in·coherence
Issue #4
15 Dec 2025
(Revised 17 Oct 2026)

The Deals We've Made (but didn't know it)



The Coherence Project

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Editor's Note:

The first three articles of this IC series explored how we got to this point in our existence, where the systems that we created and believed exceptional, turn out to be destructive to life and to civilization itself. We looked at the shifting mental models and increasing incoherence with life systems, including the reinforcing loops that Donella Meadows warned us about in her 'Limits to Growth' work, already 55 years ago. We considered the resulting increasing instability that those dynamics have created and how the self-referential stories of humanity have ignored the reality of what was and is happening – the maps we created and followed increasingly driving us toward collapse.

How does all of this happen? What makes us asleep to these dynamics? And why do these systems seem so entrenched that no warning will wake us up? That is the focus for this article – the nuts and bolts that hold these systems in place: the unconscious and invisible Deals we make in life.

Seeing the deals

This all started at my campsite, as I listened to an audiobook by Yuval Harari. I tend to drift in and out of sleep when I listen to audiobooks at night, often replaying portions again and again for the parts I didn't fully catch.

But right as I was drifting off to sleep, one statement by Yuval caught my attention and woke me up.

"Religion is a deal; spirituality is a journey."

Something clicked. I snapped awake and made a note. His book wasn't about religion, nor spirituality specifically. It was about society, history, and meaning. Within that context the word "Deal" illuminated a pattern I've been sensing for years — one that, at least for me, helps to explain a lot of the incoherence I had been seeing more and more.

In prior IC articles, we explored the decline of coherence, the unstable complexity, and the deficit between them. We examined some of our mental models, how they came about, and how they operate. But how we, society, have become so captive to these systems is something we've yet to explore in the depth it deserves. Why does everything feel so stuck? Why are we unable to respond to the clear and present danger we've created? Dangers that are not just problems, but predicaments.

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This article will be the introduction to the Deals Lens – a way of seeing the confining arrangements we've entered into with the institutions we've created. The following article will continue to explore how Deals operate in our lives and how we might address them.

The essence of the deal

As I sat within the forest, alongside rivers and in view of mountains and coastlines, I reflected on Harari's words and the dynamics and patterns I've observed of society and within my own life. It was clear – we make deals in our lives. We do so often expressly, consciously, but we make many more unconsciously and live within them for much of our lives. They shape so much of how we experience ourselves, our relationships and belonging, our sense of meaning – of right and wrong. And because of that I wanted to understand how they operate in our lives and society today.

"What deal?!", someone might ask at this point with growing irritation. Indeed, that's the point: most of us never consciously see or agree to a deal. Yet we grow up with, inherit, or adopt them, because they are inherent within the systems in which we operate.

Work hard and you'll be secure. Follow the role examples society has given you and you'll be respected. Stay inside the lines and you'll be accepted. Adopt the right identity and you'll belong. These sorts of exchanges may be implicit, yet they are pretty clear - give or do something for a promise of benefit.

The essence of the deal is not easily discernible. To see them we need to step back onto the balcony and look at how the systems of humanity are functioning. From a family placing their child into school, to the religion we believe in, to the election of a new government, and to how we engage in our career and economics. As we go about our lives, these deals are largely invisible to us. No one says, "By the way, this is the deal you are entering by engaging in this process/institution." But if we pause with presence and curiosity, we can begin to see and unfold what is happening – and what we are giving and receiving in the exchange.

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The deals in the system

These inherent and unconscious deals operate in the context of our lives and within our ways of seeing and thinking about reality. One way of framing this is through the 'Iceberg model' of systems (See IC3). This model is broadly used by systems thinkers, graphically representing the conceptual hierarchy of how systems behave – from what is visible (above the surface of experience), the events we see, to what is not visible (under the surface).

