The Ethics of Ignoring Rashomon
All Choices Involve Ethics: Simplification is No Exception

By Michael Lissack

Abstract: Our personal ethics are the sum of the processes we evoke while making choices. Some of these processes will be easily self-observable and thus easily articulated. Other processes remain hidden to even our most reflexive self-inspection and are thus seem obscure to self, even if observable by others. When we attempt to simplify that with which we are dealing – be it a problem, a context, a situation, or a task, we do so by making a series of choices. Those choices tend to take the form of a black box where only inputs and outputs are observable and the mechanisms and processes which link input and output are hidden from view. While black boxes resist inquiry, it is imperative that we attempt to articulate the ethics of those very choices. Simplification rests upon one's ability to shift explicit representations of meaning onto situationally and environmentally cued exformations – where meaning is derived from a decoding of the cued and attended to signal. Such "offloading" represents yet another set of choices whose ethics again need to be made observable. The key to rendering the inside of the simplification black boxes observable is to make explicit note of the four shareds upon which successful simplification depends: shared context, shared boundaries/constraints, shared history, and a shared sense of what is an "explanation." By questioning the degree to which each of the four shareds is present and asking how that could be changed it becomes possible to render simplifications mechanisms transparent enough for ethical inquiry. Simplification always involves tradeoffs amongst explicitness, efficiency, lossiness, truthiness, and robustness. Those tradeoffs are judged by the chooser in light of the four shareds and thus any statements about the ethics of simplification must in turn be couched in the language of the four shareds. Simplification is NOT just a design choice. It is a series of ethical choices highly revelatory of the values and beliefs of the simplifying designer.

Keywords: *Simplification, Context, Boundary, Constraint, Habitus, Fundierung, Explanation, Exformation, Lossiness, Truthiness, Efficiency, Jargon*

Introduction

Few scientific papers and even fewer in the social sciences begin by acknowledging the limitations placed upon us as humans. We speak and write as if we have access to much more of the world than we really do. Since this is a paper about ethics, it is essential to begin by recognizing both the limitations and their consequences.

Humans have limited cognitive capabilities. We cannot process the complex interwoven infinite string of things that make up whatever it is that reality might be. At best, we can hold five to nine ideas in our minds simultaneously. Most of us have lots of trouble with the idea that what matters may be one or two steps removed from what we are observing. We know we are limited in this way — but we ignore it.

We tend to speak as if we have access to something called "the truth." Whatever access we have, however, is limited by the point above. We cannot process the whole truth. We can only process bits and pieces. The "truth" we are so sure we have access to is a narrative created by our minds to render the world somewhat coherent. Our mind's goal is coherence not truth.

For every situation we find ourselves in, we pick out some aspects of what we are dealing with or encountering and using those three to nine data points we tell ourselves a story. We then refine that story so that it "fits" into our current understanding of the world — an understanding which itself is the result of the years of prior story telling gone before and our immediate perception of the situation or context we find ourselves in. Our story of coherence is built upon those data points, but we will tell the story as if it is based upon some "revealed truth."

In order to avoid exhaustion, we also rely on our prior stories to "explain" current situations. If one or more of our chosen data points lines up with a previously told narrative, it requires a lot less energy to just go with the existing story rather than try to tell a new one. (Which, by the way, is why it is so much easier just to tell "the truth" — there is no need to either come up with a new story or remember what story you may have told previously.) We allow these chosen data points to trigger some meaning in our heads, and we then rely on the triggered meaning, unless or until the prior narrative fails to render the present situation coherent.

Throughout this process, we ignore the simple fact that we are choosing which of the infinite data points and observations available to us to pay attention to. This fact needs repeating. We choose what we pay attention to, and then we weave our narrative around those choices. Different people encountering the very same situation are highly likely to make different choices of data points.
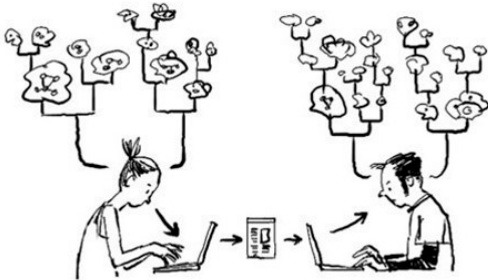
The "Same" Object Triggers Differing Interpretations

The ethical questions which follow stem from that very observation. The 1950 film classic Akira Kurosawa's Rashomon was about how a single incident could support multiple truths. The Rashomon effect is (according to Wikipedia) "a term used to describe the circumstance when the same event is given contradictory interpretations by different individuals involved."

The Rashomon effect makes our efforts to simplify questionable. When simplicity works it can be a very powerful tool. In 1862, Victor Hugo while on vacation wanted to know how his novel Les Misérables was selling. He sent a one character telegram to his publisher -- ?. The publisher replied with a single character -- ! - telling Hugo of its success. This was simplification at its best. A single character conveyed all the information needed to each of the two participants.

