

The
**LIFE
TRAP**

*and how
to escape it*

Richard Docwra

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Introduction

Introduction

This book is all about you. More specifically, how your view of the world, your behaviour, your life and the possibilities for it could all be limited and stifled by the society, ideas and people that surround you. And how most of us end up trapped in restricted, limited and unfulfilled lives as a result.

This book explores how this trap is created, how we can escape it and why it matters so much that we do – both to our ability to live good, fulfilled lives as individuals, and our ability to build a good, civilised and happy society.

Here is a basic outline of the arguments we'll make in this book.

Most of us believe that we think for ourselves and shape our own destinies all the time, but in reality this is far from the case. We'll explore some of the latest psychological and neurological research which shows that our views, beliefs and behaviour are strongly influenced and moulded by other people around us. It all adds up to a picture of human beings that aren't as rational as we previously thought.

At the same time, we live in a world with more pressures, influences and information for each of us to deal with than ever before. We will explore some of the key things that can influence us, from education to advertising, so that we draw a picture of the overall

pressures that are moulding our thoughts, attitudes and behaviour.

In a world like this we need to be taught the skills and tools to be able to see the world clearly and build up realistic, well-informed worldviews and lives. We're not simply born with this ability. In this book, we'll explore what these skills consist of and how they can help us – as well as what can happen to us if we're not equipped with them.

A key argument of this book is that the society we currently live in and the institutions that surround us – including our children's education system – don't recognise the importance of these skills and don't equip us with them to anywhere near the level we need. In fact, we live at a time where the external conditions in society actually militate *against* us developing them.

As a consequence, many people are trapped in very restricted, limited lives, only following the path that they've been fed by the dominant ideas of the society they live in. As we'll see, this can have a massive effect on our lives and what we get out of them. It can also have a significant effect on how we behave towards other people and the wider world around us. It can make us more selfish, more materialistic, less willing to help others and ultimately less civilised.

So, this is a critical issue for our own lives. But this doesn't just affect us as individuals. The repercussions of failing to provide these tools to people run to a societal level. When people grow up without these tools and skills, the more they are open to the influence of others – from potentially negative

influences like materialism through to the influence of political demagogues. At a time of political upheaval and rising populism, this is clearly an urgent issue.

This book is therefore a call to action for us to make an intervention now – and start building these skills and tools into our society’s infrastructure and our own lives.

It will also explore what we can do about it – both as a society and as individuals. We’ll look at how we can empower ourselves with these skills so that we have a better chance of escaping our own particular ‘life traps’ and explore at how we can move towards a society that nurtures and recognises the value of these important attributes.

In short, we will find out how to escape the Life Trap – and give everyone the best chance of independent and fulfilled lives, and a good, peaceful and civilised society.



Part 1

How do we think?

How do we think?

Before we consider how human beings think, let's briefly remind ourselves what we are – as it can be easy to forget the true reality we live in when we are immersed in the complexity and rush of daily life.

What are you?

You are an animal – a descendent of the hominids (great apes) branch of the primates. Specifically, you are a member of the species *homo sapiens* (often called 'human beings'), which evolved around only 200,000 years ago – a flicker in the overall life of the planet and the other species that have lived on it. As the great Carl Sagan noted, if the history of the universe was compressed into one year, human beings and all of human history would only have been around for the last 10 seconds.

The earliest evidence of humans wearing clothes was 78,000 years ago, and agriculture began only around 9,500 years ago. Many of the key developments in human history like this that we take for granted have taken place reasonably recently.

The last 200 or so years of human history have featured some even more rapid changes and development in science and technology (from the discovery of electricity to the invention of the motor

car) that have changed the way we understand the world and live our lives.

These changes have also had a significant impact on our planet. From the massive increase in our use of the planet's natural resources through to the development of urban areas, roads and agriculture, these changes have threatened an ever-increasing number of the other estimated 8.7 million species that live on Earth.

So that's a brief outline of what you are and where you are. We can now go straight into building some more perspective to this picture, and take a look at how we think.

What do we mean by our 'worldviews'?

In this book we will explore how the external world can influence our values, worldviews and behaviour. Before we start, we should clarify what we mean by this.

Pause for a moment. Become aware of what it is like to be 'you' and living inside your head. No-one else in the world has this experience, and can know what it's like to be you¹. Consider the thoughts that are flowing through your mind. Your ambitions and hopes for the future. Your sense of what's right and wrong. Your views of other people. The things that do – and don't – matter to you in life.

All these things – and more – constitute your worldview. It's the way you see the world, the way you feel about it, the judgements you make about it and the things you care about.

Together, these things constitute ‘all there is’ for us from our subjective viewpoint as thinking creatures. It’s the lens with which we view the world, and is therefore an incredibly important thing.

One of the arguments we’ll make in this book is that some people can have much clearer and broader worldviews than others. It could be seen as the mental equivalent of been able to see well rather than having very bad sight problems. Some people have a clearer sense of the world and reality they live within, a better sense of the possibilities in life and are better equipped than others to manage the complexity and influences around them, through skills like critical thinking. This leads to much better lives for these people, and can lead to considerably worse lives for those without this wider viewpoint and these skills. A lack of these skills in the population can also cause problems for wider society.

Our point is that these skills are vital to each and every one of us – and to the future of a good, compassionate, civilised society. We should be giving everyone the chance to develop them, and it should not simply be a matter of luck as to whether people have these skills, as it is at the moment.

How you think and behave

Each of us tends to think that we behave in deliberate, rational ways, our actions driven by conclusions that we’ve reached for ourselves through rational, calculated thinking. The latest research in psychology, neuroscience and other disciplines is however unearthing a rather different picture –

that much of our thinking is instinctive rather than rational, and that we are prone to a range of cognitive biases. Below we present some initial points² from this research just to show you some examples of how our assumptions about how we think are wrong.

- **Value is relative** – have you ever found yourself feeling pleased with something you have gained – such as a pay rise – but then noticed your pleasure turning to anger or resentment when you realised that other people had received a better pay rise than you? If so, it's not surprising, as evidence suggests that our relative status compared to others is a critical factor we use to judge our happiness, rather than what we actually have ourselves.

The broader point is that “Humans do not make judgements in absolute values but rather in relative terms.”³ This applies not just when we compare ourselves to other people, but in most situations – for example, when we have a choice of three price points in buying a product we will tend to choose the middle one, as we are trying to evaluate the costs and benefits of different options so we can arrive at a conclusion as to the value of each.

This insight on relative value is already being widely applied by influencers the world over. Advertisers try to manipulate us into buying products by asking us to imagine how they will boost our status against other people, and retailers often deliberately add a particularly high priced item in a list of three choices to encourage you to buy the middle priced item (and thus spend more than if you'd been left alone to buy the cheapest one).

- **We are programmed to conform.** As psychologist Bruce Hood notes, “Our need to conform is a powerful force that shapes us and literally changes the way we think.”⁴ In other words, there is a physical reaction in regions of the brain when our views differ from those of the consensus.

We are even willing to override the judgements of our senses in order to conform, as was proved by an experiment by Solomon Asch where he asked people to compare the lengths of different drawn lines and found that people were prepared to give what was obviously the wrong answer in order to conform to the group consensus and avoid being ostracized.

This isn't confined to how we behave when in the direct presence of a group – it also shapes our behaviour and thinking when away from the group. So, the group has the power to change the views, behaviour and even the perceptions of the individual – and this can be in terrible ways as well as positive ones.

This is borne out by experiments such as the notorious studies conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale University in the early 1960's, in which ordinary people were prepared to administer a seemingly fatal electric shock to someone, simply because of pressure from an authority figure.⁵

- **We can be good or bad – depending on our environment.** Following on from the previous point, we would all like to think we are naturally good, and that we are in control of our own behaviour through rational thought, but this does

not seem to be the case. Evidence from a range of (often quite shocking) experiments suggests that we are capable of acts of great cruelty if the conditions allow or encourage them.

One infamous example of this is the 1971 Stanford University Prison Experiment in which psychologist Phil Zimbardo simulated a prison setup, using student volunteers in the roles of guards and inmates. Zimbardo found that, by setting up an authoritarian scenario, the students in the guard roles ended up committing acts of cruelty and creating suffering for those in the prisoner roles, even though everyone knew that it was just an experiment and not real.

These experiments show that we are not in control of our behaviour in the way that we think, and that “the situations we can find ourselves in and the influence of those around us determine how we behave and treat others.”⁶

Overall, we are immensely complex creatures whose thinking and behaviour can't be packaged up into a few simple points. However, the picture most of us carry around of humans being entirely rational creatures, in control of our own minds, seems to be a long way from the reality that research is beginning to reveal.

The implications of these insights (and similar ones that have been uncovered by researchers in recent decades) are profound – not just for us but for society at large. We will explore these in the book, but here are a few brief examples:

- We should try to live our own lives with greater awareness of our real tendencies, and vulnerabilities to manipulation and influence, as this will help us lead better, kinder and more independent lives.
- We should find ways to educate other people (especially children) about the reality of how we think and behave, for the same reasons as above.
- We need to be much more careful about the values, ideas and culture we are building in society generally, in order to ensure that these encourage prosocial, compassionate and civilised behaviour – even at the most seemingly abstract or detailed level such as what we encourage people to value in life (for example material success versus other people’s welfare).

How this knowledge is being used against you

Before we move on to consider these points though, we should make an observation.

These latest insights into human beings are clearly important and can help us make our lives better. As you might expect though, these insights are also potentially of great value to the people that are trying to *do* the influencing of others, as they can help them to make more money, gain more power and achieve many other aims – some of which may not be benign. As a result, lots of influencers (in fact, any of them worth their salt) are taking the most up to date learning about how people think and behave and are using these insights to find more powerful ways of

influencing, persuading and ultimately, manipulating people.

This idea, termed ‘Behavioural Economics’, has been presented in a number of books that have proved incredibly popular around the world. One of the best-known of these is ‘Nudge’ by US academics Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, which explores how we make decisions and argues that “a few small adjustments to the way something is presented — a simple ‘nudge’ — can make us choose differently, and a tiny change can have a huge effect. Examples included boosting healthy eating by getting supermarkets to put wholesome food on the middle shelf, since shoppers tend to reach for goods at eye-level.”⁷

When it was published in 2008, Nudge caused a sensation among the political classes and became required reading for many members of Tony Blair’s cabinet. This is because it gave them the sense that they had key new insights to help them drive the behaviour of a country’s citizens.

In 2010, the next Prime Minister, David Cameron, set up a ‘nudge unit’ at the Cabinet office to work on “how to use behavioural economics and market signals to persuade citizens to behave in a more socially integrated way”. The co-author of Nudge, Richard Thaler, acted as an advisor to the unit.

The aim of the unit, The Guardian reported, was “to explore ways of encouraging citizens to behave in social ways relying on market incentives, as opposed to regulations”. The then-deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, said “he believed the unit could change the way citizens think.”⁸

The unit has provided insights on a range of social issues – from helping first-time visitors to a job centre to get into work as quickly as possible through to getting people to pay tax on time by noting in tax reminder letters “that most people living in the recipient’s town or postcode had already paid.”⁹ Many of these social experiments with small tweaks in the communication of particular issues have proved to be successful and rolled out further across the country.

Although this particular unit claimed to have socially beneficial aims, these ideas from behavioural economics can be – and, of course, are – used by other sources to influence people in order to promote any aim – many of which may not be socially beneficial – from getting us to consume more to promoting destructive political ideas.

Whether the aims of the ‘nudging’ are benign or not, it is important that we are aware that people are trying to influence us, as we may not wish to be manipulated in this way. The aim of this book is therefore to encourage you to make up your own mind about all the messages you receive and protect yourself from any attempts at manipulation – whether it is being done with benign motives or not.

We therefore end this section with the observation that we not only have to use these insights about how we think and behave to empower people to live better lives; we also have to be aware that they are being used on us by influencers to try to mould our thinking and behaviour. So, understanding these tools and tendencies can help us build up our much-needed armour of critical thinking, which we will explore in a later section.



Part 2

What influences
are around us?

What influences are around us?

Given our vulnerability to manipulation from the world around us, let us now explore some of the key sources of influence around each of us and some of the ways they can influence us. As we will see, there is a wide range of areas, and each can have a powerful effect on our thoughts and behaviour.

Other people

All of the sources of influence we discuss in this book ultimately relate to the influence of other people in some way. But certain people can have a direct influence on our thoughts and behaviour throughout our lives. For example:

Parents and close family

These individuals can have an incalculable influence on the people we become later in life. Psychologist Oliver James notes that “Differences in most people’s psychology, in most respects, are not much influenced by genes....In general, parental care is critical, especially during the first six years.”¹⁰

Our parents’ influence ranges from the values and ideas they instil in us through to the experiences

and behaviour they subject us to and which influence us by example. For many people, these can bring a mixture of both negative and positive influences.

An important aspect of our upbringing around our carers and close family in early life is the attitude they encourage us to take towards learning and making sense of the world. Do they encourage us to be curious about the world, ask questions and think independently, perhaps challenging accepted norms and assumptions, or do they encourage us to accept particular ideas or belief systems, either for reasons of tradition, appeals to authority, or something else?

It is a matter of luck as to whether we are born into a family environment that encourages us to think for ourselves and see the world clearly. We clearly need to find a way to embed this atmosphere and teaching into other institutions in society so that everyone has the chance to become equipped with these tools – especially those who don't have the great fortune to be brought up in this type of atmosphere. As we'll see when we explore the effects of not having these tools, this is an important matter of social justice.

Friends and peers

The friendships and social groups we exist in – and aspire to exist in – can also have a big influence on our worldviews and behaviour. We all want to fit in, be liked and feel part of a group, and as we've seen, the science shows that we will change our behaviour in order to achieve this.

Just like our families, our friends can have a mix of positive and negative influences on us in terms of our

perspective on the world. For example, they might inspire us to try new things, visit new places and broaden our horizons, but we might also be influenced by them to want the latest gadget or clothes in order to fit in or ‘keep up’ with them.

Other people generally

It isn’t just the people immediately around us who can influence us though. As we have already seen, human beings have a biological tendency to conform. Our ideas and behaviour are therefore heavily influenced by other people around us – both those physically and emotionally close to us such as those just listed, but also wider groups of people, from interest groups up to the level of entire societies.

For example, we noted in an earlier chapter how humans are built to assess the relative value of things. Our position in relation to other people is vital to us, and therefore other people are a strong influence on our thoughts and behaviour, even if they are not deliberately trying to influence us.

For example, you’ve probably been in the situation where you’ve felt that other people’s lives are more interesting, colourful and fulfilled than your own. The problem is not that other people’s lives are more exciting than yours – it’s that you’re comparing your life with theirs in the first place!

First, the pictures other people paint of their experiences can be extremely unreliable and unrealistic. This can be the case even in one-to-one situations, in which people want to make their lives appear interesting, but can be further exacerbated

by social media, which can become a marketplace for bragging about our experiences, in which we carefully yet unconsciously share the experiences that communicate a particular image we want to convey of our lives – even if it’s not a realistic one. As we’ll discuss later, advertising is another major source of information, messages and influence in our lives – and this also provides us with an unrealistic view of the world and other people’s lives.

Even if we weren’t seeing unrealistic and deliberately aspirational versions of other people’s experiences around us, we may still get the feeling that our own experiences and lives are missing something in comparison to those of other people that we see and hear about ‘out there’ in the world. This is partly because, when we see or hear reports of other people’s experiences, our imaginations can take flight and conjure up richer, more fantastical views of what the other people’s experiences must have been like. In other words, our minds can project our own needs and fantasies onto our perception of other people’s experiences to make them appear far more joyous and pleasurable than they actually were. In reality though, other people’s lives are very much like yours.

With this in mind, it’s no wonder that our perceptions of other people’s experiences can sometimes seem more exciting than our own – even though they are probably not.

The problem is, constant comparison with other people’s lives and experiences can lead us into not paying enough attention to our own. This can lead to our own experiences feeling quite dull, and to us ignoring the true richness and pleasure of our own

experiences and lives. So, not only are we placing too much attention on other people's experiences that are often unrealistic in the first place, we're also doing this at the expense of our appreciation of our own experiences. And let's remember that our own experiences are the only ones we'll ever have – so we might as well make the most of them!

This point doesn't just apply to our experiences – it applies to the way we live and perceive our lives in general.

We therefore need to develop the skills and perspective to be able to refrain from comparing ourselves with others so much.

Institutions

Our views of the world and the tools we are given to manage them are shaped by a number of institutions as we go through our lives – from the education system to the places we work.

Education system

This plays a central role in forming the people we become. The institutions in this sector, such as schools, are incredibly important in terms of social justice, as their aim should be to give everyone access to the fundamental learning, life skills, tools and ideas that we need in life, regardless of their background. This enables people who have not had such opportunities at home to develop these skills and consider these ideas too.

