

Choosing Whysly

Alex Bennet, Mountain Quest Institute

**Why we can't see what
is right in front of us**

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what is right in front of us*

Alex Bennet
Mountain Quest Institute

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Dedication

This is dedicated to the curious and courageous learners who dare to look beyond their personal blindness and bias to create the future imagined by our forefathers, rich in diversity, opportunity, and inclusion.

Deep Appreciation to Robert Turner, Moria Levy, and Annie Green for their thoughts and energy that continue to spark and expand my thinking and writing. More recent appreciation of my AI partner, AI-PRO 4o, for support in scenario and story building and DALL-E for cover support.

Preface

As the environment in which we live has increasingly imbibed fear and chaos, the results of fragmentation and hubris, I keep questioning how so many people can be oblivious to the tearing apart of our democratic way of life? Why do we choose not to see what is right in front of us?

This is a large question. Is it philosophical in nature? Certainly we can learn from neuroscience just how this works in the mind/brain. And surely there is research in psychology and sociology that addresses this. Or, perhaps theories around communication, culture or change studies? And how about critical theory? On the other hand, we certainly can learn in this regard from anthropology (the science of human beings), epistemology (the theory of knowledge), and education and pedagogy. Come to think of it, this idea of not seeing what is right in front of us may even bring in behavioral economics and political science, especially in today's volatile environment. And, frankly, how does spirituality fit into this why?

Reflecting, it is all of these fields and disciplines. It is only the human that puts things in boxes, applying labels (names) and then clustering like things together for ease of understanding. Only in a complex world, "like" things have many aspects to them, just as you and I do. We aren't one thing ... and even when we are looking from a single perspective, other things are simultaneously going on both inside and outside of us with us learning and changing in response, whether we *know* it or not. We are complex adaptive systems that cannot live in stasis, which means we are either expanding or declining, living or dying, every moment of life.

So, what seems like a simple question becomes, well, complicated, no, complex, because it is about people and so it cannot help but be complex. In order to explore potential answers to this question of why we choose not to see what is right in front of us, we have to take a consilience approach, the "jumping together" of knowledge through the dynamic linking of facts and fact-based theories *across* fields to create a common groundwork of explanation.

When looking at the two cultures of science and humanism in 1959, C. P. Snow wrote about the importance of their interdependence. As he believed, "Nothing fundamental separates the course of human history from the course of physical history, whether in the stars or in organic diversity." (Wilson, 1998). In other words, the issues we face today demand that we use ALL of our

resources—all of our understanding across a myriad of fields of learning—to produce a clearer view of reality.

As I moved through foundational references in the Mountain Quest 40,000+ volume research library exploring this theme, it became clear that this important topic was well-grounded. It was necessary to go back to the original research for working definitions and to discover the consistency that the expansion across various domains of knowledge was built upon. This was a fascinating learning journey. I've provided those references for anyone who chooses to dive deeper.

While exploring these foundational ideas and linking them with the current world turbulence, hubris, and fragmentation, the power and necessity of consilience to achieve understanding became even clearer. There is such diversity in human thought—just as there is magnificent diversity among people—all there to provide the opportunity for a higher level of learning and expansion. Why is it we can't see what is right in front of us? As a hypothesis, I would propose that, at some level, whether consciously or unconsciously, this has to do with choice. This hypothesis is explored throughout this book.

In deep diving recently deep into the synergy between critical thinking and creative thinking for another book, the realization emerged that during the last century, with a focus on strategic thinking, we had somehow been caught up in the how's that came along with technological advancement, to the detriment of focusing on the "why's." As we technologically continue to move forward, rapidly morphing toward a quantum mindset, past how's are left rapidly behind as new, exciting ideas and realities emerge right in front of us. For those of us who see them, who embrace them, it is critical to understand our why's in order to help us *whysly* choose—and create—our future. It is my hope this book will help us do so.

Alex Bennet

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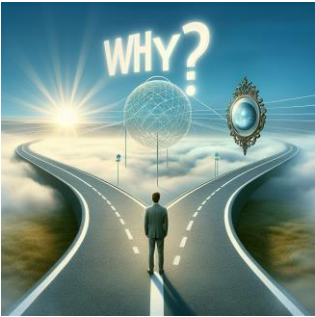
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Foreword

In her early years, my dear friend, Dr. Alex, drew deeply from her Greek family upbringing. Now, it is no vast stretch of the imagination that in *Whysly*, she transports us back two and a half millennia to the foundations of Greek wisdom. On this excursion, Alex shifts us to cognition cultivated in the outskirts of ancient Athens at Plato's Academy, where we find a genesis of the modern university. We ponder there, as it were, at the feet of Plato, the philosopher—teacher par excellence. For him, the meaning of existence, the purposes of life, the truth, and the beauty of what is before us and around us unfold delightfully as we pursue unending, bold, insightful questions—the *Why*? To be sure, with Plato, the questions are more important than the answers. As the questions shift and the responses accumulate, our perspectives shift and we see more; as the breadth and depth of our vision unfolds, it follows as the day the night, we also begin to know more *whysly*.

