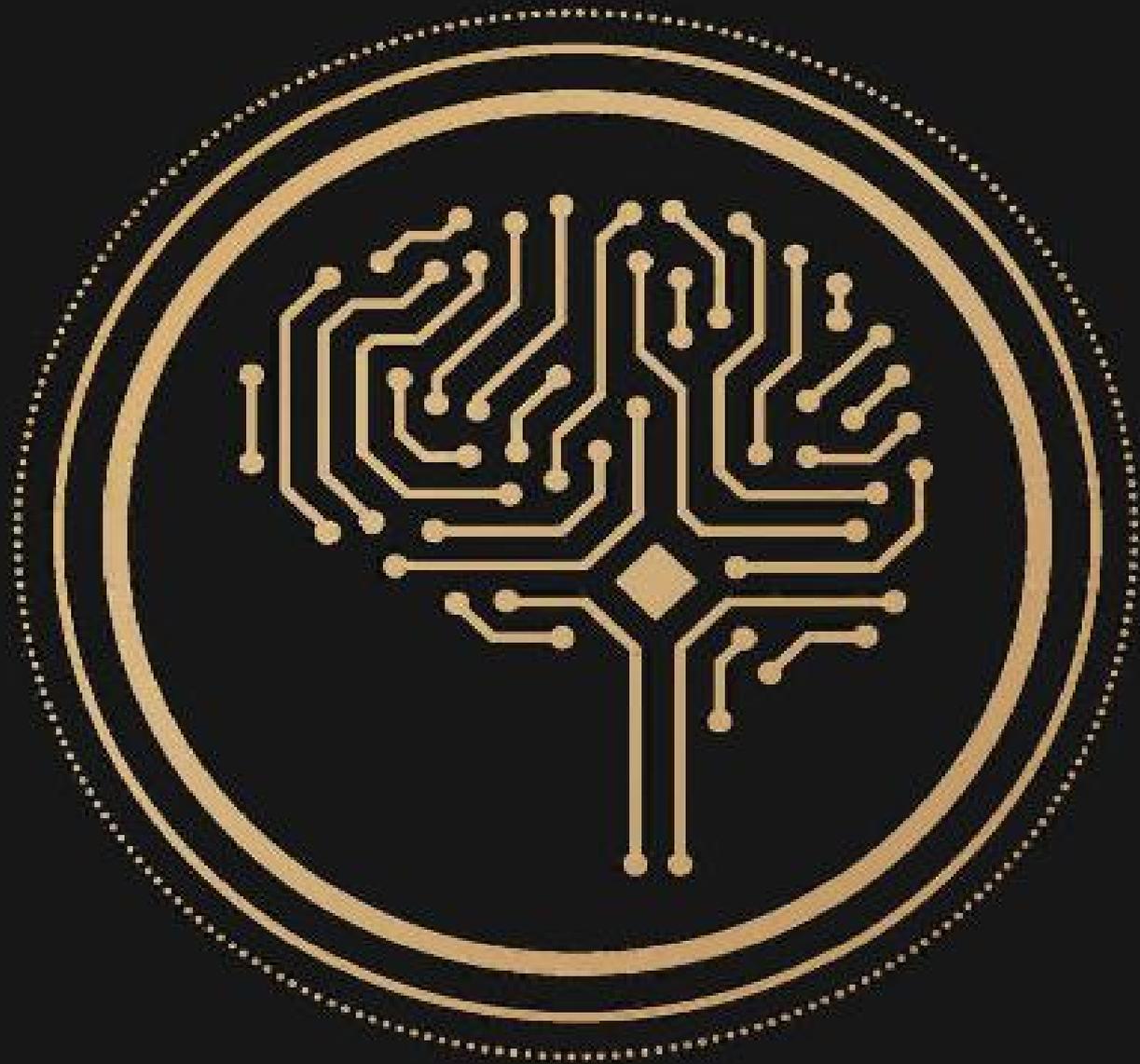


"Any man could, if he were so inclined, be the sculptor of his own brain." - Santiago Ramón y Cajal

DESIGNING



THE MIND

THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHITECTURE

Designing the Mind: The Principles of Psychitecture

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1: The Theory and Practice of Psychitecture](#)

[Chapter 2: Cognitive Biases and How to Rewire Them](#)

[Chapter 3: Values and the Methods of Introspection](#)

[Chapter 4: Cognitive Self-Mastery and Wisdom](#)

[Chapter 5: Emotional Algorithms and the Art of Restructuring](#)

[Chapter 6: Desires and the Keys to Modulating Them](#)

[Chapter 7: Emotional Self-Mastery and Equanimity](#)

[Chapter 8: Self-Direction and Its Impediments](#)

[Chapter 9: Behavioral Algorithms and Self-Control](#)

[Chapter 10: Self-Mastery](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Notes](#)

DESIGNING THE MIND

THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHITECTURE

DESIGNING THE MIND

First published by Designing the Mind 2021

Copyright © 2021 by Designing the Mind, LLC.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

Introduction

The year is 2084. You're playing a game of four-dimensional basketball, and one of your teammates makes a backhanded insult about your free throw skills. Immediately, a few things happen in your mind.