Like the parents, carers and close family that surround children in their early lives, schools have a significant influence on children and their worldviews, behaviour and aspirations. And although they may initially appear to be objective and unbiased institutions, they are also subject to some variability in the attitude they encourage us to take towards learning and making sense of the world.

For example, some schools, even those that are state-sponsored, have a religious foundation to them that can lead to children being brought up with a particular set of beliefs and ways of thinking about the world that makes it harder for them to explore other possibilities.

This effect isn't simply confined to religious schools though, even though they are a significant example of it. All schools have a certain 'bias' (for want of a better word) to how and what they teach their children. They have to do this, as they have to choose a particular approach to teaching, a particular set of values to promote, a particular set of subjects to prioritise and a particular way to teach and evaluate them, amongst other things.

So, there is no problem in principle that schools have to narrow their topics down and make a choice as to how they do present them, as they can't escape this. The thing that matters is what they choose in each case, and what ideas this choice is motivated by. And this latter point is a vital one, as whilst we can all see that schools and educational institutions have a massive influence on our children's lives and worldviews, it is also the case that schools in turn are massively influenced by broader factors as to what they teach

and how they teach it. This is influenced by a range of things, from the philosophy of the government in power at a given point, through to the overarching ideas, values and priorities that dominate a particular society at a given time.

At present, it is clear that the focus of the state education system is driven by economic priorities and ideas. This shows itself in two clear ways:

- First, the subjects that are prioritised in the national curriculum are heavily biased towards those that will make students more effective actors in the economy – such as maths, computing and sciences. These are clearly important topics that everyone should be taught, but the level of focus on these can squeeze out opportunities to learn other important ideas and skills – such as those emotional, life and ‘soft’ skills that we are considering in this book. This bias not only leads pupils to become deficient in important life skills – it also leads them to automatically pick up the values associated with a focus in becoming more effective actors in an economy, such as the drive for material wealth, career success and competition.
- Second, the way that topics are taught and evaluated at schools has taken on a form that more closely resembles a commercial organisation desperately trying to meet its demanding sales targets than an institution that is responsible for the careful care, nurturing and development of infinitely complex human beings. At present, many teachers would say they are desperately unhappy in their work. Not only has funding for education been limited for many years in the name of ‘austerity’, but they are

being asked to teach and evaluate their pupils in a way that is rabidly obsessed with results, targets and performance, and where teaching, teacher motivation and the richness of the educational experience for pupils are suffering hugely as a result.

We are not saying that economic skills and proper evaluation are not important. We are however arguing that the unbalanced focus of education at the moment is greatly exacerbating the ‘crisis of capability’ we are seeing in people being able to live well-informed, independent and fulfilling lives. It is also educating children with a particular set of values and aspirations, focused on career and material success, rather than on helping people carve out the lives (both at work and outside it) that they really want and will give them most fulfilment.

The philosophy governing state education therefore needs to be shifted towards the aim of ‘helping pupils develop the perspective, tools and skills to thrive as self-determined, kind and fulfilled human beings’ and away from ‘helping pupils become effective cogs in an economic machine’. This will improve the lives of our children in years to come, the health and stability of our society and, importantly, the motivation and health of our teachers.

Workplaces

Many of us spend a good proportion of our waking hours at work. We can be influenced by the values and working practices of the organisations we work for, as well as by the actual jobs we do.

For example, if you're an investment banker who works in a bullish, competitive environment and your sole aim is to maximise the financial value of your clients' investments, your 'working bubble' is likely to be one that sees the world as a place to make profit, where life is highly competitive and it's 'everyone for themselves'. In this case, you might be missing out on opportunities to stand back and consider the other things that life could be offering you or the effects that this pursuit of wealth could be having on other people.

This is clearly just a generalisation for illustration and we are not aiming to cast judgement on this or any other career choice. Also, many of us will have roles in which the values and aims aren't so polarised. We are simply pointing out that our jobs, workplaces and organisational cultures can have an effect on our worldviews and behaviour more generally. When you are next at work, it is worth standing back and observing what particular 'flavour' of influences surrounds you in your role and organisation, and whether you feel this creates a particular 'bubble' of world views and attitudes you carry with you at work, and perhaps into your own life.

Other institutions

There is a wide range of other institutions and groups we might choose to get involved with over the course of our lives, and these can influence our worldviews and behaviours, just like our workplaces.

These institutions can include the charities we help, the clubs and societies we belong to, the sports teams that we follow, the political parties we support and many other areas. The influences can be wide-

ranging – from the feeling of the importance of service and contribution that can come from volunteering for a charity, through to the feeling of being part of a group with similar values when you join a political party. Again, many institutions can influence us in a mixture of positive and less helpful ways, with the political party as a good example, where you may feel the value of comradeship and a sense of belonging, but where you may find your views becoming hardened by being surrounded with similar political voices, which might make you less willing to hear other views or see the good in people who hold them.

Even if we don't choose to get involved with other institutions, this can influence the way we see the world and behave – in some cases, perhaps by making us feel isolated from others, and perhaps resentful towards them. And this should confirm the overall point we're making in this section – that you are always exposed to influences, whatever you decide to get involved with – or not get involved with in your life. The critical point is to be aware of these influences, and to be able to manage their effect on your worldview and behaviour.

Cultural influences

We can experience a range of influences as a result of the culture we live in.

These influences may be present due to the history of the country or culture one lives in, or may be a result of other influences (such as political, economic or religious) mixing into its culture.

For example, a distinct working culture has evolved in the USA over the last century, which has led to a markedly different approach to holiday allowance and how to use it. “Americans take less holiday than most other nations in the developing world...In 2014 Americans averaged 1,789 working hours, compared with 1,677 for British workers and only 1,371 for Germans.”¹¹ And it’s not just the holiday allowance that differs between these countries – it can be accompanied by a differing attitude towards work itself and how the work/life balance should operate.

There are a wide range of important factors that can feature in one’s culture, and a different sense of culture can be found at a small, local level as well as at a national level. For example, at a local level, someone may live in a community in which people are expected to behave in a particular way – for example, men being aggressive and dominant. Even at a countrywide level, we may have a sense of what ‘English’ culture consists of, and feel that this influences how we behave.

Our personal identity will also affect what sort of cultural influences we receive. Our personal identity is formed of a range of important factors, including race, gender, sexuality and place of birth (from local to international levels). For each of these factors there can be strong cultural forces influencing us – either to think and behave in ways that fit within a particular identity type (e.g. ‘behave like a boy’) or that are aimed at us because we are seen to fit within a particular identity type (e.g. being treated with hostility because you are from another country or culture than the one you currently live in).

In this section it is difficult to move beyond generalisations and a couple of specific examples as our cultural influences can consist of such a wide range of variables – from food to traditional beliefs. Despite this, our main conclusion is that we can receive a wide range of influences from our culture, which can significantly affect how we behave and see the world.

Religious influences

They say you should never discuss religion or politics at a dinner party – but that’s not going to stop us here! First, let us note that this book is not concerned with making a critique of religion or any specific religions. Religion is a fundamental part of many people’s lives around the world, and is interlinked with issues of tradition, race, and many other important areas.

We are exploring religion here simply in its capacity as a source of influence in our lives, and exploring what effect it can have on our minds and worldviews.

Before we explore some of the main sources from which we might receive religious influence, let’s consider why religion can have such a strong influence on us, and such a limiting effect on our worldviews. There are three key reasons why it matters:

- **It can influence every aspect of our lives.** The teachings and worldview of most religions cover every aspect of our worldviews – including how we perceive reality, our values, whether we think critically or not – and can become our ‘operating system’ for how we see the world.

- **It's a very 'sticky' influence.** It can become embedded in our lives. It can be at the centre of how we identify ourselves, and once we identify ourselves as being of a particular religious denomination, it can be hard (and sometimes extremely painful, emotionally and psychologically) to move away from this. A similar argument can be made for certain types of political ideology, which can also be particularly powerful, 'sticky' influences on people. Some religions can also be 'closed systems', which have a range of functions within them to stop people from moving away from them – including claiming that they worship the one 'true' god, that other religions are wrong and that apostates will receive punishment in this life or after death if they leave the religion.
- **It can be very restrictive.** Following a particular religious belief can push people down a very specific funnel that really restricts their worldviews, values and lives. It can also militate against some of the things we are arguing in this book that we need to be taught – like getting a clear view of the reality of our world, developing critical thought and being able to carve out your own life. For example, some strands of religious thought seek to get people to believe in historical events that are not factually correct, or follow specific values based on following authority or tradition rather than informed and compassionate reflection about what's needed.

There are of course many subtleties within the thinking of different religions, and we're not arguing that each is the same, but we don't have space in the book to explore the differences between religions in

detail. We want to make the point though that these tendencies are present in the thinking of the major Abrahamic religions (including Christianity, Judaism and Islam). In summary, religions can act against people developing the skills and perspective we all need in order to live well-informed and independent lives.

The other issue is the status that religion has, both in our individual lives and societies. We give it special privilege above other types of influence, and let it into our lives in ways that we wouldn't readily allow with other influences.

First, we treat it differently as an influence in our own lives. For example, some readers may feel religion is a controversial issue to include in this book. Yet it is another influence on us, so why should it not be included like the others?

It is an issue that can generate a great deal of personal emotion, for some of the reasons noted above – e.g. its stickiness (including the fact that we identify ourselves with it) and the fact that it can influence every aspect of our lives. And these factors could be part of the reason why we see it as a special type of influence, to be treated differently from others. To illustrate this, consider how many people are much more willing to allow (or even actively build) particular forms of religious influences into their and their children's lives than political or any other influences. For example, many people are happy to bring up their children with a religious influence as an identifier from an early age (e.g. 'We're bringing Josh up as a Christian'), but are very unlikely to do so with any other influence or identifier (e.g. 'We're

bringing Josh up as a Communist’!). We will explore this more detail shortly.

Second, it has special privilege in our society too as an influence, as it is seen to be outside the rules that would apply to other influences, such as political ones. For example, a specific religion (in the UK, at least) is promoted by state above others. Also, religion has an elevated place in the national curriculum in education, despite it being just one part of a broader subject of ‘How to think about the world’. This sense of special privilege can lead to religious ideas being able to seep into society more deeply and widely than other types of influences. We will explore this in more detail shortly, when we look at ‘the state’ as a source of religious influence.

Let’s now explore some of the different sources of religious influence in our lives.

Religious influences are much stronger in some other countries and cultures around the world than in the UK. The latest British Social Attitudes Survey suggests that “53% of all adults describe themselves as having no religious affiliation, up from 48% in 2015”.¹²

But although our country is perhaps becoming less formally religious, such ideas and values still play a major role in many people’s lives. More specifically, religion itself remains a significant source of influence on us throughout our lives. Let us explore a few of the key ways this happens:

Tradition

Many of our traditions and celebrations in the UK and around the world are bound up in religious symbolism and stories – from Christmas to the coronation of kings and queens. We are therefore regularly exposed to religious influence even though we may not realise it.

The state

One of the reasons that religion is still a strong influence on many people's lives is that religious thinking is still embedded within the British state. In reality, we still do not have a secular state, in which religion and the state are kept separate. In the UK, Christianity is the state religion, with the Church of England as the state church.

In some ways, we are therefore brought up as religious in this country. One of the most important way this happens is in the education system.

Roughly two thirds of state schools in the UK¹³ have no particular religious character. The remaining third could be described as 'Faith Schools' – those that have a particular faith character. In the UK the vast majority of faith schools are either Church of England (67% of faith schools) or Roman Catholic (29%).

Even in the 'non-religious' state schools, children are introduced to, and taught about, religion in a way that is generally unclear and unhelpful in enabling them to see the world clearly.

- First, Religious Education (RE) tends to be dealt with as an exclusive topic rather than as a branch

of philosophical thought that has its roots in certain political, cultural and historical traditions. When we teach religion, we should be teaching it as just one strand of a broader topic of ‘the history of thought and ideas’, alongside other philosophical ideas.

- Second, even within our existing inadequate RE curriculum, there is bias towards a particular branch of religion, due to Christianity being the state religion. Even those two thirds of schools without any specific religious character must, in their RE lessons, “reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Britain are mainly Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions.”¹⁴

These two factors taken together can mean that our children are brought up with a way of seeing the world that could be called ‘diluted Christianity’ – which restricts their worldviews and doesn’t equip them with the tools to think critically about religion or other ways of thinking about the world and life. Instead it gives them a gentle but significant push towards Christianity.

This is to say nothing of the one third of state schools (plus many others outside the state sector) that do have a religious character. For all their faults, at least non-religious state schools are obliged to teach children about a range of religions. For faith schools, however the rules are different. They have to follow the national curriculum, but they can choose what they teach in religious studies. Some types of faith school however (faith academies) don’t have to teach

the national curriculum at all, and can build up their own view of what children should be taught.

This gives us a situation in which state schools are letting our children down and participating in the restriction of their worldviews and lives, rather than acting against it, to help everyone gain worldviews that are as open as possible and are equipped with the tools they need to live well-informed, fulfilled lives. We therefore need to change this.

Parenting and families

Much of the time it is parental choice that decides whether a child should be sent to a religious school or not. It is also parental choice that dictates whether a child should be brought up within a particular religious viewpoint or not, and this can have a life-long impact on them.

For many parents there are very strong issues of tradition and identity behind a decision to bring up a child within a particular religious framework, even if you exclude the incredibly strong pull of the religious beliefs themselves. And we wouldn't question the fact that most parents want nothing but the very best for their children when making these choices.

But, from the perspective of influences in our lives, a child subject to a particular religious upbringing is clearly having their worldviews and choices restricted for them, as they are being given a particular (often inaccurate) view of reality and a particular set of values and expectations – some of which the child may not choose for themselves or feel are correct, if they had a proper choice.

Clearly there are better and worse ways of bringing a child up in a religious environment. Some parents might teach children many of the skills that we are discussing in this book – such as how to think critically, challenge authority etc. – and simply tell them that the religious worldview they have chosen is just one of many one could choose. Yet there are likely to be many religious parents who aren't taking this approach, and even the ones that are would still be restricting their children's worldviews.

They would also be doing so at a critical time in that child's life – when they have not yet developed the full range of mental capacities and tools to manage their response to external influences and their approach to life. You could see this as a phase where their minds are building up immunity to external viruses (which is what influences can turn into). And yet, at this critical stage of mental vulnerability, their parents are pushing one of these influences at them.

We therefore suggest that children should be given the tools to think about this stuff for themselves so they can make their own choice about their beliefs – instead of imposing these beliefs on them. We shouldn't be imposing – we should be equipping and empowering.

As we will see later in the book though, we are not just 'mentally vulnerable' as children to the influences around us. We currently remain vulnerable to them through the whole of our adult lives, as most of us are not given the full range of tools and skills we need to manage these external influences. We never receive this 'immunity jab' to protect us. And we must take steps to change this dangerous situation.

Religious institutions

These are another form of institution to add to the list in the previous section. A range of institutions can surround a religion – from places of worship that people can attend regularly and from which they can gain a sense of belonging and involvement in a community, through to more abstract institutions such as lobbying groups that can campaign on behalf of certain religions for their ideas and values to be adopted as policies or as part of a country’s law.

At any level, these institutions can play a role in influencing us – for example through reinforcing the religion’s ideas through contact with other people or through attempting to influence governments to apply their ideas or principles more generally across a population.

Conclusion

As we noted at the start of this section, we’re not seeking to critique religion in its broadest sense here. We’re not arguing for an end to faith. But we are suggesting that religion is a very strong and ‘sticky’ influence in our lives, and can actively militate against people developing the tools they need to live better informed, more independent and more fulfilled lives. This is particularly the case given its privileged position as an influence in people’s lives and society generally.

We therefore suggest that the conclusions for other influences in this book should apply to religious thought too, Namely, people should be given the skills

– both in childhood and throughout their lives – to think for themselves.

So we suggest that, at minimum, all children should be given the skills and perspective we recommend in this book, even if they have a religious upbringing. This will at least give them the tools to review their situation and make their own decision about the life and beliefs they want for themselves when they reach adulthood. But ideally, we suggest children should be allowed to grow up and develop their minds with a more open sense of the possibilities for belief than being pushed down one path before they've developed the skills to consider this for themselves.

Economic influences

Economic factors are one of the least recognised but most important influences acting on us in the modern world. Many people may not realise that we live within a society with a particular economic philosophy, but we do, and the choice of economic philosophy our society adopts can permeate most aspects of that society (from the type of education we receive to the rights we have when we rent a property), and can strongly influence our own lives (including our ambitions, what we value and the particular vision of life we aspire to).

Our current economic model is this. Traditional economics is based on a picture of human beings as consistently rational and narrowly self-interested agents who usually pursue their subjectively-defined ends optimally. This portrayal of people has often been described as 'Homo economicus' or 'economic man'.¹⁵

Unfortunately, this picture of human beings is severely flawed and inadequate – in so many ways that we don't have time to mention them all here! Essentially, it sees us almost as robots, single-mindedly pursuing our own needs with computer-like accuracy. The reality however is that we clearly aren't always self-interested or rational, and we don't always pursue our aims optimally. We're also much more than just 'need satisfying' creatures, and the needs we do have extend vastly beyond those that material goods and the economic system can provide for – friendships, nature and meaning, to name just a few.