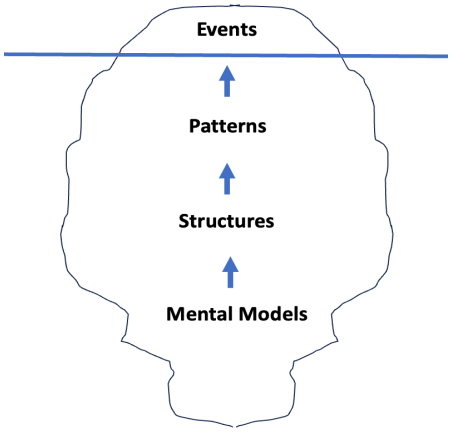


Fig-1. The Iceberg Model. A representation of the systems operating across human life. Events are the visible results (e.g., a sale, an act of love, a car crash). Over time these events form patterns that we can observe if we bring attention to them. These events and patterns are determined by the structures of cause and effect relationships in the system (e.g., one thing causes another thing to happen, causing another thing to happen, determined by the processes, norms, order, and proximity of variables). Those structures are broadly generated and maintained by the mental models we hold (e.g., the deep beliefs we hold about how life works).

At the deepest level of the iceberg model rests our **mental models** – the assumptions we carry about how life works, how we see the world, what's normal, what's possible, what is acceptable and desirable. Those models tell us how life is mapped – and how we should navigate it.

Those maps influence the development and continued support of systemic relationship **structures** – the cause and effect relationships shaped by the rules, norms, and practices that people engage in. In turn, those structures determine the **patterns** of behavior of the systems that we observe in moments (**events**).

So where might the deals we are considering sit within the Iceberg representation? Deals emerge from the mental models as invisible operational structures that hold the system in place. Deals are essentially the nuts and bolts supporting the generation and maintenance of the structure of relationships by influencing and incentivizing the behavior of the human actors within the system. The exchanges in the deals are the promises of something the brain wants (reward) or relief from something it does not (threat) in return for some behavior (e.g., contribution, sacrifice, etc).

These arrangements of reward offers and threat protections are animated and enabled through **stories** – the groupings of narratives that together form a belief system that we might choose but more often adopt or inherit. They animate the subconscious deals in a way that can feel natural and believable ways of how things are or should/need to be. They bring the rewards and

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threats into clarity and color in a compelling argument. Some of them are orally narrated, others may be more extensive and written down for us to follow as well.

They help to define what is acceptable or not. How we should behave. What we should believe to be true or worthy of condemnation. The most recognizable example might be the Christian Bible. The story is of an almighty being whose son is sacrificed so that humans can have eternal life, if they worship him and follow the Bible's prescriptions and descriptions of what is true and real. That this depiction risks offending some Christians speaks to the power of the stories and the inherent deals Harari was speaking to.

Another story example is of a government based on principles and laws in which all people are created equal and will be treated so under the law. And yet another is that working hard to contribute to an employer and in your career will result in greater security, acceptance, admiration, and ultimately happiness – in short a better life.

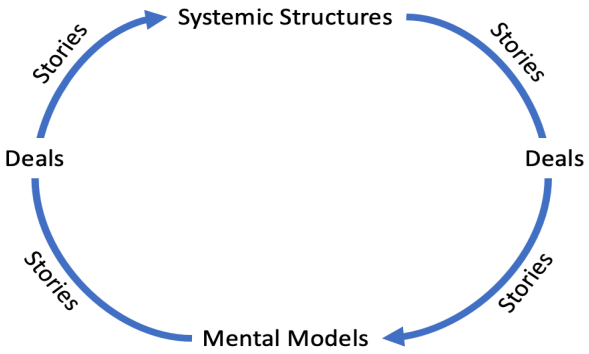


Fig-2. The Deal Flow. Deals generate and are animated by the Stories, reinforcing the Structures and the deals and the mental models.

We enter the deal at the same time that we buy into the Story. Each reinforcing the other along with the mental models and systemic structures (See Fig-2). This is how the deals can operate counter to and even overwrite lived reality – through stories that appeal to perceived needs and wants in the short-term, reinforced by the systemic structures they enable, while delivering consequences that are not yet recognized or visible.

In short, what we believe shapes what we build, and what we build confirms what we believe. The mental model shapes the world for us, the deals create the draw and commitment, the stories animate the deals, while keeping them hidden, and all of them maintain the structure of causal relationships, reinforcing each other over time.

