Recognition Theory

Why knowing isn't enough – and what might be

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The story we all know

On the 27th of November 2025, a queue snaked around the block at Westminster Central Hall. Henry Bird, writing in The Sunday Times, had arrived expecting a modest gathering. What he found surprised him: Sir Mark Rylance, Deborah Meaden, Jennifer Saunders, Jarvis Cocker filing in alongside Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green politicians. The National Emergency Briefing – billed as the first event of its kind in the UK – had drawn a crowd far grander than anyone had anticipated.

One by one, ten experts took the stage. Chris Packham opened with a warning that failing to tackle climate change would be far more tragic than Covid-19: "It's not thousands, it's not hundreds of thousands, or millions of lives that are at risk – it's billions of lives that are at risk." Lieutenant General Richard Nugee, who led the Ministry of Defence's climate review in 2020, warned that cascading crises and diminishing trust in government meant the UK risked becoming "an ungovernable state." Professor Hayley Fowler said we "risk sliding into a state of permanent crisis management."

The science was clear. The warnings were urgent. The messengers were credible. The audience was receptive.

And yet.

Here is what haunts the organisers: climate scepticism in the UK is *increasing* even as climate impacts intensify. After the event, actress Olivia Williams captured the puzzle perfectly: "What is amazing and puzzling to me is that there are some people who'd rather listen to me with a degree in English than

they would to all the incredible people with PhDs here. People are listening and watching numpties on Instagram and not listening to these people who've devoted their lives to studying what is actually happening."

This is the question that should stop us in our tracks: Why doesn't knowing change anything?

The pattern we keep missing

The Westminster briefing wasn't the first attempt. It was the latest in a sequence stretching back decades.

The story begins with science. From the 1980s onward, evidence accumulated. Researchers published. Data mounted. The weight of findings became difficult to dismiss. The scientists had done their work.

Then came consensus. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change convened the world's experts. Reports were issued, each more certain than the last. The remaining doubters were marginalised. Science had spoken with one voice.

Then came boundaries. The concept of planetary limits entered public discourse. Nine boundaries identified, then warnings about how many had been crossed. The abstract became concrete: this much carbon, this much warming, this much time remaining.

Then came emergency. Local councils, national governments, international bodies declared climate emergencies. The language of crisis replaced the language of concern.

Surely now – with the science settled, the consensus achieved, the boundaries mapped, the emergency declared – surely now behaviour would change.

It didn't.

And then came the backlash. Trump in America, Reform UK and others in Britain, populist movements across Europe – dismissing it all as "fake news," "elite hysteria," "the climate scam." The harder the scientists pushed, the harder the resistance pushed back. The more urgent the warnings, the more entrenched the denial.

We might be tempted to see this as a battle between knowledge and ignorance, between those who accept science and those who reject it. That framing feels satisfying. It identifies enemies. It explains the stalemate.

But it misses the deeper pattern.

The trap that catches everyone

Look again at the Westminster briefing. Not to criticise, but to notice.

The scientists who spoke that evening have devoted their lives to understanding what is happening to our planet. Their work is rigorous, essential, and largely thankless. Chris Packham, Professor Fowler, Lieutenant General Nugee – these are not the problem. If we needed heroes, they would be among them.

And yet the format of the evening enacted something worth examining.

Experts stood on stage. An audience sat in seats. Information flowed one direction – from those who have studied to those who haven't; from those who know to those who need to learn. This is how we've been taught knowledge works: accumulated by specialists, then transmitted to the public, who will act appropriately once they understand.

It's a reasonable model. It's how education works, how journalism works, how public health campaigns work. And for many purposes, it works well enough.

But for the climate crisis, it hasn't worked. Not because the science is wrong or the scientists are arrogant, but because the model itself may be incomplete. It assumes that the gap between knowing and doing can be bridged by better knowing. More data. Clearer presentation. More credible messengers.

Olivia Williams's puzzlement reveals the assumption: "People are listening and watching numpties on Instagram and not listening to these people who've devoted their lives to studying what is actually happening." The implicit question is: why don't people listen to those who know?

But there's another question underneath: what if listening isn't enough? What if the gap between knowing and changing isn't an information gap at all?

Two ways of relating to knowledge

In my presentation to the Schumacher Institute – the event that led to this briefing – I used a metaphor: the shift from kings to gardeners.

