

Paragentism – How to Thrive in a World of F!ckwits

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Introduction - A Warning About This Book

This is not a book about being right.

It is a book about steering.

Paragentism does not offer rules, virtues, or axioms.

It offers **six Steerings** — directions of adjustment you apply depending on context, scale, and consequences.

You steer toward them or away from them to maximise agency — yours, and the system's.

They are not ideals.

They are **prompts**.

In one sentence:

Steer toward agency — and away from being a Fuckwit.

If you have a short attention span, you can stop now and you have it. If you want more detail and nuance here is the next level down. The case for doing this is outlined in Chapters 1,2 and 3. The basic justification is the world is not fair, rules don't work comprehensively and increasingly we are valuing symbols instead of things that are real. This suggests a new paradigm is needed. The Steerings below are a summary of my new paradigm.

Steering 1 — Toward Agency

Steer toward actions that increase future optionality and away from those that reduce it — yours or the system's. Chapter 4 covers this, but also uncovers potential conflicts that deserve clarification.

Steering 2 — Consider the Counterfactual

Actively seek the frame you are missing, especially when you feel certain. Look for reasons why the opposite of what you think could be true. Chapter 5 outlines the basic approach to try and avoid applying Steering 1 immorally.

Steering 3 — Consider Appropriate Scale

What works at one scale often fails at another. This applies across individuals, teams, and organisations. Chapter 6 deals specifically with the problem of taking things too far.

Steering 4 — Consider Consumption

Consumption is unavoidable. The question is whether it preserves future agency or destroys it. Chapter 7 scales up to deal with global level system problems.

Steering 5 — Consider Others

Lead people in ways that prompt and permit agency. Exit relationships where agency is persistently avoided. Chapter 8 comes back down to focus on what to do to operate Paragentically.

Steering 6 — Consider the Unit

Agency may operate at the level of the individual, the relationship, the team, or—more rarely—the organisation. Focus where agency is most relevant. Chapter 9 is about working out where to apply your agency. Sometimes this means walking away.

I am not interested in telling you how the world *should* work.

I am interested in how it *does* work — and why so many intelligent, well-intentioned people keep losing agency inside it.

Including me.

Whenever I use the word *Fuckwit* in this book, assume I am talking about myself first. If it applies to you as well, that is because we are the same species.

The word is deliberately inelegant. It may provoke a stronger reaction than a more polite label would. That is intentional. I ask you to consider whether it serves you to treat *Fuckwit* here as a technical term rather than an insult.

For the purposes of this book, a *Fuckwit* is simply this:

Fuckwit — a person who acts in ways that erode agency, their own and/or others’.

No stupidity is required.

No malice is necessary.

Often, quite the opposite.

Fuckwittery is not a moral diagnosis.

It is a functional one.

Paragentism’s job is not to protect the author or the reader from ever being a Fuckwit. It is to make Fuckwittery increasingly avoidable in the future.

Why This Book Exists

This book came out of a growing dissatisfaction with the world I was moving through.

Not because it is unfair - that was never the real problem.

But because, again and again, I found myself **thwarted from exercising agency**.

By rules.

By processes.

By ethical expectations that sounded noble but failed under pressure.

By people who were not, in fact, ethical at all and held asymmetrical power.

By organisations designed to scale regardless of the impact they had on me

When I looked more closely, I realised something uncomfortable: much of what frustrated me externally was mirrored internally. I had internalised value imprints that worked passably in stable, cooperative environments - but failed badly under uncertainty, asymmetry, and adversarial conditions.

I wanted to be free, and I was powerless to achieve freedom without an oblique strategy. I cannot meaningfully change the world at scale - unless this book somehow becomes unbelievably widely read. But I can act on myself.

So I set out to codify an ethics I could actually live by. My north star was simple: to set myself free - both from myself and from a world that often seemed bent on eroding my agency at every turn.

If you come from a historically disadvantaged group, you may read this and think: this just sounds like another middle-class, educated, hetero, privileged white male having a midlife crisis. You might be right. We might also have more in common than you think.

If this is a crisis, it has been going on for nearly fifty years. I have been grappling with these questions since I was about eight years old, when I first found myself subject to arbitrary and immoral authority at school - authority that demanded compliance without judgment and obedience without explanation. Violently but not criminally by the standards of the time. That moment never really left me.

Now I am going to share some of my background. It may make you think I am a Fuckwit.

Partly because I grew up in middle-class, suburban Australia, where success outside of sport is often treated with suspicion. Partly because the usual template for a book like this is: I was disadvantaged, I suffered, I overcame, now follow me. That's not my story.

Despite accomplishing a great deal by conventional standards, most of my life I have felt imprisoned - unable to do what I wanted to do, unable to express my full capability, and repeatedly blocked from exercising agency in ways that actually mattered to me.

I am a high achiever across multiple domains. I think naturally in systems, and I appear to have been genetically endowed with a set of cognitive traits that are relatively rare: high intelligence, strong memory, intense focus, rapid learning, creativity, and meta-pattern recognition. Those traits have been as much a burden as an advantage.

They made relating to other people difficult. I learned rationality and tactical empathy largely as coping strategies for alienation. As a child and adolescent, I moved between

social groups to avoid being expelled from them. Later, I lost the ability to recognise when it was time to leave. I was invited twice to grade for my black belt in karate - and expelled from both clubs before I could do so.

I am not a specialist. I am domain-agnostic - more a polymath than an expert. I accumulate skills easily, but rarely to Olympic levels. My early environment imprinted me to value success, and I chased it broadly: academically, professionally, physically, creatively. On paper, this worked. In lived experience, it didn't.

Like many high-achieving children, I developed a deep status anxiety. Achievement temporarily relieved it. Then the relief faded. So I chased more. Bigger achievements produced less and less return. Eventually, achievement became a kind of addiction - necessary to feel acceptable, never sufficient to feel free.

I looked for answers everywhere: religions, philosophies, psychological systems, ethical frameworks. Christianity and Hermeticism. Buddhism and Stoicism. Egoism, utilitarianism, duty, virtue. I spent a long time discriminating between the major ethical "isms." All of them ultimately failed in practice, or produced internal conflicts I could not resolve - especially under conditions of incomplete information, immoral counterparts, and real consequences.

If you are still thinking "first world problem," you may still be right. Given the rise of neuro-atypicality and mental illness in Western societies, this does seem to be a first-world problem - one that is widespread and growing. I do not claim to have a cure. At best, I am offering a way to reduce the symptoms.

Paragentism is my best attempt so far to think and act morally without requiring a fair world, ethical partners, or certainty. I am trying my best not to be a Fuckwit.

By the way, I made up the word.

Para - beyond or across.

Agent - a sentient, self-interested, self-aware actor.

Ism - a practice or doctrine.

I use Paragentism to mean the practice of going beyond inherited moral frameworks in order to preserve and increase agency.

Not righteousness.

Not purity.

Agency.

Why Ethics Fails in the World

“To ask the hard question is simple” is the opening line of W H Auden’s poem The Question. It seems to me Ethics was built to answer a hard question simply in a messy world:

What is right?

That question made sense when problems were small, actors were visible, information was local, and consequences were legible. It works far less well under modern conditions: uncertainty, scale, abstraction, misaligned incentives, asymmetric power and - most importantly - the presence of **immoral counterparts**.

Ethics assumes more cooperation than really exists.

I did not fully appreciate this until I noticed a pattern in my own behaviour.

I have mistaken compliance blindly for virtue.

I have mistaken blind compliance for non-virtue.

I have mistaken intention for effect.

I have mistaken effect as intention.

I have mistaken safety for morality.

I have mistaken morality as risky.

Each time, I experienced an **avoidable erosion of agency** - and became upset. Often angry. Less often depressed or anxious.

Not because I had done something “wrong,” but because I had followed an **imprinting of values** that failed under real conditions. I was being a Fuckwit

What Ethics Tries to Do

Ethics defines what is right. Historically, it has done so in two broad ways:

- by consequences
- by ideals

In simplified form:

Egoism says what is right is what maximises individual utility in the long run, remembering that you have to get along with other people. Ayn Rand’s Objectivism is largely a restatement of Egoism. It does not handle immoral counterparts very well. Done badly, it gives rise to predatory capitalism.

Utilitarianism says what is right is what maximises collective utility in the long run, remembering that you are no more important than anyone else. It does not handle scale or incomplete information well. Done badly, it gives rise to oppressive socialism.

Kantian Duty says what is right is about maximising human dignity, assuming God will judge you. It does not handle health conflicts - such as right to life versus right to choose, or euthanasia - particularly well. It also tends to feel preachy and righteous to atheists (God love them). Done badly, it gives rise to parasitic welfare states, where both the giver and receiver are trapped in cycles of dependency. Compare and contrast this with the Christian ideal of *voluntary* sacrifice to redeem oneself in God's judgment - an ideal that becomes profoundly agency-destructive when institutionalised. I am really a big fan of some of the insights from different religions, but I am really not ok with how I see large religious movements destroy agency across the world in the name of their God's and values. These people are often individually very nice and well meaning. But still as a collective in institutions they are Fuckwits.

Aristotelian Virtue says what is right is about building habits of striving for excellence. It does not handle scale, incomplete information, righteousness, or moral conflict particularly well. But it has one important property: when done badly, it does not decay into large-scale system maladaptation in the way the others do.

Each framework works tolerably well under ideal conditions. None of them were designed for a world where:

- information is partial,
- incentives are misaligned,
- power is sharply asymmetrical,
- systems act without conscience,
- and not everyone is playing by the same rules.

What Paragentism Tries Instead

Paragentism defines what is right as:

What preserves or increases agency, given what I know right now?

And then immediately asks:

How might the opposite of my first conclusion be true?

Paragentism is an evolution of ethics toward something more practical and less righteous.

Ethics often aims at the ideal.

Paragentism aims at the **better**.

Ideal is idealistic.

Better is actionable.

It treats ethics as navigation under uncertainty, not moral declaration.

Since Paragentism is new, there are no established examples of its failure modes yet. That should make you suspicious - and it makes me cautiously explorative. But it has survived longer than the other 'isms' inside my own life without collapsing into paralysis, sanctimony, self-betrayal or self-harm.

That alone makes it worth trying a while longer.

A Note on Accusation

I am **very** interested in telling you where you went wrong. That instinct is strong and wrong because it probably would not help either of us. So instead, I am going to try very hard not to do that.

Every individual-level failure in this book is mine.

I will not excuse these failures.

I will not redeem them.

I will simply show you the move - and the cost.

In doing so, I learn from them and improve my own agency.

Hopefully, yours improves as well.

If you recognise yourself, that recognition is yours.

I am not taking it from you, not pushing it on you.

At the very least I hope you either think a bit more or get a laugh. Some of my friends accuse me of thinking too much. They may be right. But I still think it is such a stupid thing to say.

Why Systems Get No Such Mercy

Institutions do not feel shame. They cannot lose agency - only impose costs.

They are often the villains not because they are evil, but because they are **predictably inflexible at the expense of the individuals who interact with them.**

And inflexibility is how Fuckwittery scales. This realisation has been one of the hardest aspects of my life to accept. I was born into a world of existing large-scale systems and organisations that I don't agree with, have essentially no say over and cannot escape. The only option is to find a way to transcend their pernicious effects.

What This Book Is

This *is* a manifesto of sorts.

Not for purity.

Not for fairness.

Not for righteousness.

For agency.

Thriving begins when we stop pretending the Emperor is clothed - and start calling naked immorality what it is. Let's point our fingers in ridicule and laugh out loud!

Chapter 1 - The World Is Not Fair (and Never Was)

Fairness is an attractive idea. It feels civilised. Reassuring. Morally tidy.

It is also false.

Not occasionally false. Structurally false. The world has never been fair, and every attempt to pretend otherwise produces predictable failures of agency - usually at scale. I did not arrive at this conclusion through cynicism. I arrived at it through repetition.

The first Steering of Paragentism is to move toward agency. Doing that requires you accept that the world is not fair. Instead of complaining about that, we can do better by exercising our agency to get the most out of our lives. By steering toward actions that increase future optionality and away from those that reduce it, you may actually increase unfairness in the world. This is both natural and moral when done right.

The Fairness Instinct

Most people carry an implicit model of the world that tells them how effort should translate into outcome. Mine was not naïve. It was detailed. Rational. Internally consistent. I believed that if you:

- worked hard and worked smart,
- paid your taxes,
- took calculated risks,
- got along with other people,
- persisted through failure,
- thought creatively and strategically,
- executed relentlessly,
- and learned from your mistakes,

then the world would eventually allow you a specific reward: **economic independence** - the ability to live a stable middle-class life supported largely by accumulated capital rather than continual labour. Not extravagance. Not dominance. Just sovereignty. I wanted to get rich, but believed I would be able to be of independent means if I committed myself.

This belief felt reasonable. It was also wrong.

Why Unfairness Is Natural

Unfairness is not an invention of capitalism, patriarchy, or bureaucracy. It predates all of them. Walk into a forest. Two trees of the same species sprout at roughly the same time. One happens to be closer to water. Another has better soil. A third gets shaded early. The better-placed tree grows faster. Because it grows faster, it gets taller. Because it

gets taller, it captures more light. Because it captures more light, the advantage compounds. No malice. No injustice. No referee.

Nature does not apologise for this. It does not attempt redistribution. It does not halt growth to ensure proportionality. Unfairness is not a moral failure of reality. It is the mechanism by which reality differentiates.

The Heinz Problem (and Why It Matters)

Consider the classic Heinz dilemma:

A man steals a drug he cannot afford to save his dying wife. Is it wrong?

The question itself is a trap. It assumes a moral universe where fairness still applies. There is no fair outcome available. Only trade-offs, power, consequence, and loss. The purpose of the question is not to determine the “correct” answer, but to understand how you arrive at one.

Moral philosophy loves this example because it exposes something uncomfortable: fairness collapses precisely where reality matters most. The dilemma is not an exception. It is common.

When Fairness Becomes Ideology

Because unfairness is uncomfortable, we attempt to correct it conceptually. One modern attempt is large-scale positive affirmation and proportional correction: if outcomes are unequal, the system must be biased. Sometimes that is true. Often it is not.

A close friend of mine researched why so few women become orchestral conductors. She saw bias everywhere. Across multiple European studies, she found almost no female orchestra conductors and initially concluded systemic discrimination. The pattern looked obvious. The explanation was ready-made.

But when she actually examined the mechanisms, the evidence refused to cooperate. There was:

- No systematic exclusion.
- No hidden barriers.
- Only limited evidence of male conductors blocking qualified women.

The absence of women was real. The explanation she expected and sought was not. What she did find was far simpler - and far less comfortable given her prior beliefs. The applicant pool itself was asymmetric. Almost no women actually wanted to be orchestra conductors. Not because they were barred, but because the work is brutal: extreme hours, relentless competition, long apprenticeships, constant travel, and a

narrow chance of success. The cost-benefit trade-off filtered most people out long before discrimination could.

This does not mean the situation is fair. It is probably unfair in subtler ways. With few visible female role models, fewer women imagine themselves in the role. Gatekeepers - consciously or not - find it easier to picture a conductor who matches the historical template. Fewer women opt in early, which shrinks the pool further, which reinforces the pattern. This is how asymmetry sustains itself without anyone needing to conspire.

There is a reasonable case for limited positive discrimination at the margin: allowing a small number of highly capable pioneer women to break the pattern, create exemplars, and expand the imagined future applicant pool. There is not a defensible case for enforcing proportional outcomes regardless of individual merit. It is unfair when a single male conductor loses a role to a less talented or less qualified woman purely to satisfy a quota. Not because he is a man - but because agency and competence were subordinated to group identity.

Pushed far enough, the logic collapses. What about wheelchair-bound applicants? What about black applicants? What about Muslim applicants? What about Jewish applicants? What about neuro-atypical applicants? At that point, the question is no longer about justice. It is about category management. The issue was never group membership. The issue is individual agency.

The Satirical Edge

There is a deeper practical problem with group-based correction schemes. They are almost always advocated by people who benefit from them. This is rarely acknowledged. Those most fluent in the language of historical disadvantage and intersectionality are typically positioned to gain status, opportunity, or moral authority from the resulting reallocations. Even when they are sincere, they are not disinterested.

This is not unique to the political left. Men who protest for the right to life often do so for status within their church. Moral posturing is a reliable currency wherever hierarchies exist. Intersectional accounting also collapses under its own weight.

Which disadvantage counts more? Which combination counts enough? How far back do we trace causality? At what point does the ledger close? And why these groups?

There is one historically disadvantaged group with almost no advocates at all.

- They earn less.
- They are promoted less.
- They are trusted less.
- They are chosen less - romantically, socially, professionally.

This is the group of short, ugly people. They have no champions, not because their disadvantage is imaginary, but because it is awkward, unmarketable, and offers no moral prestige or social status to champion. Even for the short, ugly people themselves. This is the tell. Group-based justice is not applied where disadvantage is greatest. It is applied where advocacy is easiest and rewards are available. At that point, the project stops being about fairness and becomes theatre.

How Fairness Thinking Produces Fuckwittery

When fairness is treated as a moral law, three things happen:

- Judgment is outsourced “The system will reward this eventually.”
- Power is ignored “Effort should be enough.”
- Agency is delayed “It would be wrong to act differently.”

Each of these shrinks your ability to steer. I have mistaken endurance for inevitability. I have mistaken compliance for virtue. I have mistaken persistence for leverage. Each time, someone else made the move.

My Repeating Error

I internalised the fairness myth deeply. I believed that disciplined effort, strategic intelligence, social competence, and persistence would eventually be rewarded with economic independence. I have worked my arse off by that standard. Seventy-five startups. Years of calculated risk. Relentless iteration. Creative problem-solving. Strategic adaptation. Failing and learning.

I am not economically independent yet. Not because I failed to invest effort or intelligence, but because:

- luck is unevenly distributed,
- compounding advantages matter more than diligence,
- and tax systems make it extremely difficult to accumulate surplus capital unless you start ahead or exit spectacularly.

Meanwhile, I see others - social media influencers among them - achieve far greater economic success with a fraction of the investment. Not because they are immoral. Not because they cheated. Because life is not fair.

The Paradox

This is the paradox. Trying to make the world fair makes it more unfair. The world is unfair by nature. Attempts to counter that fact at scale are not only unnatural - they are incoherent. They require freezing a dynamic system, categorising individuals into moral

buckets, and redistributing outcomes as if merit, effort, sacrifice, preference, and luck were interchangeable tokens. They are not.

In trying to correct unfairness abstractly, these schemes create a new one concretely: they penalise the meritorious non-disadvantaged while rewarding the merely eligible. A less talented applicant advances. A more capable one is passed over. The injustice is now visible, personal, and denied. This is fairness theatre.

The irony is complete: a crusade against unfairness that is itself unfair, justified by moral language, and insulated from accountability by ideology. The world is unfair. It never was otherwise. Pretending it should be fair does not civilise it. It only guarantees that unfairness will be redistributed blindly, rather than engaged intelligently. Reality does not respond to group correction. It responds to individual agency. And any system that forgets that will fail - no matter how righteous it sounds.

The Only Honest Starting Point

If the world were fair, this book would be unnecessary. You could work hard, follow the rules, be patient, and trust that outcomes would align with effort. You would not need to think strategically about agency, leverage, timing, or risk. The system would do that for you. But the world is not fair.

It never was, and it is unlikely to become so at the scale that matters. The mistake is not noticing this. The mistake is continuing to behave as though fairness were a law of nature rather than a comforting fiction. This wider pattern has been exposed publicly before. In his Channel 4 interview with Cathy Newman, Jordan Peterson repeatedly encountered the same assumption: if outcomes are unequal, the system must be biased.

Newman could not accept the alternative proposition - that unequal outcomes may emerge even when a system is not systematically discriminatory. Each time Peterson pointed to differences in preference, temperament, risk tolerance, or life choices, she attempted to reframe his position back into oppression-by-default.

The exchange stalled not because unfairness was denied, but because complexity was. Peterson's insistence was simple and deeply unfashionable: causality is multi-factorial, group averages do not explain individual outcomes, and moral certainty cannot replace analysis. That interview resonated because it exposed how fragile fairness-based explanations become when they are forced to confront a world where agency, choice, and asymmetry actually operate.

Paragentism does not attempt to fix the world. It does not promise justice, balance, or proportional reward. It starts from a more honest premise: Given an unfair world, how does an individual increase agency without becoming predatory, delusional, or morally anaesthetised?

How can anyone get free of the social prison we are born into?

That question cannot be answered at the level of groups, slogans, or systems. It can only be answered where action happens. With the individual.

Chapter 2 — The Failure of Moral Rules

Rules exist to simplify judgment. That is their appeal. They promise safety, consistency, and moral cover: *if I follow the rule, I have done the right thing*. For a time, this works. Then reality reaches the edge of the rule, and everything collapses. This substitution feels like virtue because it removes personal risk. In practice, it is often abdication. I followed rules I already knew were insufficient because breaking them felt dangerous, and I told myself this restraint was principled rather than avoidant. Rules are built for the centre of the distribution, while life reliably happens at the margins.

The various Steerings of Paragentism are not rules. Instead they are presented as prompts to figure out how to act ethically in a world that is unfair, uncertain and unethical. Steering provides a way to avoid Fuckwits – both dealing with them and being one. I don't believe it is possible to determine hard and fast ethical rules for achieving greater agency because what is right in one context may not be right in another.

The Speed Limit Problem

Consider a common case. A driver approaches a set of traffic lights on a slight downhill bend, with a posted speed limit of 60 km/h. They are doing 55 km/h, technically compliant but still too fast for the geometry, visibility, and timing to turn the corner. They probably should be under 25 km/h to take the corner safely under control. Maybe they are running late, or out for a thrill or just plain self-absorbed, but whatever the reason they are going too fast. Now imagine this is outside a school. A ball rolls onto the road, a child starts to go after it, not paying enough attention to the oncoming car, sightlines shorten, and nothing illegal has occurred - yet everything dangerous has. The rule is satisfied because they are under the limit, but reality is not. Yet if something goes wrong the defence is ready: I was under the speed limit.

What follows is predictable. A terrible, regrettable incident occurs, pressure builds, and authority intervenes by lowering the speed limit to 40 km/h or installing speed bumps outside every school. The problem was never raw speed; it was context, judgment, and attention. The intervention photographs well and feels decisive, but it solves the wrong problem. Careful drivers crawl, inattentive drivers remain inattentive, flow degrades, and risk is redistributed rather than reduced.

Notice how responsibility is handled. Laws and rules are frequently designed around *who is easiest to constrain, criticise, or fine*, not who is most capable of preventing harm. It is politically simpler to impose a blanket constraint on passing drivers than to grapple with distributed responsibility, supervision quality, or situational judgment. The speed limit has nothing to do with the school staff who are supposed to be looking out for the children that go to their school. Despite being *en loco parentis*, the authority is not interested in holding them accountable. In our society, enforcement tends to follow extractability, not causality. When rules fail at the edge, the administrative reflex is to

tighten them at the centre. And the sober reality is that 40 km/h is probably still too fast to take that corner.

Few phrases do more damage while sounding reasonable than just follow the rules. It means don't think, don't adapt, don't notice context, and don't own the outcome. It implies that adaptation is dangerous and deviation is immoral. It signals that outcomes matter less than compliance. The phrase feels neutral, which is precisely why it is powerful. This is how decent people enforce bad outcomes with a clean conscience.

Rules Always Fail at the Edge

When harm occurs under a process, responsibility becomes diffuse. No one chose the outcome; it simply emerged. This diffusion protects individuals while preserving the authority of the system. It also ensures that no learning occurs. A process that cannot be questioned cannot improve. The problem is not that rules exist; it is treating them as substitutes for judgment and standards for culpability.

Heritage Listing as Moral Evasion

Heritage protection is often presented as an unquestionable moral good: preservation, community value, cultural memory. That framing collapses the moment cost is ignored. I believe if something is genuinely worth preserving, the community should buy it and preserve it. If it is not worth buying, it is not worth forcing someone else to preserve. However the way that heritage protection works is simply to erode owners' rights over the property they own without compensation.

Cloudland Ballroom in Brisbane was a privately owned asset sitting on land whose highest-value use had clearly shifted. Built on Montpelier Heights in Bowen Hills, Brisbane as part of an intended *Luna Park* amusement park. Construction began in 1939–40 under amusement park developer T.H. Eslick; the fun park was never completed due to delays and onset of World War II. The site featured a distinctive parabolic laminated roof arch visible across Brisbane. A funicular railway connected the main road to the ballroom.

Opened on 2 August 1940 as *Luna Park Ballroom*, intended as the “best ballroom in the Southern Hemisphere” with a large sprung timber dance floor and extensive capacity. Wartime pressures saw the park close within six months and Eslick depart. Unused, the building was requisitioned by the U.S. military in 1942 as *Camp Luna Park*; troops later restored the dance floor and interior before returning it after the war. The venue was reopened in 1947 under new owners Mya Winters & Francis Rouch as *Cloudland Ballroom*. It became Brisbane's premier social and entertainment venue for formal balls, dances, concerts, school and university exams, markets and civic events. Thousands of dances and concerts were hosted across the 1950s–70s, featuring Australian and international acts and dance events. Acts included Buddy Holly (1958

tour), AC/DC, Cold Chisel, INXS, The Saints, Midnight Oil and others; it also saw social gatherings, debutante balls and community functions.

By the late 1970s–1980s, maintenance issues and changing cultural patterns saw the venue decline. In the early hours of 7 November 1982, the owners engaged the Deen Brothers, a demolition contractor, to demolish the building overnight. The demolition proceeded without a final demolition permit being issued.

Although a permit process existed, heritage listing did not, in practice, make demolition unlawful under the regulatory framework at the time. Enforcement mechanisms were slow and weak; once demolition began and the structure was removed, there was no practical remedy. Legal responsibility rested primarily with the property owner, not the contractor. No successful prosecutions, fines, or other legal penalties were imposed on either the owners or the Deen Brothers as a result of the demolition.

The owners retained their property rights and proceeded with redevelopment. The Deen Brothers continued operating as a demolition contractor and faced no documented legal or commercial sanctions arising from Cloudland. The principal outcome was political and regulatory rather than legal.

The demolition became a catalyst for public debate and led to subsequent strengthening of Queensland heritage legislation later in the 1980s. These reforms were intended to ensure that heritage listing would carry enforceable restrictions and allow faster intervention in similar cases in the future. However this legislation erodes the rights of owners without compensation.

Cloudland's owners wanted to redevelop the site to capture higher value, which is precisely how land markets signal changing social priorities. Cloudland had been listed by the National Trust, but that listing carried no legal force and, more importantly, no financial commitment. The listing declared cultural value while avoiding the cost of preserving it.

The subsequent outrage over Cloudland's demolition illustrates the same pattern. Cultural value was loudly proclaimed only once the owners exercised their legitimate right to redeploy their capital. The moral demand arrived after the economic signal had already been ignored. In effect, society wanted the benefit of preservation without paying for it, while condemning those who refused to subsidise that preference privately.

This is the moral failure. If Cloudland was genuinely worth preserving, the National Trust, the state, or the community should have bought the site at market value and maintained it. Preservation is not free, and heritage claims do not nullify opportunity cost. Instead, value was asserted symbolically while the burden of that value was

expected to be carried by the owners through foregone redevelopment, increased holding costs, and constrained use. That is expropriation without compensation.

Cloudland demonstrates why heritage listing without compulsory acquisition is ethically incoherent. It attempts to freeze land use while allowing the cost of that freeze to fall on individual owners rather than on those who claim the value. The authority claims virtue, the public claims loss, and the owner absorbs the cost. That is not a tragedy of greed; it is a failure to align moral claims with financial responsibility.

The aftermath now plays out across my entire suburb. A heritage overlay has been applied broadly, not because each house is individually worthy of preservation, but because age and location trigger classification. This converts a blunt administrative rule into a moral claim. Owners are told their properties embody collective value, yet no one offers to buy that value or pay for its preservation. The result is not protection of heritage, but a systematic transfer of cost from the community to individual owners. It also insulates the local council from any accountability for decisions about what to preserve.

Development does not stop under these overlays. It simply becomes slower, more expensive, and more bureaucratic. Demolition still occurs. New buildings still rise. The only difference is that additional layers of consultants, reports, approvals, and reviews are now required. Heritage does not prevent change; it taxes it. What is preserved is not history, but process.

My own house is a ludicrous inclusion under this logic. Unlike Cloudland there is no remaining reasons to preserve my building. Whatever heritage value it may once have had has been thoroughly erased by decades of modification. It is an old wooden house, lifted onto concrete blocks, structurally altered, and visually compromised by additions that make it neither representative nor exemplary of a past era. The large Greek style columns and white marble balustrades are particularly at odds with its Queenslander origins. It is not a careful restoration of a historical form; it is a mish mash of expedient changes over the decades. Most made long before we owned it.

Yet this house is treated as if it carries the same moral weight as genuinely significant structures. Because of this classification, demolition costs are higher, redevelopment options are constrained, and market value to developers is reduced. No compensation is offered. No acquisition is proposed. The claim of value exists only as a restriction.

The net effect is not preservation but make-work. Planners, heritage consultants, review panels, and compliance officers are kept busy arbitrating outcomes that would have occurred anyway. Development still happens; it just costs more. The extra cost does not save beauty, ensure coherence, or preserve cultural continuity. It just pays for more paperwork.