1. You feel pain.
2. You have the urge to reach through your virtual reality brain implant and make the guy regret his smug little comment.
3. Your self-esteem spends the next few days/weeks in a tailspin, causing you to ruminate over the insult, imagine and reimagine how you wish you had responded, and suffer.

But in the midst of this process, you think to yourself, "Wait a minute - it's 2084. We have technology for this."

So you open up an application through your neural interface that allows you to quickly modify your own brain. You sit through a few mind advertisements, try not to think any thoughts the government wouldn't like, and then you're in.

With just a few brain clicks, you are able to tell the software to remove your tendencies to suffer, seek revenge, and ruminate when someone insults you. You even add a feature that allows you to actually feel joy when you are insulted and to quickly respond with a witty and good-natured retort. Your new automatic response allows you to diffuse hostile situations and look like a rockstar, instantly making that awful sting of an insult a thing of the past.

By the year 2084, it is entirely plausible that we could have a

method for directly modifying our brains to remove the maladaptive tendencies that hold us back. But unless this book has stood the test of time unreasonably well, you are most likely reading in an era in which this process will sound like science fiction. We can't just remove our mental bugs with a few clicks. Our ingrained psychological limitations are set in stone for the time being, right?

We are not as powerless as you may think. With the right cognitive tools, it is possible for anyone to make modifications to their own psychological software: their mind. Our unwanted psychological tendencies really do break down into what can be compared to software algorithms. In this case, the insult is an input which triggers a kind of mental program. This program initiates a distorted thought cycle that causes you to reevaluate your self-worth in response to disrespect from your peers. This thought cycle then outputs emotional and behavioral responses which cause you to feel terrible and react impulsively.

Because these responses were programmed into us eons ago, humans have had a very long time to study them. Though they lacked our modern technological metaphors, ancient thinkers began examining and developing counter-algorithms for many of our problematic mental modules.

These thinkers had the forethought to write their insights down for posterity, and their wisdom, however scattered and diverse, is the open-source code we can use to program our own minds. My long-term goal is to curate and systematize these tools of software self-optimization and distribute them to as many people as possible. I want to do the next best thing to giving you an instant brain-modification implant. I want to provide you with a handbook for designing and optimizing your own psychological software.

Most people who read books to improve themselves do it because they want to advance their careers, lose weight, or make

more money. “Why am I designing my mind?” you may ask, “What am I getting out of it?” If this is you, I will go ahead and weed you out by announcing that this book will not directly help you attain or achieve anything out there in the world. It won’t turn you into a master of seduction or a champion of your conference room. It will not get you abs.

This book is for those who find the idea of building a better mind thrilling in and of itself. It is for those who are impassioned by the thought of cultivating greater wisdom, self-control, or tranquility - who are drawn to the philosophies of Buddhism and Stoicism or the fields of humanistic psychology and psychotherapy. We all want to be happier, healthier, better people. But only a few grasp that all of our highest aims can be reached by placing our focus directly on our minds.

If this describes you, you are what we will call a psychitect. You are among a collective of rare individuals who are excited by the idea of overcoming the seemingly fixed parts of themselves. You view the default state of your mind as an invitation to intervene and transmute. You want to unflinchingly look reality in the eye and find ways to alter it. You want to live a great life - not a normal one. If this is you, read on.

What do you dislike about your mind? Which patterns emerge when you examine your life - patterns you feel have held you back? Does fear prevent you from pursuing your ambitions? Does jealousy ruin your relationships? Do you allow distractions to rule your life? Do you have an inner critic whose expectations you are never able to meet?

This book will make the bold claim that the human condition as you know it - is optional. That it is possible for you to unplug from your own mind, examine it from above, and modify the very psychological code on which you operate, permanently altering

these limiting patterns.

You will learn to build unshakable peace and levity into your mind so you can embrace whatever life throws at you while responding with effective action. You will develop the skills to think with razor-sharp clarity, overcome your own distortions of judgment, and cultivate wisdom so you can make the right decisions in your life. You will learn to build the habits, lifestyle, and character which will gradually enable you to become your ideal self.

And to begin this process, you won't have to wait one day for futuristic technology to arrive. You can rewire the default behaviors, emotional responses, and biases that hold you back. You can learn the principles and practices for building a mind better than you ever thought possible, one algorithm at a time. Most importantly, you can internalize a mindset that will allow you to take this process beyond what you read in this book. And as you scale the heights of self-mastery, you will gradually come to resemble the legendary figures who have unlocked radically superior states of mind.