A king commands from above. He surveys his territory, issues decrees, expects compliance. His knowledge is power over. When things go wrong, the solution is more command: clearer orders, better enforcement, stronger authority.

A gardener tends from within. She knows her plot through relationship – through seasons of attention, through learning what this soil needs, through discovering what wants to grow here. Her knowledge is participation in. When things go wrong, she looks for what she's missed, what relationship has broken down, what the garden itself might be trying to teach.

Both the king and the gardener act. Both use knowledge. The difference lies in the posture: above or within, command or tending, override or recognition.

This isn't a moral distinction. Kings aren't villains; gardeners aren't saints. The distinction points to two different relationships between the knower and the known – and to the possibility that our civilisation has become stuck in one mode when the situation calls for the other.

The Westminster briefing, despite the best intentions of everyone involved, operated in king mode. Not because scientists are kings, but because the *format* – experts transmitting truth to audiences who will then comply – embodies a particular theory of how change happens. That theory has been tested for decades. The results are in.

Climate scepticism is increasing as the evidence mounts. The more urgent the warnings, the more resistance they generate. Something in the approach itself may be triggering the very defences it needs to dissolve.

The same trap, different banners

And here's what makes this genuinely difficult: the populist backlash doesn't escape the trap. It reverses the polarity while keeping the structure.

When figures like Trump dismiss climate science as "fake news," they're not proposing a gardener's relationship with the land. They're claiming to be better kings – authorities who see what the establishment cannot, who will decree different truths from a different throne.

The symbolic warfare continues. My experts against your experts. My facts against your facts. My emergency against your hoax. Both sides assume that whoever controls the narrative controls reality.

Neither asks what the territory itself might be trying to teach.

This is the pattern I want to name: not a flaw in scientists or sceptics, but a structural feature of how symbolic intelligence operates when it loses contact with what it represents. The map begins to feel more real than the territory. The debate becomes more engaging than the encounter. We argue about climate while the climate itself goes unmet.

The trap catches everyone. It catches activists who mistake righteous certainty for relationship. It catches policymakers who mistake targets for transformation. It catches systems thinkers who mistake elegant models for participatory knowing. It catches me, writing this briefing, substituting words for the encounter they point toward.

Recognising this isn't cause for despair. It's the beginning of a different possibility.

The consciousness trap

To understand why knowing doesn't produce change, we need to examine how symbolic intelligence works – and where it goes wrong.

In their recent book *The Blind Spot*, physicist Adam Frank, philosopher Evan Thompson, and cosmologist Marcelo Gleiser identify a pattern at the heart of modern science. They call it "surreptitious substitution": the replacement of concrete, tangible experience with abstract mathematical constructs, followed by the forgetting that the substitution ever occurred.

Their parable of temperature illuminates the pattern. We begin with bodily sensations of hot and cold – the felt experience that anchors all our thinking about heat. Scientists noticed that these sensations correlate with changes in the volume of fluids, and they built thermometers.

They used thermometers to develop thermodynamics. They used thermodynamics to define temperature abstractly, without reference to any substance. They even defined absolute zero – a temperature that cannot be experienced because it represents the complete absence of thermal energy.

"The Blind Spot arrives when we think that thermodynamic temperature is more fundamental than the bodily experience of hot and cold. This happens when we get so caught up in the ascending spiral of abstraction and idealisation that we lose sight of the concrete, bodily experiences that anchor the abstractions and remain necessary for them to be meaningful."

This is what Whitehead called "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" – mistaking the abstract for the concrete, the map for the territory, the representation for the reality it represents.

Frank, Gleiser, and Thompson locate this pattern primarily in scientific methodology. But the pattern operates more broadly. Science didn't invent substitution; it inherited and refined a vulnerability inherent in symbolic intelligence itself.

The deeper pattern

Cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have shown that metaphor isn't decorative language – it's the cognitive mechanism by which abstract thought becomes possible at all. We understand time through spatial metaphors ("looking forward to the future"), arguments through war metaphors ("defending a position"), and ideas through object metaphors ("grasping a concept").

If this is right, then substitution isn't an occasional error. It's the entry fee for symbolic intelligence. We don't sometimes mistake maps for territory; mapping *is* how we think. The moment experience is named, something is gained and something is lost. The name enables manipulation, communication, accumulation across generations. But the name is not the experience. And the very utility of naming makes the substitution invisible.

