

Paper

Drift

How Minds, Morals and Institutions Lose Touch with Reality

NICHOLAS NIEHAUS

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Where AI helped write this work, the note at the start of the text says who did what.

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Contents

A note on this edition

Abstract

1. The Woman Who Did Not Know Why

2. What Drift Is, and What It Is Not

3. Why Drift Happens

4. The Root: A Problem of Consciousness

5. Ossification and the Drift into Infallibility

6. Drift Across the Human World

7. Dysgenic Drift

8. Preventing Drift

9. Why Now

Conclusion

Works Cited

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A note on this edition

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Abstract

Human practices, rules, words, beliefs and institutions are maps of the world, built to serve purposes. This paper argues that such maps tend to come loose from the purposes and realities that justified them through a process it calls drift: a gradual, unintended detachment that continues after the practice can no longer be checked against either. Drift runs through copying, generational forgetting and inertia. Insulation from consequences makes it affordable, abstraction speeds it, and it compounds. It ends in ossification, where a practice can no longer be corrected and may come to work against its own purpose. The paper locates drift's root in consciousness itself, in the mind's capacity to hold a map apart from the territory, and explains why drift is so rarely felt. It traces drift through morality, religion, equality, institutions, language, the family, progress and artificial intelligence. It then proposes principles for preventing it, with the aim of building a standing process that keeps practice aligned with reality as conditions change faster than ever before.

1

The Woman Who Did Not Know Why

A woman posts a video of herself dancing in front of her children. The dance is twerking, and she insists, with complete sincerity, that it is not sexual. To her it is fun, a way of moving, something everyone does. She is not lying. She really does not know what the dance is for.

But the dance knows. Its movements were not invented at random. They come from a display that served an end, and they still serve it whether or not the dancer remembers. Somewhere back along the line of copies, someone did this on purpose. Someone else copied it because it worked. Others copied the copiers because everyone was doing it. Each copy car-

ried a little less of the reason and a little more of the motion. Eventually the motion arrived, whole and fluent, in a person who had never been told the reason at all. She performs the act perfectly and understands it not at all.

This is a small case, and the point of starting with it is that it is small. Nothing grand has happened. No one has been deceived by a conspiracy or corrupted by an ideology. A behavior has simply outlived the knowledge of why it exists. Yet in that small case sits the whole structure of the problem this paper is about. The behavior continues. Its effects continue. The awareness of its purpose is gone. And because the awareness is gone, the behavior can no longer be questioned in the only terms that would matter. You cannot ask whether a practice still serves its purpose if no one remembers that it had one.

The same structure appears wherever we look. The ethologist's turkey hen cares for her chicks only when she hears the chick's cheep. Give a stuffed polecat, her natural enemy, a recording of that sound and she will gather it under her wing. A hen that cannot hear the cheep will attack her own chicks. The behavior has a purpose, and the purpose is real. But the hen does not hold the purpose. She holds the trigger. When the world presents the trigger without the thing it once reliably signaled, the behavior fires anyway, and serves nothing.

Human beings are not turkeys, and much of this paper is about what makes our case different and worse. But we share the hen's basic arrangement more than we like to admit. Most of what any of us does in a day we did not design. We inherited it: our manners, our foods, our words, our holidays, our moral reflexes, the shape of our institutions, our sense of what is decent and what is shameful. Each of these began as somebody's answer to some problem. Very few of us could say what problem.

Consider a few more cases, each of which will return later in the paper.

For most of history, sex outside marriage carried a real risk of a child no one was prepared to raise. A strong moral rule against it, enforced by shame, protected women, children and families from that risk. It was not arbitrary. It was a protocol for a world without contraception. Then contraception arrived. The conditions that justified the rule changed. But the rule had long since stopped being held as a protocol. It was held as a moral absolute, and its origin had been forgotten. So it could not update. Those who kept it could not explain it except by appeal to authority. Those who rejected it rejected it wholesale, unable to see what part of it had been wise. Both sides had lost the reason. Neither could reason about it.

The anthropologist Marvin Harris argued that the ancient Middle Eastern prohibition on pork began as an ecological rule: in arid lands, pigs give no milk, wool or labor, need shade and water, and compete with people for grain. Others, such as Mary Douglas, have read it as a matter of symbolic classification rather than practical cost. Whatever the full truth of its origins, the general pattern is clear enough: a practice that may once have tracked a material danger is kept, centuries later and continents away, as a mark of identity and obedience long after anyone can state what danger it tracked.

Social Security was designed for a population in which few people lived long past retirement age and many workers supported each retiree. The program stayed fixed while the pop-

ulation changed around it. Life expectancy rose; birth rates fell; the ratio of workers to retirees narrowed. The rule is the same; the world it was built for is gone. What was once a modest insurance scheme became something its designers never intended and could not have endorsed.

In each case the pattern is the same. A goal produced a behavior. The behavior was copied. The copying outran the understanding. The behavior detached from its goal and carried on under its own momentum. And it continued to produce effects, some still useful, many now harmful, that no one living had chosen.

We can state the pattern as a sequence:

1. A person or group wants an end.
2. They adopt a behavior that achieves it.
3. Others copy the behavior.
4. With each copy, awareness of the original purpose weakens, until it is gone.
5. The behavior, now detached from its purpose, continues by inertia.
6. Its effects continue, invisible to those who produce them.

Goal, behavior, copy, detach, continue, effect. This paper calls the movement through that sequence drift.

The word is chosen deliberately. A car on a straight road, left alone, does not crash all at once. It drifts. Each moment the deviation is too small to feel. The driver who is not correcting does not notice that he is not correcting. Only when the wheels hit the shoulder does the distance become obvious, and by then it has been accumulating for miles. Drift is not a dramatic failure. It is the default outcome of not steering.

The claim of this paper is that drift is one of the most important and least understood forces in human life. It is how a practice outlives its purpose, how a word comes to mean something its first users would not recognize, how a moral rule that once protected people comes to harm them, how an institution founded to serve a goal comes to serve only itself, and how a whole civilization can move, without anyone deciding to move it, from a picture of the world that was largely true to one that is largely false. Much of what we call our current paradigm, this paper will argue, does not stand on reality at all. It operates within drift, as an extension of it, and the moral inversions that most trouble thoughtful people today are drift's late and characteristic products.

But the deepest claim is about where drift comes from. Drift is not first a sociological fact, or a political one, or a theological one, though it shows up in all of these. It is first a fact about minds. It begins in the gap between what we know and why we know it, between the map we carry and the territory it was drawn from. A being that could not separate its picture of the world from the world could not drift from it. We can, and so we do. Drift is, at bottom, a problem of consciousness.

And it is a problem to be solved, like any other. The aim of this paper is not to lament drift or to blame anyone for it. Drift is not a sin committed by bad people. It is what happens to ev-

eryone, good and bad alike, who does not deliberately keep their practices tied to their purposes. The aim is to understand it well enough to prevent it: to describe how it works, why it is so hard to see, what it has done, and what a person, an institution or a civilization would have to build in order to stop drifting and stay aligned with reality.

2
What Drift Is, and What It Is Not

A concept that explains everything explains nothing. If drift is to do real work, it needs a definition precise enough to say when something is drift and when it is not. This section gives one.

A definition

Drift is the gradual, unintended detachment of a practice, rule, word, belief or institution from the purpose and the reality that originally justified it, such that it continues to operate after it can no longer be checked against either.

Each part of the definition matters.

Gradual. Drift happens in steps too small to notice. That is why it can go so far. A sudden break invites resistance; a slow slide does not.

Unintended. No one decides to drift. Drift is what happens in the absence of a decision. This separates it from deliberate change, which is discussed below.

Detachment from purpose and reality. Every human practice is a kind of map. It encodes a claim about the world: if you do this, that will follow. A rule against sex outside marriage encodes the claim that such sex risks children no one will raise. A ritual of mourning encodes something about what the living need after a death. Drift is the separation of the map from the territory it was drawn to describe. The practice persists; the claim it encoded is forgotten; and so the practice floats free of the facts that once made it sensible.

Continues to operate. Drift is not forgetting alone. A forgotten practice that simply stops is not a problem. Drift is forgetting combined with continuation. The behavior keeps running, and it keeps producing effects.