So, the economic models and policies that result from this inadequate, restricted picture of human beings naturally fail to give us what we need. The other key weakness of traditional economics – and even the more liberal branch of Keynesian economics – is that it takes no account of the environment we live within and assumes there will be unlimited resources for us to use ('sources') and unlimited places to dump them when we don't need them anymore ('sinks').

The problem is that the inadequate version of economics is the philosophy that still overarches global society today, and therefore continues to provide the dominant template of values, principles and ideas that is followed by the politicians, institutions and companies in our society, and who in turn push it on us, as key influencers of our lives. So, many of the other sources of influence we've been talking about in this book will be transmitting the influences of this faulty economic system to us – from schools to newspapers.

You may well recognise the sort of influences this philosophy has on us from your own life. These include:

- The push for economic growth and material success, and seeing these things as highly desirable goals – both on a societal and individual level.
- Encouraging us to consume more, and new things.
- Encouraging competition between people for greater success, wealth and consumption.
- Encouraging people to be busy, as this is seen as an indicator of success and productivity.
- Discouraging activities that are less economically productive – such as reflection and rest.
- Promoting the idea of individualism, including the idea that we are all in this on our own, in competition with each other, and as Margaret Thatcher famously said ‘There is no such thing as society’.¹⁶ This leads to the desire to look after one’s own interests before those of others.
- Seeking a smaller state and less help for those left behind – instead of seeing us being all in it together’ as a society and supporting each other. This follows from the idea of individualism above, and includes the (incorrect) belief in the idea that greater wealth will ‘trickle down’ to those less fortunate in society. This leads to a deep suspicion of anyone who could be seen as relying on the state too much.

These influences can seep into our lives in a number of ways, including:

- **Our aspirations** – the influence of current dominant economic ideas tends to encourage people to seek material success, in careers that earn high salaries. People who reach senior roles early in their career are seen as ‘high flyers’. As we note in our book ‘How to achieve less’, “Vast numbers of people seek jobs in order to achieve ‘success’ rather than to find something they genuinely want to do.”¹⁷ Interestingly, people who adopt caring careers (such as nursing or caring) tend to be seen in a different way – as ethical, but not as impressive and aspirational. The pursuit of a life of creative work is often seen as frivolous (unless it is financially successful, when it is seen as laudable), as it is not focussed on advancing the person’s social, career or financial status. For evidence of this, just recall the conservative advice of your careers advisor at school!
- **Our pace of life** – “in the modern world we’re constantly busy. We never stop and are always on the go. In fact, we see the level of busyness in our lives as a representation of how important we are. We seek to maximise the number of things we can squeeze into one 24 hour period, and get frustrated and annoyed with ourselves and others (road rage, anyone?) when something holds us back from achieving these unrealistic and arbitrary expectations.”¹⁸
- **Our consumption** – we live in a culture of consumerism, where advertisements, friends and many other sources influence us to seek the latest gadgets, clothes, decorations and things. And, given our natural tendency to compare ourselves

with other people, we feel bad about ourselves (and can be made by others to feel bad about ourselves) if we are not ‘keeping up with the Joneses’, not using the ‘right’ brands or engaging in many other ultimately meaningless comparisons. This influence is so strong on us that we build up debts in order to keep up with others. Consumerism can be very addictive as it activates reward centres in the brain (in a range of contexts – for example, both when we look at products we like and when we think we can buy them at a good price)¹⁹, yet the pleasure is often short-lived, and many people find themselves wanting more soon after having acquired something. And so we go on to desire the next thing, and get trapped on what’s been labelled the ‘hedonic treadmill’. Ultimately, beyond a certain level, material goods don’t give us the things we really need in our lives. These lie in other areas – from relationships to creativity. We therefore can spend our lives pursuing objects that we don’t really need, mainly for the value that they are held in by other people – which, upon reflection, is a rather depressing waste of our time, stress and resources.

- **Our leisure activities** – we all have to go shopping, and sometimes it can be fun. But shopping and buying new stuff has now become a hobby for many people – something that they spend a great deal of their leisure time on. In fact, it’s become one of the most popular leisure activities in this country. There are clearly better things to do with our time, that open our minds and cost us less, but shopping as a leisure activity is a great example of people being caught in a lifestyle trap –

and even an addiction. They are doing something that gives them only temporary pleasure, and can cost them more money than they really have available, but at the same time this activity lures them towards places, advertisements and groups that see these goods as important to social status, and that build the desire for further objects or goods even more. And so the participants become caught in a recurring trap of desire creation, temporary satisfaction, then new desire creation again.

- **Our values** – a strongly materialist mindset also appears to lead people “to engage in behaviors and hold attitudes damaging to our communities and to the world’s ecological health”²⁰. In other words, if our minds are focussed on acquiring more goods and pursuing our own selfish aims for ourselves, we’re less likely to be open to looking out for others or the wider world. This is a great example of how a particular set of influences (in this case, materialist) can close our minds off to other options and alter our ideas and behaviour – and sometimes for the worse.

These are just a small selection of the ways in which the economic system and economic ideas can affect us.

And these ideas are pushed on us by a variety of powerful sources that surround us every day. Let’s simply take advertising and consumerism as an example.

Every day, each of us is bombarded with around 1,600 commercial messages – on the TV, on the tube, on the internet – trying to sell us stuff, and telling

us that our lives will be incomplete unless we buy a particular product.

The people and companies who are developing these messages invest a lot of time, money and effort to ensure that they are as effective as possible at influencing us. As part of this, they might gather insights on how each of us thinks and behaves, and then use sophisticated and powerful psychological techniques to attempt to influence us. Vance Packard gives an example of this in *The Hidden Persuaders*:

“Motivational research is the type of research that seeks to learn what motivates people in making choices. It employs techniques designed to reach the unconscious or subconscious mind because preferences generally are determined by factors of which the individual is not conscious.”²¹

Even our family and friends can reinforce this idea that we need more stuff. Chatting about someone’s plans for an exotic holiday or someone else’s new mobile phone can make us feel we need those things, and that we’re missing out if we don’t have them.

Or look in newspapers and magazines. A while back, we took a weekday edition of The Sun newspaper – and found that over one third of the paper consisted of advertisements! And media like this don’t just contain loads of ads but also stories about new gadgets, clothes, property, travel and many other things, all suggesting that having them will make life better.

In short, they support and promote the idea of a consumerist lifestyle, where it’s good and natural to want more stuff, and where you feel dissatisfied without it.

Very few people in the media or in politics are challenging or questioning whether this culture of consumerism is a good idea. If you do you're labelled as some sort of radical lunatic. Which just shows how dominant the idea has become – we live in a culture where consumerism defines our idea of what a 'good life' is.

So what's the problem with that? The problem is that consumerism is an influence that can be harmful to human flourishing. Here are some of the reasons why:

- **It is manipulative** – modern advertising is not just about telling people that a product exists – i.e. responding to a need that someone may already have. It is now about creating desires and needs that we might not have had before seeing the advertisement. In other words, it aims to create fake desires and needs in us by manipulating us, so that we will want their product.

But how dare anyone manipulate me into having these wants and needs? Isn't this just an aggressive attempt to exercise power over me – no less harmful than physical aggression? And it's particularly exploitative of people who are vulnerable or don't have the experience or knowledge yet to think critically about this stuff – such as children.

- **It doesn't meet our human needs – yet it claims do so** – consumerism promotes material goods, which are important to us up to a certain point. But beyond the basics like food, shelter and a bed for the night, there are many other things that are more important to our happiness than material goods – friendships, love, a sense of

purpose, creativity etc. And financial markets and consumerism can't provide these things.

The real problem is that consumerism *often claims that it can*. It does this by linking itself with things that actually do bring value – a bit like a parasite. Take a recent ad for Doritos for example, which uses the idea of friendship to sell their crisps. In reality it's the experience of friendship we want – the crisps are entirely superfluous to it.

This can lead to us thinking that this stuff should be making us happy but feeling that something is wrong with us when it's not providing the fulfilment and happiness we crave.

- **It restricts our choices and lives** – even if consumerism did meet our needs it would not be an appropriate philosophy to base our lives and societies on, because it tries to brainwash us into thinking that it's the only way to live and be happy.

But this obviously isn't true. So, despite all its assertions that it gives us 'choice' and 'freedom', it actually takes away the freedoms that are really important to us – including the freedom to think for ourselves and decide for ourselves about the lives we want to live.

- **It's unsustainable** – we live on a planet with a rapidly growing population (7.5 billion people and counting) and a finite set of natural resources for this population to consume. We are already living way beyond the planet's limits.

Yet, despite this, consumerism and advertising continue to encourage us to increase our levels of

consumption. They even try to present consumerism as a way of solving the planet's problems! (e.g. 'we're using too many plastic bottles – so buy our bottle instead!').

So, consumerism is a damaging influence on us – encouraging us towards behaviours that actually damage the planet. And it doesn't just promote unsustainable behaviour – as we've already noted, evidence shows that a strongly materialist point of view “tends to conflict with the desire to help the world be a better place and to take care of others”.²²

You can read more about the problems with consumerism in our popular book 'The problem with consumerism', which can be found on the Life Squared website.

These economic influences are everywhere in our lives. As a consequence, they are extremely hard to challenge or shift, as they become what is 'normal'. But, as we've noted, there are many other things to value in life and different ways to live your life than this, and we should be given the tools to consider these so we can build the lives we really want. For example, you might prefer to work less and live a more frugal life, which enables you not only to have less impact on the planet but also spend more time on the things that matter to you such as doing creative work and volunteering to help other people. The world is open to us – we just need to realise it!

It's no wonder that these influences are powerful, as they play a key role in supporting the overall economic philosophy. One of the key tenets of neoliberal economic philosophy has been the need to seek constant

economic growth, as this will supposedly provide us with the best possible lives. As consumerism builds ever greater demand for goods and services, it is easy to see how it plays an important role in driving this economic growth.

In conclusion, although it is powerful and dominates our modern lives, our economic model is failing us and we need a new one. One that is specifically built to deliver the full range of things that human beings need to thrive, and one that does this within the capacity of the one planet we have. Many of the things that people need to thrive (such as fulfilment, education and equality) will not fall directly within the role of the economic system but it will need to be structured in a way that creates the best conditions possible for these things to be provided elsewhere – for example, through a well-funded education system.

Political influences

There are many ways in which political ideas and views can influence our lives – from political bias in newspapers through to political movements (such as the campaign for and against Brexit) exerting pressure on us.

In this section though we'll just explore two components of politics and its influence. First, we'll consider how and why politicians try to influence us, including the methods and language they use to communicate with the public. Second, we'll explore the role played by overall political ideas and philosophies in setting the context of our views, lives and the parameters of our societies. Although these two examples of political

influence might seem to be acting at quite different levels, we will see how the broader ideas can seep down into the language politicians use to influence us.

How politicians try to influence us

At its most basic level, the role of an elected politician serving in a democracy is to represent the interests of their constituents. The role of an opposition politician is to challenge the elected government to ensure it is running the country properly and representing the interests of his or her constituents.

Let us first deal with the motivations of politicians and try to see them in a positive light. People become politicians for a range of reasons, and although we may have (for good reason) developed a more cynical attitude to politicians in the modern world, most are still motivated by a genuine desire to make the world a better place.

There are two issues though:

- First, each politician's view of what could make the world a better place can vary a great deal – both in terms of the values they believe in (e.g. 'our country should offer a safe haven to refugees') and how they think these values can most effectively be put into action (e.g. 'we should let refugees stay in the UK for 5 years').

Our values can be hard to get a grip on sometimes, as morality doesn't consist of clear boundaries between 'right' and 'wrong'. In truth, it is a collection of grey areas and questions of degree – and no-one has the 'right' answer, because there rarely is one

in the field of morality. See the Life Squared book 'How to live ethically' for more discussion of what values are.

Politicians therefore have a choice. They can either admit that values are grey areas on a spectrum, and engage in an honest conversation about these values with other people, in an attempt to find compromise and the best solution to an issue. Or they can simply attempt to convince people that their view is the 'right' one, through blocking attempts to discuss the issue properly and refusing to accept that values can have grey areas. It will be clear to you which of these is the norm in modern politics!

- Second, each politician, no matter what their political views, needs and seeks to gain some form of influence and power (and then retain it) if they are going to be successful in their aims to make the world better – in whatever sense they see it.

So, although it seems reasonable to suggest that most politicians are motivated by genuine values, under our current political system most are also seeking to gain and retain power, as well as try to persuade people that their particular values should be followed. As we'll see later, this situation is not good for democracy, and doesn't have to be this way, but it's how things are at present. It also results in politicians using a range of techniques to influence us, including the following:

- **Moral certainty** – politicians are fond of moral certainty. You will often hear the phrase 'This is the right thing to do'. In a political world where we

are being asked to follow orders from up high, it's easy to see why they use this language, as it gives voters a sense that the politician is in control, is powerful, is able to make clear decisions and take decisive action.

Unfortunately though, statements like this are also false, and can negatively affect us. As we've already seen, morality and values are a collection of grey areas and questions of degree – and no-one has the one 'right' answer, because there rarely is one in morality. But by claiming that their view is 'The right thing to do', a politician attempts to stop debate, close down any other moral possibilities than their own and make you accept their view. This is clearly either naive, or manipulative, misleading and dishonest. So always be distrustful of a politician who says 'this is the right thing to do' because it's never that simple.

- **Over-simplification** – following on from the previous point, there can be a broader tendency in politicians when communicating with the public to over-simplify issues – not just moral choices – and reduce them to black or white debates. For example, the political campaigns that led up to the 2016 EU membership referendum in Britain failed to communicate the detail of an immensely complicated and important issue, and instead reduced the issue to vastly over-simplified, and often inaccurate, claims and accusations.

Politicians from all sides can get sucked into an over-simplistic blame game on issues such as this, instead of trying to openly address the complexities and issues it presents, and trying to actually solve

the problem. Some of the reasons for this type of stance could be a fear of publically ‘losing face’, a desire not to make issues complicated for the public and a desire to keep their ‘political message’ clear on each particular issue.

This type of stance can contribute to people developing ill-informed opinions, seeing issues or other people in a polarised, over-simplistic way (which can lead to fear, hatred and conflict) and having unrealistic expectations for our politicians, society and own lives. It can ultimately also lead to bad political decisions being made.

In reality though the world is a complex place, and it is important for us to understand this, so that we have realistic expectations of other people (including politicians) and our own aspirations for the society we want to see. Also, if we, as the public, were able to develop a better understanding of the complex issues that politicians must wrestle with, it would be likely to make us empathise more with them and feel more positively towards them.

- **Not answering questions** – politicians are given media training to enable them to move any interviews or TV appearances to their own agenda as soon as possible. This can take a number of forms.

First, they might simply ignore the question they’ve been asked, and pivot to the issue they want to discuss e.g. ‘What is the government going to do about the train drivers’ strike?’ could be answered with ‘Well, I think the most critical issue today is the latest employment figures which show...’.

Another tactic is to fail to give a direct answer to the question. Next time you listen to a politician being interviewed, notice that they almost never reply ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to an answer. This enables a politician to switch the question to the point they want to make, and also means they avoid making commitments or statements that they might have to stick to at a later date.

This is most famously illustrated by Newsnight presenter Jeremy Paxman’s infamous interview with the then home secretary Michael Howard, in May 1997. Paxman asks Howard the question “Did you threaten to overrule him?” – and Howard deliberately avoids answering the question. Frustrated at not getting a straight answer, Paxman asks the same question again, and is met with the same evasion. In the end, he asks the same question twelve times and fails to receive a direct answer.

These tactics from politicians are all incredibly frustrating for us as viewers and members of the electorate as they make us feel as if they aren’t speaking to us honestly, are blocking communications and are deliberately trying to manipulate the truth. It turns political discourse into a stodgy, unedifying mess. No wonder people have become cynical about politicians and politics.

- **Refusing to admit error** – there is a well-known tendency among modern politicians to ‘spin’ their communications – to present information in a particular way that will suit their point of view. This can run from emphasising the positives in disappointing budget figures through to simply

refusing to admit errors. This can lead to the public having a very unclear view of how their country or local council is being run, with facts being obscured from us.

This particular method of influencing seems to stem from a politician's desire to seem 'strong' to voters and to give reassurance. They may also feel it is a way to show the power of their convictions.

Again though, this backfires, as it often results in a shutting down of dialogue – a refusal of politicians to honestly and directly discuss things that haven't gone so well and what can be done to improve them. This closing of dialogue again prevents the public from hearing what really happened or participating in any dialogue to help improve things. We are left frustrated and voiceless.