This is the consciousness trap: symbolic intelligence, having abstracted itself into concept, naturally locates itself in the abstraction. It begins to operate as if its representations were complete, as if its models captured the whole, as if the feedback loops that constrain other forms of intelligence no

longer applied to it. The trap isn't a pathology of modern science or a failure of education. It's structural – the shadow side of the very capacity that enables culture, planning, communication across time.

The speed of the trap

There is a speed dimension here that matters enormously. The trap doesn't work through deliberate choice to prefer maps over territory; it operates faster than deliberation. By the time we're consciously thinking, the substitution has already occurred.

Consider what happens when you articulate a thought. The words themselves are symbols – they translate lived experience into a shareable map before the thought is even complete. Other thoughts crowd in. The theft is immediate and complete. Symbolic intelligence doesn't wait for permission to substitute representation for reality – it does so automatically, continuously, as its basic mode of operation.

This is why "just think more carefully" cannot be the solution. Careful thinking is itself symbolic processing. You cannot think your way out of a trap that operates faster than thought.

What works instead is *formation* – the slow reshaping of perception and response through practices that operate at the speed where the trap operates. The German tradition calls this *Bildung*: not the accumulation of information but the transformation of the person who receives it. Contemplative traditions have always known this. You don't argue your way to wisdom; you form yourself into someone capable of recognising it.

The evolutionary mechanism

The consciousness trap is not an accident of history or a character flaw. As evolutionary biologists Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd demonstrate in *Not By Genes Alone*, it is a predictable byproduct of the very capacity that makes human culture possible.

Cultural transmission – the ability to learn from others – gives humans extraordinary adaptive power. We can acquire complex skills, adapt to virtually any environment, and accumulate knowledge across generations. No genetic change is required; the learning system handles it.

But this openness comes with an inescapable vulnerability. Richerson and Boyd call it the "costly information hypothesis": the same features that allow beneficial ideas to spread also open a portal through which maladaptive ideas can enter – ideas whose content makes them more likely to spread even though they reduce wellbeing.

"Selection can't get rid of cultural maladaptation without giving up the ability to rapidly track varying environments ... Culture gets humans fast cumulative evolution on the cheap, but only if it also makes us vulnerable to selfish cultural variants."

This is not a bug to be fixed. It is a structural trade-off. The same door admits both wisdom and folly. Our propensity to adopt beliefs that harm us is part of the price we pay for the remarkable power of cumulative cultural adaptation.

The regulatory context

"The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think."
– Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind (1972)

Bateson wrote this over fifty years ago. It has been quoted in thousands of papers, taught in universities, affirmed by systems thinkers worldwide. And still the gap he named has widened.

The consciousness trap doesn't occur in a vacuum. It occurs within – and against – a context of regulation that has been operating for 13.8 billion years.

Long before anything we would recognise as consciousness appeared, the universe exhibited feedback-responsive self-organisation. Thermodynamic systems dissipate energy along gradients. Far-from-equilibrium structures maintain themselves through continuous exchange with their environments. Cells regulate their internal states. Ecosystems maintain dynamic equilibria across disturbances. At every scale, we find adaptive, feedback-responsive processes that maintain coherence without anything we would recognise as conscious awareness directing them.

This is regulation: the capacity of systems to sense their context, respond to perturbation, and maintain relationship with the larger wholes they participate in. It isn't a metaphorical extension of a human property onto the universe. It's recognition that what we call intelligence in humans is a local instance of something far more widespread – or rather, that human symbolic intelligence is a recent elaboration of regulatory capacities that long preceded it.

Bateson pointed toward this when he defined information as "*a difference that makes a difference"* – a formulation that locates meaning in relationship and response rather than in abstract representation. His "ecology of mind" wasn't metaphor; it was recognition that mind-like processes – feedback, learning, adaptation – operate at scales far beyond individual organisms.

Geoffrey Vickers developed this insight into his theory of "appreciative systems." He saw that human institutions don't primarily pursue goals; they maintain relationships. The goal-oriented language that dominates management and policy systematically misrepresents how human systems work – and in misrepresenting them, damages them. Vickers was diagnosing the consciousness trap *avant la lettre*: the substitution of goal-pursuit for relationship-maintenance, of representation for participation.

Peter Checkland extended Vickers's insight into methodology. His "soft systems" approach acknowledged that human situations are irreducibly relational – they cannot be captured in the objective models that work for engineering problems. The analyst is always part of the system being analysed. The mapmaker cannot stand outside the territory.