Many of the millennial generation try this same approach to "communicating" with their peers. Their one character expressions are called emoji. Emoji can have many meanings – a concept which most of their users overlook. Instead, they expect the same results as Hugo and his publisher. Sometimes, when the communication is only within a small tight knot circle, they are pleased. Oft-times when they include someone who is just a bit outside the circle, they are embarrassed. The curse of ambiguity strikes their single character "communication." The ghost of multiple meanings appears. And, simplicity is lost.

When we simplify we are asking others to accept our interpretation of the world. Is that an ethical request?

Simplification

Simplification is our shortcut to coherence so things make sense and we "know" what to do. Simplicity is also a great equalizer --the simpler something appears to be, we believe that more people can both do and understand it. However, our shorthand assumptions on which such simplification is based may describe a belief system which others do not hold. Simplification leads to a conflation of labels and the things so labelled - such that we overlook the subtleties and nuances that give the actual things significance. Some of this problem stems from our reliance on computers and our use of the "mind as computer" model to govern how we think and learn - as evidenced with our use of keywords, soundbites, texting and Twitter. It is exacerbated by society's tendency toward dis-intermediation and a lack of curation.

Books and articles about simplicity have tended to be about the virtues of ever more simplification and/or attempts to describe how one goes about simplifying. Simplicity and simplification are posed as the "solution" to information overload and complexity. When we perceive the world as coherent, we just get on with things. When our perception of coherence is shattered; things no longer make sense and we do not know how to act. We ask questions, and worry about our inability to find answers. We may react to our loss of assurance with a loss of self-confidence; and we may retreat to "the way it was" or address the new situation by simplifying it.

Simplification usually involves five choices:

1. Decide that some distinctions about the item, situation, or thing in need of simplifying are important and others are not.
2. Discard information that fails to convey meaning when viewed through the filter of those "important distinctions."
3. Look for representations or other signals (which can be words, pictures, anecdotes, movements, etc.) as icons for each important distinction.
4. Choose a set of representations to use.
5. Substitute the chosen representations wherever possible.

This process can be summarized as a shift from explicit elucidation to a reliance upon contextually dependent cues -- what Nørretranders (1991) termed "exformation." Exformation is meaning which is "off-oaded" into the environment or the context in a manner that is capable of then being called back when needed.

The risks we face in relying on simplicity are many. Emergence, the encounter with "the new," eventually overwhelms any complexity reduction including simplifications in the form of labels, categories, frameworks and models. By acting based on simplifications, we rely on models lacking in degrees of freedom and unable to perceive, account for, or attend to adjacent possibles and useful affordances. Such models are usually fragile rather than resilient. This reduces to our ability to cope with change, prosper with emergence, and innovate.

Our goals for simplicity and simplification are lossness and robustness. Lossness (the opposite of lossiness) is the idea that the essential meaning, the "essence" of the whole in all its details, remains preserved when simplification occurs. To the extent that essence is lost in the process of simplification, the resulting representation is considered to be lossy. Holograms, for example, are mostly lossless. (The concept has its origins in data compression. When you compress a picture from a RAW file to a GIF, for example, you attempt to use a method which minimizes lossiness.) Lossiness is to be avoided. Lossness is the goal. But, lossness has no value if the representation is not also robust. We simplify to render the "essence" easier to use, implement, embody, or manipulate. To the extent that the simplified representation is so highly situationally dependent that they become lossy as context changes, they offer little robustness. Taleb would call them "fragile." Such fragility is also to be avoided.

In truth, the lossness and robustness, lossiness and fragility, of any simplification will be context dependent. How dependent will vary. What is considered as the "context" will vary. In that context dependence lies many of simplicity's ethical questions.

The most important observation about simplification is to acknowledge that we can choose to recognize and deal with the multiplicities of meaning in any ambiguity, or to deny the alternatives. We can embrace Rashomon or deny him. We can also deliberately choose to incorporate ambiguity when we want others assume their own meaning in a situation. The choice of how we declare and assign meaning is one each of us consistently makes -- though we are often as oblivious to the process we employ as to the notion of choice itself.

In making choices for simplification we are, in effect, designing the reality with which we cope. We each have cognitive limits, and cannot process all the information that is present in the world around us. We must choose what to pay attention to, what to allocate energy and effort to, and what to ultimately deal with. We call the result of these choices 'reality,' but that reality is only a subset of the swirl of items, information, people, and environments around us. In making these choices without sufficient deliberation, our trade-off allocations may not attune well to those made by others on which our actions depend.   And when that happens, simplifications fail.