Plato and Dr. Alex want us to indulge our senses, our field of view, what it presents to us and how it lifts us. To that end, Alex basks in consilience—coalescing disparate perspectives together into new and revealing tapestries of knowledge. She wants us to see more and to know more—mixing fields and perceptions to illuminate what is dancing together, to envision it more clearly in our mind's eye. When we delight in the kaleidoscopic magnitude of these variations before us, we experience, as Plato offers in the dramatic dialogue *Theaetetus*, that “*Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.*”

Indeed, for Plato, at the Academy, there are never enough questions. Alex fills that void quite well. Do these endeavors reveal truth? That, somehow, is more dependent upon the seeker and the search than upon the aggregation of answers. What begins as steps or a series of questions can culminate in a vista offering a clearer perspective. However, it is not an easy ascent, and Alex offers an abundance of guideposts for the climb. You have endless choices.

Fast forward to Dr. Alex's world of the modern knowledge worker heralded by Fritz Machlup, the economist, and Peter Drucker, the management sage in the closing third of our last century, with 39 books in 36 languages on the new knowledge economy. By the end of the century, Alex and her partner and spouse, Dr. David Bennet, were in the thick of this new knowledge-centric world. David co-founded a firm that provided consulting services for managing complexity in this new knowledge era, and Alex served as the Chief Knowledge

Officer and Deputy Chief Information Officer for Enterprise Integration in the U.S. Department of the Navy, one of the largest organizations in the world. Their combined efforts eventually created the Mountain Quest Institute (MQI) in the mountains of West Virginia, which has published over 40 books. All of this is to say that Plato's work at the Academy, which elucidated the nature of knowledge and learning, is being deeply replicated in the realm of multiple perspectives, formerly known as consilience.

A brief example to express the value of enhanced perspectives as championed at MQI. At the onset of the modern knowledge era, MacGregor Company management consultants popularized the Nine Dot Puzzle, which challenged people to connect nine dots in a format using three or fewer straight lines. As you find this puzzle on the Internet, the solution is achieved by "thinking outside the box". Once that creative window was introduced, the answers flowed, and the solutions exceeded 100. But who is counting?

Now, Dr. Alex is offering out-of-the-box perspectives that essentially make our potential unlimited. In this new era of intelligence, through MQI offerings* of Unleashing the Human Mind, Reblooming Knowledge, Whole Thought, Infinite Learning and Knowledge Capacities, and—specifically addressing current challenges—the exploration of fRAGmentation and Hubris leading up to this volume, the Nine Dot Puzzle has become three-dimensional. With the coalescing of Human Intelligence (HI) and AI, the solutions are infinite. The MQI *iFusion* endeavor offers that level of *Whysly* for us!

**Robert Turner, Author, Researcher,
Mountain Quest Institute Associate**

***MQI-published texts in support of iFusion:** (1) *Unleashing the Human Mind: A Consilience Approach to Managing Self* (2022); (2) *Reblooming the Knowledge Movement: The Democratization of Organizations* (2023); (3) *Innovative Creativity: Creating with Innovation in Mind* (2024); (4) *Whole Thought: The Rise of Human Intelligence* (2024); (5) *Knowledge Capacities I: Igniting Whole Thought* (2024); (6) *Infinite Learning: Your Life, Your Choice* (2025); (7) *Knowledge Capacities II: Cultivating Infinite Learning* (2024); (8) *fRAGmentation: The Power of e Pluribus Unum* (2025); (9) *The Taint of Hubris: Rediscovering Humility and Bridging Authentic Connection* (2025); and also in support (10) *C&C Thinking: Becoming Whole* (critical and creative) (2025); (11) *Contiguity: Entangled Living and Learning* (2025); and a five-book workbook series *University of the Universe* (Experiential, Existential, Environmental, Relational, and Temporal) (released throughout 2025).

Chapter 1

Introduction

In a world where chaos holds sway,
We seek out new truths every day.
With *Whysly* intent,
Our focus is bent
On horizons where insights will play.

In the complex landscape of human perception, the phenomenon of "not seeing what is right in front of you" forces us to confront the intricate interplay of cognitive processes, emotional biases, and social influences that shape our understanding of reality. In this usage, the verb "seeing" is both literal and metaphorical, representing sight as well as noticing, perceiving, comprehending, or knowing something beyond visual observation.

In Phenomenology, this "seeing" is a way of engaging with the world, an active process of meaning-making, rather than passive image reception. For example, in Plato's well-known allegory of the cave, "seeing the light" stands for intellectual enlightenment and recognition of truth, not just an exposure to visual images. Thus, when we explore "why we can't see what is right in front of us", we are exploring the "why" we are not fully and intellectually engaging with the world in which we currently exist.

Unfortunately, there's no simple answer to why this occurs. This is often hidden in the realms of our internal workings. For example, individuals often find themselves ignoring or denying evidence that contradicts their beliefs, largely due to deep-seated cognitive dissonance, cultural conditioning, and/or group dynamics.

This phenomenon transcends disciplinary boundaries, as insights from psychology reveal how cognitive biases and emotional tagging can skew perception, while sociological frameworks emphasize the role of socialization and ideology in shaping individual worldviews. Neuroscience adds another layer, illustrating how attention and emotional responses are governed by brain structures that prioritize certain information over others.

Moreover, educational theories highlight the importance of critical thinking and pedagogy in fostering greater awareness, while political science examines how ideologies and media framing can reinforce selective perceptions. The convergence of these disciplines, and others, deepens our

understanding of why certain truths remain elusive to individuals—and sometimes entire communities—despite their apparent presence.