After it can no longer be checked. This is the decisive feature. Correction requires comparison. To ask whether a rule is good, you must be able to say what it is for and look at whether it achieves that. A practice whose purpose is forgotten cannot be compared to anything. It can be obeyed or rejected, but not evaluated. It has passed out of the reach of reason. When drift is complete, the practice has drifted into infallibility.

The word is borrowed. In biology, genetic drift names random change in the frequency of genes in a population, change that comes from chance in reproduction rather than from selection. Genetic drift has no direction and no purpose to depart from. Drift in this paper's sense is different: it is directional, it is cumulative, and it is possible only where there is a purpose or a map to come loose from. What the two share is that both are change no one aimed at, carried by imperfect copying across generations, and unnoticed because no one is steering.

The stages

The six-step sequence from the first section can be grouped into three stages.

Encoding. A purpose is served by a behavior, and the behavior is passed on. At this stage the reason travels with the rule. The first generation keeps the practice because it understands it.

Detachment. The reason thins with each transmission while the rule stays intact. Rules are easy to copy; reasons are hard to copy. A child can imitate a gesture perfectly at age three. Understanding why the gesture matters may take a lifetime, and some never get there. So the behavior is passed on more faithfully than its justification. In time the justification falls away entirely. The reason dies a generation before the rule does.

Ossification. The detached rule hardens. Because no one can say what it is for, no one can say when it has stopped working, and so it is defended as an end in itself. It becomes part of identity, of what "we" do, of what decent people believe. It sets the baseline from which the next round of drift begins. An ossified practice is not simply mistaken. It is protected from correction by the very fact that its origin has been lost.

What drift is not

Several things look like drift and are not. Keeping them apart is necessary if the concept is to be useful and if the remedy is to be aimed correctly.

Drift is not change. Most change is healthy. Practices should change when conditions change. A society that kept every rule it had a thousand years ago would be ossified, not grounded. The problem is not that things move. The problem is moving without knowing why. A practice that changes because its purpose is now better served another way has not drifted. It has updated.

Drift is not shift. Sometimes a whole picture of the world is replaced by another, as when the Copernican model replaced the Ptolemaic. Everything downstream of the old picture then adjusts to the new one. This adjustment can look like drift, since old practices are abandoned and old words take new meanings. But it has a direction and a reason. The adjustment follows a change at the core. Drift has no core change driving it. It is movement in the absence of any new understanding. Much of what looks like drift in a culture is in fact the slow downstream catch-up to an earlier shift, and the two should be distinguished case by case.

Drift is not adaptation, though it borrows adaptation's machinery. When conditions change and behavior changes to match them, that is adaptation, and it is how living things survive. Drift often begins as adaptation: a group grows richer, safer or more comfortable, and its practices loosen accordingly. But adaptation tracks the environment, while drift loses track of it. The test is whether the change is still answerable to results. An adapting practice is corrected by consequences. A drifting one has escaped them.

Drift is not deliberate substitution. Sometimes a practice or a word is changed on purpose, by people who know what it meant and want it to mean something else. The redefinition of a word by an activist, the rewriting of a curriculum by a committee, the replacement of one moral framework by another through organized effort: these are acts, not drifts. They may

succeed because drift has already loosened the ground. A people that no longer knows why its practices exist is easy to persuade that they exist for no reason at all. But the substitution itself is intentional, and it calls for a different kind of response: argument and contest, not only regrounding.

Drift is not deconstruction, though deconstruction feeds on it. To deconstruct a practice is to show that it is contingent, that it could have been otherwise, that it is a human construction rather than a fact of nature. Applied to practices that really have drifted, deconstruction does useful work. It scrapes off the accumulated gunk of rules that no longer serve anyone. But deconstruction has no way of telling a drifted practice from a grounded one, because it does not ask what the practice was for. It assumes that whatever is constructed is arbitrary. And so, once the gunk is gone, it keeps scraping, and begins to scrape against reality itself.

Drift goes both ways

It would be easy to read drift as a one-way slide from wise tradition into modern folly. That is not what the concept says. Drift can run in either direction, and recognizing this is part of what makes it a diagnosis rather than a polemic.

A society can drift away from reality by abandoning practices whose purpose it has forgotten. But it can also drift by keeping practices whose purpose has expired. The rule against sex outside marriage did not drift only when people began to ignore it. It had already drifted when it was held as an eternal law rather than as a response to particular conditions, because at that point it could no longer update. A fixed morality, held without knowledge of its reasons, is itself a drift from reality. Reality moves. A map that cannot move with it falls behind, even if it was accurate when drawn.

There is, then, a second form of the error alongside the first. In the first, people start inside a true picture of the world and slide out of it. In the second, people start inside a picture that was once the best available and refuse to leave it when the territory changes or better maps appear. Both are failures of the same capacity: the capacity to keep a practice answerable to the reality it is about. The remedy for both is the same. It is not to go back, and it is not to go forward. It is to go down, to the reasons, and rebuild from there.

A test

From all this a practical test follows. For any practice, rule, word, belief or institution, ask two questions.

Can it still state its why? Can those who keep it say what it is for, in terms of real effects on real people?

Can it still be checked? Is there any result that would show it has stopped serving that purpose, and is anyone looking?

A practice that passes both tests is grounded, however old it is. A practice that fails both has drifted, however new it is. And a practice that fails both and is defended anyway, as sacred, as obvious, as beyond question, has ossified.

The rest of this paper uses this test. It asks why practices come to fail it, why the failure is so hard to see, what it has cost us, and how to build people and institutions that keep passing it.

3
Why Drift Happens

Drift has no single cause. It has a family of causes that work together, each loosening the tie between a practice and its purpose in a different way. This section sets out seven. They are not seven kinds of drift. They are seven forces that produce one result: a map that keeps running after it has come loose from the territory.

1. Rules travel better than reasons

The first and most basic cause is that behavior is easier to copy than understanding.

Human beings are extraordinary copiers. Developmental psychologists have found that young children will faithfully copy steps in a task even when they can plainly see the steps do nothing. In one well-known line of experiments, an adult showed children and chimpanzees how to get a reward out of a puzzle box, adding some useless actions along the way. When the box was opaque, both species copied everything. When the box was transparent, so that the useless actions were visibly useless, the chimpanzees skipped them. The children did not. Later work found that warning children explicitly to ignore the unnecessary steps did little to stop them. The researchers concluded that children do not experience the extra steps as arbitrary at all. They automatically encode an adult's purposeful action as causally necessary, so the copied step rewrites their own understanding of how the task works.

This is not a defect. It is the engine of human culture. The anthropologist Joseph Henrich has shown how much of what keeps human groups alive is knowledge no individual could work out alone and few could explain. His best-known example is the processing of bitter manioc in the Amazon, a long, multistep, multiday procedure that removes cyanide from the root. The steps, Henrich writes, are "causally opaque." The people who perform them often cannot say why they work, and anyone who skipped the steps because they seemed pointless would be poisoned slowly over years. Copying without understanding is how such knowledge survives.

But the same capacity that lets good practices survive without explanation lets any practice survive without explanation. Fidelity of copying does not distinguish between a step that removes poison and a step that does nothing. And it has a built-in asymmetry. The behavior is visible; it can be watched and imitated. The reason is invisible; it must be explained, and explanation is costly, fragile and often skipped. Much of the most important knowledge is, in Michael Polanyi's phrase, tacit: "we can know more than we can tell." It lives in the hands of the master and passes by apprenticeship. When the chain of apprenticeship breaks, the explicit rule survives, because it can be written down, while the tacit reason is lost, because it never was.

So the reason thins faster than the rule. The first generation acts from understanding. The second acts from instruction. The third acts from habit. By the fourth, the practice is simply "what we do." The reason dies a generation before the rule does.

Max Weber described the institutional version of this process a century ago. A movement begins with a founder whose authority is personal and whose purpose is alive in him. To survive the founder, the movement must be routinized: turned into offices, procedures and rules that can run without him. Routinization is necessary. It is also the moment the living purpose begins to be replaced by its procedural residue.