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The structure of the deal

If we look back over history, we can see how many of these deals operated from the earliest of societies, maybe even more visibly than today. We depended on a certain level of negotiating for survival: loyalty for protection, labor for housing and food, obedience for mercy. These arrangements directly kept people alive, fed. They were fairly simple and transparent.

Over time, those simple exchanges morphed into more complex structures — religious roles, political hierarchies, economic obligations, moral expectations. Adults submitted and performed within them. Children inherited and performed within them. Over time, with conditioning, individuals experienced them as reality. Cultures both shaped and were shaped by them. Today the deals are more complex, more opaque, more interconnected and often unpredictable. They happen faster and often unravel quicker, and with increasing consequence.

These deals are promises exchanged for other promises. They appeal to a need or want and in aggregate evolve in a story that persuades enough people to engage in the deal that becomes self-reinforcing. Over time the deal forms into an institution, a social system, or a well-regarded belief.

Deals often involve the unconscious and sacrificial exchange of something inherent within us as individual humans – autonomy, imagination, creative inspiration, integrity, relational independence, self-sufficiency, personal growth, critical thought, morality, and capacity for compassion and empathy – in exchange for something we want or perceive we need: certainty, identity, belonging, safety, security, meaning, convenience, status, acceptance, etc.. These latter promises often appeal to the more immediate threat or reward triggers within the human brain (e.g., limbic system), while the sacrifices made for them appeal to the engagement of the prefrontal cortex. Many of these threat or reward triggers are social in nature, triggering some of the same neurochemical responses as physical threats and rewards. Comparatively, the higher level operations involved in the sacrifices have less power and influence over human response, decisions, and narratives.

As these deals become more entrenched within communities, operating as norms or simply reality, they become even more insidious. The consequences also go unnoticed, often externalized so that the feedback of the deal never reaches us at all. In modern systems, this often takes the form of waste and material pollution onto the ecology or social pollution and inequity/unfairness and mental detriment onto members of the population. The well-being of the recipients of these externalized consequences (planet and people) are often the basis of the ‘commons’ that get eroded and extracted from. These dynamics can be seen through the lens of the feedback loops in the system structure, addressed in previous articles.

As mentioned, deals take shape at individual and collective levels, attracting and reinforcing individual deals. They don’t need to be overly complex, but they can be, especially over time as deals deepen and broaden and interconnect with other deals and other facets of civilization. We will take a top down view of a few of the major deals first, and consider the individual

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experiences within them. From governance, to economics, to religion, we will explore each with some depth.

Deals within governance

Deals within governance are some of the oldest and most important in human history. From the earliest tribal structures, to the Code of Hammurabi, to the layered local, regional, national, and international governance systems of today. How we associate and organize, how we maintain order and keep the peace, and how we function together to work toward a shared goal or vision. These are some of the most obvious deals because they are expressed into public disclosures, rules, and laws that guide behavior.

Deals within governance can take various forms, such as authoritarian or democratic systems. Authoritarian deals may promise order, protection, basic necessities, for those willing to engage in loyal support of the regime, belonging, additional protection, and positions of advantage. What is given (sacrificed) in exchange for these promises in such authoritarian forms of governance are typically freedom of movement, thought, independence, choice, speech, and more. In this deal, it is less agreed to by both parties and more so forced upon one (the populace) by the other (those wielding the government). The deal is accepted, at least on the surface, because the consequences of not doing so are likely to result in some form of persecution.

In contrast, democratic deals promise representation, fairness, and belonging in exchange for trust, compliance with rules, and some level of participation. Ideally, these deals rest on principle, reason, evidence, checks and balances, and accountability. But democratic governance systems, like all systems, operate under constraints and over time drift away from their ideals – the basis of the deal itself. Short election cycles reward immediacy over foresight. Power concentrates. Financial influence and corruption festers. Media becomes subjugated to that power and the masses become more manipulable. And all of this becomes a reinforcing feedback loop, which as we saw in IC1 and IC2, leads to increasing levels of instability and risk of collapse.