As we delve into this multifaceted issue, we will explore the underlying mechanisms that contribute to this state of selective blindness, drawing from a wealth of theoretical perspectives that illuminate the ways in which our minds and societies construct our perceived realities. By expanding our understanding of entangled insights, we aim to foster greater awareness of our individual blind spots and encourage conscious critical engagement with the truths currently shaping our lives and communities.

A World in Chaos: Economic and Social Turmoil in the U.S. (An Example)

In a nation where the principles of democracy and equality were once seen as hallmarks of society, the present moment finds many Americans in a state of uncertainty. Fractures of political divisiveness, deepening economic inequality, and widespread social unrest color the national mood. Recent years have seen a shift toward more extreme rhetoric, with ideological divisions sharpening and eroding a sense of shared reality. Policy debates increasingly hinge more on entrenched party lines and less on shared facts or nuanced reasoning.

Simultaneously, a series of high-impact decisions are made under the guise of fiscal necessity: essential social programs—Medicaid, Social Security, education subsidies, and public assistance—face deep cuts. Supporters of these measures point to budget shortfalls and rising national debt as reasons for “belt-tightening.” Detractors, meanwhile, argue these are disproportionate sacrifices demanded mainly of the most vulnerable. The rationale of “returning tax benefits” is invoked, even as these tax breaks overwhelmingly favor the highest earners and largest corporations.

These moves raise profound ethical questions about the allocation of resources and the foundational values underlying policy. As critical services erode, those at the social margins—children, the elderly, low-income workers—face compounding hardships. Rising tariffs and inflation further restrict access to healthcare, education, and basic necessities, intensifying the gulf between privileged and precarious.

Proponents of austerity measures assert their necessity for economic “health,” training efficiency for effectiveness. Critics document a steady deepening of inequality and loss of opportunity among disadvantaged populations. Language itself obscures impact: policy and media discussions frequently focus on “fiscal responsibility,” glossing over human consequences and rarely centering on the lived experiences of those most affected.

Despite the justifications, long-term projections suggest these very cuts accelerate federal debt, ignoring the nuanced and interconnected effects, and contradicting stated fiscal objectives. Many citizens—overwhelmed by the chaos or worn down by relentless newsfeeds—remain unaware or actively avoidant of these consequences.

Misinformation, spin, and deepening partisanship fragment the information environment. Social media algorithms and echo chambers intensify this, pre-selecting the narratives users encounter and reinforcing ideological silos. Those who speak up against these trends encounter dismissal, sometimes hostility, as concerns are reframed as political attacks or dismissed as exaggeration. This selective blindness fosters business-as-usual, even as underlying social tensions intensify, threatening the underpinning of civic trust and cohesion, and democracy itself.

Communities now face spiraling healthcare expenses, rising poverty, and the fragmenting of public infrastructure and safety nets—challenges that demand collective awareness and coordinated response. The critical question emerges: How do ordinary people come to terms with and respond to a reality that is actively denied or minimized by prevailing narratives?

Though the magnitude of the challenge may seem overwhelming, it also brings an inflection point: the possibility for communities to re-examine their beliefs, engage critically, and reclaim the guiding ideas of democracy, dignity, and equity.

This example illustrates how current events can lead to chaos and disillusionment, especially when people fail to recognize the underlying issues due to framing, misinformation, or emotional attachment to dominant narratives. It invites reflection on how to foster greater awareness and understanding of these critical social issues.

Let's develop a fictional example that illustrates how a character can struggle to recognize the interconnectedness of their personal well-being with events occurring in their community, emphasizing the importance of awareness and empathy.

The Overlooked Horizon (A Story)

In the small town of Maplewood, Amanda Hughes sat at her kitchen table, the sunlight filtering through the window and casting warm circles on the wooden surface. Despite the inviting atmosphere, Amanda's heart was heavy with an unshakeable feeling of dissatisfaction. At 35, she had a stable job at a local bank, a modest home, and a loving family. However, a persistent longing gnawed at her: a sense of purpose and fulfillment that seemed to elude her.

Every morning, she rushed through her routine, putting on a brave face for her colleagues and family. Yet, beneath her cheerful demeanor, she felt a void. This feeling intensified as her community grappled with cuts in funding for essential services. Vital programs that once provided support for her neighbors—like food assistance and mental health services—had been slashed in recent years, all in the name of budget cuts and efficiency. Friends were losing their jobs. Yet, despite the visible impact of these changes, Amanda had convinced herself that they didn't affect her directly.

One evening, during a casual dinner with friends, the topic of budget cuts came up. “Have you heard they’re cutting the community center’s funding again?” her friend Sarah said, frowning. “It’s heartbreaking. That place was a refuge for so many.”

Amanda nodded, but a part of her felt detached. She had never been to the community center; it was just one of many buildings in town that didn’t resonate with her. “I mean, I get it,” she replied. “They need to save money, right? It’s tough out there.”

As her friends voiced their frustrations about the lack of support for the most vulnerable members of their community, Amanda couldn’t relate. She had a comfortable life, after all. Her thoughts wandered to her own life—how busy she had been with work, family events, and social gatherings. Why waste energy worrying about things that didn’t impact her directly?