Systems like this sustain themselves immorally in our society. Heritage listings justify council staff, planners, consultants, review panels, and appeals processes. Rules create work, work defends rules, and costs are externalised to whoever cannot say no. This is not conspiracy but structural self-interest. It mirrors the speed-limit example exactly: judgment fails, rules expand, parasites multiply and agency shrinks.

Why Rules Feel Moral

Rules exist to simplify judgment. That is their appeal. They promise safety, consistency, and moral cover: if I follow the rule, I have done the right thing. For a time this works, especially in stable environments where outcomes are predictable. But reality does not stay stable, and when conditions shift, rules fail. Not occasionally — structurally.

Rules feel moral because they externalise responsibility. They substitute obedience for judgment and compliance for ownership. Instead of asking, “What is the best move here, given the consequences?” the question becomes, “What does the rule require of me?” This feels responsible because it removes personal risk. In practice, it removes agency.

Bureaucracy is the clearest place to observe rule failure because it optimises for procedural compliance rather than outcome. In one case, I needed to pay my car registration, which could not be done online because the vehicle was owned by my company as part of a legal tax structure. I received the notice, went to the Department of Transport, and waited forty-five minutes.

At the counter, I was asked to prove my identity in order to pay. I showed the letter and my driver’s licence. The teller asked for a business card proving I was a director. It was my day off; I did not have one. She then asked for my office to fax a letter confirming my directorship. We did not own a fax machine. She refused to accept payment.

I suggested a database search. My identity and directorship could be verified instantly. She refused because that would involve paying a fee to another department. I pointed out the absurdity: I was trying to pay a bill they had sent me. Even if I were not a director, how could accepting my payment be a problem? She replied she was “trying to help me.” She was not. She was protecting herself by following procedure without regard to purpose, cost, or consequence.

When you see signs stating that rudeness to staff will not be tolerated, what you are often seeing is institutional protection of procedure. The sign exists not because the rule works, but because someone challenged it. The organisation did not fix the process; it fortified it.

Those signs remind me not of civility, but of restraint. In that incident, I lost my temper, was escorted out by security, and had to return another day to repeat the entire exercise. Asserting myself felt righteous. It achieved nothing. I reduced my own agency.

I was a Fuckwit in that moment. But the larger collection of Fuckwits was the organisation that designed and defended a process so detached from purpose that it resembled Kafka. When an institution produces outcomes like that and congratulates itself on compliance, it has failed morally, not just administratively.

This is the moral seduction of rules. The teller did not feel cruel; she felt correct. Compliance had become the moral act, independent of outcome.

Years later, the same department produced a more sophisticated version of the same problem. The theatre was digital. The logic was identical.

I received a driver's licence renewal notice instructing me to renew online. It warned vaguely that additional requirements might apply, including a new photograph, but did not specify whether I was affected. It simply sent me to the website.

When I attempted to log in, I was blocked by two-factor authentication tied to an obsolete email address. I could not access the old email. I could not update the email without logging in. I could not renew without logging in. I could not confirm whether I needed to attend in person without logging in. I was trapped in a procedural loop.

The system offered alternative identity validation. A driver's licence and the renewal notice were insufficient. It also required a vehicle registration document. I attempted to retrieve my motorcycle registration certificate. The system informed me that only the "registered operator" could access it. The motorcycle is owned by my company as trustee for my family trust — a standard legal structure. I am the director. The system does not care. The legal entity must match the digital identity exactly. Context is irrelevant.

My only option was to call or attend in person to change the email. It was 4:05pm on a Monday. The call centre had closed.

The letter said renew online. The system prevented renewal online. The phone line closed at four. The service centre requires half a day. The photo requirement remained ambiguous. I could easily invest time restoring access only to discover I must attend in person anyway.

No individual in this chain is malicious. But the system designers are Fuckwits. They built structural obstruction. The system is optimised for risk containment, audit compliance, and identity purity — not for user recovery or outcome efficiency. I simply want to pay a renewal fee. It is difficult to imagine catastrophic consequences from accepting payment from someone holding the official notice and a current licence.

Again, the moral seduction of rules appears.

The digital system does not feel cruel. It prevents fraud. It enforces entity separation. It requires two-factor authentication. Each rule is defensible. Together, they produce a Kafkaesque outcome: a citizen attempting to comply is blocked by the mechanisms designed to ensure compliance.

The original teller hid behind a rulebook. The new teller is an authentication server. The pattern is identical. Responsibility is externalised to procedure. Judgment is replaced with execution. The purpose — enable lawful participation — becomes secondary to preserving internal logic.

This is the expansion of Fuckwittery in the digital age. It is cleaner, calmer, and harder to confront. There is no villain. Only a chain of rational micro-decisions producing an irrational macro-result.

The lesson is not that bureaucracy is evil. It is that systems drift toward procedural self-protection unless corrected by outcome-oriented agency. The more we accept “the system won’t let me,” the more we internalise obedience as morality.

I am learning to recognise this earlier. Not to rage, which reduces my agency, but to anticipate it, route around it, and minimise its cost. The world contains many Kafka machines. The Paragent does not smash them head-on. He studies their geometry and finds the exit.

I have discovered that things sometimes work better when rules are bent — especially when strict compliance has already failed purpose entirely.

Success from rule breaking

At the time, I worked for a company called Gardner Perrott. It was a small division of a very large global company called Brambles Limited. My role was to win new clients. Gardner Perrott did two main things: it sandblasted and painted large steel structures in industrial plants to prevent corrosion, usually on fixed-price contracts; and it hired out ultra-high-pressure water blasting and vacuum loader trucks on hourly rates for specialised cleaning jobs such as removing scale from pipes, heat exchangers, tanks, tailings ponds, and storm drains. I reported to RK, the Southern Queensland Sales Manager. NM was the Southern Queensland Regional Manager, and VB was the State Manager (full names withheld to respect privacy).

I started on roughly \$32,000 with a commission structure of 10%, capped so I could at most double my base salary. I had a sales budget of \$1 million for the year. That year I brought approximately \$5 million in opportunities into the business and converted just \$10,000. There was a tense meeting where I was carpeted by VB, who explained that all Brambles businesses were managed to deliver a ROANFE — Return on Net Funds Employed — an accounting abstraction dressed up as discipline.

The logic was blunt. If I sold \$600,000 in a year, the margin on that would make me a break-even investment. To justify my cost, I needed to sell \$1 million. VB framed this as a performance issue, implying I was not working hard enough. NM pointed out the value of the pipeline I had generated, but VB dismissed it. If results did not improve within ninety days, he said he would have to “spear” me. His word for firing.

I went into emergency mode because I had nothing left to lose. At that point, I did not know enough to ask for what I needed to make sales, but I knew the system was broken. I understood what Gardner Perrott *did*, but I did not understand why new customers would choose us over rivals. When I asked RK what our point of difference was, he said, “We’re Gardner Perrott,” as if the name itself carried inherent value. That might have been true for long-standing clients. For new clients, it meant nothing.

I also had no control over pricing. Estimates were prepared by a specialist estimator, and we never won on price. I was typically bidding against two or three competitors, which meant that if we were cost-competitive I should have won at least a quarter of the work. I won virtually none. Around the time VB threatened my job, the specialist estimator was let go, making it clear that pressure was cascading downward. Poor leadership propagates efficiently.

Left with no other choice I exercised my agency. I taught myself how to do take-offs and estimates using Lotus 1-2-3. I learned about production rates, paint usage, access costs, and how to reduce scaffold time using cherry pickers and scissor lifts. I negotiated directly with RK and NM on the production rates required to make jobs winnable. In practical terms, I reclaimed agency that the system had removed. No one really helped me to do this. There was no structured on-boarding or training process. I just had to figure it out somehow or get fired.

My break came with JB, who ran the Steggles feedlot at Wacol. He had three prices. Ours was the highest — from memory about \$127,000 compared to competitors at around \$107,000 and \$112,000. I had built a good relationship with JB, and it was clear he wanted to give me the job, but he could not justify the premium price. I called or visited him every day for two weeks. Eventually, I asked the only question that mattered: what would it take to make us worth the price premium?

That question changed everything. It was not about being cheapest; it was about being worth more. We explored superficial options such as colour matching to Steggles branding, but that produced only marginal value. Then we addressed the real issue. The entire purpose of the job was to prevent corrosion. Normally, the client retained 5% for twelve months, and the contractor returned to fix rust spots to release it. JB and I realised we could restructure that risk. So I broke the rules to do it. I made an offer to Steggles I was not permitted to make.

We agreed that Steggles would retain 10% at completion, release half after twelve months, and release the remainder after five years. In effect, we offered a five-year warranty instead of just twelve months. That made our offer five times more valuable than our competitors' because corrosion prevention was the sole reason the job existed. On that basis, JB awarded us the contract.

I did this without approval. I had no authority to offer the price, and VB did not have authority to offer a five-year warranty. I made the offer anyway. When I returned to the office, RK grabbed the purchase order to check the discount he thought I had offered. There was none. Then he saw the five-year retention and erupted. He asked "What the hell were you thinking offering a five-year warranty?" I stayed calm and said the only line that could make it defensible: "But RK — we're Gardner Perrott."

That reframing worked. If the brand was meant to justify a premium, it had to *mean* something. We delivered the job for under \$70,000 cost. At a 30% margin, we could have sold it for \$100,000 all along and still won on price. We simply did not know that until judgment replaced process.

In the next ninety days I sold over \$600,000, enough to make VB's firing threat evaporate. In the following year I sold \$1.25 million. By then, my commission structure had been removed in favour of a higher base salary. I took it. I was still not sure whether exercising agency would always be tolerated.

Prior to Gardner Perrot, rules had felt moral because they promised safety. In practice, they produced paralysis or the shifting of accountability as far as I could see. Bureaucracy protected itself. Corporate process protected internal order. Neither protected purpose, outcome, or human judgment. In this case, breaking the rule was not immoral. It was the only agency enhancing option available. But breaking the rules for success is generally a good rule not to follow.

How Ethical Rules Fail

Each major ethical framework attempts to replace judgment with principle. Each does so for understandable reasons. Each fails in a characteristic way when compassion and context are required simultaneously.

Egoism — Compassion Omitted

Egoism evaluates actions based on benefit to the individual, accounting for long- and short-term consequences. What it does not require is compassion for the counterpart. *Caveat emptor* is not a bug; it is a feature.

If I sell you something harmful, the transaction is ethical so long as it is legal, consented to, and does not damage my future interests. Your stress, vulnerability, or confusion is irrelevant. Airports exemplify this logic: deliberately uncomfortable environments

engineered to extract predictable spending through retail, parking fees, and access taxes. Within egoism this is rational extraction. Outside it, exploitation of predictable human weakness.

Utilitarianism — Compassion Turned Inward

Utilitarianism aims to maximise overall good. Its failure mode is excess. By focusing on aggregates, it normalises self-sacrifice without limit. If the many benefit, the individual must give.

Free health care feels compassionate. In practice, it often weakens the incentives that reduce long-term harm. When the cost of care is fully socialised, behaviours that predictably increase healthcare demand—smoking, drug abuse, dangerous driving, chronic obesity—are partially subsidised by those who do not engage in them. The justification is numerical—overall access increases—but the calculation is incomplete because it ignores behavioural response and moral hazard.

Free health care does not encourage people to live healthier lives, nor does it encourage people to provision for their own future costs. In most Western countries, roughly half of a person's lifetime healthcare expenditure occurs in the final five years of life. A system that prevents or discourages individuals from saving for that predictable cost shifts the burden forward onto younger generations, who subsidise older ones through taxation regardless of their own future prospects. Compassion for the many becomes sacrifice of the self, and agency erodes quietly under accumulated moral debt.

Given demographic ageing across the Western world, Australia's Medicare and private health insurance arrangements appear structurally unsustainable. The moral intent is generosity; the systemic outcome is dependency, cost inflation, and intergenerational transfer without consent. As with other utilitarian rules, compassion expressed as entitlement detaches consequence from choice, until the system itself becomes the patient.

The strongest argument for universal health care is that early, unconditional access reduces catastrophic failure, prevents expensive downstream crises, and preserves baseline social cohesion, but this case weakens to the extent that most healthcare expenditure is reactive rather than proactive, arriving only after behaviour and risk have already been locked in. Compassion for the many becomes sacrifice of the self, and agency erodes quietly under accumulated moral debt.

Kantian Duty — Compassion Prohibited

Kantian ethics prioritises duty and universal principles. In doing so, it strips context from moral decision-making. Kant's Categorical Imperative is to act from duty only on rules that you could choose to be universal laws. Duty is constrained by the requirement that people must always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means. This

means respecting their agency in principle. There are no exceptions to moral duty — universal rules ignore context. Kantian duty does not require preserving someone's actual interests, welfare, or expressed will in specific situations. Once a rule applies (do not lie, do not kill, do no harm), it applies regardless of outcomes or consent.

Consumer credit law is often framed as a duty to protect borrowers from harm and prevent their exploitation by lenders. The law is an example of Kantian paternalism: the bank must not enable actions such as a customer taking on “bad” debt. The bank is legally obligated to preserve human dignity by blocking (so-called) self-destructive choices. Banks do not approve loans to customers who cannot prove their capacity to service loan repayments, regardless of their collateral.

So even if a customer requests the loan voluntarily, understands the terms and risks, has sufficient security, and accepts responsibility for the outcome if they fail to make repayments, they are treated as incapable of legitimate risk-bearing. Their choice is overridden “for their own good.” Their agency is denied. The hurdle is universally applied. If a loan would be harmful in some cases, it must be denied in all structurally similar cases. There is no assessment of upside versus downside, no weighting of borrower intent, alternatives, resourcefulness, or necessity. There is no allowance for different levels of risk tolerance among different customers.

By denying the loan, the bank satisfies its legal and moral duty, avoids liability, and demonstrates compliance. The borrower bears the cost of lost opportunity, reduced agency, and potentially forced dependency on worse alternatives (payday lenders, informal debt, stagnation). The person is used to prove the system's virtue, not to advance their own ends. Dignity is reduced to non-participation. Kantian logic equates dignity with restraint: you are protected by being stopped. But dignity, experientially, includes the right to choose risk in pursuit of goals.

The contradiction in the system is the claim that, even though an individual is assumed to be capable of self-determination, the bank respects them too much to let them take the risk of not being able to repay their loan and having their collateral liquidated to cover the debt. This is the precise Kantian failure: respect for people becomes compliance with rules about people.

The bank's refusal is immoral not because risk exists, but because the borrower's agency is subordinated to an absolutist duty that confuses protection with respect. The moral system preserves itself while denying the very autonomy it claims to honour. It has no compassion for individual customers. Many examples of consumer protection going too far occur in healthcare. Laws that control psychedelic drug use, regulate prescription medication, and prohibit euthanasia support are all examples of contradictory Kantian duty.

Virtue Ethics — Conflicting Goods, No Arbiter

Virtue ethics avoids rigid rules but fails through indeterminacy. Virtues can collide: compassion can conflict with honesty, justice, courage, and temperance. Telling the truth can harm comfort. Mercy can enable repeated harm. Restraint can feel cruel while indulgence entrenches dependency.

Virtue ethics offers no resolution mechanism beyond assuming a wise actor will simply know what to do. Under pressure, power asymmetry, or institutional scale, that assumption fails. Compassion may remain, but become inconsistent, selective, and/ or unaccountable.

Aristotelian virtue ethics defines what is right as habitually striving for excellence (*aretē*) in pursuit of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). The ethical actor cultivates virtues—discipline, courage, temperance, fairness—appropriate to a given practice. This framework functions tolerably at the level of individual character. It fails when applied to modern institutions, where excellence itself is contested.

Elite sport exposes this failure clearly. In Olympic competition, “excellence” admits at least two internally coherent interpretations: Naturalistic excellence and Optimisation excellence. Naturalistic excellence is achieved through training, discipline, restraint, and cultivation of one’s given biology. Optimisation excellence is achieved by maximising outcomes using all available technologies, including biomedical, psychological, and systemic enhancement.

Both interpretations can plausibly claim virtue. The first emphasises temperance and fairness. The second emphasises commitment, ambition, and boundary-pushing courage. Virtue ethics provides no internal mechanism to rank these competing goods.

The framework assumes the presence of a *phronimos*—a wise actor who will simply know which excellence counts. At Olympic scale, under asymmetric incentives, national pressure, and commercial stakes, this assumption collapses.

How the world championship competitions deal with Performance Enhancing Drugs (PEDs) is a notable ethics contradiction. The prohibition of performance-enhancing drugs is commonly justified in virtue-ethical terms: PEDs are said to corrupt excellence, undermine character, or violate fairness. Yet this ban cannot be derived from virtue ethics alone.

Athletes consent to risk; harm is not decisive. PEDs often increase performance excellence; outcome is not decisive. Comparable or greater harms arise from legal training methods. The bans exist not because virtue ethics resolves the issue, but because excellence has become ambiguous and destabilising.

This ambiguity becomes obvious when PEDs are compared with other accepted performance enhancements. Customised nutrition, supplementation, altitude training,

cryotherapy, recovery science, and load optimisation all directly modify physiology. They alter endurance, strength, hormonal balance, and recovery capacity. The difference from PEDs is one of degree and convention, not moral kind.

Sports psychology, visualisation, hypnosis, CBT, biofeedback, and flow-state training engineer mental resilience, pain tolerance, confidence, and focus. These techniques enhance performance by systematically altering internal states. They bypass “raw” character just as surely as biochemical interventions bypass untrained physiology. If PEDs are condemned for “artificially” boosting capacity, then engineered mental resilience must be suspect as well. Both are simply technologies for enhancing performance, operating in different domains. Virtue ethics supplies no principled basis for treating one as corrupting excellence and the other as expressing it.

Economic advantage further undermines the virtue claim. Access to elite coaches, facilities, equipment, medical teams, and uninterrupted training time strongly predicts outcomes. Soviet-bloc countries formalised this by making athletes military personnel: training full-time to win medals was their job. Athletes were openly instrumentalised for national prestige. In the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) athletes remain civilians, not state employees. However, AIS funding provides access to elite coaching, facilities, sports science, medicine, nutrition, and psychology. The institute is justified publicly in terms of talent development, health, opportunity, and national pride. The difference to the Soviet-bloc approach is rhetorical and institutional, not functional. These centralised structural supports violate fairness far more systematically than many PEDs, yet they are tolerated, normalised, or ignored. Virtue ethics offers no mechanism to correct for this asymmetry, nor to explain why some advantages are “earned” while others are “cheating.”

Despite repeated appeals to virtue, the boundary around PEDs is not drawn by ethical reasoning about excellence. It is set by external forces:

- Governance bodies managing comparability, escalation, and liability.
- Public perception of what counts as “human” achievement.
- Media narratives that frame enhancement as heroic or fraudulent.
- Geopolitical interests tied to national prestige and rivalry.
- Commercial incentives related to sponsorship, broadcast value, and brand safety.

Each claims the language of virtue—fairness, integrity, excellence—while enforcing negotiated compromises shaped by power and interest. Virtue ethics cannot resolve conflicts between incompatible goods because it cannot specify which excellence counts. Wisdom does not scale across institutions or remain coherent under asymmetric incentives. What remains is not moral clarity but managed inconsistency.

Virtue ethics survives only as a justificatory narrative—a moral performance layered over political, economic, and cultural governance decisions. In this domain, virtue ethics does not guide action. It legitimises outcomes decided elsewhere.

Across all the frameworks above, the failure patterns emerge. Egoism ignores the other. Utilitarianism consumes the self. Kantianism traps the person. Virtue ethics stalls at conflict. Each replaces judgment with abstraction because abstraction feels safer than responsibility. It is not. Making ethics into hard and fast rules causes problems with real world situations. Better to treat ethical frameworks as offering guidance not prescriptions.

From this perspective Egoism recommends healthy long term self interest. Utilitarianism urges taking other people into account. Kantian Duty urges treating people with consistent dignity. Aristotelean Virtue inspires us to pursue excellence. Paragentism is consistent with these ideals.

The Paragentist question is simple: what judgment did I outsource to a rule, who declared this valuable, who pays the cost, who gains moral credit, and where did compassion actually fail? No blame is required. Only steering to maximise agency.

Chapter 3 — Simulacra and the Rise of Fake Morality

The creators of the 1999 movie *The Matrix* (the Wachowskis) were inspired by a range of philosophical writings. One key text was Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard makes the radical claim that we no longer live in reality — we live in layers of representation that have replaced reality. These layers are simulacra: copies without originals.

Increasingly I find myself accepting Baudrillard's claim and see it as a quiet moral failure embedded in modern life that rarely gets named because it is so normalised. We are surrounded by symbols that claim to represent substance, but increasingly do not. And we respond to these *Simulacra* anyway. This chapter highlights how value is often misrepresented or exaggerated.

Adam Smith's invisible hand is meant to work because self-interest is constrained by reality. If you make something better, people buy it. If you lie, you eventually lose. That feedback loop is supposed to discipline behaviour. What has changed is not human nature, but the economics of perception. Smith assumed that self-interest and trade would combine to create value for others. He was correct, but incomplete. What Smith missed is the value one party trades for another's is subjectively determined. So to gather more wealth in trade the alternative to creating more value is to create merely the perception of it. At every scale it seems that is cheaper to alter a trading partner's perception of your value than actually offering anything better.

At its core, I am making a simple claim: it is immoral to present something as meaningfully different when it is not because that erodes agency. It is not clever branding. It is not persuasion. It is deception, designed to induce people to overpay by manipulating their perception of value rather than delivering it. When this becomes widespread, markets stop working as moral coordination systems and democracies turn into immoral theatres of deception.

Corporations can now spend extraordinary sums shaping perceptions of value instead of improving the goods and services they offer. Marketing has become more cost effective than innovation. This immoral behaviour is not confined to corporates. Political parties, NGOs and activist movements all spend more on messaging and fund raising than they do on making real systemic improvements.

Changing what people think is easier than changing what is. This is a cheat. And it only works because enough people reward the cheat. It works because human motivation is not primarily truth-seeking. It is need-seeking.

Perception laundering

Across my research in motivation and years of work in customer experience, a consistent pattern emerges. People orient toward offers that appear to satisfy one or more core motivational needs, and once that attachment is formed, scrutiny drops sharply. Whether the offer is valid becomes secondary to whether it feels relevant.

These “CAPFUL” needs are stable and recurring. People seek Certainty (a sense of safety, predictability, or explanation). They seek Aspiration (progress, improvement, a better future self). They seek Prestige (status, recognition, legitimacy). They seek Fulfilment (meaning, coherence, closure). They seek the Unusual (novelty, distinction, escape from sameness). And they seek Love (belonging, care, acceptance).

When an offer appears to meet one or more of these needs, it gains psychological traction immediately. At that point, the mind does not ask, “Is this true?” or “Does this actually work?” It asks, “What if this delivers what I want?” Attachment forms before verification. This is the psychological vulnerability the cheat exploits.

Perception laundering is rife in the supplement, diet and exercise equipment industries. The products in these industries are wrapped in symbology instead of being comprised of substance. Common symbols convey scientific aesthetics—men in white coats, molecular diagrams, performance graphs, Latin names, exemplar case stories. But the products themselves often deliver little more than placebo effects at best. In these industries health is symbolised, not measurably improved. The customer is not buying efficacy; they are buying questionable reassurance. While the bulk of what makes these products seem valuable is almost entirely symbolic, the price premiums are real.

Cosmetic Vapourware

Moisturisers provide an excellent example because the boundary between substance and symbolism is legally enforced. By definition, cosmetics are not allowed to work therapeutically. If a moisturiser actually repaired skin, reversed ageing, regenerated collagen, or meaningfully altered skin structure, it would no longer be a cosmetic. It would be a drug. And as a drug, it would be required to pass clinical trials, demonstrate efficacy, disclose mechanisms of action, and accept liability for its claims.

Most moisturisers do none of this because they cannot. They hydrate the outermost layer of skin temporarily and make it smell different. That is all. Everything else—anti-ageing, skin repair, rejuvenation, cellular renewal—is marketing language carefully engineered to sit just below the threshold of regulatory enforcement. This is not an edge case. Perception laundering is the business model.

The cosmetic industry has perfected the art of signalling scientific legitimacy without being bound by scientific standards. Products are packaged in clinical whites, blues, and silvers. Ingredient names are elongated, Latinised, or chemicalised. Diagrams

imply molecular precision. Advertising language borrows selectively from dermatology, biochemistry, and medicine while avoiding any claim that would trigger regulatory scrutiny. Consumers are not buying measurable outcomes. They are buying reassurance.

As Charles Revson, founder of Revlon, put it bluntly: “In the factory we make cosmetics; in the drugstore we sell hope.” That is not a confession. It is an accurate description of the transaction. The moral failure here is not that people want to look younger or feel better about themselves. It is that companies deliberately imply causal effects they are legally forbidden from delivering. The difference between “improves the appearance of fine lines” and “reduces fine lines” is not semantic. It is the entire gap between symbolism and substance. Moisturisers are not uniquely deceptive. They are simply unusually obvious about what modern branding has become: a system for selling reassurance at scale while avoiding responsibility for results.

The invisible hand fails not because companies lie—companies always test boundaries—but because Fuckwits reward the lie. People defend their favourite brands with near-religious fervour. Criticism is taken personally. Scepticism is framed as ignorance. Identity attaches to jars of perfumed grease.

Why virtue signalling replaces agency

Once symbols replace substance, the next question is unavoidable: why does this persist? Why do intelligent people, well-intentioned institutions, and entire cultures repeatedly choose signalling over agency, even when outcomes worsen? The answer is not ignorance. It is incentive alignment. Virtue signalling replaces agency because it is cheaper, safer, faster, and emotionally rewarding.

Marketing, ideology, and moral signalling increasingly target our motivational levers directly. A product does not have to be better if it offers Aspiration. A political stance does not have to work if it offers Certainty. A belief system does not have to be coherent if it offers Belonging. A moral posture does not have to improve outcomes if it offers Prestige.

Once the desired payoff is activated, scrutiny feels like a threat. Questioning the offer risks losing the imagined reward. Doubt becomes uncomfortable. Skepticism feels disloyal. Evidence is filtered not for accuracy, but for compatibility with the desired outcome.

This is why people defend overpriced products that no longer justify their cost. Why they cling to ideologies that reduce their agency. Why they repeat moral slogans long after those slogans have ceased to produce results. The attachment is not to the truth of the claim, but to the promise it appears to make to the self.

The cheat persists because it aligns with human motivation rather than fighting it. It bypasses effort, accountability, and improvement by offering psychological payoff up front. And because enough people reward this shortcut—by buying, voting, signalling, or complying—the system learns that symbolism outperforms substance.

Commitment Follows Investment

I learned this the hard way. I spent five years in Amway. I invested time, money, and belief. The promise was wealth and freedom through persistence, positivity, and adherence to the system. Failure was never evidence that the model might be flawed; it was always reframed as personal insufficiency. If you weren't succeeding, you hadn't tried hard enough. You hadn't believed enough. You hadn't followed the process closely enough.

It took me far too long to realise what was happening. I was naïve. I should have exited earlier. The system was structurally resistant to falsification. Hope was continuously replenished, even as evidence accumulated against success.

And yet, the experience was not worthless. I learned how to persist in the face of rejection. I learned sales discipline. I learned how to remain motivated under pressure. These were real skills.

But the deeper lesson came later: symbolic hope can sustain effort long after reality has delivered its verdict. That is the engine that powers many modern moral and economic systems. They do not need to work. They only need to keep belief alive.

Virtue signalling thrives in precisely these conditions. It allows people to feel aligned, protected, and superior while avoiding the discomfort of recalibration. It replaces the hard work of asking "Is this working?" with the easier comfort of asking "Am I on the right side?"

Agency is demanding. It requires saying no to bad ideas, even when they are popular. It requires updating beliefs when evidence changes. It requires accepting partial wins and imperfect solutions. It requires tolerating discomfort, ambiguity, and criticism.

Signalling requires none of this. It scales beautifully. It flatters identity. It punishes dissent. And because it feels moral, it is aggressively defended. This is why virtue signalling does not merely coexist with declining outcomes—it actively displaces the mechanisms that would correct them. Once signalling becomes the primary currency, agency becomes dangerous. Judgment becomes heresy. And responsibility becomes optional.

That is not a moral failure of individuals. It is a selection effect. Systems reward what they can see, measure, and broadcast. Quiet competence does not trend. Loud virtue does. And so the system drifts—not toward evil, but toward emptiness. Toward symbols that feel good, protect identity, and require nothing in return.

What looks like mass irrationality is actually a short cut response to unmet needs. The failure is not that people want certainty, aspiration, or belonging. The failure is that systems increasingly offer symbols of satisfaction instead of the hard, slow work of delivering the real thing. And once symbols reliably meet motivational needs more cheaply than reality can, the cheat becomes dominant. Not because it is true. But because it is effective.

Consider how branding now operates in industries where real differentiation is minimal. Telecommunications companies all sell access to essentially the same infrastructure. Coverage, speeds, and reliability differ marginally at best. Yet each brand tells a story of uniqueness, superiority, and alignment with values that have nothing to do with call quality or data delivery. The customer is invited to believe they are choosing identity, not bandwidth. This is not value creation. It is perception laundering.