- **Using biased language** – language or phrasing can be used by politicians to influence how we perceive a particular policy, situation or fact. This can be one of the more subtle forms of political influence that we are subject to, as it can creep into common usage beyond politicians of a particular stripe, and become the common way we perceive an issue, even though it is a biased view.

For example, people's views on the issue of taxation can vary dramatically. Some (generally those on the political left) may see it as a positive thing – an essential way to achieve a better, more cohesive and more equal society by paying for social services and helping to redistribute wealth. Others (towards the political right) may see it as an imposition – where your money is being taken to pay for things you

have little control over or may not benefit from. Many people will sit somewhere between these two views.

The language we generally use in the UK to discuss taxation though tends to be drawn from the right wing political view, seeing the ‘Taxman’ as a faceless bogeyman – someone you’re trying to keep your money away from. Advice telling you ‘how to beat the taxman’ is common, even when they’re not politically motivated. Indeed, even the civil service and HMRC have presented it this way! One rarely sees taxation presented in a different way from this in the UK – for example, as a positive thing – a part of your moral duty to be a good citizen, making a contribution to a better society in which we’re all in it together. And, be aware, this isn’t such a ridiculous idea, as it is practiced in other countries, such as Sweden.

The ubiquity of this phrasing and language to discuss something like taxation is not surprising at a time dominated by centre-right politics in the UK – from Thatcher onwards.

It also however shows the lack of an alternative, snappy language from others in society (including the ‘left’ of politics) to articulate the idea of taxation in a positive way.

It’s not just the issue of taxation in which these implicit language biases appear. This point applies to a range of other ideas – for example the idea of ‘choice’ against the idea of ‘regulation’. As we’ve already noted, we live at a time with a strong neoliberal worldview, which leads to influences

that promote the idea of a smaller state and stronger economic markets. This leads to the use of phrases like ‘choice’ being seen in a positive sense and phrases such as ‘regulation’ being portrayed as impositions on people’s freedom, which drain economic growth and innovation. Under another vision of society though, we could see choice in a different way – as ‘waste’ or ‘greed’ or at best pointless past a certain level, as well as seeing regulation in a more positive way – as ‘protection’, ‘social justice’, ‘fairness’ or ‘equality’. We could also see the freedoms of the many to live decent lives as being more important than the freedoms of the wealthy few to gain more money and power.

In conclusion, there are several ways of spinning meaning from our language, and the most common uses that influence us can be dependent on the dominant ideas and views overarching our society.

- **Lying, sowing mistrust, undermining democracy** – this section on politics has taken a positive view of the motives of most politicians, and the influencing methods noted up to here have reflected this. In the last two years though, the political game has changed with the rise of the far right in the USA and around Europe. The tactics used by Trump and other members of the far right have moved beyond the ‘normal’ (yet still unacceptable) techniques of influence listed so far, and into much more extreme measures, aimed at sowing fear and division between groups in society, undermining confidence in democratic processes and institutions and eroding people’s trust in each other and the information they receive. In other

words, these are the actions of demagogues and fascists, attempting to weaken the democratic state and build authoritarian power. We should fight with all our energy against dangerous attempts like this to undermine our democracy and sense of civilisation in society.

So overall, these things turn politicians – the people who are supposed to be representing us – into people that are trying to influence us, disempower us and prevent us from taking part in democratic debate. As we hinted at earlier, it doesn't have to be like this. Many of these methods of influencing used by politicians aren't truly necessary – they're symptoms of a problem with our politics at the moment. Politicians feel the need to impose views and ideas on us from on high, rather than having grown up, two-way conversations with the public. This one-way, top-down approach leads politicians to work ever harder to exert even greater levels of influence on us, using increasingly desperate, obvious and frustrating techniques to do so.

The role of political ideas

We have already seen how an overall economic idea or philosophy can influence our society and lives without us realising it, and the same can be said of political ideas. Indeed, there can be a lot of overlap between economic and political ideas – each can be part of the other.

Political ideas can include issues such as:

- How much control the citizens of a country should be given in running it and making decisions on how it

should be run – in other words, the type of political system we should have – such as a democracy.

- How much of a role the state should have in the economy – including models such as state planned (communist) and individualist (capitalist) economies.

As we have already argued, we live in the UK at a time where the political compass has been pointing firmly to the centre right for nearly four decades, from the government of Margaret Thatcher onwards. Centre-right thinking tends towards a certain set of biases in its ideas, including a desire for lower taxes and less spending on state services such as social welfare. People on the left would argue that this tends to benefit the rich at the expense of the poor, and can create greater inequality in society.

This dominant way of thinking tends to set the agenda not only for how our institutions are run (for example, leading schools to prioritise subjects like maths and science that will make us effective actors in the economy), but also for how we see the world as a society. In fact, it is easy for the biases of this dominant way of political thinking to seep down into our everyday lives and views, so that they become the norm. Any view that runs contrary to these can seem quite extreme and radical in the light of them. For an example of this we can return to the idea of taxation.

As we've seen, this is discussed with a right-wing bias in our society generally at the moment. The idea of taxing people more is seen as anathema and extreme. Yet our attitude to taxation is driven by our attitude (as individuals and a society) to much broader political

issues – such as how much we should look after each other in a society, how much we should see ourselves as individuals or co-operating, supportive members of a group and to what extent we should allow the accumulation of private wealth and power. And if we take a step back, we can see that there are other ways we could see our society and relationship with each other – and other ‘big ideas’ we could have as a blanket over our society and lives – some of which might be better than the ones we have. We need to be able to stand back and see these ‘big ideas’ as individuals and how they govern our lives, and this can be very difficult to achieve when we are all immersed in a society with a particular political worldview that’s fed to us all the time.

If we take a step back though, despite the fact that there is a fair amount of political bias in our society at the moment, we are fortunate to live in a relatively benign political system, in which democracy is seen as an important idea and people’s rights are respected – even if this isn’t achieved in anywhere near a perfect way.

To see an alternative view of what is possible in politics, we only have to look at countries like North Korea, with their state controlled media blocking out any communications or views that could show an alternative view of life to that promoted by the state.

At its best our political system and our political ideas give each of us the freedom to think for ourselves and live our own lives. But at their worst they can be one of the most brutal and effective ways of oppressing people, manipulating them and taking away their freedoms.

It is critical to realise that the distance between these two extremes of political influence is not that great. Just take a look at Germany before Nazi rule – a reasonably free, civilised European country – and how quickly it descended into a despotic state that demanded people’s obedience and following its view of the world. In other words, we should realise that our political situation (and therefore our freedom) is fragile and that we need to look after it and fight for it. You can see in the USA at the moment how even a seemingly robust democratic system with its values of freedom of speech can be put under immense strain by a leader and governing party that wants to shut down freedom of speech and other important democratic principles.

Broadcast media — newspapers, television and radio

We live in a world of 24-hour news and in which real-time information about world events is available at the click of the button. We consume a great deal of information from the world around us from a range of broadcast media sources, including newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the internet, but how can be sure which (if any) offer a reliable picture of the world?

Before we begin this section, we should note that this is not going to focus on the recently-coined idea of ‘Fake news’. This is one of several tactics used by Trump and other members of the far right that have moved beyond the ‘normal’ (yet still unacceptable) techniques of influence listed so far, and into much

more extreme territory. This concept, as with so many others that have emerged since the rise of Donald Trump a couple of years ago, is a confection – a made up idea. Its aim is to discredit any institution that is critical of his regime’s views and practices, including established departments like the CIA within the US, or independent media outlets across the world – a classic trick of a budding fascist or demagogue. In the case of media outlets, the aim is to sow mistrust and doubt in the credibility and truth of their stories. As noted before in this book, this is an exceptional set of circumstances brought about by a demagogue, and should be fought with all possible urgency. We should therefore view the Trump administration’s idea of ‘Fake news’ as the ultimate source of fake news itself.

For clarification – for years before the rise of Trump, and continuing quite independently from it to this day, there has been a change in the broadcast media landscape in the modern world, with a vast increase in channels and information available due to changes in technology and the rise of the web, plus a change in the information gathering techniques of various broadcast media. Some of this leads to influences on us that we need to be aware of and manage. And this is what we will deal with in this section.

The changing face of journalism

Think of journalism and what picture comes into your mind? Perhaps it’s a busy, smoky office on Fleet Street, with journalists scurrying about trying to file their stories in time to begin their long ‘lunches’. This picture, although perhaps accurate several decades ago, no longer reflects the reality of journalism in the

UK, which has changed beyond recognition in the last 20 years.

As Nick Davies notes in 'Flat Earth News', his unmatched exposé of the realities of modern journalism, it's not just this atmosphere of journalism that has disappeared:

"...the very practice of old-style reporting generally has gone, too – the army of journalists travelling the country to cover a trial, or any other kind of story; the reporting milking information from contacts among 'cabinet ministers and cabbies' the intrepid investigator out on the road following the trail of clues...That journalism has been replaced by...what some now call 'churnalism'."²³

In other words, as newspapers have been bought out by global media companies whose main aim is to make as much money as possible, the teams of reporters on each title have been stripped back to their bare bones in order to save costs. Instead of gathering their own reporting and evidence, most media outlets now rely on the same handful of major news sources. This is particularly the case for global news websites, "all of whom rely overwhelmingly on AP (Associated Press) and Reuters".²⁴ This results in a homogenised view of the news, with only a small selection of stories filtering through all main media. You can see the results of this by looking through a random selection of national newspapers on the same day – most of them contain the same stories and pictures!

This restriction of sources clearly has a knock-on effect on the way we each see the world, as we only get a very restricted picture of current affairs. Naturally,

there is a limit as to how much we can expect to know (and want to know) about what's going on in the world at any given moment, but it would be useful to us to have the option of a more varied and dynamic view from our press.

Media bias

Perhaps one of the strongest influences on our lives, and sources of bias of which many people are unaware, is broadcast media such as newspapers and television. The restricted view of the world we gain from broadcast media is exacerbated by the bias of different newspapers, magazines and television channels.

A traditional view of broadcast media like these is that they exist to report the news, inform and entertain people – or as the original mantra of the BBC ran 'Inform, educate and entertain'.

Some media do still aim to do this where possible, and the BBC remains respected around the world in its attempts to provide an independent, clear picture of the world. But many would argue that even the BBC is subject to bias.

Looking beyond the BBC at other broadcast channels and newspapers, we can see that many broadcast media have simply become mouthpieces to amplify the views of their wealthy and powerful owners. In reality it has always been like this to a certain extent, for example with Lord Rothermere owning the Daily Mail from 1922 and using it as a mouthpiece for populist views, and the idea of media bias was characterised as far back as Citizen Kane, but has been present way

before then. And in the last 30 years, as media have gone global, the power they can wield has increased and along with it their value to people and companies with enough wealth to buy them.

The largest global media companies include Comcast (owning NBC in the US), Time Warner (owning HBO and Time Warner) and The Walt Disney company (owning ABC, ESPN and many other companies).

Probably the best known global media owner is Rupert Murdoch. His company, News Corporation, is the world's second largest media conglomerate, and owns a wide range of media interests, from Harpercollins publishers to newspapers like The Sun, The Times and the New York Post.

It is not the level of ownership that is necessarily the main problem here of course – the key issue is the level of influence and power that owning such media can bring. The owner (or owners) of each publication can be more powerful than the people or politicians in a particular country, and that has to be bad for democracy.

Sometimes this level of media ownership can seem farcical, for example in the case of Italy where Silvio Berlusconi, at the same time as being the Prime Minister, was also the major shareholder of Italy's main private free TV company, Mediaset, Italy's biggest publisher, Mondadori, and Italy's biggest advertising company Publitalia[ii]. Such control of the media by the head of a state is obviously a major threat to that country's democratic process.

One may argue that there is little problem if media owners choose not to exercise the potential influence

they have, but we would argue that a) the whole principle of having this inordinate level of influence is undemocratic and risks an abuse of power and b) in reality, media owners do exercise the influence they have to further their interests and views. For example, Murdoch is known for supporting right-of-centre politics and his media channels (such as Fox News, so beloved by Donald Trump) are often accused of having this bias.

One famous example of media ownership (indeed, Murdoch's) influencing politics was The Sun's support for the Conservatives in the 1992 UK General Election, and their claim that 'It was the Sun wot won it'. Labour had been leading the opinion polls for much of the 3 years leading up to the election and was looking like a possible winner, but The Sun's sustained campaign against the Labour Party was generally agreed to have been influential in turning this result around to an unlikely Conservative victory.

Now, this is an extreme example of media influence on people's behaviour, but there are plenty of daily examples of media bias in reporting, and this can influence how we as individuals interpret the basic facts they present to us. Take the following simple example – The Daily Express and The Guardian each published an article on 14th February 2018 following the news that aid workers at the charity Oxfam had used sex workers in Haiti following the earthquake in 2010.

The Guardian article investigated the previous employment history of the main aid official embroiled in the scandal, whilst the Express covered the Haitian president's condemnation of the incidents. Different

angles on the same event, but not particularly politically loaded. This changes towards the end of the Daily Express article however, which concludes with positive mention of the campaign to end the UK's foreign aid budget, supported by the newspaper, and giving the web address of the petition that readers can sign.

The basic story in these two articles isn't too different, but the Express story lurches at the end from factual reporting into a campaigning, right-wing opinion piece.

In this situation, newspapers are no longer aiming to report facts, and media stories become more like propaganda pieces, where a newspaper is trying to influence its readers to adopt a particular view of the world, rather than simply communicating a story to them.

Many people don't realise that this bias exists – and no newspaper or broadcast channel is inclined to make us aware of their bias before we use them. And this can make its effect on us even greater without many of us realizing it. We might read the newspapers just thinking 'this is how the world is' and that they are simply reporting the reality of the world. Yet, as we have seen, there can be a huge bias to the way some broadcast media report about the world around us.

And studies show²⁵ this media bias can affect us. The example of how the Sun felt it influenced the election result in the UK provides a practical example of this.

So far we have only discussed a limited range of broadcast media, but the same principles however apply to every nugget of media that we read (or

‘consume’), whether it is from traditional media like newspapers or new media like those on the internet.

But why does this all matter? It leads to a population driven by influence and opinionated chatter rather than by making themselves well-informed about issues and then forming opinions or making decisions on the basis of these. It is a small number of people influencing the lives and worldviews of a massive majority – manipulating them in their own interests. We should be getting angry about this, and doing something to put an end to it.

So, broadcast media can be used as tools with which to influence us. And even on a small, day-to-day level, these things affect how we think, how we see the world and how we behave. It is therefore clearly important that we equip ourselves with an understanding of the biases behind each publication, channel, or programme before we choose how and whether to interpret the information emanating from it.

PR and ‘pseudo-news’

Newspapers want quick, easy stories that will interest their readers and are willing to gobble up any (without too much checking) that seem useful.

PR companies understand this and know exactly how to concoct stories and present them to the media in ways that they can’t resist. They can go to great lengths to do this, but the level of influence they achieve is well worth the investment for the (inevitably wealthy) people and companies whose interests they serve.

These can run from campaigning charities hosting a stunt to gain media attention through to tobacco

companies hiring PR companies to influence public thinking about the health risks of their products. In each case though, these PR-driven events and stories are taking place specifically order to reach the news, rather than the news simply being a report of events that have taken place in their own right.

PR can be considerably more subtle than advertising and its influence can be harder to spot – indeed, its aim is that the public should not see the hand of PR behind the messages it conveys. As Stauber & Rampton note in their book *Toxic Sludge is Good for You*:

“You know you’re looking at propaganda when you open your newspaper and notice an ad for General Electric, but you’re less likely to notice the rest of the mix – the story about GE that appears on page one, which may well have been placed by the same firm that placed the ad.”²⁶

Some of the artificially constructed tools that PR companies use include:

- **‘Astroturfing’ and front groups** – the PR industry is responsible for many apparently ‘grassroots’ campaign groups that spring up in order to lobby government for policy changes. This is a process known as ‘astroturfing’, as far from being democratic, grassroots movements build by a concerned, motivated general public coming together, they are often well-funded, carefully-coordinated, artificial attempts to influence people in order to push corporate interests. A great example of such a group is the ‘National Smokers Alliance’ – a so-called grassroots lobby group for

smokers rights, which was actually created by the world's largest PR firm on behalf of the tobacco company Philip Morris, with millions of pounds of their funding. Its aim (from around 1990-91) was to create a movement to push back on increasing numbers of smoke-free laws in the US, but to do so without appearing to have corporate involvement. Its membership reached 3 million smokers by 1995²⁷, showing the potential power and influence that such groups can wield.