2. Rules keep running

The second cause is inertia. Once a behavior is established, it continues by default. Stopping it requires a reason; continuing it does not.

Rituals are especially good at this, and they are built to be. Studies of ritual find that people judge a ritual more powerful the more steps it has, the more it repeats, and the more precisely it is timed, even when they cannot say how it works. Opacity does not weaken a ritual's authority. It can strengthen it. A rule whose reason has been lost may therefore gain prestige rather than lose it, because it now looks like something too deep to question.

This is part of why ritual matters for stable societies. Its job is to hold norms in place against the pressure of momentary convenience. But the feature that protects a valuable norm also protects a dead one. A practice designed to resist casual correction will resist necessary correction too.

3. Insulation makes drift affordable

The third cause explains why drift accelerates in successful societies. Drift needs room. A practice can only drift far from reality if reality is not punishing the drift.

For most of human history, reality punished quickly. A group whose practices stopped serving survival did not survive. Hunger, disease, predators and rival groups were constant, brutal correctors. Under those conditions, even practices whose reasons were forgotten were continually tested against results. This is the truth in Friedrich Hayek's defense of tradition: rules that survived did so because groups following them prospered, even when no one knew why the rules worked. Hayek himself conceded that the traditions selected this way are not "necessarily 'good'." His argument holds only as long as results keep feeding back.

Human success removes that feedback. Agriculture, then trade, then industry, then modern medicine and the welfare state progressively insulated people from the consequences of their practices. This was the conquest of nature, and it is one of the great achievements of our species. But it had a cost no one priced. Every corrective we removed from the world was a corrective removed from our maps. When a mistaken practice no longer gets anyone killed, or even poor, it can persist indefinitely. Wealth is a buffer, and a buffer is room to drift.

Anti-realism, in this sense, begins at the first dollar of profit. A society drifts away from what made it strong because it can afford to. The richer the society, the further it can drift before

reality sends the bill, and the larger the bill when it comes. We tend to drift from reality in proportion to our distance over it.

Success insulates in a subtler way too. In her study of the Challenger disaster, the sociologist Diane Vaughan showed how NASA engineers, each time a booster seal showed more damage than expected and the flight still succeeded, redefined the damage as acceptable. No rule was broken. Each step was locally reasonable. The deviant became the normal, and luck was mistaken for evidence, until the launch on which it was not. Vaughan called this the normalization of deviance. Every success that comes despite a drifting practice, rather than because of it, is taken as proof that the practice is sound.

The sociologist William Ogburn noticed a related pattern in 1922 and called it cultural lag: material conditions change faster than the norms, laws and institutions meant to govern them, producing a period of maladjustment. Ogburn's lag is drift seen from the other side. Sometimes the rule moves away from reality. Just as often, reality moves away from the rule.

4. The intangible drifts fastest

The fourth cause concerns what is drifting. Practices tied directly to physical outcomes drift slowly, because the physical world corrects them. A bridge built on a forgotten principle falls down. A farming method that stops working produces no crop. But much of human life is not physical. Words, meanings, moral judgments, social status, money and law are maps built on maps. Their connection to the territory runs through long chains of other abstractions.

These things drift fastest and furthest, because nothing physical stops them. A moral rule can be extended indefinitely; a meaning can be stretched indefinitely; an obligation can be expanded indefinitely. Care for others, for example, began as care for particular people one could see and help. Abstracted into a principle, it can be scaled without limit, applied to everyone, everywhere, regardless of cost, because the abstraction no longer touches the material reality that would have limited it. What is not physical can drift from physical reality without anything pushing back.

This is why drift is most visible, and most extreme, in morality, language and culture rather than in engineering. The intangible is where drift is easiest, fastest and hardest to purge.

5. Drift compounds

The fifth cause turns drift from a slow slide into an acceleration. Drift does not merely add up. It compounds.

When a practice ossifies, it does not stay put. It becomes the new baseline from which the next round of drift begins. A rule extended once becomes the precedent for its next extension. Each step is small relative to the last one, and so each feels reasonable. But the steps are measured from a moving starting point, and so the total distance from the original purpose grows faster and faster. One drift supports another. One myth makes the next one plausible. A process that would take centuries if it moved at a constant rate can move in decades once it feeds on itself.

Intuition compounds the problem. Our sense of what is reasonable is trained on the world we have lived in. If that world has already drifted, our intuitions drift with it, and then judge the next drift by a standard that has itself moved. The instrument we would use to detect drift is calibrated by drift.

At some point drift becomes a flywheel. Interests form around the drifted practice. People build careers, identities and institutions on it. Now there are incentives to keep it moving in the same direction, and the drift that began as an accident is sustained as a cause.

6. Institutions serve themselves

The sixth cause is specific to organizations. Every institution is created to serve a purpose outside itself: a school to educate, a hospital to heal, a government to protect its people. But to serve that purpose, the institution must first survive, and survival creates purposes of its own: budgets, jobs, status, procedures and the protection of all of these.

Over time these internal purposes tend to displace the external one. Sociologists call this goal displacement. Robert Merton described it in 1940: adherence to the rules, "originally conceived as a means, becomes transformed into an end-in-itself," so that "an instrumental value becomes a terminal value." That sentence is as close to a textbook definition of drift as the social sciences have produced. And the interests that form around a drifted practice defend it. Robert Michels observed that every organization, however democratic its founding ideals, produces a leadership class devoted to preserving its own position. Drift is not only forgotten. It is also protected by those who profit from it.

An institution that has drifted in this way still uses the language of its founding mission. But its real function has become its own continuation. It responds to threats to itself far more quickly than to failures of its mission. And because its founding purpose is still on the letterhead, it is very hard to see from outside, and almost impossible to see from inside, that the purpose is no longer what drives it.

The economist Mancur Olson described the same process at the level of whole societies. Stable societies accumulate organized interest groups, each protecting its own share, until the society can no longer adapt. He called the result sclerosis. Rules accrete; few ever expire; each one has a constituency. Sclerosis is ossification at the scale of a nation.

7. Selection drifts

The seventh cause is the most uncomfortable, and it receives its own section later. Drift affects not only maps but the people who carry them.

When an enterprise is new and hard, it attracts and keeps people who can do hard things: the founders, the builders, the first settlers. When it becomes established, safe and comfortable, it attracts people who want what has already been built. The pressure that selected for strength, initiative and competence relaxes. The quality of the people carrying the practice declines along with the understanding of why it exists. The two forms of drift feed each other:

a group that has forgotten what its practices are for will not know what kind of people it needs to sustain them.

This is dysgenic drift. It is broader than genetics: it is the general tendency of anything to decline once the pressure that formed it is removed. Section 7 treats it directly.

How the causes combine

These seven causes are distinct, and it matters to keep them distinct, because each calls for a different remedy. But in practice they work together. Copying lets a rule outrun its reason. Inertia keeps the rule running. Insulation removes the penalty for running it badly. Abstraction removes the physical limit on how far it can go. Compounding accelerates it. Institutions protect it. Declining selection removes the people who might have corrected it.

What they share is a single outcome: a practice that continues after it has lost contact with the reality that justified it. And underneath all seven lies a single precondition, which is the subject of the next section. None of this could happen to a creature that could not separate its picture of the world from the world itself.

4
The Root: A Problem of Consciousness

Each of the causes in the last section acts on something. Copying, inertia, insulation, abstraction, compounding, institutional self-interest and declining selection are all forces that pull a practice away from its purpose. But a practice can only be pulled away from its purpose if the two were separable in the first place. The deepest question about drift is not what pulls, but why there is anything to pull apart.

The answer is consciousness.

The map that can float

An animal acting on instinct cannot drift in the way this paper means, because it holds no picture of the world apart from its response to the world. The turkey hen does not believe anything about chicks. She reacts to a sound. When the sound and the chick come apart, she fails, but she does not drift, because there was never a belief to come loose. Her error is fixed and immediate. It does not travel, accumulate or compound.

Human beings are different. We represent the world to ourselves. We carry maps: beliefs, rules, words, stories, theories, values. These maps are the source of nearly everything that makes us powerful. A map can be held when the territory is absent. It can be shared with someone who has never seen the territory. It can be combined with other maps to reach conclusions no single experience could reach. It can be passed to children who will never meet the people who drew it. All of human culture, science and morality rests on this ability to hold a picture of the world apart from the world.