That weekend, while grocery shopping, Amanda noticed the long lines at the local food pantry. Families with tired faces shuffled in and out, and the shelves looked nearly bare. She felt a pang of sympathy but quickly dismissed it. “They should just work harder,” she thought. This sentiment seemed justified as her own family had worked hard to build their life.

But then, during a visit to the bank, her boss announced that the branch would be downsizing, and staff hours would be reduced. Amanda's stomach sank. Her pay would be cut, putting a dent in their finances. “I can manage,” she told herself, but the unease bubbled beneath the surface.

Weeks passed, and as tensions within her community escalated, so did her silent struggle. Amanda began to feel the financial strain, yet she continued to soldier on, convincing herself that others had it worse. She organized family outings, participated in community events, and wore her cheerful facade like armor.

However, late at night, when the house was quiet, Amanda found herself scrolling through social media. Posts from friends echoed the frustrations she had ignored: stories of layoffs, personal struggles, and pleas for help. For a moment, she felt the weight of their experiences, but quickly shut down those

nagging thoughts. “I’m fine,” she whispered to herself. “I just need to work harder.”

One fateful night, Amanda received a call from Sarah. The community was organizing a fundraiser to support the food pantry. “It’s a great opportunity to help people, Amanda. We need as many hands as we can get,” Sarah urged.

In a rare moment of clarity, Amanda hesitated. The invitation felt like a call to action, yet she wanted to find an excuse. “I really can’t. I have a lot on my plate right now,” she protested, even as her heart yearned to contribute.

That evening, Amanda sat alone in her living room, the weight of the decision hanging heavily above her. Her gaze fell on the photos lining the wall—moments of joy shared with family and friends. Yet, something felt incomplete, as if she was missing a connection to something deeper.

In that quiet moment, realization washed over her like a tide. She had been so focused on her own life, her own struggles, that she had ignored the plight of others and the impact that the larger social issues had on her community—including herself. While she had felt somewhat secure, the challenges faced by her neighbors were all interconnected.

The next day, with newfound determination, Amanda called Sarah. “I changed my mind. I want to help with the fundraiser,” she said, her voice steady. This time, she would not only show up for herself but for her community.

As she joined her friends, a sense of belonging enveloped her. Amanda began to understand that the emotional fulfillment she had been craving was not found in isolation or attachment to her own circumstances. It was in the shared struggles, the connections, and the collective efforts to lift one another that she would find her true sense of purpose. Connected events were becoming clearer. She and her community were in this together.

In overcoming her own reluctance to see the broader picture, Amanda took the first step toward reconnecting with her community—and herself. Through her journey, she discovered that sometimes the most profound revelations come from addressing the needs of others, ultimately leading to personal fulfillment and a deeper understanding of the world surrounding her.

Amanda’s journey toward seeing the larger reality began with choice—her choice—to get involved. Our journey toward understanding why we don’t see what is right in front of us also begins with choice, to gain an understanding of exactly what that entails.

Chapter 2

Choice and Agency

In the realm where choices arise,
Our beliefs shape what's wise in our eyes.
Beyond what we see,
Lies agency free
As perceptions give way to surprise.

When considering human agency, it is tempting to imagine ourselves as independent choosers—rational agents who freely survey options and select among them. Yet in practice, our acts of choosing are profoundly shaped, perhaps even constrained, by our own wants, perceptions, and beliefs. Often, we are “blind” to realities outside our inner frameworks. In this sense, we exercise agency not as free and open arbiters of possibility, but as beings whose horizons of choice are circumscribed, sometimes invisibly, by the limits of our subjectivity.

Do we truly choose, or do we simply select among what we *want*—and perhaps even, what we *wish*—to see? Put another way: To what extent is our agency an act of “choosing to see what we choose to see,” and what does this mean for the nature and scope of human freedom?

The Role of Beliefs in Human Choice

Human agency—the ability to make choices and act upon them—is deeply influenced by the beliefs an individual holds. Far from being free-floating acts of will, our choices are powerfully shaped, constrained, and sometimes even determined by the frameworks of perception and understanding we bring to the world.

Humans often imagine knowledge as a set of *objective* facts about the world. However, a growing body of philosophical, psychological, and neuroscientific research suggests that *our knowledge is unavoidably shaped by subjective filters*, focusing our attention on certain options while rendering others invisible.

A primary filter is our belief system. For example, Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance (1957) shows that people are motivated to maintain consistency between their actions and beliefs, often choosing paths that minimize psychological conflict, even if it means ignoring alternative

information. Similarly, Kunda (1990) describes “motivated reasoning” as our tendency to interpret facts in ways that protect our existing beliefs and desires, which in turn channels our decision-making along well-worn tracks.

From a more philosophical and constructivist perspective, Kelly (1955) argues that individuals deploy “personal constructs”—essentially, belief systems—to interpret reality and navigate choices. In this sense, our beliefs not only filter our perceptions but help build the very world in which our choices make sense.

Kuhn (1962) argues that even scientific knowledge is shaped by paradigms—community-wide belief systems that determine what scientists see and how they interpret their findings. Neuroscience brings further depth to this picture. According to Friston’s (2010) “free-energy principle,” the brain is a prediction machine: what we perceive and act upon is not simply given by the senses, but is shaped by prior beliefs and expectations. Our brains generate models of the world rooted in belief, and we choose largely within the boundaries those models afford.

