Twitter Thread by Malcolm is back by the ■cean!



Malcolm is back by the ■cean!
@Malcolm_Ocean

Alright, 1 hour worth of thoughts on:

Spatial metaphors for human systems

for @threadapalooza

> Spatial metaphors for human systems.
>
> — Conor White-Sullivan \U000100cf\U0001f1fa\U0001f1f8 (@Conaw) December 18, 2020

1/ Okay, let's start with BRIDGES!

(first that came to mind)

This is a common human system metaphor, people talking about bridging between cultures or perspectives, or communities/individuals.



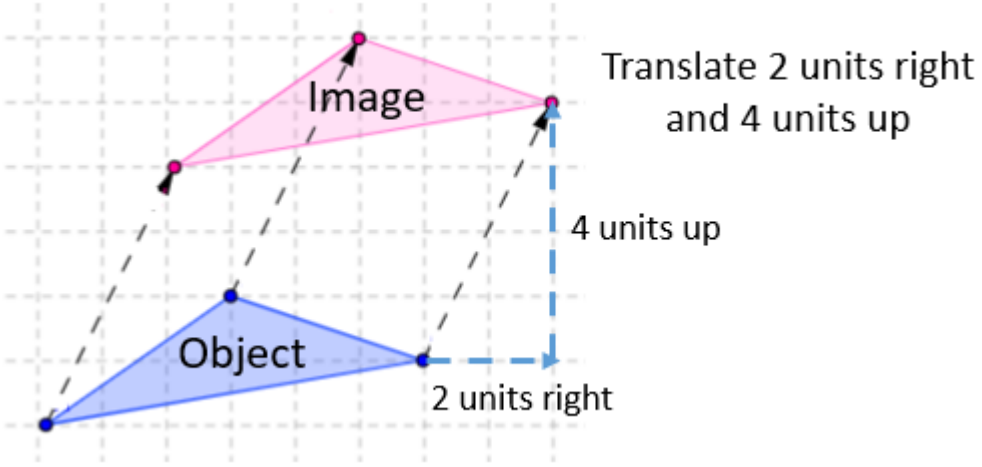
2/ In fact it's the metaphor @vgr used in the prompt he gave me for @threadapalooza last year, in a thread I never finished:

https://t.co/3hjZmfEz5c

> 1 like = 1 opinion on "Bridging subcultures that don\u2019t quite harmonize"
>
> (It's not quite a natural category for me but it's what vgr gave me and I like a challenge! good way to draw out some implicit opinions. comment if you have more specific Qs) https://t.co/eAn0MhwZfX
>
> — Malcolm is back by the \U0001f30ecean! (@Malcolm_Ocean) December 16, 2019

3/ The bridge metaphor is kind of an obvious one: forging some kind of translation connection between two different perspectives.

It's a kinda limited connection though. In fact, the word "translation", in the context of mathematics, means "to move across" which matches bridge



4/ So a bridge, as a metaphor, is a way to move one perspective across to another. But let's contrast that with the metaphor of "depth perception", where the two perspectives are integrated into a larger whole.

Way harder than bridging, & more potent.

https://t.co/bM2qWCrona

> Your two eyes have different perspectives and thus contradict each other constantly about what's closer and what's on what side of what...
>
> ...and\u2014usually\u2014rather than wasting energy on an argument over which 2D view is right, the brain integrates them into DEPTH PERCEPTION \U0001f92f pic.twitter.com/k9w9t8pqxE
>
> — Malcolm is back by the \U0001f30ecean! (@Malcolm_Ocean) May 11, 2020

5/ Bridging between two perspectives seems to me like a bit of a kind of "peace" opposite of war. You've got civility, and not total difference. And it's a necessary first step. But it's only barely creating something new.

https://t.co/ibaYBxz47w

> "The opposite of war isn't peace\u2014it's creation!" pic.twitter.com/ayn9PIH6gx

— Malcolm is back by the \U0001f30ecean! (@Malcolm_Ocean) December 21, 2020

6/ The depth perception metaphor continues to blow my mind and feels really important to understanding the value of difference.