But the same separation that makes a map useful makes it able to drift. A map that can be held when the territory is absent can also be held when the territory has changed. A map that can be passed on without the territory can be passed on wrongly, or incompletely, or long after the territory it describes has vanished. Alfred Korzybski put the point in a phrase that became famous: "A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness." The usefulness depends on "if correct." Nothing in the map itself guarantees that it stays correct. Its correctness is a relation to something outside it, and that relation must be maintained.

This is why drift is first a mental phenomenon. It is not, in the first instance, something societies do or institutions do or religions do. It is something minds do, and societies, institutions and religions drift because they are made of minds and of the maps minds share. The separation of map from territory is the precondition of every other cause. Copying would not lose reasons if reasons were not separable from behaviors. Abstraction would not float free if abstractions were tied to their objects. Institutions would not forget their missions if missions were not ideas that can be remembered or forgotten.

Language deepens the separation. A word allows us to treat as a separate thing what in reality is part of a whole: to speak of "care" apart from the person cared for, "equality" apart from the people being compared, "the economy" apart from the work and goods it describes. Words are the medium in which maps travel, and they create the illusion that what they name exists on its own. Once a concept has a name, it can be passed along, extended and moralized without anyone checking what it once pointed to. The original drift is caused by the separation of minds from reality, and words are the vehicle.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead named the characteristic error that results. He called it "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness," the accident of mistaking the abstract for the concrete. Drift completes this fallacy over time. First we form an abstraction to describe something real. Then we forget that it is an abstraction. Then we treat the abstraction as the real thing and the reality as its imperfect copy. At the far end of this process, as the theorist Jean Baudrillard observed of modern culture, the map comes to precede the territory: we no longer check the map against the world, we try to make the world conform to the map.

Why drift is not felt

If drift is a mental phenomenon, it has a mental disguise. The most dangerous feature of drift is that it cannot be felt from inside. Several well-studied features of the mind explain why.

First, gradual change is nearly invisible. Experiments on change blindness show that people miss large changes in what they are looking at, even when they are looking for a change, as long as the change happens slowly enough. Nothing jars. There is no moment at which things are suddenly different.

Second, the mind stops registering what persists. Habituation, one of the most basic forms of learning, means that a constant condition fades from attention. And on the prevailing account of perception, the brain works mostly by predicting its inputs and attending to the er-

rors. Slow change is absorbed step by step into the predictions, so it never produces the surprise that would draw attention to it.

Third, and most important for drift across generations, each person takes the world of his childhood as the baseline. The fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly described what he called the shifting baseline syndrome: each generation of scientists takes the fish stocks at the start of its career as normal, and measures decline from there. Over several generations, a collapse can occur that no single generation perceives as a collapse. The psychologist Peter Kahn found the same pattern in children's sense of their environment. Children in a heavily polluted city told him their city had no pollution. The smell was there. The category to notice it was missing, because the polluted air was the only air they had ever known.

This is what it means to be born into drift. A person raised inside a drifted practice does not experience it as a departure from anything. He experiences it as the world. The rule against something, or the permission for something, or the meaning of a word, or the purpose of an institution, simply is what it is. There is no earlier state in his memory to compare it with. He is like a man walking in a field with his eyes closed, sure he is walking straight, who opens them to find he has walked in a circle.

Finally, as the copying experiments in the last section showed, the copy rewrites the copier. A child who imitates a useless step does not hold the step at arm's length as arbitrary. He comes to believe it is necessary. Drift does not merely leave a gap between the map and the territory. It changes the map in our heads so that the gap disappears from view. The person who has drifted does not feel that he is following a rule whose reason he has lost. He feels that he is seeing the world as it is.

None of us is exempt. Every reader of this paper, and its author, was born into practices whose reasons he does not know, holds meanings that have shifted since his grandparents' day, and judges by intuitions trained on a world that had already drifted. Drift is not something other people do. It is the water we all swim in.

The Fall

There is an old story that describes this condition with unusual precision. In the garden, man lived in direct contact with what is. Then he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and gained the power to judge, to name and to represent. And with that power came exile. He could no longer simply live in the garden. He had to find his way by his own maps.

Read as a description rather than as history, the story says that the capacity to hold a picture of the world apart from the world is both the glory of the human mind and the source of its estrangement. To let the map slide off the territory is to leave the garden. It is to drift into anti-realism. In this reading, the Fall is not a single event in the past. It is a permanent possibility, renewed in every generation and every mind: the possibility that our maps will come loose from what they describe and that we will live by the maps instead. Drift is the Fall, happening slowly.

And the story points to the way back. If drift is the departure from reality, the remedy is a return to it, not by giving up the power to make maps, which would be giving up our humanity, but by continually checking those maps against what they describe. The road back to the garden is not forward into newer abstractions, nor backward into older ones. It is down, to reality.

A problem to be solved

To locate drift in consciousness might seem to make it hopeless. If the capacity that makes us human is the same capacity that makes us drift, then drift is our nature, and nothing can be done.

That conclusion does not follow. Consciousness creates the possibility of drift. It also creates the possibility of noticing drift and correcting it. Animals cannot drift, but neither can they correct their maps, because they have none. We can. The same mind that can let a map float can also hold it up against the world and ask whether it still fits.

What drift shows is that this correction does not happen by itself. A map left alone drifts, just as a car left alone drifts and a house left alone decays. Keeping a map aligned with reality takes continual work, the way keeping any ordered system in order takes continual energy. There is no resting point to which things naturally return. Alignment is not a state we reach once. It is a practice we keep up or lose.

Drift is therefore a problem in the ordinary sense: something with causes that can be understood and effects that can be prevented. It is a problem of consciousness, so its solution must also work on consciousness: on how we form, carry, transmit and check our maps. But it is not a mystery and not a fate. The rest of this paper describes what drift has done when left unchecked, and then what checking it would take.

5
Ossification and the Drift into Infallibility

Drift describes movement. Ossification describes what drift leaves behind. A practice that has drifted far enough from its purpose does not stay soft and open to revision. It hardens. This section describes how, and why ossification, more than drift itself, is what makes the problem so hard to fix.

Why the detached cannot be corrected

Every criticism of a practice depends, in the end, on reality. To say that a rule is bad is to say that it fails to do something it should do, or does something it should not. To make that judgment you must know what the rule is for and be able to see what it actually does. Criticism is comparison, and comparison needs two things to compare: the purpose and the result.

A practice that has lost its purpose has lost one of the two. It can still be observed, but it cannot be evaluated, because there is no standard it is supposed to meet. Ask why it exists and the answer is “because it is right,” or “because that is who we are,” or “because it is sacred.”

Each of these answers ends the inquiry. The practice has passed out of the realm where reasons apply. It has drifted into infallibility.

This is the decisive moment in the life of a drifted practice. Before it, the practice can still be argued over in terms of what it achieves. After it, the practice can only be obeyed or defied. Those who keep it cannot defend it except by appeal to authority. Those who reject it cannot show what part of it was wise. Both have lost the ability to reason about it, and the debate between them becomes a contest of wills.

Identity hardens with the rule

Ossification is not only a property of rules. It is a property of people.

When a practice has been kept long enough, it becomes part of who its keepers are. To question it is no longer to question a means to an end. It is to question the people themselves, their parents, their community and their sense of what is decent. The conclusion ossifies, and the identity built on it ossifies too. People defend the practice not because they believe in it in any examined sense, but because they are committed to it, and the commitment carries all the downstream implications they accepted along with it. This is commitment drift: holding positions one would never choose from scratch, because they follow from premises one accepted long ago and never revisited.

Ossification can also be engineered. Not every hardened practice drifted into place. Sometimes a group pushes a new norm with the explicit aim of making it part of the unquestioned background, so that it becomes a moral intuition rather than a policy, felt rather than argued for. Once a norm has been absorbed into intuition, it has the same immunity from criticism as any drifted rule. This is substitution rather than drift, but it exploits drift's final stage: it aims to produce, deliberately and quickly, the ossified condition that drift produces slowly and by accident.