The key takeaway here however is that of choice. Simplification is a process of choice. All processes of choice involve ethics. Ethics is focused on a few key concepts. The first is respect – the idea that others should be seen as if they will be dealt with repeatedly and not just as a one-time transaction. The second is the ubiquity

of choice – we are always making choices and ethics is the study of how and why we do so. The third is humility – we know less than we think, especially about the context, history, sense of boundaries and constraints, and sense of what constitutes an explanation (what I write about as "the four shareds") which go into how others will process the choices make. And finally, the importance of questions over answers. Ethics is about asking questions and having the integrity to reflexively ask them again and again as we revisit choice out of respect and humility.

And so to the ethics of simplicity we turn.

Hidden Assumptions

Our minds dislike ambiguity and doubt. Instead, we have an ingrained desire to construct coherent narratives which leads us to seek confirming evidence, while disregarding information that refutes our prior view – a problem known as confirmation bias. What results is a confidence in our understanding which is greater than the circumstances warrant, and a further confidence in the simplifications we have chosen on which we then base our actions. Nobel Prize winning economist Daniel Kahneman tells us: "We are ruined by our own biases. When making decisions, we see what we want, ignore probabilities, and minimize risks that uproot our hopes." When we simplify, we allow our biases to help determine the very reality we are creating.

Much of the time any two of us may see the same situation differently:
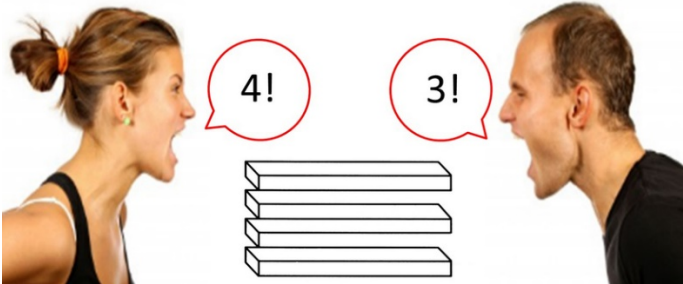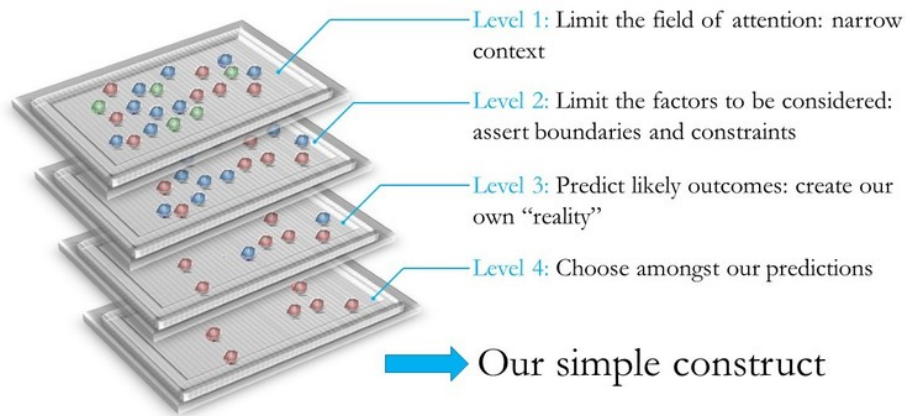

Regardless, we then use the same words to mean different things:

And yet wonder why our meaning gets lost. The process, all too often, resembles a black box. There is input (the world) and there is output (the simple). We are unaware of (through either obliviousness or deliberate ignorance) the process in between. Ethical considerations demand that the black box of simplification be opened to examination. We pick and choose what observations and data points to pay attention to:

We filter "Reality" almost without thought

Level 1: Limit the field of attention: narrow context

Level 2: Limit the factors to be considered: assert boundaries and constraints

Level 3: Predict likely outcomes: create our own "reality"

Level 4: Choose amongst our predictions

→ Our simple construct

To express that the world, a situation, or a person is 'x', we filter the reality that we see. First, we limit our field of attention. We narrow the context of what it is we are dealing with. Then, we limit the factors to be considered. We assert a set of boundaries and constraints. Then, we predict likely outcomes given the boundaries and constraints that we just imposed. In effect, at this point, we have constructed in our heads – multiple realities. Then, finally we pick amongst those multiple realities. By choosing from amongst our predictions, we have taken the complex, complicated reality that we first encountered and turned it into a simple construct. We create a story around those CHOSEN points.

