

The Future of Work podcast is a weekly show where Jacob has in-depth conversations with senior level executives, business leaders, and bestselling authors around the world on the future of work and the future in general. Topics cover everything from AI and automation to the gig economy to big data to the future of learning and everything in between. Each episode explores a new topic and features a special guest.

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Jacob Morgan: Welcome, everyone to another episode of The Future Of Work Podcast. My guest today is Robin Hanson. He's the Associate Professor of Economics at George Mason University, and a Research Associate at The Future of Humanity Institute of Oxford University. He recently spoke at TED, and he's the author of a new book called, The Elephant In The Brain: Hidden Motives In Everyday Life, which is coming out at the beginning of 2018.

And some of you might remember Robin. He was a previous podcast guest, [00:00:30] where he talked about his older book, called, The Age Of Em, and we talked a lot about artificial intelligence and all sorts of really crazy Sci-Fi stuff, so Robin, welcome back to the podcast.

Robin Hanson: Great to be back.

Jacob Morgan: Alright, so first I gotta ask, how as your life changed, or has it changed since you have taken the TED stage. I think your talk now has over a million views, which is amazing. Congratulations.

Robin Hanson: It does. That's great. I don't actually see much difference. I presume some percentage of the times I'm invited [00:01:00] to speak might be due to that, but it's not actually ... The rate of invitations hasn't actually changed noticeably, so-

Jacob Morgan: So, you're still doing a lot of the same stuff that you were doing before. So, it's not like all of a sudden you're showered in gold and-

Robin Hanson: Yeah, not for me. Maybe somebody else.

Jacob Morgan: Alright, cool.

Robin Hanson: Maybe if I had a company, and I was looking for investors, maybe that would help.

Jacob Morgan: Hey, exactly, exactly. So, what are you up to these days? I know last time we talked, you were still doing some research and speaking, but this new book is

very different than [00:01:30] the AI book that you were working on before, so how did you get to this?

Robin Hanson: Yeah. I had an excessively diverse research agenda. Academia prefers you to focus on one thing for your whole life, and get really good at that and being known for that one thing, and I have unfortunately deviated from that. And so, my last book was on a very different topic than this book, and both of those are on a very different topic than the thing I was most known for a few years before, so that's just me being excessively [00:02:00] diverse, I suppose.

But, this book is on a topic ... I think the thing I most learned that I want to pass on to other social scientists ... After a long career, I realized a big mistake I think we've all been making for a long time.

Jacob Morgan: How did you get to writing this book? And for people that didn't listen to the first podcast that we did together, maybe you can even give some background information about yourself and what you're involved in these days, what you're doing, and what's a day [00:02:30] in the life of Robin like?

Robin Hanson: Well, long ago, I was a Physics undergraduate, and then I went off to grad school to do Philosophy of Science, and then I figured out answers to the questions that I had that I wanted at that time and went back to Physics for a bit ... And then I read some cool stuff happening in Silicon Valley at the time ... This was 1983, in Artificial Intelligence and Hypertext Publishing, and so I went off to Silicon Valley to seek my fortune, and I started working at Lockheed NASA on AI [00:03:00] at the time, and on the side I hung out with the Xanadu Group, who were thinking about the World Wide Web actually at the time, basically.

I did that for nine years and then I decided ... I had this hobby of institution design, and I decided to try that and make that a career, so I went back to school to get my Ph.D. in Social Science, wherein when I first went on the market after a four years and you're out program, I went on the political science market and did better there, but I didn't quite get a tenure track job. I got a Postdoc in Health Policy, [00:03:30] and after that I got my tenure track job here at George Mason University in 1999, where I've been since then, now going on 18 years.

The Health Policy Postdoc is where I first got a glimpse of this big mistake we're all making that I've called the elephant in the brain. The Elephant In The Brain book was written with a co-author, Kevin Simler, and he was a software [00:04:00] engineer who retired temporarily from software engineering, and he had it in his mind that he wanted to be an intellectual for a while. But, he looked at the formal requirements of applying to a school, etc., and he thought, he'll just approach me personally, which he did, and he said, "How about you and I just work together informally." And then after a while, we thought, well why don't we write a book together, and so that's how this book came out of it.

He had read some stuff I'd been writing on blogs for a while, and was interested enough to make that his focus, [00:04:30] and together we wrote this book.

Jacob Morgan: Ah, very cool. And so, today, what are you spending a lot of your time on? Are you balancing research with speaking with planning for a next book or-

Robin Hanson: Well, having these two books has been a lot, so ... The first book came out in June of 2016, and so that's a year and a half almost since that first book came out, but I've been doing a lot of publicity for it, and I've basically given like [00:05:00] 115 talks on it over the years.

Jacob Morgan: That's a lot of talks.

Robin Hanson: And then the revision of that book will come out in May, and at the moment, what I've been doing the last few days, is going over the final page proofs for that. Then I've got the second book coming out January 2nd in hardback, but it's actually coming out December 1st, i.e., tomorrow, 'cause we're recording this the day before December 1st, in Kindle, and I've been trying to set up a list date for that and get that [00:05:30] going.

And then I have a grant from the Open Philanthropy Foundation where I'm working on thinking about the future of artificial intelligence from the point of view of it being software. So the idea there is, is that a lot of people when they imagine some future world with really advanced machines, they imagine implicitly some huge revolution between now and then. Some big way in which software changes, and that we have the new kind of software then, but people are not usually very clear about what that new kind of software is exactly, [00:06:00] and so I thought it was worth trying to work out a scenario where we just assumed that the way we eventually get really powerful software is by the slow, steady accumulation of the kind of software we've seen for the last 70 years, which honestly hasn't changed that much over the years.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, and maybe we can touch on that as well, since I know that's still a very hot topic. But it's crazy that you wrote one book that just came out a year and a half ago, and already you have a new book, which is almost 400 pages-

Robin Hanson: Well, I was working on both of them in parallel really.

Jacob Morgan: Oh, okay. [00:06:30] So you were cheating a little bit.