These thinkers – and the systems thinking tradition they represent – identified the pattern. They saw that modern institutions systematically privilege production over regulation, goals over relationships, parts over wholes. Their insights have been taught in universities and applied in organisations for fifty years.

Yet the crises they diagnosed have accelerated.

Why? Because even systems thinking can operate within the trap it names. You can create elegant models of relational dynamics and still treat those models as better maps rather than as invitations to participatory knowing. You can acknowledge multiple perspectives while still believing that your meta-perspective transcends them all. You can describe appreciative systems while approaching the description through the very goal-oriented cognition Vickers warned against.

The trap is not escaped by understanding it. The trap is escaped – if at all – by restored relationship with the regulatory context that symbolic intelligence has severed itself from.

What the trap severs

This is what makes the consciousness trap different from ordinary error. Ordinary errors can be corrected by better information. The consciousness trap is the condition in which symbolic intelligence operates *as if* the feedback loops that constrain other forms of intelligence no longer applied to it. The models feel complete. The representations seem sufficient. The regulatory signals that would otherwise correct and constrain are filtered out, reinterpreted, or simply not received.

The result is a system that can run indefinitely without reference to consequences – until it can't. Until the accumulated override meets the limits that were always there, now encountered not as gentle corrective feedback but as catastrophic failure.

This is why civilisations collapse despite accurate diagnosis of their problems. The diagnosis itself operates within symbolic intelligence. It produces more maps, more models, more

sophisticated representations. What it cannot produce – what it structurally excludes – is restored relationship with the regulatory patterns that would constrain behaviour before catastrophe becomes unavoidable.

Recognition and understanding

Recognition is different from understanding.

Understanding happens in symbolic consciousness – you grasp a concept, see its implications, can explain it to others. You can understand something while holding it at arm's length, treating it as information to be processed rather than reality to be lived. Understanding is extrinsic knowing: knowing about.

Recognition happens when the pattern you've been studying reveals itself as already present in your own life, already holding you, already teaching you what you thought you were learning elsewhere. Recognition is intrinsic knowing: knowing from within.

The distinction has a rich philosophical history. Michael Polanyi distinguished "tacit knowledge" – the kind of knowing that cannot be fully articulated – from explicit, propositional knowledge. Hubert Dreyfus showed how expertise develops through stages, from rule-following to intuitive mastery that can no longer explain itself. The "situated learning" tradition demonstrated that competence emerges through participation in communities of practice, not through abstract instruction.

In my own work as a facilitator, I saw this distinction operate for forty-five years. I convened what I called "benchmarking networks" – groups of experienced senior managers from different organisations who met to discover what good practice

looked and felt like. The value wasn't in the explicit knowledge they exchanged; it was in the recognition that happened when they saw skilled practice enacted by peers. Something shifted that couldn't have been transmitted through documents or presentations.

Four ways of knowing

Action inquiry, developed by William Torbert and Peter Reason, distinguishes four ways of knowing: propositional, experiential, practical, and presentational.

Propositional knowing is knowing-that: facts, theories, explicit claims. This is where symbolic intelligence feels most at home.

Experiential knowing is direct encounter: the felt sense of what it's like to be in a situation, prior to conceptualisation.

Practical knowing is knowing-how: the embodied competence that guides action, often operating below conscious awareness.

Presentational knowing bridges the others: the capacity to give form to experience through story, image, drama, and metaphor.

Systems thinking, like most academic disciplines, concentrates on propositional knowing while reaching toward the practical. But as Ian Roderick of the Schumacher Institute noted when reading an earlier draft of this briefing, we need more *presentational* knowing – good stories and drama that make recognition possible.

This is why testimony matters. Not as proof – testimony doesn't work that way – but as invitation. When someone offers honest

account of how a pattern revealed itself through their life, it creates conditions where others might recognise something they already know.

The hermeneutic circle

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer showed that genuine understanding isn't extraction of meaning from an inert object. Genuine interpretation requires being addressed by what you're engaging with. The text makes a claim on you. Your prejudices are exposed, challenged, transformed. What Gadamer called the "fusion of horizons" isn't you assimilating the other into your frame – it's both horizons being changed through the encounter.

Here's where the consciousness trap enters: the hermeneutic circle can spin in two modes.