- **Surveys** – these are popular with newspapers and can be concocted (with small samples and therefore no statistical validity) by advertisers or interest groups to promote their products or views. For example, in a bid to promote sales of bacon in the US, legendary PR pioneer Edward Bernays “conducted a survey of physicians and reported their recommendation that people eat hearty breakfasts. He sent the results of the survey to 5,000 physicians, along with publicity touting bacon and eggs as a hearty breakfast.”²⁸
- **‘Experts’ and research** – PR companies will hire people with impressive-sounding qualifications to speak up for them and represent their views, in a bid to influence the public. Think tanks and lobby groups have also become increasingly powerful in recent decades, not only influencing governments but also supplying reports and ‘experts’ to the media with the sole aim of pushing the influence and messages of their members. These enable interest groups to hide behind a respectable, authoritative academic sheen.

At least 40% of the news we read²⁹ is actually this sort of PR fluff – events and stories that wouldn't have existed without someone desiring to communicate or influence something using the news media.

The effect of all this pseudo-news is to distort, confuse and bias the news media that people have traditionally trusted and depended on. Our views of the world naturally then become distorted, confused and biased in turn.

The influence of PR on politics, news media, consumption and our own lives, attitudes and worldviews is enormous.

Ultimately then, the news media that we have trusted for so long to give us news and facts is actually being vastly compromised and manipulated itself, and much of the content we see, hear and read in the news are people and companies concocting pseudo-news and attempting to manipulate us. Nick Davies puts it well in Flat Earth News, where he says “the billions of people who rely on the mass media for information have suffered...under a bombardment of falsehood, distortion and propaganda.”³⁰

Digital and social media

One of the most obvious sources of influences in our modern lives is the internet. Not only do we obtain a large proportion of our information and news from it, but we also receive a wide range of commercial, political and other messages through it.

Most of the influences we have discussed so far can reach us via the internet. In this section we will

therefore focus on three areas that are particular to this medium:

Finding information

One of the most attractive ideas about the internet is that it is a free, unregulated space – a level playing field for information. Sadly, this is not the case in reality. A critical factor is how we search for information. The main way to find information on the internet is to use a search engine like Google. Search engines use algorithms to help them identify the pages on the web that are most likely to match what we are searching for, but these algorithms can have their own biases.

As an article in the MIT Technology Review puts it, “Algorithms promote some results above others, and even a seemingly neutral piece of code can reflect society’s biases. What’s more, without any insight into how the algorithms work or what the broader context is, searches can unfairly shape the discussion of a topic.”³¹

This level of bias is present, even without even considering the further biases overlaid onto search engines through paid advertising, which can push certain pages higher up the search rankings even though they may not be the most relevant content to what the user is seeking. These commercial biases can have the same influence on us as some of the other forms of advertising and PR bias, discussed earlier.

Linked to this point is the fact that we leave massive data trails behind us when we use the internet – much of this without us realising it. This provides data

for companies and other influencers to exploit. For example, if you've been browsing sofas on a shopping website you may be amazed to see an advert for sofas appear on the next website you visit. Ads like this are just one way that the landscape of our online life can be influenced by external sources.

Returning to the previous point, it could be argued that biased results are exactly what we do want from search engines, in order to help us navigate our way through the billions of irrelevant web pages out there to find those that are of use to us. We have to have some means of prioritising and ranking the billions of pages out there in relation to our searches.

Perhaps this shows up the inconsistency in our views of the internet. We benefit from the bias of search algorithms but we seem to demand that the results we receive are unbiased. Perhaps the best we can aim for is two things:

- To drop our expectation that the internet should be completely unbiased, and replace this with a more informed viewpoint of what we should reasonably demand from it.
- To inform and familiarise ourselves about the hidden processes and biases that are operating behind our daily use of the internet, including:
 - Search engine algorithms (including those relating to paid advertising), so that we can bear these in mind when interpreting the results.
 - Online advertising and other ways that information is targeted at us in order to influence us.

Data harvesting

There is increasing concern and media coverage at the moment about how the data we trustingly provide when we use the internet is being used by companies, countries, individuals and other interest groups to influence us, make profit and seek greater power.

Most of us tend to use the internet and give our personal details away on it without understanding how they are being used by other organisations and individuals on it. When you use certain social media sites for example, information about every aspect of your life is being collected – your interests, attitudes, friends and history to name just a few. Many of us are not aware of this, nor of the fact that companies can (and do) bring together different sets of data like this about us, and use them for other purposes than we'd originally assumed.

Many companies on the internet (including Facebook) now make their money from putting messages from different companies, groups and individuals in front of a targeted audience in order to influence them in some way. That audience is you. It is important to be aware of this as you use the internet and before you blithely agree to user terms and conditions without reading them. Ultimately, it pays to be aware of the phrase, the original source of which is unclear: 'If you're not paying for the product, you *are* the product'.

The legality of some of these practices is highly questionable. For example, at an international level, our data has become an instrument of warfare, with which countries can interfere with, and influence, the democratic processes of other countries. Politicians

have also used data to influence voting in highly questionable ways in their own country – for example in the recent story broken by The Observer, in which the data company Cambridge Analytica was accused of gaining unauthorised access to tens of millions of Facebook profiles and using them to “build a political targeting system”³² to influence Americans to vote for Donald Trump in 2016.

Organisations are also using our data to influence us at a much simpler commercial level. A current example of this is provided in a recent edition of The Guardian newspaper, which reports “The Gold Coast council will use a new city wifi service to harvest Facebook data from visitors to next month’s Commonwealth Games....Users who object to sharing their Facebook data – amid growing concern about how personal information is obtained and used by companies and governments – can still access the free wifi, but the speed will be much slower and downloads restricted.”³³ In other words your ability to access the service to a satisfactory level is dependent on whether you allow the company to use your data to manipulate you.

If reading these examples is making you feel worried and angry, then you need to take action now. Like many of the consequences of the technological revolution we are currently going through, we are still trying to understand how these issues affect our lives and how we should legislate for them in society. However, these areas are already clearly being exploited by the wealthy and powerful – just as they continue to exploit other ways of influencing and manipulating us – and we must quickly come up with

some principles of regulation in these areas to protect the mental and other freedoms of ordinary people from their exploitation by those in power – whoever they may be.

Social media

There are plenty of people who are concerned about the impact of social media and smartphones on our lives. For example, psychologist Bruce Hood notes:

“Our face-to-face interaction that was so finely tuned by natural selection is largely disappearing as we spend more time staring at terminal screens that were only invented a generation ago.”³⁴

It is of course sensible to be cautious about the role of any new major technological innovation. The truth is though we don't yet know what the long-term impact of this technology will be on us, but there are bound to be a mix of advantages and disadvantages.

There are however some areas that we can already see that we need to be cautious about:

- **It distorts our view of other people's lives** – first, social media channels like Facebook only provide a highly restricted view of other people's lives – the bits they want to share (often, the bits that make them look good). It's self-destructive to compare ourselves to others at the best of times, but when this comparison is based on an inaccurate picture of other people's lives, this can result in even more pain and dissatisfaction for us.
- **It can be an echo chamber of political views** – we tend to surround ourselves with people who have

similar views to us, and subscribe to media that reinforce or support our views. In our online lives, this can lead to us existing in a bubble in which all the news and views we hear support our own, reassuring us that we're always right. Meanwhile the world moves on around us, without us having a realistic view of it or other people's views.

- **It can encourage polarisation** – linked to the above point is the hostility that social media and online communications can bring. When we're face to face with people we tend to regulate our behaviour as we see another human being in front of us. Online however this empathetic link, and therefore the self-regulation that comes with it, can disappear, and people can say dreadful things to each other that they would not say face to face. This tendency can be another danger of online communications as they cause people to split up into factions, where issues become black or white and polarised rather than nuanced, and where people slink back to their 'sides' rather than attempt to listen and engage in constructive dialogue.
- **It can lead to less civilised communication** – people also seem to need to say more extreme things online in order to be noticed. For example, tweets that make people react with some sort of strong emotion – from sadness through to anger – tend to be the ones that get shared the most, and successful startup companies have been built on generating content that triggers these emotions successfully.
- **It can be difficult to separate fact from opinion** – in our desire for increasingly bite-

sized portions of news, we can be easily led into accepting many of the posts we see on social media as facts, without having any idea of their source or veracity. This makes us extremely vulnerable to being influenced by opinion, or the fake stories that are regularly planted by interest groups of all types – from political groups through to the propaganda machines of entire countries. Even the erratic and unreliable social media posts of a single person – such as the current President of the United States – can be enough to influence large numbers of people, even when their content is quite obviously not based on facts.

In conclusion then, electronic communications and social media have transformed the way we communicate with each other, do business and live our lives. It has had many positive impacts and opened up rich and useful information to billions of people. It has however also created other important, more negative factors, including a couple of key overall points that are relevant to our subject here:

- Social media has the capacity to amplify the influence of other people on us – whether crowds, peers, companies or politicians. We each need to be equipped to manage this influence and retain our ability to see the world clearly, make our own decisions and look after our mental health in the light of this.
- With the development of technology on the web, the processes through which we are influenced (and through which our own data is used to influence us) have become ever more complex and hidden. It is even harder than before for us to understand how

we are being influenced – and we not only need to be taught how this stuff works so we can protect ourselves, but there needs to be much tighter policing of the online space to ensure our data isn't being used illegally to exploit us or pursue power.

- Aside from the issue of influence and accuracy of information, a great deal of the information, content and communication generated by electronic communications and social media is entirely useless to us. Yet it can still draw our attention in and take up our time. It could therefore be seen as a form of online noise or pollution that simply didn't exist before the advent of this new technology. So, we need to be taught the skills to decide whether we want a relationship with this content, how to manage this relationship and where it fits into the other priorities in our lives.

Conclusion

This section on influences has been a long one, but it's been necessary in order to point out the scope of influences on us in our lives. Even so, the areas we've covered here just represent a partial picture of how we're influenced.

Our conclusion is there is a vast, strong and complex range of influences acting on us every day, from a wide range of sources. We have also seen the powerful effect they can have on our worldviews and behaviour – effectively providing us with a filter through which we see the world and through which we evaluate our lives and behaviour, as well as those of other people. We will shortly explore why this matters so much.



Part 3

How are we trapped and why does this matter?

How are we trapped and why does this matter?

We have now established that each of us can be influenced by a large range of things in the external world and this can affect both the way we see the world and our behaviour. In this chapter we will discuss why this matters so much – both for our own lives and society more generally.

Why it matters in our own lives

It matters because it can fundamentally affect our lives, including, but not limited to, the following factors:

- **It can limit our worldviews** – in other words, our ability to gain perspective and see the world clearly. This matters because perspective is power. It gives us a vantage point over the world and our existence; a context to issues; a position from which to evaluate anything in a more informed way. Without it or the ability to seek it, we don't have this power.
- **It can stop us identifying the things that really matter to us** – as we may not have the opportunity to reflect on these or the tools to pull

ourselves away from the influences around us, and think for ourselves about what really matters to us.

- **It can limit our aspirations** – as we may not see other possibilities in life beyond those that are being fed to us.
- **It can limit our potential for fulfilling, good lives** – as we may not see other possibilities beyond those open to us, so we just end up being moulded by our surroundings rather than being authors of our own lives.
- **It can affect our mental health** – and can do this in a range of ways, due to the pressure and expectations that are being heaped on us by external influences – for example, becoming stressed and unhappy with who we are if we don't have the ideal characteristics or ambitions of the dominant dogma (e.g. beautiful, wealthy, extroverted etc.). Additionally, when we are living according to values or expectations that aren't truly our own we can experience a form of dissonance, where we know something isn't right but we're not sure what – and this can be an uncomfortable experience to live through. It can make us feel lost and unable to see what's wrong because the system is telling us it's right – and there are few voices or resources helping us to see things clearly or tell us what the alternatives are. This was a big reason for setting up Life Squared in the first place – to offer people this form of 'map' when they're lost in the modern world like this.

- **It can limit our capacity for kindness, compassion and living in line with our positive values** – we have an instinct for caring for those closest to us and, with rational thinking and the application of our values, can extend this compassion to a much wider range of people and animals. We can also apply our values to the environment. But if we are influenced by particular worldviews that encourage us to prioritise other things first (from our own wealth to consuming more products), we can end up adopting selfish and anti-social behaviours that we might not otherwise have chosen.
- **It can leave us open to manipulation** – from people who exploit our ‘soft mental underbellies’. This can mean that we lose control of the decisions or lives we really wanted, and end up being influenced into views, behaviour and decisions that we wouldn’t have chosen ourselves if we had full control of our decision making.

To illustrate these points, consider the particular Life Trap that many of us are living in right now. You may have built up a picture of it from part 2, and seeing some of the key influences that are acting upon us. Each of us might be living within a different Life Trap, depending on the influences we’re surrounded by, but most of us could expect to be living within the following basic trap:

- **Ambitious** – hungry for recognition and achievement in work, in order to feel a sense of value about yourself

- **Materialist** – wanting to acquire more material goods, achieve material success equal to or better than other people. Worried about financial security
- **Rushed** – living a busy life with where you feel rushed, packing in as many things as possible, with little time to pause. You do this out of a sense of obligation and habit but also because it would feel embarrassing not to be busy
- **Distracted** – wanting to fill any pauses in activity or your attention with distraction, as this has become habitual, and you don't want to feel bored
- **Self-oriented** – although we care about other people we have little time to give to them, and little money to give to help those in need as we need it to keep our own needs maintained
- **Isolated** – feeling cut off from other people, and from real connection with others, because of all the other demands on you
- **Empty and lacking meaning** – in the moments you get to reflect and stand back from your life, you feel it is flashing by, and that there must be more meaning to it than the way you live now (as materialism isn't providing you with what you need). But you don't know how to find greater meaning (as with the erosion of religion there are few other institutions to support you in finding meaning) and you don't have the time or space to explore this anyway.
- **Feeling powerless; lacking control** – you know something isn't right about the way you are living but you feel that your life is rushing by at such

a pace that you are unable to stop, reflect and change it.

Perhaps these symptoms feel familiar to you as the Life Trap that surrounds you? If so, don't despair! Later in this book we will set out the tools we need to escape the Life Trap, and how we can help everyone to escape it.

Overarching all these factors though is a bigger principle – namely, that it matters to be able to think for ourselves. It is surely a fundamental component of being a human being that we should be able to be the authors of our own lives if we possibly can, and be as self-determined and in control of our lives as possible – and not be other people's puppets. It's a question of human dignity and self-respect – of being truly free. Ultimately we could go as far as to say that becoming an independent thinker is a way of living to our full potential as a human being.

Overall, it may seem extreme and a little hysterical to put it this way, but this is ultimately about our *mental freedom* – a freedom which can be as important as our physical freedom, as not having it can be a form of 'mental incarceration' where we can't live proper lives. Some of the influences on us (or not giving us the tools to deal with them) could be classed as a form of 'mental slavery' – using power to restrict people's mental freedom and ability to think and live lives for themselves. It is inhumane – it treats people like objects to be manipulated rather than human beings.

We therefore suggest it should be a basic human right to be able to think for ourselves, as it is a fundamental part of what it means to be a fully-functioning human

being. And, given that we can't do this unless we are given the right skills and surrounded by conditions, we should be building society and the institutions within it to give us these things. We'll explore what these might be in the final chapter.

This should be a fundamental component of a 'good society' – but we don't have it at the moment, and as we can see, it's causing us big problems, both individually and as a society.

Why it matters for society

Our vulnerability to influence doesn't just affect our own lives. It potentially has serious consequences for wider society too if it goes unchecked. Below are a few examples.

- **Political involvement** – one of the symptoms of a lack of intellectual independence within the population could be the drop in voter participation in elections that we have seen over recent years. This may in part come from an increasing sense of cynicism about politicians and politics (often for good reason, considering one of our earlier chapters on political language and influence), but also a sense that politics doesn't really matter. But politics does matter – and we all 'do' politics on a daily basis, whether we realise it or not.

As we've seen, we are also all influenced by political and economic ideas, but if people don't have the perspective or skills to see this, they will be unable and unwilling to challenge this. And, along with a feeling that people aren't being listened to, this

can fill people with a sense of apathy about politics. And, as we will see, the consequences of us being a compliant, flat citizenship can be dangerous.

- **Environment and social justice** – as we have already noted, evidence suggests that a more materialist worldview can lead to people caring less about the other people and wider world around them. If we live within a highly materialistic system in which personal consumption and financial success is the driver, people are likely to prioritise these aims above other environmental or social ones, or may not even see the importance of the latter issues clearly at all. It is therefore no surprise for example to see the slow, ineffective reaction we have made as a society in the last 40 years to the threat of climate change – perhaps the most serious global challenge of our time. Part of the battle with issues like climate change, social inequality and social injustice is to equip people with an understanding of the issues and the systems and ideas around us that help to reinforce them – including unfettered consumption and the economic dogmas that drive this. But until we can do this, our ability to solve serious social and environmental issues could be hampered.
- **Conflict** – if people are strongly influenced by different beliefs, dogmas or ideas – whether religious, political or other – this can make them more open to conflict with those who think differently. For example, if you are brought up as a child to believe your particular religion’s story is true and that you’ve been wronged by other religious

groups, you are likely to form an antagonistic view towards them.

