

Beyond Mind Reading: A StratML-Enabled Web of Intentions, Stakeholders, and Results

Owen Ambur, October 9, 2017

Here are some thoughts on how the Strategy Markup Language (StratML) standard relates to points made by Nicholas Epley in *Mindwise: Why We Misunderstand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want*. He begins by observing:

... your brain's greatest skill is its ability to think about the minds of others in order to understand them better... [However] it makes mistakes that lead to misunderstanding and conflict ... you infer what others are thinking, feeling, wanting, or intending... (p. xi)

While being empathetic requires us to be sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others, such sensitivity is meaningless unless it prompts us to act in ways likely to be beneficial to them. What they think and feel are much less important than what they need and want. Conversely, what they intend to *do* and how it might affect us are more important than whether they can “read” *our* minds.

The vision of the StratML standard ([ISO 17469-1](#)) is: A worldwide web of *intentions, stakeholders, and results*. Its usage will facilitate discovery and sharing of planned actions with those who may be affected.

Epley asserts that mind reading, which he calls our *sixth sense*, “forms the foundation of all social interaction, creating the web of presumptions and assumptions that enable large societies to function effectively.” (p. xi) However, unless performance metrics are quantified, reliably gathered, and openly shared, the degree to which large societies function effectively is a matter of judgment.¹ Lacking a “[Dear Leader](#)” to tell us how wonderful things are, anyone’s view is as good as anyone else’s. Moreover, as effective as anyone might view any society to be, improvement is always possible. Perfection is not the goal; continuous improvement should be.

StratML Part 2, Performance Plans and Reports ([ANSI/AIIM 22:2017](#)), supports the documentation and sharing of performance indicators and stakeholder roles. Openly sharing such data in machine-readable format will enable value-added service providers to make salient who is aiming to do what for (or to) whom as well as how progress is measured and when success can be declared.

With reference to progress, Epley notes, “Getting along and getting ahead requires coordinating with others.” (p. xii) Among the purposes of the StratML standard is to facilitate the discovery and engagement of potential performance partners – on a worldwide basis.

Robin Dunbar posited the expected size of human groups should be about 150, based upon the size of our brains in relation to other social primates. Citing Dunbar’s Number, [Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler have noted](#) a community of that size may be the maximum that can be maintained by peer pressure alone. For larger groups, police forces and hierarchical structures become necessary. They suggest those group dynamics are functions of “the human mind’s ability to track social relationships, to form mental rosters that identify who is who, and to form mental network maps that track who is connected to whom and how strong or weak, cooperative or aggressive, those relationships are.”

Thus, the challenge is not merely to “read” the minds of others but also to maintain in our own minds a complex web of personal relationships. Coordinating action adds still more complexity, far beyond our mental capacity. While mistakes are inevitable, Epley says: “the mistakes we make trying to understand the minds of others are predictable and therefore correctable.” (p. xiv) On the other hand, correcting such personal mind reading mistakes may not be enough. Fortunately, there is a better option.

[Dietrich Dorner has noted](#) we “court failure in predictable ways” – probably because “very early on, human beings developed a tendency to deal with problems on an ad hoc basis” since the tasks facing our prehistoric ancestors were “problems of the moment and usually had no significance beyond themselves.” Even today, “real-world decision-making processes are rarely well documented, and it is hard, if not impossible, to reconstruct them.” Moreover, “Reports ... are often unintentionally distorted or even intentionally falsified.” Along that train of thought, Epley says:

... human beings developed a skill to use their façade to mislead and misdirect others – to be liars and deceivers... [And] our attempts to guess when another person is telling the truth and when they are lying are just that: little better than guesses. (p. 8)

Charles Ford [has noted](#) everyone lies and he suggests the most important lesson we can learn is how we use lies to deceive ourselves. Moreover, Epley argues, “Getting to know someone, even over a lifetime ... creates an illusion of insight that far surpasses actual insight.” (p. 9) That may be true even of ourselves. For example, Epley says we so commonly underestimate how long it will take to complete tasks that psychologists have coined a name for the error: the *planning fallacy*. (p. 18)

“The interesting thing about the planning fallacy,” he says, “is that despite having so much experience committing it ourselves, we so consistently think that our own mistakes are things of the past rather than the present.” That virtually guarantees “we’ll keep making the same mistakes over and over again.” Moreover, while Epley suggests we are aware of what he calls our brains’ “finished products,” we are unconscious of the processes used to construct those attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and feelings. So we fail to recognize our mental errors. (p. 19)

Documenting and sharing our plans (intentions) and results (performance reports) in open, standard, machine-readable format will enable value-added services to help us learn from our mistakes and plan to correct them, including by engaging others whose assistance may be required.

