

HOW DO WE PREDICT WHICH IDEAS PASS THE TEST OF TIME?

The Demise and Durability of Political and Societal Frameworks

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Exhibition view of “Human Brains: It Begins with an Idea” Fondazione Prada, Venice 23 April – 27 November 2022. Photo: Marco Cappelletti Courtesy: [Fondazione Prada](#)

How do we predict which ideas will pass the test of time? And what can leaders do to unlock the best facets of humanity to ensure sustainable governance? A neurophilosophical study of human nature can help steer us towards the answers to these questions and explain why slavery and other toxic ideologies landed in their rightful place, the dustbin of history. In particular, the workings of our brain can help us understand the ever-present tension between human nature attributes and our dignity requirements, providing insights into the demise and durability of political and societal frameworks.

The freshly coronated King Charles III and the Prince of Wales recently expressed their personal sorrow at the [suffering caused by the slave trade](#). Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834 as a result of the Slavery Abolition Act. Today, it is self-evident why Britain decided to abolish such a brutal and morally indefensible system. But it is worth remembering that the exploitation of enslaved workers contributed profoundly to the wider prosperity of the nation; the profits made from slavery permeated British society. It wasn't just the plantation owners

who benefited: merchants, sugar refiners, manufacturers, insurance brokers, attorneys, shipbuilders and money lenders all shared the spoils. And yet several factors led to the demise of slavery as an institution. The economic deterioration of the West Indian colonies no doubt played a role, as did slave revolts. The costs of maintaining slavery became too high, and its repercussions excessively negative to justify it. However, on a deeper level, the erosion of its legitimacy can perhaps be best explained in neurophilosophical terms.

By drawing on neurocognitive perspectives that harness neuroimaging, psychophysiological methods, and behavioural studies that analyse how these mechanisms play out across cultures and social contexts, we can piece together a set of conditions needed for ideas to survive. These conditions are directly linked to three human nature attributes and nine dignity needs.

Dignity Needs

History teaches us that human dignity is a fundamental requirement for the preservation of societal cohesion, prosperity, ideologies and institutions. The guarantee of individual human dignity for all, at all times, and under all circumstances is crucial for ideas to pass the test of time. [My understanding of 'dignity'](#) is not restricted to the absence of humiliation, but also the presence of recognition. With a nod to recent insights from neuroscience, I have previously expanded the real and pragmatic meaning of this term to denote [nine universal human dignity needs](#), namely: *reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness*. Systems of government and social institutions, such as slavery, communism and colonialism, based on ideas that do not meet these criteria will fail in the end as they cannot guarantee the preservation of human dignity.

Human history is peppered with examples of ideas and systems that were unsustainable, leading to their obsolescence and, ultimately, their extinction. This is despite often being backed by significant military, economic, and political power. A case in point is the apartheid system, which was an extreme and collective form of punishment, discrimination, alienation in violation of rights and liberties. It was a brutal assault on human dignity, which ultimately was unable to defend its legitimacy in the face of domestic turmoil and international pressure. In a similar vein, communist regimes across the former Soviet bloc ruled through repression and terror, trampling on basic rights and freedoms. The cumulative effect of these practices was that despite strong security apparatuses, communist regimes could not contain the growing frustration and disillusionment of their populations. In turn, colonialism was a brutal enterprise that used fear and forced labour to place foreign political systems under its thumb while seizing resources and territory.

This of course does not mean that systems with dignity deficits will automatically crumble, indeed not all 'immoral' ideas have perished. Some will even thrive in certain circumstances. Many pockets of the world (including democracies) still struggle with strands of economic and cultural inequality, racial and ethnic profiling, ideas that claim the superiority of one group over another. But these do not find wide resonance, and a complex system of norms and institutions exist to address them. These too, in time, will become obsolete.

Human Nature Attributes

Our shared neurochemistry can also guide us towards the ideas we are most likely to favour or dismiss. Choosing ideas that set the basis for inclusive governance will eventually ensure greater sustainability, whereas any guiding idea that advocates inequality and discrimination is ultimately bound to become obsolete. These ideas must account for the emotional, amoral and egoistic attributes of human nature. These three characteristics are universal and timeless, being genetically coded into our innate makeup. At the same time, they are subject to influences from our environment. Contrary to many long-revered beliefs, human beings are the products of both nature and nurture through personal and political circumstances, which continuously interact with, and shape, one another.

What do I mean in practice when I say human beings are emotional amoral egoists? Research into the human brain has revealed the centrality of emotions in the human experience and their interaction with key cognitive processes, such as learning or memory formation. Emotionality plays a critical role in our thought processes and is intimately tied to our rational decisions. Studies show that [man is born neither moral nor immoral, but amoral](#). This means that human beings do not have an innate understanding of good and evil: we will oscillate between morality and immorality based on our "perceived emotional self-interest" and the circumstances in which we find ourselves in. Studies on stress, for example, show that in the face of moral dilemmas, stress leads to more egocentric and short-term decisions. We do not enter the world as an entirely blank slate (a 'tabula rasa'), as suggested by Locke. We are instead 'predisposed' in the sense that we are endowed by nature with a powerful survival instinct, one that makes us engage in actions that maximise our chances of survival. I have previously suggested that we are "[a predisposed tabula rasa](#)." In other words, without socialised norms relating to solidarity and the general good, individuals are likely to pursue self-maximising benefits, further deepening trends toward inequality and injustice.

Statecraft and Governance

Unpacking the criteria for the survivability of ideas and political systems has implications for our understanding of public policy, global security and global order. The most effective ideas are more likely to lead to societal cohesion, justice, security and prosperity for all, thereby laying the foundations for national and international stability. Conversely, ideas that do not find acceptance across society will inevitably lead to disruptions and crises in the international system. So how can statesmen and women benefit from these insights into human nature? Because human nature is resilient, fragile and malleable, its development is informed by many external factors. This means that creating a sustainable and fair governance system will need to harness people's inborn tendencies for the better, and prevent our innate egoism and emotionality from generating conflict, aggression, inequality and alienation.