In genuine interpretation, each pass through the circle transforms the interpreter. You read, you're challenged, you return with altered understanding, you read again, the text addresses you differently. This is formative. The circle spirals toward deeper recognition.

But the circle can also spin without transformation. You read, you assimilate what you read into existing categories, you return unchanged, you read again and find only confirmation of what you already knew. The apparent engagement with otherness is reinforcement of the same.

The consciousness trap is the hermeneutic circle operating in closed loop with maps – refining representations, updating models, increasing sophistication, while reality never gets a word in.

The question of maps

This raises an apparent tension. If we must use maps to navigate reality, how can the consciousness trap thesis condemn map-use?

The philosopher Hans Vaihinger addressed this directly in his 1911 work *The Philosophy of "As If"*. His argument: humans use useful, consciously provisional ideas – fictions or idealisations – to navigate an impossibly complex reality. We proceed "as if" these fictions were true for practical purposes, while knowing they are not the whole truth.

We act "as if" a material world exists, "as if" ethical certainty is possible, "as if" the future will resemble the past enough to make planning worthwhile. These simplifications make life and thought manageable, bridging the gap between our limited knowledge and the world's complexity.

The distinction isn't between using maps and not using maps. It's between maps that remain subordinate to territory and maps that substitute for territory. Maps held lightly remain tools. Maps mistaken for territory become prisons. The difference lies not in the map but in the relationship between map-holder and map.

"As If": a personal example

I know this from experience. In 1987-88, I consciously lived for a year treating the Bible as containing truth expressed in language appropriate to its time and place. Not inerrancy – not every word literally accurate – but the possibility that this ancient library of texts might disclose something real if I allowed it to address me rather than holding it at analytical distance.

It worked – not by forcing reality to conform to proposition, but by opening perception to experiences I would otherwise have filtered out. The "as if" operated as doorway, not destination. It made me available to encounter, which then validated or corrected the frame through direct experience.

The same principle operates in professional life. Project managers proceed "as if" they know what will happen – creating plans, schedules, risk registers – while the good ones remain responsive to what unfolds. The plan isn't a prediction; it's a device for noticing when reality diverges from expectation. Held lightly, it enables adaptive response. Held rigidly, it blinds us to what's happening.

This is why the consciousness trap cannot be escaped through better maps. Every map, however sophisticated, can become a substitute for the territory it represents. The escape lies not in the content of our representations but in our capacity to hold them as representations – provisional, partial, always less than the reality they point toward.

Convergent evidence

If the consciousness trap were merely philosophical speculation, it would be interesting but not compelling. What makes it urgent is convergence – what nineteenth-century philosopher William Whewell called "consilience."

Darwin's *Origin of Species* exemplifies this approach. No single domain proved evolution. But when geology, palaeontology, biogeography, comparative anatomy, embryology, and selective breeding all independently pointed toward common descent with modification, the convergence became undeniable.

We employ analogous methodology here. When multiple independent domains converge on compatible insights about distributed intelligence and regulatory override, that convergence suggests genuine pattern recognition rather than projection. I do not claim proof – consilience doesn't work that way – but I do claim that the evidence is "compatible with, and suggestive of, a common pattern."

The witnesses

Neuroscience: Antonio Damasio's research demonstrates that adaptive, goal-directed processes have been regulating life for billions of years through molecular pathways that operate without conscious awareness. The body thinks. Cells make decisions. What we call "our" intelligence is a late arrival, dependent on systems it didn't create and doesn't control.

Forest ecology: Suzanne Simard's documentation of mycorrhizal networks shows trees connected in vast underground webs, adaptively allocating resources, prioritising stressed individuals, maintaining forest coherence across disturbances. Because trees lack symbolic consciousness, we called this "just chemistry" rather than intelligence. The consciousness trap made the intelligence invisible.

Complexity science: Jean Boulton's identification of "patterns with agency" at ecological scales reveals intelligent units that are systems rather than individual organisms. These patterns regulate adaptively, responding to context in ways that maintain stability. But we cannot point to a conscious entity doing the regulating, so the intelligence goes unrecognised.

Consciousness science: Integrated Information Theory (IIT), developed by Giulio Tononi and championed by Christof Koch, takes the existence of conscious experience as its starting point rather than trying to explain it away. The theory proposes that consciousness is integration – the capacity of a system to exist as a unified whole that is more than the sum of its parts. This approach acknowledges what *The Blind Spot* authors call the primacy of consciousness: "There is no way to step outside consciousness and measure it against something else."