This is the same pattern seen elsewhere. When symbols outperform outcomes, reality loses. The market stops punishing dishonesty and starts subsidising it. Innovation becomes unnecessary when narrative suffices. The product stagnates while the story improves. And because this deception is aesthetic, comforting, and socially reinforced, it persists without resistance. People know, vaguely, that the claims are exaggerated. They buy anyway. The symbol feels good. The substance is irrelevant. That is how symbols replace substance without anyone having to explicitly agree to the trade.

Branding Substance

To be clear, not all branding is dishonest. Some brands genuinely deliver differences that matter. Dyson products are expensive, but they are often demonstrably better engineered. They last longer, perform better, and solve real problems in different ways. The premium may or may not be worth it to a given buyer, but the difference is at least anchored in reality.

Apple is a more complicated case. There was a time when Apple products offered clear advantages in design, usability, and integration. Over time, however, those advantages have narrowed while prices have continued to rise. Aggressive digital rights management, ecosystem lock-in, reduced user control, and deliberate incompatibility now form part of the Apple product strategy. Whatever marginal improvements exist are increasingly outweighed by constraints and costs placed on the user. Yet many customers defend Apple purchases with remarkable intensity. Criticism of the product is taken personally. Ownership becomes identity. The symbolic value of signalling taste, status, and belonging overwhelms any sober assessment of value for money. Being overcharged is reframed as discernment.

Amazon illustrates a different pattern again. Compared to eBay, Temu, or AliExpress, Amazon offers broadly comparable prices with significantly better reliability, faster delivery, integrated logistics, and vastly superior refunds and returns. Prime bundles

tangible benefits—speed, convenience, and content—into a single offering. This is not symbolism pretending to be substance. It is substance delivered at scale. Amazon has many legitimate criticisms, but the core value proposition is real.

The distinction matters. When branding reflects genuine differences, markets still work. When branding replaces differences, markets rot. The moral failure occurs when companies discover that manipulating belief is more profitable than improving products—and consumer Fuckwits reward them for it.

Social media accelerates this failure by turning signalling itself into a primary economic activity. Platforms reward visibility, outrage, and alignment, not accuracy or contribution. Moral language becomes a performance metric. People learn quickly that being seen to care matters more than actually helping. Identity replaces judgment. Expression replaces responsibility. The symbol detaches from the outcome and floats free.

How institutions become immoral theatre

Politics follows the same logic. The longest-ever US government shutdown ended after 43 days on November 13, 2025. It was slow motion immoral theatre. A tragic farce. Government shutdowns are often narrated as clashes of principle or unavoidable constitutional standoffs. In reality, they are the predictable outcome of a system that rewards grandstanding over governing.

In the US system, both chambers of Congress must approve a spending plan to send to the president to be signed into law. The House was able to pass a temporary funding bill to avoid a shutdown, but it could not clear the Senate amid Democratic resistance.

The Republicans controlled both the House of Representatives and the Senate, but at the end of September, senators were seven short of the 60 votes needed to pass a spending bill. This gave Democrats some negotiating leverage. The Democratic party's main demand was that the bill should include an extension of expiring tax credits that make health insurance cheaper for millions of Americans. So on October 1, the US government shut down for the first time in nearly seven years.

The Republican starting position in the immoral theatre was not frivolous. The United States is carrying a national debt large enough that interest servicing is on track to rival defence spending within a few years. This is not a partisan fantasy; it is arithmetic. Any government that takes long-term stewardship seriously must confront the fact that debt interest crowds out everything else—defence, infrastructure, welfare, and future flexibility. On that point, the Republicans were broadly correct: spending restraint is not cruelty, it is arithmetic delayed too long.

Where their position collapsed was ideology. Rather than negotiating reductions across discretionary spending in a way that could plausibly attract bipartisan support,

Republicans fixated on refusing to continue Affordable Care Act subsidies. This was not because those subsidies were the largest driver of the deficit—they were not—but because the Care Act had become a symbolic enemy. The policy was treated less as a line item and more as an identity marker. Blocking it signalled ideological purity to their base, even if it made compromise impossible.

Democrats responded in kind to draw out the whole farce. They blocked supply entirely, even though a shutdown disproportionately harmed their own voter base: public sector workers, contractors, lower-income households dependent on government continuity. From a welfare perspective, this was indefensible. They did this with a mandate based on just 7 seats in the Senate. From a representative democracy perspective this was questionable. But from a signalling perspective, it was optimal. Media coverage mattered more than outcomes. Being seen to “stand firm” against Republican demands was more valuable than keeping the government functioning.

Both sides behaved like Fuckwits. Even though what each did was rational within a perverse incentive structure. Both sides acted immorally, all the while proclaiming their righteous moral outrage of the other side. Republicans chose symbolic opposition to Obamacare over practical deficit management. Democrats chose symbolic resistance over protecting their own constituents from predictable harm. The result was a shutdown that satisfied neither fiscal responsibility nor social welfare, but delivered abundant footage, talking points, and moral signalling.

This is what immoral theatre looks like at scale. Each side can claim righteousness. Neither side owns the consequences. Governing—the unglamorous work of trade-offs, partial wins, and shared responsibility—loses to media performance. The system does not fail because one side is evil and the other stupid. It fails because symbols are rewarded more reliably than solutions and both sides have no issue with acting unethically in the pursuit of power. A classic farce.

The repeated failure of both sides of US politics to prioritise governing well over grandstanding is not an ideological problem; it is a structural one. Government shutdowns are not tragic misunderstandings or unavoidable clashes of principle. They are deliberate acts of immoral theatre. Each side signals righteousness to its base while outsourcing the costs to the public. No one is rewarded for compromise, competence, or quiet effectiveness. Everyone is motivated to adversarial performance. The voting system selects for those who are best at signalling virtue, not those who can actually govern.

Once symbols dominate, this behaviour becomes rational. Why solve hard problems when you can perform a farce of outraged concern? Why accept trade-offs when impunity is rewarded? Why risk being wrong when alignment against a common enemy guarantees applause from the base?

This is how symbols come to replace substance not just in markets or politics, but in morality itself. The language of good and evil detaches from consequences and attaches to identity. The appearance of virtue becomes more important than its effects. And because this feels moral—because it flatters the self-image of those participating—it is fiercely defended.

The tragedy is that none of this requires malice. It emerges naturally wherever signalling is cheaper than improvement and where people confuse feeling right with doing good. The system does not collapse because people are evil. It collapses because enough people stop caring whether the thing they are rewarding actually works. Political reality evolves from unreal to surreal.

That is the landscape this chapter addresses: a world where symbols dominate substance, where markets misprice value, where politics rewards performance over competence, and where morality itself becomes a kind of brand.

Signalling offers status with much lower risk and cost. It allows people to feel morally elevated without having to solve anything. It converts complex trade-offs into simple declarations. It rewards alignment over competence and certainty over curiosity. In environments where visibility is rewarded and error is punished, signalling is the rational strategy. This is where “woke” ideology becomes not just a cultural tendency but a structural trap.

Woke Will Eat Itself

At its core, woke ideology claims to protect people from harm and correct continuing historical disadvantage. It does so by rejecting the idea that unequal outcomes can ever be morally neutral, and by asserting that disparities must reflect systemic injustice rather than the uneven distribution of talent, temperament, effort, luck, or trade-offs that characterise real life.

This position is emotionally compelling because it externalises responsibility to structural and historical conditions. It offers a simple explanatory frame for why life feels unfair, and in doing so removes the burden of individual agency. Woke ideology asserts that an individual’s relative disadvantage is not something they should be expected to navigate, adapt to, or overcome. Instead, it is reclassified as a structural condition for which responsibility lies elsewhere.

Within this framework, historical disadvantage is treated not as context, but as absolute. Disadvantage is conferred by group membership regardless of individual circumstance, competence, or behaviour. The result is a moral exemption from agency. Solutions must be structural, not personal. Outcomes are decoupled from choice, effort, and judgment.

Ironically, this is profoundly disempowering for anyone attempting to transcend disadvantage, because self-authorship is reframed not as resilience but as complicity in injustice. Effort becomes morally secondary. Suggesting individual agency as a response to disadvantage is treated with suspicion, as though it were an attempt to perpetuate harm—a weave of guilt, paralysis, and moral immobility.

The failure deepens because group membership does not map cleanly onto actual need. Not every individual within a designated group is disadvantaged, and not every individual outside those groups is advantaged. Yet once entitlement is defined categorically, resources follow identity rather than circumstance.

Support should not be available purely because of group membership. Doing so creates perverse incentives. When aid is guaranteed by category, people are encouraged to amplify or misrepresent need to qualify, while those with genuine need but without the correct symbolic markers are excluded. Ayn Rand identified this dynamic clearly in *Atlas Shrugged*: systems that reward claimed vulnerability rather than demonstrated need select for grievance, not recovery.

A First Nations person may receive counselling or assistance funded by the state or a charity simply by virtue of identity. If that support is not required, it may still be consumed because the entitlement exists. Meanwhile, my sister—white, middle-class, and a chronic alcoholic—may be ineligible for the same support because her suffering is not symbolically legible. Her need is real. Her distress is real. But it does not map to the approved category.

This is not compassion. It is administrative immorality through process. Help is allocated according to narrative rather than need. When support is distributed at the group level instead of the individual level, it becomes symbolic—and in becoming symbolic, it abandons the very principle it claims to uphold.

This is why the Woke framework feels humane while perniciously eroding autonomy. It promises protection without demanding responsibility, moral standing without judgment, and belonging without self-authorship. But life is not fair. It never has been. Relative advantage is not an aberration to be corrected out of existence; it is a universal condition that appears and disappears across time, context, health, competence, and circumstance. Any framework that treats unfairness as evidence of moral failure rather than a fact of reality is already detached from the world it claims to improve.

Most tellingly, Woke ideology has no system exit conditions. Because life never becomes fair, the framework can never declare a transformational success. It must therefore escalate, entrench, or silence to remain coherent. Disagreement is not treated as error, ignorance, or even malice—it is treated as harm. This matters because dialogue is the mechanism by which agency improves. If disagreement is prohibited,

judgment cannot sharpen. If outcomes cannot be questioned, learning stops. Protection becomes paralysis.

Caustic Campuses

Nowhere is Woke more corrosive than in universities. Australian universities increasingly treat non-woke perspectives as unspeakable—not incorrect, not weak, but unspeakable. Inquiry gives way to alignment. Students learn quickly which positions are safe, while non-woke academics avoid positions that are career-ending. Philosophical and ideological risk is punished. Conformity is rewarded. Institutions designed to cultivate judgment instead train self-censorship. This is not education. It is moral theatre with rubrics.

Woke ideology is also fundamentally anti-merit, and this is not an accidental side effect. It is structurally necessary. Merit is individual, comparative, and outcome-based. It requires evaluation, ranking, and differentiation. It produces winners and losers. Woke ideology cannot tolerate this because it operates at the level of groups, not persons. If outcomes differ, the explanation must be structural injustice rather than differential ability, effort, judgment, or trade-offs. Merit therefore becomes morally suspect because it threatens the group narrative.

Once merit is framed as oppression, excellence itself becomes dangerous. Selection shifts from competence to compliance. Advancement is no longer earned by contribution, but by alignment. This is corrosive because merit is not a moral luxury; it is a coordination mechanism. Complex systems—engineering, medicine, science, governance—depend on selecting people who are actually good at the task. When merit is suppressed, failure is not evenly distributed. It concentrates downstream, where consequences are real and unavoidable.

I am particularly interested in QUT because I have done three degrees there, lectured in its business school, and my wife did her MBA and PhD there. Also I still have friends who work there. QUT seems to have gone beyond the Woke anti-merit logic as abstract. Women appear to have been systemically advantaged in senior appointments, producing a leadership composition that materially exceeds what would be expected from the senior-academic pool. At comparable levels internationally and in Australia, women typically comprise around 30–35% of senior academics and university leaders. QUT's executive sits far above that range. This outcome conflicts with QUT's stated commitment to merit-based, unbiased selection and is most plausibly explained not by chance, but by an over-correction driven by gender-equity objectives rather than neutral assessment of merit alone.

The numbers make this difficult to dismiss as coincidence. Taking the executive as an example (five women out of eight roles, or 62.5%) and comparing this with a realistic unbiased baseline of roughly 30% women drawn from the senior-academic pool, a

simple chi-square test shows that the probability of observing an outcome this extreme by chance is about 4.5%. In plain terms, if there was no female selection bias at QUT this result has less than a 1 in 20 chance of occurring. This is not proof of illegality or conspiracy, but it is statistically significant evidence of merit being less important than gender for executive selection at QUT.

Jordan Peterson's critique explains why this matters. His claim is not that women lack competence, but that once identity becomes a binding selection criterion, merit can no longer dominate selection. Merit-based hiring draws from the top of a competence distribution; introduce non-merit constraints and, in expectation, the average competence of appointees must fall relative to a merit-only counterfactual. This is a mathematical consequence, not a moral judgment. The stronger the corrective pressure, the greater the dilution at the margin. In this sense, systemic positive discrimination does not merely risk undermining merit—it guarantees it, on average—precisely the outcome that complex institutions can least afford.

There are only a few possible justifications for apparently gender biased appointments at QUT. Perhaps this is the one time in twenty where the pool of female candidates were remarkably superior to male ones. Perhaps the rest of the world has gotten it wrong and female academics are superior to men. This is not supported by the research into publication quality, the most important metric for promotion with universities.

Across large bibliometric datasets, male-authored work receives more citations on average than female-authored work. Representative findings:

- Global, multi-disciplinary analyses (millions of papers) consistently find that men have higher mean and median citation counts than women at the author level.
- High-impact journals (medicine, life sciences): papers with male first or senior authors show higher median citation counts than comparable papers with female first or senior authors.
- Elite tail of the distribution: men are over-represented among the most highly cited researchers (top 1–5% by citations) across most fields.
- Career-level totals: men accumulate substantially higher lifetime citation counts, reflecting both higher per-paper citations and higher publication volume.

These are observed outcomes, not adjusted claims. When studies control for field, year, journal, co-authorship size, and self-citation the gap narrows, but often remains in many fields. In some fields or years, field-normalised citation impact is similar, but parity is not universal. This means controls explain some, not all, of the difference. A residual gap frequently persists. Because publication impact and citation performance

remain central promotion signals within universities, this evidence directly contradicts the claim that senior academic talent pools should naturally skew female.

When you put all this together it seems more likely a few female executives exercised their power in the QUT to advantage other women. Ironically this has created a new class of disadvantage (being male) at QUT. Within my framework, it is entirely possible that senior women advantaging other women is ethical. Humans are not neutral agents; they are embedded, loyal, reciprocal creatures who advance those they trust, identify with, and believe will preserve their values. Acting in favour of one's own group can be an expression of agency, solidarity, and strategic self-interest. I do not condemn that. What I condemn is dishonesty about it.

Woke ideology explicitly denies the legitimacy of in-group advantage while simultaneously institutionalising it under the language of equity and justice. It claims moral superiority while practising the very group-based preference it declares immoral in others. If women at QUT are consciously or unconsciously advancing other women, that may be defensible under an agentic ethic. What is indefensible—within Woke's own terms—is pretending this behaviour is neutral, meritocratic, or morally elevated rather than what it plainly is: group preference exercised under moral camouflage. Woke condemns tribalism everywhere except where it holds power.

The result is a moral environment where fairness is proclaimed but excellence is distrusted, where compassion is signalled but competence is optional, and where agency erodes behind a language of care. Virtue signalling thrives here because merit is dangerous, agency is suspect, and alignment is safe. The system therefore selects for those who can speak the language fluently, not those who can actually do the work.

Chapter 4 — Agency Matters

Most people confuse agency with outcomes.

They equate success with winning, income with freedom, and stability with safety. These associations are understandable—but wrong. Agency is not about arriving. It is about steering.

A failed venture that sharpens judgment, expands networks, and builds resilience is an agency gain—even if it ends in financial loss. A well-paid job that traps you inside a narrow role, erodes negotiating power, and punishes deviation is an agency loss—even if it looks successful from the outside.

I have experienced both sides of this repeatedly.

Agency Means Steering, Not Success

Teaching at university was never optimised for income. Nor was training in karate. Both increased insight, status, reputation, and optionality. They expanded the number of futures I could plausibly move toward. That is agency.

By contrast, I have had periods of intense workaholicism where income rose quickly, competence sharpened, and external validation flowed. In the short term, agency increased: more capital, more capability, more apparent momentum. But over time the identity narrowed, health suffered, and exit options shrank. What looked like commitment was actually foreclosure.

Agency is not the absence of effort. It is the preservation of future moves.

The question is never “Did this work?”

It is always “Can I steer better next time?”

Lecturing as Risk and Risk Reduction

I did not start teaching at university because it was prestigious or lucrative. I started teaching to de-risk my first start-up. At the time, I was inspired by ED—then Head of School at the Brisbane Graduate School of Business at QUT—who took entrepreneurship seriously as a discipline rather than a slogan. Ironically, I had originally enrolled in an MBA for the opposite reason: to signal eligibility for corporate promotion. The plan was orthodox—climb the ladder, take on more responsibility, earn more money. The MBA quietly destroyed that plan.

What I learned was not how impressive professional management was, but how impressive it often wasn't. Many of the leaders I had deferred to in large organisations were, on closer inspection, less capable than I was. More importantly, I learned that owning a modestly successful business offered far more autonomy and financial upside

than being a senior manager inside someone else's system. And the right business had the potential to blow up and scale to real wealth. So I quit.

I left my role as State Marketing Manager at OBT (part of Otis Elevators), despite having a pregnant wife and a mortgage. I was failing there anyway—for the same reason I struggled early at Gardner Perrott. OBT had no real USP, and I was not built to sell entropy. I went back to ED and told him—only half joking—that it was his fault I had quit my job. He asked, graciously, what I thought he was supposed to do about it. I said give me a lecturing gig. I had been awarded the MBA medallion for graduating first in my year out of more than 100 other MBAs and I was a real life entrepreneur. But I knew nothing about lecturing and did not have a PhD.

ED ultimately agreed to give me my chance despite zero experience and I ended up lecturing around the world, part time for 15 years. I think he did it partly because he liked me, partly because my grades were so far to the edge of the curve that he wanted to keep me around and partly because he didn't really want to do lecturing anymore. He justified putting me on by saying he was the only head of school that still had to lecture. He was increasing his agency by increasing mine and I remain grateful to him to this day for the inspiration, support and the chance.

The logic for me was simple. Part-time academic income extended my startup runway. It converted existential financial risk into tolerable uncertainty. That single move cascaded. Teaching at QUT led to visiting professorships. Five international universities paid me to teach in the Netherlands, Belgium, China, and Hong Kong. Wanting to keep that lifestyle pulled me into a PhD because I was not officially qualified to be a lecturer and this was causing some admin concerns. The PhD research enabled me to become an expert in both organisational creativity and cognitive psychology (particularly motivation theory). That pulled me into customer experience consulting with one of my former students as a subcontractor. Consulting was as rewarding as lecturing but without the problem of marking papers or dealing with difficult students. And it paid better. Consulting and lecturing meant more money, fewer working days, and more control over my time. At one point I was involved in six different start-ups and still lecturing and consulting. Eventually started my own consultancy with a partner. Along the way I wrote a couple of books that got published (by De Gruyter and Emerald) and even earned me some very modest royalties. While it was only a few thousand dollars it proved to me that my writing was worth something. That gave me confidence to keep developing my thinking.

The PhD also embedded me in the International Society of Professional Innovation Managers (ISPIM). I first went to the ISPIM conference in Warsaw in 2007. I have attended their conference every year since then. As a result, I have got to travel to Europe and visit a new city every year tax effectively since then. And I still front the rock band attached to conference we started in 2012. Through that network I met SC, and

together our families bought and renovated a masia near Barcelona. We return every year to live between two families, two cultures, and two possible futures. That experience has quietly seeded another option entirely: running a chiringuito by the sea in later life. It has also got me to learn Spanish which is the third most widely spoken language on the planet. That has given me the possibility of moving to South America where countries like Panama, Uruguay and Chile offer far less grasping tax regimes and a more meritocratic society.

None of this was planned. None of it was optimised for income. But every step expanded the number of futures I could plausibly move toward. That is using agency to enhance agency.

Karate: Constraint as Liberation

It is worth comparing and contrasting career decisions with a totally different arena. Karate was a different kind of investment. But no less agency enhancing. I came to martial arts for the wrong reasons. I wanted to be able to deal with anyone who threatened me. This was an overreaction to being bullied at school. I was afraid of being physically or emotionally dominated by other men, and I had internalised a crude binary: oppressor or oppressed. If forced to choose, I wanted to be the former. This made me pre-emptively aggressive in a way that took years to get past.

Across four phases and roughly fifteen years, I trained in martial arts—three attempts at karate and one at kung fu. I never earned a black belt. What I earned was more valuable. I learned that commonly the men who seek fights outside of the dojo are those who have never learned to fight. Men without competence need to prove they are not afraid. Men with training seem to lose that compulsion. It is a paradox: those most capable of violence are typically the least interested in perpetrating it.

Karate imposed constraint—ritual, hierarchy, repetition, discomfort. That constraint did not make me weaker. It freed me from fear. It also cured me of pre-emptive aggression, which I now recognise as a defensive pathology.

I learned that I do not want friendships structured by dominance hierarchies. I want *power with*, not *power over*. Some friendships did not survive that shift. Karate did not increase my income. It increased my agency by dissolving a lot of my fear.

The common link between these threads is that stepping outside my comfort zone provided both new opportunities and growth. The choice to do that was an act of exercising my agency. That agency ultimately compounded as I learned. And it all kind of evolved without a preset plan. I just kept pursuing increased personal agency as I went along. And things have kept changing for the better as a result.

Why Agency Matters in a Constrained World

The modern world is saturated with constraint. Speed limits are set for the least attentive driver, not the most capable one. Access prescription medicine is subject to doctor gatekeepers regardless of the benefit you seek or your competence to assess the risk. Drugs that change your state of consciousness are criminalised and prohibited. This makes sense for heroin. Probably not for marijuana. Almost certainly not for a single dose of a psychedelic in the right setting¹. The constraints apply both person and property.

Zoning laws prevent you from rebuilding your own house, even when no neighbour is harmed. At the same time the same laws permit local authorities to compulsorily acquire your property and fly planes over your house at any time of the day or night. I have a friend who quips that the trees in his yard have more rights than he does. The constraints compound into scaled institutions because this creates more stability.

Taxation seems non-negotiable and non-escapable, regardless of how responsibly or productively you act. Bureaucratic processes ignore context, merit, or intent in favour of uniform compliance. Our legal system requires every one to act lawfully, even though it would be totally ridiculous to think that a single person could know all of the thousands of laws that we have and the precedents in tort that may or may not apply.

Life Imprisonment

Large systems are not necessarily evil. But they are full of Fuckwits—and they propagate Fuckwittery at scale. They are built to manage populations, not individuals. Their effects, however, land on individuals. And they are substantively immovable. That immovability produces a specific felt experience for me: imprisonment.

When the road I live on was widened closer to the city, I worried part of my land would be resumed. Under Australian law, if the state takes your land, you are compensated—but not at necessarily at the price you would sell at. You have no veto. You can fight valuation in court, or you can accept it.

In my case I tried to act early. I reached out to negotiate a better driveway configuration rather than a legal battle over compensation. The authorities refused to engage. There would be a sham “community consultation,” but the outcome was to be predetermined by the engineers designing the road widening. They would decide, and that would be

¹ I currently take a combination of supplements and drugs daily to extend my health span. I don't use marijuana but the friends I have that do seem to be happier by doing so and I don't understand the societal prohibition of it. I am even more bemused by the prohibition of psychedelics. The research on psilocybin has me really curious about whether a single good trip could help me be a less intense and nicer person. I have not been brave enough to seek out a legal way to try it yet.

that. Life is not fair. And there is nothing I can do to stop Brisbane City Council if they decide to widen my road.

The same is true of the second runway at Brisbane Airport. Fifteen kilometres away, aircraft movements over our house increased from roughly two per day to more than sixty. Loud enough to interrupt phone calls. Melbourne and Sydney have curfews. Brisbane does not. We absorb the noise pollution so the airport can expand and the operator can make more money. There is no compensation. There is no appeal. There is no leverage. Life is not fair. And there is nothing I can do to stop the planes.

But agency seeking makes the response obvious. Move house. Not protest. Not rage. Not moral argument. Not voting for a powerless Green representative who promised to take the plane noise on in Federal Parliament. Not calling in bomb hoaxes to the airport. Relocation. This is what it means to say **freedom not digital**. I will never be free, but I can become *more free*. Each choice shifts the constraint surface. **Freedom is analogue.**

The real difficulty is not whether to move, but where to move. Choice itself becomes the challenge. Too few options is imprisonment. Too many options is paralysis. Where outcomes are fully determined, there is nothing to steer. Certainty becomes the ultimate constraint. Where freedom is absolute, there is nothing to grip. No direction is meaningfully better than any other. We need enough constraint to orient—and enough optionality to move.

Increasing agency creates a virtuous cycle: more capacity to change actions, context, and commitments in the future. But push too far, and choice overload stalls motion entirely. I know I should move. The question is *where*. Street, suburb, city, country. Australia increasingly looks like a poor fit for how constraining I find the system. And yet, most Australians never seriously consider leaving. If more people like me did, the system would have to adapt.

But that is a collective problem. Agency starts personal. The move does not need to be perfect. It only needs to enhance my ability to steer.

The mistake I made was to try to attack constraint head on. I have complained angrily and ineffectively about being overtaxed for years. What I needed was either more leverage or to leave for a different tax regime. I have bitterly critiqued public servants about their lack of effectiveness, high costs, parasitic approaches and ridiculously unfair processes justified in the name of fairness. This has had the net effect of draining my energy, damaging my attitude and upsetting all of my friends and family who would listen. The way our government works cultivates my political outrage without any control surface.

The result is predictable: experience constraint → rant → futile action → reduced agency. This is not because the grievance is wrong. It is because attacking immovable constraint consumes agency instead of increasing it. I have been on a hiding to nothing. The worst part of this is the system I was born into imprinted me to be this way.

Winning Above the Board

I was eight years old when my grandfather taught me chess. He was warm, affectionate, and playful about it, but he heckled me constantly while we played. The teasing was loving rather than cruel, but it was relentless. He talked through my moves, questioned my decisions, laughed at mistakes, and broke my concentration whenever he could.

At first I thought this was unfair. I was trying to think, and he was interfering. But that interference was the lesson. He made it clear—implicitly and explicitly—that chess was not won by the best sequence of moves alone. It was won by the person who could hold their attention when someone was trying to disrupt it. Most of our games were not decided by superior tactics. They were decided by focus. When I became irritated or distracted, I made mistakes. When I stayed calm, I could survive positions I shouldn't have. The contest was not only on the board. It was above it.

That taught me something that went far beyond chess. The rules did not prohibit distraction, but they did not protect against it either. The winning strategy was oblique. Instead of simply playing better within the obvious frame, I had to solve the meta-problem: how to maintain concentration despite provocation.

It took years. I played for a long time before I could force a draw. It took several more years before I could win. But the imprint was permanent: there is almost always a legal way to win that isn't obvious from the surface rules. Agency lives in the angles. You don't need to break the rules—you just need to understand what the rules leave out. As I grew up I internalised this more deeply.

Changing the Game

The squash final happened when I was thirteen. My opponent was seventeen. It was an under-18s competition, and he was clearly more skilled than I was. Better technique. Better shot selection. More experience. Stronger. He hit the ball so hard I could barely get it back. Early on, I tried to play “proper” squash—short rallies, attacking play, precision. I was losing badly. But I was fitter.

At some point during the match, I stopped trying to win points and started trying to make the game last longer. My focus was just to get the ball back. I chased everything. I returned shots I had no right to return. I turned rallies into endurance tests. I shifted my objective from winning to extending.

This wasn't cheating. The rules didn't forbid long rallies. But they didn't frame the contest that way either. I wasn't trying to outplay him because I couldn't. I was trying to

outlast him. As the match dragged on, the advantage moved. He fatigued. His precision degraded. He hit the ball less hard. It became easier for me to hit it back. His frustration increased. My confidence increased. Without changing the rules, the basis of the competition shifted—from skill to stamina. I won not by becoming the better squash player, but by redefining the basis of that competition.

Chess taught me that the real game is often not the one you are told you are playing. Squash taught me that you can change the basis of competition without breaking the rules. Together, they imprinted a deep pattern:

- I have agency even when it doesn't look like I do
- If I'm losing at one level, look for the meta-level game
- Oblique strategies matter more than frontal ones
- Persistence is required while searching for the winning angle
- Even when I "shouldn't" win, I still can

This pattern has served me well. It also explains why I struggle so deeply with tax, legal, and bureaucratic systems. In those domains, the power asymmetry is far greater, the angles are narrower, and many oblique strategies are deliberately closed off. The systems are designed not just to constrain action, but to exhaust resistance. For someone trained early to believe there is always a way through, that kind of system feels not just unfair—but intolerable. I have learned freedom is not something you can insist on. It is something you approach asymptotically.

