EYE OF EUROPE

Emotion Ecosystems 2040

Workshop report

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We warmly thank all contributors to the workshop, whose insights and reflections have meaningfully shaped the content of this report.

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Context

The foresight workshop ***Emotion Ecosystems 2040*** was conducted on 24-25th of June 2025, as part of the project ***Eye of Europe***. As a Coordination and Support Action funded through Horizon Europe, the project aims to enhance the integration of foresight practices into Research and Innovation (R&I) policy making across Europe. Ultimately, *Eye of Europe* envisions a more **cohesive and influential R&I foresight community that contributes significantly, as a collective intelligence**, **to shaping and guiding policy decisions**.

The project coordinator—the Executive Agency for Education, Research and Innovation Funding in Romania (UEFISCDI)—led the workshop *Emotion Ecosystems 2040* as part of a series of **11 foresight pilots** planned in the project. The goal of these pilots is to address topics that are relevant for the European Research Area and to experiment with innovative methodologies and diverse groups of participants, thus helping shape a new generation of foresight.

The design and structure of the workshop

Over the course of the two-day workshop, the participants explored the theme of emotion ecosystems by working through a structured process in **three facilitated groups**, whose composition shifted at key moments. The work began by framing the concept of "emotion ecosystems" in terms of a curated set of **societal tensions**, each expressing the strain between a shared aspiration and its undesirable consequences. To delve into these tensions, participants applied the **Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)** framework twice: first, to **examine the present** by

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unpacking common narratives, systemic structures, shared worldviews, and deep cultural metaphors; and then again, in a creative key, to **imagine preferable futures**. This second phase involved reconstructing alternative metaphors, beliefs, and systemic designs, supported by a short **horizon scanning** exercise based on a set of pre-existing and participant-generated key drivers of change. The following sections outline this process in greater detail.

Plenary presentation of workshop approach

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Unpacking the theme of “emotion ecosystems”

The event explored the concept of **emotion ecosystems**—the dynamic, interwoven emotional currents that shape our collectives, whether in communities, institutions, or digital spaces. Emotion ecosystems evolve continuously in response to technological innovation, political shifts, and cultural transformations.

To explore the broad and complex theme of "emotion ecosystems", participants approached it through **the lens of several societal tensions that reveal the emotional contradictions shaping our times**. These tensions offered a way to ground the abstract theme in lived experience, highlighting the emotional undercurrents of contemporary life.

Each of the tensions in the list below is framed in terms of **a broad societal aspiration** (the first term) and **an undesirable outcome** (the second term). The latter suggests that, at least to some extent, the way in which collectives have been pursuing the aspiration has generated unwanted side-effects - hence the tension and the underlying emotional strain or incongruity.

The box below showcases the full list of tensions - the starter list provided by the workshop facilitators together with the additional ones proposed by participants.

Starter list of tensions

- Hyperconectedness & Sense of isolation
- Craving for unity & Tribal polarization
- Extending care at planetary scale & Emotional fatigue
- Search for authenticity & Pathologizing existential anxiety
- Release from pressures of survival & Perceived unhappiness

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- Healing collective traumas & Solitary coping
- Desire for freedom vs. Emotional disorientation
- Quest for joy & Social conformism
- Collective emotional cohesion & Virality of emotions
- Abundance of emotional signaling & Neglect of embodied emotions
- Preoccupation with self realisation & Spiritual consumerism
- Acknowledging non-human consciousness & Patronising protectionism

Additional tensions proposed by the workshop participants

- Striving for emotional wellbeing & Commodification of wellbeing
- Searching for truth and meaning & Settling for what feels true
- Aiming to reduce uncertainty & Oversimplification
- Ethical earning & Increased competitivity
- Quest for safety & Sense of social control
- Quest for work-leisure balance & Erasure of boundaries between the two

These dynamic polarities opened up multiple entry points for reflection and imagination, inviting the participants to engage with the topic from **different perspectives, anchored in their fields of expertise**. The latter included social psychology, psychotherapy, anthropology, philosophy, cultural history, spirituality, political science, the arts and creative industries, journalism, media studies, science and technology studies, and robotics.

Examining the Present

In an increasingly complex society, such tensions cannot not be fully understood by looking only at surface-level symptoms. To explore the dynamics of each tension in greater depth, participants applied the **Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)** framework developed by Sohail Inayatullah. The CLA helps unpack complex

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issues by exploring them across **four interconnected levels of depth**, moving from surface-level symptoms to deep cultural narratives. Each layer offers a different type of insight and leverages different ways of knowing and imagining, as described below:

Headlines / Litany – "What's happening?"

This is the most visible and immediate layer, containing items typically found in **media discourse, public opinion, and common narratives**. It includes headlines, statistics, and simplified representations of a problem. It tends to describe issues in a reactive, often emotional way (e.g. *"Loneliness is on the rise"*, *"Mental health crisis among youth"*).

Systems / Structures – "What structures create this?"

This level examines the **institutional, economic, technological, and policy systems** that produce or sustain the litany. It invites analyses of power dynamics, infrastructure, behaviors, and organizational norms (e.g. the design of social media platforms, education systems, or urban planning).

Worldview / Paradigm – "What beliefs sustain this system?"

Here, the focus shifts to the **cultural values, ideologies, and mental models** that justify and maintain the systems above. They include broadly shared assumptions, identities, or societal logics (e.g. *"productivity defines worth"*, *"connection equals visibility"*).

Myth & Metaphor – "What stories lie underneath the worldview?"

