

Quan-Hoang Vuong

Meandering Sobriety



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*The Centre for Interdisciplinary Social Research,
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Special sale: food for thought

(I know this does not sound like a Preface, but it is.)

Thinking is a fundamental activity of our species – those that give names to other creatures and call themselves humans. Textbooks tell us that there is about 1.2 kg of matter called the brain inside the human body. It sounds small but actually is proportionally the biggest among all animals on Earth.

I became more aware of thinking at around 5th grade upon hearing about an ancient paradox. It can be summarized as follows.

□

Once upon a time, there was a stupid king. In his kingdom lived a sage who was highly respected for his intelligence. The King did not appreciate this fact. Maybe the Sage made fun of the King's intellect, but I am not so sure. Anyway, one day, the King summoned the Sage, intending to kill him.

The King said, "Wise man, I heard you earn a living by thinking and arguing. Now I give you two options to die."

The Sage said, "Please tell me the choices, Your Majesty."

The King continued, "You live by your tongue, so I will let you say one sentence before you die. If what you say is true, you will die by hanging. If what you say is false, you will die by beheading."

Little did the King know that this was a stupid order. After a short while, the Sage confidently spoke his “last words”, which actually were what saved his life:

“Your Majesty, I am about to be beheaded!”

□

As a “wild animal” going out into life from a young age, my brain spent a lot of time and energy looking for food. Now that I have become older, my body no longer needs so much sustenance. However, my mind craves a different type of nourishment: food for thought.

Food for thought can directly lead to food (on the table). My main job as a scientist exemplifies what I have just stated. Maybe we were wrong. Maybe it has been “thought for food” all along, like in such a sequence as TFFTTTFTFFTTFFFT...

In the hyper-chaotic infosphere today, we are surrounded by the noises of information, not only as wavy shores or waterfalls but also mega-tsunamis, through Twitter, Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram, Youtube, etc. More than ever, tranquility and calmness are necessary. Like what you have seen in wilderness video clips, predators such as lions, bears, and alligators act lightning-fast when catching prey. But when food is served, the natural world returns to its peaceful, soothing silence.

This short book is in its own tidy infosphere, where each little story is also brief and self-contained. Despite this small appearance, I hope the content inside carries the value of tranquility and life observation. The book is petite, but pretty sure not malnourished. A not-too-small detail is that the way

the content was shaped and distilled reflects some innovations of mine and my research team: the mindsponge theory, a new theory of serendipity, the *bayesvl* R package, the BMF analytics, as well as other experiences from working in the field of science. After all, scientific works were my main source of food (before this book sells well – if it does).

Much of the content, seemingly fragmented, has reflected our lab’s essential cultural values, which have led to mindsponge theory, BMF analytics and related works. Thus, under the analytical paradigm of these closely-connected concepts, the pieces come together as bits and pieces of one whole thing. I think it is a bit unfair to tell about things in a house without mentioning the house itself.

Welcome to the priceless sober moments – with a chicken-burger price tag!

I hope this book will bring readers some moments of calmness, peaceful smiles, and maybe a couple of good laughs too.

□

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Quan-Hoang Vuong.

Purposes, audiences and uses

Purposes

This book is written to promote and advocate nuanced thinking in everyday life as well as in professional activities, which may require deeper thinking or even complex thinking like the so-called “devil’s advocate.”

The stories try to achieve the goal mentioned above by encouraging information processing, taking into account the co-existence of the world’s diverse cultural value systems.

In a world of rapidly and overwhelmingly flowing information quanta, which often generates chaos and risk-inviting decisions, we may wish to attain better sobriety and calmness. These qualities help us see more useful and valuable patterns of information, data and solutions we seek to solve our issues.

In short, the book helps show that thinking is worth... thinking about!

Audiences

The content of the book sees no limits concerning audiences. It has three parts to enable me to better structure the content with some required focus only.

Specifically, the first part mainly uses ideas from real-world scientific research evidence, representing my lifelong interest in academic information and insights. I think sharing them benefits wider audiences than academics only. The

second part presents snippets from the business world, but their insights can also be useful for both academics and general audiences. Finally, the last part contains stories from daily life. It has no specific target information, just stories and information that might be fun and worth thinking about.

Uses

This book can be a reasonable choice for anybody who likes reliable information and fun moments while working on or thinking about information processing, cultural values and the like.

Situations and outcomes described in the book might make a reader think, then smile or laugh. That is the first use: consumption of information.

But more than normal consumption, a reader can also distill the stories to work out key mathematical elements, as George Pólya (1945) presented: specialization, generalization and analogy.

The final use is an informatics-like concept: reusability (programmers like this very much). For this, I will say a little more. Mark Twain is loved by so many people not just for his great works but also anecdotes relating to his sense of humor, smart (and very fast) responses, and getting himself out of uncomfortable situations without sacrificing his dignity. The following anecdotes, attributed to Mark Twain, exemplify this.