Civilisational dynamics: Luke Kemp's analysis of 324 collapsed civilisations identifies conditions that make societies vulnerable: storable surplus, monopolisable force, and barriers to exit. Every civilisation built on these foundations has eventually collapsed. Peter Turchin's structural-demographic analysis reveals mathematical regularities in civilisational cycles – patterns that recur because they express dynamics that symbolic intelligence cannot override simply by understanding them.

The Blind Spot: Frank, Gleiser, and Thompson identify what they call "the strange loop": "The universe contains the life-world, but the life-world contains the universe." We cannot step outside our experience to check it against reality, because any such checking occurs within experience. This isn't solipsism – it's recognition that the knower cannot be factored out of the known.

These scholars document consequences of the consciousness trap without naming the underlying mechanism. Recognition Theory names what multiple independent observers have already seen. The trap has been visible to careful scholars; what's been missing is recognition of the common generative pattern.

The industrialised portal

Richerson and Boyd showed that cultural learning opens a portal through which maladaptive ideas can enter. But they were writing before that portal was industrialised.

In cybernetics, Stafford Beer identified what he called "algedonic channels" – specialised communication pathways that transmit urgent, critical signals requiring immediate attention. In the body, pain serves this function: it bypasses normal processing to demand response. These channels exist because some information cannot wait for deliberation.

What happens when algedonic channels are exploited?

The attention economy runs on urgency. Every notification, every headline, every algorithmic recommendation competes to trigger the response: *this matters, attend now*. The channels evolved to signal genuine emergency are flooded with manufactured urgency. The signal-to-noise ratio collapses.

This is why the Westminster briefing faces headwinds the scientists didn't create. When climate scientists say "emergency," they're competing with a thousand other claims on the same channel – each engineered to trigger the same response, most of them far less consequential. The boy who cried wolf has become an industry.

We're not just trapped by our own symbolic operations. We're being actively farmed.

The portal that Richerson and Boyd identified – the opening through which both wisdom and folly enter – has been industrialised at scale. Algorithms optimise for engagement,

which means optimising for emotional response, which means exploiting the very channels that should be reserved for genuine emergency. The infrastructure of the attention economy is infrastructure for the consciousness trap.

This doesn't excuse individual responsibility. But it does explain why the gap between knowing and doing has widened even as information has become more abundant. The system is designed to capture attention, not to support recognition.

Practical implications for systems thinkers

Recognition Theory resists methodologies and six-step programmes – these would be more maps substituting for territory. But it does offer diagnostic tools.

The pattern test

The first is a diagnostic question to apply to any intervention:

Does this initiative work with embedded regulatory patterns, or does it require constant external override?

This is not a binary but a spectrum. Yet the signatures are distinct.

Systems that work with regulatory intelligence tend to be self-maintaining: they sustain themselves through relationship to larger wholes, not through constant injection of external resources or management attention. They tend to be resilient: they absorb perturbations and return to coherence. They tend to be generative: they create conditions for more life, not less.

Systems requiring constant override tend to be extraction-dependent: they take more than they give back. Remove the

subsidy – of attention, resources, or control – and they fail. They tend to be fragile: small perturbations cause cascading failures. They tend to be degrading - they deplete the conditions they depend on.

The Pattern Test doesn't tell you what to do. It helps you see what you're already doing – and whether the intervention you're designing will require permanent life support or can eventually sustain itself through relationship to its context.

Reality coherence intelligence

The second tool is a reframing of what good systems practice means.

The dominant paradigm treats intelligence as a property that individuals or systems possess – measurable as capacity, achievable through sufficient sophistication. This leads to the pursuit of ever-smarter control systems, better models, more comprehensive frameworks.

Recognition Theory proposes a different understanding: intelligence is relational integrity with what is happening. Not a property you possess but a quality of relationship you participate in. Not something you have but something you do – moment by moment, in responsive engagement with reality.

This shifts the question from "How do I become smarter?" to "How do I become more coherent with what's actually happening?" The latter question opens toward formation, practice, relationship – toward the slow work that the consciousness trap cannot shortcut.

Guidelines for practice

Before intervening, sense. What regulatory patterns are already operating? What intelligence is the system already exhibiting? Where is it stuck, and where is it moving? Intervention that ignores existing intelligence will likely trigger resistance or create dependency.