Robin Hanson: Well, I think you're allowed that. That means the third book will not come out nearly as soon after.

Jacob Morgan: Okay, good. I was gonna say, is the third one coming out the year after next-

Robin Hanson: I don't even have a draft.

Jacob Morgan: Okay, good. So, let's talk a little bit about the new book, 'cause the first one was so much about AI and technology. Can you ... I don't even know how you would do this, but maybe just like a high level overview of what this new book is about and what you mean when you [00:07:00] say, "The elephant in the brain."

Robin Hanson: Well, sure. So, the elephant in the brain is like the elephant in the room, except it's in your brain. It's the part of your mind that you don't want to see and acknowledge, even though it's kind of obvious once it's pointed out. And it's the reason why you don't know about the main reasons for a lot of the things you do, and that should be somewhat disturbing to you, and that's the main claim of the book.

We could have gone in lots [00:07:30] of directions to elaborate on it, but we decided to focus on this one main claim in the book, which is that we have a lot of hidden motives ... A lot of things we do in our lives, we think we do them for one reason, or at least we say we do them for one reason, at least when we're in public, and we really do them for quite different reasons. And that gets in the way of a lot of policy analysis and reform.

So, we have ten chapters in the book ... About ten different areas of our lives that we're wrong about what we do. The first third of the book is an [00:08:00] overall theoretical framing of why it might be plausible that you would just be wrong about what you do, and then we go through ten areas of life where we say, you're just wrong about what you're doing, at a really basic level. The ten areas are: laughter, body language, conversation, consumption or purchasing, art, charity, education, medicine, religion and politics.

Each of these areas, there's a standard story about what you're doing that is the basis for most policy analysis, and the usual thing people [00:08:30] will say in public, and then there's a whole bunch of puzzles ... Things that don't make sense from the point of view of that standard story, and then our resolution, what's the alternative motive. And this alternative motive tends to be more selfish. It tends to violate the norms that humans have about the sort of things you're supposed to do and not supposed to do. And that's the plausible reason why you're not aware of them.

You're better off not knowing what you're doing if what you're doing is something people criticize.

Jacob Morgan: And that's a pretty [00:09:00] interesting concept, and listening to you talk, it makes me think of the show Curb Your Enthusiasm or Seinfeld, where these characters act in a way that you wish you could act, but you never do.

So, is that kind of similar to what we're talking about? These fictitious characters that say things that we would never say because it's not polite, or we shouldn't say it ... Or is this kind of a different level of what you're looking at?

Robin Hanson: Well, often comics [00:09:30] will use our hypocrisy as the basis of comedy, and in the moment of noticing the comedy, we notice our hypocrisy. We notice how we say one thing and really want another thing, and that's often something comics play often. But then when we go back to thinking about politics or policy, we just forget about that, basically.

So, for example, school ... I'm building a lot on my colleague Bryan Caplan's book, also coming out soon, The Case Against Education ... [00:10:00] If you talk ... If you fill out an application to a school, or you go to a graduation ceremony, or you have a politician talking about school, the usual story about what school is for is to learn the material. And most education research is focused on how could you get people to learn the material faster and more reliably and better material, and that sort of thing. But, a lot of us kind of know that most people going to school are not really that eager to learn the material, and most people out of school know that most of the stuff they taught in school [00:10:30] wasn't very useful, and even then you hardly remember any of it. So, there's a big disconnect between our simple standard story that going to school is for learning the material, and the thing that a lot of us realize, and which can be the basis of comedy, that that doesn't work. We aren't really learning very much.

Nevertheless, we are going to school for some reason. What's the reason? And more plausibly, we say, is that you're showing off. Now, there are many other reasons, but if we have to pick one main one, they're showing [00:11:00] off how smart, how conscientious, how conformist, etc., and that makes a lot more sense on a lot of the details of school, but it's not the sort of thing we like to admit, because showing off is not something we generally approve of.

Jacob Morgan: Which is true. Showing off is definitely something that most people don't approve of. How did you do the research of the book? 'Cause you talk about a lot of different things. You looked at everything from animals to politics [00:11:30] to body language ... I mean, it seems like a pretty intensive project. Can you talk about how you did some of the research and found out these things?

Robin Hanson: Well, one of the things that's going on here is that I'm relatively old. I was born in 1959, and so I'm 58 years old now, but my first book came out last ... In 2016, and my second book comes out now, so I waited a long time before I wrote books. And so that means I wasn't a 22 year old [00:12:00] trying to figure out how to write a book and what to say. I've been collecting things to say my whole life, and finally deciding it's time to put them down and write them up. So, that means I've been reading about and thinking about these topics for a long time.

That was also true of my previous book. Now there essentially was more research I could do, specifically for the previous book, but for here I'm building on just a lifetime of experience and knowing where the bodies are buried basically. And then [00:12:30] I could point my co-author to where to look to learn about these things, but the basic thing was to know that in each of these

areas, there are a lot of puzzles with the standard story. And once you know that and know where to look, it's not that hard to find stuff.

But this is, I would say, the key thing that we economists and more generally social scientists have been getting wrong for a long time. When [00:13:00] people say out of habit that they go to school to learn the material, we nod and that makes so much sense that we then go on and analyze education and the whole process and everything given that assumption, and we rarely even question whether that's what's going on. We do that in medicine and we do that in art, and charity, etc., and we end up just making analyses and reform proposals based on these analyses, and then we are puzzled to realize that people just [00:13:30] are not interested in our reform proposals.

We can make very solid arguments, and people will nod and acknowledge those arguments, and then they yawn and go away and just don't want to do anything. And I'm offering this as a main explanation for this phenomenon, that what we've been doing is giving reforms, proposing reforms that purport to, and plausibly do, give people more of the things they've been saying they want. But, it's not actually giving them more of the things they actually want, [00:14:00] and so that means they're not very interested because they didn't really want the things they were saying they wanted. People going to school don't really want to learn more material, and if you offer them ways to learn more material by going to school, they're not that eager to adopt it.

Jacob Morgan: So, this is kind of like an unconscious ... It's not like these are hidden motives that we control, these are motives that we kind of don't know, right?