A similar dynamic happens in governance today as it intersects with capitalism's reinforcing feedback loops. As the wealth and power of corporations and their significant shareholders have increased exponentially, and as governments have granted them increasing access, influence, and for corporations protections and rights of personhood (such as political speech) – the deal with citizens that promised representation, opportunity, fairness, protection, and security, has begun to unravel.

Yet people don't often experience this as an unraveling at the systemic level. They experience it as frustration, conflict, distrust, resignation, and/or fatigue. They engage in narratives blaming a

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person or a group, they become more apathetic and less likely to engage – often outcomes of the deal structure itself. And as these further unravel the deal, the risk of collapse increases.

In governance, where elections happen on a regular basis (e.g., every four years), deals often feed into new deals. In campaigns, a specific deal is offered that encompasses how a candidate is perceived as well as what they promise to do once in office. If elected, much of their perceived performance in office depends on the status of that deal. And if that deal begins to unravel or was never intended to be delivered upon, the electorate can decide to seek out a new deal in the next elections or even before, in cases of a recall or ouster vote.

In any case, rarely in governance are deals sustained. The perception of dissatisfaction dominates, as people seek a ‘what’ (who) to focus their dissatisfaction upon, rather than recognize the ‘how’ (the dynamics of what’s transpired) within the complexity.

Deals within economics

If economics is the exchange of one thing for another, then the deals within it have been around for upwards of a hundred thousand years. But those were largely gift exchanges within the social circle of relatives and tribal members.

Fast-forward through thousands of years to the last four hundred, as fossil fuel-aided industries, corporate forms, financial products, and capital markets have shifted the deals of relationship and exchange into something highly complex and far more transactional and “exchange-value” oriented instead of relational and “use-value”.

Yet the deals within economics go far beyond the accounting to include the nature of how we relate to the organizations paying our wages, or issuing stock or debt instruments, or selling us their products, or extracting from and polluting our local environment, or, as mentioned, engaging with the institutions within societal governance (see above).

For workers, there is the expressed employment or contractual agreement. Sacrifice of time, energy, and freedom to comply with process and work standards, in return for monetary compensation and benefits (if any!). But underneath that recognized agreement sits an unacknowledged deal: a sense of belonging, status, meaning, identity, in exchange for the sacrifice of independence, freedom of thought and exploration, self-expression, and self-reliance. What is gained responds to the limbic reward mechanisms, while what is exchanged speaks to higher level processing within the PFC. As most people already recognize, emotions dominate behavior.

Over the centuries the Worker Deal (see IC5) has begun to unravel. The landscape of technology, markets, and the promises of infinite growth have shifted dramatically. No longer does work deliver on fair wage, loyalty, identity, or belonging, and the looming shadow of AI threatens the availability of jobs for rising and existing workers alike.

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At the macro level, the deals within economics increasingly prioritize short-term financial performance over long-term resilience and wellness. The unconscious deal with the public was essentially: The systems provide a positive economic story to feel positive and secure about, built on a closed-loop mythology that underlies the system, while it extracts from and externalizes costs on society and the ecology (that it ignores and denies), in exchange for the public's participation – contributions and consumptions. The majority take on the risk of these costs, while those who reap the most will position themselves into safer positions.

As these deals unravel from the reinforcing feedback loops (See IC1 and IC2), the consequences are becoming more and more clear: wealth inequality has grown exponentially, and those who have reaped the rewards of the extractive and destructive system aren't the ones who will suffer the most. Massive droughts/floods, food and water scarcity, wet-bulb temperatures/heat-exhaustion, and more. The deals within economics tie directly into the increasing instability and decreasing coherence discussed in IC2.

And the deals within economics are unraveling for more and more people, more and more quickly. The loss of loyalty, meaning, and identity, along with the precarity of unaffordability – even good jobs can often fail to meet the cost requirements of many cities in developed countries. Some are physically leaving the environment of these deals – into nature or less developed and less costly geographies, seeking an entirely new deal. But for most people, life is tied into and dependent upon the deals within these systems that are beginning to collapse upon them.