Freedom Is Analog, Not Digital. Freedom is not a switch you flip. It is a gradient you move along. An employee who becomes a contractor is not free—but is more free. A contractor who builds a business is not sovereign—but has more leverage. A person who gains discretionary time, negotiates better terms, or can say no without catastrophe is not unconstrained—but is freer. Each step matters.

Wishing, whining and waiting for total freedom is paralysis. Treating partial freedom as meaningless is self-sabotage. Agency grows incrementally, and it compounds. I cannot escape the system. I can learn to flow within it. The key insight I discovered about this is tricky relationship between agency and uncertainty.

How to Act Instead of Being Acted Upon

Agency exists only where outcomes are not fully determined. Where everything is certain, there is nothing to steer. This paradox appears as koans in religious traditions. In Jewish mysticism: If God is omnipotent can God create an object God cannot lift? Omnipotence collapses under its own absolutes when referred to itself. If God is omniscient and omnipotent, how can God be surprised? An all-knowing God cannot be surprised; an all-powerful God should have the power to experience surprise.

These puzzles are not theological games. They train the mind to seek oblique strategies—ways out of frame traps. One solution to both koans is atheism: there is no God, therefore no contradiction. Atheists I know like this answer. I like asking them whether, if another internally consistent solution existed, they would consider changing their position. This exposes a structural asymmetry in metaphysical debate: nothing can be proven, only falsified, yet atheists insist belief in “nothing” is categorically different from belief in “something.”

The problem for me is that atheism as a response to the existentialist WTF is going on problem is as unsatisfying as nihilism is to the problem of agency. A solution to the object lifting koan is constraint by choice. An omnipotent God could create an otherwise unliftable object and still be able to lift it—but promises not to. The object is unliftable by commitment, not capacity. It is effectively liftable and unliftable at the same time. God knows who came up with that.

A solution to the surprise koan is a more involved. To experience surprise, the One must divide itself. God wraps part of itself inside itself, creating apparent separation. Experience becomes possible. We are that separation: God, godding. This is described more experientially in the 2010 movie *Eat-Pray-Love*, perhaps the most redeeming part of the script.

We might be : God, godding is a compelling narrative for me because it is validated in my everyday dual experience of reality. That is, I default to knowing myself as “I” and everything else as “not I”. This discrimination is automatic and perfect. However, I have learned I can choose to switch my perception to realise that this dualism is not exclusively real. When I look at clouds in the sky, I am not seeing the actual clouds. I am conscious of the representation of those clouds inside my mind. Since that experience is inside my head it follows that the “Self” actually extends all the way to include the clouds in a phenomenological sense. That “Self” recognition is beyond my natural perception of “self” and compels a non-dual experience of reality. Surprisingly non-dual experiences fit better with the scientific materialist creation myth.

I am a trained physicist, so I get the Big Bang story. It is no less preposterous than *Eat-Pray-Love*, just differently framed. Here it is: In the beginning, there was no space and no time. That “no – thing” is not directly comprehensible by anyone as far as I can tell. But apparently it was unstable. Without cause, everything expanded from no volume and no duration, creating space and time in the process. Space itself stretched from a hot, dense simplicity into the potential of the remaining “no -thing” which contained no space or time. Tiny irregularities mattered. Almost all matter became hydrogen; a little became helium. The universe was vast, dark, and mostly empty.

Gravity went to work. Hydrogen slowly gathered around the denser patches of tiny irregularity until stars ignited. Inside them, gravity crushed matter into fire. Stars fused

hydrogen into heavier elements—helium, carbon, oxygen, iron. When the largest stars died, they exploded, scattering those elements outward. Everything you can touch—every atom heavier than hydrogen—is star ash from a supernova.

From that ash, new stars formed. Around some of them, dust congealed to become planets. Earth began as a dry, molten rock. Before life could begin at all, impacts from water-rich comets and asteroids delivered much of its water, turning it into an ocean world. On Earth, chemistry learned a strange trick: molecules began copying themselves not quite perfectly. Life emerged—not by plan, but by persistence.

For billions of years, life stayed simple. During that long vulnerability, the architecture of the solar system mattered: Jupiter's mass altered the trajectories of many large bodies, reducing—but not eliminating—the rate of planet-sterilising impacts during life's early phase. Then something close to impossible happened. One cell swallowed another and did not digest it. Instead, they cooperated. Power stations inside cells. Eukaryotic life. Complexity unlocked. From that accident came plants, animals, nervous systems, minds—and eventually a species capable of wondering how any of this happened.

The materialist atheist creation myth concludes that we are not separate from the universe that appeared without cause. We are what the universe is doing here, now—ancient star ash briefly arranged into a question, arising from a nothing so complete it is barely intelligible.

Gödel showed that any system complex enough to describe reality must rely on truths it cannot prove. Every creation story therefore stands on axioms, not certainty. All creation myths selectively fit some of the facts we observe in the cosmos, and I cannot be certain which—if any—are true. But I don't need to be certain. On existentialism, I side with Alan Watts. Watts asserts when choosing a creation myth, choose the story that supports agency—because the alternative is pointless nihilism.

Watts also presented the idea that to have any experience at all we must be able to contrast two sides. Each side represents a different end of the same thing. This is important for certainty and uncertainty. Watts would likely chuckle and agree that being in a state of uncertainty brings with it a certainty about a lack of certainty. Being in a state of certainty makes it uncertain whether you have missed something that would undermine your certainty. This is not just word play. Considering how opposed qualities are the same is a way to get to a meta level of understanding and unlock oblique strategies. This is a path to agency.

Certain Uncertainty for Agency

Agency requires a certain level of uncertainty. Where uncertainty is absolute, there is nothing to grip. This is why people hate uncertainty. It feels dangerous. But without it, agency collapses. Every meaningful action sits between two kinds of uncertainty:

U1 — Upside uncertainty: learning, growth, opportunity.

U2 — Downside uncertainty: loss, damage, irreversible harm.

Starting a business increases U1 dramatically—new skills, independence, asymmetric upside. It also increases U2—financial risk, reputation, stress.

Staying in a safe job minimises U2. But it also flattens U1. Over time, stagnation can become its own risk.

Speaking publicly or publishing carries reputational downside. But it also creates potential influence, status, and leverage.

Agency is not about eliminating uncertainty. It is about managing the trade-off between U1 and U2. Where no trade-off exist it is about moving to a new context where a sweet spot between U1 and U2 can be found.

Acting Instead of Being Acted Upon

Each person has a Sphere of Agency—the zone in which they can act to make change without catastrophic loss. Growth comes from deliberately pushing the boundary of that sphere while avoiding sovereign risk to the self. Leaving the comfort zone expands the sphere. Betting the house can collapse it. You can expand the sphere through various choices:

- capital accumulation,
- skill acquisition,
- psychological resilience,
- personal integration,
- social status and leverage.

All these choices are different and yet all involve getting out of your comfort zone. Not so far out that you perish. Agency grows where risk is survivable and learning compounds. Every action creates two dimensions of possibility: your agency and the agency of others.

The following table outlines a way to think about how agency can expand and be eroded. Generally choices that increase agency are considered ethical (moral) in Panagentism. Choice that erode agency are considered unethical (immoral). However this is both agent subjective and context relative.

		Other Agency	
		Enhanced	Eroded
Your Agency	Enhanced	QI Moral Gain	QIV ? Advantage
	Eroded	QII Immoral Sacrifice	QIII Immoral Collapse

Quadrant I — Gain

Actions in QI are preferred because they enhance self and other agency. These are the gold standard. Paragentic moral choice can include:

- A marriage where both partners support growth.
- Teaching, where students gain competence and the teacher gains clarity and reputation.
- Parenting that teaches agency with compassion rather than imprinting dependency or compliance.
- Markets with genuine value exchange.
- Mentorship where learning flows both ways.

These contexts feel vital because agency is expanding on both sides. They are valuable—and worth seeking and cultivating.

Quadrant II — Sacrifice

The QII quadrant is often moralised—and destructive. Paragentism is directly in conflict with Christianity in this regard. Peterson has suggested that a key message from the Christian stories is that the ideal man is one who voluntarily sacrifices for others. As I understand that claim, I find myself morally opposed to it. Self-sacrifice is self-harm. Paragentic moral choices usually reject QII options:

- Chronic overwork framed as virtue.

- Burnout in caring professions.
- Soldiers sent to die for their country or religion.

Individuals who sacrifice are often honourable but misguided. I have spent long periods here myself—working without leverage, sacrificing future options for immediate approval, remaining loyal for far too long in marriages, jobs and business partnerships that were unhealthy. It felt like the right thing to do, but ultimately it was self-harming and unsustainable. If you cannot trust yourself to look out for your interests, how can you trust anyone? If you do not look out for yourself, how can anyone trust that your capacity to exercise your agency will endure? Stop honouring the people who set themselves up on the way to martyrdom. It is a status seeking error on their part and a moral error on your part.

This is why Paragentism points to a line between contribution and sacrifice. Another story about my maternal grandfather (the one I learned to play chess with) is relevant here. He was not an engineer, just trained as an aircraft fitter. He never had the chance to study engineering at university. His family needed him to leave school early and go to work. Enlisting in the RAF was not a romantic gesture; it was one of the few paths available that allowed him to apply his mechanical intelligence productively.

As an aircraft fitter, he worked out how to pressurise the fuel lines in WWII Spitfires so the fuel would not freeze at altitude and cause engine failure. That intervention saved countless pilots from avoidable crashes. It also laid groundwork that later enabled cabin pressurisation in commercial jet travel. Millions of people have flown safely because he solved that problem. He died aged 94 having survived being shot down in Africa, wounded and later developing heart disease. I am proud of him.

What he did expanded agency. Not symbolically, but mechanically. He increased survivability, reliability, and future possibility. He did not offer his life to the system; he applied intelligence to reduce unnecessary loss inside it. And yet this does not sanctify the war he was part of.

Working Spitfires also meant more effective killing. More people died because those aircraft functioned as intended. Paragentism does not allow you to pretend otherwise. Both things are true at once.

The moral error is not competence under constraint.

The moral error is treating self-erasure as virtue.

My grandfather exercised agency in the only way available to him. He reduced failure modes. He did not glorify sacrifice, nor did he require others to destroy their agency to give his work meaning. The system did that. This distinction matters.

We can honour skill, ingenuity, and courage without moralising death. We can respect individuals who act well inside broken systems while still condemning the systems themselves. Paragentism does not claim that nothing good can occur in war. It claims that war persists only because we are taught to praise the destruction of agency. Pride in contribution is compatible with rejection of martyrdom. Respect for people is compatible with rejection of the structure. If that tension is uncomfortable, it should be.

Modern warfare leverages the glorification of self-sacrifice. If people were not taught that dying for your country or religion is noble, large-scale war could not be sustained. Regimes could threaten, bargain, and posture—but they could not battle. War requires Fuckwits willing to erase their own future agency, and moral praise is the mechanism by which they are recruited to do so.

Accordingly, the first task of any military system is the systematic reduction of individual agency. Judgment is replaced by obedience, autonomy by command, and responsibility is displaced upward. This is not incidental. Large-scale war is much harder without it.

Quadrant III — Collapse

QIII is where agency erodes for both self and other. Paragent individual moral choices usually avoid:

- lying for short-term advantage,
- addict–enabler cycles,
- bureaucracies that frustrate both staff and public,
- ideological purity tests,
- co-dependent relationships.

The co-dependency of addict and enabler is classic QIII. The addict erodes agency by becoming dependent on their addiction and this is reinforced by the support of the enabler. Consequences are deferred. Decisions are outsourced. Responsibility is softened by need. Each failure and support act reinforces the narrative that autonomy is not possible.

The enabler avoids agency by continuing to help and increasing their obligation to support the addict. Conflict is postponed. Boundaries are blurred. Intervention replaces expectation. Each act of assistance feels compassionate, but quietly removes pressure for change — including the pressure the enabler would otherwise have to tolerate. The more the enabler tries to help the more they are required to continue to help. Both their options and the addict's options shrink.

Both parties are now trapped. The addict cannot recover without losing the support that makes survival tolerable. The enabler cannot withdraw without feeling cruel, selfish, or responsible for harm. Exit is no longer merely difficult. It feels immoral.

This is the defining feature of QIII. The relationship system stabilises around mutual incapacity. Each party requires the other to remain exactly as they are. Any move toward independence threatens the structure itself and the other. No villain is required. Intentions can be good on both sides. Compassion incorrectly applied becomes the mechanism of entrapment.

What makes this collapse particularly insidious is that it masquerades as care. Help continues. Effort is expended. Moral language is abundant. Yet agency drains away from both participants. The addict loses trajectory. The enabler loses discretion. Responsibility dissolves into roles.

Contrast this with interdependence. In an interdependent relationship, help is conditional, directional, and temporary. Both parties retain the ability to act, refuse, renegotiate, or exit. Support increases agency rather than replacing it.

In co-dependence, support becomes maintenance. The relationship persists not because it works, but because leaving it would require someone to endure discomfort, guilt, or perceived moral failure. QIII does not require institutions, scale, or policy. Two people are enough. And once recognised at this level, the pattern becomes unmistakable elsewhere.

Quadrant IV — Advantage

The QIV quadrant deals with an uncomfortable reality: agency is unevenly distributed. In any given context, some people are more resourceful than others. They have more leverage. This can be due to macro contextual factors. In the current situation they may be a better fit due to things like proximity, timing, relevance or history. Resourcefulness can be due to micro factors external to the agent. They may simply have more available resources like time, money, equipment, networks or information. Leverage can also be due to nano factors internal to the agent. They may enjoy better advantage from their resources better due to things like their skills, insight, vision, strategy, creativity, IQ or personality. In combination macro, micro and nano factors combine to determine an agent's capability. The differences between agent capability emerge because they are grounded in resourcefulness and leverage rather than entitlement. It is morally appropriate to become more capable because this increases agency. Agents should seek to become more resourceful and to control more leverage.

Over time capability advantages tend to compound. This gives rise to hierarchies. Hierarchies are a naturally emergent way of apportioning scarce resources. It can be

hard to accurately assess someone else's true capability. People mask, bluff, signal, and perform. Hierarchies provide a less error prone way to estimate agent capability. For this reason, hierarchies are valuable, especially when they are correlated with accumulation (micro capability), merit (nano capability) and relevance (macro capability).

Paragentism defines status as an agent's position in a hierarchy. It is generally moral to both seek status and signal it authentically. It is also necessary to conceal status sometimes. Immoral actors try to signal higher status they have earned, especially via simulacra. Fuckwits try to destroy, dismantle, diminish, distort or discredit hierarchies. This is generally not to increase agency. Fuckwit motivation is to reduce envy and/ or satisfy feelings of entitlement. Damaging hierarchies results in agent status being decoupled from agent capability. Status is not perfect as a proxy for capability, but it is better than no signal at all.

For this reason, Paragentism does not require you to optimise for others first. It requires you to operate primarily in the interests of your own agency. High status agents have no moral obligation to change the status of low status counterparts. However it is can be appropriate to invest in lower status agency because this can create QI options. Low status agents have a primary obligation to restore and improve their own agency when possible.

This is a claim about obligation, not prohibition. Paragentism rejects automatic moral debt based on status position alone, but it does not discourage voluntary investment, mentorship, or cooperation when those actions increase future optionality for both parties. Agency is preserved by choice, not compelled by guilt.

QIV actions are those where advancing your agency constrains another's in the short term. This includes competition, exclusion, enforcement, filtering, locking in switching costs and adversarial negotiation. QIV options are potentially justified when they:

- There is no viable QI alternative option,
- Your future agency is increased or preserved,
- The underlying system is not damaged,
- Counterparts' agencies are not destroyed (though their agency is reduced),

These actions cause harm in a narrow sense. The question is not whether harm occurs. The question is whether it stays within bounds. Later chapters contain more detailed Steerings related QIV restraint.

QIV is the quadrant most easily abused through self-deception. It fails when advantage is justified indefinitely rather than temporarily; when the other party's future agency is treated as irrelevant; or when asymmetry is reframed as "choice" after options have already been removed. Creating dependency, entrenching helplessness, or extracting

value beyond what preserves the ongoing viability of the system are not QIV behaviours — they are QIII rationalised after the fact. If advantage cannot be exited without collapse, it is no longer bounded.

For now it is enough to point to burning the game is shortsighted when it eliminates your chance to play again. The same applies to dealing with other people. Winning the “game of games” applies here. No one will continue to play when they do not believe they have any chance to win. No one wants to play with a bad winner. Others represent potential opportunities to enhance future agency. This could be through cooperation, trade, alliance, or partnership. That potential creates the trade-off consideration. You can morally exploit asymmetry for advantage—but over-extraction destroys future optionality.

This chapter has deepened the considerations around what it means to act in a way that increases agency. A useful starting point is:

1. Avoid QIII because everybody is worse off with Collapse
2. Reject QII because Sacrifice ignores your moral responsibility to yourself
3. Aim for QI because Gain for both yourself and others is preferred
4. Settle for QIV because Advantage within bounds is ok if no QI options exist

The quadrants do not introduce a new morality, nor do they sit above or below the Steerings described in later chapters. They exist entirely within Steering 1. Steering 1 directs action toward increased agency, but it does not by itself resolve conflicts where agency is uneven, incentives are misaligned, or cooperation has failed. The quadrants are a way of going one level down — a diagnostic lens that clarifies how Steering 1 applies when agents do not start equal, do not play fair, or do not share time horizons. The other Steerings remain orthogonal. The quadrants do not replace them, override them, or derive authority from them. They simply describe how agency trade-offs behave under asymmetry.

Escaping the Prison

Think of agency as a prison escape problem. Inside support matters: peers, collaborators, mentors. Outside support matters too: capital, alternative markets, alternative jurisdictions. Resources must be reframed. Skills become leverage. Work becomes capital. Weaknesses must be identified: loopholes, gradients, timing. Patience beats protest. Compounding beats rage. A prison break is not rebellion. It is navigation. The goal is not to destroy the prison. It is to leave it — incrementally, intelligently, intact.

My own life maps cleanly onto this framework. Early on, constraint felt unjust, like being locked up without cause. I responded with anger, then with workaholism — a confused mix of Quadrant II self-sacrifice and Quadrant III resentment. I gave more than I could afford, without leverage, expecting fairness to emerge if I pushed hard enough. It didn't.

What followed was repetition rather than progress: effort without exit, sacrifice without compounding. Eventually, I did something different. I invented an internal future agent — a reference point for who I wanted to become if I actually succeeded in escaping. This was not a fantasy self, but a diagnostic one: someone who had already made it out and could advise from outside the cell walls. I call him Rob80.

There is validation for this in hypnosis (I have a post doc certification in Ericksonian Hypnotherapy and another as a master NLP practitioner). A core principle of hypnotic work is that if a person can clearly imagine a future state — if they can perceive a gap rather than an impossibility — then the capability to cross that gap already exists within them. Hypnosis does not implant new capacities; it brings latent ones into conscious reach. Rob80 functions in exactly this way. He is a deliberate construct that allows me to draw capability, patience, and strategic restraint from my subconscious into conscious decision-making, without pretending certainty or denying constraint.

Rob80 is not a wiser man in the moral sense. He is a man who learned how to get leverage. Earlier versions of me burned energy trying to correct unfairness directly — arguing, proving, exposing, and insisting that better reasoning would eventually realign broken systems. It rarely did. The systems absorbed the pressure, converted it into noise, and continued unchanged. Rob80 is cool and free. The future me I am exercising my agency to become.

What shifted was my tolerance for symbolic action. I stopped mistaking moral clarity for leverage. I stopped spending agency on fights that could not produce exits. I learned to distinguish between being right and being free.

Rob80 waits where waiting increases optionality. He redirects effort toward paths that lead to exits, rather than institutions that demand loyalty without return. He treats

systems as constrained optimisation problems, not as moral adversaries. He is not more virtuous. He is less trapped.

Paragentism is not a theory I polish from a distance. It is a strategy I backed into after exhausting the alternatives. I am proud of having arrived at it because it is not a complaint about the world. It is a plan for freedom — a deliberate shift toward Quadrant I, without pretending Quadrant II does not exist.

Chapter 5 — Opposing Your Own Opinion

This is not a chapter about being open-minded. It is a chapter about maintaining agency under uncertainty.

You Can't Know For Sure

Every decision is made with incomplete information. You cannot:

- access full context,
- consider every option,
- predict all downstream consequences,
- or know which variables will matter most.

Decision and action demand compression. You narrow reality to what seems relevant and act inside that reduction. That narrowing is unavoidable — and risky. Paragentism does not try to eliminate uncertainty. It assumes it — and then asks how to steer within it. Good things follow from this. You cannot be sure. But you can be satisfied. You may not be right. But you will probably be better. You may be wrong. But less often, and less badly. The goal is not correctness. It is error reduction.

Why Counterfactuals Increase Agency

Counterfactuals are not about fairness to opposing views. They are a steering tool. Used properly, they increase agency in three ways:

1. They surface ignored context

Asking “what if the opposite were true?” exposes assumptions you silently treated as fixed or irrelevant.

2. They expand the option space

Binary framings collapse possibility. Counterfactuals often reveal integrated or oblique solutions that were invisible inside the original frame.

3. They reduce unintended consequences

Most failures are not caused by bad intent, but by unexamined second-order effects. Counterfactuals stress-test outcomes before reality does. Counterfactuals do not make you indecisive. They make you harder to fool — including by yourself.

Steelmanning

Most people “consider the other side” by attacking its weakest form. This does nothing for agency. Paragentism instead requires steelmanning. To steelman an argument:

- construct the strongest plausible version of the opposing view,
- grant it competent actors and coherent incentives,

- and ask what would have to be true for it to work as claimed.

If your position survives that process, your confidence is earned. If it doesn't, your agency increases anyway — because you noticed the flaw before reality punished you. Steelmanning is not concession. It is calibration.

Steelmanning is also useful with other people. When you restate someone's position in a way they recognise as fair, accurate, and even generous, something counterintuitive happens: they feel respected. And once a person feels respected, they become more open to revision rather than more entrenched. This increases your agency. People do not change their minds because they are defeated. They change their minds because they are understood.

Podcaster Lex Fridman demonstrates this well. He often begins by agreeing with an interviewee's position and steelmanning it — sometimes better than they have themselves — before saying, “For the purpose of exploring this further, let me take a counter view.”

A similar attitude is often attributed to Daniel Kahneman. I recall an anecdote — possibly apocryphal, but consistent with his work — that he gets excited about disagreement because it signals an opportunity to learn something he did not already know. Whether literally true or not, the posture aligns with his lifelong focus on reducing judgment error through structured opposition and adversarial collaboration.

Respect is not moral decoration. It is leverage.

How to Use Counterfactuals

The method is deliberately simple.

1. State the claim being made.
2. Invert it.
3. Steelman the inversion. Ask:
 - a. At what scale might the opposite be valid?
 - b. For which agents would it increase agency?
 - c. What costs would it impose — and on whom?
 - d. What assumptions would have to be true?

You are not required to accept the opposite. You should simply try to understand how and where it could be possible. This will potentially inform and expand your original perspective.

Concrete Counterfactuals

What follows are some counterfactuals to specific examples and associated claims made earlier in the book. I didn't cherry pick these to support my previous opinions. They were selected to illustrate how counterfactuals are used. In most cases you can

see that the counterfactual does not overturn my previous claim. Instead the counterfactual often moderates or expands the applicability of the claim.

Fairness

Claim: The world is not fair.

Counterfactual: What if the social contract actually works — imperfectly, slowly, and unevenly?

I did work the social contract. I studied, worked hard and smart, paid my taxes, took calculated risks, maintained relationships, persisted through failure, and adapted when things went wrong. The outcome was not riches. But it was enough. I now hold sufficient equity to live without working at a modest but stable level. That does not prove the world is fair. But it does mean the claim “the system never rewards effort” is false or exaggerated. It also supports a change from feeling victimised and imprisoned to maybe things are not all that bad. That attitude change is powerful for agency.

Orchestral Conductors and Gender Imbalance

Claim: Gender imbalance does not prove discrimination.

Counterfactuals:

What if women are, on average, worse at the job and being selected out?

Uncomfortable, but not incoherent. If true, forced correction would distort performance.

What if men really are biased and gatekeeping?

Then nepotism should break the pattern. Men with daughters or wives would want to advantage them. If that does not occur, gatekeeping and bias may not be the dominant mechanism.

What if women are actually better than men?

Then this is a market failure. Someone is losing money by excluding them. Who — and why has arbitrage not corrected it?

Each counterfactual implies a different intervention. Treating them as interchangeable collapses agency. It also suggests going beyond just group-based statistics to determine causal relationships. Finding specific instances from counterfactuals to test causal mechanisms of perceived disadvantage is a better response than me just criticising woke perspectives.

Development, My House, and Housing Affordability

Claim: Planning restrictions and development costs are parasitic.

Counterfactual: What if slowing development stabilises housing affordability over time?

Higher development costs slow supply and raise prices — but rapid development can also accelerate speculation and capital concentration. If friction dampens price acceleration, that matters. I was only thinking of how these laws make it harder for me to sell my house at a higher price, but there is a potential benefit of trying to slow house price increases. My sons will almost certainly struggle to buy their own homes. Slowing price increases may do more for their future agency than maximising short-term efficiency. This is not an argument for bureaucracy demonstrating value. It is an argument that speed is not always progress. This adds a Stoicism perspective because reframes something negative as potentially good.

Rules and Bureaucracy (DOT)

Claim: Process replaces judgment with stupidity.

Counterfactual: What if removing discretion reduces harm variance?

It is difficult to justify why identification was required to pay a bill. It is easy to justify why the clerk was not allowed to exercise judgment. Some systems are designed to fail predictably rather than variably. When average competence is low, that trade-off can be rational. The issue was not that this process was badly designed, the wider frame is that DOT front line staff should not be expected to exercise substantive discretion generally. There are probably other processes where deviation does create risks and proper identification is necessary.

Placebos and Simulacra Effects

Claim: Placebos are fake medicine and therefore illegitimate. Simulacra are misrepresentations of true value.

Counterfactuals:

What if placebo effects are real effects, just achieved differently?

Placebos reliably produce measurable improvements in pain, mood, and some functional outcomes. They are inexpensive, scalable, and often carry fewer side effects than pharmacological interventions. If the goal of a system is to improve wellbeing

rather than to preserve conceptual purity, dismissing placebos as illegitimate makes little sense.

Rory Sutherland presented a wonderful counterfactual for placebos in his 2009 TED talk *Life lessons from an ad man*. Here is an excerpt from the talk transcript:

Now, here is another naive advertising man's question again. And this shows that engineers, medical people, scientific people, have an obsession with solving the problems of reality, when actually most problems, once you reach a basic level of wealth in society, most problems are actually problems of perception. So I'll ask you another question. What on earth is wrong with placebos? They seem fantastic to me. They cost very little to develop. They work extraordinarily well. They have no side effects, or if they do, they're imaginary, so you can safely ignore them. (Laughter)

Researching and deliberately maximising placebo effects could reduce healthcare costs, improve access and deliver real health benefits. If an outcome improves and harm is minimal, the mechanism may matter less than the result. This does not justify deception without limits. But it does challenge the idea that only mechanistic interventions count as “real” medicine.

What if simulacra are a valid way of creating value that is intangible?

Sutherland’s overall claim in his TED talk is that creating “intangible” or “badge” or “perceptual” value may be a good thing for a variety of reasons. He suggests how intangible value can provide solutions to improve public transport, environmental problems, scarce resources and support progressive cultural change.

Counterfactuals do not tell you what to believe. They tell you what you might be missing. Steelmanning does not weaken conviction; it earns it. And when used openly, it offers something rarer than being right: the ability to influence without coercion — which is agency at high resolution.

Steelmanning Compassion

Counterfactuals can be used to improve systems. Steelmanning is often an effective way to find integrative solutions to apparent conflict, especially where good intentions and harmful outcomes coexist. This is particularly important for QIII cases as defined in the previous chapter, where actions can appear to reject compassion while claiming to serve it. To see how this process works in practice, consider welfare.

The strongest case for welfare is humane and pragmatic. People fall into hardship through illness, bad luck, trauma, caregiving responsibilities, or structural change. Left unsupported, these shocks compound. Temporary assistance prevents cascading failure — homelessness, family breakdown, chronic illness. In this sense, welfare is not indulgence. It is shock absorption. It buys time.

This intent matters. Welfare is not designed to reward failure or encourage dependence. It is meant to preserve dignity during disruption — to prevent people from falling so far that recovery becomes impossible. Few serious people deny this, nor should they.

So the relevant question is not whether welfare is compassionate in intent. It is whether it succeeds. That requires defining success in advance. What would successful welfare look like?

Successful welfare would be temporary for most people, intensive early, and increasingly unnecessary over time. People would enter the system during shocks and leave once stability and capability were restored. Time on support would be expected to shorten, not lengthen. Long-term reliance would be rare, explicit, and justified — not normalised.

Support would be front-loaded rather than flat. More effort would be applied early, when intervention matters most: income smoothing, skills repair, confidence rebuilding, and practical pathways back to independence. As capability returned, support would taper — not as punishment, but as a signal that autonomy is the goal.

Success would be measured by exits, not enrolments. Institutions would track how many people no longer need assistance, how durable those exits are, and what interventions caused them. Organisations that reliably restore independence would grow; those that do not would be redesigned or replaced.