That construct becomes the story we tell…

We test that story for coherence.
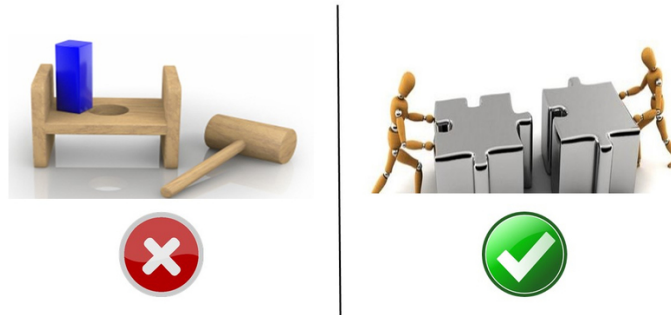
What this means is that the ONLY way to get past the discord and dissonance is for each side to ask lots of questions about what data points are being used to compose the narrative around and to acknowledge that the other side is using different data points. But, that would mean giving up the privilege that is asserted from falsely claiming that your narrative is "the truth." Instead, we get the complete nonsense of each side insisting that the other side's narrative is based on "lies and distortions."

But notice that fourth step — we CHOOSE what we will pay attention to and to believe. We make that choice based upon our prior history, contexts, beliefs and based on our present surroundings, context, and situation.

Our choices of how to simplify are based upon what I call the four shareds:

1.   shared context,
2.   shared boundaries/constraints,
3.   shared history, and
4.   a shared sense of what is an "explanation."

Shared Context

When we share context with another we are capable of referring to that context directly or indirectly. Bourdieu called this kind of context our "habitus," while Husserl referred to it as the basis for the Fundierung relation. Shared perceptions of the environment or situation allow for mutuality in representation and reference. If we share a habitus, we share an understanding of some set of repeatable practices (waiting for the bus at the bus stop, walking the aisles at a grocery store, interacting with the desktop metaphor on our PC). Our understanding of the repeatable practice fades into the background such that we pay little attention to it and instead we pay attention to purposive goal which the exercise of that practice allows us to accomplish.

We walk to the bus stop, have idle conversation along the way, and perhaps get annoyed at waiting for the bus. But more often than not we describe this as "going to work." The quality of our walk along Spring Street, its sights, smells and people are background (unless or until something out of the ordinary is encountered). The same holds for our walk up and down the aisles of the grocery. We are not noticing the art and colors created by the merchant's displays (whether purposive or inadvertent). We are not noticing the smells of coffee and cheese (again unless unexpected as a chlorine fish odor might be). We ignore the idle chatter with the ladies we pass in the aisles (with an exception for the one who asked for help in picking a ripe melon).

That which we ignore is what Bourdieu called the habitus -- the embodiment of the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences. Habitus, Bourdieu often noted, is so ingrained that people often mistook its "feel" as natural instead of culturally developed. By labelling one's reaction and interaction to the habitus as natural, one can "justify" ignoring both the conditions which produce and maintain it and one's own role in choosing to be part of that environ and part of those interactions. But, note, we choose to so ignore. The very expression "stop to smell the roses" is a commonplace reminder that we have the ability to make other choices.

Our brains are designed (or have evolved) such that we tend to take the familiar for granted and pay far greater attention to the new or the unexpected. This taken-for-granted-ness is the key idea behind Husserl's "fundierung" – the foundation upon which we act or proceed. We seldom pay attention to most of the qualities of the pen with which we write – instead we pay attention to our writing. We mostly share the fundierung of the pen. The exceptions are the calligrapher whose focus is on the act of writing not on the content of what is written and each of us whenever the pen breaks.

When habitus and fundierung are shared, it is far easier to offload meaning into the environment. Cues will be perceived as coming "from the same place." More importantly, that which is to be labelled as "different" will be recognized as different by those who share the context, habitus, and fundierung. Shared context becomes a means by which insiders can be identified and outsiders excluded. Such inclusions and exclusions need not be done in a purposive manner. They too may be by-products of the fundierung behind other choices.

But, there are serious ethical questions which lie beneath the surface. If simplicity and simplification are relying upon shared context, habitus and fundierung, then they may also be implicitly relying upon hidden definitions of insider and outsider. When corporate recruiters limit their attention to a small group of colleges, that simplification effectuates choices about insiders and outsiders. When marketers or policy makers simplify their target by picking "labelled groups," implicit in those labels are choices about insiders and outsiders.

It is the implicitness of these choices, the fundierung of the process by which they get made, which needs to be brought to the surface. Fundierung is about that which is taken for granted and ignored. Choices to include and exclude are being implicitly made when we simplify to the extent that our simplification is itself relying upon shared context, habitus, or fundierung.

Shared Boundaries/Constraints

Unlike habitus and fundierung, our notions of boundaries and constraints tend to be articulable. We may have an implicit sense of what a constraint is or where a boundary lies, but when called upon we usually are very capable of expressing the existence of that same boundary or constraint. To the extent that we are unsure of exact location, definition, or condition, we tend to react to that lack of certainty by choosing to stay a "safe distance away." Others with whom we are interacting will both likely be exhibiting similar behavior and implicitly observing how we are interacting with the boundary or constraint.