At the deepest level, CLA explores the **archetypes, metaphors, and emotional narratives** that shape our unconscious understanding of reality. These are often symbolic and metaphorical (e.g. *"the world is a marketplace"*, *"humans as machines"*, *"life is a race"*).

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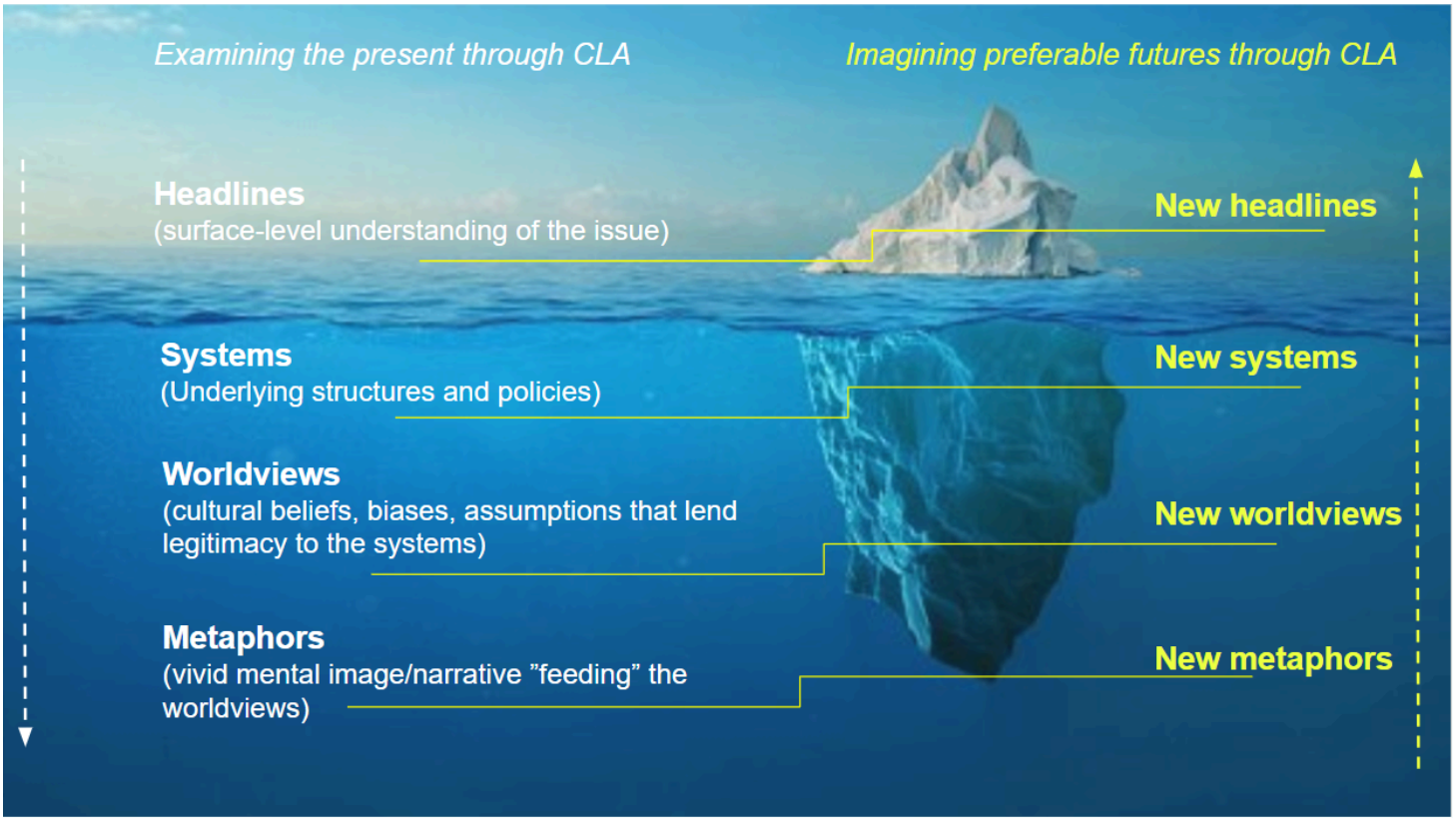
Imagining Preferable Futures

After gaining a layered understanding of the present, participants' attention turned to the future. Using the layers of the CLA, the working groups engaged in a **creative reconstruction** process: proposing **new metaphors**, **alternative worldviews, beliefs and values**, and **innovative systemic structures** that could support more equitable, connected, and sustainable futures.

A video tutorial on the Causal Layered Analysis approach, developed by Eye of Europe partner *Finland Futures Research Centre*, was shared in advance with the workshop participants



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Furthermore, to inform the design of new systems, the process added a brief **horizon scanning** exercise, identifying key **drivers of change** that might influence how these futures take shape. The starter list of relevant drivers in society by 2040 is presented in the boxes below:

Artificial Intelligence
- Emotion recognition
- Digital companionships
- Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)

Blurring digital-physical environments
- Internet of things (Sensors and networks)
- XR (Virtual reality, Augmented reality)
- Wearables
- Brain-to-machine interface

Automation
- Robots
- Humanoids
- Smart factories

Demographics
- Aging population
- Immigration
- Intergenerational gaps

Environment
- Climate crisis
- Estrangement from nature
- Closer to nature movements

Politics and Geopolitics
- War zones
- Information warfare
- Split of the Internet
- Polarization of voters and parties

Privacy & data in society
- Data privacy threats
- People managing, owning, and profiting from their digital footprint
- Open data, open-source software, data altruism