Whilst being overwhelmingly driven by emotions, sometimes reason, reflection and conscious moral judgements guide us to act symbiotically, in our own interest as well as in that of others: a win-win non-conflictual competition, with absolute rather than relative gains. Our capacity for reason can only flourish in an environment where our requirements for dignity are fulfilled. Political freedom on its own is not sufficient because it can coexist with discrimination, inequality, exclusion, extreme poverty and loss of collective dignity, both on the individual and group level. The most sustainable political systems, regardless of their structural makeup, are the ones that are able to keep in check the ever-present tension between the three attributes of human nature (emotionality, amorality and egoism), and the nine dignity needs mentioned

above. In practice, this means balancing emotionality with reason, security and human rights; balancing amorality with accountability, transparency and justice; and balancing egoism with opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness. I have called this delicate balancing act the “[Ever-Present Tension Principle](#)”. When this equilibrium is radically out of sync, large-scale systemic and ideological transformations are more likely to take place. Brutal communist regimes crumbled and colonialism collapsed when the ever-present tension reached breaking point. Today, this tension is at its strongest in societies rife with poverty, exclusion and economic exploitation, injustices that currently lead to societal friction in even the most mature democracies.

Recent transdisciplinary insights into human emotions demand a reconceptualisation of the role played by emotions in international dynamics. In the same way as individuals, [states are emotional, amoral and egoistic](#). Whether or not the emotionality and egoism of states leads to constructive or destructive state behaviour on the international stage depends on the surrounding circumstances. States, like humans, are intrinsically neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ but amoral. The moral compass of any state is moulded by the national interest, influenced by applied history, strategic culture, in addition to a skewed view of their own history and those of others as well as societal and international circumstances, which can recalibrate the intuitions that drive political leaders. Their behaviour will thus fluctuate significantly, on the basis of perceived fears, collective memory, national identity, social norms, cultural practices and many other variables, including the potential exploitation of weaker states.

In light of recent findings, my “[Symbiotic Realism](#)” paradigm argues that states, like humans, are not driven exclusively by rational calculations. Instead, they are propelled by a wide range of affective needs, such as the desire for a sense of belonging and a positive identity, as well as sometimes the need to dominate and exploit others through nefarious means, which have the potential to hinder decision-making and generate instability and insecurity. Even tried and tested systems, such as liberal democracy, could use an upgrade. Liberal democracy has survived despite significant forms of economic, social, political and cultural inequalities that still persist in mature democracies. So what can be done to remedy this? At least part of the answer lies in anchoring universal dignity within the political order. Guaranteeing dignity for all, at all times and under all circumstances, is something most liberal democracies tackle insufficiently – despite dignity playing a crucial role in how humans treat each other. At the most basic level, all citizens need what the esteemed sociologist Lord Ralf Dahrendorf called a “common floor”: a suitable level of housing, education, health care and job opportunities. This is a good starting point, but we should go further and ensure that this extends to the attainment of collective human dignity encompassing social, economic, and cultural inclusion and recognition.

Democratic rights mean little if you don’t have recognition and respect, as well as equal life chances. This is why dignity in its holistic sense is often predictive of the sustainability of societies. Dignity-based governance can secure the consent of the governed and unlock the best in human behaviour. It might be time to rethink how we measure the quality of concepts such as “freedom” and “democracy.” Freedom House researchers evaluate a country's freedom based on political rights indicators which often disregard pragmatic circumstances on the ground, including non-relativist cultural frameworks, applied history, and the stage of evolution each society might be in. Their chosen criteria might ring hollow to millions of people, including in democracies, who feel disenfranchised by economic, ethnic and cultural inequality, as well as [inequality of attention, recognition and respect](#). What matters most for the stability of societies is not the exact form of political governance but rather the ability of any system to

deliver basic needs of justice, peace, security and prosperity, through the guarantee of the critical nine human dignity needs mentioned above.

In today's interdependent world, we are faced with multiple global challenges, not least economic inequality, pandemics, water and food insecurity, digital divides, as well as big power competition and aggression. These challenges are a powerful reminder that zero-sum approaches to international relations – where one side has to lose for the other side to win – have passed their use-by date. My previously published frameworks of Symbiotic Realism and [Multi-Sum Security](#) touch on the idea of shared gains and misery: in the long term, the misery of other states, no matter how distant or different, will affect all states in one way or another. No state can afford to be indifferent to the loss of other states, even if such a loss leaves its individual gain unaffected at the first glance.

[Dignity-based governance](#) is the prerequisite for progress and lasting improvement in the human condition. The slave trade may be a thing of the past, but sadly its toxic legacy lives on in many pockets of the world, where citizens live under the thumb of severe discrimination-related poverty and exclusion. Even leading democracies struggle with high levels of marginalisation, injustice and poverty, leading to loss of individual and group dignity and causing a destructive negative spiral of exploitation. This will, in turn, compromise the overall wellbeing of large swathes of society in terms of security, stability and economic prosperity. Most of these shortcomings can be pinned to an uneven balance between our human nature attributes and dignity needs, as embodied in the Ever-Present Tension Principle.

Looking to the future, political and societal leaders as well as the general public need to improve their understanding of human nature, in particular what motivates and drives people (namely the nine dignity needs). These insights need to be woven into public policies at all levels of governance, to address the needs and concerns of all sections of society. Doing so will incentivise the cooperative aspects of our collective innate predilections - and help steer us towards more durable and inclusive governance frameworks. 🍁

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