Robin Hanson: Well, it varies. It varies to a remarkable degree across [00:14:30] topic and person and context. So, some people going to school actually think they want to learn the material, and a lot of other people are more cynically going to school so that they can get a degree to impress somebody else, but when those second group of people who know why they are going to school ... If you invited them to give a graduation ceremony speech or to propose a bill for education in front of Congress, they would slip into the usual idealistic mode of talking about learning the material because they know that's what you're supposed to say.

Jacob Morgan: [00:15:00] Makes sense, yeah. I mean, we've all been in that situation where we had to do those types of things. But then in some cases, it's also motives that we're not aware of, right?

Robin Hanson: Right, and it varies again. One of the more dramatic examples is medicine. Probably the thing that will surprise the most people in reading the book is to hear that medicine is mostly not about health. That is, people talk as if they were going to the doctor and [00:15:30] getting medicine in order to get healthier, but that just doesn't make sense of a lot of details of health and medicine.

And so, more plausibly in the end, we're using medicine to show that we care about each other, and that's a reasonable thing to do, and people do acknowledge that that's part of their motive for getting medicine and pushing medicine on other people. They just don't consciously quite realize how far that goes as a percentage of the real motives.

Jacob Morgan: So, how can we apply some of these things ... Well, and [00:16:00] your book is broken up into a couple different areas, right? So, why do we hide our motives. I think part two is around the hidden motives in everyday life, and then you have the conclusion or the follow-up for all those things.

So, maybe we can start with the beginning around a couple minutes ... Why we hide our motives. We can talk a couple minutes about some of these hidden motives that exist, and then I think we can talk a little bit about how this applies to the workplace. So, for example, reading [00:16:30] through your book, I immediately thought of things like employee engagement programs, and leadership and stuff like that. So it would be interesting to transition to that.

But, why don't we start off with why are we hiding our motives? Are we doing it on purpose?

Robin Hanson: We were built to do it on purpose, but we're not necessarily consciously doing it on purpose. So, humans are unusual compared to [00:17:00] other animals, and even other primates in a number of important ways. We have larger groups and larger brains, and we have language and we have weapons ... And a standard observation made about how humans are different is that we have social norms that we enforce that other animals don't have really ... Because, we can have a norm about don't hit people. Then if somebody sees somebody else hit somebody, they can use language to report it and tell other people what [00:17:30] they say, and then other people can talk together about what to do about it. And then they have weapons so that they can enforce their collective opinion, even when the person who is violating the norm is big and strong.

And that allowed humans to avoid a lot of the harsh conflict that primate tribes and groups have, like chimpanzees, where they break into factions and they're fighting all the time ... And some are taking advantage of each other in big ways ... And that allowed humans to have bigger social groups, which all seems great, [00:18:00] but primates have huge brains because of this really complicated politics they have of all these sub-groups and switching allegiances, and people trying to pretend to be one group and really lean to another ... and all those sorts of things, which takes a lot of mental complexity to figure out.

If humans had been successful in taking away most of the advantages of playing politics through their norms, which the norms would seem to do because many of the norms are about ... Don't hit people, don't threaten people, don't brag, don't form sub-coalitions, [00:18:30] share, make decisions commonly ... And if that at all worked to take away the advantage of playing politics so much, well

humans would have smaller brains than the other primates. But, in fact, we have the biggest brains of all.

So, there's this big question, well what are we doing with these huge brains. The other primates have them to figure out all their complicated social politics, and we have these norms that seem to take away a lot of the advantage of that, yet we have the hugest brains of all. And one solution is to say, well, we have [00:19:00] these norms that we pretend to enforce, and sometimes we do, but we put a lot of energy into evading the norm enforcement and into pretending to follow the rules, but not really following them ... To get other people around us not to enforce our violations against us, to find ways to accuse our rivals of violating norms even when they haven't. And that takes all the big brain power.

And a lot of these norms are expressed in terms of motives. So, if I accidentally hit you, that's fine. If I meant to hit you on purpose, well that's a big norm violation. [00:19:30] And so, because a lot of these norms are expressed in terms of motives, we care a lot about the motives that other people see in us, and in fact, all the time, whatever we're doing, we're constantly keeping track of a story in the back of our minds. If somebody were to challenge us right now about what we're doing, what would we say about our motives? What would our story be? Because we're always ready for that sort of challenge.

And when we see a rival, we're constantly looking for a chance to accuse them of bad motives in whatever they're doing. And so, [00:20:00] this process inside us that sets up the story all the time of what we would say if we were asked about our motives, is the process that produces the motives we say when people ask us what we're doing.

Now, you might think, well we keep this separate track of what our real motives are, but actually ... you the conscious person that I might talk to in a conversation, is the PR person of your mind. He's not necessarily the guy in charge. So, it's like, there's a president and there's a [00:20:30] press secretary, and the president makes the decision, but the press secretary is the one who explains it and who everybody asks, why did you do that and what's your reasoning and what are you gonna do next?

But the press secretary doesn't necessarily know the real reasons, but they have to make them up and they have to make them sound good. And so the conscious mind that you are aware of, that you hear yourself talk and that you talk to other people, that part of you is the part that's managing that press secretary [00:21:00] job ... managing the story of what you say you do to look good, and there's a much deeper, bigger part of you that's actually figuring out what to do, and you're not very consciously aware of that.

Jacob Morgan:

This is making my head hurt, Robin. This is very complicated stuff, and you're making me doubt anything that I do. So, how do we make sense of this? How do you know this is happening? If you're having a conversation with somebody, do you need to stop and [00:21:30] take a minute and say, okay ... do I really want

to say this? Why am I saying this? How do you understand what's going on in your head?

Robin Hanson:

Well, the basic thing is to just stand back and look at other people. Try to look at the general pattern of human behavior and make sense of that. And then assume you're like everybody else, and if you aren't, I guess that's not gonna go so well, but mostly you are.