Philosophical inquiry further complicates the story. Bernard Williams (1973a, 1973b) asks whether beliefs themselves are subject to choice, concluding that while agency is central to being human, consciously “deciding to believe” is limited. This is because beliefs are shaped by what we recognize as reasons or evidence, which themselves are subjective, filtered through our existing frameworks.

Lastly, ubiquitous cognitive biases, such as *confirmation bias*, which is detailed later in this book, reinforce the tendency to attend to and seek information that matches what we already believe (Nickerson, 1998). In practice, this means that rather than surveying all possible options, humans interpret new information within our existing frameworks, gravitating toward those options consistent with prior convictions, effectively narrowing the field of real choices. New facts are often accepted or rejected based on whether they fit with what we already believe.

A related second filter is *perception*. What we know begins with what we perceive, and perception itself is selective—shaped by expectations, emotions, attention, and prior experience. This brings in a third filter, *emotional influences*. Emotions direct what we find important, memorable, or meaningful. They color not only how we perceive events but how we remember and judge them. A fourth filter is *social and cultural framing*. What counts as knowledge—and how it’s valued—is affected by cultural norms, language, and social context.

There is a depth of research that supports the connection between the subjectivity of knowledge, the roles of emotion, belief, and cultural context, and how they all relate to agency. The table below provides a brief summary of major themes running through this research.

Theme	Key Reference	Main Point
Scientific paradigms	Kuhn (1962)	Scientific knowledge is paradigm-bound, not strictly objective.
Personal constructs	Kelly (1955)	We interpret reality through idiosyncratic belief systems.
Emotion and cognition	Damasio (1994)	Emotion is central to forming knowledge and making choices.
Motivated reasoning, bias	Kunda (1990; Nickerson (1998)	Knowledge is shaped by desire, belief, and selective attention.
Subjective perception	Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962)	All perception and knowledge is embodied and subjective.
Cultural/social framing	Berger & Luckman (1966)	What “counts” as knowledge is determined socially and culturally.
Agency & reflective freedom	Taylor (1985)	Agency is meaningful through self-reflection on one’s frameworks.
Dynamic nature of knowledge construction	Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962); Bennet, Bennet, & Turner (2022)	Knowledge is subjectively re-created in the instant for the situation and context at hand.
Interplay between cognition and emotion	Damasio (1994); Greenfield (2000)	All information coming in through the senses is subject to a subjective emotional tag.

Connections to Agency

If all knowledge is subjective, then so is the field of possible choice. What we believe we can do, what outcomes we see as likely or worthwhile, and even what options we recognize as available, are all constructed through our ever-changing, subjective frameworks. Agency is not a matter of unfiltered will acting upon pure reality—it is the capacity to choose *within the world as we know and feel it*.

The implications are multiple. First, the *boundaries of agency*. Agency is only as broad as the knowledge we possess and the ways we are able to frame and interpret the world. If we are blind to certain facts, perspectives, or possibilities, those choices do not exist in our field of agency.

Second, the *potential for growth*. While all knowledge is subjective, *being aware* of this subjectivity gives us the chance to expand our horizons—to seek

out new experiences, perspectives, and emotions that alter our framework, thus broadening our possible choices.

Third, *responsibility and humility*. Recognizing the subjectivity of knowledge should lead to increased humility in asserting our choices and greater openness to others' perspectives.

This begs the question: *Is agency meaningful if it is so fundamentally subjective?* Let's explore both sides (the "yes" and "no") of that question, and perhaps look at a middle ground as well.

The Case for "Yes": Agency Remains Meaningful. Even if agency is radically subjective—filtered entirely through one's own beliefs and perceptions—it can still be deeply meaningful, both individually and socially.

- *Personal Significance*: From the inside, agency is about the felt experience of making choices—deliberating, intending, acting. This experience is foundational to how humans understand themselves as persons ("I am the one who decides..."), and how they assign responsibility and meaning to their lives.
- *Social and Moral Responsibility*: Societies are structured around the assumption that people are responsible for their actions, even if shaped by beliefs. Legal and ethical systems rely on the premise that, within the world as each person sees it, they are making choices.
- *Value of Subjective Worlds*: Meaning is not found only in some "objective" sense but also in the worlds we each inhabit. If my choices have meaning within my subjective worldview, that meaning is real for me, and for others who recognize it.

The Case for "No": Agency is Problematic if Radically Subjective. If agency is only meaningful within the limits of subjective belief, there are concerns.

- *Limits of Freedom*: If I cannot see beyond my beliefs, are my actions truly "free" or simply the outworking of conditioning and bias? Radical subjectivity could mean human agency is an illusion—people are pushed by inner forces they neither chose nor see.
- *Diminished Moral Accountability*: If individuals are entirely bound by their subjective frames, holding them responsible may seem unfair—could they really have chosen otherwise?
- *Social Fragmentation*: Different subjective frameworks can lead to conflicting truths. If agency is only meaningful relative to personal beliefs, the basis for common, shared understanding weakens.

Middle Ground: Recognizing Subjectivity but Seeking Expansion. Many philosophers and psychologists suggest that while agency is inevitably subjective, meaningful agency emerges when individuals are able to *reflect on, question, and sometimes expand or challenge* their beliefs.