Media (Public discourse & public opinion)
- Misinformation & disinformation
- Deep fakes
- New main sources for news: social media, video networks, online personalities and creators, chatbots
- Social media filter bubbles & echo chambers
- Content virality driven by emotional engagement/resonance

Work
- Remote work
- Work companions
- Increased work mobility
- Restructuring of job markets

Health
- Digital technologies for mental health (biofeedback, wearables, brain stimulation)
- Psychedelics
- Health science (Microbiome, Genomics)
- Increased incidence of anxiety and depression
- Increased incidence of neurodegenerative diseases
- More people with chronic diseases

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Workshop discussions and outcomes

Warming up with emotions

To attune to the emotional dimension of the theme, **the workshop began with a short, real-time anonymous survey**—a warm-up to surface the different perspectives in the group. The survey consisted of the six questions below, where respondents were invited to mark their view on a slider between the two options A and B. The survey results are presented at the end of the report.

- Emotions are A) internal, private experiences or B) relational processes, networked, and performative
- Emotions are A) universal and discrete (e.g., anger, joy) or B) shaped by culture and experience
- Emotions are A) separate from rational thought or B) intertwined with thinking, perception, and meaning-making
- Emotions are A) automatic, reactive responses or B) proactive simulations guiding adaptive behavior
- Emotions are A) short-lived, passing states or B) enduring & reflective of temperament or long-term patterns (e.g., melancholia, optimism)
- Emotions are A) visceral, energetic (e.g., rage, desire) or B) gaining meaning within narrative frameworks & personal history

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The selected tensions addressed during the workshop

The section below presents the outcomes of the group work. To focus the discussions, participants first voted individually on the full list of tensions. Based on the results, each of the three facilitated tables "adopted" two tensions, resulting in six top-ranked themes. Of these, the first three below were explored in greater depth, while the remaining three were addressed in a less systematic, more exploratory manner.

Hyperconnectedness & Sense of isolation

Examining the present

Headlines / Litany

- **Connected but lonely** – suggesting that digital connection does not always translate into emotional closeness or meaningful relationships.
- **The loneliness epidemic** – framing widespread social disconnection as a public health or societal crisis.
- **The world in your palm, but no one to talk to** – highlighting the paradox of having global access to information and people yet feeling personally isolated.
- ***Rel-cession* (relationship recession)** – pointing to a decline in the quality, depth, or number of truly personal relationships.
- **Oversharing (pics, videos, memes, emojis) but underfeeling** – suggesting that expressive content online often lacks genuine emotional depth or connection.
- **Discomfort with physical presence and face-to-face interaction** – noting a shift where in-person socialising feels awkward, unfamiliar, or anxiety-inducing.

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Systems / Structures

- The **platform economy**, particularly social media:
    - Fast, cheap, and ubiquitous digital infrastructure designed to connect people
    - Algorithms that promote emotionally charged content to boost engagement and time spent on platforms
    - Emotional radicalization that fragments and polarizes users
    - Reward-based gratification systems that reinforce addictive behaviors
    - Platforms engineered to bypass meaningful friction and conflict (e.g. through anonymity, curated or fake profiles)
- **Changing family dynamics**: declining interdependence, growing atomization, weakening intergenerational ties; expressions of love/attention increasingly translated into material rewards
- **Broader economic and cultural systems** rooted in individualism and self-optimization
- **Erosion of shared cultural references**, values, norms, and narratives capable of supporting a collective identity
- **Weak or outdated governance structures** (national and supra-national) unable to regulate capitalism and Big Tech effectively

Worldviews

- **Human connection is limitless** – we can (and should) connect with ever-larger groups; the world is one big digital village
- **A "fair trade-off"**: the freedom to express ourselves in exchange for personal data, tracking, and algorithmic control
- **Platforms are just neutral tools**; it's all about individual choice and agency
- **Worth is measured by connectivity** – the more connected you are, the more valuable you seem

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- **Scarcity mindset**: attention, affection, and relevance are limited and must be competed for
- **Connection** refers to many individual selves linked to many others
- **Real-life relationships** are inherently hard and should be streamlined or eased
- **Convenience and comfort** are more important than emotional commitment and effort

Metaphor

A few alternatives, some of which gained further support from new participants in round two

- Armchair global village / Global village from the comfort of your home
- Full fridge of over-processed ready-meals (** from round 2)
- Connection on demand (* from round 2)
- Junk connections
- I share therefore we are

Final metaphor: **Full fridge of over-processed ready-meals**

> *The metaphor captures the illusion of abundance in today's hyperconnected world: endless options for interaction, always within reach, yet ultimately unsatisfying and low in real emotional nourishment. Like ultra-processed food, these digital connections are engineered for convenience, speed, and instant gratification, but lack depth, authenticity, and long-term sustenance. This metaphor reflects a worldview where ease and quantity replace quality and where relationships are consumed rather than cultivated, leaving us full, yet emotionally undernourished.*