The system would clearly distinguish between those who can recover and those who cannot. People with permanent or severe limitations would receive ongoing support without stigma. But that category would be the exception, not the organising principle.

Seen this way, agency and compassion are not opposites, even though they are often framed that way. Compassion without agency collapses into maintenance. Agency without compassion collapses into indifference. A welfare system that restores independence is not less humane — it is the only form of compassion that respects dignity over time.

This reframing implies a design change. Welfare should not be maintenance. It should be intervention — proactive, time-bounded, and explicitly designed around exit conditions. Not as coercion, but as respect. To expect someone to remain dependent indefinitely is not to honour their dignity; it is to abandon any expectation of recovery.

That redesign requires incentives to align with outcomes rather than process. Funding should be anchored to the value created when agency is restored, not the cost of providing services. Restoring independence creates measurable value for the rest of us: reduced future transfers, higher participation, lower social drag, and recovered human potential. Providers should be paid against that value, not reimbursed on a cost-plus basis for staying busy.

Under a value-based model, this often means paying more, not less. Paying more for success is not indulgence; it is how we stop paying forever for failure. When a provider generates a durable exit, they should share in the upside created by that success.

In practical terms, funding would be priced as a fraction of the value created, deliberately calibrated to clear four layers: direct costs, overheads, a base surplus (profit or retained surplus), and a growth premium to fund innovation and scale.

Today, many welfare and care organisations operate with deeply distorted cost structures. It is not unusual to see roughly 60% direct costs and 40% overheads, with no surplus and no growth capacity — and in some cases even higher overheads driving net operating losses. This is commonly framed by service providers as chronic underfunding. In reality, it reflects systems designed around compliance rather than outcomes.

The dysfunction is not confined to providers. Government funders are often far worse at converting funding into value. Large public agencies can control vast budgets while delivering no frontline services themselves, retaining the majority of funding for administration, policy, assurance, oversight, and compliance. Contractors are then paid a fraction of the total allocation and required to absorb extensive reporting, auditing, and “quality” regimes that add cost without adding care. By the time those burdens are met, very little funding reaches actual service provision. The result is a grotesque inversion: systems ostensibly created to support vulnerable people end up primarily funding their own oversight machinery. This is not accidental. It is what happens when funders are never held accountable for value delivered — only for process followed.

A more functional benchmark is well established in competent service organisations: roughly 70% direct costs, 20% overheads, and 10% surplus. In a not-for-profit context, that surplus is not extraction — it is resilience. In a value-based model, successful exits would be priced to clear that structure plus an explicit additional premium — for example, a further 10% — reserved for growth and learning. Organisations would earn that premium only when independence is genuinely restored.

Value-based pricing improves service provision on both sides. Providers are rewarded for restoring agency, not expanding bureaucracy. Funders gain visibility into where value is created — and where it is lost — before care even begins. Compassion is not reduced by this shift — it is made scarce enough to matter, and effective enough to compound. It

also restores agency to service providers themselves: they are no longer begging for funding; they are earning the right to grow through success.

Consider the counterfactuals this framing exposes:

- Wouldn't it be better if government relationships with funded care providers were anchored in outputs — restored capability and independence — rather than inputs and compliance?
- If the aspiration is genuinely to correct disadvantage rather than manage it, how could exit conditions not be central to the design?
- And if successful exits became more common, wouldn't that free resources — time, money, attention — for those who genuinely need longer support?
- If you received welfare, would you consider it compassionate to receive support that you were expected to remain dependent on for the rest of your life?

These counterfactuals do not reject welfare. They take its stated purpose seriously. They show how steelmanning and counterfactual thinking can turn apparent moral conflicts into integrated design solutions — not by denying compassion, but by aligning it with agency.

Chapter 6 Too Much of a Good Thing

Most failures of agency do not begin with bad intent. They begin with going too far. Surely you can't have too much of a good thing. Can you be too beautiful, too disciplined, too rich, too intelligent? In ordinary discourse these are framed as virtues. In the Paragentism frame these are secondary considerations. The primary consideration is the potential to take agency too far.

Individuals who exercise their agency to benefit themselves are at risk of going too far. You can simply magnify a good thing beyond the point where it is healthy. Too much beauty can leave you unable to notice and appreciate it. Too much discipline becomes an inability to adapt. Too much wealth becomes a full-time job to manage and may erode resourcefulness and initiative. Too much intelligence can lead to over complexifying decisions. What happens with individuals also happens inside systems.

Big, Bad and Ugly

Fuckwittery and scale are often correlated. There is nothing wrong with organisations scaling per se. The challenges arise because, as organisations scale, they must contend with both low-agency Fuckwits (who do dumb things) and high-agency Fuckwits (immoral operators), each of whom forces defensive behaviour that degrades the system for everyone else. These bad actors can be customers, employees, suppliers, rivals, or publics—organisations external to the firm, including media, NGOs, and government.

PayPal Problems

A clear example of scale going too far is PayPal. What began as a practical intermediary enabling trust between buyers and sellers has evolved into a system primarily optimised for managing risk at massive scale. At that size, discretion becomes dangerous, judgment becomes inconsistent, and process replaces responsibility. The organisation no longer resolves problems between reasonable humans. PayPal has built procedures, structures and policies to operate at this scale. All exhibit different kinds of Fuckwittery.

PayPal has pre-empted dealing with immoral customers. Its Terms and Conditions explicitly permit it to suspend, limit, or close accounts, withhold funds, and act without explanation or compensation, at its sole discretion. Customers must accept this asymmetry and erosion of their agency as a condition of use. My mistake was assuming that longevity, good behaviour, or reasonableness would override fine print designed to remove precisely those expectations.

My negative experience with PayPal is not a story about malice or incompetence. It is a case study in what happens when a system becomes too large to resolve ordinary problems in ordinary human ways. Each failure mode compounds the next. PayPal

operated immorally and in doing so lost a long-term customer and burdened itself with unnecessary costs.

1. Overcorrection

The episode began after getting back to Spain from the ISPIM conference in Bergin Norway. In 25 years as a customer I had only ever made payments with the platform. Using PayPal typically cost nothing, included payment protection and hid my credit card details from online sellers. This was the first time I tried to use the system to receive money.

I made two requests to friends to repay their share of the drinks bill from band rehearsals in Bergin. Both friends were back home, one in England and the other in Finland. It was only \$150 each, but PayPal's automated risk system flagged the transaction and suspended my accounts. Apparently, I these requests made me appear to be a money launderer, terrorist or drug dealer. I can't be sure why there was an issue because PayPal refused to ever explain their reasons for being Fuckwits about this.

This is a classic corporate overcorrection: a blunt control applied to manage tail risk at scale. The system prioritised false positives over false negatives, treating a legitimate customer as a threat. At small scale, a human might have contacted me to determine legitimacy. At PayPal's scale, the system acted first and asked nothing.

2. Oversight

Releasing the suspension required escalation through three layers. First, frontline customer service, who had no authority or information. Second, an internal risk or compliance team I was never allowed to deal with directly. Their initial response was to uphold the account closure and demand more info. After I supplied the requested information, that team deactivated my account permanently. I was advised PayPal was going to hold my money for 6 months and possibly punish me with a "high dispute transaction fee". It is not clear if this was something actual humans acted on just a second layer of automated system. Third, I had to initiate a further appeal process to undo the original decision and subsequent review. Each addition layer in this structure existed to manage employees as much as customers—because PayPal does not trust either group fully. Judgment was replaced by wrote compliance with procedure.

3. Overlay

The involvement of PayPal's Privacy Manager introduced an entirely separate organisational layer. This should never have been necessary. It existed only because the earlier systems failed. The attempt to resolve the matter by offering a form of "make-good" rather than fixing the root issue was another overlay—an additional compensatory mechanism layered on top of a broken process. This is textbook bureaucratic accretion: instead of removing the failure, the organisation adds another subsystem to absorb its consequences. It seemed it was cheaper and lower risk for

PayPal to try to buy me off than accepting responsibility and fixing things promptly, properly and transparently.

4. Offside

The final resolution required escalation outside PayPal entirely, to AFCA acting as a de facto Ombudsman. Only external force produced a proper outcome: a formal apology and compensation that mattered not because of its monetary value, but because it was correctly labelled as remediation rather than goodwill. When a customer must invoke an external regulator to resolve a routine error, the system has drifted offside—no longer aligned with its original purpose of enabling transactions between consenting parties.

PayPal was not evil. Its Fuckwittery was bad because it became too big to act humanely by default. My mistake was not reading the fine print in the first place and agreeing to give up my agency. Then I was left with accepting the result or going through the months of process to get satisfaction.

Did I go too far? Maybe it was stupid to pursue PayPal for so long and so hard. In the end I got my money, PayPal's \$200 bribe to go away and a further \$500 for the inconvenience. Not a very good hourly rate and there was some opportunity cost to not have time, intellect or energy to pursue other things. In my defence I was trying to "Be the change I wanted to see in the world". This quote about personal responsibility for societal improvement is widely attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. Even if he never said it, I am not sure he would agree with how I dealt with PayPal. Even so, I am sure that if more of us did not just accept getting shafted by large organisations, then life would be better for all of us.

The point of this case is not whether I was right or wrong to persist. It is that the same dynamic operates at every level. Individuals overshoot because effort initially works. Organisations overshoot because controls initially work. In both cases, the failure is not intent but scale.

Why Bigger Fails

Most agency failures are not caused by bad intent or laziness. They arise from **overextension**. A strategy that works initially is intensified past its useful range. Because early gains are real, escalation feels rational. Because collapse is delayed, the cause is misattributed. These are not binary errors but **errors of degree**—misjudging where enough becomes too much.

Law of Diminishing Returns

Additional effort yields less benefit.

After completing my PhD, I continued doing academic research. This made little sense even at the time. I had no intention of remaining in academia, and academic

publications have negligible commercial value in the business world. There is no money, no practical reputation transfer, and no leverage from journal papers outside narrow disciplinary circles. Yet I persisted. Partly out of habit. Partly because stopping felt like waste. Eventually I realised that the marginal return on additional research had collapsed. The real leverage was elsewhere: writing books that synthesised, integrated, and interpreted existing research for business readers. The mistake was not scholarship; it was continuing long after the return had flattened.

Negative Inflection Points

Past a threshold, improvement reverses into harm.

I love good food. I have invested heavily in becoming genuinely skilled at cooking—multi-course, white-tablecloth-level food at home. For years this increased joy, social connection, and craft satisfaction. The inflection point came when I switched sport after work for Amway as a side hustle. Physical output dropped. Intake did not. Food and alcohol quietly became dopamine substitutes. At my worst, in my early thirties, I ballooned to 138 kg. Some of this was simple arithmetic. Some of it was self-medication. The marriage I was in at the time was strained, for multiple reasons, and eating and drinking became ways to feel better without solving anything. Since then I have spent decades trying to re-establish a healthier equilibrium. I am in a much better place now, but at nearly 58 I still have not managed to get my weight under 100 kg. The improvement curve did not merely flatten; it inverted.

Salt Curves / Goldilocks Zones

Too little fails; too much breaks.

The Goldilocks and the Three Bears parable is usually treated as a children's story. I did not take it seriously until I re-encountered the idea through Edward de Bono. Many important input–output relationships are not linear, exponential, or power-law. They follow **salt curves**. De Bono's example is literal salt. With no salt, you die because your body cannot regulate blood pressure. With too much salt, you die of high blood pressure. Between those extremes is a viable band. Salt curves are hard to reason about because they have **three distinct response zones**: too little, optimal, and too much. Statistics handles monotonic relationships well—more is better, more is worse, or more is irrelevant. Salt curves break that intuition. We usually start with a change, see an early gain as we pass the dose threshold, then assume “more is better.” We fail to notice the upper inflection point where further input makes outcomes worse. Minimum efficient scale is discussed often. **Maximum efficient scale is usually ignored.**

Opportunity Cost

Every extra unit invested here removes options elsewhere.

I have tried seventy-four startups. That number is often read as stubbornness or lack of focus. It is better understood as disciplined exit. Stopping each one created space for the next. Many never reached formal business structures at all. I culled them during pre-lim feasibility when leverage was absent, timing was wrong, or the opportunity cost was too high. The harder question underneath this pattern was not whether to persist with a given idea, but whether I should be persisting with business at all. That question has never fully gone away. Opportunity cost is invisible because it shows up as things that never happened. Persisting in a bad idea does not just waste time; it prevents better ideas—or entirely different lives—from ever being tried. In this case, stopping was not failure. It was how optionality was preserved.

The above examples show how individuals are subject to the Law of Diminishing Returns, Negative Inflection Points, Salt Curves, and Opportunity Costs. At the individual level this usually appears as Quadrant I Gain or Quadrant IV Advantage taken to extremes. At the group level, however, the same dynamics scale differently. What begins as QI or QIV can tip into Quadrant III Collapse. The way welfare currently operates is an example.

Beating Welfare

Compassion for others is laudable. Some people genuinely need support — temporarily, sometimes urgently. That much should not be controversial. The harder question is whether our welfare systems have scaled too far and are now ineffective. In earlier chapters I described how welfare systems need to change to be moral with the Paragentism framework. What follows is my argument for how our current approach to welfare support systems are failing. That does not mean I reject welfare as a good idea, I just find the way it is being done now includes multiple examples of going too far.

In Australia, long-term welfare reliance is not marginal. Official reporting shows substantial numbers of working-age people remaining on unemployment benefits for many years, including tens of thousands for a decade or more, even during periods of strong labour markets. The longer people remain on income support, the more skills, networks, confidence, and employability decay. Poverty becomes persistent rather than transitional. Re-entry into work becomes harder, not easier.

This is not speculation. Internal government analysis shows that the share of welfare recipients on support for more than two years rose dramatically over the last fifteen years and remains high. At the same time, government-funded employment services place only a small minority of recipients into sustained work, despite increasing expenditure. The system absorbs effort without reliably producing exits.

The effects compound across generations. Australian longitudinal data show that children raised in welfare-reliant households are significantly more likely to rely on welfare themselves as young adults. This does not imply moral failure by parents or

children. It indicates that chronic dependency alters incentive structures, expectations, and trajectories. Where activation requirements have been applied, intergenerational reliance has measurably declined—suggesting that incentives and consequences matter.

From a Paragentist perspective, the diagnosis is structural. When assistance becomes permanent or unconditional, the recipient's incentive to rebuild agency weakens. Consequences are blunted. Learning is deferred. Dependency replaces adaptation. Risk is externalised rather than managed. Over time, recipients may choose maintaining support over pursuing autonomy, because the system rewards neediness more reliably than effort.

At the same time, ongoing support systems generate perverse incentives for providers:

- staff are paid by program continuation, not program exit;
- success is measured by service delivery, not recipient independence;
- institutional survival depends on persistent demand.

As a result, welfare systems rarely shrink because they worked. In my research I could not find a single instance of permanent welfare or ongoing support that resolved the disadvantage it was supposed to alleviate. Dependency becomes structurally stabilised. Both giver and receiver are locked into an agency-eroding equilibrium. This is not malice. It is incentive alignment failure.

Building permanent support systems breeds parasites—not because people are bad, but because systems reward parasitism.

By contrast, episodic support can be agency-enhancing. It reduces short-term agency to restore long-term agency. Examples include:

- short-term income support after job loss,
- temporary medical or disaster assistance,
- time-limited training or rehabilitation,
- bridge funding or emergency relief.

This kind of support helps people regain footing and re-enter trajectories where they can act for themselves. It scaffolds agency rather than replacing it. The critical distinction is not compassion versus cruelty. It is exit-oriented support versus dependency-preserving support.

An uncomfortable conclusion follows. In any other domain—medicine, engineering, public safety—the absence of a single celebrated case where a permanent intervention eliminated the problem it targeted would be taken as evidence of structural failure. Welfare is treated differently. Despite decades of expansion, reform, and expenditure, I could not find a single instance of permanent welfare or ongoing support that was

wound down because it resolved the disadvantage it was designed to alleviate. There are no victory laps. No sunset announcements. No institutions declaring their mission complete and closing their doors.

Instead, welfare systems persist, expand, rebrand, or tighten eligibility—rarely, not because they succeeded, but because dependency remains. This is not accidental. It is the predictable outcome of incentive alignment. When recipients are rewarded for need rather than progress, and providers are funded for continuation rather than exit, dependency becomes structurally stabilised. Both giver and receiver are locked into an agency-eroding equilibrium.

Again this is not a claim about bad people. It is a conclusion about bad systems. Permanent support systems breed parasites—not through malice, but through design. They convert temporary misfortune into chronic dependency and call the result compassion. Across the developed world, welfare systems are not restoring agency to people who need support; they are reliably manufacturing Fuckwits instead. That is immoral. That is a Quadrant III collapse dynamic.

How to Correct for Oversteer

When agency goes too far, the problem is rarely a single bad decision. It is drift. Oversteer accumulates gradually until control is lost. There is no universal fix sequence. Different contexts call for different interventions. What follows is a set of tools, not steps. Some are diagnostic, others corrective, and they can be applied in different orders depending on context.

Recognise Failure

One essential diagnostic tool is recognising whether you have gone too far, or whether an organisation has scaled beyond its effective limits. This judgement is necessarily subjective. Useful indicators include how often Fuckwittery occurs, how severe it is when it does, and how many Fuckwits per square metre the system now contains. When failures become systemic rather than local, something has gone wrong at the level of scale, incentives, or control.

The Volkswagen emissions scandal “Emissionsgate” is a clear example. In 2015, regulators discovered that Volkswagen had deliberately installed software—known as a “defeat device”—in millions of diesel vehicles. The software detected when the car was undergoing laboratory emissions testing and temporarily altered engine behaviour so the vehicle complied with regulatory limits. Under normal driving conditions, those controls were disabled, causing the cars to emit nitrogen oxides at up to forty times the legal thresholds.

This was not an accident, a miscalculation, or a rogue engineer. Roughly eleven million vehicles worldwide were impacted. The behaviour was designed, implemented, and maintained over years. Volkswagen had scaled to a point where meeting regulatory, commercial, and reputational constraints simultaneously was no longer possible using honest means. Rather than reduce claims, change products, or slow growth, the organisation chose deception. That decision signals oversteer. Oversteer failures often coincide with concealment.

Root Causes

Another diagnostic tool is searching for root causes. Toyota identified chronic waste, defects, and delays as process failures, then radically improved them through continuous improvement (kaizen), just-in-time flow, and empowering frontline workers to stop the line. The result was dramatically higher quality, lower cost, faster cycles—and Toyota became the most consistently profitable and reliable global automaker.

However, even trying to find root causes can be subject to oversteer. Corporates often construct Ishikawa (fishbone) diagrams to map causal chains. These can be useful, but they are not strictly necessary and can become simulacra—artefacts that exaggerate rigour without producing insight. Toyota runs internal competitions where teams must present elaborate Ishikawa diagrams to demonstrate the seriousness of their approach; a simple “eureka moment” is not accepted. The diagram becomes proof of work. The risk is mistaking methodological theatre for understanding.

Remove Causes

Some tools are subtractive rather than analytical. Removing causes—especially those with disproportionate impact or low removal cost—can materially reduce failure. Any root cause removed that reduces error is progress. Some gambling addicts voluntarily ban themselves from casinos. They do not cure the addiction; they remove access to the trigger. Agency is restored by subtraction, not discipline.

Reduce Scale

Reducing scale is a powerful corrective tool. Fewer people, fewer interfaces, fewer handoffs, and fewer exceptions reduce complexity rapidly. This option is often resisted because growth is culturally equated with success. There is a saying that you cannot shrink to success. Perhaps—but you can certainly grow into a bigger failure. In 2008 Starbucks closed roughly 600 underperforming stores, slowed expansion, and refocused on product quality and customer experience. Coherence returned. Growth later resumed on healthier terms.

Retune Links

Some failures arise not from core design, but from unexamined assumptions and poorly handled edge cases at scale. Retuning means revisiting what a system treats as normal, rare, or impossible, and adjusting how exceptions are handled. Often, large reductions in failure can be achieved without structural overhaul simply by making exception handling explicit. This is adjustment, not demolition.

A recurring failure mode here is accountability avoidance. Frontline staff are positioned not to solve problems, but to act as buffers protecting the organisation from the fuckwits who caused those problems in the first place. When this happens, outcomes are owned by no one.

I experienced this with Amazon after a forced Firestick upgrade broke Prime Video while leaving everything else functional. The update was pushed automatically, there was no rollback path, and no way to reach the engineers who approved or deployed it. Support channels existed to delay me and absorb my frustration, not to fix the fault or reverse the change. This was achieved by forcing me through pre-written scripts that consumed time and resolved nothing. Accountability evaporated into process.

This was entirely out of character for Amazon, which normally provides excellent customer support. The difference was backend IT. Their version of “support” appeared designed to avoid resolution rather than enable it. All that was required was a rollback to a previously working Firestick OS version, but rollback was not an allowed resolution path.

The failure then compounded when poor router UI design required a full reset to troubleshoot, after which the manufacturer—having prioritised security over recoverability—provided no password recovery path. The result was total loss of internet service until the ISP intervened.

Retuning links means reversing this logic. Shorten the distance between decision and consequence. Reconnect those who design, approve, or operate systems with the users they affect. Restore proportionality so edge cases trigger judgment, not automation. When links are retuned—rather than overlaid with new controls—systems become more adaptive, failures become cheaper, and agency increases on both sides.

Redesign Flows

When variability rather than scale is the problem, redesigning flows can help. Motorola identified chronic process variation as the root cause of cost and quality failures. Through Six Sigma discipline, it redesigned processes to reduce defects and cycle times. Large-scale improvements followed without abandoning scale. GE and others later copied the method.

Over time, however, Six Sigma can devolve from quality improvement into cost reduction by suppressing variability. Processes are tightened not to improve outcomes, but to eliminate deviation. The result can be efficiency without slack. Such systems perform well only under ideal conditions.

Efficient systems are fragile. Reducing transit time between flights shortens journeys—unless the first plane is delayed. Then you miss the second and become stuck in transit, waiting. The system is optimised for averages, not reality.

I saw the same pattern as a CX consultant. UX designers resisted parallel processes, believing their job was to minimise friction through simplification. What they missed was that different people experience friction differently. A single “optimal” path is suboptimal because one size fits all means it fits no one very well.

Dominant types want control and direction, so agency increases when they are given choices. Influencer types value engagement and enjoy longer interactions when there is someone interesting to talk to. Supporter types prefer low friction until something breaks, at which point they want escalation to a human who can fix it. Conscientious types want detail, transparency, and an audit trail, and are frustrated when information is hidden or collapsed.

In all cases, the objective of the workflow is the same; only the path differs. “Choose your own adventure” flows are more resilient and agency-enhancing than enforced uniformity. At scale, however, flow redesign is usually hijacked by nudges and cost reduction, trading robustness for apparent efficiency. Corporates generally prefer rich and compliant customers over more capable ones, because capable customers are harder to steer, cheaper to satisfy selectively, and more expensive to control.

Rebuild Systems

Sometimes inherited systems are themselves the root cause of failure. Large enterprise platforms such as SAP are a common example. SAP is extraordinarily complex, frequently cited in post-implementation reviews as regretted, and notorious for an inefficient user interface that actively damages productivity. User constraints are imposed not to help work get done, but to control risk at scale. The result is a system optimised for auditability and backward compatibility rather than effectiveness.

SAP is also as expensive as poison. Implementation costs routinely dwarf initial estimates, switching costs become prohibitive once embedded, and organisations find themselves locked into long-term dependency. Like terminal cancer, once it has spread through core processes it is extremely difficult to remove without major trauma.

By contrast, building a bespoke ERP—particularly now with AI-assisted development—is often cheaper and faster than SAP integration, with dramatically lower ongoing maintenance costs than SAP’s SaaS licensing. A custom system can start as a better fit

for how the business actually operates and evolve as needs change, rather than forcing the organisation to contort itself around inherited abstractions. Several of Elon Musk's companies rejected SAP for precisely these reasons. This was not novelty for its own sake. It was a refusal to let legacy infrastructure dictate behaviour, incentives, and organisational shape.

Relocate Focus

In some cases the correct response is not repair but relocation. Fujifilm responded to the collapse of photographic film by pivoting into cosmetics, leveraging its chemical expertise. It did not attempt to out-optimize digital photography. It changed arenas. Agency was preserved by moving, not by fighting.

Relax Convictions

Some forms of oversteer are not mechanical but ideological. These problems persist because convictions are too rigid to allow new evidence or perspectives to be considered. These convictions function as mechanisms of group cohesion. Shared certainty preserves identity and solidarity, even when that certainty blocks understanding. Relaxing convictions does not mean abandoning values—it means loosening certainty long enough to test alternative explanations without moral panic. This has been covered already under Steering 2 — Consider the Counterfactual.

A useful example comes from Levitt and Dubner's *Freakonomics* (2005), which advanced the controversial hypothesis that the legalisation of abortion following *Roe v. Wade* contributed to a reduction in violent crime roughly twenty years later. The claim was not that abortion is good or bad. It was that women who could have raised children, but judged their circumstances to be poor, chose not to. They were disproportionately poor, single, and Black. That exercise of agency resulted in fewer unwanted births, which in turn reduced downstream social harm by lowering later violent crime.

Two groups reacted with particular hostility. Right-to-life advocates rejected the argument outright because it conflicted with their conviction that abortion is wrong, even though they also regarded violent crime as wrong. The hypothesis required holding both harms in view simultaneously, which their moral framework did not permit.

Some pro-Black advocacy groups also rejected the argument because it appeared to locate the problem within Black communities themselves. This directly conflicted with their prevailing claim that disproportionate Black arrest and conviction rates for violent crime are primarily the result of biased law enforcement. It downplayed the role of adverse childhood conditions in poor Black neighbourhoods, especially for male children growing up without fathers present.

The point is not whether the hypothesis is definitively true. It is that it was plausible, testable, and informative—and that refusing to engage with it foreclosed learning. When

convictions harden into identity, systems stop being examined as systems. Complex causality collapses into moral positioning, and agency-enhancing insights are treated as threats.

I am right to choose, within limits, because of Paragentism. Pregnancy is serious, and agency matters precisely because the stakes are high. Early in a pregnancy, what exists is a clump of cells with no consciousness, no preferences, and no exercised agency. At that stage, abortion removes biological potential, not an agent. As pregnancy progresses, that balance changes. At some point—wherever the exact boundary lies—development crosses from pre-agency biology into emergent agency. Beyond that point, termination no longer primarily preserves choice; it begins to destroy the future agency of a child. For that reason, timing matters. A mother should not simply defer the decision until late term. Doing so is morally negligent. I do not know precisely where the crossover point is, but uncertainty about the boundary does not negate the existence of the boundary.

Before both of my sons were born, we underwent nuchal translucency screening to assess the likelihood of Down syndrome. The practitioner asked what we would do if the result were positive. We answered without hesitation: we would terminate. It was clear she judged us for that decision, but it was equally clear she was constrained. She could not force us to carry the pregnancy to term. She simply said the procedure could not be done there.

That exchange highlights a broader agency issue. When religious convictions are translated into law, they are often used to reduce the agency of others—anti-abortion statutes, bans on same-sex marriage, and similar interventions. Secular Fuckwits do the same thing, pushing laws to prevent adults from smoking cannabis or experimenting with psychedelics. I am comfortable with laws that constrain behaviour to prevent direct harm to others—do not drink and drive. I am far less comfortable with laws that exist to enforce moral conformity by stripping people of agency in decisions that primarily affect their own lives.

Relaxing convictions creates space for uncomfortable possibilities to be explored without immediately converting them into accusations. Many problems remain unsolved not because solutions are unavailable, but because certain explanations are considered unacceptable in advance. Relaxing conviction is not moral weakness. It is a prerequisite for understanding systems that actually work.

This chapter has covered the problem of taking things too far. Either as an individual being too extreme, or an organisation that fails due to problems emerging at scale. Correcting for oversteer is not about imposing control. It is about restoring

responsiveness. When systems grow faster than judgment, the solution is not more force, but better steering.

Chapter 7 Fouling Our Own Tank

Chapter 6 showed how systems foul themselves by over-optimising a single value at organisational scale. At global scale, the same mechanism does not merely degrade performance — it poisons the shared environment itself. Life consumes. That is not a metaphor; it is a biochemical fact. Every living system takes in energy and matter, transforms it, and excretes waste. A fish does not choose whether to shit. It shits because it is alive. If the tank is large enough, the waste disperses. If the tank is too small, the fish poisons its own environment. Other creatures in the tank may eat its shit and live. At no point does morality enter the system.

Most debates about consumption start in the wrong place. They begin by asking whether humans *should* consume less, as if consumption were optional, or as if restraint were a virtue capable of scaling. That framing mistakes a structural problem for a moral one. Consumption is not a behaviour layered on top of life; it is the mechanism of life itself. Any ethical system that treats non-consumption, abstention, or purity as a baseline is already incoherent.

What matters is not whether consumption occurs, but how its effects compound as scale increases.

Agency erodes with scale. It does not vanish at a threshold; it degrades continuously. Individuals can notice consequences, adjust behaviour, and respond to feedback. Small groups can coordinate informally. Larger organisations increasingly behave like systems responding to gradients rather than agents making choices. Incentives dominate judgment. Compliance replaces responsibility. Survival pressure overwhelms discretion. By the time scale is very large—multinational corporations, national governments, or humanity as a whole—the idea of collective moral agency is largely fictitious.