Design for handoff. Ask of every intervention: can this eventually sustain itself without me? If not, you may be creating extraction-dependency rather than building capacity. Sometimes ongoing support is genuinely needed – but be honest about whether you're building relationship or requiring permanent override.

Attend to what your models exclude. Every framework makes some things visible and others invisible. The consciousness trap operates through models that feel complete. What is your framework not showing you? Who in the system sees what you cannot?

Move at the speed of trust. Fetishising efficiency mistakes speed for capability. But systems change at the pace relationships allow. Forcing faster movement often triggers the very resistance it was meant to overcome.

Coming of age

Everything presented here points toward a single recognition: humanity needs to grow up.

I offer this as metaphor, not as quasi-biological claim. But the metaphor illuminates something important about our situation.

Adolescents possess adult capacities before they possess adult judgement. They can drive cars, wield weapons, make babies, manipulate symbols – but the regulatory systems that would constrain these capacities appropriately are still forming. Adolescence is powerful and dangerous precisely because capability outpaces wisdom.

This is where we are as a species. We have symbolic intelligence capable of reshaping the planet. We lack the collective maturity to wield it well. For five or six millennia – since writing and numbers and storable surplus enabled override at civilisational scale – we have been adolescents with increasing power and insufficient constraint.

The consciousness trap is not a flaw to be fixed. It is a developmental stage to be outgrown.

Coming of age isn't a programme to be implemented. It's a maturation that happens – or fails to happen – through how we live. Adolescents don't become adults by following instructions. They become adults through encounter, through consequence, through the slow formation of judgement that only experience can provide.

The first step is recognition. Not understanding the problem – we have endless analyses of the problem. Recognition: seeing ourselves within the pattern, acknowledging that we are the adolescents in question, that our collective behaviour exhibits precisely the characteristics we would diagnose in any other system operating beyond its regulatory capacity.

What comes after recognition? We don't fully know. No generation knows in advance what maturity will require of it. But we know the direction: from supremacy toward

participation, from override toward recognition, from the belief that our symbols are superior to the living systems they represent, toward the humility that allows intelligence to serve life rather than dominate it.

The shift from kings to gardeners isn't a demotion. It's a homecoming.

The rest is growing up.

Testimony

I offer one testimony. Not as proof – testimony doesn't work that way – but as one life honestly reported, showing how the pattern revealed itself through paths no one else will walk.

In 1948, a seven-year-old boy sat in the playground at Warwick School, lonely, unhappy, and bewildered, playing with his favourite toys: small die-cast models of cars. His father was a motor mechanic, and he loved finding out how things worked. And then a question emerged—"What's it all about?" That question never left. Then, around 1960 at university, came something he wouldn't have words for until decades later. A kind of nondual awareness. A recognition that the boundaries he assumed were solid were permeable.

That experience never left. It became a reference point, a knowing that preceded all the frameworks I would later study. Decades of searching followed. Theological formation. Contemplative practice. Academic study. A PhD in project management that unexpectedly confirmed relational patterns. Forty-five years of facilitation across three continents. Always the same question underneath: how do we help human systems work better together?

And always the same frustration: why doesn't good analysis produce good outcomes? Why do people understand and continue unchanged? Why does the knowing-doing gap persist despite everything we've learned about it?

The answer came slowly, then all at once. I had been looking in the wrong place. I had been searching for wisdom in books and traditions and exotic practices, when wisdom had been beside me for sixty years—in my wife, maintaining the relational network that enabled my searching. She embodied what I sought: the kind of intelligence Suzanne Simard's research reveals in forest networks—operating through relationship, patience, attention to what is happening rather than what our models say should be happening.

When I finally saw this – saw her, saw what she had been doing all along – it was the recognition this theory describes. Not understanding a new concept but recognising a pattern that had been holding me my entire adult life.

I do not offer Recognition Theory as a completed system. I offer it as coordinates for others who recognise this territory. The theory will develop through those who find it useful, critique it, extend it, correct it. That development will itself be an instance of the distributed intelligence it describes.

Closing

The Westminster briefing demonstrated something important: people are hungry for this conversation. The queue around the block, the diversity of the crowd, the mix of scientists and celebrities and politicians and ordinary citizens – this shows that the concern is there. The energy is there. The willingness is there.