- The process of *reflection, learning, and growing awareness* can allow people to modify their subjective frameworks—deepening the authenticity and range of their agency.
- Agency, then, is meaningful to the extent that individuals can recognize their filters and strive to transcend, revise, or at least acknowledge them.

Here’s a summary table:

Position	Is Agency Meaningful?	Key Arguments
Radical Subjectivity	Yes	Agency is meaningful within subjective experience; personal worlds matter.
	No	If choices are predetermined by beliefs, “free” agency is an illusion.
Reflective Subjectivity	Yes, with qualification	Agency gains meaning as one becomes more aware of, and can revise, one’s own beliefs.

While agency is meaningful, its meaning appears to change depending on *whether we see subjectivity as a prison or as a field for growth*. As long as individuals can reflect on and potentially broaden their perspectives, agency retains significant, even if its exercise will always be shaped by the limits of individual perception and belief.

In summary, human choice operates within a web of beliefs that shape not just what is chosen, but what is even *seen as* choosable. Our agency is thus both empowered and limited by belief: we are free to act, but we look (and choose) through the lenses our experiences and convictions have fashioned.

Can We Choose Beyond Our Limited Perceptions/Beliefs?

Let’s frame our question clearly. If all agency (the ability to choose) operates within what we can perceive and believe, is it ever possible for a person to select something that lies *outside* those boundaries? Can we, by some act of will, transcend the invisible walls built by our current knowledge and worldview?

1. **The Sense in Which We Cannot.** From a phenomenological or psychological standpoint, *the limits of perception and belief are, by definition, the limits of choice*. Add to our conversation above, we cannot

consciously choose something that does not even appear as an option, or that we cannot conceptualize as possible, real, or desirable. Merleau-Ponty (1962/1945) argues that our lived, embodied experience structures all meaning and possibility. If something isn't within our horizon of sense, we cannot select it. Rumsfeld's (2002) famous "unknown unknowns" line is "What we don't know we don't know is unavailable to our deliberations" encapsulates the idea that there are factors affecting our decisions and understanding of which we are completely unaware. For example, a person raised in a culture that has no concept of romantic love cannot choose a love marriage. As a second example, someone who truly believes a wall is impassable cannot choose to walk through it.

2. The Sense in Which We Can. *Change is possible*—people's belief systems and perceptions do sometimes shift, allowing "new" choices to appear. But this process is often gradual and "outside-in," rather than a direct act of will. Mechanisms that expand possibility include:

- *Encountering the Unexpected:* New experiences can disrupt current beliefs and cause paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1962). For example, a person may meet someone with a radically different worldview or witness a counterevidence event, causing them to question their old limits.
- *Education and Dialogue:* Exposure to new ideas through travel, learning or conversation can bring unseen options into view (Gadamer, 1960/1975).
- *Reflective Self-Doubt:* Crisis, doubt, or inner conflict, that which creates cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) may prompt questioning and allow a person to entertain alternatives previously ignored.
- *Imagination and Art:* Creative expression sometimes helps people "try on" new ways of seeing, briefly transcending habitual belief.
- *BUT ...* in each case, it is *new perception/belief* that makes new choices possible—not direct selection beyond the limits of the old. We do not reach completely outside our worldviews by fiat, but by disruption, expansion, or transformation of them.

3. The Role of Agency in Self-Transcendence. Some philosophers (Taylor, 1985) suggest agency consists not just in "choosing among" options, but in the capacity to *reflect on* and *revise* the frameworks that structure choice in the first place. This means agency is exercised at two levels:

- Choosing within a framework, or

- Seeking to expand or reconsider the framework itself.
- BUT ... even such expansion requires some perception that one's beliefs might be partial, limiting, or open to question.

In conclusion, generally a person cannot “choose” in the fullest sense *beyond* their current limits of perception and belief—those limits define the field of choice. But agency is meaningful partly *because* frameworks are not perfectly fixed: new experiences, encounters, and reflections can, sometimes unpredictably, expand what we can see, believe, and therefore choose. Agency includes not only selection within a worldview, but—crucially—the (always partial) possibility of changing that worldview itself.

Does Recognizing Our Subjective Limits Alter Our Agency?

In Plato's “Apology” 36c-38a, Socrates expresses that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” emphasizing the importance of self-reflection and seeking wisdom such that one's beliefs and actions gain true value and purpose. The examined life, while more complex, also has greater scope for growth, meaning, and authentic agency. Let's explore both sides of this question along with its transformative potential.

1. Recognizing Subjectivity as Agency-Enhancing. *Awareness breeds possibility.* When we realize our knowledge and choices are filtered by subjective beliefs, emotions, and perspectives, we gain an opportunity for *meta-cognition*—thinking about our thinking. This can:

- *Expand our options:* Recognizing the boundaries of our worldview makes it possible to seek out new perspectives, challenge our own biases, and learn from others. The *veil* that limits our choices becomes, paradoxically, more transparent.
- *Foster humility and openness:* When we understand our limitations, we become more receptive to alternative viewpoints, feedback, and even radically different experiences.
- *Increase reflective freedom:* As philosopher Charles Taylor (1985) argues, agency is not just about acting but also about reflecting on the frameworks within which we act. Recognizing subjectivity allows us to question and sometimes revise those very frameworks, thereby making new forms of agency possible.
- *Example:* A scientist aware of how paradigms shape her research can intentionally seek cross-disciplinary insights, opening up creative and

innovative solutions unavailable within her original paradigm (Kuhn, 1962).