The Ouroboros Problem

This erosion of agency explains why environmental harm is so persistent despite widespread agreement that it is undesirable. What is commonly called “environmental damage” is not primarily the result of malice, ignorance, or weak ethics. It is an emergent outcome of delayed feedback, scale mismatch, and system coupling. The word *damage* is itself value-laden; it implies injury, wrongdoing, or deviation from a proper state. In reality, what we label damage is often the predictable consequence of a successful species exceeding the buffering capacity of its environment.

Humans did not fall out of balance with nature. We were evolved by nature to dominate niches. As apex predators, our success expresses itself as expansion. In most ecosystems, higher trophic levels mean fewer predators. Humans are an anomaly only in degree, not in kind. We expanded rapidly because selection favoured those who

could reshape environments to their advantage. From that perspective, the current predicament is not a moral failure but an evolutionary one: success without sufficient countervailing feedback.

What matters here is the pattern, not any single illustration. Across unrelated domains — biology, evolution, organisations, governance, and ideology — the same failure repeats. These systems share no values, no politics, and no moral language, yet they arrive at the same outcome. When explanations from orthogonal domains converge, the signal is structural.

If consumption were the problem, restraint would solve it.

If ethics were the problem, education would solve it.

If bad actor were the problem, removal would solve it.

None of those work.

The failure recurs because agency erodes with scale, control replaces design, and systems overshoot once feedback is delayed. Understanding why this happens requires moving past surface behaviours to the mechanisms that produce them. That is where the argument now turns.

Predator–prey dynamics are not moral relationships; they are feedback systems. Predation limits growth, and scarcity limits predation. When either side overshoots, pressure accumulates until behaviour, population, or structure changes. These dynamics do not optimise for harmony or fairness. They optimise for persistence.

In natural systems, this feedback is immediate and inescapable. Predators that overhunt starve. Prey that over-reproduce collapse their food supply. The cost of overshoot is paid quickly and locally, and the system corrects without deliberation.

Human systems differ only in degree. Through technology, coordination, and abstraction, humans have weakened or displaced many of the feedback loops that once constrained expansion. We have reduced predation, delayed scarcity, externalised waste, and globalised consumption. The predator–prey relationship has not vanished; it has been stretched across space, time, and systems until its corrective signals are no longer perceptible to individual agents.

The predator–prey dynamic has not disappeared; it has become more complex. Humans are preyed upon by viruses and bacteria, even as we incorporate remnants of past viruses into our DNA and depend on bacterial ecosystems in our gut. We are not outside nature observing it from above. We are embedded in a system of extraordinary complexity, simultaneously dominating and being constrained by forces operating at different scales and timescales. Moralising this complexity does not simplify it; it obscures it.

When feedback is tight, agency is meaningful. Actions have consequences that can be perceived and responded to. When feedback is delayed or displaced, agency erodes. Behaviour continues, but adjustment lags behind impact. What appears as irresponsibility is often simply action without signal.

Large organisations amplify these dynamics. Corporations at scale are not meaningfully agentic. They do not possess intention in the way individuals do. They respond to incentives, regulatory pressure, and survival gradients. Externalisation is not a moral failing of executives; it is a structural outcome. As organisations grow, they optimise for efficiency, specialisation, and predictability. These same properties create fragility. Variance is stripped out. Redundancy is removed. When shocks occur, the costs of fragility are pushed outward—onto workers, customers, suppliers, and ecosystems. Once consumption and externalisation operate at planetary scale, no individual, firm, or market actor can restore feedback alone.

State Constraint

Governments exhibit a similar pattern, with an additional danger. Unlike corporations, governments in modern democracies face few externally imposed constraints on their operating space. Democratic feedback is slow, blunt, and often dysfunctional. As states grow, their agency erodes internally while their power over others expands. This makes constraining large organisations—including governments—not only legitimate but necessary. Reducing the option space of a very large system does not meaningfully reduce agency, because little agency remains inside it.

Workers sit in an uncomfortable position within this structure. Employment trades autonomy for security. That trade-off is often rational in the short term, but its long-term cost is frequently mispriced. Workers lose control over what is produced, how it is produced, and what externalities are imposed. They are then blamed—explicitly or implicitly—for participating in systems they do not control. Moralising worker behaviour under these conditions targets actors with minimal leverage and maximal dependency.

Fragmentation appears, at first glance, to offer an escape. Many small producers, many independent decisions, many sources of variation. In many domains, fragmentation does improve resilience and agency. But it is not a universal solution. Where extraction draws from a shared, regenerative stock—fisheries are the canonical example—many rational, independent actors can still collapse the resource. This is not greed. It is a coordination problem under uncertainty with delayed feedback. Each actor's decision is locally rational and globally destructive.

The usual response is centralised control: quotas, licences, prohibitions. These often work in the narrow sense of slowing collapse, but they do so by stripping agency from precisely those actors who still possess it. Small operators bear the cost. Large

incumbents adapt, arbitrage, or lobby. The cure reproduces the disease at a different level.

Compounding this problem is the state's assumption of automatic ownership over commons. Governments routinely claim pre-emptive ownership of frequency bands, mineral rights, water, seabeds, and other shared domains before value is even discovered. This inserts friction at the point of exploration. The innovator or explorer must pay the state simply to try. Doing this after discovery is called nationalisation; doing it in advance is treated as natural. Morally and functionally, the difference is thin. Both suppress experimentation, delay discovery, and privilege incumbents who can absorb upfront costs.

These patterns are reinforced by the way modern systems respond to crisis. Problems are ignored until they become acute, then addressed with blunt, oversized interventions. Droughts lead to water monopolies. Financial instability leads to regulatory overcorrection. Environmental stress leads to sweeping prohibitions. This hysteresis—underreaction followed by panic—locks in loss of agency and entrenches centralised control.

Overlaying all of this is an ideology of restraint that mistakes suffering for virtue. Degrowth narratives argue that the solution to consumption is to have less of everything: fewer goods, fewer children, less energy, less ambition. This position is not merely impractical; it is internally incoherent. It treats human existence itself as a moral problem and collides directly with demographic reality. Asking societies to consume less by becoming poorer and smaller is as immoral as asking people not to reproduce because children consume resources.

What emerges from all of this is not a picture of moral failure, but of systems pushed beyond the range where their original assumptions hold. Consumption is inevitable. Scale erodes agency. Centralised control reduces it further. Fragmentation helps until it doesn't. Moralising outcomes that are structurally determined produces guilt, resentment, and symbolic action, not resolution.

The problem, then, is not that humans consume. It is that we have built systems that magnify consumption's side effects while simultaneously stripping away the very agency required to respond to them.

Why History Repeats

If the pattern repeats across biology, evolution, organisations, governance, and ideology, the cause is not local. It is structural. The failure is not that humans consume, but that the systems we have built to manage scale respond in the only way they know how: by suppressing agency rather than redesigning feedback.

Large-scale corporates optimise for efficiency, predictability, and throughput. These goals are rational locally, but destructive globally. Efficiency strips out redundancy, narrows variance, and hardens processes. The system becomes both easier to manage under expected conditions and catastrophically vulnerable under surprise. This fragility is not an accident. As Taleb outlined in *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder* (2013), becoming more fragile is the price corporate systems pay for optimisation.

When shocks occur, fragile systems overreact by exporting risk to protect themselves. Workers are forced to absorb volatility through job loss, casualisation and contracts. Customers are left with degraded quality, higher prices, worse customer support and/or dubious fine print. Suppliers carry uncertainty, the smaller ones being forced to accept less tenable supply conditions and extended payment terms. Ecosystems are polluted with waste. The larger the system, the more complete this externalisation becomes. No individual decision-maker in a scaled system intends harm but the structure guarantees it.

Legislation mirrors corporate Fuckwittery. Regulation fails for the same reason large organisations fail because it is designed around control rather than learning. Like corporates, the state assumes harm is prevented by reducing agency. Rules are written to constrain behaviour, close loopholes, and enforce compliance. This logic is at best incomplete and at worst wrong.

Control-by-restriction treats agency as a threat rather than as a for adaptation. It assumes that fewer options lead to safer outcomes, when in practice fewer options may lead to brittleness, evasion, and perverse optimisation. The regulatory state and the corporate bureaucracy converge on the same pathology because they share the same design assumption.

Large systems are difficult to steer. They are complex, politically entrenched, and structurally opaque. As a result, control tends to fall where it is easiest to apply. In regulation the burden tends to fall on individuals, entrepreneurs, and small firms. These are precisely the domains where agency, experimentation, and learning can still occur.

This asymmetry entrenches scaled incumbents. Large organisations can absorb compliance costs, hire specialists, and lobby for favourable interpretation. Small actors cannot. The result is not safer or cleaner systems, but fewer paths for experimentation and adaptation. The system becomes more legible to regulators and less responsive to reality.

Banking illustrates this clearly. In the early twentieth century, the United States had tens of thousands of independent banks, many formed locally to serve specific communities. Over time, regulatory burden, capital requirements, and supervisory risk increasingly incentivised scale. Today, creating a genuinely new bank in the U.S. is exceptionally difficult, even for well-capitalised groups. Consolidation has not been

driven solely by market efficiency, but by regulatory structures that filter out small entrants before they begin. The fact that Berkshire Hathaway investors backed Nubank in Brazil rather than attempting the same innovation in the U.S. is not an accident. It is a symptom of regulatory over-control suppressing enterprise in favour of corporatisation.

Degrowth Delusion

Much environmental thinking assumes that consumption itself is the problem and that restraint is the cure. Degrowth and negative-growth ideologies are the clearest expressions of this error. They treat reduced consumption as a virtue and assume that humanity can act as a single moral agent capable of collective self-denial.

This is absolute Fuckwittery. It is morally equivalent to arguing that people should not have children because children consume resources and create waste. It collides directly with demographic reality, ignores evolutionary dynamics, and offers no mechanism for adaptation. Restraint does not scale. Systems do not respond to sermons. When restraint is imposed at scale, it produces black markets, resentment, symbolic compliance, and eventual collapse.

Environmental problems exhibit delayed consequence. More generally systems rarely respond early. Problems are tolerated until they become visible, measurable, and politically undeniable. By the time intervention occurs, the response must be large to be seen as credible. This produces over-correction: monopolies justified “for safety,” centralisation justified “for coordination,” permanent controls justified by temporary crises.

Utilities, water authorities, dam projects, and quota regimes all follow this pattern. Under-reaction is followed by panic. The resulting structures persist long after the original conditions have changed. Agency lost during crisis is rarely restored. The system becomes easier to manage and harder to evolve.

Water Cost Leakage

In South East Queensland (SEQ), drought produced exactly the sort of over-correction that erodes agency and entrenches centralised control. During the Millennium Drought (early 2000s), water supply in Brisbane and surrounding regions fell to record lows, triggering severe restrictions that lasted for years and placed enormous pressure on households and businesses. In response, state authorities consolidated a patchwork of local water supply entities into a single statutory authority — Seqwater — with responsibility for the entire region’s bulk water storage, transport, and planning functions.

Prior to this period, SEQ’s water system was made up of many smaller, local catchment and supply units, including dams and reservoirs independently managed by councils and utilities. Over the course of drought and recovery, assets were progressively

transferred to the central authority: the Queensland Water Commission's strategy ultimately merged multiple entities such as the SEQ Water Grid Manager, LinkWater, and water recycling and desalination assets into Seqwater.

The result was a region-wide bulk water grid — an interconnected network of dams, weirs, treatment plants, desalination capacity, recycled water schemes, and around 600 kilometres of pipelines designed to move water where it was needed most. This infrastructure provided security against future droughts but came with enormous capital costs and long-term price implications. Seqwater now manages more than \$10 billion of water infrastructure and carries region-wide planning obligations.

This consolidation and over-investment did not abolish vulnerability; it merely relocated it. To pay for the expanded infrastructure and recover the costs of drought responses, bulk water pricing shifted to a capital-recovery model. A statutory review process was used to set prices sufficient to recover “prudent costs,” including a so-called drought allowance — effectively charging consumers for past crisis-driven investment.

Residents paid the price. In 2007–08, the Brisbane City Council bulk water price was approximately \$0.63 per kilolitre. Adjusted for inflation at 3% per year, that price would have risen to about \$0.85 per kilolitre a decade later. Instead, bulk water prices reached roughly \$2.75 per kilolitre — more than three times the inflation-adjusted level — reflecting the permanent cost of drought-driven centralisation and infrastructure overbuild rather than normal price escalation. Either the public water managers were negligent in failing to invest incrementally before the drought and were forced into a costly catch-up, or they massively over-corrected in response to it — or, more likely, both.

Before and during this period, household rainwater tanks were actively discouraged or constrained by regulation, justified on public health grounds such as mosquito control and water quality management. The effect was to suppress distributed, local buffering capacity in favour of dependence on central supply — reducing household agency first, then later justifying large-scale central infrastructure when that dependency became visible.

In aggregate, the SEQ water story typifies hysteresis: under-reaction to drought produces long, severe restrictions; panic-driven centralisation produces massive, expensive infrastructure; prices are raised to service the over-investment; and local agency — from small councils to individual households — is displaced in favour of a monolithic authority justified “for long-term security.” Once the crisis passes, the centralised structure persists, and the agency lost in response to drought is rarely restored.

Complexity parasites

As control mechanisms accumulate, complexity follows. Rules layer upon rules. Exceptions spawn sub-exceptions. Navigating the system increasingly requires specialised expertise. A parasitic class emerges — lawyers, consultants, compliance specialists, and lobbyists — whose livelihoods depend on the persistence of complexity rather than on the resolution of underlying problems.

This class is not malicious; it is structurally incentivised. Clear rules and fast resolution threaten revenue. Ambiguity sustains it. Complexity becomes self-justifying, defended as necessary even when it produces no better outcomes. The system appears sophisticated and well-governed while becoming progressively less capable of learning or adaptation.

Lobbying thrives in this environment. Complex law creates interpretive wiggle room that large organisations can exploit while claiming formal compliance. Influence shifts from behaviour to interpretation. Outcomes drift steadily away from original intent, shielded by procedural legitimacy.

Simpler law would constrain this behaviour more effectively, but simplicity removes leverage. It is far easier to game a complex system than a clear one. As complexity rises, enforcement becomes performative, trust erodes, and the appearance of control replaces its substance.

Gigaprojects democratic allergy

There are times when scale is critical. China and the UAE execute large infrastructure projects at far higher rates than democracies. This is often framed as evidence of authoritarian efficiency. The deeper issue is that democracies resist productive concentration of capital while tolerating massive bureaucratic concentration instead.

Capital that could build shared substrate is fragmented or blocked, while administrative control scales without corresponding accountability. The result is neither agility nor resilience, but expensive inertia. The problem is how systems are designed to behave once they grow. Fixing that requires redesign, not restraint.

How to Scale Consumption Without Bloating

Every system that governs human behaviour sits on a salt curve. With no constraint, outcomes are chaotic and predatory. With too much constraint, outcomes become brittle, oppressive, and incapable of adaptation. The mistake is not having a state, but assuming that more control always reduces harm.

A steelman is straightforward: some constraints are necessary. Speed limits exist because unbounded individual choice produces predictable harm. Road systems

generate negative externalities that individuals cannot price alone. Without limits, risk escalates, accidents increase, and social costs rise. Pure laissez-faire fails.

But current speed enforcement exposes how over-control in form becomes under-control in effect. Enforcement is sparse, probabilistic, and revenue-driven.

Governments under-invest in monitoring because they bear capital costs and rely on fine revenue. The result is tolerated harm.

If the goal were genuinely road safety, dense monitoring that eliminated speeding would be the obvious solution — especially when the cost of dense monitoring could be outsourced from government at zero capital cost. Fully privatised speed cameras would deliver near-perfect monitoring because profitability would drive deployment until marginal returns vanished. The state would pay nothing. The only loss would be fine revenue.

There is ample precedent for this logic. The Dutch Royal family effectively invented the limited-liability corporation to incentivise wealthy private citizens to invest in ships for colonisation and international trade, multiplying available capital without bearing the risk themselves. The purpose was not morality but leverage. Privatised speed enforcement uses the same principle: align private incentive with public outcome. That it is not adopted exposes an uncomfortable possibility — current policy tolerates injury and death in order to preserve a government revenue stream.

The state's role is not to suppress agency everywhere, but to place friction where agency has already collapsed — at scale — and remove it where agency still exists. This is not an argument for smaller government in the way it currently works. It is an argument for redesigning government to reduce Fuckwittery and restore agency.

State Constraint

Better agency via government does not imply abdication. It implies narrower, redesigned involvement. Where state action increases agency, it should expand. Where it suppresses agency through scale, complexity, or moral panic, it should retreat, fragment, or be restructured.

The following sections are not prescriptions for a better society. They are thought experiments in moral redesign — mechanisms for forcing bloated governance systems back from failure and toward agency maximisation.

Self-Employment vs. Employment

Modern economies claim to value entrepreneurship while structurally privileging employment. This does not mean businesses receive no tax concessions; it means the entire system is optimised around stable employment relationships rather than individual agency.

Employment income is predictable, legible, and easy for the state to tax, regulate, insure, and monitor. Self-employment is variable, opaque, and administratively inconvenient. That asymmetry matters.

The privilege shows up everywhere: labour law, payroll systems, welfare eligibility, credit assessment, insurance, and compliance regimes all treat employment as the default. Risk is socialised downward onto workers, while agency concentrates upward in organisations. Self-employment, by contrast, carries higher compliance burden, income volatility, financing penalties, and regulatory friction. Even where tax advantages exist on paper, the surrounding system nudges people back toward jobs rather than ownership.

The result is not that entrepreneurship is impossible, but that it is delayed, undercapitalised, and pursued only by those able to tolerate prolonged insecurity. Risk avoidance is rewarded. Experimentation is deferred. Exactly the opposite of what resilience requires.

Governments compound this failure by attempting to pick winners through grants and programs administered by people who have never built a startup. This is classic Fuckwittery. The state should stay out of selection entirely.

The real bottleneck is not ideas or talent. It is customers. Risk-avoidance by large organisations prevents new and small firms from ever landing meaningful clients.

A better mechanism is demand-side seeding. Organisations above a minimum revenue threshold (for example, \$2 million) would be required to source a fixed share of inputs (say 10%) from new or small businesses, or forfeit the equivalent as tax. This is not charity. Large firms still seek value and reliability. It simply counterbalances structural risk aversion that locks whales away from small suppliers.

Done correctly, this disadvantages scale without banning it. Large organisations are not punished for existing; they are required to regenerate the ecosystem they depend on. Scale ceases to be an extractive endpoint and becomes a responsibility — while freeing both capital and entire layers of grant bureaucracy that currently produce little beyond signalling.

Rationalising Research

The same mechanism can be extended to research if increasing national innovation is genuinely the goal. Large organisations could be required to allocate a portion of mandated external spend to privately funded research with universities or independent labs of their choosing.

This closes the loop between research and use. Funding flows from actors who want to understand and apply the findings, not from distant government programs. Accountability returns because research is valued by those who must act on it, not by

committees optimising for fashion or ideology. Academic freedom is preserved because demand determines relevance, not bureaucratic preference.

Universities will object that “pure research” would be starved. This claim is overstated and self-serving. Pure research has always been funded from surplus — historically via patronage, spillovers from applied work, or endowments. Treating permanent subsidy as a right has insulated large volumes of low-value, self-referential work from scrutiny.

If a field cannot attract any external interest, that is not evidence of hidden genius. It is feedback.

This is not an argument against pure research. It is an argument against using “pure research” as a shield for permanent subsidy. Demand-anchored funding disciplines indulgence without banning curiosity. It forces fields to earn slack before spending it.

Disciplines sustained primarily by ideological insulation rather than insight — Gender Studies being an obvious example — would be forced to earn their keep. Much of what is defended as “pure research” in these areas is recursive: work designed to validate pre-existing activist priors and perpetuate narratives of permanent disadvantage. Shielding this from accountability does not protect knowledge; it protects institutionalised bias.

Researchers would remain free to pursue whatever questions they like. They would simply need to persuade others of the value — or fund it from earned surplus rather than compulsory subsidy. That is not censorship. It is the restoration of agency and honesty to a system that learned how to spend other people’s money without consequence.

Worker Mobility

Low mobility turns employment into coercion. The problem is not job loss; it is income cliffs. Fear of no income at all traps people in roles long after they stop being productive, adaptive, or healthy.

Replace welfare-style unemployment insurance with worker-owned mobility accounts. Workers pay a mandatory minimum contribution while employed and may voluntarily contribute more. There is no maximum accumulation. This is not welfare. It is personal insurance — stored future agency.

Payout rates are capped (for example, 75% of prior income), but duration scales with accumulated balance. The reserve can be drawn whether someone quits, is dismissed, or is made redundant, subject to availability conditions and strict time limits. It funds retraining, self-employment, sabbaticals, or deliberate career resets.

Crucially, higher income produces better outcomes in two dimensions. First, 75% of a higher income is more than 75% of a lower one. Second, higher earners can contribute

more while maintaining their standard of living, extending their runway. Productivity compounds optionality.

This generalises a privilege already enjoyed by business owners. When someone sells a business, the proceeds function as a privately accumulated transition fund. No one calls that welfare. Mobility accounts give employees structural parity — the ability to convert past productivity into future freedom.

Do Not Tax Stored Agency

Governments routinely undermine agency by taxing delayed gratification, particularly through capital gains tax on business exits. By the time a business is sold, value has already been taxed repeatedly. Taxing the gain again penalises patience, not consumption.

This distortion is stark when contrasted with real estate. Property gains capture far less tax along the way despite relying on the same public infrastructure. Productive capital formation is punished; passive appreciation is privileged.

Delayed gratification is not rent extraction. It is the accumulation of optionality. If agency matters, deferred income should be taxed least, not most.

The deeper problem is time inconsistency at scale. Governments want revenue now, not later. They cannot defer gratification themselves. This delays or prevents economic independence, manufacturing dependency that is later “solved” with state retirement systems. The state congratulates itself for fixing the problem it created.

This pathology becomes grotesque when governments sell income-producing assets to service debt. Spend too much. Issue bonds. Struggle with interest. Sell productive assets. Permanently reduce income. Raise taxes. Spend more to placate anger. Repeat. This is not ignorance. It is scale without agency.

Temporary Scale

Some things require scale to build. None should retain scale to extract. Temporary concentration may be justified to build shared substrate. Fragmentation must follow. The internet is the exemplar. It required massive coordination and public investment, but ownership was never centralised. Protocols were open. Anyone could build. Innovation exploded because the substrate did not capture value.

USB succeeded for the same reason. FireWire failed despite technical superiority because it attempted to extract rents at the protocol layer. Apple’s proposed \$1-per-port fee turned shared infrastructure into a toll road. Adoption stalled. Better technology lost because the substrate tried to own the market it enabled.

The same pattern appears in AI. Microsoft did not fund OpenAI out of benevolence, but to create demand for Azure compute. That incentive is structural. By offering AI services at near-commodity pricing, adoption accelerates and value stays at the edges.

The danger is enclosure. If AI platforms extract rents at the interface, throttle access, or gate capability, adoption slows and agency collapses back toward incumbents. Scale has no restraint. Only structure constrains it. Protocols beat platforms. Standards beat monopolies. Infrastructure should enable markets, not own them.

This difference shows up clearly in take rates. Apple's App Store and Uber extract around 30% at the interface. That is not payment for infrastructure; it is a toll on participation. At those levels, scale stops enabling markets and starts owning them.

By contrast, enabling platforms operate at much lower extraction. eBay's take rate is roughly 13%. Airbnb's effective take for hosts is closer to 3%. At these levels, producers retain pricing power, exit options, and differentiation. Fragmentation survives.

This distinction also appears in regulation. Some cities responded to Airbnb not by disciplining extraction, but by banning competition outright. Hotels are licensed, capital-intensive, unionised, and politically organised. Airbnb hosts are fragmented and harder to monitor. Cities like Barcelona introduced licensing regimes for Airbnb hosts and then stopped issuing new licences.

This is best understood as incentive alignment, not malice. Hotels generate predictable tax streams. Airbnb hosts do not. Protecting hotels preserves administrative simplicity and revenue certainty. What presents as housing protection is often incumbent insurance. Agency is sacrificed not to protect citizens, but to stabilise the state's operating model.

Freeing Fragmentation

Imagine infrastructure that amplifies discovery and trust while leaving production, pricing, and exit at the edges. Not neutral — infrastructure never is — but non-extractive.

This already exists. I recently discovered a local Australian supplier, Online Safety Workwear, selling blank polo shirts via eBay. They offer 220–230 GSM garments at around \$17 per unit. Mainstream fashion brands sell thinner shirts at multiples of the price. The difference is branding, not quality.

OSW succeeds because eBay provides discoverability and trust without owning supply. OSW controls pricing, product, and exit. eBay takes a fee but does not enclose demand. With over 65,000 orders and a perfect five-star rating, quality beats mediocrity when the substrate enables rather than extracts.

Potatogate

Commons fail in two predictable ways. They fail when extraction is uncoordinated and exceeds regeneration. They also fail when coordination hardens into permanent control. The first failure is familiar and intuitive — overfishing, deforestation, depleted aquifers. The second is less obvious and, in modern economies, far more common: systems built to prevent scarcity persist long after scarcity has passed, suppressing quality, diversity, and agency.

Western Australia's potato industry is a near-perfect case study. The Potato Marketing Corporation (PMC) was established in 1946 under the Marketing of Potatoes Act, in a post-war environment where food security was a legitimate concern. Potatoes were a staple crop. Shortages were politically unacceptable. The PMC's mandate was to stabilise supply and prices by coordinating production across growers. This was not environmental protection. It was risk management: prevent oversupply, avoid gluts and shortages, and guarantee year-round availability.

At inception, this was understandable. It was early-state Fuckwittery of the forgivable kind: a blunt instrument applied to a real problem under conditions of uncertainty. The problem is not that the PMC existed. The problem is that it scaled — and then outlived its justification.

As the PMC accumulated authority, it moved from coordinating outcomes to micromanaging behaviour. It controlled who could grow potatoes, how many they could grow, and which varieties they were permitted to plant. Production quotas and licensing regimes were enforced. Variety mixes were mandated. Growers were no longer responding to consumer demand or agronomic opportunity; they were responding to compliance requirements.

Predictably, growers optimised for what the system rewarded: tonnes per hectare, durability, and regulatory legibility. The result was convergence on washed white potatoes — predominantly Nadines. Nadines are high-yield, resilient, and easy to standardise. They are also bland. Varieties that taste better — Kipflers, reds, and niche potatoes — are lower yield, more variable, and harder to fit into rigid quota regimes. Quality and diversity became liabilities.

This was not a market failure. It was a control failure. The PMC treated the commons problem as one of grower behaviour rather than aggregate supply. Instead of setting total production limits and letting growers decide how to meet them, it told actors what to grow, how much to grow, and in what mix. Centralised control replaced coordination. Innovation stopped. Consumer choice narrowed. Mediocrity stabilised.

Crucially, the PMC did not self-correct when the original scarcity problem disappeared. By the late twentieth century, potato shortages were no longer a credible risk. Supply chains were robust. Consumers were more sophisticated. Yet the control structure

persisted, defended by incumbents and administrators whose legitimacy depended on its continuation. This is the signature of scaled governance failure: systems that cannot relinquish control once their original purpose has passed.

Agency eventually reasserted itself through a single actor. Tony Galati, a grower and retailer, openly defied the PMC. When prevented from selling potatoes beyond his quota, he gave them away for free. When blocked from expanding through traditional wholesale channels, he vertically integrated through Spudshed. His actions were not reckless. They were diagnostic. The system preferred waste to adaptation. Compliance to choice.

Galati exposed a regime that would rather see potatoes destroyed than allow market correction. Public sentiment followed reality. The PMC was abolished in 2016 — not because enforcement failed, but because the structure had become indefensible. The lesson generalises cleanly.

Commons are not protected by telling participants how to behave. They are protected by constraining totals and allowing behaviour to adapt inside those limits. A fishery collapses because too many fish are removed, not because the wrong boat caught them. A staple crop fails when supply collapses, not because growers were insufficiently instructed.

Where coordination is required, it should be outcome-based and temporary, not behavioural and permanent. Enforce aggregate limits. Measure regeneration. Then step back. The WA potato system failed not because coordination was wrong, but because control replaced coordination — and then refused to die. What began as scarcity protection became quality suppression. What began as stabilisation became enclosure. Commons require coordination without enclosure — and the humility to dismantle controls once their purpose has passed.

All Rise for the Lagistrate

Law would work better if it were designed to maximise agency rather than manage compliance. That implies different design criteria to those currently in use.

First, law should be simple enough to be remembered. Rules that require professional intermediaries to interpret already privilege scale and suppress agency. Second, the larger the organisation, the harsher and more constrained its operating space should be. Scale collapses agency; law should apply friction where agency is already gone and remove it where agency still exists. Third, law must be inoculated against parasitism — designed so that no class can profit from prolonging conflict or manufacturing complexity. Modern law fails all three.