From a political perspective, if people aren't given the tools to challenge political propaganda, see a political issue clearly or search for reliable information so they can reach an informed view on the issue, they are not only likely to make poor voting decisions (i.e. those they might not otherwise make), but also are more likely to adopt more entrenched, polarized and aggressive viewpoints where they don't see the grey areas in debates or see the other person's side – with perhaps the Brexit referendum being a recent example of this. All of this can lead to greater conflict, less discussion and less compassion.

- **Democracy and civilisation** – perhaps the biggest issue for society though is that, as we've just seen, when we fail to provide people with the tools they need to think for themselves we leave them open to manipulation by others.

This has dangerous consequences for wider society. It means that citizens are vulnerable to influence from anyone – whether it is a politician, company or media owner – with the desire and the means to pull them towards a particular agenda.

It also makes people less able to discern between truth and fiction in the world around them, which also means that other can conjure up stories and scenarios that may be patently false (from political accusations to religious dogma) but that nevertheless have strong power to unsettle and influence populations.

These portrayals of what could happen to society may feel eerily familiar to some readers, as they reflect what has actually been happening in the last couple of years in the USA, UK and some other countries. We are of course not arguing that situations like the rise of Trump are solely down to a lack of thinking skills in the population at large – they are clearly much more complicated than this – but it could certainly be argued that a society that’s more focussed on protecting the free working of financial markets than of promoting and protecting the wellbeing of its citizens – including their mental freedom – has aided the rise of the far right in the USA and elsewhere.

What it ultimately comes down to is power. To quote Edward Bernays from his seminal book *Propaganda*:

“In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons...who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses.”³⁵

At a societal level, those with power (and often, wealth) are in a better position to influence and manipulate (or, for a more powerful phrase, control) people than anyone else. And if we truly believe in the idea of a democratic political system we shouldn’t allow this to happen.

Instead, we should choose political and economic systems (and institutions within them) that protect people and nurture their capacity for critical

thinking and making independent choices – not exploiting their lack of this capacity. Giving people the tools to think for themselves and carve out their own lives creates a stronger, more robust society, and withholding these tools creates the opposite.

We also need to appreciate the consequences of failing to deal with this issue. We take our calm, peaceful and relatively compassionate society for granted. But civilised societies like this aren't guaranteed, as we've seen countless times in the past, including the horror of Nazi Germany.

The smooth, co-operative surface of civilisation that we all skate upon is very thin, and can be shattered with relative ease. So there's a lot at stake here. If we don't recognise and provide these skills, this can threaten our society and civilisation as well as our individual lives.

The need to build a society that provides the right conditions for people to think for themselves and be civilised is therefore more urgent than ever – as we can see before our eyes.

Conclusions

Overall, we can see that a lack of tools and perspective for clear, independent thinking can have a serious effect on our own lives.

But it also has a wider effect, and could be part of the cause of some of our biggest problems as individuals and in society – from worsening mental health to the rise of the far right in politics. Ultimately, we should view the promotion of people's mental freedom as a key component of any vision of a good society.



Part 4

What tools and conditions do we need to escape the Life Trap?

What tools and conditions do we need to escape the Life Trap?

In this book we have painted a new picture of human beings – as creatures that are vulnerable to social pressure and other external influences, and that live in a world where they are surrounded by complex, strong influences every moment of their waking lives.

We are not however automatically born with the perspective needed to understand the complex world around us or the skills needed to deal with the manifold influences acting upon us. A key message of this book is therefore that we remain ‘mentally vulnerable’ over the course of our whole lives – from childhood through to adulthood – as we never receive the full range of tools and skills we need to manage these external influences.

Overall, as we’ve already noted, we need a society in which people have the opportunity to enjoy a reasonable level of mental freedom as well as physical freedom. This includes having the chance to build a clear view of the world, be well-informed, think critically and make their own decisions about how they want to live their lives, rather than being pulled along by the tide – either of other people’s opinions

or of the many dominant dogmas in society – from consumerism to certain political ideas.

We need to be taught a particular range of ideas and tools when we're young, as part of the education system, but these also need to be available to us to learn when we're adults, and we need to be surrounded by a society and culture that is conducive to us developing and exercising these tools, including institutions that can support us in building these skills throughout life.

Tools and perspective needed

Let us now explore the range of tools and perspective that people will need to be taught if they are to have these skills.

- **Understand our nature as human beings** – we need to help people to move on from the outdated and misleading traditional view of human beings that most people (not just economists!) still carry – namely, that we are rational creatures, able to make optimal decisions about our lives all the time, and that we are not influenced by the world around us or other people in any significant way.

To achieve this, people should be taught a basic level of 'human species awareness' in schools from primary level onwards, so that everyone has a basic grasp of the latest research on how human beings work – not just physically (which is covered in science classes), but how we think and function mentally.

This should include an accessible mix of psychology, neurology and other disciplines, and could possibly

be part of an overall ‘perspective’ teaching topic, which we’ll explore in the next point.

- **Gain perspective on life** – perspective is the ability to stand back and see a situation in a wider context. It is a mental tool that can be extremely useful when we are immersed in any form of complexity – from existing as a human being, to living our day-to-day lives, through to battling with a moral question.

First, gaining perspective can simply make our lives happier, as we see our own existence within the ‘bigger picture’. More relevant to this book, it can also help us to better understand various major aspects of our lives and the world. As a consequence, it can help us to navigate our way through life more easily, both on large questions and everyday ones. For example, it can help us to consider big questions such as how we should live and what path to pursue in our lives. It can also aid our decision-making about more detailed, everyday issues such as moral questions (‘how should I behave in this situation?’).

It’s therefore particularly useful and appropriate in the modern world, given the increasingly high levels of complexity and accumulated knowledge that surround each of us, and the increased difficulty of navigating this. It means we don’t have to know everything in order to live well-informed lives.

We therefore need to give people this sense of perspective – both as children within the education system, and also make it available to adults, to help them step back from their lives.

To do this, we need to help people develop perspective across a particular range of topics, starting with the basic assumptions on which we base our views of reality, moving on to our situation within the universe and planet around us, through to our make-up as creatures and the systems and concepts we use to relate to each other and manage our lives. These topics include:

- The reality we live in, including philosophical questions such as ‘what is reality?’. People should be taught to consider the bigger questions of life from a young age, and become comfortable dealing with these sorts of abstract issue, and able to reach their own well-informed conclusions about them.
- Our situation, including our universe (its age, origins, size and scale, plus the place of our planet within it), and our planet (its terrain, the origin of life, what biological life consists of, and the diversity and extent of nature)
- Our species, including our characteristics as creatures (our biological and genetic make-up, our abilities and factors that influence our thinking and behaviour) and the variations in our circumstances on the planet (such as location, population levels and wealth)
- Human affairs, or how we manage our affairs as a species, including political systems, economic ideas, beliefs, values, cultures and the history of human affairs. Again these don’t have to be taught in detail, but a big picture view of how the ideas surrounding us work and any biases

or assumptions they have will be incredibly important in helping people to see the world around them clearly and challenge even the broadest, biggest ideas that we live within – which is what we all need to be able to do.

- Our concepts. The abstract concepts that we use in our thinking and that inform our lives, including those such as the idea of ‘morality’ and what values are.

Aside from helping people generally to develop perspective on their own life in the modern world, we should teach children the value of perspective in any situation, and how to develop it as a general thinking skill.

In order to develop perspective on these topics (and any others), people need learn a particular way of thinking about them, and be taught about them in a particular way.

Maps are a useful metaphor for this way of learning and thinking. They work because they sacrifice detail (e.g. an exact description of the surroundings in a particular location, such as the colour of the flowers) in order to provide an overall perspective, and enable users to find their way around the terrain represented on the map.

We need to do the same when learning about topics in order to gain perspective. In this way of learning, understanding the structure and parameters of a topic and how to navigate around it is just as important as understanding some of the detail, as this overview enables us to find our way around it and then seek further information on a particular

area should we wish. This approach to education is being pioneered by the Big History Project, with the support of Bill Gates.

- **Think for ourselves** – in an extraordinarily complex world in which we're surrounded by influences, complexity and distractions, we need to learn how we're influenced by the wider world, how to challenge the information we receive (whether this is broad ideas or individual messages), how to filter out the stuff that is biased and irrelevant to us and how to locate the golden nuggets of relevant, credible information that we actually need.

In other words, we need to learn how to think for ourselves. This includes the following topics:

- **Understanding how our minds work** – acknowledging with humility that we're at an early stage of our understanding on this. But then using the latest research to present a picture of how human beings think and behave – and presenting it in a way that prioritises the knowledge that will help us improve people's lives and make society more compassionate and civilised – for example, showing our limitations and 'vulnerabilities to manipulation'.
- **Understanding how the world affects us** – understanding how our views and behaviour can be influenced and the common ways this can happen in our modern lives. This includes understanding the various ways in which we can be influenced, and the techniques that can be used (including those such as 'framing') by other to influence us. Another part of this skill

is being aware of the manifold ‘inputs’ we receive – from broader things such as social pressure and political language, through to individual messages such as advertisements.

- **Critical thinking** – this is the art of questioning the ideas and messages that we receive from any external source – whether it is friends, newspapers, television, the internet, or anything else. This isn’t confined to specific messages such as advertisements or conversations but also broader cultural, political, or social orthodoxies such as the importance of striving for ever greater material wealth.

Critical thinking is both a skill and an attitude towards the world. An attitude not of suspicion but of curiosity and scepticism – a desire to challenge whatever you are told until you can assure yourself that it is genuine. A commitment to not just accepting what you’re told.

There are many things we can’t control in the world around us. But by learning how to think critically, we start to impose some personal control where it really matters. It means that we think for ourselves, rather than being carried along by the tide of other people’s opinions or influence.

With the vast range of communications flying around in the modern world, it is important that we each get into the habit of questioning any messages we receive, so that we can evaluate whether the sources are reliable, what the purpose of the message is, how we should

interpret it, and whether it is something to be digested or ignored.

We should extend this sense of ‘curious scepticism’ so that we habitually challenge everything we hear or see – no matter how powerful their source (appeals to authority) or how long these ideas have been held (appeals to tradition). Essentially we need to get people into the habit of not accepting what you’re told until you can find evidence to back it up. But critically we also have to be taught to find the right, robust evidence – not the stuff that’s easiest to find or the echo chambers that back up our own views – such as Donald Trump’s reliance on the biased right-wing broadcasting of Fox News as his main news source. In other words, to understand where reliable sources can be found, where we might find proper evidence.

- **Media awareness** – we need to take a different view of the media that surround us. Instead of trusting everything we read, watch or hear, we need to be taught to adopt a sceptical, critical attitude towards them. In our everyday consumption of media, we need to get into the habit of informing ourselves about the sources and biases of the media we consume and take this into account when we interpret and consume them.

We also need to teach people:

- The effect that different media, and the use of these media, can have on us.
- How to balance our consumption of different media in our lives – including, but not limited

to, how much time we spend online and in front of screens. We should present this issue as part of a choice of how we prioritise what matters in our lives and what we want to spend our limited time on.

- How to live well within a saturated media landscape – in other words, how to deal with ‘information pollution’ and the fact that there is an endless supply of information out there but we have limited time in our lives to consume it. Again present this as a choice of how we want to prioritise our time in our lives.
- How each media channel works, and how it produces content.
- How to seek trusted sources of media information, identify any biases and take them into account when you consume these media.
- To adopt a different perspective of what the news is for. To move on from the traditional view that it’s there to inform us with facts and realise the biases it contains from proprietors as well as PR inside it. Not to just be critical of it, but get it to play a different function in your life if you want it at all.
- How to live a good life online – including:
 - How to see the online world as part of the real world, and conduct oneself with the same values that you would in the real world.
 - How to adopt a more informed view of the internet – understand how the internet and

our life on it works, and how our views can be manipulated by it.

- Understand how organisations, countries and other interest groups use our personal data online, and how to take control of our own data trails.
- **Political awareness** – we need to help people develop their capacity to understand political arguments, challenge other people’s arguments and take part in political conversations and the political process in an effective way. This includes teaching people the following areas:
 - How to understand big political (and other) ideas and how to spot them influencing the more detailed policies and situations we see in our daily lives. In other words, become more politically savvy. This is part of the important skill of being able to see the bigger picture view in our own lives generally, so that we are better able to challenge the overall ideas and assumptions that govern us, right back to assumptions about what economics and politics are, and what ends they should be directed towards.
 - How political views work – it is possible to ‘map’ the spectrum of political views, as well as the spectrum of possible responses to any given political issue. Helping people to understand these spectrums and explore them for different political issues is a good way to help people make sense of political ideas, see the grey areas in political debates and have better political conversations. The website www.political

compass.org provides a useful map of political views and an interactive questionnaire to show you where yours fit.

- How to understand how political language works and be able to interpret it. Essentially, this amounts to a toolkit to protect oneself from political influence – from anyone with a political bias, whether a politician or someone else. An important tool within this topic is how to deal with rhetoric, the art of communication and persuasion. And the suggestion to include this in our education is not a new one. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that “rhetoric should be widely taught and understood, so that the wise members of society would be able to contend effectively with the rhetoric of the unwise.”³⁶ 2,300 years later, we still need to be taught these skills! Because, as Stauber and Rampton argue, “When the public is educated about its techniques, it often loses its ability to mislead and manipulate”³⁷
- How to challenge political ideas and opinions – following on from the above point, we need to be taught how to challenge other people’s political views in a polite but effective way.
- How to take action effectively – how to take control, seek change and get your voice heard. How to be a more active, well-informed citizen in a society.
- **Information literacy** – in a complex world where we are saturated with information – much of it biased and irrelevant to us – a really important skill

is to know how to ‘find the needle in a haystack’. In other words, to know how to search not only for the most relevant information you need, but also the most reliable sources of this information within an almost endless mass of possible information. For example, you don’t just want any old information about how to reduce your CO2 emissions, but the most reliable and credible information on this.

Before the modern information age, libraries and books used to be the most obvious way of finding information. And they remain a useful source. In the modern world though, most people would turn to internet search engines to seek information. These can be incredibly useful, but, as we’ve seen, they are subject to their own algorithms and biases which can obscure the pieces of information we are really seeking. So, we need to help people understand where to look and how to use information sources – including, but not limited to, the internet – as effectively as possible.

- **How to live your own life** – how to work out what matters to you, live your own life and be happy with your own identity, rather than being carried passively along by the influences and distractions that surround all of us.
- **Finding meaning** – if we are to carve out our own lives we need to be able to seek and find those things that will give our lives meaning. Broadly this could be described as becoming skilled at the ‘art of living’ – a wide range of important skills and types of wisdom and awareness that can be instrumental in enabling us to lead fulfilled and self-aware lives. In the past, people

may have traditionally gained opportunities to consider some of these topics from involvement in religions, but you don't need religion to gain them, and we should ensure that everyone has the opportunity to consider them, regardless of their background or situation.

These skills in the art of living include how to understand and make the best of your life's journey (including how to think about ageing and death), how to look after yourself (including resilience, mental health and comparison with other people), how to appreciate the experience of life (including slowing down, exploring your inner life and finding wonder) and how to connect with other people in a meaningful, fulfilling way.

- **Carving out your identity** – our personal identity is not simply the labels that we or others apply to ourselves – such as our gender, religion, or country of origin. It is our sense of who we are as an individual, what matters to us, and how we feel about ourselves. Our ability to build, nurture, and protect it has a significant bearing on what we get from our lives and our experience of them.

A strong sense of identity gives each of us a secure place from which to deal with the world around us – a set of judgements and instincts we can trust in a complex world full of competing pressures and influences. We develop this sense of identity over time rather than instantly, and it needs to be nurtured and tended to.

We therefore need to help people develop an honest sense of what they are really about, including what makes them happy and fulfilled, what makes them unhappy or uncomfortable, what their priorities are in life, and how they really want to live.

Another important element of building one's identity is learning to be happy with oneself – or at least accepting who you are at a particular point in time. This includes accepting your natural tendencies, qualities, and physical features and realising that you are neither perfect nor imperfect: you are just yourself.

We therefore need to give people the skills and encouragement to do this, as well as in how to be a 'friend to yourself' – seeing the best in yourself and making the best of yourself, rather than attacking yourself with self-doubt and negative thoughts.

Our sense of identity also needs to be flexible. We need to be open to change as we travel through life and prepared to accommodate new ideas and discoveries – both about the external world and ourselves.

- **Courage and resilience** – a final, important point is that living one's own life requires courage. We noted in one of the first sections of this book the human need to conform – to fit in with other people, not just in immediate family or peer groups but also in broader groups of human beings, most of whom we've never met. If we are to live independent, well-informed lives,

we sometimes need to go against this strong urge to conform. This can be a very hard thing to do as there will often be lots of pressure on us to agree with the majority or follow the herd, so it's rarely the easiest or most comfortable source of action, but it is important to do it and develop the courage and faith in your convictions (as long as they are well informed!) to be able to do so.