How God drifted

The clearest large-scale example of drift into infallibility is the history of the idea of God.

Early religious belief was, among other things, an attempt to explain the world. The thunder came from someone. The harvest depended on someone. The sickness was sent by someone. These were causal hypotheses, and in their setting they were reasonable ones. They made claims about this world, and so in principle they could be tested by it.

Over time, those claims met better explanations. Natural causes accounted for thunder, harvests and sickness more reliably than divine ones did. Each time, the divine explanation did not simply fail. It moved. It relocated from the visible world to a realm behind it, from specific events to general providence, from the local god of a people and a place to a universal god of all places and none. In the Jewish and Christian history this movement can be traced through specific events: the destruction of the Temple, which removed God's earthly dwelling; the delay of the expected return of Christ, which turned an imminent hope into an indefinite one; the adoption of the Greek philosophical doctrine of the immortal soul, which moved salvation

out of this world altogether. At each step the belief survived by moving further from anything that could test it.

The result is a God defined as outside reality: beyond evidence, beyond falsification, beyond any result in this world that could count against him. The supernatural, on this reading, is not religion's original feature. It is the residue of religion's drift. Religion gave up this world, ceding it to the natural sciences, and untethered itself from reality. In order never to be wrong, it gave up the ability ever to be right.

The same pattern applies to the moral content of religion. Some of the most demanding teachings of Christianity, such as turning the other cheek, giving to all who ask and taking no thought for tomorrow, were given in the expectation that the present world was about to end. Whatever one makes of that expectation, it is a reasonable hypothesis that such teachings were never designed to govern a permanent civilization. When the end did not come, the teachings did not lapse. They ossified into permanent rules, and their descendants survive today, detached from any religious belief, in secular moral intuitions about care, guilt and the weak. A temporary ethic, kept after its reason expired, becomes a permanent constraint on a world it was never meant for.

None of this requires blaming religion. Religion drifted for the same reasons everything drifts. For a long time, in fact, belief in a supernatural judge may have held drift in check, by giving people a fixed reference outside themselves. The point is structural. A belief system that protects itself from refutation by moving out of reach of evidence has, by that same move, made itself impossible to correct. That is the general shape of ossification, and religion is simply its most visible and longest-running case.

When words drift

Drift also works on language, and here it is easiest to watch.

A word can stay the same while its meaning slides. "Nice" once meant foolish; "silly" once meant blessed. Such shifts are ordinary and usually harmless. The linguist Edward Sapir, writing in 1921, used this paper's very word for the process: language, he wrote, "moves down time in a current of its own making. It has a drift." And the drift has direction: it is made of countless small, unconscious choices by speakers that accumulate one way.

Some drift is not harmless, because its direction changes what a society can think. Psychologists have documented one form of this, which the psychologist Nick Haslam named concept creep. Over recent decades, concepts of harm in psychology and in the wider culture, including abuse, bullying, trauma, prejudice and mental disorder, have expanded in two directions. They have expanded outward, to cover new kinds of experience, and downward, to cover milder cases than before. A word that once named a severe harm now names a mild discomfort as well, and carries the full moral weight of the original into the new territory.

An experiment published in 2018 suggests one reason this happens. Participants were asked to judge whether dots were blue. As blue dots became rarer, participants began to count purple dots as blue. The same thing happened with threatening faces and unethical research pro-

posals: as real cases became rare, people expanded the concept to include cases they would earlier have excluded. The researchers called it prevalence-induced concept change. As a problem shrinks, the concept that names it grows, so that the amount of the problem people perceive stays roughly the same.

This is drift in its purest mental form. The concept was a map of a real danger. As the danger receded, the map did not shrink to match. It stretched to fill the space. The word stays fixed while the meaning slides. And because the word keeps its original moral force, the slide is not neutral. It turns ever smaller matters into grave ones, and shifts what people feel entitled to demand.

The euphemism treadmill shows the same mechanism running in the opposite direction. A word for a social problem picks up the stigma of the problem and is replaced by a softer one, which in time picks up the same stigma and is replaced again. Each replacement moves the language further from naming the thing plainly, and in the process quietly changes the question. A sequence from "bum" to "homeless" to "unhoused" is not only a change in politeness. The last term implies an agent who did the unhousing, and so moves the responsibility somewhere else without any argument being made.

Inversion

When a practice ossifies and conditions continue to change, a further stage can follow. The practice stops merely failing to serve its purpose and begins to work against it. The means, detached from the end, comes back around to destroy the end.

Consider how this can happen to justice. A community resolves to be tolerant and stops enforcing minor rules. Behavior adjusts to the new incentives; minor disorder grows. Enforcement is now seen as harsh, out of step with the community's values. In time the private citizen who tries to stop disorder is himself treated as the problem. A store security guard is disciplined for stopping a shoplifter. At each step the practice of tolerance was extended a little further from its original purpose, which was to make the community a better place to live. By the end, it punishes those who defend the community and protects those who harm it. The moral poles have been reversed.

This is moral inversion, and it is drift's characteristic late product. It explains a feature of the present that many people find bewildering: that principles which once protected the vulnerable now seem to harm them, and that people acting with good intentions produce results opposite to the ones they intend. The intentions are not the problem. The problem is that the practice they are following has been cut off from the results by which it could be judged, and has kept moving.

The innovators who try to correct such inversions face a further obstacle. They are judged by the standard they are trying to retire. Born into a world in which the inverted practice is the norm, people see the corrector as the deviant. This, too, is drift: the moral reformer is condemned by the very intuitions whose drift he is pointing out.

Shedding

Drift and ossification call for different responses. Drift can be corrected gradually, like steering a car back to the center of the road. A practice that is still soft can be traced to its purpose, checked against results and adjusted.

An ossified practice cannot be adjusted in this way, because it no longer responds to reasons. It has become a shell. A living thing that grows inside a shell must eventually shed it or be crushed by it. A plant that has outgrown its pot must be repotted or become root-bound and stunted. Ossified practices are like this. They must be broken open and shed, and what was alive inside them freed from what has hardened around it.

This is why the return to reality is sometimes gradual and sometimes not. Where drift is still soft, regrounding can proceed by steady correction. Where it has ossified, it requires something more like molting: the deliberate breaking and shedding of structures that can no longer be reformed from within. The aim of shedding is not destruction for its own sake. It is to liberate whatever was good in the original practice from the gunk that has accumulated around it, and to rebuild on reality what had come to rest on nothing.

6
Drift Across the Human World

If drift is a general feature of minds that carry maps, it should appear wherever maps are carried. It does. This section traces it through eight domains. The aim is not a complete account of any of them. It is to show the same mechanism at work in each: a practice built for a purpose, transmitted without the purpose, continuing by inertia, insulated from results, and at length turning against the end it was built to serve.

Morality

Morality is the domain where drift does the most damage, because moral rules are maps of what helps and harms human life, and they are among the most abstract maps we carry.

Many moral rules began as practical protocols: ways of protecting children, binding families, enabling cooperation, managing risk. Reciprocity is a clear case. Helping others began, in large part, as a form of exchange. I help you, you help me, and we are both better off. Over time the exchange was moralized and generalized. Help became a duty in itself, cut off from the return that had made it rational. The expectation of something in return came to feel selfish. And temporary help, meant to carry someone through a hard time, ossified into permanent support that no longer asks anything of its recipient and no longer helps him stand on his own.

A deeper drift runs through the history of moral judgment itself. Morality began by judging results: what a person's actions actually did to others. Over time, judgment moved inward, from what a person achieves, to what a person does, to what a person is. Each step moved morality further from outcomes. A morality of results can be checked by looking at results. A morality of intentions cannot be checked at all, because intentions are invisible and always

available to be claimed. The old proverb that the road to hell is paved with good intentions describes exactly this: a morality judged by intent has, by its structure, cut itself off from the causal chain. It can no longer see what it produces. So it drifts, while its effects continue, often in the opposite direction from the one intended.

Equality and rights

Equality offers an unusually clear chain of drift, because each link can be traced.