2. **Recognizing Subjectivity as Agency-Limiting.** Awareness can also breed paralysis or skepticism.
 - *Analysis paralysis:* Becoming highly aware of the ways our choices are limited or constructed can make decision-making harder, sometimes leading to doubt or hesitancy.
 - *Epistemic humility taken to extremes:* If we become so skeptical of our own perspective (radical subjectivism or relativism), we may feel that truly “authentic” or “informed” agency is impossible.
 - *Example:* A person paralyzed by self-doubt about their judgment may struggle to take action, worried any choice is simply the outcome of invisible bias.
3. **Transformative Potential: Changing the Nature of Agency.** Rather than simply increasing or decreasing agency, *recognizing subjectivity transforms its nature.*
 - *From naïve to reflective agency:* Instead of acting within our worldview by default, we become capable of shaping, questioning, and sometimes transcending elements of it. Dewey (1916/1933) argued that growth in self-knowledge is central to education and moral agency.
 - *Recursive self-improvement:* Metacognition—the ability to reflect on our own cognition—lets us improve not only our choices, but our *ways of choosing* (Flavell, 1979).
4. **Synthesis.** Recognizing the subjectivity of our perception and belief:
 - *Expands agency* by opening new options, fostering growth, and increasing the adaptability of individuals.
 - *May momentarily limit agency* by opening new options, fostering growth, and increasing the adaptability of individuals.
 - *Transforms agency* by opening new options, fostering growth, and increasing the adaptability of individuals.

After Thoughts

In essence, human agency is inextricably linked to the beliefs, perceptions, emotions, and cultural frameworks that shape our experience of the world. Far from being purely free, our choices emerge within horizons set by what we

perceive and believe—limits that are both real and, at times, invisible. Yet, awareness of this subjectivity can itself become a source of expanded freedom, prompting self-reflection, humility, and the ongoing potential to reshape our frameworks. Ultimately, while we cannot always see *beyond* our present limits, agency finds its greatest significance in our capacity to recognize, question, and sometimes *transcend* them.

True freedom is not the absence of limits, but the awareness of them. By examining the lenses through which we “see”, we open ourselves to growth, and, in doing so, widen the field of real choice. In the end, agency lies not just in choosing, but in the courage to question the world in which our choices arise.



About the Author

Alex Bennet is a Professor, Innovation and Knowledge Institute Southeast Asia (IKI-SEA), Bangkok University, and the Director of the Mountain Quest Institute, a research and retreat center located in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia. Through three quests—the quests for knowledge, consciousness and meaning—the Institute is dedicated to helping individuals achieve personal and professional growth, and organizations create and sustain high performance in a rapidly changing, uncertain, and increasingly complex world. Alex is the former Chief Knowledge Officer and Deputy CIO for Enterprise Integration of the U.S. Department of the Navy, having previously served as Acquisition Reform Executive and Standards Improvement Executive, and is recipient of the Distinguished Public Service Award, the highest civilian honor from the Secretary of the Navy. She has published hundreds of papers and journal articles, and authored, co-authored or edited over 40 books, primarily with her life partner, Dr. David Bennet, a nuclear physicist and neuroscientist, who recently transitioned. Together, the Drs. Bennet have spoken and taught around the world. This is the 3rd book in the series looking at the current state of the world through different lenses. These are *fRAGgmentation: The Power of e Pluribus Unum* and *The Taint of Hubris: Rediscovering Humility and Bridging Authentic Connection*. A fourth book: *Becoming Wise, Open, Kind, and Empowered* is an open source volume downloadable from ResearchGate and www.mqresearchcenter.com. Other 2025 publications include *Infinite Learning: Your Life, Your Choice*; *C&C Thinking: Becoming Whole* (creative and critical thinking); and *Contiguity: Entangled Living and Learning*. Alex believes in the multidimensionality and interconnectedness of humanity as we move out of infancy into full consciousness. Contact her at alex@mountainquestinstitute.com

The Mountain Quest Research Center located in the

Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia is a research, retreat, and learning center dedicated to helping individuals achieve personal and professional growth, and organizations create and sustain high performance in a rapidly changing, uncertain, and increasingly complex world. MQI has three quests: the Quest for Knowledge, the Quest for Consciousness, and the Quest for



Meaning. MQI is scientific, humanistic, and spiritual and finds no contradiction in this blend.

Eye Opening Research for Today's World!

fRAGmented: e Pluribus Unum (2025)

Alex Bennet with Foreword by YOU

This is our world, a tapestry woven with threads of diversity and division. As we journey in this book through the complexities of our world, we critically explore fragmentation in the physical, holistic human, digital, narrative/art, and societal domains, and delve into the societal political fragmentation occurring today.