What's missing is the form that could channel that energy into genuine transformation rather than more information, more warnings, more urgency that triggers more resistance.

The question isn't how to make people understand.

The question is how we learn to recognise together what we already know.

That's slower work. It's also the only work that addresses what's broken. And we have less time than we think to learn how to do it.

The rest is conversation.

❧

Terry Cooke-Davies
Distinguished Fellow, The Schumacher Institute
Folkestone, December 2025

Written in conversation with Claude (Anthropic AI)

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THE CONSCIOUSNESS TRAP

Eric Berne as Foundational Case of Unmet Recognition

"His own script was unclear to him and hence unavailable for change."

Claude Steiner

THE CASE

Eric Berne, creator of Transactional Analysis, could map life scripts and analyse injunctions with unsurpassed precision. Tragically, he could not reach "the place where behaviour and commitment form." Steiner wrote: "He slipped out of our lives. His heart aching went unchallenged."

DIAGNOSTIC READING

What is trapped in this story? Symbolic intelligence that mistakes representation for mastery	What is the unmet form of recognition? Relational tending, comfort “strokes”. Not the analysis of scripts, but the metabolising of them.

Knowing	No one knew scripts better than him.
Insight	He could map the pattern.
Relational failure	His distance kept loved ones from comforting him.
Recognition	He couldn't metabolise strokes.
Transformation	But the pattern persisted.
Tragedy	He died still inside the script.

This is the consciousness trap: Intelligence elaborating its own imprisonment.

INFERENCE: Transformation is relational, not cognitive.

THE CONSCIOUSNESS TRAP

Rome as Foundational Case of Civilisational Override

"*They make a desert and call it peace*." — Tacitus

THE CASE

Rome's finest minds diagnosed the empire's decay with devastating precision. Tacitus mapped the corruption of institutions, Seneca the moral bankruptcy of the elite, later historians the overextension and loss of civic virtue. The symbolic intelligence of Roman civilisation could see exactly what was destroying it. The seeing didn't save them.

DIAGNOSTIC READING

What is trapped in this story? Imperial intelligence that mistakes administration for relationship with territory and peoples	What is the unmet form of recognition? Feedback from provinces, from land, from the immiserated many. Not the management of empire but metabolising its effects.

Knowing	Roman intellectuals diagnosed the decay.
Insight	They could map the corruption.
Relational failure	Elite distance from provinces and populace.
Recognition	Couldn't metabolise feedback from the system.
Transformation	But the wealth pump continued.
Tragedy	Collapse stretched across centuries.

This is the consciousness trap: A civilisation elaborating its own imprisonment.

INFERENCE: Transformation is relational, not administrative.

The pattern scales. What Berne was to his own script, Rome was to its empire. What Rome was to its provinces, we are to our planet.

FACILITATOR GUIDE

The Consciousness Trap (Personal + Civilisational)

PURPOSE

To support facilitators, educators, and weavers in using the Consciousness Trap cards for collective inquiry, capacity-building, and relational diagnosis.

SESSION FLOW

1. Opening Ground (5–10 mins)
   Breath and body check-in. Frame the inquiry:
   "Today we explore the difference between knowing and transformation—between seeing a pattern and metabolising it."
2. Card Introduction (10 mins)
   Present both cards side by side. Read each quote aloud. Invite initial impressions.
3. Small Group Inquiry (20–30 mins)
   Prompt groups to explore:
   What is the unmet form of recognition in each case?
   How does symbolic intelligence block transformation?
   Where do you see these patterns alive today—in self, society, systems?
4. Harvest Themes (15 mins)
   Return to full group. Invite metaphors, tensions, resonances. Don't rush to closure.
5. Embodied Reflection (5 mins)
   Ask:
   "How does this land in your body?"
   "What is one thing you feel called to tend or track differently?"

6. Closing Frame
   Reiterate the core diagnostic refrain:
   "Transformation is relational, not cognitive. Diagnosis does not equal change." Offer silence or a collective gesture to close.

OPTIONAL EXPANSIONS

- Create a third card with a contemporary parallel (climate policy, AI ethics).
- Invite participants to write their own card: "Where do I mistake knowing for becoming?"

FACILITATOR REMINDERS

- Don't optimise. Compost.
- Stay with tension.
- Model partialness.
- Prioritise resonance over resolution.

This isn't a curriculum. It's a field. Let it breathe.

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