



SFI TRANSMISSION

COMPLEXITY SCIENCE FOR COVID-19

STRATEGIC INSIGHT: Getting the quarantine end game right means thinking about how to change thinking itself.

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Our world mostly works. When you're leaving the airplane, don't think, follow: good design nudges you all the way to the taxi. Architect Christopher Alexander built a life's work on showing how something as simple as the design of a home's window seat has, over centuries, adjusted to a delicate balance of physical, psychological, and social needs. In equilibrium, good systems get you by on instinct.

Like the hiker who brought a can of espresso beans, however, many of us are now noticing how much of day-to-day mind-life has been cooked, not left raw. By choice, or by necessity, we're forced to think about things we've usually left to the environment. As I asked a friend who teaches philosophy: have you ever done this much thinking before?

There's a challenge down the road from today's mental jubilee. Call it the quarantine end game. We do, actually, want to get kids out of the house, throw a dinner party, or hear some jazz. When COVID is tamed, but not yet defeated, we'll need new norms for how we bring our worlds back together.

It's more than just hand-washing. It's whom, for example, we trust, and why. What reasons do we give when we turn someone down for a play date? What reasons can that person throw back? You can't hand them a printout of an article from the *Financial Times*, or a machine-learning GPS trace. It matters, because the explanations we give each other are buildings we come to live in, often for life.

We know quite a bit about how people go about those buildings, and it's more than just how it makes them feel, or whether "it makes sense." For an explanation to flourish, it often has to have a particular kind of feel, and make a particular kind of sense. We're predisposed, for example, to prefer "unifying" explanations about the world — something we call a consilience drive. The same preferences also go wrong, and those who tilt too far

can end up on a conspiracy-theory forum, or in a mental ward. Parallel work shows that moral matters are just as complicated, and high-level concepts like justice, friendship, or dignity are more than window-dressing on a world of short-term contracts.

Getting the quarantine end game right means thinking about how to change thinking itself. You can't sell an idea the way you sell a can of soda. That's no silver lining, but if evolution did indeed make us thinkers, we might as well get back to getting good at it.