Whether we (or they) are accepting of the boundaries and constraints will be partially determined by our

sense of how "appropriate" we perceive them to be – both for the situation and for ourselves. Appropriateness is measured by the notion of coherence - how well story, self, representations, and situation fit together into a sense of being "one." In the absence of sufficient coherence, dissonance takes over. Such sufficiency demands a "requisite variety" -- the notion that we need sufficient ambiguity and degrees of freedom to support adjacent possibilities for action. Appropriateness allows us to recognize that boundaries and constraints are not only limitations but may also function as enablers.

Simplification primarily relies on shared boundaries and constraints in three ways:

1. When the boundaries and constraints are explicit, they need not be otherwise articulated. We instead rely on shared context to tell us how to behave inside of or outside of the boundary or constraint. We could not make our way through life if we were continually being told what set of rules or behaviors did not apply because we were on one side or the other of a boundary, the information overload would be crippling. Making a boundary or constraint explicit and obvious is thus one way to simplify. The more obvious and explicit the greater the shared sense of what or where the boundary or constraint is.

2. When the boundaries and constraints are implicit, hidden, or unsure, we usually will attempt to remain a safe distance therefrom. To the extent that we desire to induce others to stay that safe distance, we will both obfuscate the boundary or constraint and make obvious a significant penalty for violation.

3. Alternatively, when the boundaries and constraints are implicit, hidden, or unsure, some of us at particular times will attempt to probe or challenge what we believe to be the boundary or constraint. Such challenges can vary with respect to how public or private they may be. Battles over boundary and constraint definitions are themselves simplifications of battles regarding the inclusionary or exclusionary effects of implicit reliance on habitus. Thus, the greater the publicness of the battle, the greater the stakes at least one of the protagonists perceives.

The third case happens far more often than we like to believe. At the societal level, and with rather high stakes, boundary issues are raised whenever the slogan "Black Lives Matter" is evoked. One's actual acceptance of the slogan -- without the immediate articulation of some form of "don't all lives matter?" – depends upon shared context and habitus, but the slogan's acceptance has become an implicit boundary. The fighting over that boundary takes place at multiple levels: content, symbolism, evocation of history, perceived ritualistic indications of respect, and group identity.

Simplification is assisted to the extent that boundaries or constraints are shared and articulable in common amongst the relevant stakeholders. Ethical issues arise both in the definition of such boundaries and constraints and in the degree of explicitness asserted to be held by stakeholders.

Shared History
All historical narratives contain an irreducible and inexpungable element of interpretation. The historian has to interpret his materials in order to construct the moving pattern of images in which the form of the historical process is to be mirrored. And this because the historical record is both too lull and too sparse. On the one

hand, there are always more facts in the record than the historian can possibly include in his narrative representation of a given segment of the historical process. And so, the historian must "interpret" his data by excluding certain facts from his account as irrelevant to his narrative purpose. On the other hand, in his efforts to reconstruct "what happened" in any given period of history, the historian inevitably must include in his narrative an account of some event or complex of events for which the facts that would permit a plausible explanation of its occurrence are lacking. And this means that the historian must "interpret" his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds. A historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative. (White, 1973)

Shared history matters in any process of simplification, because the history possessed and attended to by the interpreter of symbols, labels, representations, and exformational cues has a huge influence on the meaning which that interpreter perceives. White, above, tells us that all of history is a product of interpretation. The obverse is also true: all interpretations are a product of history. Interpretations are not a product of History with a capital "H," but instead of the personal and attended to at that moment history of each individual interpreter. The greater the history which is shared in common, the greater the likelihood of similar interpretation.

Meaning is given by sets of objects and associations that are invoked when a term is used. Membership of these sets can change. In everyday life words and phrases often emerge from concrete situations in which participants jointly work out ways of describing what is going on. New terms, symbols or images are situated-they acquire meaning through collective use in real situations" (Gooding and Addis, 2008).

The ethical questions here revolve around the idea that what matters is the elements of shared history which are attended to at the moment of interpretation. Because it is attended to history matters, if one can manipulate what is attended to, one can manipulate interpretation. Truth and facts are not what matter. Instead, coherence with pre-existing beliefs and "truthiness" are far more important.