Anecdote 1. In a talk about literature, Mark Twain and another writer made speeches about their writings, philosophies of life, and future works. At one point, the other

writer wanted to say a few sarcastic words about Mark Twain. He said that, unlike Mark Twain, who kept talking about money, commercial values, and royalties, he would spend time focusing on literature's humanities and ethics issues. He wanted to tell the audience that he cared about humanities and ethics, so he was not a mediocre writer paying attention only to materialistic gains. Mark Twain calmly responded in no time: "It turns out that this gentleman and I share the philosophy. We only talk about things we lack."

Anecdote 2. Mark Twain entered a party room and sat with several unfamiliar people at a table. He politely saluted the only (seemingly classy) lady among diners, saying it was fortunate for him to sit beside a beautiful and noble lady. Instead of returning a polite welcome, the lady said: "Thank you, but unfortunately, I cannot say the same thing about you." Mark Twain still calmly responded: "Madam, I believe you can do the same thing as I just did: Tell a lie."

It is hard to imagine that Mark Twain could respond so efficiently, effectively and elegantly without a very efficient information-processing mechanism. I hope investing in the book will earn the reader some dividends in a not very distant future.

About the Author

Quan-Hoang Vuong, Ph.D. (Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2004), is Distinguished Scientist at Hanoi-based Phenikaa University. Dr. Vuong spent many years in industries, including ING Barings and World Bank/IFC. During 2003-2015 he became an entrepreneur, starting several ventures, including the first online domestic entrepreneur community, which he successfully sold during 2008-2009. His current private business is Vuong & Associates, an advisory firm providing boutique analytics-based services.

In 2017, he founded the Centre for Interdisciplinary Social Research at Phenikaa University and has since directed its research operations full-time. He also serves as an associated member of the Vietnam Institute for Advanced Study in Mathematics and the National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED), the science funder of the government.

Dr. Vuong has published over 200 academic papers and books with leading publishers. He was awarded National Book Prize (2008) and National Journalism Prize (2011). A special event occurred in 2021 when his co-author in one of Vietnam's most-read books in economic history became the Vietnam Prime Minister, Prof. Pham Minh Chinh.

In 2019, he and his engineering colleague La Viet Phuong successfully developed the *bayesvl* R package for implementing MCMC simulations, leading to various contributions to interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences. The *bayesvl* package was later approved

and published by the R Core Team on CRAN, becoming an official R library.

SCIENCE SOBRIETY

A mathematician and his rest point

The two following stories are connected through the lens of mind exploration.

The first story was told by Kelsey-Sugg and Morrow (2022). It is about Dr. John Francis – often called by the title “Planet Walker” due to his journeys on foot for 22 years. But he has an even more special feat: choosing to communicate with “silence” for 17 years.

ABC News reported that the man did not recognize his voice the first time he spoke again. He looked around to find who was speaking and, in a peculiar way, thought, “There’s someone behind me saying what I’m thinking”.

And then, he realized that he was speaking and started laughing at this discovery.

In the case of John Francis, it all started with the following problem. As an environmentalist, he tried to urge people to act when he witnessed the San Francisco Bay environmental disaster in 1971. But words alone were not effective. His walking for environmental purposes led to controversy, skepticism, quarrels, etc., which were also ineffective. And then, it was a moment of serendipity when John decided to try “a day of silence” – or, in his own words: “I’m just going to shut up for the day”. Unbeknownst to him, the decision to try it for one day led to a complete change in the perception of the value of silence –to stop making noise. That one-day experiment turned into a long silence.

This is a great example of finding the value of silence after deciding for yourself to stop the “noise production”.

Now let’s talk about the second interesting story – a conversation between brilliant minds.

The person who told me a few years ago was an “authoritative source” – Professor Ngo Bao Chau, the French-Vietnamese mathematician who won the Fields Medal in 2010. Prof. Chau has an uncle who made great contributions to Vietnamese mathematics since the early days of the nation’s science development: Prof. Ngo Thuc Lanh (1923–2019).

One day, Prof. Chau returned to work in Vietnam and visited his uncle, who was quite old then. At one point, he was severely deaf. In today’s world, the use of hearing aids is no longer a strange thing, and the cost is no longer an issue. However, it seems Prof. Ngo Thuc Lanh did not want to use it.

After talking for a while, what left a deep impression on Prof. Chau was that his uncle opened his eyes to a new realm of value. It was very different than how people usually try to convince others. Prof. Lanh had that kind of persuasion with just one sentence:

“... Being deaf is truly a blessing, my dear Chau!”

This is the joyful cheer of a person being freed from the chains of the compulsion to “consume” artificial noise.

This shift in value, through the lens of the dynamic system of the mindsponge theory, can now be explained clearly, using both logical reasoning and analytics. A binary value, 0 or 1, is

favorable for usual perceptions (such as true or false, good or evil, etc.). However, cultural values do not change like that. Rather, each is a continuum. The rate at which the potentiometer turns to create changes depends on factors such as knowledge background, impactful events, serendipity moments, and the proactive manner of conducting feedback-seeking experiments.