Deals within religion

Within Harari's reflections on religion and spirituality, I heard him making a distinction about the relationships people have with both. Addressing religion as a deal, is a delicate task; I want to be careful here, because there is a risk that people might feel talked *about* instead of talked *with*. My intention is the latter.

Another clarification: I'm not suggesting that people who ascribe to a theology consciously "made a deal". I speak, as I have above, focusing on the implicit and unconscious deals made within religion and its belief system, as within many other institutions in society.

What's striking to me about the deals within religion is how much more deep they sit within the human consciousness than the other deals we've discussed above. They offer a rhyme and reason to life. A rhythm. A moral grammar. An existential solution. A way of understanding life, and what is beyond it, that arrives early, wrapped in warmth and comfort, guidance, meaning, safety, community, and belonging. It's inherited and reinforced across almost every facet and space for meaning and it has little to no exposure for falsification.

The structure is built within a story about why we are here, how everything fits together, what we should do while we are here, and what happens after. And within that story sits an unspoken

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arrangement - The Deal: live within this story and you don't need to worry or try to make sense of the ambiguous and uncertain. You will belong. You will have the comfort of faith in an end result to life itself. In return, you will contribute your efforts to further the story, contribute your energy, finances, and even enroll others. And you will assimilate your own thinking, inclinations, understandings, and relationships to what the religion ascribes/prescribes.

These deals have generated consequences that have shaped the very nature of human civilization, inciting division, violence, torture, and wars. Yet they have also generated beautiful works of architecture, human expression, love, and cooperation. They have shaped human understanding in ways that may be difficult to identify because of their very pervasive nature.

Like the other deals in governance and in economy, there have been dynamics operating over time that have increasingly unsettled deals within religion. Whether it's been the progression of science and knowledge-emphasis, globalization and the intermesh of cultures and ideas, or an emphasis toward economic relationships and materiality, humanity has broadly shifted away from deals within religion. But what happens as these other deals, across governance and economics, begin to unravel? History shows us that under times of fear and loss there is a strong shift toward deals within religion. A prayer, a request. Pleading and bargaining: "Dear [DEITY], if you help solve this for me, I promise I will always….". But it goes much deeper.

Deals within religion offer an absolution and a fundamental hope that a miracle can arrive to save the day, and is immune to facts. Its power comes from its internal subjectivity. The ultimate story that we not only buy into but we self-author with ourselves as the subject – "My relationship with [DEITY].". That can't be falsified by reality. And what it promises can't be equaled by any other deals: meaning, salvation, eternal care. And as the context of other deals unravel the structures of civilization, the story of faith and consequent reward is confirmed, but driven by fear instead of love. These are the dynamics of the institutional deal, not a reflection on the validity or strength of anyone's faith and belief system.

So as collapse accelerates, we may see deals within religion recruit from that context, and be reinforced by it. Every other deal that fails sends people toward the deal that can't, in their estimation, fail. And the deals within religion define terms outside the reach of earthly consequence from the beginning. It is the last floor. Letting go means there is nothing else to orient by – until we consider what existed before even that deal was consummated.

Why they are hard to see

If any (or all) of this feels abstract or slightly uncomfortable, that makes sense. A fish in a bay doesn't know the ocean surrounds it. In the same way, someone raised with a particular mental model and inside a particular deal often only knows it as "the way things are/should be."

Someone living in a transactional culture may genuinely believe looking out for oneself is the only way to engage with others. And someone from a more relational culture may not

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understand the basis of such engagement and take great offense at it (e.g., 15th century explorers' non-reciprocation of gifts from the native Americans).

One more subtle point matters here:

The challenges we face today aren't simply a matter of denial. It's that the reality of life we are seeing more clearly sits in contradiction to and outside of the mental models, deals, stories, and structures that we have progressively created, adopted, inherited and lived within over hundreds of generations. Yet from the inside they can feel so coherent because they are all interlinked, sharing the same distortion, lining up with one another.