This is not yet another book promising useful tricks for happiness like gratitude journals and cold showers or singing the praises of positive thinking, neuro-linguistic programming, or mindfulness meditation (although that one will have its place). I will refer to ideas and techniques which have been viewed through the lens of spirituality. But every mindset and method you find in this work is rational, psychological, and empirical. This book is based on the time-tested insights of ancient thinkers, the science of neuroplasticity, and findings within cognitive, affective, and behavioral science. It looks at the ways ordinary (and extraordinary) people can modify the “software” of their minds to dramatically impact their lives today. The ways we can structure our minds directly for wisdom, well-being, and character, and to reach toward our highest visions for ourselves.

The first catalyst for this book came about a decade ago. I don't remember the exact event, but ultimately, it was what happened right after that matters. The event was something bad, ostensibly. Some moderately-sized mistake or setback in my life. I had faced many of these before, just like everyone else. But this time was different. The negative emotion which was supposed to proceed from this setback didn't come - no grieving, no anxiety, no frustration. I did something in my mind that caused me to bypass the emotion I was supposed to have, and then I continued on with my life, responding to the event only in my actions.

What I did in my mind was not suppression or repression or denial, for you fellow armchair psychologists. It was a form of effective emotional self-regulation, and it turns out the ancient Greeks beat me to it a couple thousand years ago. No, I was not unique in this experience - only in the obsession I developed as a result of it. It became clear to me that this experience was only one example of what seemed to be a dark art one could master to become immune to problems some spend entire lives wrestling with - path for continually upgrading the basic elements of my mind.

As I studied the human mind, its limitations, and its potential, I found a striking coherence. All the mental problems with which I struggled boiled down to automatic and systematic mental phenomena - chains of triggers and responses, inputs and outputs. More interestingly, the solutions to these problems that worked all fit into the same framework. I labeled these patterns algorithms, and the sum of these algorithms became psychological software. Within this software framework, my mental challenges began to make sense.

I started applying a new methodology to solving my problems - one centered less around changing my life circumstances and more on changing the psychological patterns at their source. I found that

the problems which once seemed perpetual could be permanently extinguished. The version of my mind that once seemed out of reach could be iteratively approached, and ultimately, eclipsed by new, even better versions. I coined the term psychitecture to refer to this practice of designing and optimizing the software of one's mind. And concurrently with my practice, I was finding more and more evidence within cognitive, affective, and behavioral science that this framework wasn't just a metaphor. This was actually how the mind worked.

This discipline has grown beyond my initial sights. Lots of research has confirmed to me that the art of emotion regulation and restructuring is very real and very effective. But the pursuit of self-mastery has further developed to encompass three major components: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. And the more I reflected on them, the more I realized that these three domains encompass the core competencies required for well-being and success in life.

Furthermore, incompetence in any of these three areas represents not only foolishness and weakness, but what some call evil. All of the "bad actors" in society can be explained in reference to deficiencies in one or more of these areas. This is why helping others to develop self-mastery in all its forms has become the greatest source of purpose in my life. The self-mastery triad will provide the organizational backbone of this book, and the chapters will teach you the principles and practices needed to master all three realms.

I am not the spiritual guru or venerated professor you may be seeking. My formal background is in the design of systems - physical, digital, and theoretical. But my most relevant credential is a lifelong appetite for introspective investigation, ravenous reading, and obsessive self-optimization. I don't tend to focus on myself in

this book because I find the ancient teachers, practical philosophers, and cognitive scientists who have inspired it to be far more interesting.

My philosophical mentors have included Lao Tzu, Siddhārtha Gautama, Aristotle, Epicurus, Diogenes, Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Seneca, Michel de Montaigne, Rene Descartes, Friedrich Nietzsche, Abraham Maslow, Victor Frankl, Aaron Beck, and many more. My contemporary influences are too many to name here, but you will be introduced to them along the way. Though they did not use the term themselves, I will refer to many of these individuals as psychitectural thinkers or visionaries. I'm no more a teacher of their wisdom than a student. My role has simply been to study, curate, and synthesize these insights into a modern framework, which I present to you in the following chapters.

You can join the community at designingthemind.org to receive more psychitectural insights and to participate in the discussion. This book, and DTM's growing community of psychitects, represents a living, breathing body of ideas which will continue to take shape over time. I invite you to take part in its evolution.

Psychitect's Toolkit

FREE PSYCHITECT'S TOOLKIT



In addition to this book, readers can download a free, 50-page guide on psychitecture, which includes:

- An overview of the basic concepts of psychitecture and psychological algorithms
- A breakdown of 8 psychotechnologies you can start using to reprogram your mind
- 64 incredible book recommendations related to self mastery and psychitecture
- A list of 16 websites, blogs, and podcasts that can aid in self-optimization
- Quotes from the great psychitectural visionaries

Just go to designingthemind.org/psychitecture to get your Psychitect's Toolkit.