Like our minds, large bureaucracies also entail incomprehensible processes and may be incapable of recognizing and learning from mistakes – unless the results are catastrophic and impossible to ignore. However, section 10 of the GPRA Modernization Act (GPRAMA) requires U.S. federal agencies to publish their performance plans and reports in machine-readable format, like StratML. So there is now a chance they may become [learning organizations](#) capable of continuous improvement ... if politics are not allowed to stand in the way. Hopefully, agencies at all levels of government, worldwide, will pick up on that good practice. Presumably, it might also provide competitive advantage to enterprises in commercial marketplaces as well ... if consumers become smart enough to insist upon replacing advertising and marketing hype with appropriate performance metrics for products and services.

Contrary to Epley's wording, however, our attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and feelings are not "final products" from any but the most egocentric perspective. In terms of the StratML [value chain](#), they are *inputs* rather than *outputs* or *outcomes*. Feelings may motivate actions, which may or may not reflect well-considered intentions. In and of themselves, many of our mental mistakes may be inconsequential – unless they result in adverse impacts upon ourselves and/or others, perhaps generating a [vicious cycle](#) of actions and reactions. That risk may be accentuated because, as Epley notes:

Unconscious processes seem largely responsible for much of what we habitually do in daily life, and conscious processes seem largely responsible for making sense of what we do so that we can explain it to ourselves and others. (p. 20)

In other words, lacking reliable performance indicators, we tell stories and, as Ford has observed, we do so first and foremost to deceive ourselves. With respect to how we do so, Epley suggests:

... we introspect about our own minds in the same way we do about the minds of others: by using a theory that makes sense of our own behavior even when we lack direct access to the actual causes of it. It works quickly and automatically, and it simply doesn't account for what you don't know. (pp. 29 & 30)

Consequently, he says:

No psychologist asks people to explain the causes of their own thoughts or behavior anymore unless they're interested in storytelling... asking [people] *why* they think or feel or want invokes nothing but theoretical guesswork... introspection makes us *feel* like we know what's going on in our own heads, even when we don't. (p. 30)

No doubt, the fact that different stories can be concocted from the same evidence accounts for at least some of the problem with "fake news" – particularly since a large majority of the "reporters" are biased toward left-leaning political groupthink. The fact they seem unwilling or unable to own up to the effects of such personal bias may be explained by Epley's observation, "The sense of privileged access you have to the actual workings of your own mind ... appears to be an illusion." (p. 32) Epley further observes:

... *naïve realism* [is what psychologists call] the intuitive sense that we see the world out there as it actually is, rather than as it appears from our own perspective... Having these kinds of thoughts about the minds of others is what escalates differences of opinion into differences worth fighting (and sometimes dying) for. (p. 33)

Short of physical fighting, Epley notes, "Disengagement can come anytime there is a distance between two minds that needs to be bridged." (p. 41) That begs the question as to why the distance must be bridged, i.e., toward what end. Of course, avoiding a fight is a good reason and so too is avoiding disengagement – if the parties must work together to achieve common objectives. However, isn't focusing on differences likely to be a bigger part of the problem than the solution – particularly if the parties have little or no influence upon the outcome?²

Epley continues his argument by pointing out: “For psychologists, distance is not just physical space. It is also psychological space, the degree to which you feel closely connected to someone else.” (p. 42) And that begs the question as to why we feel close to others, particularly since time and exposure seems to do little to improve our understanding of them. Since we may be naively realistic about what they truly think, feel, and intend to do, what does “closeness” actually mean? There is also the issue of the happy medium. Too much of anything may be bad. Certainly, physical [overcrowding](#) has detrimental impacts but, taken too far, so may emotional proximity, e.g., [codependency](#).