So, we can just go through some examples here. So I'm gonna first start you out with some animal examples. We look at animals and we [00:22:00] can try to explain their behavior, and often the behavior is explained by different motives than you might have thought at first.

If you look at chimpanzees and other primates, they spend a huge amount of their time sitting and picking bugs and other stuff out of the fur of the other animals. Now, on the surface, that looks like a very helpful, sort of pro-social thing to be doing. Parasites and bugs can get stuck in your fur and having a person sit [00:22:30] next to you or behind you and pick them out, that's very handy and useful.

But it turns out that the time that they spend doing all this picking doesn't really depend much on how many parasites are in any one area, and it doesn't depend on how big they are to have to spend all the time picking, but it does depend a lot on the size of the groups they're in. The bigger the group, the more time they spend picking insects off of each other. And what we've decided is the best explanation for what's going on is that [00:23:00] this is a political ally forming process. If I go pick the insects off your back and you pick the insects off of mine, then we're allies. We're showing each other that we're dedicated to each other and gonna help each other, and this is how they decide who's on whose team.

Again, from a distance, it looks like they're helping, and if they were explaining it as a human would, that's the kind of story they would tell, but in fact, it's more selfish and more political than you might have thought.

Another example, [00:23:30] there are birds, babbler birds, who have small groups and the birds do things like ... One of the birds will sit way up on the tallest branch of whatever bush or tree they're in, and watch out for predators. If a predator comes near, they will call out and warn them, and then rush away. That looks like, of course, that they are helping everybody by watching out for predators.

They also do things like give each [00:24:00] other food. Put food right in each other's beaks to help ... And that also, of course, appears like they're helping them out, but interestingly, they fight for the right to be on the top branch. They will go out of their way to have a fight in order to push somebody else off the top branch and be the one at the top.

Not only that, they will fight to push food down the throats of other birds. The other birds will be resisting it, and they will win the fight to push the food down their throats. Now, that doesn't sound quite so helpful anymore, does it? [00:24:30] But, again, if humans were talking about this and explaining themselves, they would tend to talk about this in pro-social terms of them being helpful, but in fact what it looks like is this is their status hierarchy. The high status birds are the one at the top, and they of course pay for that status in part by having to do the helpful thing, but they'd rather be the high status. They also show status by being able to afford to not eat all their food and give some of it to others, and so the ones who get the food are seen as low status by comparison. [00:25:00] And they are eager to get status.

And so again, I'm telling you this about other animals to show you how we can understand motives of other animals without talking to them or even knowing how they're feeling and what's going on in their head. And so, we're gonna do the same thing for people. We're going to not listen so much to what they say, but look at what they do and try to explain what they do, in terms of what motive can make sense of that.

Jacob Morgan: How would you apply some of this to the world of work, for example? [00:25:30] Because, in the workplace, we have politics, we have these employee engagement programs where we try to introduce perks to get employees to work there, we want our companies to be ranked on these various lists, the way that we structure compensation and bonuses ... It seems there is a huge application of some of these concepts into the work environment.

Robin Hanson: Absolutely.

Jacob Morgan: So, how would you connect this [00:26:00] to some of the stuff that you see in the workplace?

Robin Hanson: The main thing is to be looking at particular behaviors, and acknowledging the usual story about what people say about why they're doing that behavior, and then look for puzzles. Look for things that don't quite make sense so much for that explanation, and then look for other explanations.

So, there's a lot of things in the workplace where people give one reason for what they do, and when you look at the details, it doesn't entirely make that [00:26:30] much sense. There must be something else going on, you would conclude, because these explanations aren't working.

So, for example, you might say, why do people have meetings? And of course the obvious reason for a meeting is to talk about the agenda items. Meetings have agendas and you go there to talk about the items, and then you might say, why do you want to talk about the items? Well, we need to work it out. We need to figure out what we think about it and decide what to do. And that would be a standard rationale for [00:27:00] meetings. And I think almost

everyone who has been in almost any organization has the sense that there are just too many meetings with too many people that go on for too long to be really well accounted for by this story.

Something else must be going on, especially since there's a lot of meetings where you're not really discussing it. You have the yes men phenomena, which happens a lot in meetings, where some leader says, let's do this, and everybody says, [00:27:30] yes, that sounds great. And you might pause and think, well why did we have to have a meeting for that? If all we were gonna do is just say, yes that's great, couldn't we just have that be assumed? And so, again, you're collecting these puzzles about the meetings. Why are there all these meetings? Why do people not actually do much challenging or analysis or contrary opinions in the meetings? Why are all the people there who don't seem to need to be there, [00:28:00] and then you're looking for some other explanation.

You say, well what else could meetings be for? What else could they be other than ways to share information? And then you are able to come up with some alternative readings. You can say, well, one thing we could do at meetings is create a common sense that we know who's in charge and we're still accepting their leadership. There's a dominant person in a group, and they are still dominant and we are still showing that we submit to their dominance. [00:28:30] And you could also create a common sense that nobody's challenging them. Continually with new changes and new issues coming up, everybody still agrees they're in charge and we're gonna do things their way. And that's certainly a function that meetings can and do perform. They create this common sense of what we think we're doing and why, and those common senses are not being challenged.

Jacob Morgan: How do you know, though, if that's really [00:29:00] correct though? So, for example, I'm looking at the meeting example. And I might have my own assumptions of why the meetings are actually being held, but I guess, you don't really know, do you? I mean, there's no way to kind of like-

Robin Hanson: Well, you don't know in any one case, but you could look overall on average. So, the more that you're standing back and looking at the whole world and looking at statistics, the more you could have a better judgment about the average case. Now, we should acknowledge, almost everything people do is complicated, and there's usually many reasons [00:29:30] for doing any one thing. Each one of those reasons is relevant sometimes, and so it's really more about the percentage of the motives when we're standing back and looking.

And the usual motive people say, is part of the mix. It's not a zero percentage, and that's why it works as an excuse. I mean, it wouldn't work as an excuse if it never happened. That would just be laughable, right? It works as an excuse because sometimes that is what's going on. It's just not what's going on as often as people say, but it has [00:30:00] to be going on sometimes or it's not an excuse.