Truthiness was coined in 2005 by Stephen Colbert, as:

"Truthiness is 'What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true.'
It's not only that I feel it to be true, but that I feel it to be true."
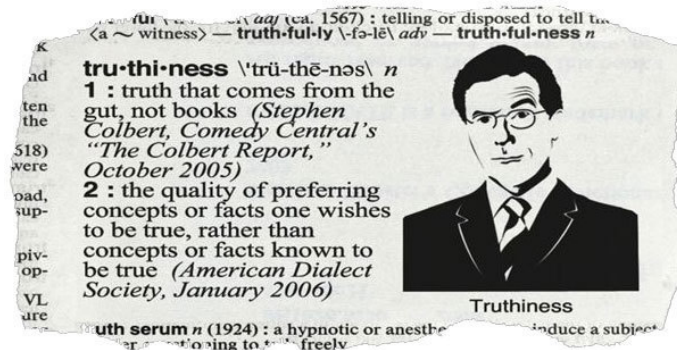
More generally, truthiness refers to the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be

true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.

Truthiness is a large determinant of whether attended to "history" enters into an interpreter's interpretation. While logic and rationality may argue that only if one has well-earned confidence in one's descriptors does it make sense to use them to analyze a situation, truthiness relies on confidence alone. There is no screening for "well-earned." Metaphors and analogies may be fascinating and tantalizing, objectively they are very uncertain and questionable. But, metaphors and analogies are simple and lend themselves to truthiness. It used to be (especially amongst academics and journalists) that if one wanted to 'model' or 'label' a situation, one needed to be sure of the definitions, identities, and terms of use one was making use of. In theory we were all taught to do this at school. Yet, no such epistemic care appears to be the norm any longer. Labels are all too quickly assumed to be accurate depictions of reality. Truthiness wins.

To the extent that we share history, and have that shared history called to our attention, the greater the likelihood that we will accept simplifications in the form of asserted truthiness. "Make the lie big, make it simple, keep saying it, and eventually they will believe it." (Usually attributed to Adolf Hitler.) Thus, the selective telling and retelling of "facts" becomes part of the attended to history which we will recall and make use of in interpretation. Which "facts" and how they told need to be looked at as ethical questions and not just taken for granted. If a protagonist is capable of telling what Gould called canonical stories, bringing into play "just enough" shared history and truthiness, such a simplification will likely have great power

"The organizing power of canonical stories leads us to ignore important facts readily within our potential sight, and to twist or misread the information that we do manage to record. In other words, canonical stories predictably "drive" facts into definite and distorted pathways that validate the outlines and necessary components of these archetypal tales. We therefore fail to note important items in plain sight, while we misread other facts by forcing them into preset mental channels…" (Gould, 2010).

Shared Sense of What Constitutes an Explanation
Simplifications only work if they are accepted and used. When they are challenged, they need to be able to withstand the questioning of how, why, and does that really matter. To the extent that the challenge is being evaluated by those with similar understandings of what constitutes an explanation, the greater the likelihood that the challenge with its questions and answers will be interpreted in a similar manner. But, there are multiple perspectives about what it is that constitutes a "good" or an "adequate" explanation.

An analogy may be helpful. There are two ways of learning accounting as a professional field. One (the traditional approach) asserts that the purpose of accounting is to present an accurate snapshot of an organization and its activities through a set of numbers developed via a commonly agreed upon rule set. This approach asserts that accuracy is the most important criteria with which to judge the accountant's work. A second approach asserts instead that the purpose of accounting is to capture a rough out of focus polaroid picture snapshot of the organization and its activity. The goal of the out-of-focus picture is to generate questions and it is the narrative formed by seeking answers to those questions which is the accountant's goal. Creating the context for the generation of good questions becomes the criteria with which to judge the accountant's work. The traditional evaluation of an explanation as being rooted in "provable facts" and based on appeals to truth is thus like first kind of accounting. But, if coherence with self-identity and canonical stories is the criterion, then in the pursuit of truthiness explanations can be judged to be more like

the second kind.

The truthiness standard for explanation starts from the premise that the goal of simplicity is to construct models, labels or representations which allow the observers and users thereof to better attune to context, such that they or other observers and users may make use of that model, label or representation as a guide to next actions. In this view, simplicity is successful when it reveals or calls greater attention to, affordances (both good or bad) which were previously (i.e. before application of the simplistic model, label or representation) unrecognized by the observer or the salience of which was understated. Simplifications fail when they call attention to false affordances – false because when contextually embedded the possibility for action is non-existent or infeasible – or overstates salience of affordances due to the imposition of overly restrictive boundary conditions or constraints within the context of the situation.

Friedman (1953) argued that, in economics, if a model works, then we should regard it as "truth." In life, such models often take the form of labels –mere words. Vygotsky (1962) noted that the use of such words can be reality changing. Or, as first, he and, then, Hawking and Mlodinow explain:

"It is not merely the content of a word that changes, but the way reality is generated and reflected in a word" (Vygotsky, 1962).

"The only meaningful thing is the usefulness of the model…. When such a model is successful at explaining events, we tend to attribute to it, and to the elements and concepts that constitute it, the quality of reality or absolute truth." (Hawking and Mlodinow, 2010)

If there is a disagreement about what constitutes a good explanation, then challenges to simplification will be met with acceptance by some and virulent disagreement by others. Truth has a hard time displacing truthiness (until or unless some physical "real-world" entities supervene – and, even then, the "explanations" offered for what happened will differ wildly).

