WHAT IS THE ANSWER TO COMPLEXITY?

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We have all heard the word *complexity*. Moreover, maybe we could say that if we are not directly related to the research in complexity science, then we may have come across its increase in usage only lately. However, is it so? Has complexity increased? Or, is it the case that the usage of the word is more frequent now while complexity per se has been the same for a long time? And, if complexity has indeed increased, then what is it that different individuals or groups or institutions are doing to make sense of it and help the society navigate it?

Well! Both the question and the answer to this is not so simple, and in some sense, it is complex.

A Google n-gram for the last 500+ years reveals that the word "complexity" had a relatively steady usage for 200+ years from 1750-1950, and then it has been on the rise.
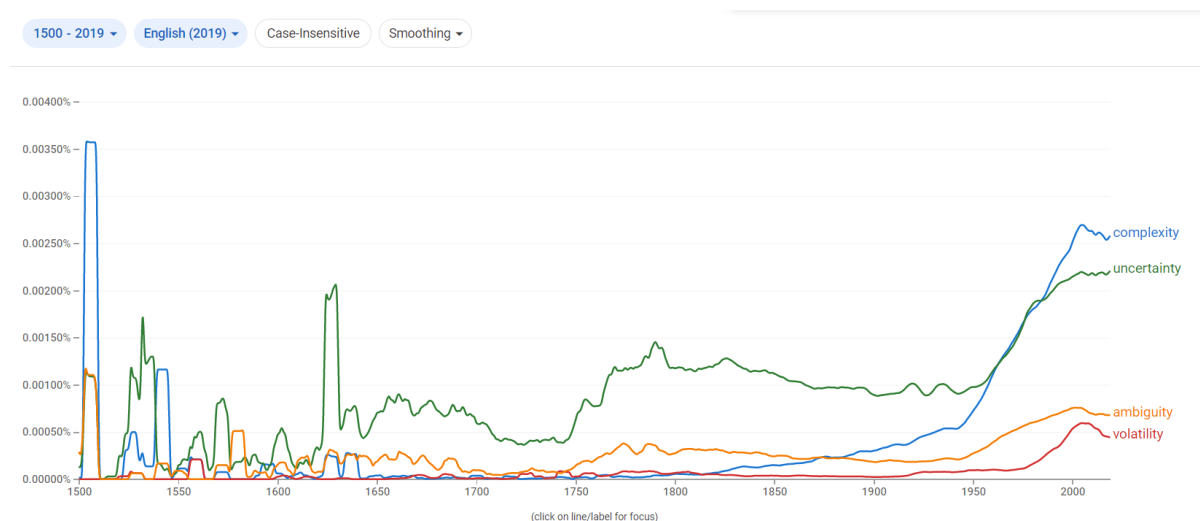
Let us assume that not only the usage of the word but also complexity itself has increased. Let us look at other phenomena that unfolded in the last few decades.

- In 1979, what led **Jon Kabat-Zinn** - a PhD in molecular biology, to start a unique practice for patient recovery at the Medical School of the University of Massachusetts?

- In 1987, what led **Tenzin Gyatso (the 14th Dalai Lama)**, **Francisco Varela** - cybernetician, biologist, neuroscientist, and **Adam Engle** – a lawyer and an entrepreneur, to set up a new Institute?

- What is one of the most crucial practices covered at the **Greater Good Science Center,** University of California, Berkeley, since 2001?

- What made **Google** assemble inter-disciplinary scientists to study and look at a practice to aid better work experience, and then later hive it off as an independent non-profit entity for the world at large?

An umbrella answer to all of the above questions lies in the single-most important factor that blends the west and the east, the ancient and the modern, the particular and the general, the beta and the meta.

It brings to life the persistent commitment by some of the leading global academic institutions, business organizations and individual influencers. We are referring to their commitment towards **Contemplative Practices**, informed by scientific inquiries and research. Contemplative Practices is more like a placeholder that refers to several ancient meditation and reflection techniques.
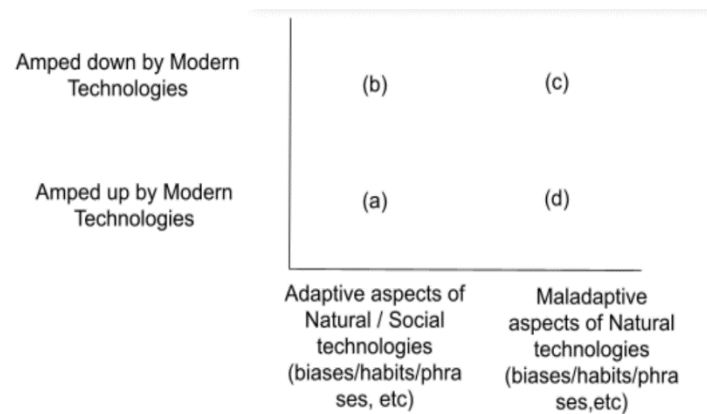
Why should we pay heed to it? For starters, our evolution brought an interesting move, inside the individual and outside. It had to do with what may be called as *few-for-many*. With so much of complexity already since aeons, we needed something *fewer* to manage the *many*. We wanted something to hold on to, that which is either relatively unchanging or we keep it as relatively unchanged, around which we can navigate the myriad changes inside and outside.