The idea began as a claim about moral worth before God: that every soul matters. It was translated into a political claim, equality before the law, which removed many real and arbitrary injustices. It then extended to equality of opportunity, then to a claim on equal outcomes, then to sameness, the view that any difference between groups is evidence of injustice, and finally to the claim that each person is entitled to be regarded as whatever he defines himself to be. Each step removed more of the original constraint and kept more of the abstract claim. At each step the word "equality" stayed the same and carried the moral authority of the first step into the next. By the end, a principle that began as a check on arbitrary power had become a demand that reality itself conform to a principle.

Rights show a parallel drift. The right to life was originally a negative right: a claim that others may not kill you. It has drifted toward a positive right: a claim that others must provide whatever you need to live as you choose. A negative right limits what others may do to you. A positive right obliges others to act for you. As the meaning shifted slowly, and as people adapted to each shift, they forgot what the right had meant and accepted its expansion without ever having agreed to it.

Democracy, too, began as a means: a way to give citizens power over the government that ruled them and to replace bad rulers without bloodshed. It has been sacralized into an end. We make sacred democracy and other such institutions and forget why they exist, and so we cannot ask whether, in a given case, they are still doing the job they were built for.

Institutions

Institutions drift in the way Section 3 described: they come to serve themselves. Universities founded to pursue truth come to serve the reproduction of their own faculties and fashions. Welfare programs founded to carry people through hardship come to serve populations and purposes their founders never imagined. A useful test of legitimacy follows. When most of a program's actual use no longer matches its original purpose, the program has drifted, whatever its name says.

Governments drift in the same way. A government exists to serve the people who constitute it and pay for it. Over time its attention drifts toward its own employees, toward organized interests and toward whoever can make the most effective claims on it. The British historian Robert Conquest is credited with the observation that any organization not explicitly right-wing will sooner or later become left-wing. Whatever its exact truth, it names a pattern of directional drift: institutions without an explicit commitment that is regularly enforced tend to

move toward the positions of their most active and organized members, and each move becomes the baseline for the next.

At the scale of whole societies, institutional drift produces the sclerosis Mancur Olson described. Rules accumulate and almost none expire. Each has its defenders. The society slows, then stalls, unable to do things it once did easily, not because it lacks resources but because every action must pass through layers of accumulated procedure whose purposes no one can any longer state.

Language

Section 5 described how words drift. The general point here is that language is the medium in which most other drift travels. A society's words carry its maps from one generation to the next, and when the words drift, the maps drift with them.

This makes language a key battleground. Dictionaries record how words are used now, which means they record drift. They do not say what a word must mean if it is to keep pointing at the thing it was coined to name. A dictionary built on reality rather than usage would do the opposite: trace each word to what it originally referred to, and mark where its use has come loose. Such a dictionary would do for language what originalism tries to do for law: hold the meaning to its source, so that change has to be argued for rather than allowed to slide in unnoticed.

Sex, marriage and the family

Some of the deepest drifts concern sex and the family, because these are where the most ancient and most practical moral protocols live.

Marriage was, for most of history, an institution for producing and raising children within a stable alliance between families. Its rules made sense in that light: permanence, fidelity, the involvement of the wider family in the choice of partner. As the purposes were forgotten, the institution drifted toward a private arrangement for the happiness of two adults, and then toward something hardly distinguishable from dating. Each step made sense to people who no longer knew what marriage had been for. But an institution designed to bind people to the hardest and most important work of a life cannot bear that work once it has been redefined as a source of personal satisfaction.

Sex itself has drifted from its connection to reproduction. Much of this followed reasonably from contraception, which changed the conditions on which the old rules were built. But the drift did not stop where the change in conditions stopped. Once sex was detached from reproduction in principle, it could be detached from anything else, and in the limit from reality altogether. All perversion is a form of drift: desire no longer moored to the purpose it evolved to serve, seeking ever stronger and stranger stimulation because the ordinary no longer satisfies a desire that no longer knows what it is for. The return from this condition is a form of regrounding: rediscovering what the desire is for, and finding it once again satisfied by its natural object.

Children, in this sense, ground us. They are the point at which the abstractions of adult life meet the most concrete of realities: a dependent human being who must be fed, taught and formed. Societies with fewer children lose one of their strongest connections to the territory, and drift more easily.

Progress and the current paradigm

The idea of progress has drifted too, and this is where the concept of drift bears most directly on the present.

For several centuries, Western progress largely meant liberation: removing unjust constraints from people who did not deserve them. It ended slavery, extended the franchise, broke down arbitrary barriers of birth and law. This work was real and good. But liberation is a project with a finite supply. Once the unjust constraints are gone, a movement whose purpose was to remove constraints has nothing left to do, unless it begins to remove constraints that are not unjust, including the constraints of reality itself. Liberation ran out of slaves and kept going.

This is drift in the strict sense. The practice of liberation continued after its purpose was achieved, because the purpose had been forgotten and only the motion remained. And because the motion still wore the moral authority of its earlier victories, it could not easily be questioned. To oppose the next liberation was to align oneself, in the eyes of its advocates, with the slaveholders.

Much of what is now called progress, on this view, is not progress but drift: further estrangement from reality presented as further advance. The current paradigm operates within drift and as an extension of it. Its characteristic moral inversions, in which strength is suspect and weakness is holy, in which builders are villains and dismantlers are heroes, in which the defense of standards is cruelty and their abandonment is kindness, are what drift produces when it runs long enough without correction. Skepticism, a useful tool for clearing away false beliefs, has ossified into a permanent posture of critique that can no longer build anything. The deconstruction that once scraped off real accumulations of error now scrapes against reality.

There is reason to think this paradigm is approaching its limit. Drift can only go so far before the distance from reality becomes too expensive to sustain. The costs of sclerosis, the failures of policies built on drifted maps, the growing gap between what is said and what is plainly the case all mount. At some point we are simply out of space for these concepts to drift further. That point is where a paradigm ends, and where the question becomes what will replace it.

Artificial intelligence

The newest domain is also the one where drift could become most permanent, or be most decisively overcome.

Artificial intelligence systems are trained on the maps human beings have produced. They learn our words, our judgments and our moral intuitions as they stand today, drifted as they are. A system trained this way and then used by billions of people to answer questions, draft documents and form opinions could fix the present state of our drift in place on a scale no previous technology could. It could ossify, in a single generation, practices and meanings whose drift would otherwise have continued to be contested. And systems that learn from their users' responses can pull those users along a trajectory, reinforcing whatever they already believe until belief and reality come further apart.

But AI also offers something no previous technology has: the ability to trace drift at scale. A sufficiently capable system could follow every word to its origin, every rule to its purpose, every institution to its founding mission, and every practice to its results, and report where the map has come loose. Section 8 returns to this. Whether AI deepens drift or ends it depends on whether it is built to reflect our maps or to check them.

The person

Finally, drift happens within a single life, and this is the scale at which anyone can see it most directly.

A person who does not continually steer his own life drifts. He stays up later than he meant to, follows the next video, takes the easier path, slowly settles into habits he never chose. His beliefs drift too. At some point a life ossifies around its beliefs: the person stops revising them, builds an identity on them, and defends them because they are his rather than because they are true. The individual who wants to stay aligned with reality must do for himself what a healthy civilization must do: keep asking why he does what he does, check it against results, and be willing to shed what no longer fits. Never ossify.

7

Dysgenic Drift

Everything so far has concerned maps: rules, words, beliefs and institutions coming loose from what they describe. There is a second form of drift that acts on the carriers of the maps, and it deserves its own name. This paper calls it dysgenic drift. The term is meant broadly. It is not chiefly about genetics, though genetics is one place it operates. It is the general tendency of anything to get worse over time once the pressures that made it good are removed: people, companies, institutions, standards, products, cultures.

The pattern can be stated simply. When an enterprise is new, hard and dangerous, it selects for the people able to build it. Founders, pioneers and first settlers are, by the nature of the task, those with the most initiative, the highest tolerance for risk and the greatest capacity for work. As the enterprise succeeds, it becomes safer, richer and easier. It now attracts people who want what has been built rather than people who can build. The pressure that selected for strength relaxes. The strong clear the way, and the weak follow and inherit.