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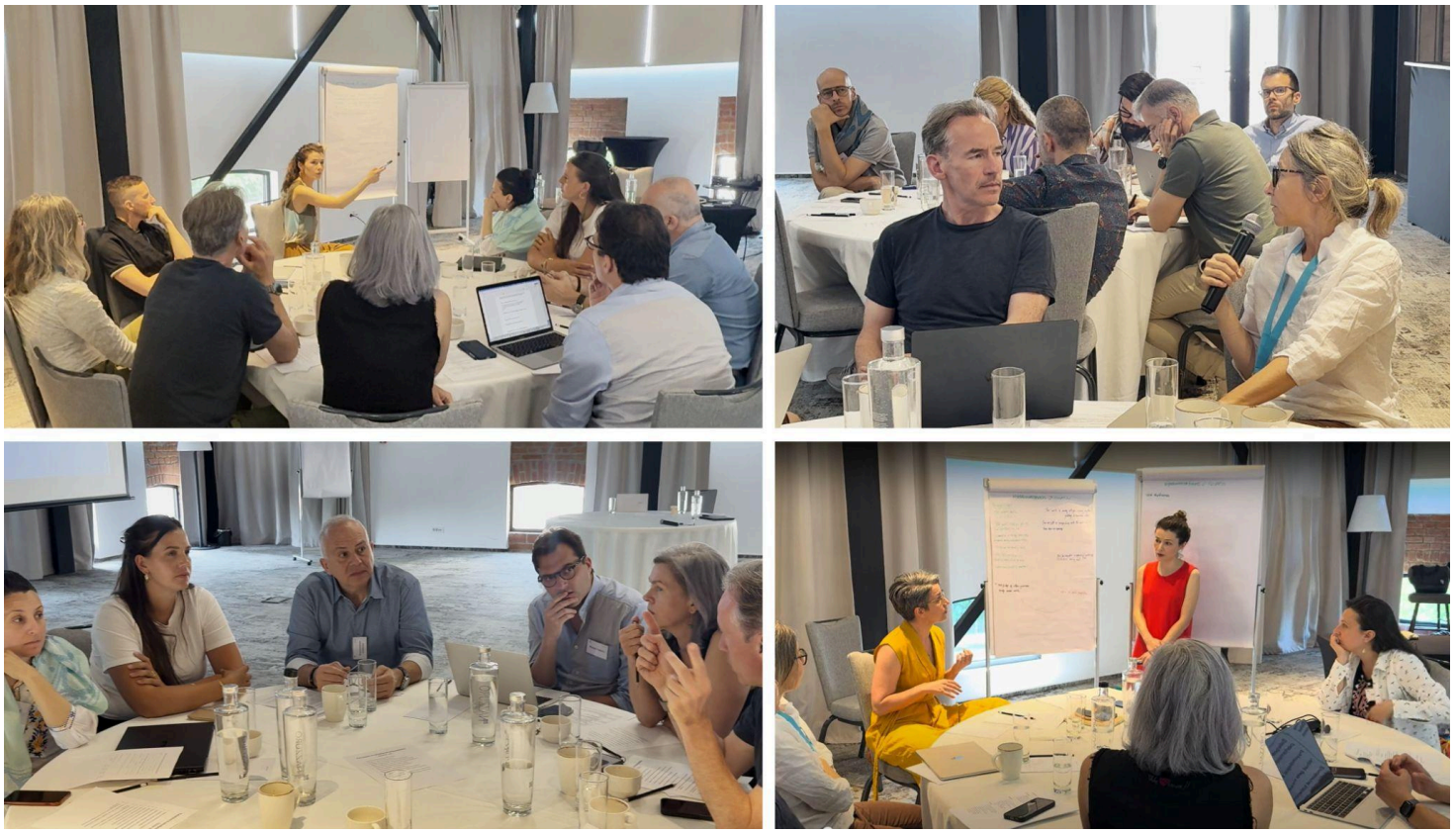

Group work table 1

Imagining preferable futures

At this stage, the goal was to imagine how a brighter future than the present could be shaped. We turned again to the Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), but this time through a creative lens, using it to develop new metaphors and mental images that express more positive worldviews and beliefs. The latter ones can, in turn, support the emergence of innovative systems and structures. Instead of reproducing the current litany—a collective lament about disconnection—we aim to reach a transformed surface level, where public discourse and personal testimonies reflect the signs of a more equitable, connected, and regenerative society.

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New Metaphor(s)

These new metaphors signal a shift from consumption to care, from speed to depth, and from fragmentation to interdependence:

- Tending a garden – nurturing growth through time, attention, and relational care
- Hand-crafted quilt – diverse, stitched-together connections forming a coherent whole
- Cooking a meal together – shared presence, reciprocity, and co-creation
- **Nutritious mycelium** – a living, intelligent network that sustains, connects, and regenerates from below the surface

  The chosen metaphor "nutritious mycelium" evokes a vision of society as a living, intelligent network—much like the underground fungal systems that sustain forests—where connections are deep, mutual, and regenerative.

  This metaphor reframes connectivity from being about speed, visibility, and quantity (as in the previous metaphor: a fridge full of processed meals) to one about interdependence, nourishment, and care. It reflects a shift from performance and isolation toward a culture of connection that replenishes, heals, adapts, and enables new growth for individuals and communities or networks.