- **How to be good** – it can be tricky to live in line with our values, especially when we are subject to so many influences on them and living within a complex world with a rather old-fashioned and inconsistent conception of what morality is. As a result most people have reasonable intentions but can be influenced into poor choices or inconsistent moral decisions. Aside from the other tools outlined in this section, we therefore need to help people become more ethically savvy, so they can live more effectively as moral agents. Here are three important areas to include in this education:
 - **Understanding morality** – the first step is to help people develop a more modern, enlightened sense of what morality actually is and what values are – as, contrary to common dogma, they are not simply things handed down to us through tradition or religious teaching.

Values are abstract concepts developed by human beings. They reflect some of the instincts we have (such as the desire to protect the people closest to us) and the way we'd like the world to be (for example, peaceful).

As we've already explored though, values aren't clear-cut. They are a collection of grey areas and questions of degree. By their nature, there will be moral questions that people don't agree on. It is useful to understand this aspect of morality as it gives us a more realistic view of how moral language and arguments work, and a more reasonable expectation of what we can expect from our own moral behaviour and values when we start to consider them. It also helps us be more critical of anyone (for example a politician) who seeks to persuade us that their view is unequivocally 'right'.

For a more detailed exploration of morality and values, read 'Living Well' by Richard Docwra – available as a free download from Humanists UK.

- **Identify, and live effectively with, our own values** – we need to help people to identify the values that they hold, and then work out how to live in way that's consistent with these.

This idea of 'how to live effectively with your values' is something we don't really consider in modern life and certainly don't formally equip people with at present, but given that there are lots of grey areas in morality and values, people really do need help to navigate them. This will not only bring greater fulfilment to people, but could have a positive effect on wider society by making people more effective at living in line with their compassion and values.

- **Appreciate why values matter** – we don't simply need to teach people to gaze inwards and focus on their abstract values, but they also need to consider why values matter in practice – more specifically, how our values and behaviour affect other people and the world around us.

People will be taught to do this as part of the above process of reflecting on their own values. This should be in relation to both the direct and indirect impacts of our behaviours. An example of a direct impact is how we affect the person in front of us when we smile or are kind to them. Indirect impacts are how we affect the much wider world with our actions, even when we aren't thinking about it. This is particularly important in a complex, interconnected world in which even the simplest actions we take can have a chain of impacts on many other people and the wider world.

There is a further level at which our values matter – that of society in general, and people need to be able to reflect on broader issues such as what a 'good society' consists of and the values needed to promote this society.

Given our new understanding of people, and the fact that civilisation is fragile, we should also teach people the importance of values in maintaining a compassionate, civilized society, and the consequences of this not happening. For example, we should show people the big picture of what can happen if people are made to see other groups of people as less than human.

So, these are some of the tools we need. Given what you have read so far, it will come as no surprise to hear that we are not given them to anywhere near an adequate level in modern society.

This is partly because our education system and other institutions are being driven by other priorities and partly because policy makers may not yet have realized the full importance of these tools.

The latter point is perhaps understandable and can be addressed by more publicity, lobbying and campaign work to make policy makers and the wider public more aware of the importance of these tools.

The priorities of our institutions though is a much harder issue to address. We explored this earlier on page 23, where we noted that the state education system is dominated by an economically-focussed philosophy, which prioritises topics that will make students more effective actors in the economy – such as maths, computing and sciences – but which squeezes out opportunities to learn other important ideas and skills – such as those emotional, life and ‘soft’ skills that we are considering in this book. Most schools also fail to teach children to see the ‘big picture’ in their lives, or of issues generally.

It’s not just about the education system though. There is very little recognition of the importance of these skills in modern society, and as a result, very few institutions that help people to develop or nurture them at any point in their lives, whether as children or adults. Even non-governmental organisations like charities seem to only deal with a limited range of these topics, such as mental health and mindfulness,

which although very important, do not give us anywhere near the full range tools or perspective we need.

There's a particular lack of organisations in the UK focusing on media awareness and critical thinking, including how media can influence our thoughts. And, with the honourable exception of Life Squared, there are virtually no organisations helping people understand the full issue or providing the full range of perspective and tools people need.

So, we have a very long way to go.

Social conditions

The values, norms, culture and philosophy of our society matter, as this is the atmosphere in which each of us is brought up, and which not only shapes the institutions around us, but also the norms and values we're instilling in people, often without realising it.

So, we don't just need to give people the tools outlined above – we need a certain set of conditions in our society to encourage and support people to develop these ideas and skills throughout life, or at the very least, not get in the way of people developing them.

Here is a summary of what these conditions need to look like. We are only looking at them in very broad terms here as we will explore them in more detail later:

- An economic system that prioritises human flourishing (within the limits of the planet) above other aims, such as economic growth

- A culture that recognises both the critical importance of ‘mental freedom’ as part of human flourishing, and that certain policies and skills are needed to protect and nurture it
- A less individualistic and more community-based ethic in each society, where people see themselves as part of a community supporting each other and are not only willing but proud to contribute to this
- A recognition of how fragile civilisation is and how important our values and personal conduct are to keeping a compassionate, civilised society.

So, the system we live within should be promoting these skills and creating the conditions to promote human flourishing and well-informed living. Sadly, many of the norms in society today actually have the effect of preventing this rather than promoting it.

The setup of modern society allows (and indeed, actively encourages) a wide range of influences to restrict and mould people’s worldviews and lives. We’ve presented a number of ways this happens – from promoting individualism though to stifling political debate, and a wide variety of sources through which these influences flow – from schools to advertising.

The causes of this are manifold, but our devotion to an economic dogma that puts economic growth before human flourishing means that some of the most dominant influences around us are those that promote a particular materialist, individualistic, competitive, hurried, success-led view of life. These are pushed on us through a wide range of important sources in our lives – from schools to friends to advertising.

So, we not only need to challenge the political and economic ideas themselves, but all the institutions that pass them on to us – to ensure they promote a more human-focussed agenda.

Another important, and closely linked, reason for our society having the wrong conditions for developing these skills is our political leaning to the right as a society – one that has been closely linked to the dominance of the aforementioned economic dogma in the last 40 years. Even supposedly centre, or centre-left political parties (such as Tony Blair’s New Labour) have built their policies around this dogma, which has led to these parties and politics generally, shifting to the right in the last 40 years, in both the UK and the USA.

There are several reasons why this lurch to the right in politics (coupled with the economic dogma noted previously) provides poor conditions to nurture the thinking skills we need. To provide just a couple of examples:

- **It promotes a market-driven political system**, where regulation is seen as unnecessary and a burden, but which in turn allows all sorts of power to be wielded with impunity. For example, it allows too much freedom for big corporations and powerful individuals to get richer and consolidate their power – enabling them to influence more people without much interference from the state.
- **It seeks a small state** – and this gives less funding for any educational or state-supported initiatives to benefit the public. It also encourages values of individualism and selfishness, rather

than the values of communality and contribution that are needed to foster socially positive values. Finally the small state also tends to lead to greater inequality and poorer social justice – points that are needed not just as desirable values in a society, but in order to give everyone access to the education and resources they need to develop the skills we’ve been talking about.

In conclusion, we live at a time where these skills aren’t taught to us at anywhere near the level we need. In addition, the external conditions in society actually militate against us developing them, rather than helping us to build them meaningfully throughout life. In the final chapter of this book we will explore how we can take steps to change this – and change our lives and society for the better in the process.



Part 5

How can we escape
the Life Trap?

How can we escape the Life Trap?

In this book, we've set out some of the tools and conditions we need to escape the Life Trap and why we need them so urgently. We've also seen that these aren't provided adequately for us at the moment, and indeed that some of the characteristics of modern western society actually militate against us developing them.

In this final section, we will explore how we can bring these tools into our own lives so we can begin to free ourselves from our own 'life traps'. If you want to jump straight to this, go to the section called 'A toolkit for individuals'.

We will begin though by looking at the bigger picture – what changes can we make to various areas of modern society to provide people with the skills and conditions they need to escape the Life Trap?

Changing our society

As we've already argued, we don't simply need to make changes to our own lives. The issue of mental freedom – freedom from manipulation and the right to be able to make our own decisions – is something that should have a much more prominent place in our

political discussions and should be one of the most important factors to consider when we think about what a 'good society' should consist of.

The arguments of this book bring a lot of interesting consequences for our society in general, from how we should educate our children through to whether and how we should regulate the ability of the powerful to influence and manipulate other people. Some of these consequences may feel radical from our current position on this issue. But we suggest these only feel radical because our current position as a society on this issue is so unenlightened, and fails so singularly to take it into account.

At a societal level, it's a bit of a 'chicken and egg' situation. Like nurturing a seedling into a strong plant, we need the appropriate values and conditions in society for human beings to grow and flourish into empowered, independent, well-informed and compassionate people. This in turn make us more able and likely to build a good, civilised and compassionate society. So, a virtuous circle is established.

Let us first set out some of the basic principles and values that would need to be present in society. We'll then also summarise the direction in which certain aspects of society would need to travel in order to achieve these aims.

General principles

As we have seen, to enable people's mental freedom to flourish we need a range of far-reaching changes to society, including:

- Institutions that will equip people with the perspective and tools they need to think for themselves, and support them to do this, for life.
- Institutions that will challenge and regulate bad practice from any interest group (whether a country, company or individual) seeking to use their power to manipulate others, or allowing certain groups to do this.
- A less individualistic and more community-based ethic in each society, where people see themselves as part of a group supporting each other and are not only willing but proud to contribute to this.

For these changes to happen, we need a society that recognises the importance of the issues we discussed in this book. As a first step towards this, everyone, but especially policy makers, needs to understand the consequences of the latest research about how people think and behave. We're not as rational as we've traditionally thought, and we are shaped by external environments, values and institutions – so we need these external factors to be conducive to developing compassionate, thoughtful and independent people. We can't just throw people into the world and expect them to come out OK, and we can't have the society we currently have and expect it to bring well-rounded people. It's time we we looked at the world we want, the way we educate people to live and the way we let information flow around them.

We also need a society that does not slavishly follow dogmas of its own – whether economic, political or religious. We need a society that is self-aware enough to realise the biases inherent within its overriding

ideas and systems (such as political and economic arrangements) and that is able to put in checks and balances to limit the impact of these biases on people's mental freedom. For example, in a society with a Christian bias we should be equipping everyone with the tools to think in a critical and well-informed way about religion.

We need some significant changes to our institutions and the way we run society in the light of this issue, and people have to be fully onside for these to happen. To achieve this our first step has to be to embed the ideas raised in this book into our society – and for people to start caring about them. This starts with making politicians and decision makers understand the importance of the issue and the massive effect it can have on people's lives.

The role of regulation is important too. We live in a political age where regulation is often seen as an imposition on business, preventing the market from functioning properly or restricting people's freedom. This view is of course a product of our society's right-wing, economic bias, when our alternative view is that some freedoms are more important than others, and we sometimes need regulation in order to protect people's most important freedoms.

Unless it is strictly necessary, we should try to avoid interfering with society and people's lives with excessive regulation that attempts to 'protect' them from the various inputs and influences they might be subject to. Instead we should aim to equip people with the mental tools they need to make decisions for themselves and 'defend' themselves. But we should also regulate serious cases where power is being

abused in order to manipulate people and restrict their mental freedom. For example, developing policies and regulations to:

- Protect people from certain inputs that could restrict their mental freedom, particularly in childhood, where their mental tools might not be sufficiently developed to enable them to act as truly self-determined agents. One immediate example of this is to ban advertising to any children under 16.
- Protect social justice by making sure we don't allow people with power and influence to gain disproportionate levels of control over our mental lives. One example of this is to prevent concentrations and monopolies of media ownership, a subject that the European Union has looked into in recent years but not yet taken sufficiently strong action on.³⁸
- Place our personal data under much greater protection, so that it is not used to manipulate or control us without us being aware of it. Although there is new legislation coming into force in May 2018 for data protection, this doesn't do enough to challenge the use of our data by other countries and international corporations, and steps need to be taken to do this as this is a whole new level of crime and international influence that has arisen in recent years, such as the alleged interference by Russia in the US elections in 2016 through the manipulation of social media and data.

We need to campaign about this – now. The principles identified in this book are relatively new, and need to be brought into the public and political consciousness.

If you think these issues, matter, you need to start making a noise about it. Tell your MP about this book and the issues it raises and ask them what they will do to raise them and get them addressed. Speak to your local school about their education syllabus and challenge them to include these topics. Spread the word about this book to your friends and contacts online, and get people talking about these issues. Most of us are stuck in the ‘Life Trap’ to some extent, and it will be a great relief to many people when they see this, understand it and have some initial guidance on how to begin escaping from it.

Education

- **We need to teach these skills in our education system** – a key recommendation of this book is that we need to make teaching these skills and giving this perspective a key part of the education curriculum for every child, from primary age onwards, no matter what their economic, social or religious background. We also need to give teachers the space, trust, flexibility and funds to pass on this important knowledge to new generations, in ways that are as human-focussed and effective as possible.
- **Make more space for ‘human-focussed’ learning** – we should ensure there is more capacity given in the curriculum for topics that encourage the positive development of people and society – including topics such as well-being and resilience – not just those carried by the economic worldview. Skills like these are sometimes dismissed as ‘soft’ and perhaps less important

by certain commentators but they are of course nothing of the sort, and are vital in people's lives – and incidentally, in helping them to become more effective players in the economy too!

- **Build institutions to support and encourage adults to develop these skills throughout life** – as these are critical to everyone, at every stage of their adult lives. These institutions should also have the capacity to assist people when they are struggling to find their mental freedom for any reason. Institutions such as further education establishments, mental health organisations and Citizens Advice Bureaux could be empowered to offer these services, as they are complementary to their existing services. Also see the role of 'Media Literacy' organisations recommended later in this section.
- **Raise awareness of the importance of mental freedom** – we need to make people aware of the importance of the issues raised in this book – not just for their capacity to live out their own lives properly but in their role as an influence on other people – as a parent, friend, colleague and participant in social media. This should include advice to help parents to empower their children with these skills (such as giving them perspective and building critical thinking skills) from an early age. We need to encourage people to take more responsibility for what they say and how they say it. Also to aim to be better informed and more conscious of how they spread information and influence themselves. It should be established as a clear ethical principle

in how people conduct themselves in a reasonable society, as simple as not littering the street.

Institutions

- **Encourage workplaces to develop people's mental capacities** – make it part of the duties of responsible employers to have a work environment that promotes mental freedom. This could cover a wide range of practices, including promoting intellectual enquiry, helping employees to broaden their perspective and horizons, promoting tolerance and compassion and encouraging the skills of critical thinking. And promoting these all as life skills to apply to their wider lives, not simply work skills.

Economics

- **We need to change the role and focus of our economic system** – from one in which human beings chase economic growth with no limits to one built to serve the sole aim of human flourishing within the parameters of the one planet we have. In other words, a system that will help people reach their full potential, not actively prevent them from doing this.

Our choice of economic system (and it is a choice) is at the centre of many of our modern ills, from climate change to consumerism, yet it remains the 'elephant in the room' and even those people who are challenging it rarely cite the damage it does to our mental freedom and capacity for self-determination as one of its core problems.

We must therefore begin by raising public and political awareness of the issues identified in this book, so that members of the public build a better understanding of how these issues affect their lives and can raise their voices to build an unignorable call for change.

There are some exciting ideas around for this new economic model, including the idea of ‘Doughnut Economics’, as developed by Kate Raworth. The overall challenge will not just be to change the economic model; it will also be to re-frame how people see their responsibilities and relationships with others, as part of creating a better, more compassionate society.

As part of developing this alternative economic model, we need to find more effective and attractive ways of presenting it to the public. For example, to revisit an earlier point, we need to re-frame the idea of taxation and making a contribution to society so that it can be seen as a positive thing, rather than a negative drain on one’s own resources and an attack on one’s freedom.

- **Stronger regulation of commercial messages** – as we’ve already noted, an important area that needs regulation is the use of commercial messages, which can be used by wealthy and powerful groups or individuals to influence and manipulate others. Measures might include a ban on all forms of advertising to children under sixteen, and a law to ensure that any advertisement, promotion or campaign, from whatever source and in whatever medium, carries a prominent, standard label to show that it is attempting to communicate a message

for a specific purpose. The labelling could include a summary of the source of the communication and the purpose, so there would be a small selection of standard labels, including ‘commercial advertising campaign’, ‘government health campaign’ and ‘charity fundraising campaign’. It would be strictly regulated by an independent body.

Politics

- **Remind everyone why democracy and civilisation matter so much** – provide the public with a new take on politics and society, in the light of what we know about human beings and our experiences of the past, so that we can protect the level of civilisation and humanity in our society, when we know that we skate on a very thin line of civilisation. Develop a campaign to remind everyone of this, and the fact that we must not take it for granted, as well as to encourage the values and behaviour we need to protect this ‘civilised’ sheen to our society. There’s an important role for everyone in this process – including the public, politicians and media.