On the other hand, if it is purely subjective, does it really matter whether we “feel” close to each other or not? Presumably, it must mean more than simply doing relatively little harm to each other. However, even those who very consciously inflict harm upon others may feel extremely close to those with whom they share antagonism toward their victims. As Epley notes:

What distinguishes the violent actors from the nonviolent ones are fully human emotions and motives that are very familiar ... a deep connection to a social group, intense empathy for others who have suffered for a cause, and a passionate commitment to defend a livelihood under attack. The violent actors are overwhelmed by empathy for their own group, which all too often naturally leads to disdain for competing groups. They act out of *parochial altruism*, a strong commitment to benefit one’s own group or cause without regard for the consequences for oneself. (pp. 52 & 53)

In *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, Paul Bloom argues, contrary to the common wisdom:

Empathy is biased, pushing us in the direction of parochialism and racism. It is shortsighted, motivating actions that might make things better in the short term but lead to tragic results in the future. It is innumerate, favoring the one over the many. It can spark violence; our empathy for those close to us is a powerful force for war and atrocity toward others. It is corrosive in personal relationships; it exhausts the spirit and can diminish the force of kindness and love. (p. 9)

He observes, “We are often quick to point out the good that empathy does but blind to its costs... there is a natural tendency to see one’s preferred causes and beliefs as bolstered by empathy...” However, he says that’s an illusion and he cites the power of fiction (like fake news) to stir up empathy, depending upon personal biases. (p. 48) In stark contrast to the common view equating empathy with kindness, Bloom associates it with war. (p. 188)

Beyond the simple misdirection of empathy, Epley notes, “Nature is filled with fakes...” because from an evolutionary standpoint, “Pretending to be something you’re not can sometimes help you succeed as whatever you are.” (p. 66) Balanced with cooperative behaviors, deceit can not only be profitable in the short term but also supportive of survival across generations. That dynamic provides strong support for the persistence of [ingroups and outgroups](#) in order to gain power over others, including through voting.

With respect to voting and [majoritarianism](#), what is most disappointing about how pervasive deceit has become in politics is that it now seems to be taken for granted – not only as common practice but also justified in order to achieve the desired partisan ends. Politicians are no longer embarrassed to be hypocrites; they simply switch sides and use the very same arguments as their opponents as circumstances require and their partisans generally laud them for doing so. Lying is commonly excused by partisans because, when their political patrons do it, it is only to achieve a “noble cause”. (See [Noble Cause Corruption](#).) The prevailing perspective now seems to be that we should just “[move on](#)” – from one indiscretion to the next – because we’re only human and can’t truly be blamed for our flaws ... unless, of course, we’re a member of a disfavored outgroup.

Presumably, politicians are among the most closely watched human beings on earth, falling short only of infants and entertainment celebrities. Thus, one might expect the “mere-presence” effect, which Epley says has been reliably demonstrated, to apply particularly to them. As he explains the effect:

If you’re doing something simple ... you’re likely to perform better if you have real person watching you than if you’re alone. But if you’re doing something difficult ... you are likely to perform worse when you have another person watching ... (p. 78)

Since much of what politicians are expected to do is hard and they have so many people watching them, perhaps that might help to explain why they seem to perform so poorly. In previous times, difficult decisions may have been taken behind closed doors but keeping such deliberations secret from We the People is no longer acceptable. Yet the results of politically motivated openness and transparency may not be entirely positive – particularly to the degree that posturing is promoted, lauded, and rewarded with reelection. Moreover, as Epley observes:

Although Piaget’s general insight that children are more egocentric than adults was correct, psychologists now believe he was mistaken in at least one critical way... ***Childhood instincts are not outgrown so much as they are overcome by more careful and reflective thinking.*** (p. 87, emphasis added)

As [observed](#) by the [Apostle Matthew](#), it is much easier to see the flaws in others than in ourselves. Thus, partisans on all sides readily see how Epley’s observation about childhood instincts applies by omission to leaders on *other* side(s) of the political divide. Indeed, the more popular (populist and entertaining) they are among their partisan in-groups, the more childish they appear to others. While such dynamics may engender rabble-rousing, juvenile playtime fun for political campaign rally participants, Donald Norman [has suggested](#) the greatest danger occurs when entertainment takes precedence over thought, when we are experiencing (and emoting) rather than quietly reflecting.