Biases, Habits and Phrases played this role for a long time. Biases and habits became somewhat like natural technologies to manage innumerable changes inside and outside. Phrases or idioms or aphorisms came as social technologies to do a similar thing; and these biases, habits and phrases also functioned as earlier versions of codes or automations of sorts to handle the swelling complexity.

According to a leading American Anthropologist and Author of the book *Collapse of Complex Societies*, Joseph Tainter, "complexity is an increase in the differentiated parts having emergent non-linear relations, that require a form of dynamic integration, in order to function".
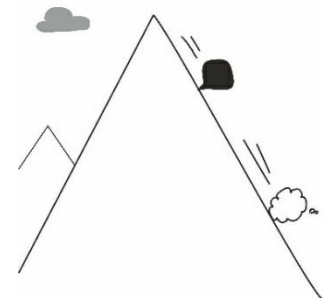
Biases, habits and phrases are found to be useful in many complex situations, except for those times when they do not work or backfire. These natural and social technologies can be adaptive or maladaptive, across different individuals, groups, circumstances and times. The crucial aspect in our times is the interplay between the natural and social technologies on the one hand, with the modern-day technologies on the other. Modern technologies powered by equations and codes, that are shaping the world of atoms and bits in disruptive ways. They could be amplifying or neutralizing natural or social technologies.

	Adaptive aspects of Natural / Social technologies (biases/habits/phrases, etc)	Maladaptive aspects of Natural technologies (biases/habits/phrases,etc)
Amped down by Modern Technologies	(b)	(c)
Amped up by Modern Technologies	(a)	(d)

Modern technologies aren't the same for all i.e. they do not work the same for all individuals. Their effect could be different for different individuals and groups. Sometimes the adaptive aspects of natural or social technologies could be amped up by modern technologies, and sometimes they could be amped down. Some other times the maladaptive aspects could be amped up or amped down too. The reverse may also be true.

For example, if one has not developed critical thinking or critical feeling, and one binges on the social media technologies, then that person could be highly prone to large scale bias driven tribalism and echo chambers of sorts. Or somebody who hasn't cultivated conversational intelligence, then one can get sucked into bad faith, straw-manning of arguments, or what is now being called as context-shredding (pulling things out of context). This may be further amped up by the constraints of some of the social media technologies that do not allow for nuanced, well-reasoned argumentation or co-discoveries.

The natural/social technologies of individuals or group(s) end up harnessing or appropriating various modern technologies differently. These could further amp up or down the access to resources, opportunities and outcomes across the population. The key question then is, in what ways the digital connect or the digital divide further amplifies or reduces the divisions or inequalities in the physical milieu. These concerns are attracting decibels and headlines across the world.

So, in a world where massive disruptions happen in a blink, what could be an aid? Much on the lines of the natural technologies (biases/habits) and social technologies (phrases), there have been some additional technologies from our ancient past; that may already emerge as one of the possible answers to complexity. That which enables a process that we call complexification. That which enables the cultivation of poise amidst inner and outer disruption. That which aids nuance or differentiation on the one hand, and on the other, also holds or integrates them, or even stays with the paradoxes or the inexplicable. That which may enable adjudication over the various natural and social technologies.

All of it points in the direction of what could generally be called "*Contemplative Technologies"* that enable the cultivation of different kinds of Meta amidst the ever-whelming disruptive beta. Aspects like meta-awareness, meta-cognition, meta-emotion, meta-language, meta-action, meta-politics, meta-economics, meta-social and so on. Through various practices of meditations, dialogues and conscious actions.

Could we then ring in contemplative practices now to aid us to preside over the complex interplay between the earlier and the modern technologies? Between the inner disruptions and outer disruptions?

Viewing it from the lens of a two-by-two grid.
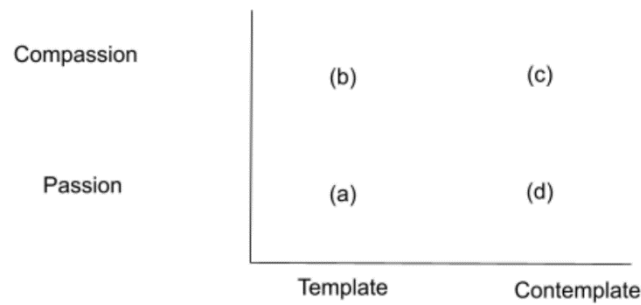
a. Invariably we operate out of some basic levels of templates and passions. Often borrowed and conditioned, seldom contemplated.
b. Sometimes we do cultivate compassion, but may be unable to move from our earlier templates or evaluations or biases.
c. Sometimes we are able to hit the sweet spot of contemplation and compassion. This sweet-spot has an interesting feature of being dynamic in nature, in that, it stems from epistemic humility and continuous discovery.
d. Sometimes we are able to have many contemplations but they are unable to move the erstwhile passions, or be hijacked by them.