7/ I recall a convo with @rjgoodin a few years ago where we were talking about people valuing "diversity", and the sense in which it has intrinsic value, not just market value (another metaphor btw)

ie it's valuable not just because people want it

https://t.co/kZ25LvaGvY

> What's a survey question that would distinguish between...
>
> "I am very into this woke stuff because I personally think it is correct"
>
> vs.
>
> "I will give woke-aligned answers to questions, because that stuff is labeled 'good' and I'm going with the social flow"?
>
> — Eli Tyre (@EpistemicHope) December 20, 2020

8/ However, the same valuable potential energy that's available in diversity can be destructive if there's more of it than can be effectively integrated.

If you plugged a thousand cameras into your brain, you'd go crazy before you could integrate all those perspectives.

9/ A natural metaphor for this is that difference in perspective is like nuclear fission energy:

you need a minimum critical mass to get anything interesting to happen at all, but then if you have more than that... you get an explosive bomb that's hard to control



10/ More diversity, in this sense, isn't simply better. So there needs to be some equivalent of the nuclear control rods that govern the critical mass and maintain the capacity for safe dialogue, to avoid explosions.

This can take many forms. But what even is governance?

11/ Hmmm... "govern". Do ppl know about flyball governors? Super cool device that automatically regulates the speed of engines by turning increased speed into grav potential energy + centrifugal force that in turn slows the spinning. Great metaphor for self-governing systems.

12/ By contrast, a lot human groups have positive feedback loops around regulating group conflict and tension. As the thing speeds up, you get pulled to the outside where it's harder to hold on!



13/ And of course when people go flying they then end up traumatized and guarded in future interactions.

The other thing that's cool about the flyball governor is that the potential energy that's stored automatically gets used to restore speed if the engine power drops ■

14/ Anyway, the point of talking about the flyball governor, aside from "it's super cool!" is to point at how governance can be something that's built into the system rather than tacked on top, and it NEEDS to be something that can regulate in both directions, otherwise WHOOPS

15/ One metaphor I've heard people use for regulating group dynamics is of a cell membrane

(what's my prompt again? "Spatial metaphors for human systems" ...idk what counts as spatial - everything's pretty spatial to me. I guess I'll avoid computer stuff tho—doing great so far)

15.....? welp this is its own thread now:

(about 10 tweets - it'll link back here at the bottom so you can navigate)

https://t.co/kxZuyBENg6

> Ahh fuckit part of my @threadapalooza thread had a clear subtopic and wanted to be its own thread.
>
> Here's the thread about "membranes" as a metaphor for groups of people. https://t.co/Ke0Dzv6L1q
>
> — Malcolm is back by the \U0001f30ecean! (@Malcolm_Ocean) December 21, 2020

16/ ...six minutes left, what else is important?

I better say something about hierarchy. Hierarchy, as the assymetric organization of things into different functional levels, is a vital part of this beautiful fractal universe.

It can breed power abuses, but so can any context.

17/ Trees are hierarchical in organizing how the roots connect to the branches and out to the leaves. There are also of course rhizomes or weird wandery cacti that don't have a clear hierarchy, but even these have cellular hierarchy.

This is called a functional hierarchy.

18/ The "can't see the forest for the trees" metaphor is another example of hierarchy, in this case more in terms of abstraction. Trees are one level of abstraction, one level of analysis, forest is another. Up higher is maybe a whole biome or climate.

19/ Anyway, hierarchy is basically necessary for organizing large structures, but it doesn't have to be command hierarchy, and it doesn't even have to be *centralized* hierarchy!

Your brain has parallel hierarchies where each level has many connections both up and down.

20/ Of course the default result if you try to apply that to a human system is a shitshow—matrix organizations are kind of an example of such an attempt, as is this message that happened at Spotify.

https://t.co/oi3zr0U65s

21/ I think we can do it though, and that's part of my vision outlined in this thread ■

But it'll require a totally different capacity for each node to do self-authored prioritization, as well as way better communication than most companies have.

https://t.co/Z7djNRxgOx

> Wanting to write a thread on the larger meta-vision I have that inspired me to make this move.
>
> Initially wrote this in response to @andy_matuschak's response "Y'all, this attitude is rad", but wanted it to be a top-level thread because it's important and stands on its own. https://t.co/kh6m8hFkql
>
> — Malcolm is back by the \U0001f30ecean! (@Malcolm_Ocean) October 19, 2020

....fin?

It's been a little over an hour but I wanted to finish my initial thoughts. I think I can keep going, but I don't want to make that into homework for myself.

This has been a ton of fun and I want to find ways to do it more.