Almost by definition, popular politicians are entertainers and the best of them are natural populists whose utterances are so sublimely received that reflecting critically on them would be virtually blasphemous. Moreover, they are great at claiming credit, even if it is unnecessary to do so because their partisans have already granted it to them in advance. Consider the implications of an experiment Epley conducted with nearly 700 Harvard MBA students:

... overclaiming increased as the size of the group increased. Groups of four or less look relatively reasonable, claiming more responsibility than is logically possible but at least being in the vicinity of 100 percent. As the number of group members increases, however, their judgments get increasingly unhinged from reality. (p. 95)

This finding seems applicable to government and particularly to politicians. Disconnection from reality may be inevitable not only with respect to credit but also blame, in the commonsensical notion that when everyone is responsible, nobody is. (See [diffusion of responsibility](#).) Logically speaking, the larger and more centralized the power of government, the less anyone will feel responsible for anything that may or may not occur. While that may be emotionally satisfying in the short run, prospects are slim that such dynamics will work out well over the longer term.

Epley notes Piaget argued that becoming aware of our own perspective liberates us from it. (p. 98) That may be largely true of the average person, whose actions are not being closely scrutinized. However, it seems farfetched to think politicians who hope to be reelected could be “liberated” from the perspectives of their partisans, much less their own. Moreover, due to what is called the *curse of knowledge*, Epley observes that expertise can cloud our understanding of the perspectives of others – because once we possess it, we can’t envision not having it. (p. 103) Presumably, that may occur regardless of whether our expert “knowledge” is accurate or not. For example, he cites the common knowledge, “Around the globe, wealth inequality is generally rising, with the world’s richest getting richer and the poor stagnating.” He suggests, “This divide over money creates a divide inside minds, between those who favor equality versus those who favor meritocracy.” (p. 118)

Actually, however, across the world, the [poor are generally less poor](#) than ever before. If anything, it is the middle class that may have stagnated, in the relatively rare instances in which it has been fortunate enough to have arisen over the past several centuries. However, even the decline of the middle class [may be open to debate](#). Moreover, in the United States we [spend more on social welfare benefits for each poor family](#) than the [average worker-supported household earns](#) (\$59,039 in 2016) – [more than Europe](#), for example. By world standards, there are [no poor people in the U.S.](#) They are disadvantaged only by comparison to middle- and upper-income families in our country. One reason they don’t have as much income as the average worker – without working – is because politically motivated government income transfer programs are inefficient and ineffective. Another reason is that [much of the money is spent on other forms of assistance](#) besides direct income support, presumably because those needing financial assistance may not be well-equipped to handle free money appropriately.

Shortsighted attempts to create equality of outcomes have universally failed, serving only to make everyone poorer – with the exception of the political elite empowered to confiscate other people’s money. Meritocracy *versus* equality is a false choice. To the contrary, by definition, meritocracy and *equality of opportunity* are essentially one and the same. Ironically, it is those who insist upon equality of *outcomes* who are implicitly calling for more poverty and politically motivated favoritism. Indeed, while our emotional [motivations may be unclear](#), [research has shown](#) we are [willing to incur personal losses in order to punish others](#) perceived to have taken unfair advantage of the system – regardless of whether they have actually done so or not.

To his credit, Epley points out this is not truly a political issue, despite the relative success leftist politicians and their [allies](#) in a strongly [biased news media](#) have enjoyed in presenting it as one. As he observes, it is a “predictable error” – some of which are “wildly wrong” with respect to the magnitude of actual differences. (pp. 118 - 120) Expounding on the cause of the problem, he says:

What your brain extracts automatically from a group is an overall assessment, not its distinct individuals... Instead of remembering exact details, you extract the “gist” of the information. The “gist” is not its individual members but, rather, its average. (pp. 121 & 122)