Through various contemplative practices, one could gain a greater degree of self-awareness. This could enable one to deal differently with the here-and-now and there-and-then.

Over the years, the perception of contemplative practices has also been shifting. A move from:

● *Isolated Practice to Integrated Practice*: From being something to be practiced in isolation, at a certain time of the day, in a certain posture, to now being looked at as an on-going on-demand practice across our entire day. During our meetings, or even writing emails or performing a chore, or sheer walking from one place to another, or having a sip of water or that small morsel of food.

● *Serving Health Goals to additionally Serving Social Goals, Economic Goals, Political Goals*: From being in service of one's well-being to now being integrated towards better relationships, better creativity, better productivity, better dialectic and perspective taking. Through constant reflection and experimentations in how we interact with each other, how we make sense of the various game-theoretic constructs of the systems, and try to reimagine the various #RulesNormsIncentives.

And all of these aren't new. Something has been happening rapidly over the last couple of decades. Sales of self-help books, meditation workshops, subscriptions to social channels of various gurus, interdisciplinary researches across major global academic institutions on contemplative practices etc., all are growing.
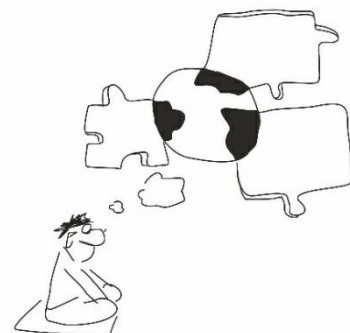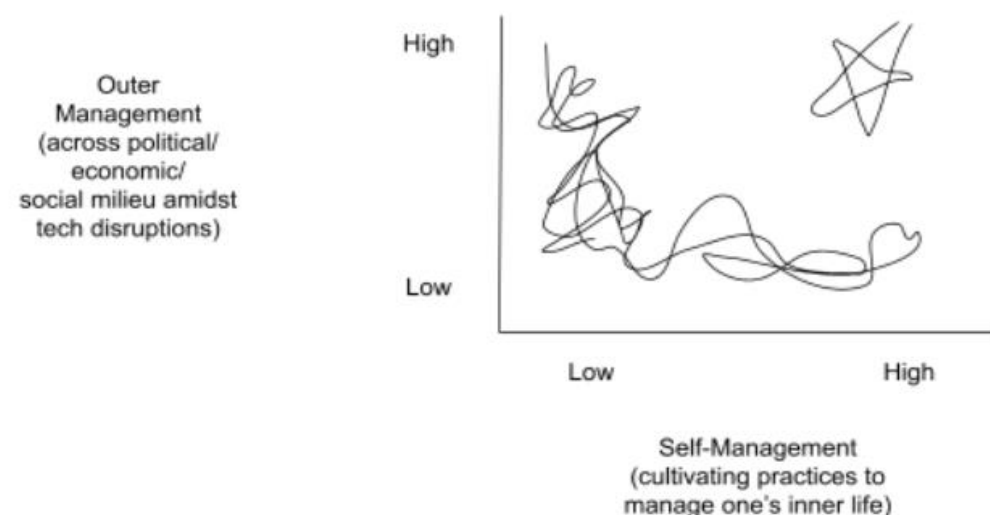
Even then, these practices often fall prey to the *few for many* approaches and get reduced to tools that lack depth and rigor. Or even when some of them turn into cases of opportunism led cult creation or promoting some kind of pseudo-spiritual-scientific-combo mumbo jumbo.

Perhaps there is a definite need for an authentic and scientifically oriented institution to envision a *Center for Contemplative Practices and Research* to emanate from India. **One that shines the interdisciplinary light on the indigenous**, and thus paves its applications across Political, Economic, Social, and Philosophical spectrum.

It could help in the soft-landing between the earlier and the modern technologies. It could help in ensuring that equations and codes meet biases-habits-phrases in the dawn of a new civilization. And avert the increasingly possible twilight of a potential collapse or the maladaptive aspects of the ongoing rivalrous game-theoretic misery.

Self-management ought to precede or be simultaneous to all others forms of management, and such a centre could be the essential lighthouse.

High

Outer
Management
(across political/
economic/
social milieu amidst
tech disruptions)

Low

Low   High

Self-Management
(cultivating practices to
manage one's inner life)

Of course, the above depends a lot on many factors like one's cosmology,
overarching life goals, dispositions, states of consciousness, and more. Hence twin
move of creating structures (#RulesNormsIncentives) from outside (by leaders) and the
skills by individuals, could create an interesting dance and possibilities.