My divorce provides a concrete example. My wife and I had already agreed on how to divide our assets. There was no dispute. No power struggle. No unresolved conflict. We

simply needed to formalise an agreement we had already reached. That should have been trivial. It was not allowed. We were required to retain separate lawyers.

There is a steelman for this rule. Family law assumes asymmetry of power, hidden coercion, or emotional pressure. Separate representation is meant to protect weaker parties and prevent unfair outcomes. As a safeguard, the intent is defensible.

But complexity flips the incentive. Both lawyers explicitly attempted to reopen settled matters. Mine said, unprompted, “I can get you more.” My ex-wife independently reported the same from hers. This was not subtle guidance. It was an explicit invitation to escalate conflict neither of us wanted. The shared asset pool became fuel.

This was not ambiguity. We were already aligned. The problem was structural: the system sets us as adversaries and rewards the counsel for escalation. Lawyers are paid more when disputes last longer. Shared assets are consumed by the process that claims to protect fairness.

This was both an individual moral failure and a structural incentives failure. The system does not force lawyers to behave this way — but it selects for those who will. Those oriented toward resolution, simplicity, and closure are economically disfavoured. Over time, the profession filters itself. Law becomes dominated by people comfortable monetising conflict, ambiguity, and delay. This is why lawyer jokes exist. They are not ideological slurs. They are experiential compression.

Contrast this with medicine. Doctors also operate under extreme expertise asymmetry. Yet even in private practice, GPs rarely extend consultations unnecessarily to extract more money. Over-servicing is culturally shameful, professionally sanctioned, and reputationally punished. A good GP restores function and exits. Chronic dependence is a failure mode, not a business model. Law evolved the opposite norm. Duration is revenue. Conflict becomes the product.

Paragentism does not propose moral scolding. It proposes redesign. Most legal disputes begin as agreements that later fracture: marriages, partnerships, employment arrangements, commercial deals. Instead of treating breakdown as an adversarial contest, imagine treating these explicitly as discontinuing agreements.

Replace adversarial representation with a single neutral professional: a Lagistrate — a lawyer-magistrate whose role is foresight, not advocacy. The Lagistrate helps parties surface counterfactuals when they form an agreement and writes them into clear, executable terms in plain language.

If a dispute arises later, it is resolved by reference to the original agreement by the same Lagistrate — or a successor bound to its structure. Fees are fixed. Escalation is non-billable. Resolution is the objective. This removes the parasite’s food source. No arms race. No incentive to prolong. Less lawyers. The Lagistrate restores law to coordination

rather than extraction — and makes conflict resolution boring again. Law works better when it is legible, finite, and asymmetrically strict — permissive where agency exists, constraining where it does not. Complexity does not protect agency. It consumes it.

This chapter has extended that same logic beyond individuals and firms to markets and, ultimately, the ecosphere. A system fouls its own tank not because it produces waste, and not because its occupants lack virtue, but because scale allows waste to accumulate faster than any local corrective can respond. In natural systems, this is rarely fatal. No single organism controls the whole environment. Predation, competition, and fragmentation prevent any one agent from consuming both the system and the mechanisms that constrain it.

What breaks this pattern is hyperscale. When systems consolidate, optimise for cost leadership, and eliminate redundancy, they also eliminate the constraints that once limited their own expansion. At that point, failure is no longer correctable locally. It propagates.

Humans are not failing because they consume too much, or because they lack the right ethics. As a species, we are structurally incapable of coordinated agency at planetary scale. Appeals to collective restraint mistake an aggregation problem for a moral one. The only interventions that have ever worked in complex systems are those that prevent total consolidation: fragmentation, bounded scope, enforced limits on scale, and the deliberate reintroduction of structural friction. Survival, in this frame, does not come from managing consumption, but from preventing any single system from becoming large enough to poison the entire tank.

At large scale, constraint does not remove agency; it applies where agency no longer operates. Paragentism treats such constraint as regulation of dynamics, not restriction of agency.

Chapter 8 Catalysing Agency

The previous chapter showed how scale erodes agency. It follows that the state must be constrained if agency is to be preserved.

Agency is not merely the capacity to choose. It is the capacity to execute choice in the world. When agency can be exercised reliably—without arbitrary friction or capricious override—it becomes sovereignty. Sovereign agents are free. Not because they face no constraints, but because they can act, bear consequences, and remain intact.

One effective way to constrain the state is to fragment it. Fragmentation preserves individual sovereignty by preventing power from accumulating unchecked. This matters because when agency collapses at scale, sovereignty becomes scarce—and wherever sovereignty is scarce, it concentrates. Concentrated sovereignty at the scale of the state magnifies the potential harm caused by bad actors.

The problem is not concentration of power.

The problem is how power becomes concentrated, and how concentrated power is used.

At scale, individual sovereignty collapses. We no longer have agency over systems directly; we can only act through them. Power does not disappear under fragmentation. It localises—concentrating authority at multiple, constrained points so agency can still operate. The two World Wars can be read as catastrophic failures of concentrated state power at continental scale. The formation of the European Union was a direct response to these and earlier pan-European conflicts.

Be the King, Not the Tyrant

Leadership exists because sovereignty cannot be evenly distributed. Someone will hold more of it. The moral question is not whether power is concentrated, but whether it is used to control behaviour—or to make others sovereign in turn. Paragentism asserts that leadership must focus on developing agency at all levels.

A King uses power to propagate sovereignty.

A tyrant uses power to replace it.

Leadership is a hierarchical interaction involving individuals. One party holds higher status and therefore has greater capacity to exercise power and authority. Leadership occurs with the self, and within relationships, teams, and organisations. With that capacity comes responsibility for the conditions under which others can think, choose, and act as agents.

Steering 5 is about how to leverage status: whether you consume agency, replace it, suppress it—or catalyse it.

Status, Power, and Authority

Status is held. Power and authority are exercised. Status is your relative position within a hierarchy. It is contextual, dynamic, and only meaningfully comparable between individuals. Power and authority are the mechanisms through which that status produces real effects.

- Status answers: Where do I sit relative to you?
- Power answers: What can I cause or prevent?
- Authority answers: What am I legitimately entitled to decide, enforce, or correct?

Once hierarchy exists, influence is unavoidable. Expectations shift, deference appears, constraints emerge, and options are shaped—even in the absence of explicit commands. Whether or not power is formally exercised, status alters behaviour. Denying this does not remove asymmetry; it merely disguises how influence is operating, making it harder to see, harder to contest, and harder to constrain.

Much contemporary leadership language reacts to this discomfort by attempting to erase hierarchy rhetorically.

“Empowerment” is the dominant example. At its best, empowerment is an attempt to fix undue influence: situations where authority is misused, agency is suppressed, or power becomes arbitrary. That impulse is not wrong. Hierarchies can and do cause harm. But empowerment, as it is commonly practised in woke and new-age contexts, attacks the symptom rather than the mechanism. Instead of steering how power is exercised, it denies that power exists at all, while permitting the exercise of authority without the corresponding responsibility being owned.

This form of empowerment (often justified as a corrective for assumed historical disadvantage) produces entitlement rather than agency. Authority is asserted without accountability. Standards are softened. Boundaries are blurred. Status is symbolically equalised without corresponding changes in capability, responsibility, or consequence.

The result is not increased agency. It is dependency dressed as virtue. When leadership responsibility is abdicated rather than redesigned, agency does not rise to fill the gap. It collapses. If agency existed in the first place, this intervention does not allow it to flourish. A different paradigm is required.

Leaders as Agency Catalysts

In chemistry, a catalyst facilitates a reaction without being consumed by it. Leadership works the same way. The leader does not act instead of the other person, absorb their responsibility, or permanently carry their load. They reduce friction, clarify conditions, and encourage agency to be exercised. A leader is not depleted by exercising leadership; they are enhanced.

Good leaders help their followers increase their resourcefulness. Over time, this tends to raise follower capability, confidence, and status. As those followers become more agentic, their capacity to lead also increases. When this occurs, leadership scales rather than bottlenecks.

Leadership as a catalyst for agency accepts hierarchy. It accepts status. It accepts asymmetry. It uses them deliberately to produce agency rather than suppress it. Where empowerment attempts to neutralise influence by pretending it is not there, Paragentic Leadership steers influence by making it visible, bounded, and productive.

Leadership defined this way is the opposite of Fuckwittery.

Steering 5 is about choosing, deliberately, to use status-backed power and authority to catalyse agency rather than consume it, replace it, or suppress it.

Status that credentials leadership can arise from multiple sources:

- Personal — charisma, presence, personal gravitas
- Positional — formal role or legal mandate
- Expert — knowledge, skill, experience
- Ownership — control of money, information, or assets
- Social — network reach and mobilisation power

Which form dominates depends on context, not ideology. Status is necessary. Without hierarchy, coordination collapses and responsibility diffuses. Once status exists, it automatically influences behaviour. The question is how—and whether that influence is intentional or merely consequential. Status can be intentionally exercised by leaders in four fundamentally different ways.

QI Gain

Catalysed agency that benefits both parties. Status is used to reduce dependency and increase the other person's capacity to act. Agency compounds and both parties benefit. This is the stable optimum.

QII Sacrifice

Agency for others at persistent cost to self. Status is used to absorb responsibility rather than catalyse it. The leader carries the load, dependency grows, and agency withers while followers are temporarily lifted. Over time, the leader depletes and their personal status erodes in the eyes of their followers.

QIII Collapse

Agency suppression for control or risk avoidance. Status is used to constrain, monitor, and punish initiative. Agency is suppressed in the name of control or risk avoidance. Much corporate management operates here by design, and the leader again lowers their personal status in the eyes of their followers, even if formal authority is retained.

QIV Advantage

Extracted action against the follower's interests. Status is used to compel behaviour not in the other party's immediate interest. This may be episodically necessary, particularly in crises, but it is corrosive if it goes too far or becomes habitual.

Status itself is not the problem. How it is exercised is. People who claim to be “anti-status” are usually reacting to specific forms of power, not hierarchy itself. Few object to increasing expert status by learning more or expanding networks to enhance social status. Resistance tends to appear where authority is opaque, coercive, or hard to exit. The error is treating all status-seeking as suspect rather than discriminating between how authority is acquired and how it is exercised.

Status exists in selling, negotiation, and leadership contexts. What differs is not whether hierarchy exists, but how it is structured and who is responsible for the arena. These are modes, not identities—and they can change within the same interaction or relationship.

- **Selling** — Influence without authority. Status is asymmetric and unfavourable. The other party owes the seller nothing. The seller's task is to get buy-in.
- **Negotiation** — Influence among near-equals, bounded by mutual walk-away power. Each counterpart's task is to achieve acceptable agreement under constraint.
- **Leadership** — Influence with authority. Status is asymmetric and durable. The leader is responsible for standards, correction, and outcomes.

In practice, these modes often occur sequentially. In business development, a supplier sells to establish buy-in, negotiates price and scope, then leads during delivery. Confusion arises when people deny the mode they are actually in.

Why Leaders Must Be Agency Catalysts

A system optimised for preventing large-scale harm is not optimised for preserving agency.

The European Union was conceived as a peace architecture. Europe is a manufactured agglomeration of historically distinct peoples, languages, regions, and wealth distributions. For centuries, competition between sovereign European states produced recurring wars, twice escalating into continent-wide catastrophe in the twentieth century. The EU's core logic was to make war structurally irrational by binding states

together economically, legally, and administratively. Pooling sovereignty upward to prevent large-scale violence was a rational trade-off.

But at EU scale, decision-making is distant from consequence, correction is slow or impossible, and exit is treated as a systemic threat rather than a legitimate choice. Safety hardens into control. Stability becomes the success metric. This is how Fuckwittery emerges at scale.

Two instructive examples are Catalonia's bid for independence and the EU privacy law General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Catalonia

Spain is not a culturally or economically homogeneous nation. It is a manufactured agglomerate of regions with distinct languages, histories, and wealth levels. Catalonia is one of its most productive regions. Its grievance was explicit: taxation without representation and redistribution without local control.

Catalonia contributes roughly 20% of Spanish tax revenue while receiving only around 14% of public spending in return—a fiscal deficit estimated at roughly 9% of Catalonia's GDP, or more than €20 billion annually. This is not a marginal budgetary dispute. It reflects a structural extraction with limited regional authority over taxation or spending priorities. The grievance mirrors the justification used by the American colonies in separating from Great Britain.

On 1 October 2017, Catalonia held an independence referendum. Among those who voted, approximately 90% voted in favour of independence, with turnout around 43%. The Catalan Parliament subsequently declared independence. Spain responded by invoking constitutional emergency powers, dissolving the regional government, charging leaders with sedition, imprisoning several senior politicians, and forcing the regional president into exile.

The EU backed Spain. It refused to recognise Catalonia as a sovereign state and made clear that an independent Catalonia would not be recognised as part of the EU or granted membership. Fragmentation was blocked.

This stands in contrast to Brexit, where EU opposition could not prevent exit. The difference was scale and leverage: a member state could leave; a region could not.

The EU's motivation is intelligible. Preventing fragmentation preserves stability. But the consequence is clear: when exit is denied, sovereignty becomes fictive.

GDPR

GDPR was designed to reduce harm from unchecked data exploitation in a digital economy where individuals had little visibility or control.

The core abuse was economic and asymmetric: individuals gave up private behavioural data for free, while firms aggregated and monetised that data—either by selling it directly or by using it to predict, influence, and manipulate purchasing behaviour in ways that reduced individual agency.

Something had to constrain this. GDPR chose the wrong mechanism.

Consent banners did not restore agency. They converted exploitation into permission. Enforcement has been inconsistent, compliance burdens have favoured incumbents, consent fatigue has proliferated, and real privacy outcomes remain weak. Calls for “GDPR 2.0” largely amount to more procedure layered onto the same failure mode.

What GDPR should have done was change the economics rather than formalise consent. It could have prohibited coercive data-for-access trades outright. Or it could have required firms to pay for personal data at prices high enough to make indiscriminate surveillance uneconomic.

GDPR did neither. Instead, it licensed the existing trade and eroded the agency of the very individuals it claimed to protect. Agency was not restored; it was bureaucratized. This is QIII collapse at continental scale.

Eight years on, GDPR remains unrepealed and materially uncorrected—an enduring monument to state Fuckwittery.

These examples complete the argument from the previous chapter. At large scale, agency collapses and systems must be constrained. While the state can, in principle, constrain corporations, NGOs, and NFPs, the harder question remains: who constrains the state?

Power must be concentrated somewhere. Accountability mechanisms exist not because power is evil, but because immoral actors are inevitable and individual agency cannot operate at scale.

Once power is localised—within governments, organisations, teams, families—the question changes. Leadership becomes unavoidable. And with it comes moral responsibility.

This is why leaders must be agency catalysts.

How to Lead for Agency

Up to this point, Paragentism has treated leadership as a problem of **agency under hierarchy**. Steering 5 asks a practical question: once status exists, how should power and authority actually be exercised to catalyse agency rather than suppress it?

Answering that question requires a language for **how leaders intervene**. Most leadership discussion collapses into moral exhortation (“be inspiring”) or abstract

virtues (“be authentic”), neither of which explains what a leader should *do* differently on Monday morning. What is needed here is a set of concrete, observable mechanisms. This is why theoretical framework supporting the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) appears at this point in the book.

I was drawn to the MLQ because it is one of the few leadership frameworks with decades of repeated empirical validation. Across many studies, its dimensions have been shown to correlate strongly with leadership effectiveness, follower satisfaction, and discretionary effort. When I began using it analytically and operationally—treating its dimensions as tools rather than labels—I found it could explain an extraordinary proportion of leadership outcomes. Using MLQ dimensions, I was repeatedly able to account for more than 80% of the variance in effectiveness, satisfaction, and discretionary effort produced by leaders. In most social science domains, 30% explanatory power is considered strong. This was remarkable.

That experience suggested that the MLQ was capturing something structurally real about how leadership works. It did not feel like a personality inventory or a motivational theory. It felt like a map of the control variables leaders actually use, whether consciously or not.

In this chapter, the MLQ framework is not treated as a personality assessment or diagnostic tool. It is used as a control vocabulary: a way to name distinct leadership interventions so their effects on agency can be examined, combined, bounded, and sequenced.

The MLQ distinguishes between three broad classes of leadership behaviour: **transactional**, **laissez-faire**, and **transformational**. These are not identities or moral types. They are observable ways leaders influence behaviour.

Transactional leadership (A, C, and D) focuses on securing **required performance** from followers.

Assertive (A) leadership sets clear expectations, roles, standards, and decision rights. It also establishes explicit incentives. Assertion is not only about clarity; it includes the use of both **tangible rewards** (such as commissions, bonuses, promotions) and **intangible rewards** (recognition, group membership, trust) to reinforce required behaviour.

Corrective (C) leadership maintains standards and accountability. It intervenes when performance drifts, closing the feedback loop between action and consequence. Correction must be **fast** to be effective. Delayed correction is not neutral; it allows drift to compound and signals that standards are optional.

Deferred (D) leadership enforces boundaries through exit when responsibility is persistently avoided or when catastrophic failure has occurred. Deferral does not mean

neglect. It refers to situations where feedback is necessarily delayed: either because failure must cross a clear threshold (chronic underperformance), or because consequences must be addressed after a crisis has passed. Importantly, **late correction is not deferred leadership**; it is a failure of corrective leadership.

Corrective and deferred leadership are often misunderstood as punishment. They are not. **Non-contingent punishment has never worked**; it produces resistance. **Poorly applied contingent punishment** produces compliance at best—work-to-rule behaviour—and reliably destroys satisfaction and discretionary effort. Proper ACD leadership is not punitive. It is about maintaining a credible relationship between standards, action, and consequence so agency can operate within a stable arena.

Transformational Leadership (IMLOP)

Transformational leadership (IMLOP) operates on a different axis from transactional leadership. Where transactional leadership (ACD) secures *required performance* through clarity, incentives, correction, and boundaries, IMLOP mobilises **discretionary effort**—effort people give voluntarily because they *want* to contribute.

These are not personality traits, moral types, or leadership identities. They are **intervention modes**: distinct ways a leader can influence how followers interpret their role, their work, and themselves. IMLOP does not replace ACD. It builds on it, activating motivations that compliance systems cannot reach.

Iconic (I) leadership operates through presence, charisma, and personal magnetism. Unlike ACD, which appeals to rational exchange (“do X and receive Y”), Iconic leadership motivates behaviour that is *not rationally worth it* under transactional terms. Followers act because they want to be associated with the leader, approved of by them, or part of their mission.

This is the form of leadership that can take people into battle, into sacrifice, or into extraordinary effort where reward is uncertain and risk is real. The follower does not comply; they *commit*.

Charisma is often treated as an innate trait, but this is misleading. Work such as *The Charisma Myth* (Olivia Fox Cabane, 2012) shows that charisma can be developed as a skill rather than assumed as a given. Presence, warmth, and power are one route to Iconic status—but not the only one. Leaders who **demonstrably place the group ahead of themselves**—absorbing cost, taking risk, or foregoing personal gain for collective benefit—often become iconic through credible self-sacrifice. This is the logic of the servant leader. Followers commit not because the leader is impressive, but because they are trustworthy at the deepest level. In both cases, the effect is the same: voluntary commitment beyond what ACD alone could secure.

Lateral (L) leadership expands the option space. Where ACD prioritises reliability and tends to suppress deviation, L deliberately **permits temporary non-compliance** in service of learning, adaptation, and innovation. It reframes constraints, invites experimentation, and encourages risk-taking that transactional systems would normally quash.

Critically, L includes *shielding followers from organisational punishment* while they explore. The leader creates a safe pocket in which deviation is tolerated so long as it serves discovery. Followers engage because they want to innovate, solve problems, and create—not because they are required to.

Moral (M) leadership uses culture as a **control system**. Where ACD governs behaviour through procedures (what to do) and policy (what not to do), culture governs the grey space between them. Shared values guide judgement when rules are silent, conflicting, or incomplete, and determine when positive deviation is warranted.

Moral leadership is not about moralising. It is about *living the values visibly* and encouraging followers to align their own judgement accordingly. ACD drives compliance; culture enables agency. When followers understand what the organisation stands for, they can act responsibly without waiting for instruction—provided their actions align with those values.

One-on-One (O) leadership individualises influence. ACD necessarily force-fits individuals into organisational needs; O moderates that fit by recognising the follower as a distinct person with specific motivations, constraints, and aspirations.

This mode resembles Carl Rogers' concept of unconditional positive regard. The follower feels seen, respected, and supported as an individual. As a result, they want to please the leader and contribute voluntarily. This is a *matriarchal* dynamic rather than a patriarchal one. Used well, O strengthens agency. Used excessively, it risks indulgence or dependency, which is why it must be bounded by ACD.

Positive (P) leadership provides belief, optimism, and future orientation. Where ACD focuses on present obligations, P pulls effort forward through vision. This includes classic visionary leadership and BHAGs (Big Hairy Audacious Goals).

Followers commit because they want the future to exist, want the group to succeed, and want to be part of something meaningful. P sustains effort through uncertainty and hardship by framing difficulty as navigable and success as achievable.

Hands-Off (H) leadership is deliberate non-intervention. It is not neglect, but *withdrawal by design*. Where ACD and IMLOP both involve active influence, H creates space for agency to express itself without leader input.

Followers must step up, decide, and act. This makes H both a developmental tool and a diagnostic one: it reveals whether prior leadership has genuinely built capability or

merely substituted for it. A leader who cannot safely be absent has not catalysed agency.

Taken together, IMLOP describes how leaders mobilise **voluntary commitment** rather than compliance. None of these modes replace transactional leadership. They sit on top of it. With ACD in place, these tools allow leadership to scale without becoming a bottleneck and enable leaders to act as **catalysts of agency rather than managers of dependence**.

Agency does not emerge from inspiration alone. It requires a stable arena in which initiative is safe, meaningful, and consequential. The leadership tools described above are best understood not as styles, but as **control surfaces** that shape that arena.

Transactional leadership (ACD) establishes the conditions under which agency *can* operate. Assertive leadership defines what is required. Corrective leadership maintains standards. Deferred leadership enforces boundaries when responsibility is persistently avoided. Together, these create predictability. Without predictability, initiative is irrational.

ACD does not generate agency. It removes the reasons not to exercise it.

Once the arena is stable, **transformational leadership (IMLOP)** determines how discretionary effort is deployed within it. Each IMLOP mode activates a different motive for voluntary action: identification (I), experimentation (L), judgement (M), individual alignment (O), or belief in the future (P). These tools do not replace structure. They fill the discretionary space that structure deliberately leaves open.

Finally, **hands-off leadership (H)** tests whether agency is real. By withdrawing, the leader observes whether initiative, judgement, and responsibility persist in their absence. Where they do not, earlier leadership has substituted for agency rather than catalysed it.

Leading for agency, then, is not about choosing the “right” style. It is about sequencing interventions correctly: stabilising the arena, activating discretionary effort, and then getting out of the way.

How Leadership Fails to Catalyse Agency

Leadership fails when the tools described above are **misordered, substituted, or overused**. Most agency collapse does not come from malice or incompetence, but from applying the right tools at the wrong time—or using one class of tool to compensate for the absence of another.

IMLOP without ACD is the most common modern failure.

When transactional foundations are weak, transformational tools do not create agency; they create distortion.

- **I without ACD** becomes manipulation. Charisma substitutes for clarity, and followers are asked to commit without knowing what is required or what will happen if they do not. This is how cult dynamics form.
- **L without ACD** becomes chaos. Innovation is encouraged without boundaries, standards, or consequence. Temporary non-compliance becomes permanent drift.
- **M without ACD** becomes moral pressure. Values are invoked without structure, producing guilt, signalling, or factionalism instead of judgement.
- **O without ACD** becomes indulgence. Individual needs override organisational requirements, and entitlement replaces responsibility.
- **P without ACD** becomes fantasy. Vision is offered without traction, optimism without constraint, belief without delivery.

In all cases, agency collapses because the arena is unstable. Discretionary effort cannot attach to undefined obligations.

ACD without IMLOP produces compliance without ownership.

Where transactional leadership is applied correctly but exclusively, behaviour converges to the minimum required standard. People do what is necessary to avoid correction or exit, but no more. Satisfaction and discretionary effort decline, initiative dries up, and leadership becomes a bottleneck. This mode is often mistaken for discipline or professionalism, but it does not scale agency.

Overuse of H is failure by premature withdrawal.

Hands-off leadership only works when agency has already been built. Applied too early, it reads as abandonment. Applied too broadly, it becomes neglect. The test is simple: if the leader steps back and the system degrades immediately, H has revealed dependency—not maturity.

Late or misapplied C and D destroy trust.

Correction that is delayed, inconsistent, or non-contingent teaches followers that standards are arbitrary. Deferred leadership applied as punishment rather than boundary-setting produces resistance or work-to-rule behaviour. In both cases, agency becomes unsafe.

Status denial is a category error.

Leaders who pretend hierarchy does not exist still influence behaviour—just opaquely and unaccountably. This makes power harder to see, harder to contest, and harder to constrain. Agency cannot develop where influence is hidden.

Diagnostic Rule

When agency is absent, the cause is almost always structural, not personal.

- If people do not act, **ACD is weak or illegible.**
- If people comply but do not care, **IMLOP is absent.**
- If people collapse when you step away, **H was applied too early.**
- If initiative is punished, **C and D are misused.**
- If belief replaces clarity, **IMLOP is compensating for missing ACD.**

Persistent avoidance of agency after all conditions are met is not a leadership failure. It is a **selection signal.**

Leading for agency is not about inspiring harder or controlling tighter. It is about **using the right tool, in the right order, for the right purpose.**

Semco – Agency by Design

When Ricardo Semler took over Semco, a Brazilian manufacturing firm, the company was struggling under conventional hierarchical management. Decision-making was centralised, supervision was heavy, and responsibility was tightly controlled. Employees complied, but initiative was minimal. The organisation functioned, but agency was largely absent.

Semler's intervention is often described as radical empowerment. That framing misses the point. What Semler actually did was systematically redesign the arena so agency became rational.

Step 1: Stabilising the Arena (ACD)

Semler did not begin with trust slogans or cultural rhetoric. He began by making responsibility and payoff explicit.

Assertive (A): Roles, financials, and performance data were made transparent. Crucially, salaries were made public. Everyone could see what everyone else was paid. This removed ambiguity about reward, status, and contribution and forced value judgements into the open. Payoffs were real and legible: profit sharing, autonomy, influence, and income increased with contribution.

Corrective (C): Peer-based accountability replaced managerial supervision. Poor decisions were not hidden or softened; they were visible and discussed. Feedback loops were immediate because consequences were shared.

Deferred (D): Exit was real. People who consistently avoided responsibility or abused autonomy were removed—not dramatically, but decisively. Autonomy was conditional on ownership.

Publishing salaries was not an act of egalitarian ideology. It was arena design. By making rewards transparent, Semler reduced politics, constrained status games, and aligned perceived fairness with actual contribution.

Step 2: Activating Discretionary Agency (IMLOP)

Once the arena was stable, Semler activated discretionary effort.

Iconic (I): Semler earned legitimacy by visibly giving up control and privilege. He subjected himself to the same transparency and constraints as others, generating trust through credible self-restraint.

Lateral (L): Teams were encouraged to redesign workflows, schedules, and even business units. Temporary non-compliance with legacy rules was tolerated when it served learning or improvement.

Moral (M): Culture governed judgement where rules ran out. Shared values guided decisions without constant escalation.

One-on-One (O): Individuals chose roles, managers, and even salaries within transparent bounds. The organisation adapted to people rather than forcing people into rigid roles.

Positive (P): The future narrative was explicit: growth through adaptability rather than control.

None of this replaced ACD. Freedom existed within a legible system of consequence.

Step 3: Withdrawal as Proof (H)

Semler then reduced his presence. He travelled, disengaged from daily decisions, and allowed the system to run without him. It did not collapse. In many areas, performance improved. Responsibility stayed local.

This was not abdication. It was a diagnostic act. H revealed that agency had actually been built.

Outcome

Semco became more profitable, more resilient, and more adaptive. Leadership scaled rather than bottlenecked. Agency was not a slogan. It was operational.

Valve – Agency by Fragmentation

Valve Corporation, the company behind Steam and several landmark game franchises, represents a second, equally successful but radically different way of maximising agency.

Valve's internal model, described in its Handbook for New Employees, eliminates formal managerial hierarchy. Employees are not assigned work, roles, or objectives from above. Instead, individuals choose what to work on, which projects to join, and how to allocate their time. Teams form organically around initiatives that attract sustained commitment. Desks on wheels make this fluidity practical rather than symbolic.

At Valve, authority does not disappear. It moves inward. Traditional ACD mechanisms—assertive expectations, corrective feedback, and boundary enforcement—are not provided by higher-level leaders. They are self-imposed and peer-imposed.

Assertiveness takes the form of public self-commitment. Choosing work is a visible declaration of intent.

Correction is rapid, social, and reputational. Peer evaluation, project traction, and informal status provide fast feedback on contribution.

Deferral exists as selection rather than supervision. Those who cannot sustain contribution stall, marginalise themselves, or leave.

There is no managerial buffer protecting initiative from consequence. Responsibility is direct, visible, and personal. Autonomy is not a benefit. It is a requirement. This internalisation of ACD produces extremely high agency for those capable of bearing it. Combined with extraordinary talent density, large margins, and modular work, this model has produced some of the highest revenue-per-employee figures ever recorded.