However, even if not for the fact we’re relatively poor mind readers, what does it mean to construct a mental “average” for groups of people who think or act, much less look, differently than we do? Epley says, “Groups emerge just as objects do: when you detect differences between them... all groups are defined by ... what makes them *different* from other groups.” (p. 127)

In other words, we dehumanize, objectify, stereotype, and perhaps apply guilt-by-association to others based upon *our own*, stereotypical biases. Setting such hypocrisy aside, Epley argues, “Defining groups by their differences is not as big a problem for our vision as it is for our imagination. People on opposite sides of a negotiation are well aware that they are opposed to each other, but they are often left to imagine the precise ways in which they are opposed.” (p. 128) To alleviate that problem, Epley suggests:

... the secret to solving disputes is recognizing that the other side may not have completely opposing interests, and may have more overlap in interests ... Solving disputes therefore requires openly discussing each others’ actual interests, identifying similarities, and then identifying integrative solutions that maximize the benefits for both sides. (p. 132)

But is discussion truly required, particularly since the probability is high that such talk entails not only lies but also self-deception? Might it not be better just to focus directly on identifying common objectives? Epley says, “When groups are defined by their differences, people think they have less in common ... than they actually do and, as a result, avoid even talking ...” (p. 133)

Again, however, is talking necessary or even helpful in many cases? Is it the best way to achieve common objectives? Word of mouth may lack scalability relative to the need. At least it lacks [time and place utility](#), since many stakeholders cannot be in the same place at the same time and they certainly cannot all talk, quietly and dispassionately, at once. Indeed, attempts to engage in dialogue on controversial issues commonly degenerate into shouting matches, if not fisticuffs.

While it is not yet possible for the average person to use the Internet to deploy bots to inflict physical harm on our human opponents, virtual bots are widely used and it has been [estimated](#) that cybercrime may exceed \$400 billion per year. As currently contrived, the Internet facilitates [contagion](#), thereby vastly increasing the potential for the transmission of computer viruses but also engagement of the password effect (aka [Chinese whispers](#)) and [groupthink](#). While such power can be used for good, the uncontrolled spread of anything is at least risky, if not necessarily always bad.

With reference to the capability of crowds to make wise decisions, James [Surowiecki has argued](#) one of the requirements is *independence* of thought. Others include *diversity* and *decentralization*, complemented by the means to turn *personal* judgments into collective decisions. By contrast, particularly when conducted online or in politically charged debates, [dialogue tends to exacerbate group polarization](#). At best, dialogue may be suited for one-off resolution of relatively trivial differences in face-to-face encounters and not for the achievement of larger-scale objectives that are truly meaningful based upon deeply held beliefs.

In 1965, more than two decades before the Web was invented, [Bruce Tuckman proposed](#) a model of group development and suggested all four of its phases are necessary for teams to plan and deliver results. He named those stages Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. Presumably, dialogue would be critical in moving through the Storming and Norming phases. However, if individuals already know what they want to accomplish, is it truly necessary to waste time and effort forming groups, assessing each other's personal traits, and resolving differences that may have little or no bearing on the achievement of the goals themselves? Might it be possible simply to discover prospective performance partners based upon common objectives and proceed directly to working together to achieve them?

With reference to moving beyond talk to action (i.e., Tuckman's Performing stage), Epley suggests:

... stereotypical knowledge seems to be quickly supplanted by what a person *does*... we come to know the minds of others ... by watching how someone acts and then working backward ... to the presumed thoughts and beliefs and attitudes that caused [the] behavior. (p. 140)

However, the efficacy of merely watching what others do is limited. [Eyewitness testimony](#) is notoriously unreliable, for [many reasons](#). Moreover, Epley references *correspondence bias* – the “common sense that a person's mind corresponds directly to that person's actions” and argues, “understanding the mind of any person requires broader perspective than our own experience routinely provides.” (p. 142) Correspondence bias is also known as the Fundamental Attribution Error ([FAE](#)). Overcoming it requires consideration of the circumstances in which the behavior occurs. Epley notes:

... people in cultures that are more attentive to the situations people are in are ... less likely to infer another person's mind simply from their actions. Those living in collectivist cultures and those generally more concerned with social norms and interpersonal harmony ... are, broadly speaking, more likely to recognize when people's actions reflect the dictates of their roles and environments rather than their corresponding states of mind ... (p. 147)