Chapter 1: The Theory and Practice of Psychitecture

Mind as Machine

In the past, we humans have learned to control the world outside us, but we had very little control over the world inside us.

- Yuval Noah Harari, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century

Every era attempts to explain the human mind in the terms and metaphors of its dominant technologies. For Plato, the mind was a chariot. For Descartes, it was a mechanical clock. For Freud, it was a steam engine. Today, the most common analogue for the mind is the computer. Although it's true that our brains are not literally digital computers, built on silicon circuits and binary logic, the modern metaphor of the mind as a computer is by far the most powerful and comprehensive one we've ever had. Our hardware is the brain, the physical substrate made up of neurons, chemicals, and electrical impulses. Our software is the world of our experience - the mind. Our sensations, emotions, and thoughts are all experienced internally in the mind, but all have physical phenomena behind them and can be influenced by external events, chemicals, and technology.

Our minds don't generate emotions or cognitions arbitrarily: there are patterns coded into this software, inscribed by millions, or even billions of years of natural selection.¹ No word we speak or action we take is an isolated event, however spontaneous it may seem, and the same goes for the purely internal processes of thinking and feeling. They all flow from a determined system in the same way the outputs of a computer spring from the algorithms built into it by its programmers. The reason we cannot perfectly predict human behavior is that our minds are the most complex machines ever to exist (so far). They do not run a simple loop, but an intricate system which factors innumerable inputs and calculations into its behaviors.

The brain, like it or not, is a machine. Scientists have come to that conclusion, not because they are mechanistic killjoys, but because they have amassed evidence that every aspect of consciousness can be tied to the brain.

- Steven Pinker, "The Mystery of Consciousness"

The fact that our minds are machines does not preclude the vast richness of experience of which they are capable. It simply means that at its core, the ineffable complexity of human existence boils down to an operating system we can study and increasingly understand. Furthermore, to compare our minds to machines is not to suggest that they have been set in stone by evolution and are now doomed to iterate themselves perpetually until death. Our genes don't determine everything we will become, but they do determine how much we can be shaped by experiences during early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, which, for all, is quite a bit.²

It is possible for you to alter your brain in ways that result in functional changes. Modern medicine has developed drugs and surgical procedures for treating diseases, disorders, and injuries to the brain. Prescription drugs are available to treat everything from ADHD to obsessive compulsive disorder to severe anxiety. Implants can even be placed into the brain to help rehabilitate stroke patients or stimulate nerves for treating Parkinson's or depression.³

Healthy people can also utilize technologies and practices to further improve their brains. Your lifestyle behaviors like sleep, diet, and exercise have a massive effect on brain health and function.⁴ Growing evidence suggests that mindfulness meditation can increase concentration, self-awareness, and overall well-being.⁵ Some evidence even suggests that devices such as the transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) which are now offered as consumer products are able to improve learning, sleep quality, and mood.⁶

You can take nootropics, which are typically readily available chemicals which have demonstrated an ability to enhance cognition, increase focus or memory, boost energy, or even heighten creativity.⁷ You could even consume psychedelic drugs like psilocybin and LSD, which modern neuroscience indicates can stimulate new neural connection, ease anxiety related to death, and treat addiction and depression.⁸

There is an entire movement known as transhumanism concerned with modifying the human body, brain, and mind, and taking the evolution of human nature into our own hands. It is defined by the Humanity+ organization as:

The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the

human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.⁹

Transhumanist thinkers believe that some day in the not-so-distant future, we will be able to augment the brain and mind in ways nearly inconceivable today. Future pharmaceuticals and microscopic brain implants could rapidly repair, regenerate, and revamp brain cells. Genetic engineering could alter the mind biologically, increasing intelligence, creativity, or any other desired quality. Virtual or augmented reality technology may become so advanced as to be indistinguishable from reality, connect directly into our nervous systems, and allow us to live in worlds currently unimaginable.

Furthermore, an advanced understanding of the mind may allow us to perfectly simulate the human brain through digital computers and upload our consciousness to the cloud. Organizations such as DARPA¹⁰ and Elon Musk's Neuralink¹¹ are already working to create brain-machine interfaces. These devices would allow our brains to connect directly to computers, convert our thoughts into bits and back again, and augment our intelligence, communication, and more. Theoretically, this could allow us to effectively merge with artificial intelligence, or with other people to form one radically intelligent and capable mind.

When transhumanists refer to "technology" as the primary means of effecting changes to the human condition, this should be understood broadly to include the design of organizations, economies, polities, and the use of psychological methods and tools.