Twitter Thread by Dogs don't have thumbs

Dogs don't have thumbs
@MorlockP

One evolution in my thinking over the last ~5 years is that I now hate High Theory

I find a few other people using the phrase, but no crisp definitions so I'm going to attempt one.

It will necessarily be wrong

...if I claimed it was simple AND correct IT WOULD BE A HIGH THEORY

2/

A "high theory" is an explanation of multiple phenomena using a simple (low Kolmogorov complexity) explanation, often coupled with an appeal to essentialism.

3/

A trailer park example of High Theory is "Jews pull all the strings" or "whites are better than blacks in every way".

4/

A mid brow example of High Theory is "Christianity caused the dark ages and delayed Real Civilization by 1,000 years".

5/

High brow examples of High Theory are whatever most philosophers are nattering on about, and anything 1 or 2 steps removed from a TED talk.

6/

Einstein said "make things as simple as possible, but no simpler".

High Theory overshoots the mark and makes things way too simple.

hilarious explanation of every High Theory ever -->

https://t.co/AJroQq6UFe

> everything \U0001f44f is \U0001f44f monocausal \U0001f44f and \U0001f44f specifically \U0001f44f results \U0001f44f from \U0001f44f whatever \U0001f44f shit \U0001f44f I'm \U0001f44f on \U0001f44f about \U0001f44f at \U0001f44f any \U0001f44f given \U0001f44f time
>
> — pumpkin spice bmo (@eigenrobot) February 23, 2018

7/

Libertarian High Theory says things like "without the state redistributing wealth illegitimately and creating crimes, we wouldn't need jails"

This theory is too simple in a dozen different ways.

- There have always been murders and rapes
- laws that are indeed BS tend to >

8/

ensnare the low conscientious and criminal. The guy who was drinking in public is almost certainly causing all sorts of other problems...and would under any system of governance.

9/

Red Tribe High Theory is that we need a praetorian class and a return (RETVRN!) to traditional values, and then everything will be good.

...as if (a) feedback loops w cops aren't fundamentally broken, or (b) there was ever a golden age, or (c) RETVRN is possible

10/

Aesthetic High Theory is that if we simply (SIMPLY!) prioritized nice livable environments we'd all live in wood frame cottages, eat home cooked meals, have babbling brooks in the back yard, etc., but greedy architects / planners / whoever stole it all from us.

11/

The canonical example of High Theory that I like to point out is the bumper sticker that, say, a music teacher will have on her crappy used car "teach music; build world peace" (or whatever dumb variant)

It's a coupling of all good things, or all bad things

One single root

12/

The One Single Root aspect of high theory is what makes it so appealing

If only we could FORCE THEM TO OBEY THE CONSTITUTION, or TEACH THEM NOT TO RAPE, or whatev then not only would crime fall to zero, but the genders would live in peace, and it would never rain on picnics

13/

Someone (Joel on Software? JWZ?) wrote an essay once about how everyone wants to rewrite the crufty old code to simplify it...but every bit of that cruft is a work around for a specific scenario, or a fix, or a feature someone wants.

Books start w no page numbers >

14/

transition to roman numerals, and then transition to arabic numerals.

You can simplify the word processor, but you then start removing compatibility with desires for such features.

...but even this is effectively a pragmatic argument.

My argument about Theory is not JUST

15/

pragmatic. It's more about correct analysis of things.

It is just flat out wrong to assert that we only have cars because the auto mfgrs bought up the streetcars and dismantled them. That's true (slightly) but the results are overdetermined.

16/

We are a car based society for dozens of reasons - each of them with a different coefficient.

We have rape for dozens of reasons, each with a different coefficient.

We have copyright law for dozens of reasons.

And, in turn, each of these "things" is not one thing but

17/

a cluster of things. Cars are tools to commute, and to transport kids, and to shop, AND status symbols, AND mating tools, and and and

Democracy is a tool for selecting rulers, AND a tool of mythmaking, AND an outlet for sociopaths, AND a historic accident, AND ...

18/

And so any attempt to say that democracy IS X, or MEANS X,or is INCOMPATIBLE with Y, is wrong, because "democracy" is really a cluster of different / overlapping things.

This is bad news for the rationalist enterprise (both the modern one in 2020 and the earlier wave >

19/

...that day dreamed of formal languages for debating propositions using Boolean logic, etc.

Moldbug is pretty formalist and High Theory, and this is to be expected, because he's autistic & we autists love high theory

I like reading Molds bc his theories and writing are fun

20/

...but Molds really only does a tiny bit of high theory. A LOT of what he writes is really more the footnotes, and footnotes are inherently anti-high theory. High theory is about principles divorced from details, and footnotes are details. High theory can't survive >

21/

impact with footnotes. Footnotes complicate, diffuse, and render the monocausal multi-causal.

22/

I think that High Theory is oversupplied relative to ideal market clearing quantities bc it's fun to do, easy to do, and it looks high status.

Confidence is attractive, and so flatly asserting "All governments derive from " sounds both smart and confident.

23/

High theory is basically bumper sticker campaigning, but at a meta level, not an object level.

Bumper sticker: No farms no food (e.g. "I'm virtuous and important for farming")

High theory: "All power flows from the control of resources"

or whatever

24/

and... I dunno where I'm going with this.

Basically, this, I guess: almost everything in the real world is messy. Code has more parts than you might thing. Rivers have no one "head water". Every machine has hundreds of parts.

...and High Theory ignores all of this.

25/

Let me propose an inversion of Occam's Razor: instead of "do not needlessly multiple causes", "do not needlessly ignore causes".

26/

well, I do agree that it's better if multiple Causes are being debated at once

...but I think that in practice, the result is not most ideological consumers handcrafting results using a diversity of parts ... but each person subscribing to >>>

https://t.co/OUWpJrSsGf

> If many different groups evangelize their pet high theory simultaneously, the idea marketplace as a whole is dynamic and multicausal. If every individual group acknowledged the complexity, you might just see a morass of indecision and inaction.
>
> — aashiq (@aashiq) October 12, 2020

27/

Either Oww My Balls, Oww My Ball Two, or Oww My Balls Eight ("The Ocho").

28/

"Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is difficult. These difficulties accumulate and produce a friction which no man can imagine exactly who has not seen war." - Clausewitz

29/

"Everything is very simple in Theory, but the simplest thing is complicated in Reality. These complications accumulate and produce a friction which no man can imagine exactly who has not seen Reality." - me

30/

Yep. All "seeing like a state" is based on Theory.

https://t.co/uD1wkyAh7I

> Observation shows us that the majority person has the mental capacity to consider one relationship between two variables, no more.
>
> This is the root of Keynesian economics, supply side, demand side, the two party system, good cop bad cop...
>
> High theory of high theory
>
> — the Kestrel (@1337kestrel) October 12, 2020

31/

https://t.co/sTPmhQws8w

> This is evident in Gell-Mann Amnesia. If you\u2019ve seen the rubber hit the road in one domain of expertise you can chuckle ruefully at the simpletons. In most other domains you\u2019re the rube that has no idea what you don\u2019t know.
>
> — Brownian Motion (@cobrownell) October 12, 2020

32/

https://t.co/mieleKiV6m

> Reliable success (ex.: Apple, Tesla, Molock Publishing) stems from meticulous & tenacious tracing principles to details.
>
> This.
> Is.
> Hard.
>
> Few are capable of doing so without neglecting some branch or level (due to panic/incompetence), causing failure. Detail is costly but vital.
>
> — Camping Roomba \U0001f1fa\U0001f1f8 (@ctdonath) October 12, 2020