Moreover, Epley observes:

... most people trust what others tell them even when they might be lying ... These mistakes come not from mindlessly believing what you know is false but, rather, from the difficulty of disbelieving behavior we naturally take at face value. These mental habits appear to go way back into childhood... because doing so makes such darned good sense. (p. 149)

In other words, the benefit of discerning fact from fiction is generally not worth the mental effort. Scaled up from individuals to society at large, that may account not only for fake news but also for part of the reason crime often pays – because the perpetrators may not be caught and/or punished. Moreover, even if they are, [chances are great they will be rearrested](#) upon release from incarceration, i.e., more than three out of four (76.6%) within five years. And that doesn't take into account the crimes for which they were not caught in the meantime.³

In the United States, [it has been reported](#) that more than 23 million criminal offenses were committed in 2007, for example, resulting in approximately \$15 billion in economic losses to the victims and \$179 billion in government expenditures on police protection, judicial and legal activities, and corrections. By those measures, the cost of the corrections is more than ten times that of the crimes. It seems doubtful anyone would support cutting the corrections, simply reimbursing the victims, and investing the difference in something else. However, Epley notes:

... misunderstanding the power of context can lead us to design ineffective solutions to important problems... many solutions are useless because they misunderstand the cause of the problems... much more effective for changing behavior is targeting the broader context rather than individual minds, ***making it easier for people to do things they already want to do.*** (p. 151, emphasis added)

In the positive sense, that is the essence of the purpose of the StratML standard – to make it far easier for those with common and complementary objectives to discover and engage each other in performance partnerships. In short, ***StratML-supported services will create the context for success.***

While society should avoid enabling those who choose to engage in illegal activities, that doesn't make Epley's point about context any less relevant. With respect to crime, [Joe Mont counts the ways](#) it pays and [Steven Landsburg cites statistical evidence](#) that increasing the likelihood of being caught decreases crime far more than increasing the punishment. That suggests society may actually be enabling crime – by using systems and processes that make intentions and misdeeds difficult to detect, under the guise of convenience, nondiscrimination, and personal privacy as well as corporate [proprietary interests](#) and [intellectual property rights](#). For example, when a group of academics developed the standards enabling the Internet and the Web, they [didn't foresee the ways bad actors would use them to exploit others](#).

Broadly speaking, society supports illicit activity by creating the presumption we are free to act without the knowledge of those who may be affected. Meanwhile, although we are commonly admonished to [place ourselves in the other person's shoes](#), bad actors are unlikely to do so. Nor has Epley found any evidence that attempting to assume the perspective of others is effective. In fact, he says:

... perspective taking consistently decreased accuracy. Overthinking someone's emotional expression or inner intentions when there is little else to go on might introduce more error than insight... if your belief about the other side's perspective is mistaken, then carefully considering that person's perspective will only magnify the mistake's consequences. This is particularly likely in conflict, where members of opposing sides tend to have inaccurate views about each

other. Ironically, conflict is also the time when perspective taking is most often endorsed as a solution. (p. 168)

He says the results of his research are clear: “Perspective taking exaggerated the perceived differences between the groups, thereby increasing distrust and enhancing selfishness.” (p. 169) Thus, he argues for a commonsense alternative to mind reading: “trying harder to *get* another person’s perspective instead of trying to *take* it.” (p. 172) In terms reminiscent of Stephen Covey’s [5th habit](#) – Seek first to understand, then to be understood – Epley suggests, “Knowing others’ minds requires asking and listening, not just reading and guessing.” (p. 173)

Again, however, is it truly necessary to “know” someone else’s mind? Is it even possible, realistically speaking? Even if it were, toward what end? Isn’t it difficult enough to know our own mind, to consciously determine what we ourselves as individuals want to accomplish? Moreover, how much asking and listening can we do? Particularly if more than a few people are involved, might it not be more productive simply to focus on common and complementary objectives, expressed openly?