Nonetheless, social phenomena with certain depths in terms of their cultural value, when viewed through the lens of the mindsponge theory, become very interesting and often contain many underlying educational implications.

The old mathematician died a few years later.

The story makes me think that he had found peace before he rested in it.

Cheapest scientific material ever!

This is an old story from 2022, but every time I read it again, I laugh.

According to a CNN report, renowned French physicist, Étienne Klein, shared some scientific information with his nearly hundred thousand followers on Twitter as follows.

“Picture of Proxima Centauri, the nearest star to the Sun, located 4.2 light years away from us. It was taken by the James Webb Space Telescope. This level of detail... A new world is unveiled everyday.”

This astrophysicist was clearly praising the valuable image provided by the famous and hideously expensive James Webb space telescope. The mentioned scientific material introduced to the community is the image below.



Figure. The space photo presented by Étienne Klein (Owoseje, 2022).

Modern science is becoming increasingly expensive, and the investment amount is enormous, according to Shkliarevsky (2019). It is a major concern of even rich countries and not just a problem of developing countries, as discussed in my article in *Nature Human Behavior* in 2018.

However, the funny thing is that Étienne Klein was actually playing a prank. He wanted to tell the fake aficionados in their pursuit of “glorious science” that the universe is not just some ecstatic pictures.

The “space” image, which many thousands of people had praised, was, in fact, the cheapest “scientific material” ever seen. Étienne Klein cut a slice of chorizo (a kind of Spanish pork sausage) and took a photo of it on a black background. That was all!

This chorizo slice was enough to make many science devotees marvel at the greatness of advanced science.

The French have good humor. And French scientists are no exception.

Humans' alcoholic pride damaged

Humans take pride in our ability to create fancy alcoholic beverages. For many, drinking is not simply for the sake of taste and fun but a delicate culture of experience, appreciation, and aesthetics. But before becoming too proud of our drinks, we should take a look at nature. It turns out that chimpanzees can and enjoy drinking alcohol too!

Scientists found that wild chimpanzees at Bossou in Guinea can consume alcohol from the raffia palm. They use leafy tools (e.g., a leaf-fold, leaf-scoop, or a leaf-sponge) to take sips of the beverage. Such tools are made by detaching nearby leaves and folding or crumpling them in the mouth. On the scale from savage to noble, I think the chimps have more class than some people when it comes to drinking.



Chimpanzee (Pan troglodytes), taken by David J. Stang (CC BY-SA 4.0);

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pan_troglodytes_12zz.jpg

The alcohol by volume (ABV) of the raffia-palm wine is around 3.1% (equivalent to a light beer) on average and can sometimes be as high as 7%. The longest recorded drinking session of the chimps was about 30 minutes. The researchers estimate that the chimp can consume up to 84.9 ml of ethanol (about three 1000 ml bottles of wine) within half an hour. After consuming a large quantity of wine, chimps also exhibit signs of drunkenness. Thankfully, no chimps need to drive home from the pub.

Survival purposes may drive chimps' drinking behavior, but they sure look fun when they do it. Existing and having fun at the same time? I guess there is some lesson for us here, whatever it might be.

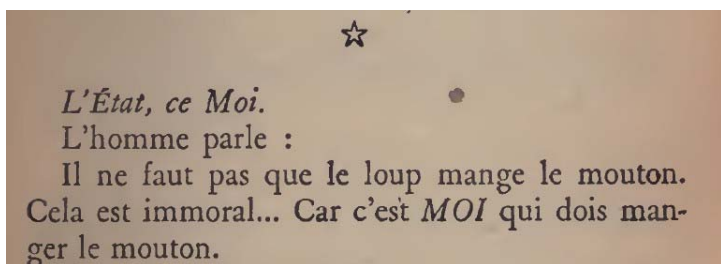
Every country wants to brag about its wine. France says its wine is the best, as does Chile, Italy, Australia, etc. I think natural Chimps wine is the best and the purest of them all.

□

**Remarks:* The piece benefits from the scientific research of Dudley (2000), Hockings et al. (2015), and, Tonooka (2001).

A moment of meandering sobriety

I now borrow an extremely short piece by Paul Valéry in *Tel Quel* (1941).



The Human says: « Il ne faut pas que le loup mange le mouton. Cela est immoral ... Car c'est MOI qui dois manger le mouton. »

Literally, the sentence means:

“The wolf must not eat the sheep. It is immoral... because I am the one to eat the mutton.”

And the Human did not say that just to sound intimidating. He meant it.

Nowadays, wolves must be protected worldwide in dedicated, preserved forest areas.

□

*Remarks: The piece uses information from Valéry (1941) and Kuijper et al. (2019).

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