New Worldviews

Worldviews that redefine what it means to connect and flourish in a hypertechnological age:

- We are evolutionarily wired for meaningful connection
- Real-life connection nurtures and expands us, while isolation diminishes us, emotionally and physically

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- Emotional awareness and intelligence are skills that can be cultivated at any age
- The world is not a single digital village, but many local "villages" learning to know and respect each other
- Nodes within a network grow stronger as a result of mutual interconnection
- We are not in competition with the world or each other
- Being in service to others is deeply fulfilling and life-enhancing
- Technology is not neutral—it reflects and shapes the values we embed within it

Drivers of Change that may shape the new systems

The new systems/structures may be influenced by emerging societal (S), technological (T), and environmental (E) forces:

- (T) Expansion of digital spaces into more immersive environments
- (T) Mixed reality enhances our sense of presence and co-presence
- (T) Brain–computer interfaces deepen integration of self and system
- (T) Emergence of non-human social agents (AI companions, coworkers, avatars of the deceased)
- (E) Extreme weather reduces the livability of public and social spaces
- (S) Centralization of digital and economic power
- (S) Aging populations reshape care and connection dynamics
- (S) Increased incidence of psychopathologies and deteriorations of mental wellbeing

New Systems & Structures

From this ground, new structures can take root—ones that reflect the updated metaphor and beliefs:

- **Value-based design** for digital platforms and virtual environments

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  - Prioritizing human dignity
  - Infused with values like love, care, mutual respect, and authentic connection *(e.g. see the worlds imagined by Studio Ghibli)*
  - Artificial systems optimized not for engagement metrics, but for human wellbeing
  - Non-human agents designed as social facilitators, encouraging real human interaction, not replacing it

- **Reimagined public spaces** that are:
  - Welcoming and resilient oases in the face of extreme weather
  - Designed to nurture human–nature relationships
  - Structured to invite spontaneous, meaningful social interactions

- **Mental health** as a collective priority:
  - Enhanced awareness, education, and intervention policies
  - AI therapists as first-line support tools that complement, not replace, human professionals
  - AI-assisted data analysis and pattern recognition to better understand mental health dynamics at societal scale

- **Robotic support systems** for **the care economy**
  - Expanding capacity for compassionate caregiving, especially in aging societies.

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Craving for unity & tribal polarization

Examining the present

Headlines/ Litany

Polarization—especially political polarization—is more apparent than ever in many European countries, testing the limits of democratic systems.

Visible signs include:

- **Extreme polarization** creates a communication breakdown:
  - *"I cannot talk with my neighbour."*
  - *"100% believe that 50% are idiots."*
- **A frequent sense of fear:**
  - *"We are being assaulted by immigrants."*
  - *"Everybody is robbing us."*
- **Clashing narratives:**
  - *The rise of 'Great Nations' movements* vs. *the political correctness of inclusivity* as the dominant axis of polarization.

Systems

Polarization is not just emotional—it's structurally reinforced by interlocking systems:

- **Algorithmic polarization**: Social media ecosystems amplify division by curating outrage-driven content and encouraging the construction of **ideological echo chambers**.
- **Accelerated societal change**: Technological disruption including AI, climate anxiety, and shifting norms outpace institutions, leaving individuals disoriented and vulnerable to **simplified narratives**.
- **Structural inequalities**: Widening material disparities and perceived injustice create fertile ground for **resentment, identity-based grievances**, and populist backlash.

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- **Democratic antagonism**: The adversarial nature of representative democracy rewards **conflict over collaboration**, often deepening societal cleavages instead of healing them.
- **Misinformation and propaganda**: The erosion of trust in institutions is accelerated by **manipulated information flows**, which blur the lines between fact and fiction.

Worldviews

- **Tribalism as safety**: Belonging to a group is seen as essential for survival.
- **Defensive morality**: "We must protect humanity from bad ideas" becomes a justification for suppressing dissent.
- **Existential fear**: Anxiety about death, ecological collapse, and societal decay drives reactionary thinking.
- **Moral dualism**: "We should hate evil"—a belief that encourages purity politics and moral exclusion.
- **Projection and denial**: "Everything bad with the world is not me" fuels scapegoating and abdication of responsibility.
- **Suspicion of difference**: Otherness is equated with danger or disruption.
- **Virality equals truth**: The faster an idea spreads, the more legitimate it appears.
- **Discomfort with doubt**: Certainty is privileged; ambivalence is feared.
- **Loss of agency**: Individuals feel powerless in shaping systemic change.
- **Fear of vulnerability**: To be exposed is to be endangered.
- **Sameness as safety**: Homogeneity is idealized as a condition for peace.

Metaphor

[Alertness to] the **Trojan Horse**—a symbol of infiltration and the perceived need to **protect a pure internal space** from external contamination.

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Group work table 2

Imagining preferable futures

New metaphor

Mixed Grains

Diversity is not an intrusion, but an **inherent truth of who we are**. Each grain represents a distinct element of self, culture, or belief, coexisting and **nourishing a shared ecosystem**.

Like a field of varied seeds, such pluralism strengthens our **collective resilience**, and strengthens individual immunity.

Rather than fearing difference, this metaphor invites us to **embrace inner complexity**, **integrate our shadows**, and recognize that we are all interwoven.

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New worldviews

- **Polarity as creative tension:** Oppositions are not conflicts to be eradicated but generative spaces for growth. Confronting differences can deepen understanding and foster transformation; just as compost turns waste into nourishment, integrating the shadow enables renewal.
  For example, the opposition/confrontation between fear-based isolationism and the formalism of diversity policies may nurture more authentic forms of acceptance.
- **Focus on desire, not avoidance:** Building futures based on what we want is more powerful than resisting what we do not want.
- **Identity as inquiry:** The question *"Who are we?"* is more urgent than ever.
- **Trust in collective becoming:** Confidence in our shared potential enables openness to transformation.

Drivers of change

The following drivers of change have been identified, most of them with an amplifying effect on polarization:

- **Climate change**, with its own polarities:
  - A perceived sense of being doomed vs. ignoring the issue
  - An opportunity for a collective aim vs. competitive pressure for resources
- **Increased generational gaps** further fragment society.
- **War, conflicts, and hybrid warfare** are weaponizing social media.
- **Artificial intelligence** is accelerating the bubble effect in social media, while also opening possibilities for synthesis and unifying perspectives when answering questions.
- **Bionics**—the blurring of natural and artificial—introduces new polarizations around the limits of acceptance.