Valve does not attempt to build agency across a broad population. It assumes agency as a precondition and structures the organisation so that it can emerge, concentrate, and self-reinforce.

Semco and Valve both achieved exceptional performance by maximising agency. Neither is accidental. Neither is naïve. They represent two coherent but distinct solutions to the same problem.

Semco builds agency by design. ACD is externalised. Expectations, payoffs, standards, and exit are explicit and legible. Agency becomes safe and rational for many people, including those who did not arrive already self-directed.

Valve builds agency by internalisation and selection. ACD is pushed inward. Individuals impose expectations on themselves, correct each other socially, and enforce boundaries through reputation and exit. Agency is intense but unevenly distributed.

Both models work. They differ in where the cost of agency is paid. Semco pays it upfront in structure and clarity. Valve pays it continuously through selection pressure and social consequence. Paragentism does not prescribe one organisational form. It asks a prior design question: Will agency be made safe through deliberate arena design, or will it be assumed and allowed to self-organise through radical fragmentation?

Leadership failure occurs when organisations copy the surface features of either model without paying its underlying costs. This completes the case for Steering 5: leadership as the deliberate catalysis of agency—whether through construction or through release—rather than its suppression, replacement, or consumption.

Chapter 9: Unit Focus

Agency is not applied in a vacuum. It is expended — and either compounded or eroded — at a particular level. That level is the unit of agency.

The error this steering addresses is not passivity or weakness. It is misallocation: applying effort at a level where agency no longer functions.

The unit of agency is not fixed. At different times, it may be the self, a relationship, a team, an organisation, or a broader arena such as a profession, institution, or jurisdiction. The correct unit is the smallest level at which effort still reliably converts into future status, resources, or optionality.

Effort is finite. When applied at the wrong level, it does not merely fail to improve outcomes — it actively erodes future agency. Time is lost. Reputation stagnates. Optionality narrows. What looks like perseverance is often just friction misread as virtue.

Agency Where It's Due

This problem is easiest to see in ordinary situations, long before anything dramatic occurs. The following summary is of a real situation. Identifying details have been deliberately concealed to preserve the agency of those involved.

JW was working in a professional role inside a large organisation. She delivered a piece of work that was well executed and visible. When the outcome was later discussed with senior stakeholders, credit for that work was taken by JW's boss.

Nothing overtly hostile occurred. There was no confrontation, no formal reprimand, no explicit theft. The organisation continued to function normally. JW remained employed, paid, and outwardly successful. Yet something important had shifted.

JW's effort had produced value, but the resulting status did not accrue to her. Her agency was being extracted upward, quietly and plausibly, through hierarchy rather than force.

At this point, multiple responses were available. These operate at different units of agency.

- JW could have focused on herself, choosing to improve her self-promotion, documentation, or visibility.
- She could have focused on her relationship with her boss by addressing the behaviour directly or renegotiating boundaries.
- She could have focused upward and involved more senior leadership or formal processes.

- She could have shifted laterally within the organisation and changed roles, teams, or reporting lines.
- She could have changed organisations entirely, leaving for another firm where this behaviour was not extant.
- Or she could have done nothing.

Each option was defensible. Each carried different risks, costs, and compounding effects. None was obviously correct without first answering a more fundamental question: Where is the most agency to be gained from acting? Was this a personal issue, a relationship issue, an organisational issue, or a signal that the arena itself was misaligned?

Until that question was answered, action of any kind risked being misapplied. Effort could be expended bravely and intelligently — and still erode agency if applied at the wrong level.

This is the kind of problem this steering exists to address. It is not about blame. It is not about confrontation or exit. It is not even about doing anything at all. It is about diagnosis. Many problems that feel personal are not. Many that feel systemic are not either. Trying to fix yourself inside a system that cannot respond is as futile as trying to reform a system when the real issue is your own misalignment. This is banging your head against a wall because it feels so good when you stop (how do you think I know that?)

Also take note that the self is also not unitary. Conscious intention and sub-conscious drives do not always align. Internal misalignment wastes effort just as surely as external resistance. Agency applied inward without integration is no more effective than agency applied outward without leverage. Our conscious selves seek agency explicitly. Our unconscious selves seek it automatically without conscious consent.

The aim of this steering is not to fix everything, or everyone. It is to decide where effort is worth applying. Where action increases future agency, even slowly, persistence makes sense. Where effort no longer compounds, persistence becomes self-erosion.

This is not a rule. It is a diagnostic. And like all Paragentist Steerings, it exists to help decide where to act — and just as importantly, where not to.

Why Focus Matters

The future can be influenced, but it cannot be controlled. Action always operates under uncertainty. The past is fixed. The only variable available is what you choose to do next — and where you choose to apply that effort. Agency therefore does not live in intention alone. It lives in allocation.

Agency can operate at multiple levels: the self, a relationship, a group, an organisation, or a broader arena such as a profession, institution, or jurisdiction. These levels are not interchangeable. Action that is effective at one level may be ineffective or damaging at another. Without recognising this, effort is easily misapplied.

It is also important to say this clearly: it is not all on you.

Many situations that feel like personal failure are structural failures misread as individual shortcomings. Systems can become non-responsive to competence, feedback, or good faith. In such cases, self-improvement becomes a trap. Polishing yourself inside a system that cannot respond does not restore agency. It simply makes you more tolerable to extract from. This does not mean the self is irrelevant. It means the self is not unitary.

Conscious intention and sub-conscious drives do not reliably align. The conscious self seeks agency explicitly — through plans, goals, and justification. The sub-conscious self seeks agency automatically — through status, control, avoidance, or dominance. When these are misaligned, effort is wasted before it ever meets the external world. Internal incoherence erodes agency just as surely as external resistance.

The symmetry matters. Trying to fix a system when the real issue is internal misalignment is futile. Trying to fix yourself inside a system that has stopped responding is equally futile. Unit focus fails in both directions.

Adding to this complexity is the uncomfortable fact that other people are sovereign. They can — and often do — exercise their agency badly. Fuckwits are not anomalies or edge cases. They are frequently selected outcomes of particular incentive structures. You cannot compel others to stop being Fuckwits, and respecting sovereignty includes recognising when change is not possible. This is where persistence becomes dangerous.

Leverage is the mechanism by which effort compounds. When leverage collapses, persistence stops being virtuous. Effort no longer increases future agency; it consumes it. Time is spent. Status decays. Optionality narrows. What looks like resilience is often just slow extraction.

Opportunity cost amplifies this effect. Effort spent in one place cannot be spent elsewhere. Staying consumes runway. The cost of staying is usually higher than the cost of leaving — but it is delayed, which makes it easy to ignore. Early exits look irrational. Late exits look inevitable.

Timing therefore matters more than justification. Systems rarely announce that they have become non-responsive. From the inside, they appear merely difficult, political, or frustrating. By the time exit is socially validated, agency has often already been lost.

This is why No-Fuckwits is not a moral rule but a focus decision. It includes choosing not to let Fuckwits into a group, ejecting them when possible, and leaving when they cannot be removed. Staying to fix what cannot be fixed is not noble. It is misapplied effort.

All of this leads to a single requirement: you need a method to decide where to focus. Without one, people default to self-blame, over-persistence, moral rationalisation, or delayed exit. None of these restore agency. The aim is not heroics. It is compounding.

The goal is not to fix everyone or everything, but to apply effort where it still increases future agency. Direction matters more than position. Vector matters more than speed. If everything you do increases your agency, you become more free over time, regardless of circumstance. This is why unit focus matters. It is the difference between effort that builds freedom — and effort that quietly erodes it.

How to Focus with Six Smooth Moves

This is not a process, a method, or a checklist. It is a set of considerations — a micro-steering — for deciding where effort belongs. The moves are listed in a sensible default order, but they are not sequential and not mandatory. You can enter at any point. You can stop at any point. The value lies in considering them, not in completing them.

The question this steering exists to answer is simple: Where should effort be focused — or withdrawn — right now?

Smooth Move 1 — Check Self

The first consideration is whether this is actually a self issue. Look for internal misalignment before assuming external obstruction. Fear, resentment, avoidance, ego defence, or narrative lock-in can all masquerade as external constraint. Over-corrections are common: over-driving yourself, deluding yourself with comforting stories, becoming slack under the banner of self-care, or spiralling into anxiety and control.

Ask a narrow question: would better internal alignment materially change outcomes here? Would clearer intent, improved skill, or better integration between conscious intention and sub-conscious drives restore leverage? If yes, effort belongs inward. If not, it probably doesn't. This move exists to prevent the error of trying to fix the world when the problem is internal.

Smooth Move 2 — Check Focus

If the issue is not primarily internal, the next consideration is whether the problem has been mislocated. Many people default to self-blame even when leverage exists elsewhere. Counterfactually consider whether effort should be directed outward rather

than inward. Does the issue live in a relationship? A group dynamic? A structural constraint?

Even when focus shifts outward, the choice of focus is still a self-directed act. The question is not who is at fault, but where influence might actually exist. This move exists to prevent self-flagellation in situations that require external adjustment.

Smooth Move 3 — Check Leverage

The next consideration is leverage. Leverage is not moral authority, persistence, or correctness. In this framework it comes from only two sources: status and resourcefulness, as defined earlier.

Ask plainly: do I have any usable status or resourcefulness here? Does acting at this level increase future status or resourcefulness, or am I operating on hope, habit, or moral pressure? If effort does not compound into greater leverage, persistence is unlikely to be rewarded. Acting without leverage is not bravery; it is erosion. This move exists to prevent persistence without leverage.

Smooth Move 4 — Check Opportunity Cost

Opportunity cost must be considered explicitly, not retrospectively. Evaluate the cost of staying across five dimensions:

Time — what is being consumed that cannot be recovered?

Emotion — what psychological load is accumulating?

Risk — what downside exposure is increasing silently?

Money — what direct or indirect financial cost is accruing?

Status — what reputational or positional decay is occurring?

The five dimensions are easily remembered as your TERMS. These costs are often delayed and asymmetric. The most dangerous ones are invisible until exit becomes forced. Ask which of these are being silently consumed, and whether staying is narrowing future options. Late exits are punished disproportionately. This move exists to make invisible costs visible.

Smooth Move 5 — Check Fuckwits

Another consideration is whether the system is selecting for Fuckwits. This is not a moral judgement. It is signal detection. Assess whether failure is being promoted, whether ideology substitutes for feedback, and whether competence is penalised. In such systems, good faith effort is often harvested rather than rewarded.

No-Fuckwits is not purity politics. It includes not letting Fuckwits into a group, ejecting them when possible, and leaving when they cannot be removed. Fuckwits are exercising agency too. You cannot compel them to stop. This move exists to prevent trying to reform what cannot respond.

Smooth Move 6 — Check Arena

The final consideration is whether the problem lives at the wrong level entirely. Sometimes the organisation is unreformable. Sometimes the industry is extractive. Sometimes the jurisdiction itself is misaligned. In these cases, effort at lower levels will never compound.

Changing arena may mean a role change, a firm change, a sector change, or a geographic change. None of these constitute failure. They are reallocations of effort to a level where agency still functions. This move exists to legitimise exit without drama.

The consideration of smooth moves stops when leverage is absent, opportunity cost dominates, Fuckwittersy is entrenched, or arena misalignment is clear. No further justification is required.

Six Smooth Moves is not about doing more. It is about choosing where effort belongs. It exists to help you recognise where action still compounds agency — and where continued effort quietly becomes self-erosion.

The Six Smooth Moves are deliberately abstract. They are a way of thinking, not a script.

To see how this micro-steering operates in a real life — with real risk, real trade-offs, and no guaranteed outcomes — consider the following case. This is not presented as a model to copy or a decision to admire. It is a worked example of unit focus under uncertainty.

Real Life Smooth Moves

TV and I are good friends. One of the reasons we are friends is that we both evaluate major life decisions through a long horizon — not in terms of comfort or approval, but in terms of how we expect to feel about the choice when looking back from old age. Long before I came up with my Rob80 concept, TV was already using his own version. This case is included with TV's explicit permission and again identities are obscured to preserve agency.

TV met AJ at a conference in India. At that point in his life, he was professionally very successful. He had become a director before turning 30, owned a penthouse in one of the best parts of his city, and was well embedded socially and professionally. Despite this, he sometimes felt alone.

There was an immediate attraction between them — to AJ's energy, intelligence, and presence. AJ is exceptionally capable: highly intelligent (PhD-level), charismatic

(including a TED talk), driven, extroverted, and strikingly attractive. TV and AJ dated long-distance for eight months.

Over time, it became clear that relocating to Belgium would be difficult for AJ. It would require learning Dutch or French, and AJ had already completed a migrant pathway once in her life to Australia. TV, for his part, was open to the idea of being the one to migrate. He wanted change, and he was curious about the experience of starting again elsewhere. TV chose to move to Australia.

This was not forced. It was an exercise of agency in the strongest sense. He gave up a senior role, economic security, social capital, proximity to friends, and closeness to family to move halfway around the world with no job, no professional network, and no local support — for a relationship and the chance of a different life.

Australia was not TV's first-choice country in abstract terms. He rated the UK and the US more highly on professional opportunity. But AJ's Australian immigration status was resolved. Other jurisdictions were not likely to be simple to navigate. TV made his decision for the relationship, not the country.

TV understood the trade-off clearly. He was giving up status and resourcefulness in the short term. The upside was relational rather than professional. He judged that from an 80-year-old perspective, not taking the chance would feel worse than the cost of trying and unwinding later if necessary. The move was difficult to reverse, but not impossible.

Later, TV and AJ decided to have children. TV understood that this decision was inherently constraining and irreversible. He also recognised that it carried higher uncertainty and higher stakes than relocation or property. He described it as “betting it all on black.” His own preference was not strong either way, but AJ very much wanted children. TV judged that he could live well with either outcome, but that denying the possibility altogether would likely be regretted. The decision reduced his freedom, but created two new self-directing beings. TV accepts the constraint. He is also happy with the choice. Having met his children I can say he is only a little self-delusional when he describes how much they enrich his life. He loves his children.

Buying a house was, by comparison, straightforward. The regulatory environment meant the downside risk was bounded. TV and AJ leveraged close to the edge, but the risk was calculated. If it went badly, TV could unwind the position and return to Belgium or relocate again with AJ. The debt would not follow indefinitely. Unlike children, property was reversible.

When TV arrived in Australia, restarting his career was far harder than he expected. He applied for many roles and received very few interviews. It took nearly a year to secure a senior role in data analytics at a university.

At the time, the job market for someone of his seniority and skillset felt thin. When the offer came, TV did not have the leverage to hold out for a better one that might or might not appear later. There was an implicit “go back to Belgium” line, but it was undefined and untested. Taking the role was a pragmatic decision to stabilise resourcefulness.

TV performed extremely well in the role. However, over time he became increasingly uncomfortable with how the university operated. Leadership appeared detached from reality, celebrating reductions in large losses as success rather than questioning the underlying model. Values were asserted where outcomes were poor. TV was asked to shape analysis to support preferred narratives about social initiatives that were not working, and to pursue commercialisation approaches that preserved ideological positions at the expense of viability.

More broadly, TV observed that people he regarded as having performed poorly were promoted, while competence and dissent were quietly penalised. He declined a promotion that would have increased his formal status because it was not remunerated adequately for the scope and risk involved. He judged that the organisation was saturated with Fuckwits and Fuckwittery, and that leverage was effectively absent.

TV did not rage-quit. He attempted to remain aloof, do his job well, and take the money. Over time, he concluded that staying was eroding his agency. In our discussions, he judged the leadership so incapable of recognising the scale of the problem that reform was unlikely. AI posed an existential threat to the university’s teaching and research models, and ideological capture had eroded the organisation’s ability to respond. Rather than attempting to fix what he believed could not respond, TV manufactured an external opportunity and left.

When the opportunity arose to join an external organisation better aligned with his views, TV took it. The move carried greater risk but offered more upside, and crucially removed the ongoing requirement to tolerate deep values conflict. This occurred at a time when AJ was between roles and uncertain about how to pivot her own career. Despite the added uncertainty, the change restored a sense of momentum and coherence between effort and outcome.

At his interview, the new employer explicitly tested whether TV shared the university’s values. Had he done so, he would not have been hired. This suggested that reputation had transferred just-in-time, and that the new arena selected for different behaviours.

What follows is not a judgement of whether TV’s decisions were right or wrong. It is an examination of the trade-offs involved, using the Six Smooth Moves to surface how effort, status, and resourcefulness were allocated under uncertainty.

TV's relocation to Australia was voluntary. It was not forced by work or crisis. He gave up a senior role, economic security, social capital, and proximity to family to move halfway around the world with no job and no network. Internally, the decision reflected a recognised desire for change and a willingness to trade comfort for meaning. The unit of optimisation was the relationship rather than career progression. Leverage was knowingly surrendered in the short term, with relational leverage gained instead. Opportunity cost across Time, Emotion, Risk, Money, and Status was high and accepted upfront. Australia was chosen for immigration feasibility rather than abstract optimisation. This was an explicit short-term reduction in agency in exchange for the possibility of future compounding.

The decision to have children was understood as irreversible and of higher stakes than relocation or property. TV evaluated it through a long-horizon lens — how it would feel to look back from old age — and located the decision at the relationship and family level rather than personal optimisation. He accepted a permanent reduction in personal freedom and optionality, offset by the creation of two new self-directing beings. Opportunity costs across all TERMS dimensions were acknowledged rather than minimised. This was a conscious trade of freedom for meaning, without illusion of reversibility.

Buying property, by contrast, was straightforward. There was no internal conflict or mislocated focus. Leverage existed through regulation, bounded downside, and exit options. Opportunity cost was largely confined to Money and Risk, both calculable. The defining distinction was reversibility: unlike children, property could be unwound.

Restarting his career in Australia proved far harder than expected. TV applied for hundreds of roles over nearly a year in what felt like a thin market for his seniority and skillset. Internally, grit was expressed rather than panic. The focus was on restoring resourcefulness, with an implicit but undefined return-to-Belgium line. At the point of offer, leverage was low; he could not hold out for a better role that might or might not appear. Accepting the university position was a pragmatic stabilisation choice, with opportunity costs in time, status risk, and financial runway. The university was entered as a provisional arena, not a long-term commitment.

Over time, TV judged the university environment to be saturated with Fuckwits and Fuckwittery. Leadership appeared detached from reality, values substituted for feedback, and people he regarded as having failed were promoted. He declined a promotion because the effort-to-reward ratio did not justify the exposure. Internally, he adopted aloof competence rather than reform. The problem was recognised as systemic rather than personal. Formal status did not translate into leverage, and the opportunity cost of staying — emotional drain, status stagnation, reputational risk, narrowing options — became increasingly clear. The Fuckwits signal was decisive. The arena was judged unreformable. Staying would erode agency; exit was a reallocation.

The move to an external organisation carried higher risk but more upside and removed the requirement to tolerate deep values conflict. It occurred while AJ was between roles, adding uncertainty. TV accepted short-term instability in exchange for restored coherence between effort and outcome. Leverage was re-established through skill-market fit and cultural alignment. Risk was accepted; status and momentum returned. At interview, the employer explicitly tested whether TV shared the university's values; had he done so, he would not have been hired. The arena shift validated the decision: effort once again compounded.

Power With vs Power Over

It is important to be explicit about what this case is and is not. TV was not applying Paragentism, nor learning it, nor acting with any awareness of the framework. The decisions described here were made without reference to it. Paragentism is used only as a lens — a way of examining patterns of effort, constraint, and reallocation that were already present, not a cause of them.

One reason this case matters to me personally is that it contrasts sharply with how I used to relate to people. For a long time, I treated relationships as implicit status contests. Effort went into positioning, comparison, and dominance — power over rather than power with. I did not recognise this as agency erosion at the time. I thought I was asserting myself. In retrospect, I was allocating effort to arenas that could not compound it.

By contrast, TV's relationships operate differently. There is no ongoing status negotiation. Influence flows laterally. Decisions are made cooperatively. This is not virtue; it is structural. Power-with relationships preserve optionality. Power-over relationships consume it.

When unit focus changes, relationships often change with it. Some long-standing dynamics cannot survive once status games are withdrawn. I attempted to renegotiate several such relationships after recognising the pattern. In some cases, it was not possible. Walking away from relationships that had lasted decades was painful, but it was not regretful. Effort spent there no longer compounded. This is one of the less discussed costs of reallocating agency — and one of the clearest signals that the unit has shifted. Paragentism is forward-looking. It is concerned with where effort should be applied *now*, not with litigating past decisions. Counterfactuals are usually avoided because they encourage outcome bias and moral certainty after the fact. In TV's case, however, a counterfactual is useful — not to second-guess TV's decision, but to surface a deeper question about unit focus: when does staying to fight increase agency, and when does it merely delay exit?

The counterfactual that follows is therefore not an argument for staying, nor an argument for leaving. It is an examination of the boundary between reform and erosion.

At the point TV chose to leave the university, another path was available. Instead of manufacturing an external exit, he could have attempted to reform the institution from within. This would have required a different allocation of effort and risk.

One possibility was to accept greater formal authority. TV declined a promotion because it was not remunerated adequately for the work and exposure involved. A counterfactual path would have treated the promotion not as compensation, but as leverage — a way of gaining access to the levers required to influence outcomes. From this perspective, short-term misalignment between effort and reward might have been justified by longer-term positional power.

Another possibility was sustained internal confrontation. Rather than remaining aloof from leadership and values conflict, TV could have made himself a visible dissenter — challenging narratives, contesting promotions, and forcing disagreements into the open. This would have traded psychological comfort and reputational safety for the chance, however small, of altering the organisation's trajectory.

A third possibility was coalition-building. TV was not alone in his assessment of the university. Other capable people shared similar concerns. A coordinated effort to resist promotion of failure and to restore feedback-driven decision-making might have increased leverage beyond what any individual could exert alone.

Each of these paths required assuming that the university was still capable of responding — that leverage, once accumulated, would translate into meaningful change. They also required accepting prolonged exposure to an environment TV experienced as ideologically distorted and operationally detached from reality.

The risk, in all three cases, is that effort would not have compounded. Formal status without real influence can be the most dangerous configuration: responsibility increases while leverage remains absent. Coalition attempts can be neutralised. Visible dissent can accelerate marginalisation. In such environments, persistence does not lead to reform; it leads to burnout or quiet ejection.

From TV's perspective, the university appeared not merely flawed, but unable to recognise the nature of its own problems. Leadership celebrated reductions in failure rather than confronting the failure itself. Ideology substituted for feedback. The organisation's response to external threats — particularly those posed by AI — suggested denial rather than adaptation.

The decisive signal, however, may not have been any single policy or leader, but the pattern of capable people choosing to leave rather than fight. When those with the highest capacity to effect change exit, it raises a hard question: is departure itself the clearest evidence that leverage has already collapsed? This counterfactual does not prove that staying would have failed. It highlights the conditions under which staying

becomes indistinguishable from self-erosion. In such cases, exit is not retreat. It is the final available expression of agency.

Inflection at EU Scale

The counterfactual above scales, but it does not scale as certainty. What happens inside a team or organisation can also happen inside institutions and jurisdictions — not as a forecast, but as a risk pattern. The question remains the same: when does staying to fight increase agency, and when does it merely delay exit?

I believe the European Union may be approaching that boundary. This is not a prediction of collapse, nor a claim of inevitability. It is an inference drawn from observable constraints and historical patterns of institutional response under stress.

For several decades, the EU's stability has depended disproportionately on Germany's capacity to absorb cost, subsidise cohesion, and underwrite collective commitments. That capacity now appears under pressure from three converging factors: rising debt obligations, adverse demographics, and structural exposure in core industries — particularly automotive — that are being disrupted faster than policy can adapt. These are long-horizon, compounding constraints rather than short-term shocks.

An important contextual factor is that taxation across much of the EU is already high. This limits how much additional extraction can occur before behavioural responses change. When systems with high existing tax burdens face declining leverage, the available responses narrow: raise taxes further, increase regulation, or centralise control. Each option risks further reducing the space in which effort can compound.

What matters is not the existence of these pressures, but how systems respond to them. One common response to declining leverage is the addition of friction: higher taxation, thicker regulation, and tighter coordination. These measures may be defensible in isolation, but taken together they often weaken the effort-to-outcome relationship for capable actors.

The risk, as I see it, is a growing mismatch between effort and outcome for resourceful agents inside the system. When additional effort yields diminishing returns — or increased extraction — optimisation begins. This does not present as protest or ideological rejection. It presents as quiet reallocation.

At that point, two broad paths tend to emerge for mobile, capable individuals. Some move toward large, capital-intensive “giga-projects” where scale, concentration of resources, and asymmetric upside still exist. Others move toward lower-tax, lower-friction jurisdictions where effort is less diluted by transfer and compliance. Over time, this can produce a loose generational split: older populations anchored to place and entitlement structures, and younger or more mobile agents optimising for optionality.

This is a critical signal. Systems rarely fail because they are criticised. They fail when the people with the highest capacity to adapt and contribute begin to leave — not dramatically, but pragmatically. Capital often moves first. Talent follows. The system remains intact for some time, but its adaptive capacity thins.

If Germany's ability to buffer the broader union continues to narrow, recipient states may face increasingly difficult trade-offs. Higher extraction to preserve cohesion is one possible response. Reassertion of sovereignty is another. Which path is taken, and when, is uncertain. The point is not what will happen, but what risks become more salient as leverage declines.

At a certain threshold — which is never visible in advance — behaviour changes quickly. Exits accelerate. Burdens concentrate. Feedback loops tighten. What previously looked like solidarity begins to feel like extraction.

This is not a forecast of the EU's future. It is an explanation of why some capable actors might begin to treat exit as a rational hedge rather than a political statement. In Paragentist terms, it marks the zone where staying to fight may still be admirable, but no longer reliably compounds agency.

Returning to Australia

I find myself at a crossroads not unlike the one TV faced — with one crucial difference. There is no dilemma. He tried to reform an institution and eventually recognised it as unreformable. I am facing something larger. I cannot fix Australia. I can only decide whether to remain embedded in it or to leave. That distinction matters. Staying is not an act of courage if the arena no longer compounds effort. Leaving is not an act of betrayal if loyalty has become extraction.

I have become disillusioned with Australia, and more than that, I am heartbroken by what feels like a betrayal. This was meant to be a high-agency country — pragmatic, fair-minded, lightly governed, and open to outsized contribution. I understand, rationally, that many of the pressures I now see are predictable consequences of scale. I have argued throughout this book that large systems lose judgment, default to process, and foul their own operating environments. None of that analysis prevents the emotional response. Knowing why something is happening does not stop you feeling it when you are inside it.

I have lived in Australia all my life, and for the first time I can say this without melodrama: it no longer feels like a place where effort compounds. It feels thick with extraction, heavy with rules designed to manage failure rather than enable success, and culturally hostile to outsized contribution. I find tall poppy syndrome and the ritualised paying of respect to traditional custodians personally offensive because both repress agency. I watched us lock down an entire population instead of protecting those actually at risk, absorb years of economic damage as moral virtue, and then move on

without accountability. Universities, once organised around the contest of competing ideas, increasingly appear to advance a narrow woke or near-woke agenda. I see high taxes paired with poor conversion to service, inventions celebrated but not funded into globally impactful innovations, and dissent reframed as selfishness. This is not collapse. It is inertia. And inertia is harder to fight than opposition.

Friends I respect have already left. Some sought lower-friction environments. Others pursued opportunity elsewhere. These were not protest exits. They were reallocations — quiet ones. On their own, such departures prove nothing. Taken together, they may represent an early signal. When high-agency people begin to exit an arena, conditions rarely stabilise; they tend to deteriorate faster. This is not a forecast of national decline. It is a recognition of asymmetric risk: the cost of being late is often far higher than the cost of being early.

Of course, I could be wrong. I am wired to be sensitive to constraint and alert to early signs of extraction. That sensitivity has served me well in some contexts and poorly in others. It may be amplifying the negatives and obscuring the positives. It may be narrowing my aperture rather than sharpening it. I am not claiming omniscience — only that this is how the system now presents itself to me, after a lifetime inside it.

I am also aware that calling out the Emperor's New Clothes is risky. If none of this mattered to me, it would be easy to keep it to myself. Readers will bring their own commitments and convictions to this page. I welcome that. I would prefer to be wrong about Australia. I can imagine agreement from those who feel similarly constrained; discomfort from those who glimpse possibilities they would rather not consider; dismissal as overdrawn; rejection on the grounds that equality must outrank agency; rejection as self-interest dressed up as theory; or the judgment that I have missed too much that is good and worth preserving. All of those responses are legitimate. The only one that would trouble me is silence born of conformity.

This is where Paragentism matters most — not as comfort, but as constraint. It exists precisely to prevent conviction from sliding into discharge, and anger into QIII action. It forces me to work the process even when the issue is personal. Being angry at Fuckwits is not exercising my agency. Deciding what to do next, without lying to myself about the terrain, is.

Paragentism does not tell you where to live, who to work for, or which systems to support. It offers something narrower and harder: a way of noticing when effort is no longer buying freedom — and the courage to respond when that becomes clear. That is all it ever claimed to do.

I encourage you to choose to be free.