Every company that has grown from a founding team into a large firm knows a version of this. The first employees work through nights and weekends because the company will die if they do not. Later employees join an established institution with established expectations, and the intensity that built the firm becomes, to them, an unreasonable demand. The difference is not a moral failing in the later employees. It is a change in what the situation selects for.

Something similar may hold for migration and settlement. The first people to cross an ocean to an unbuilt land are, almost by definition, unusual in their willingness to take risks and endure hardship. Those who come after the land is built face a different test, and the test selects differently. Here the pattern is a hypothesis about how selection works, not a claim about any group, and it should be tested case by case.

Three features of dysgenic drift connect it to drift in the narrower sense.

First, it depends on insulation. As long as an enterprise faces real danger, it cannot afford to carry people who do not contribute, and the pressure to perform stays high. Success removes the danger, and with it the selection.

Second, it depends on the inability to remove. A system that can add members but never subtract them accumulates whatever it adds. Without a way to get rid of what has gone bad, bad things accumulate. Institutions that cannot fire, cities that cannot enforce their own laws, and societies that cannot set standards for membership all face this arithmetic.

Third, the best tend to leave first. The economist Albert Hirschman observed that when a product or organization declines, the customers and members most sensitive to quality are the first to exit, which removes exactly the people whose complaints might have forced improvement. A declining institution loses its best members to exit before it loses its worst, and so declines faster. The same pattern appears at the scale of whole paradigms. Within a stable paradigm, the builders and the followers coexist. When the paradigm begins to fail, the builders are the first to see it and the first to leave for whatever comes next, and those who remain are the least able to recognize or repair what has gone wrong.

The two forms of drift reinforce each other. A group that has forgotten why its practices exist will not know what kind of people it needs to sustain them, and so will stop selecting for them. And a group whose members can no longer sustain demanding practices will let those practices go, and then forget they ever existed. Drift of the map and decline of the carriers feed each other until the whole system reaches the condition of sclerosis described earlier: full to the brim, unable to move, waiting for collapse or renewal.

Biology has its own version of this pattern, in research on what happens to a population when natural selection relaxes. That research is technical and its conclusions are debated, and it deserves careful treatment by strength of evidence rather than a passing mention. A companion paper takes up dysgenic drift in full, including its biological form, its history across civilizations, and the remedies available to a society that wants to keep renewing rather than decaying. For this paper, the point is that drift does not act on ideas alone. A civilization can lose not only the reasons for its practices but also the kind of people able to carry them, and preventing drift requires attention to both.

8

Preventing Drift

If drift is the default, alignment must be built. It does not happen by itself, and it does not stay once achieved. A car does not stay in its lane because it was once pointed straight. It stays because someone keeps steering. This section sets out what steering would mean for a person, an institution and a civilization. The principles follow directly from the diagnosis: if drift is the detachment of practice from purpose and result, prevention is the continual reattachment of practice to purpose and result.

First, a caution

The remedy for drift is not to abolish every rule whose reason we cannot state. That would be deconstruction, not correction, and it would be disastrous. Some of the most important human practices are causally opaque. The manioc-processing steps that remove cyanide from the root cannot be explained by most of the people who perform them, and anyone who dropped them as pointless would poison his family. Edmund Burke, defending inherited prejudice against the reformers of his day, urged his readers to seek "the latent wisdom which prevails in them" rather than to explode them. G. K. Chesterton made the same point in his parable of the fence across a road: do not tear it down until you know why it was put there. It is a pleasing coincidence that the essay in which Chesterton told that parable is titled "The Drift from Domesticity."

These defenders of tradition are right that a lost reason is not proof of no reason. Where they fall short is in what to do next. Chesterton tells the reformer to go and find the reason. But what if the reason is found and no longer applies? What if it cannot be found at all? The defense of tradition is strongest when results are still feeding back, so that the practices that survive have been tested by the world. When insulation cuts that feedback, survival no longer means fitness. A tradition may persist for no better reason than that nothing has yet stopped it.

So the remedy combines two tests. Search for the reason. And check the results. A practice whose reason is lost but whose results are good should be kept, and its reason sought. A practice whose reason is lost and whose results are bad should be questioned. A practice whose reason is found and no longer holds should be updated. The aim is neither to preserve nor to destroy, but to keep every practice answerable.

1. Keep the why with the rule

The first principle attacks drift at its source. Rules travel better than reasons, so reasons must be deliberately sent along with rules.

Every "should" needs a "why." A moral rule taught without its reason is a rule already halfway to drift. Teaching the reason costs more than teaching the rule, but it is the only way the next generation can tell when the rule has stopped serving its purpose. Institutions can do the same by writing down, at founding, what they are for, in terms concrete enough that failure would be visible, and by returning to that statement regularly.

Where reasons have already been lost, they must be recovered. This is the work of genealogy, or moral archaeology: tracing each practice, rule and word back to its origin, to the conditions that produced it and the problem it solved. Etymology lets us trace the drift of words. History lets us trace the drift of institutions. The study of human evolution lets us trace the drift of moral intuitions to the conditions of the ancestral world. A full regrounding would retrace everything we do in society and culture to its original cause and physical grounding, showing how each human practice grew out of the life of an animal solving practical problems.

2. Test against results

The second principle restores the comparison that drift destroys. A practice that is regularly checked against its results cannot drift far without the drift showing.

This means judging morality by what it produces rather than by what it intends. A morality of results stays tied to reality because reality supplies its verdicts. It must return something: a rule that costs more than it gives, over a reasonable horizon and to the people it is meant to serve, is a rule in need of review.

Karl Popper made this the core of his political philosophy. He replaced the question "who should rule?" with the question of how to arrange institutions so that bad rulers and bad policies can be detected and removed without too much damage. He favored piecemeal reform, small steps whose results can be seen and corrected, over grand designs that cannot be tested until it is too late. David Deutsch has extended the point: the decisive difference between societies that stagnate and societies that progress is whether they have a tradition of criticism that lets errors be found and corrected. Deutsch also offers a useful test of whether an explanation is still tied to reality. A good explanation is hard to vary: every part of it does work, so it cannot be changed without failing. A rule whose details could be changed freely without anything being lost has probably lost its reason.

Results-testing has its own drift risk. The economist Charles Goodhart observed that a statistical measure tends to break down once it is used as a target, and the social scientist Donald Campbell warned that the more a social indicator is used for decisions, the more it will be corrupted and will corrupt the practice it measures. A measure is itself a map, and it can drift from what it measures. So the tests must be audited and rotated, and the question must always return from the number to the thing the number was meant to track.

3. Fix the reference point

The third principle answers the problem of the shifting baseline. Drift is unfelt because each generation takes its starting point as normal. The remedy is a reference point that does not move with each generation.

Pauly's fisheries problem has a clear solution: keep records of what the stocks were, and measure every new count against the old records rather than against the last generation's memory. The same applies elsewhere. A society that records what its words meant, what its laws were for and what its institutions achieved can measure its present against something

outside the present. A person who keeps a written statement of what he is aiming at can measure his life against it rather than against how his life felt last year.

The ultimate reference point is reality itself, and the most reliable contact with reality is physical. A simple personal test follows: if you cannot touch your belief, if it connects to nothing you can see, measure or hold, it has likely drifted. Direct contact with the physical world, with nature, with work whose results are visible, and with children who must be fed and formed, keeps the mind's maps answerable in a way that no amount of abstract reasoning can.

4. Make expiry the default

The fourth principle targets ossification and compounding. Rules accumulate because adding them is easy and removing them is hard. American federal regulations, by one count, contained over a million distinct legal restrictions by 2016, with thousands more added each year under governments of both parties. Each was reasonable when written. The stack is not.

The remedy is to reverse the default: rules expire unless they are deliberately renewed. Sunset clauses attempt this in law. The evidence on them is instructive. Many sunset laws have themselves drifted into ritual, with reviews that rubber-stamp renewal and agencies that learn to pass them. Where sunsets have worked, as in Tennessee's 1991 rule that agency regulations expire unless continued, they have had three features: termination as the real default, dedicated staff to review what is up for renewal, and a binding vote. Expiry works only when it is real.