And so, you have to stand back and look at these larger patterns of behavior. Now, we haven't written a book about the elephant in the meeting room, so I haven't been going through these work topics as carefully-

Jacob Morgan: That'll be the next book. The sequel.

Robin Hanson: It might be. But, so I can more defend the claims I've made in the book, in terms of having ten areas and going through each of those very carefully there. And so, in this conversation, if you ask me [00:30:30] to talk about workplaces, I will be speculating a bit more, but I do have things I know there and then I can talk about other examples that where maybe the evidence is more clear and better, but again, you shouldn't focus on like, the last meeting I was in and how was I feeling and what's my evidence looking at Sue's face to what she was feeling ... You should just be looking at the overall pattern of human behavior, and how it varies.

Jacob Morgan: Fair enough.

Robin Hanson: Here's another example. When you have executives and people at high [00:31:00] levels, and they have a lifetime of experience, usually by the time they're at a high level and they've been around for a while, they have a lot of people who are constantly trying to schedule meetings with them. And a lot of those meetings, the agenda of the meeting is advice. People are saying, "I would really like to get your input onto this decision I have." And so the overt agenda of those meetings, and they're often one on one meetings, is advice, again, information is the kind of reason we like to give for meetings.

[00:31:30] And then there's this interesting phenomena, which is as soon as a very high level person like this announces their retirement ... That might not be for another six months that they retire, but they announce their retirement, the next day, nobody wants to meet with them. Suddenly, this person who knows just as much as they did the day before, and has just as much insight into all the decisions you might want to ask advice about, nobody wants the advice.

Jacob Morgan: Hmm. Yeah.

Robin Hanson: So, that suggests there is another [00:32:00] hidden motives that are going on. This advice is less about the information of the advice, and more about being able to show people that you have their support, getting their endorsement, becoming part of a team, implicit deals about who's going to help who on what. Those are more the real agenda of these meetings, but it's more socially acceptable to say you're going there for information, because who's gonna argue against information. It's just this generic, do-good idea. Everybody should want information.

Jacob Morgan: Alright, so I have the [00:32:30] question that is sort of ... I don't have data and research behind this, but like you, I'm sort of speculating a little bit around traditional employee engagement programs.

The big phenomena that I've observed, and I'd be curious if you think any of your concepts might apply to this, is looking at employee engagement programs. So the big thing that we see across the board is that companies around the world invest tons of money in employee engagement programs. We've never spent more money on these initiatives, [00:33:00] yet across the board, around the world, the scores have never been lower. And we see that there's very high disengagement rates and employees kind of hate their jobs.

So, going through your book, the one thing that I thought of is, are we just investing in kind of these short term perks to say that we're doing it, but really what we as organizations are trying to do is just to manipulate employees to get them to work longer, to get them to stay there more. It's not really about well-being. We don't truly care [00:33:30] about employees, we're just doing it so that we can extract more.

Robin Hanson: Now, in general, what I would want to do if I had enough time, is for each one of these things, I would want to not jump to conclusions, and collect a lot of data. I look for puzzles. So, I would say, tell me everything we know about employee engagement programs, and I would look for things that don't quite make sense. That is, I might say, is there any randomized trials of you do or you don't do an engagement program and the consequence? Are there any trials of you try engagement onsite or offsite ... I'd want to say, what does the data tell [00:34:00] us about these engagement programs in a detailed level. And I'd be looking for puzzles there, because those puzzles would be the key, the basis on which I could make a judgment about some alternative motive.

It's easy to make up possible alternative motives, but that's too easy. I want to know some details, and so I can easily say what other things might be going on, but I won't be satisfied just to say that. I will want to, again, get more of these details.

Obviously one explanation is just that [00:34:30] it seems irresponsible not to do something, so you do something, and then people acknowledge, well I guess you did something. You must care. And it doesn't that much matter what you do. And that's how we often treat, say, medicine. It's important that you spend money on it and that something be done, and it's less important what it is or if it works.

A related example of say, sexual harassment workshops ... Apparently, from what I've read, the data are that when you put at least men [00:35:00] in such workshops, they are more likely to do problematic things as a result. Nevertheless, we constantly have these workshops, and courts apparently do give you more of a pass if you have problems, but you say, we had these workshops.

So, obviously one explanation for why people have workshops is 'cause the courts give them a pass if they've had the workshop. It just covers their ass, and then it doesn't that much matter whether it actually reduces or fails to increase [00:35:30] harassment ... What matters is that it's the thing you're supposed to do, and if you don't do it, you're irresponsible and you're open to being sued.

Now, you might move back and say, well why do the courts give you a pass if you have the workshops if they don't work? And that becomes a question about what's going on in the courts, but at the local level, they have the workshop because otherwise they could be accused.

Similarly, you might say, well for an engagement thing, is there ever something a company might be afraid of being sued about, where if they could point to the engagement thing, they'd be saying, but look, we had these engagement workshops. [00:36:00] Or even a division manager might be accused by some superior or somebody else of not having special engaged workshops, and they say, but look, I have the engagement workshops. I'm trying to do something, and it might just be they're covering your ass ... Having a thing you can point to that says you were trying to do something about the problem.

Jacob Morgan: How do you actually get to uncover the real motives, because if you have a conversation with, let's say, somebody that you're working with, or even a friend, and you say, well what's the real reason you're doing this? They're-

Robin Hanson: Yeah, that's just not gonna ... Don't even go there-

Jacob Morgan: Yeah. [00:36:30] They're gonna say, "What are you talking about? I care about you-"

Robin Hanson: Right. You should be looking again at the patterns of human behavior in the large view, not at individual people or individual meetings, 'cause it's a bit world and there's just a lot of variety. And not even looking internally at your own introspection, just looking at the patterns of behavior.