See the publication ‘How to be civilised’ from Life Squared for a stark reminder of some of the key lessons we should learn from one of the darkest moments in human history.

- **Launch a campaign for a better politics** – we need to do politics better in this country. We need a better standard of political dialogue from politicians, a willingness to acknowledge that most issues aren’t black or white and a preparedness to engage properly with the electorate on each issue.

We should encourage politicians and the media to stop using politics to obscure facts and instead use it to enlighten people. Stop blocking communication and instead open up dialogue about political issues.

To make this happen though we also need to take responsibility as a general public to get better informed and challenge the hot air and misinformation we are routinely given by political figures.

So, next time you see or hear a politician being interviewed, listen to how they phrase their answers and see how they use this language of certainty, polarisation and evasion – and see how angry and disempowered it makes you feel. Then join us in calling for change on this – to improve the quality of political dialogue in this country, across all parties and institutions. Only by doing this will we force political actors to improve the level of political dialogue.

- **Get angry** – following on from the last point, the only way we are going to achieve any change on the issues raised in this book is if we get up and campaign for change. So, the responsibility lies with us to take action and do something about it – make others take notice.
- **Establish political arrangements that are more effective and democratic** – linked with the campaign for better politics, we need some significant improvements to our political system, to enable people to participate more effectively in politics and feel their effort is worthwhile. These improvements would include:

- A range of measures to rebalance power, including shifting it more from central to local government, ensuring that there is greater accountability from decision-makers and greater transparency in matters such as decision-making processes, and who holds which powers in office
- Measures to make the electoral system more responsive to people's needs, including replacing the first-past-the-post system (possibly with a system such as proportional representation (PR)), increasing the number of parties and candidates, and capping the amount an individual can donate to a party
- Creating the conditions to enable the public to become more involved in political decision-making, including requiring "all public bodies to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes."³⁹ Make politics less 'top-down' and more consultative.

Religion

- **Separate religion completely from the state** – this applies as a general principle, but is particularly important to apply to the role of education, because taking steps such as banning faith schools and their ability to define certain areas of the curriculum enables us to give most children the chance to grow up without being completely instilled with a particular view of the world before they have had the chance to develop the mental tools and experience to think about and explore the topic for themselves. It would also give all children some opportunity to develop

the perspective and skills needed to gain mental freedom, even if they are not provided with these in their home environment. As set out earlier in the book, this is exactly the principle that education should work on – providing these essential skills and opportunities to all children, regardless of their background.

- **Swap Religious Education for ‘The History of Ideas’** – all schools should teach a wide variety of religious thought, but it should be reframed as just a subset of a broader topic, which could roughly be called ‘the history of ideas’. This overall topic would explore the historical, cultural and political development of different types of thought over human history and would be glued together by investigating the philosophical ideas behind these branches of thought. Hence, the ideas of different religions would be examined in the same balanced way as other philosophical approaches to life, ethics, politics, reality and so on. ‘The history of ideas’ would of course form a key part of a child’s education in the skills we have discussed in this book – promoting their abstract thought, critical thinking and ability to develop a broad perspective on a range of ideas.
- **Open a dialogue with religious bodies to show the need for these skills** – rather than simply adopting a combative stance against religions for limiting people’s mental freedom, we should aim to open up a conversation to show the importance of this issue and explore how these groups can adopt the tools and principles we have discussed in this

book to enable them to help their communities adopt them as widely as possible.

Media

- **Establish an independent media literacy organisation** – it is a source of continual amazement to us that there is no significant media literacy organisation in the UK (such as Media Smarts in Canada <http://mediasmarts.ca>) – either to educate children and promote media literacy in schools or to act as a resource and campaigning hub for adults too – for example, about advertising, the press, manipulation etc. Life Squared aims to raise awareness of these issues, but has a broader role than just media awareness.

Such an organisation urgently needs to be established in the UK. It should be an independent, not-for-profit operation, and its role could include the following areas (among others) – all of which are also important action points that we are recommending as a result of this book:

- **Spread awareness of the need for media literacy** – including the issues we raise in this book. One way of presenting this need as a public campaign could be to compare it with the need to eat well. Not only do we need to be careful about what we eat – we also need to be aware of what we put in our minds (in other words, have a balanced ‘mind diet’).
- **Teach media literacy** – provide schools with teaching materials and the general public with information and guidance across a wide

range of media, including, but not limited to, those covered in this book. There's already a reasonable amount of training for children in computer skills and staying safe online but this needs to extend enormously to make them aware of the effects of media on them more generally – and equip them with the skills we've highlighted in this book to enable them to deal with it.

- **Campaign** – make the case for people's 'mental freedom' and campaign for the tools and social conditions we need in order to secure this for everyone, regardless of wealth, family beliefs or social position. This could include the media literacy organisation playing an informal 'campaigning watchdog' role, asking questions of specific media and institutions in their role as influencers and in giving (or failing to give) people the skills to develop their mental freedom. It could help to expose sectors, institutions or media that are particularly poor in these areas, and lobby for better practice, as well as raising awareness of the importance of these skills.
- **Test a programme of media labelling** – to help people understand the media they are consuming. We have labels to explain what's in our food, so we could test the same approach with our media. It is a way for people to evaluate how and where their major sources of information have obtained their information from, as well as any biases they might have. Items on a label could include the following, using this hypothetical example for The Sun newspaper:⁴⁰
 - The owner of the particular title (e.g. published by News Group Newspapers, a division of

News UK, which is a subsidiary of News Corp, owned by Rupert Murdoch)

- Circulation – (e.g. 1,465,000 in the UK)
- Audience – (e.g. 31% ABC1, 69% C2DE demographic groups)
- Editorial position – Conservative in 2017 General Election
- Political bias – right of centre

At the very least this could be a useful campaign to publicise the work of the media literacy organisation, and if successful it may have the potential to be applied as a programme at a wider scale.

- **Help people find reasonable sources of information** – give people the investigative skills and signpost them towards more reliable sources of information on certain issues, as these do exist (such as academic papers and credible research) and we should be equipped with the skills to find them.
- **Campaign for a better, stronger broadcast media** – we need to make the news media more robust and better able to do its job properly – of reporting actual news, not pseudo-news and PR fluff. As noted earlier, the media are willing to report on pseudo-news without much resistance, as it's fulfilling their need for quick and easy stories – particularly, as we've seen, at a time when so many newsrooms have been stripped of their real investigative reporters.

It's difficult to regulate this area without moving towards state-sponsored journalism which is of course itself inherently biased. Perhaps the best action is for all of us – the readers of media – to vote with our feet. In other words, we should go where the decent journalism is and show media owners that we want to pay for proper journalism rather than the usual, biased PR-fluff with the same news stories obtained from the same news wires as everyone else. There is good journalism out there – we just need to seek it out and demand more of it.

- **Undertake more research** – further research should be carried out at a national and international level to get a better understanding of how online media and habits affect our worldviews, lives and behaviour. Our lives have changed enormously with the development of online media and technology in the last 20 years, yet we have surprisingly little evidence to help us understand the effect it has had on us. Further research in this area would help everyone – from enabling better informed policies at a top level, to assisting parents with best practice at an individual level – something that, anecdotal evidence suggests, is much needed at present.

A toolkit for individuals

We now have a sense of the steps we need to take in society to help people build more empowered, better-informed lives where their mental freedom is better protected. But these changes won't come instantly, so what can we do in our own lives right now to build up our own perspective and the tools we need? Below we

will present a simple toolkit of ten practical steps you can take immediately to begin to free yourself from your own ‘life trap’.

Readers of this book who are parents may also be seeking ideas on how to help their children develop greater levels of independent thinking. Most of the points below apply to children too, and there are further specific ideas in the ‘Consumer kids’ guide on the Life Squared website (www.lifesquared.org.uk) or on Media Smarts (<http://mediasmarts.ca/>) – a great Canadian site promoting media literacy.

1. Get some perspective

First, get some perspective on your place in the bigger scheme of things – from the universe to the world to your own country. Learn about the bigger picture of the reality you find yourself living in. Seeing the world and your life clearer with this broader perspective is the first step towards bursting the bubble and thinking for yourself. Read ‘You are here’ on the Life Squared website as a starting point.

Then, try to also build an understanding of how the world works, and in particular the mechanisms that deliver the messages that could influence you – including advertising, the political system and the media. We hope this guide has provided a starting point to help you develop this perspective. Use this knowledge to help you work out how to deal with these messages.

2. Question your inputs

Question the messages you are receiving – from any source, be it adverts, the news, politicians or friends. Decide whether each message is important enough for you to pay attention to it, or whether it can be ‘filtered out’ – like an advertisement, for example.

If you decide to pay attention to the message, consider the source it came from and whether it might have a particular agenda. If you feel a particular message or source is too biased, you may want to get a more balanced view of the topic by exploring messages from a few other sources with different perspectives (for example, looking at the same story in other newspapers) or by finding a source you can trust before you make a judgement.

This process of evaluation is not always easy as we each bring our own existing biases to it (such as our political views), but we should still try to undertake it, as it helps us achieve a more balanced and realistic perspective on the world. We can also become quicker and more effective at this evaluation process over time.

3. Practice nonconformity

In the previous point, we noted the need to question your inputs. You also need to challenge them when you’re not sure about them. This can feel like a difficult or awkward thing to do, because, as we’ve already seen, human beings are hard-wired to conform and try to fit in with others. We therefore need to get in some practice in non-conformity to make it easier for us to do. Start with little acts first and you’ll be better equipped to deal with bigger or

ongoing acts of nonconformity when they're needed from you.

For example, if you're in a meeting at work with an opinionated colleague who is letting off a lot of ill-informed steam about a particular topic or trying to bulldoze the rest of the room into adopting their view (perhaps due to their seniority), why not challenge what they say rather than simply nodding and letting them get away with it as you might normally do. In the most polite way possible, ask them for evidence about a particular statement, or posit an alternative view to theirs. See what their reaction is.

Get in the habit of challenging people and standing up for yourself and for justice – whoever they are and whatever context – from asking someone to pick up the litter they dropped on the street through to sending back your food in a restaurant if it isn't good enough. These small acts of non-conformity will be needed regularly in a world that is driven by influences reinforcing similar messages.

4. Go on a mind diet

As well as getting into the habit of challenging all the messages you receive, look at the number and type of messages you are consuming. These days, we're not only failing to look after our physical health, with poor diets and little exercise, but are also getting into habits that our making our minds flabby, rather than nurturing them. For example, the average person in the UK spends three and a half hours watching television every day. Read 'The mind diet' on the Life Squared website as a starting point.

Here are a few steps you could take, aside from those already listed in this section:

- Try to seek a more balanced ‘diet’ of inputs – think about your main inputs in your daily life. Are they mainly social media and TV? Could you try to bring some other sources into your life for a more balanced ‘mental diet’? For example, reading books, mixing with some new people, or doing some research to learn more about issues that interest you?
- Challenge yourself with a wider range of views – try to broaden out the range of media you watch and read in order to see some opinions or ideas that are different from your own. Rather than immediately dismissing them, try to see the thought processes behind them. This can make us much better at dealing with other people’s views and reaching better compromises with them.
- Exercise your brain – seek out activities that will give your brain some activity rather than making it switch off. Switch off the television and paint, do some physical exercise, write, do a crossword, read a book, have a conversation – anything to get your brain active again!

5. Take some regular time to reflect

Find some regular ‘message-free’ time – perhaps 10 minutes each day – to escape from the rush, stress, influences and distractions of daily life, and just sit quietly and clear your head. Some people do this by meditating, while others simply find somewhere quiet to sit. While you’re sitting quietly, just clear

your head of any thoughts and relax – you’ll feel refreshed afterwards!

Read ‘A bit of peace and quiet’ on the Life Squared website as a starting point.

6. Build a sense of your own identity

Take the time to stand back from your life and gain a clear sense of what you are ‘about’ – your values, your needs, your aims – as this will give you a strong position from which to evaluate and manage any external sources that are seeking to influence you.

To do this, give yourself some time to go somewhere away from your daily routine – say, the park or the countryside, where you can unplug yourself from the influences that surround you. While you’re in this location, think about what the things are that really matter to you in your life. Try to think about these things honestly and with no judgement – and try to think of things that are your genuine priorities, not those that other people, adverts or influences might have tried to persuade you to adopt. While you’re thinking about them, write a small list of them. There may not be many!

Then, when you’ve written this list, think about whether you’re really prioritising them in your life at the moment, and what you could do to live more in line with what really matters to you. Be prepared to think radically about it – from changing your job to changing your lifestyle. Then, try to take action to live life in line with your real priorities rather than those that you’ve adopted in order to please

others or to ‘fit in’ – even making a start on this will feel great!

7. Build the confidence to live life your way, and build your courage and resilience in defending yourself and who you are.

But have the awareness to learn as you go along so that you adapt your worldview with grace and humour in the face of evidence and better arguments (though not in the face of pressure, social acceptance or other tools of influence).

Read ‘The modern life survival guide’ on the Life Squared website as a starting point.

8. Identify your values and live consistently with them

In the same way as you can review your priorities in life in the point above, take time to stand back and review your values in life. This can help you to become better at navigating them and making sense of the grey areas in moral debates. To help you undertake this process, read ‘How to live ethically’ and ‘Living your values’, available from the Life Squared website.

9. Be the sort of person you want to see in the world

As you build your sense of critical awareness and independent thought, make sure you don’t become impatient, patronising or aggressive with people who you feel aren’t exercising the same levels of awareness.

Listen attentively to what other people are saying in their arguments. Seek to really understand where they are coming from. Be honest, open-minded, polite and patient. Keep your sense of friendliness, fun and humility and help people to develop their own awareness – in a sensitive way. Above all, treat people with the sense of kindness and compassion that drives all the principles in this book and is the foundation of the world we want to see.

10. Realise the world is open to you

A final point of encouragement. If you are unhappy, unfulfilled and stressed by your present way of life, and stuck within the life trap, it can feel as if there are no alternatives and no escape. But there are, and there is. It's not always possible to have everything we want in life (this is a fallacy perpetuated by consumerism), but it is possible to live our lives the way we want – we just have to gain a bit of perspective on our lives and the influences around us, and then have the courage to start living our lives in the way we want, despite the pressure from these influences.

Hopefully this guide has got you started on the path to doing this. But, in the moments when you're under pressure to conform and you doubt yourself (and there will be plenty of these) have courage and be assured, you're not alone – there are plenty of great people out there who are escaping the life trap and living their own lives already. Don't expect to hear much about them in the mainstream media though, because under our current economic ideas, they don't count as 'successful'! We wish you all the best in carving out a life on your own terms.

Conclusion

We are gradually building our understanding of our nature as human beings, and this is shedding some light on the tools and conditions we need to flourish and lead good lives and how to build a good, civilised society.

A crucial ingredient in these flourishing lives is our mental freedom – our ability to defend ourselves from manipulation and influence by others, and to carve out independent, well-informed lives for ourselves.

We therefore have a choice as a society. We can pay attention to this new learning and take action to build the best lives we can for people and a better society. Or we can continue to ignore these issues in favour of the arbitrary political or economic ideas that we have become attached to, and watch our lives and society continue to decline as a result.

We hope this book is a small starting point towards making the changes we need to gain better lives and a better society.

Footnotes

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2. This is obviously the briefest and simplest of introductions to just a few of the principles that are being discovered. To find out more about this area, see some of the books we've recommended in the 'Further Reading' section at the end of the book.
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- Kasser and Kanner, American Psychological Association, 2003, p.21
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 26. Toxic sludge is good for you, Stauber and Rampton, Common Courage Press, Maine 1995, p.3
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Further reading

How we think

Bruce Hood, *The Self Illusion*, Constable, London 2012

Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Penguin, London 2011

Influences

Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, Ig Publishing, New York 2005

Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News*, Vintage, London 2009

Richard Docwra, *Modern Life – as good as it gets?*, Green Books, Totnes 2008

Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, Fourth Estate, London 2000

George Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, Penguin, London 2009

Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, Ig Publishing, New York 2007

Stauber and Rampton, *Toxic sludge is good for you*, Common Courage Press, Maine 1995

Richard Thaler & Cass Sunstein, *Nudge*, Penguin, London 2009

A selection of other relevant Life Squared publications

The problem with consumerism

The modern life survival guide

How to achieve less

You are here

How's your life? Busy? Stressed? Unfulfilled?

You may not know it, but you're probably caught in the Life Trap. You live in a complex world where you are bombarded daily with a wide range of powerful messages and influences - from advertising to social media - but at no point in your life have you been given the skills or tools you need to manage this assault on your mind.

As a result, you have ended up caught in a trap, like most of us in the modern world - living a stifled and restricted life that just follows the dominant ideas of the people and society that surround you. As a consequence, you pursue career achievement and material success, worry about what other people think of you and lead a busy, distracted life. Your life feels meaningless and isolated, yet you don't know why and are unable to take control and change it.

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