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New systems

In this period of unprecedented change, if polarity is reframed as a potential for rebirth, new systems should provide frameworks for rediscovering our shared humanity.

Small gestures may pave the way for deeper understanding and empathy—from engaging in heartfelt conversations with strangers in the park, to listening attentively and with care, to traveling to distant places and experiencing first-hand the lives of people who may one day seek a home in our countries—reminding us of our shared humanity and interdependence.

A greater ambition would be a reimagining of education: less formal and judgmental, more attuned to awakening philosophical and spiritual questions rather than offering simple answers, and, most importantly, committed to sustaining the essential quest of who we are.

Key components of this transformation include:

- **Critical Feeling.** Complementing critical thinking, critical feeling deepens discernment by treating emotions as sources of knowledge and guidance/orientation. It helps individuals move beyond fear-based reactivity toward authenticity and embodied understanding, enabling more compassionate, grounded engagement with complex realities.
- **Learning Communities.** These are supportive spaces of inquiry and experimentation where people can learn, unlearn, and co-create new ways of being. Learning communities blur the line between teacher and learner, emphasizing participation, reflection, and relational development over fixed outcomes.

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Extending care at planetary scale vs. Emotional fatigue

Interpretation of the tension

One of the key observations made during the warm-up discussions was that the second term of the tension, 'emotional fatigue', covers in fact a broad spectrum of emotional and behavioral responses.

As for the first term, the responses above were generally perceived as triggered by societal pressures to 'care' for (invest in, show support for, mobilize in favor of) an array of grand 'issues of the day', from climate change to wars in faraway places, from famine on other continents to the plight of endangered species and other living creatures. Climate change was seen as a prototypical example of a 'grand issue' that contributes to fatigue. (The genuineness and even urgency of the issues was not itself called into question.)

Furthermore, although the pressures were understood as being 'social' in nature, it was recognized that they manifest not only via media or general exhortations (e.g. by politicians and other influential people), but in everyday interaction. As a result, the pressures often have an intimate dimension.

An issue raised after tables were switched, and which most participants agreed on, was that human altruism and empathy developed, in evolutionary terms, in small groups and communities. Efforts to scale them up to larger communities have always generated emotional strains, laying bare a 'psychological gap'. When these communities encompass everybody and even reach beyond the human species, calls for empathy often generate an emotional backlash.

Finally, given the multifariousness of the term 'emotional fatigue', the litany and the worldviews will contain statements that are in tension with each other.

Examining the present

Headlines / Litany

Participants suggested brief expressive or stereotypical statements made by individuals experiencing the tension. As noted previously, these statements were meant to illustrate a variety of emotional responses to 'fatigue'.

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- "We're doomed, it's too late!" - suggesting a sense of hopelessness or powerlessness, perhaps the tendency to catastrophize.
- "I am struggling, so I cannot be expected to care about everything." -suggesting exasperation, contemplating the decision to give up.
- "It's just too much..., what can I do...?!" - suggesting being overwhelmed, feelings of disorientation and withdrawal.
- "I am doing my best, but how can I reach more people?!" - suggesting exasperation due to the inability to generate change.
- "I am just tired of overthinking!" - suggesting emotional or decisional depletion, and perhaps a sense that it does not help much anyway.

Social arrangements and systems

- **Informational overload**.

  It was suggested that one reason for emotional fatigue is the incessant stream of news and pieces of information (including data), as well as calls and appeals to individuals to act with urgency. '24/7 agenda-setting' is one example of how citizens get overwhelmed by torrents of issues and data.

- **The negative media framing of many 'global issues'**.

  This characterization of the state of affairs was somewhat disputed. Some participants suggested that the framing of individual events (e.g. a climate-related local disaster) is in fact often not negative; and that, overall, framing it is not as negative as alleged.

- **Perceived distance from decision-making** – across institutions of various types.

  It was proposed, by different participants, that this distance either (a) is mostly genuine, generating a sense of powerlessness; or (b) is to a non-negligible extent imaginary or self-created, arising out of individuals' preexisting inertia and detachment.

- **Perceived global disparities in the efforts made by different national actors to tackle global issues**.

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The participants generally agreed that, at least at the level of perception, many citizens in the more developed countries find that other nations have not made adequate commitments to fighting global issues; or that the formal commitments are not being seriously pursued. This leads to a relatively widespread sense that the burden is not equitably shared internationally.

- **Retreat from globalization**.

  This was identified as a direct response to and consequence of the point above. There are signs of economic as well as political retrenchment, e.g. by reducing a variety of support initiatives or financial aid.

- **Emotional blackmail as a common motivational strategy**.

  This was said to occur in individual relationships as well as within organizations, in political mobilization (e.g. by pressure groups), through the influence of social media, and so on. In connection with the question of (the evolutionary limits of) altruism and empathy, it was pointed out that this discourse plays on the emotion of guilt that is prevalent in the 'Western' world.

Beliefs and worldviews

- **All these problems have to be managed within capitalism, as it's the best system we have**.

  Not everybody among the participants agreed with this notion, but it was generally recognized that this is a mental reflex or a widespread belief in most developed nations.

  Additionally, and in part as a reflection of participants' disagreement on the nuances of this statement, the following two 'worldviews' were proposed as potential alternatives:

  **Continuous growth will take care of global issues*.

  **Technological developments will eventually solve global problems*.

- **It is the personal responsibility of everyone to act**.