So again, it's the details of the patterns that are gonna be the key. That's how we figure it out. If we don't have details, we can't figure it out. So, as I said, medicine is not about [00:37:00] health, but, you might say, but you haven't shown that to me. And I'd say, yeah ... the mere fact that we go to the doctor ... Yes, it's consistent with health, or showing that you care, that doesn't tell you enough yet to tell the difference. I need to tell you more about medicine, more details, and those details will be the things that won't make very much sense from one view, and a lot more sense from the other.

Jacob Morgan: Can you apply any of these concepts to leadership and management inside of organizations?

Robin Hanson: Of course.

Jacob Morgan: You touched on it a little bit in your book. I think you talked about leadership a little [00:37:30] bit, and you talk about this notion of humble bragging, kissing up to our bosses, stuff like that. So, can you kind of touch on the leadership and management aspect?

Robin Hanson: Sure. I'll make a ... This might seem tangential, but at least all this is concrete. One of the big things I've done for many years is called prediction markets, betting markets. And they're ... Some of the most successful examples of them in terms of the things people say they want, is forecasting whether you'll make a project deadline.

So, [00:38:00] often, there's a project and it has a deadline, and there's the issue of whether it will make the deadline, and they'd rather they made the deadline because otherwise a client might be unhappy or something will have to be delayed. And usually you'll have meetings about the project and whether it's making the deadline, and usually the leader of the project and people associated will be saying, yes, it looks like we're gonna make it. We're on track, yes, yes. And then, of course, quite often, you don't make the deadline.

At that point, people have various excuses, and one of the things you can [00:38:30] do to solve this problem, if you think it's a problem, is to create betting markets, where you let people involved and near the project, bet anonymously on whether you're gonna make the deadline. It's a very simple thing to do and it works very well at producing accurate estimates of whether you'll make the deadline, but it's problematic from an organizational leadership point of view, in that if you're in charge of a project like this and you're worried about what to say if you fail, you will probably want to use everybody's favorite excuse, which [00:39:00] is, the thing that killed my project, it came out of the blue. No one could have seen it coming. It'll never happen again, so we shouldn't even think about it anymore.

And, in order to make that story work, you need there to be a track record of everybody saying this will work until all of a sudden it doesn't. Now, if you set up a betting market, that's not how it's gonna look. The betting market will gradually move towards or just start out at it's not gonna work, and sit there for a long time until you finally don't work ... At which point, you can't say, well, no one could have seen that coming, [00:39:30] 'cause they did.

So, that's an example of management pretending at some level to want to have information about whether they'll make the deadline, but not really wanting it because it takes away their favorite excuse.

Jacob Morgan: And when you look at ... I was thinking of like compensation structures, offices ... Do you see any parallels between some of this and that? You know, I know-

Robin Hanson: Sure-

Jacob Morgan: Oh, go ahead.

Robin Hanson: I mean, [00:40:00] so this issue of prediction markets highlights that. The favorite presentation of what a manager for, in our society is, as is some sort of scientific decision maker. The ideal manager has a spreadsheet and he's collecting information and filling in the cells, and he's doing a calculation, and he's making the hard decisions about what to do. He's a calculator, basically. And that's an image and it's just partially true ... They do that sometimes, it's just really not the main thing they do, but it's the thing that's most [00:40:30] easily embraced and endorsed because it's good for everybody to be making these calculations.

What they are, in part, is politicians. That is, they are part of some political coalition who is ... Members are supporting each other and they are trying to get their coalitions people promoted, and their coalitions projects approved. And because it's a coalition, once they decide something they're gonna support, like a person or a project, they want the [00:41:00] member's support relatively unconditionally. They don't want the support fluctuating with some random, uncontrolled prediction thing. So, a prediction market in particular, that's just bouncing up and down, is out of control, and then not a reliable ally in supporting the project. Then they don't want that, naturally.

Managers are also motivators, but that's also something I think people don't like to acknowledge quite so much because it sounds like if your boss is motivating you, then you're not in control of your motivation, [00:41:30] right? We like to think that we choose our motivation, and we are the boss of our motivation, and it's spontaneous and authentic, and comes from inside.

The more that this other person in charge of you is motivating you, then that sounds like you're not in charge.

Jacob Morgan: It's true. It does sound like you're not in charge. In fact, there's been a lot of debates around that as far as like, who creates the sense of purpose? Is it the employee or is it the organization? Is it the manager? So, where does all that [00:42:00] sort of stuff come from.

You mentioned decision making, and I immediately thought of your previous book around AI because more and more we're seeing that AI is going to take over a lot of this potential decision making that managers usually do. So, do you see kind of a crossover between your old book and your new book? In other words, do you see any applications of how AI might help us understand our motives, help us improve decision [00:42:30] making, and help us maybe work with the elephant in the brain? Or are they just totally two separate things?

Robin Hanson: Well, there's some relation. My book about AI was about a certain kind of AI that takes over all of a sudden. So, it doesn't sit in the background and give you advice about decisions. It either just does everything or it doesn't. But, of

course, you could think about other kinds of AI, which might become more advisory.

But again, I think the key thing to notice is ... The key thing about management is, it's a bottleneck. That is, you give [00:43:00] managers tasks that you give to the bottleneck when you really just can't tolerate giving them to anybody else. You really want to delegate and move tasks away from managers as much as you possibly can because they're a bottleneck of tasks. They have very limited time and attention. Whatever they have to pay attention to comes at a great cost of other things that are not being paid attention to, so whenever possible, move something off their plate. And that's been a lot of progress in organizations in management over the decades, is finding ways to move things off of their plate to let somebody else do it ... Let [00:43:30] somebody else schedule their time, let somebody else put preliminary reports for their review, etc.

Decision making of many sorts is this premier thing that we think of as the thing they mainly do, but it isn't, in many ways, the main thing they're doing. And so, it's fine to take a lot of decisions off their plate. They've got plenty of other things to do. They certainly will not be out of a job if we take particular decisions off their plate. And so, that's certainly an issue with respect to artificial intelligence [00:44:00] and prediction markets. They both have great promise in taking some decisions off their plate, and there's no way they're gonna take all of them. That's just not a remote possibility anytime soon that they're gonna be able to take them all. So, they'll just be able to put more time into the other things they do that are not these key decision making [inaudible 00:44:19]

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, that makes sense. Before I ask you if you have any advice for employees or managers inside of companies, are there any other aspects of your [00:44:30] book that you think we should touch on that listeners should know. Keep in mind, there are some people in HR, some people in technology, some mid-level managers, some entry level employees, and some people that just want to understand what the future of work is gonna look like.