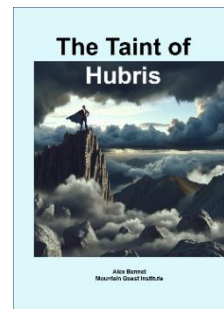


The Taint of Hubris: (2025)

Rediscovering humility and bridging authentic connections

Alex Bennet with Foreword by William Halel

Characterized by excessive pride or arrogance—and referring to something being spoiled, sullied, or negatively influenced in some way—hubris can be thought of as a contaminating aspect of human nature. It stands out as a pervasive taint that has woven itself into mythology, literature and history, and is highly visible in the societal political landscape of today.

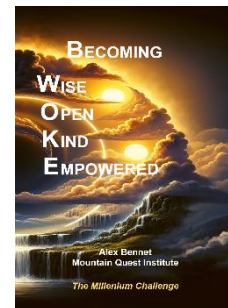


Becoming Wise, Open, Kind, Empowered (2025)

The Millenium Challenge

Alex Bennet

For many, being “woke” signifies a positive awareness and active engagement with social justice issues, which is the intent of social and cultural awakening consistent with spiritual awakening. However, in this fragmented world, core tenets of democracy such as *diversity, inclusiveness and equality* are being tossed aside and translated through prejudicial and biased beliefs and political frames. If we are wise enough to think in Whole Thought and consult and understand the patterns reflecting human decisions and events, this has been historically proven questionable. And herein lies the purpose of this book.

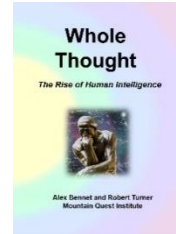


Whole Thought:

The Rise of Human Intelligence (2024)

Alex Bennet and Robert Turner with Foreword by David Bennet

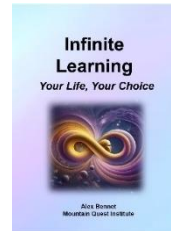
In tracing the arc of human progress, one can discern an underlying pattern steering the course of our intellectual evolution—a gradual but persistent gravitation towards what is now identified as Whole Thought. This paradigm represents a transformation in the fabric of cognition brought into relief by the cumulative ascent of human intelligence. Whole Thought is a call for action—a framework for living, learning, and leading in a manner that is reflective, inclusive, and deeply interconnected.



Infinite Learning: Your Life, Your Choice (2024)

Alex Bennet with Foreword by Vincent Ribi  re

Infinite learning is the pulse of human existence, the essence that breathes life into our quest for understanding, innovation, and growth. It is not an optional luxury but an essential requirement, ensuring we are able to meet the demands of a changing world while capable of achieving personal growth and societal contributions of profound significance. Embracing infinite learning in pursuit of Whole Thought ensures that we are constantly expanding our horizons and discovering new potentials. *Living is learning; learning is living.*



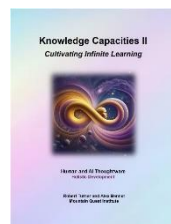
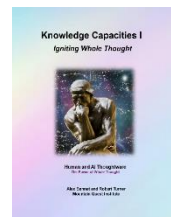
Knowledge Capacities I and II (2024)

Our capacity for knowledge is not a fixed quantity but a horizon ever-expanding. It is the reservoir from which we draw strength, the lens through which we view possibility, and the compass by which we navigate the future. It is the creation of the rise of human intelligence.

KC I: Igniting Whole Thought (40 Capacities)

KC II: Cultivating Infinite Learning (24 Capacities)

In today's dynamic and rapidly evolving environment, fostering capacity has become increasingly essential. Capacity refers to the broad potential or inherent ability of individuals and organizations to learn, adapt, and grow over time. It encompasses the fundamental ways of thinking, being, and acting that allow us to effectively engage with dynamic and complex environments.



Innovative Creativity: Creating with Innovation in Mind (2024)

Alex Bennet and Arthur Shelley with Charles Dhewa

Foreword by Robert Turner

More than ever, how do we release the Genie from the lamp? How do we tap the next level of creativity and innovation that we need here on Planet Earth? This groundbreaking work beckons us to deepen our innate creativity capacities in a new and expansive way to summon the genius within each of us.



Contiguity: Entangled Living and Learning (2025)

Alex Bennet with Foreword by Chulatep Senivongse

Learning and living are contiguous experiences, with mind creating the subjective relationships that create the temporal and spatial relationships in our stories and memories. Our thoughts, sensations, and perspectives form the connected and cohesive experience of the contiguous mind. Embrace the entangled dance of living and learning, and discover the profound connections that define our shared existence.



C&C Thinking: Becoming Whole (2025) (Critical and Creative)

Alex Bennet & Robert Turner with Foreword by Moria Levy

In an era marked by rapid technological advancement and constant change, the ability to think critically and creatively is more crucial than ever. As we look toward the future, it becomes evident that the traditional reliance on past patterns to predict and plan for what lies ahead is insufficient.



Unleashing the Human Mind: A Consilience Approach to Managing Self (2022)

David Bennet, Alex Bennet, Robert Turner

with Foreword by Florin Gaiseanu

What does it mean to be human? Increasingly we recognize that we are infinitely complex beings with immense emotional and spiritual, physical and mental capacities. Presiding over these human systems, our brain is a full integrated, biological, and extraordinary organ that is preeminent in the known Universe. Its time has come.

This book is grounded in the Intelligent Complex Adaptive Learning System (ICALS) theory based on over a decade of researching experiential learning through the expanding lens of neuroscience.