The Power of Diverse Opinions

Thousands of CEO's and other business executives test these simplification principles through the mechanism of a peer-to-peer advisory group. This is a group of 12-20 executives who meet regularly for the very purpose of encountering the perspectives of the others. The members of these groups use the Rashomon effect to full advantage hoping to gain new insights into their own situations and issues. Peer to peer groups work because they embody the following tenets (captured from my own peer-to-peer group):

The members recognize that most of the time we and others operate by the Least action principle: i.e., minimize the effort needed to satisfice our goal. I.e., its easy to rely on the initial stories we tell ourselves than make the effort to compose new ones. Unless we are made aware of the limitations which our original stories impose upon us, we will not recognize the high energy cost of staying with the original stories.

Our understanding will always be based, in part on the present context as we encounter it. (Note, by definition, abstract definitions and arbitrary labels are meant to be context free.) The more insight and self-

limitation that become evident to us through the group dialogue, the greater the opportunity for us to choose a different context. Because we can only pay attention to a limited number of data points, those we pay attention to will determine our context; context always matters.

In order to simplify any context we are dealing with, we tend to hide processes which allow inputs to become outputs and treat them as a black box. We can create more possibilities if we recognize when a black box is being used, and ask questions in an effort to at least partially reveal those hidden processes. The key strength of the group dialogue is found in the questions fellow members ask as they attempt to understand.

Because meaning is determined by the receiver, not the sender, the give and take of dialogue allows for the mutual development of reflective understanding. This requires (1) the sender work very hard to take into account how the receiver may interpret and (2) the receiver distinguish between a triggered meaning in herself and a meaning that emerges from a process of dialogue. The mutual understandings that surface becomes the foundation for the next possibility.

Possibilities are limited by affordances (i.e., only those possibilities that are immediately adjacent (available) to a current situation are capable being enacted). Choices become available as possibilities only when we recognize them as such – an unattended-to choice is incapable of being acted upon. Another contribution of the group process is surfacing adjacent and available possible actions. Goals and intentions are not to be confused with adjacent and available actions.

Collectively the group serves as a reflective sounding board for each of its members. The reflective part comes from the insight each member gains while discussing issues raised by others. When raising one's own issues, the group process changes how members listen to themselves opening a productive opportunity for self-reflection.

Successful group processes become a part of each member's day-to-day interaction with all of their significant others (professional, personal, community). As the lessons regarding questions to be asked, openness to the perspectives of others, and a recognition of self-imposed limitations are reflexively recognized and then shared, each member is able to help these others also grow.

Peer-to-peer groups thus help members to act so as to maximize the choices available to them. The re-iteration of this process over many situations creates the opportunity for members to abstract from lessons learned into guiding principles.

Implications

Ambiguity is ever present in our world, but all too often we choose to ignore it. We assert the simple in lieu of the complex; the direct in lieu of the nuanced or the subtle; the label or category in lieu of recognizing the portfolio of choices that label/category represents. How we choose to deal with ambiguity is just that - a choice. Often that choice is to opt for simplification. But, and it is a vitally important but, many times that simplification is inappropriate for the situation and leads to bad outcomes. It is a pattern we cannot seem to break. We do not go through life overwhelmed by the apparent complexity continually confronting us. Instead, we make choices about what to deal with, what to see, and what questions to ask. We choose to assert the simple over the complex. And then, we act.

But we have an alternative. We can embrace Rashomon, We can be like the executives in their peer-to-

peer groups and seek out alternative perspectives. We can ask questions instead of demanding adherence to some pre-chosen given.

To ignore multiple meanings and ignore context is to assume a stasis to the world which seldom exists. Such a stasis assumes that opportunities are predictable, context is controllable, and emergence is non- existent. The world of practicing managers does not match these oversimplifications. Prediction, at best, is only possible in the short term. Boundaries are always shifting. The composition of work teams, temporary organization, the company, the industry, or the competitive environment, is rarely predictable (in the long term at least). Identities are unclear. The trade- off between outcome and process does not favor one over the other. In the world we live in, emergence is pervasive, context is seldom controllable, ecologies are emergent and few affordances are predictable. Situation and context play key roles. In the complex world of today, continuity is but a fragile, temporary and illusionary notion; the assumption of predictability does not hold.

Heisenberg (1963) told us: "The world is not divided into different groups of objects but rather into different groups of relationships .... The world thus appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole." Simplification pretends to be a means of representing that texture. And, when the four shareds
are present, it works. But, to the extent that the four shareds are missing, simplification sets us up for error.