So, knowing that, do you think there's any other aspect of your book that we should bring up or explore that might be relevant to this group?

Robin Hanson: Well, I want to make sure I'm clear that we believe that these motives are being hidden from you [00:45:00] by how you were made, and that that was roughly in your interest. This isn't a conspiracy against you, this is a conspiracy within you, for you, to hide things from you that would otherwise hurt you to see, on average. That's why you don't see them.

So, we are not necessarily recommending that everybody face up and talk and see all these things. That may not be humanly possible, and it might not be in an individual's interest. It's more that this stuff should be somewhere available to [00:45:30] see to whoever wants to, and that people who specialize in

understanding human behavior, and in reforming and structuring human behavior, they should pay more attention to this.

So, perhaps managers and sales people need to better understand people and what they're motivated by, and what motivates them in any particular context, but most of us should probably not be looking in great detail at our real reasons for most things we do.

Again, this book [00:46:00] isn't that much about reforming yourself, and understanding yourself in each particular area, but understanding people in general, and why various whole institutions exist ... And just seeing what's the point of them. Because often we are tempted to look at some part of the world and say, well that looks broken, I wonder if I could fix it. And if you make the wrong assumptions about what's going on there when you try to fix it, you'll just go wrong.

Jacob Morgan: Well, I love that you mentioned understanding motivations of people because I think ... So, my book on employee experience, one of the arguments that I make is that we need to truly understand [00:46:30] our people to be able to help make experiences for them. And it's very hard to create a template that you deploy across the organization. So, understanding these motivations, having these conversations, observing patterns ... I think is very crucial. We also see people analytics and data science, so all of these aspects, I think are very, very important for us to pay attention to, so I'm glad you brought that up.

Alright, so we covered quite a bit. Anything else that you think we should touch on before I ask you for [00:47:00] any advice that you might have?

Robin Hanson: Again, these are all just many details to know, but the book ... Obviously I encourage people to read the book, but the book gives a lot more details than we're giving here in terms of the data that shows what these motives are. Obviously here, we're not really convincing you as a listener that, say medicine isn't about health, etc. We're just telling you that there's a book that does have a lot of details about that.

Jacob Morgan: That's [00:47:30] true. Yes, everybody listening to this, stop going to the doctor-

Robin Hanson: You know, I'm not even saying that. I might say, what you might do is cut back, except you have this real reason to show that you care, and you need to do that. And if you don't do it, that will have consequences. So, for a lot of these things, again, individual behavior isn't necessarily wrong, it just has a different motivation than we tend to say.

It's more if you're trying to understand what other people are doing, why, and then maybe introduce [00:48:00] reforms that you really need to understand what's going on.

Jacob Morgan: And sometimes you do these things 'cause it's the politics of the organization, right? So, I know that that's one of the things that a lot of comedians always talked about. You do things just because you have to do it. You don't want to go to somebody's birthday, but you go because it's kind of like, accepted. You don't want to talk to this person at work, but you have to. You don't want to smile when you see your boss, but you have to because it's part of the internal politics, the being liked at work, which is so important.

Robin Hanson: [00:48:30] Right. I mean, it's also true that you have a high opinion of yourself in part because you believe you've been following these high motives all the time. And when you see your real motives, you'll have to adopt a somewhat lower opinion of your typical motives and what their agenda is.

Now, you can simultaneously adopt a lower opinion of everybody else in the world as well. It's not gonna necessarily lower you relative to everybody else, but it's going to mean you're gonna be a little more honest and frank about people being selfish in a lot of ways.

[00:49:00] It'll empower you to think about how to improve if you want. Whenever you find that what you actually are is different than your ideals, you always have two main choices. You can either try to change what you are to live up to your ideals better, or you can try to lower your ideals, make them more realistic and feasible so that they can be better achieved by what you are.

Jacob Morgan: What advice do you have to employees listening to this podcast? They're not executives. They're maybe entry level, maybe mid-level employees. [00:49:30] Are you suggesting that we kind of call everybody out inside of our organizations when we think there are ulterior motives or-

Robin Hanson: No, not at all. That would probably not be a good idea.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, or stop playing the politics game at work or what advice do you have for them?

Robin Hanson: Again, mostly what people are doing is roughly the right thing in their situation, but the world changes and we don't ping to the details, the more that you really need to understand what's going on, the more you should face facts. So if you are a manager or a sales person where your [00:50:00] job is especially dependent on your judgment about other people and their motives, then this is something that you need to pay more attention to.

But, part of what people want is to be hypocritical. Part of what they want is to pretend one thing while doing another, and so you need to respect that, mostly, and if you're gonna call someone out on their hypocrisy, you really better have a good reason because that's not something people tend to reward.

Jacob Morgan: No. I can't remember a single situation where I've called somebody out and everything turned out to be fantastic afterwards. It's always a very [00:50:30] awkward conversation.

So, I guess this idea of playing the politics game at work is still one that's important to do. We still need to act appropriately and just ... It almost seems like just mentally be aware that people might have these other motives as opposed to explicitly calling them out.

Robin Hanson: Right now, again, people are doing a lot of politics at [00:51:00] the office, but they don't want to call it that, as you know ... Then they will give other rationales for their motives, and if you look in more detail at those other rationales, often they won't entirely make sense. There'll be a lot of ways that it doesn't quite fit, and of course if you call that out, then you are embarrassing them and trying to make them acknowledge that this isn't the real motive, and they won't appreciate that.

But you should also acknowledge this about yourself as well. We usually like to tell ourselves that we're not playing politics, we're just enforcing some norms. So, Joe over there [00:51:30] wasn't treated fair and you want to make sure Joe gets treated fair. That's why you're doing this lobbying for Joe. The fact that Joe happens to be your ally and friend, you say, well that's just incidental. I'm just lobbying for Joe because he wasn't treated fair.

