Neoplatonism, and Romantic philosophy (via Samuel Taylor Coleridge and post-Kantian thinkers like Friedrich Schlegel). From these early Romantics, Barfield inherited the concept of the "infinity" or "inexhaustible more-ness" of reality, a force that constantly draws the "finite longing for the infinite" into a process of self-transcendence. The central practice for engaging this process is *poesis*. For this tradition, sacredness is found neither in an irrational locus within the psyche nor in a propositional system, but in the *flow of self-transcendence within creativity*. *Poesis*, which we translate as poetry, is an experience of ecstasis in creativity, a transformative reawakening of our connection to the inexhaustible. Barfield supports this view with an etymological argument for what he calls "original participation." Citing words like the Greek *pneuma* or the Latin *spiritus*, which meant both "wind" and "spirit," he argues that ancient language reflected a unified, pre-Cartesian consciousness where subjective and objective meanings interpenetrated. This theoretical framework, however, invites a critical re-evaluation.

While Barfield's insights are profound, his evolutionary hypothesis requires testing against modern cognitive science. The work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, for instance, suggests that the fusion of concrete and abstract meanings is a pervasive feature of modern cognition rooted in the psychological development of individuals, not a lost feature of ancient consciousness. We routinely use words like *attack*, *see*, or *understand* to refer to both physical actions and conceptual processes without experiencing a radical disjunction. A more complex, bidirectional model, as proposed by Vervaeke and Kennedy, suggests that bottom-up sensory-motor meaning meets top-down abstract intellectual form in the *imaginal*. This model finds a potential mechanism in Michael Anderson's "massive redeployment hypothesis," which explains how the imaginal statue of Lady Justice can reactivate the physical machinery of balance to give structure to the ineffable concept of justice, thereby explaining the *translucency* of symbols. Barfield's grand historical narrative moves from "original participation," through the "division" of the meaning crisis, toward a future "final participation" that integrates participatory knowing with the gains of rational science.

However, two primary criticisms can be leveled against Barfield and his followers. First, Barfield himself fails to develop a robust "science of meaning cultivation" that fully integrates the participatory with the scientific. Second, his followers often attempt to import his ideas back into classical theism, missing the radical and creative nature of *poesis*. This creative aspect distinguishes Barfield's vision from Heidegger's. Where

Heidegger, overcorrecting for Cartesian activity, emphasizes a deep passivity—*Gelassenheit* or "letting be"—he forgets the other crucial term in Meister Eckhart: *Durchbruch*, or "breakthrough." This breakthrough is not a mystical abstraction; it is about attentional scaling, breaking the inappropriate frame, moving through, and making the new frame. Barfield's model of *poesis* is not passive reception but a synergistic partnership. It is a process where "we contribute," echoing the original Hebrew insight that we are not merely passive recipients of history but co-authors working synergistically with God in its making. This leads from the specifics of Barfield's project to the overarching synthesis of this entire inquiry.

The overarching project of this series has been to demonstrate how the vocabulary and framework of Relevance Realization theory can be put into a deep, critical, and creative dialogue with the great "prophets of the meaning crisis"—Heidegger, Corbin, Jung, Tillich, and Barfield. The ultimate aim of this dialogue is to afford a "synoptic integration" of their profound insights. This integration is what is meant by "awakening from the meaning crisis."