We act based on the simplifications we chose, regardless of "appropriateness." But, as when PT Barnum posted signs proclaiming "This way to the Egress" those who take a shortcut are all too often sorely disappointed. Keywords, emoji's, and soundbites are no substitute for careful curation. Labels and categories are no substitute for the fact checking and verification of a trusted intermediary. A 60,000- word novel is the equivalent of 3,000 tweets. The novel has a title. The tweets do not. The novel has a coherent structure and an ending (or so we hope). The tweets do not. But many of you would nonetheless pay far more attention to the 3000 tweets.

Part of the problem here is that keywords, categorizations, and labels make it all too easy to express "something" in a soundbite, text or tweet. To those in the know that "something" may have defined meaning. For others there are few cues on which meaning can be constructed. The substance of 140 characters is at most 20-25 words or a 10 second soundbite. Those 10 seconds are the cue to the other part of the problem: as more and more of our supposed conversations occur in soundbites, texts and tweets our attention span draws shorter and shorter - approaching that same 10 second mark. It is the rare member of Generation Z and beyond who will happily spend hours reading a book. Those same Gen Z'ers will spend time on an activity - rollerblading, working out, shopping - but engaging in deep thought seldom counts.

The old solution for much of this part of the problem was to rely on intermediaries and curators to do a preliminary sort of the information for us. Fifty years ago we watched the network news, listened to the radio, and read newspapers, magazines, and books. In each of these there was someone (or some few) who acted as a filter. They were our intermediaries standing between each of us and the raw sources of information. They were our curators picking and choosing which items they deemed worthy of our attention. Few of us went looking for primary sources of data unless we were doing academic research or were journalists ourselves. Fewer of us attempted to put primary data "out there in the world" be it by publishing, or letters to the editor, or calling in to a talk show. Instead we came to depend on a set of curators and

intermediaries in whom we trusted (for those my age and older think Walter Cronkite, Warren Buffett, and the Christian Science Monitor, for the younger reader think Perez Hilton, Suze Orman or Barbara Walters). If they thought we should be aware of something, we at least gave it some attention.

Spring forward to today. An ill-timed tweet or Instagram post can circulate to millions in the blink of an eye. Before any of it is vetted. Before any of it is fact checked. Often before any of it is reflected upon by its author. It's all just a click away: send, post, tweet, publish. Every day on Facebook more than 10 billion pieces of content are shared. Every day on Twitter 500 million tweets are tweeted. It is all un-curated and dis-intermediated. It is just raw data -screaming to be simplified and made cogent. At almost any price. All we have to do is simply "Google it."

Because we have lost the trusted curators and intermediaries who used to sort through information for us, we are stuck doing it for ourselves. And we are not very good at it. We mistake popularity for accuracy and credit ignorant crowds with a wisdom reserved to only the most learned master craftsman. We all know how to look up "cognitive biases" on the Internet but few of us are willing to take the steps required to overcome them.

Instead, we simplify and rely on our simplifications. The act and processes of simplification have become engrained in our personal habitus. Simplification is the fundierung which underlies our ability to label and categorize. We do it without much thought. We also do it without reflexively acknowledging that each such choice carries with it a whole host of ethical questions.

The ethical questions affect not only others but also ourselves. By making assumptions (and in so doing restricting ourselves to a set of labels and a model) we predetermine what might be learned, which will limit the options that appear to be open to us. This is because by adopting a particular perspective, and therefore making assumptions consistent with that perspective, we limit what we can "see." The perspective acts as a lens that only allows particular features to come into focus -- all other features are lost or assumed not to be relevant. Furthermore, in communicating with others, by making use of a particular viewpoint, we limit our and their ability to 'see' what is relevant.

We need to embrace Rashomon. Each of us grew up and matured under different circumstances, with different influences, made different efforts, and achieved different results. We each have our own frames for interpreting situations. What we have in common is that we all strive to make sense out of what we encounter — each from our own frame.

> *If we can learn to give up our claims to know "the truth" and instead can learn to ask the others to explain what their truth is based on...*

> *If we can learn to explore the factors that go into our assigning something to a category and a label, instead of demanding that others agree with our chosen labeling...*

> *If we can accept that each of us believes that our truth is the truth.*

> *We might find a way to dialogue about our problems and actually act in the common good.*

That will demand we accept and not reject the lessons of Rashomon. We cannot afford the hubris of self-proclaimed certainty. Rashomon demands that we put the responsibility for interpretation back where it belongs: on ourselves. We choose what interpretations make sense for us. We need to learn to examine those choices, and we need to be willing to discuss the basis on which they were made.

Simplification involves choice. Choices evoke ethics. When your labels, models or simplifications seem to be working, it may be truthy to ignore the underlying ethical issues. But, the issues remain. And, will fester for another day.

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