Epley observes, “rampant overconfidence in our sixth sense helps to explain why people may avoid asking others for their perspective ...” (p. 175) When we do make such inquiries, he suggests we should focus on “what” instead of “why”. However, even then, a “challenge to getting perspective is that others’ words are unclear, leaving room for misinterpretation.” (p. 180) That is particularly true when the words are uttered orally, center on emotions (feelings) rather than objectives, and are not documented accurately in persistent records that can be reviewed dispassionately, as often and for as long as necessary to gain and maintain understanding.

Rather than focusing initially on *what*, [Simon Sinek has argued](#) we should start with *why* and, by that, he means our purposes, causes, and beliefs. Epley suggests psychologists know better than to ask people why they think and act as they do, because they simply don’t know. His view is reminiscent of [Steve Jobs’ famous assertion](#) that it is not the customers’ role to know what they want. On the other hand, even to the degree that may have been true thus far in the evolutionary history of humankind, does that mean we must resign ourselves such a fate forever because we are simply incapable of doing better? Perhaps upon reflection we might be able to understand what really matters to each of us as individuals and then figure out how to work together to achieve our common and complementary objectives.

Epley cites research showing “... those who were more open about themselves to others were not only better understood but also happier and more satisfied with their lives ...” (pp. 181 & 182) Based upon such evidence, he rhetorically asks:

If being transparent strengthens social ties that make life worth living, shares knowledge that could help us live our lives better, and enables others to forgive our shortcomings, then why not do it more often? (p. 183, emphasis added)

By contrast, lamely falling back on privacy and claiming the so-called “[right to be forgotten](#)” generate mistrust. Covering up and failing to acknowledge mistakes and misdeeds makes matters worse. To err is human, to forgive divine. After all, in the final analysis, we *are* only human. However, those who fail

to learn from mistakes are doomed to relive them, in [Sisyphean](#) fashion. Why would anyone trust anyone else if we have mutually agreed to hide relevant information from each other? Doing so is not only ignorant, literally speaking, but also stupid. Fortunately, in dynamic markets recognition is growing that learning and sustainable success require failing fast, small (non-catastrophically) and often. So even if we as individuals are unwilling to learn from our mistakes, at least we should expect our social and governmental institutions to help overcome our individual failings – rather than exacerbating them.

Despite our weaknesses, Epley concludes, “Our ability to reason about the minds of others is one of our brain’s greatest powers” seamlessly enabling “coordination between completely disconnected brains, enabling social life on a grand scale as we know it today.” (p. 186)

As grand as life may seem today, it falls far short of what life might become when we are able to connect more efficiently with those who share our values. While mind reading may be entertaining, surely it will ultimately be more gratifying to engage each other effectively in the accomplishment of common and complementary objectives.

¹ Various indices have been compiled by which the performance of nations can be compared. However, none of them have been rendered as model performance plans in an open, standard, machine-readable format that citizens can put directly to use to improve their nation’s performance. Some of those indices include:

1. Comparative Constitutions Project’s [Constitution Rankings](#)
2. Fraser Institute’s [Economic Freedom of the World Report](#)
3. [Global Innovation Index](#)
4. [Legatum Prosperity Index](#)
5. [Income Equality](#)
6. [World Happiness Report](#)
7. Bhutan’s [Gross Happiness Index](#)
8. [Happy Planet Index](#)
9. [Social Progress Index](#)
10. [Human Development Index](#)
11. [Global Peace Index](#)
12. [Where to be Born Index](#)
13. [Gross Domestic Product \(GDP\) Listings](#)
 - a. Based upon [Nominal GDP](#)
 - i. [Per Capita](#)
 - b. Based upon [Purchasing Power Parity \(PPP\)](#)
 - i. [Per Capita](#)
 - ii. [Per Hour Worked](#)
 - c. By [Real Growth Rate](#)
14. [Disability-Adjusted Life Year](#)
15. Freedom House’s [Freedom of the World Report](#)
16. OECD’s [Fiscal Federalism Report](#)

² For example, as individuals we have virtually no power to affect national elections. See the [Paradox of Voting](#).

³ Based on [Bureau of Justice statistics](#), less than half the crimes committed in the U.S. are reported to police, and of those that are reported, only 46% of the violent crimes and 19% of the property crimes are solved. Since only 35% of property crimes are reported, that means on average each perpetrator may have nearly 15 victims.