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This outlook places the duty to solve general issues on the shoulders of individual persons. It may arise in response to the failure to enact systemic policies or to make broad societal choices. It is also typical of the mindset in many advanced nations. It too relies, in part, on the manipulation of guilt.

- **Constant activity as an imperative**.

  This is related to the idea above that responsibility rests ultimately on the shoulders of persons. It reflects the broader mindset that there is always something to do, some worthwhile action that needs to be pursued.

  The following alternative view was proposed, though it was contested by several participants:

  Our culture is focused on identifying problems and then acting to solve them.

  According to this view, the tension is underlain by the fact that individuals in our culture are fixated on identifying problems and seeking solutions, to then move on to new problems and solutions. Individuals find a source of meaning in this process of problem identification and resolution. But this leads to a sense of overload and to emotions such as despair or frustration.

  In response, some participants suggested that solving problems is a 'natural' way to be – and while it does offer a source of meaning, that's at least in part a good thing.

- **If one wants something badly enough, one should act – as there is always a way**.

  This belief was seen as underlying many calls that people should do more. It implies that the very fact that there is a global problem means that individuals are not doing enough. It also implies that the resolution is achievable, if only people would demonstrate more commitment. The belief generates a sense of individual guilt and various forms of backlash.

- **Once I paid my taxes, I've done my part**.

  In connection with the previous point, this is a countervailing belief that is quite prevalent as well. It inspires inertia and disengagement from global

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issues and from political action more generally. It can be a form of resistance to others' calls to do more.

Metaphor

Sisyphus

In the words of the participant who suggested the metaphor: "One lonely man, guilty or not, but charged."

This metaphor of endless, pointless striving was preferred to an alternative that was also liked by the participants: ***Organized illusion***, which was meant to illustrate "the gap between desire and delusion" (to quote another participant) – the generalized sense that our problems must be resolved, and resolved urgently, through strong individual commitment and immediate organized action.

Group work table 3

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Imagining preferable futures

New metaphor

No metaphor was discussed specifically and accepted as such, but one potential candidate emerging from the table (during the discussion around drivers of change) was *Slow cooking*.

It was meant to illustrate a better pacing of human action – more self-conscious and reflective, less focused on immediate results or fixed goals, saving effort and enhancing the experience.

New beliefs and worldviews

- **We are all living systems embedded in living systems**.

  This was suggested as a fundamental recognition of the complexity of the world as a system of systems. It implies an awareness of the unpredictability of human action and of its impacts.

  From this awareness there emerges the next belief:

- **We should accept and even embrace our limits**.
- **Small impact is an impact**.

  A recognition that there are a multitude of ways to achieve some effect. Given the belief immediately above, even 'inaction' or 'just being' will have small impacts, and these too may be channeled in the right direction. Therefore, no one can escape having *some* impact, although this is usually denied under the current mindset.

  From this view emerges the following one:

- **Be not afraid of doing nothing**.
- **Conscious activity**.

  This form of action goes beyond the goal-oriented tackling of problems. It includes awareness of one's subjective experiences and of the present moment in action. It seeks to reach beyond the routine problem-solving behaviors and enhance self-observation.

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As to the ***drivers of change***, the drivers below (technological (T), societal (S), and environmental (E)) were selected as the most relevant.

- [T] *Artificial intelligence*, in particular digital companions and AGI.
- [T] *Blurring of digital-physical environments*, in particular XR.
- [S] *The environment*, in particular estrangement from nature [added: and from human nature].
- [E] Added: The West's rapidly increasing need for energy and water (esp. if AI grows rapidly).
- [E] *Politics and geopolitics*. Added: Increased competition for various resources (rare earths, water, energy sources).
- [S] *Media*, especially disinformation & misinformation and virality.
- [S] *Cultural change*, in particular post-individualist cultural shifts.

It was generally observed that the future impact of such developments is hard to predict. Most of them may either reinforce some of the existing systems and worldviews (as expected, because they are *products* thereof); and/or partly undermine or change their nature.

For example, digital companions and XR hold a lot of promise for lonely individuals, including those plagued by emotional fatigue; but they may also amplify loneliness. Some facets of the climate crisis may increase catastrophism, but facing immediate climate emergencies could present communities with new opportunities or drive changes in belief systems. Post-individualism may similarly lead to broad changes in mindset, or reinforce the post-materialist blame game.

New social arrangements and systems

The contributions on this point were rather unspecific. The social arrangements were not described in their details or in context (e.g. in organizations, in the family, in the public sphere etc.).

- **Arrangements for doing nothing**.

  It was suggested that organizations and other groups should include 'slots' for 'doing nothing'. Doing nothing presents opportunities for momentarily

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withdrawing from urgency, from immediate response to problems, and from the 'action imperative'. It offers opportunities to take one's mind off things and to fight emotional fatigue.

- **Embedding action in nature and human nature**.

  Here too, the opinion was that human interaction, in organizations and otherwise, should be channeled in a way that recognizes the limits inherent in human nature and individual action. This interaction should be more concordant with the natural flow of time and with such things as humans' response to changes in the day or in the seasons. It should also be more consonant with the rhythms of activity in a living creature.

Plenary presentations of the results of the group work for the three tensions explored above

The following three tensions were explored as well, but in less depth than the ones above. In some cases, the discussions revealed that the chosen tension was either not as clear or not as engaging for participants as initially expected. In others, time constraints meant the conversation stopped short, allowing more space for the other tensions to be examined in detail. As a result, these sessions did not fully cover both the analysis of the present and the imagining of preferable futures. Even so, the group work on these three tensions offered valuable practice in applying the Causal Layered Analysis method.