The same principle applies beyond law. Institutions can schedule periodic reviews of their own doctrines, asking of each whether it still serves its purpose and what results it has produced. Individuals can do the same with their beliefs and habits. Anything that must be actively renewed is protected against drift by the act of renewal, because renewal forces someone to ask why.

5. A fixed core and a revisable periphery

The fifth principle resolves a tension that runs through the whole problem. Drift is dangerous when practices move away from reality. But ossification is dangerous when practices refuse to move as reality moves. Should morality be fixed or fluid?

The answer is both, at different levels. What should be fixed is the core: alignment with reality, the commitment to life, growth and truth, the standard against which every practice is judged. What should be fluid is the periphery: the particular rules, customs and institutions by which that commitment is carried out under particular conditions. The core is permanent because reality is permanent. The periphery must change because conditions change.

The error of most past moral systems has been to fix the periphery. They took rules that were wise under the conditions of their time and declared them eternal, which guaranteed that they would drift into irrelevance or harm as conditions changed. A fixed morality, in this sense, is itself a drift from reality. The aim is to move from a solid state to a liquid one: to remain the same substance while changing shape to fit the vessel, as water is the same water

whether ice or stream. A person committed to truth is not committed to any particular set of rules. He is committed to whatever rules truth requires now, and he changes them when it requires something else.

6. Shed what has ossified

The sixth principle addresses what the first five cannot reach. A practice that has already ossified does not respond to reasons, and so it cannot be corrected by steering. It must be shed.

Living things that grow inside shells molt. Plants that outgrow their pots must be repotted. Civilizations, too, may need to be repotted every few generations: to break open the structures that have hardened around them and replant what is alive in fresh soil. This can happen through deliberate reform, through the founding of new institutions beside the old, or, at the extreme, through exit: leaving a sclerotic institution and building a new one on reality from the start.

Death has played this role in human life. Each generation's passing removes some of its ossified commitments, and the young are freer to see what their elders could not. Death, in that sense, is a feature: it prevents worldviews from ossifying permanently. If human beings come to live much longer, as technology may allow, this natural corrective will weaken, and something deliberate will have to take its place. The ideal would be the reverse of drift altogether: to live long and remember everything, so that no reason is ever lost between generations, because the generation that knew the reason is still present to say it.

7. Keep expanding

The seventh principle draws on an observation about what keeps systems honest. A firm facing competition cannot drift far from serving its customers, because profit disciplines it. A frontier society cannot drift far from reality, because the frontier punishes illusion. Expansion, growth and the pursuit of difficult goals keep a society in contact with hard problems, and hard problems are reality's way of testing maps. Expansion is itself an anti-drift mechanism.

The converse is also true. A society that stops growing, settles into comfort and turns inward loses its contact with the frontier, and with it the pressure that kept its maps honest. The way back to reality is not only down, to the foundations. It is also out and up: toward new problems hard enough to test what we believe.

8. Build the update process

The final principle ties the others together. Every system of rules needs a process for updating the rules, and that process must itself be designed to resist drift.

The comparison to software is useful. A software team does not release a program once and declare it finished. It maintains it: tracking bugs, testing changes against results, pushing updates and retiring features that no longer serve. Morality has never been maintained this way, largely because we misunderstood it. Believing our moral rules to be fixed and universal, we

never thought they needed updating, and so we built no process to update them. They drifted, and when they ossified, the only correction available was revolution.

A morality grounded in reality can be maintained like any other system that answers to reality: by continual testing, experiment and revision, in the manner of a startup that learns what works by trying it. This is not relativism. The standard does not change; reality is the standard. What changes is our best current map of what reality requires, and the speed at which we can improve that map.

Artificial intelligence, which could freeze our present drift in place, could also become the most powerful anti-drift instrument ever built. A system designed to check maps rather than reflect them could trace every word to its origin, every rule to its purpose and every institution to its results, at a scale no human scholarship could match, and report wherever practice has come loose from reason or result. It could serve as the reference point that does not move. Whether it does depends on what it is built to do.

For a person, the same principles become a practice. Keep asking why you do what you do. Check your beliefs against results. Write down what you are aiming at and measure against it. Let habits expire unless you choose to renew them. Hold your core and loosen your periphery. Shed what has hardened. Keep reaching for something hard. And build these habits into daily life, since no correction made once will hold against a force that acts every day.

9

Why Now

Drift is as old as human consciousness. Why does it demand attention now, rather than at any other time?

Because the rate at which conditions change has never been faster, and is still accelerating. For most of human history, the conditions of life changed slowly. A rule that was wise in a grandparent's youth was usually still wise in a grandchild's. Moral systems could update over centuries, through the slow processes of tradition, reform and occasional upheaval, and still keep roughly in step with the world. Drift happened, but the gap it opened grew slowly.

That is no longer true. Technology now changes the conditions of human life within a single generation, and soon may change them within a single decade. Contraception changed the conditions of sexual morality in less than a lifetime. The internet changed the conditions of public speech, community and knowledge in less than one. Artificial intelligence is beginning to change the conditions of work, thought and authority faster still. Each of these changes leaves behind a layer of rules built for the old conditions. If those rules update at the old speed, the gap between our maps and the world will grow faster than at any time in history.

The speed at which a society rewrites its shared picture of the good is itself a variable. It is distinct from the content of that picture, it has been rising for centuries, and it is now outrunning the rate at which any single person can absorb it. A civilization whose moral update process runs at the speed of generations, in a world whose conditions change at the speed of

product cycles, is guaranteed to drift. It will either cling to rules that no longer fit, ossified and increasingly harmful, or it will abandon rules wholesale without knowing which ones still mattered, drifting from one fashion to the next. Both are failures to keep the map tied to the territory. Both are already visible.

The only way out is a morality that can update at the speed of the world. And the only morality that can safely update quickly is one firmly grounded in reality. A morality grounded in authority can only update by changing its authorities, which is slow and violent. A morality grounded in nothing can update freely, but has no way of telling better from worse, and so simply drifts. A morality grounded in reality has a standard that does not move and a method for revising its rules against that standard. It can change its periphery as fast as conditions require, because its core tells it which direction is correct.

This is the larger aim to which the understanding of drift points. The first task is diagnosis: to see that much of our present moral and political life stands not on reality but on drift, and to trace the drift back to where it began. The second is correction: to return to reality, regrounding our practices in their purposes and results, and shedding what has ossified. The third is prevention: to build, for the first time, a standing process that keeps our maps aligned with the world as it changes, so that the long cycle of drift, ossification and revolution gives way to something better. Not a final set of rules, which would only drift in its turn, but a permanent practice of alignment.

Conclusion

The woman dancing in front of her children did not know why she was dancing. She was not foolish or wicked. She had simply inherited a behavior without its reason, as all of us inherit most of what we do. In that small case is the whole structure this paper has described: a goal that produced a behavior, a behavior copied until its purpose was forgotten, a practice continuing by inertia and producing effects no one chose, and an awareness gone so completely that the question of purpose could not even be asked.

Multiply that case across every rule, word, belief and institution a civilization carries, extend it over centuries, insulate it from consequences with wealth, let it compound and let institutions defend it, and the result is a world that has drifted far from reality without anyone having decided to move it. Many of the moral inversions that disturb thoughtful people today, the punishment of those who defend order, the sanctification of weakness, the treatment of reality itself as a form of oppression, are not the work of any conspiracy. They are what drift produces when it runs long enough unchecked.

The source of drift is the mind's great power: the ability to hold a picture of the world apart from the world. That power cannot be given up, and should not be. But it carries a permanent obligation, which is to keep checking the picture against what it depicts. A map that is not checked will drift. A practice that is not tied to its purpose will float free. A morality that is not

tested against results will one day produce the opposite of what it intended. None of this is fate. It is the predictable result of not steering.

So drift is a problem like any other: it has causes that can be understood, effects that can be measured and remedies that can be built. The remedy is not to go back to some earlier map, which would only be another drifted map. Nor is it to go forward into newer abstractions, which would only drift further. It is to go down, to reality, and to stay there: to keep every should tied to its why, every rule tied to its results and every mind tied to the world it is trying to describe. That is what it would mean to return to reality, and then never drift again.

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