So, we like to tell ourselves these stories about how we're not playing politics, or we're playing it incidentally for some other reason that's a good reason, and these are again, our hidden motives.

Jacob Morgan: What advice would you give to maybe executives or managers at organizations that are [00:52:00] running companies that are responsible for tens, hundreds, if not thousands of their people. Is there anything they should do differently about how they lead and manage their organizations considering all these things that we've been talking about?

Robin Hanson: Oh, there probably are, and after I write a book on hidden motives in the office, then I might know a lot more about that. At the moment, I'm just at the stage of trying to understand what's going on in offices and trying to notice the puzzles, and trying to [00:52:30] focus on them and come up with explanations. I'm not really at the stage where I could give you much advice other than the world's complicated, and often the strange way things are have reasons for them that actually would make sense if you understood them, but they would still often be things people don't want to acknowledge.

Jacob Morgan: So, you've already started looking at the workplace, and have started asking some questions about it?

Robin Hanson: Sure. Yeah. It's just part of my general like looking at everything.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah. Are there any specific puzzles that you're particular interested [00:53:00] in, in the workplace?

Robin Hanson: Well, I have a blog post from 2014 I'm looking at here, called Firm Inefficiency, where I sort of acknowledge a change in my attitude, compared to most economists, where it's about whether firms are profit maximizing. So, we economists tend to, as a default, assume that firms are profit maximizing. That is what they're trying to do, is make more profit, and in this post, I list 20 different ways in which firms seem to not be profit maximizing.

With 20 different ways, it's no longer [00:53:30] a puzzle or two that there must be some unusual explanation for, and it's more like a pattern where I say, well, okay, I guess firms mostly are not profit maximizing, at least in a lot of important ways-

Jacob Morgan: What were some of the reasons that you listed from the 20?

Robin Hanson: Well, for one thing, when there's a ... I'll start right from the top. When firms face more competition, they have big bursts of productivity. Well, yeah, that raises the question, before the competition, why weren't they bursting their productivity then? They could have apparently, but they didn't, [00:54:00] right? So that says they often get lazy. Without competition, they are not profit maximizing. Because increasing productivity would still increase profits, even if you didn't face competition, right?

Jacob Morgan: Yeah. That's a good one. I never thought about that.

Robin Hanson: There's a lot of deadwood. I mean, people say this everywhere, but it seems to be true. There's a lot of places with people who are substantially less productive who still they keep them around. That's an important thing to notice and understand. What's going on there?

Not [00:54:30] invented here. Look, this is a standard observation about innovation. It's that people are much more eager to adopt innovations that were invented here. But of course, from the maximizing profit point of view, that hardly matters. You want to adopt any innovation you can find. But, apparently, the agenda of people who are trying to take credit for innovation seems to be more important than the agenda of trying to adopt whatever innovations work.

Jacob Morgan: That's also a very good one, actually.

So, what's-

Robin Hanson: Anyways, [00:55:00] that's just the first three items out of 20, but-

Jacob Morgan: So, what was your theory there? What's the ulterior motive?

Robin Hanson: Well, this is less about an ulterior motive than just, well ... Basically, firms are mostly like large battle grounds where armies of political coalitions fight each other, and nobody's in charge really. So, these political coalitions adopt the policies that are good for them, even if they aren't good for the company as a whole.

And so, for a lot of these you can have a plausible argument why they are good for a particular [00:55:30] political coalition even if they are not good for the company as a whole. One very simple example is information barriers ... Information silos.

Quite often, divisions within organizations put out barriers to information about that division getting out to other divisions. But from the point of view of a firm as a whole, it's just hard to rationalize any sort of barriers like that. What would be the point from the organization as a whole's point of view in preventing people from division A finding out details about division B? That might embarrass [00:56:00] division B, but how could it hurt the firm as a whole?

But we do tolerate and allow those, and it makes complete sense that if you're in charge of division A, you would want to limit information about your division going to other divisions 'cause that will help your political coalition that runs in part division A.

Jacob Morgan: Hmm. Yeah. You're making me think differently about all these things now. So, I'm actually gonna take a look at that blog post as well 'cause I think that's a pretty interesting topic.

So, where can people go to learn more about your [00:56:30] book, and you, and some of the stuff that you're involved with and currently doing?

Robin Hanson: Well, The Elephant In The Brain has a website, elephantinthebrain.com, and my last book, Age Of Em, has a website, ageofem.com. I have a website called hanson.gmu.edu. I'm sure you'll put links up when you post this, and I have a blog, Overcoming Bias, I tweet, so I probably give a lot more information about what I'm doing than most people do.

Jacob Morgan: [00:57:00] Pretty easy to find online I think, if you just Google Robin Hanson.

Robin Hanson: Exactly.

Jacob Morgan: You're pretty out there.

Robin Hanson: Yeah, I'll come to the top.

Jacob Morgan: And your book is coming out January 2nd, right?

Robin Hanson: And the Kindle version should be out as people are listening to it now.

Jacob Morgan: Oh, very cool. Well, I definitely recommend that people check that book out. Well, Robin, thanks for taking time out of your day to speak with me. I'm really glad you were able to come back again as being a podcast guest. You're one of the few recurring podcast guests we've had, and I always like speaking to you because your ideas are ... [00:57:30] They're futuristic in nature, and they're very counterintuitive to what a lot of other people keep hearing about and thinking about. Especially the AI concept ... Very different than what we usually hear about, and this Elephant In The Brain, I don't think I've heard much at all about this topic, so it's always great to speak with you. So, thank you.

Robin Hanson: Nice to talk to you.

Jacob Morgan: And thanks everyone for tuning in to this week's episode of the podcast. Again, my guest has been Robin Hanson. Make sure to check out his new book, The Elephant In The Brain: [00:58:00] Hidden Motives In Everyday Life. I had a chance to read an advanced copy, and I highly recommend it. I'll see all of you guys next week.