For example, in my career in corporate finance consulting in New York, I was surrounded by a story that the 'free market system and the world at large benefits from each person and entity striving to achieve its profits by whatever means. The dominant culture, and the only culture I knew, fully embraced the idea that what happened in the market was supposed to happen (i.e., "market efficiency"). The Stock Market for many had become the deity in the religion of capitalism – it knew all.

That if I am doing things in congruence with a mental model ("the market is efficient; greed is good") and a story ("I am an educated and intelligent professional, and a facilitator of the market's efficiency"), then my work – even though it creates waste, extracts meaningless profit, and carries real societal and environmental consequences – feels fully aligned with my view of reality and what is 'good'. What I was told, how I was educated, what I read, and those I worked alongside and for, all told me so.

The world feels ordered. Identity feels stable. Behavior feels justified. And when others are engaged in the same worldview and behavior, there is no reason to question what I am doing, let alone stop doing what I am doing, especially when my own quality of life and sense of belonging is tied to it.

That internal congruence is often mistaken for coherence. But it is simply an alignment within an incoherent system, not coherence with life itself.

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Seeing the non-deal of presence

How do we critique and change systems that *feel* right to us from the inside? Systems that reward us, protect us, give us identity and belonging, even as they quietly erode the conditions we all need for life. How can we let go of systems that themselves have provided us with what we perceive as safety, status, and wellbeing?

And ultimately, how can we formulate the deals in our lives more consciously and coherently with the life systems on which we depend?

The difficulty is that these systems condition how we see, think, and behave. And when the only ways of seeing we've learned are the ones embedded in the system itself, imagining something different can feel impossible. Not because alternatives don't exist, but because they have overwritten our capacities for the presence and attention needed to perceive them.

Seeing reality through different eyes, different lenses – ones based in our natural capacities for presence and attention that ask nothing of us, yet offer us ways of being that aided us throughout our evolutionary past.

How did we navigate life without the structures of civilization? We have the fossilized bones of hominins dating back to seven or eight million years ago. Our ancestors. What capacities did we have to operate our lives with, when there were no elaborate stories and no inherited mental models to draw from? How did we orient and respond, when life and our environment was less narrated, less certain, less structured? It's easy to imagine that we had inherent deals within the relationships of the tribes and even in some of the earliest religions (e.g., animism) that were guided not by stories but by the requisite presence we needed for survival. Presence with ourselves, others, and the environment on which we depended.

The four orientations we've introduced in prior IC articles – Truth, Connection, Freedom, Adventure – are framed in TLF as the innate natural processes that allowed us humans, and perhaps our predecessors, to navigate the complexity and uncertainty of the natural environment. Being present within these orientations meant whether or not we could respond and operate within and in alignment with the natural world. Orientations of presence that the developing structures of society largely overwrote over the last several millennia. Ways of being that are needed now as we determine how to operate beyond the collapsing systems of modernity and an ecology that they have increasingly destabilized. See IC1 and IC2 for more details.

The Orientations themselves offer no deal. No promise of future benefit. No exchange or sacrifice required. They sit within us and, if we choose to engage them, provide us with the capacity for coherence with life.

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Deals of the future

The Deal Lens began as an exploration of the dynamics of the systems that dominate modern society - Governance, Economics, Religion. Most people recognize that many of these systems are no longer serving society as they should, and are in fact spiraling towards their own destruction. The deals they offered and still attempt to offer today are unraveling.

The promises that once held modern life together are breaking down. But it's not just structural failure. It's a failure of meaning and of orientation. The inherited stories no longer make sense, and the frameworks built on those stories no longer deliver. We are living in an age of incoherence.

By understanding how these and other deals operate, by becoming aware of their nature and what we are implicitly exchanging by engaging with them, we can learn to shape future deals to be more coherent and responsive to the conditions of our reality – much as our ancestors unconsciously did over the hundreds of millennia.

The next article will build on this foundation to explore in more detail the nature of the deals we are in – how they collapse, and how we might respond.

Thank you for reading In·Coherence Issue #4.

Read:
The Maps We Carry (IC3)
The Collapse of the Deal (IC5)

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