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Searching for truth and meaning & Settling for what feels true

Examining the present

Headlines

- **“Don’t be sheeple (sheep people)!“** - suggesting a distrust of the mainstream narrative and a desire to appear independent-minded or resistant to groupthink.
- **“But it’s my truth!”** - suggesting a shift toward personal, subjective interpretations of reality over shared, evidence-based consensus.
- **“That feels right!”** - suggesting reliance on intuition or emotional resonance rather than factual verification.
- **“I did my own research!” -** suggesting a belief in personal investigation as inherently more trustworthy than expert or institutional sources.
- **“Well, researchers find that…”** - suggesting the continued authority of scientific or academic voices, but potentially used selectively to support one’s pre-existing beliefs.
- **“The public demands answers!”** - suggesting urgency and collective pressure for clarity or certainty, which may push for simple solutions to complex issues.

Systems

- **Information overload & Pace of knowledge production** -the sheer volume and speed of new data makes it hard to discern accuracy or relevance.
- **Everyone has a platform now & amplification of voices** - social media and online publishing give equal reach to credible and questionable sources.
- **Network systems** - interconnected digital and social infrastructures that spread information (and misinformation) rapidly.
- **Algorithmic propagation** - recommendation systems prioritize engagement over accuracy, amplifying emotionally charged or polarizing content.

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- **Respect for public science/knowledge authority asks for (over)confidence** - institutions may feel pressure to project certainty, even when the science is evolving.
- **Illiteracy in terms of scientific inquir**y - many lack the skills to evaluate claims, methods, or evidence critically.
- **No real integration between science & humanities** - siloed knowledge prevents richer, interdisciplinary understandings of truth and meaning.
- **The hardwiring of our brains, cognitive biases** - innate mental shortcuts distort how we process and judge information.
- **Strong policy emphasis on freedom of speech** - legal protections can inadvertently shield harmful or false information from challenge.
- **Attributing equal weight to expert&non-expert opinion** - public discourse often treats all viewpoints as equally valid
- **Distrust in established/mainstream media** - declining credibility in traditional news drives people toward alternative (and sometimes unreliable) sources.
- **Incentivization of disinformation** - political, financial, or ideological rewards fuel the (sometimes deliberate) spread of falsehoods.
- **Instability of filters for quality** / validity &authority over filters - there's no universally trusted gatekeeper to assess and ensure information quality.
- **Institutionalized religion promotes 'final' truths** - faith-based systems can reinforce fixed, unquestionable narratives about reality.

Worldviews

- **The world is an ordered system and we can get to know/grasp it** - the belief that reality follows understandable rules, discoverable through careful observation and reasoning.
- **Discomfort with not knowing** - unease or anxiety in the face of ambiguity or unanswered questions.
- **Uncertainty/ambivalence is not valuable** - a cultural bias toward decisive answers and clear stances rather than open-ended exploration.
- **You have to stay up-to-date** - a sense of urgency to constantly track the latest developments to avoid being "left behind."

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- **'Elitist' expertise is over-rated & We are all entitled to opinion** - skepticism toward formal authority and the idea that personal experience is equally valid in surfacing or shaping truth.
- **Science provides absolute truths** - a view of science as a definitive, final arbiter rather than an evolving, self-correcting process.
- **There are 'hidden' truths out there** - suspicion of official narratives and the allure of uncovering secrets or suppressed information.

Metaphor(s)

- **Knowing the world through my glasses / *My glasses are my gaze*** - suggesting that everyone perceives reality through their own unique filters, shaped by values, beliefs, and experiences.
- **Believing is seeing** - suggesting that convictions shape perception, where what feels true determines what is noticed or accepted as reality.
- **The heart is my compass for truth** - suggesting that emotional resonance, rather than reasoning and evidence, is the primary guide for deciding what is true.
- **Chasing rainbows** - suggesting that the search for truth can be an elusive, endless, yet promising pursuit, where the goal shifts or remains just out of reach.
- **Treasure hunting** - suggesting that truth is seen as a hidden prize waiting to be found by those who search with determination and skill.

Imagining preferable futures

New metaphor

Participants did not arrive at a new metaphor, but agreed that any compelling mental image for a more mature approach to truth seeking would need to weave emotional insight together with rational thinking/ understanding.

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New worldviews

- **Welcoming/accepting unpleasant truths** – acknowledging that truth is not always comfortable, and choosing to face it rather than avoid or deny it.
- **Ready to feel temporarily bad** – recognising that moments of discomfort can be part of a deeper process of learning and clearer understanding.

Healing collective trauma & solitary coping

The topic of *collective trauma* has been gradually geared towards the *collective pressure* we are creating and augmenting in society.

Examining the present

Headlines

- *I'm keeping up*
- *I'm on my own*
- *You snooze, you lose*
- *Fear of missing out*
- Pathologies: Exhaustion, alienation, and unresolved trauma manifesting at both individual and societal levels

Systems

- Performance-based systems
- Bureaucracy and new layers of order
- Victimization
- Imbalanced sharing: oscillating between hiding and oversharing

Worldviews & Beliefs

- *My life scars are badges of honor*
- Hero archetype: the glorification of relentless struggle

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- The need for sacrifice as a moral duty
- The "noble hamster": endless running in the wheel without pause or purpose

Metaphor

Atlas — the solitary hero who must carry the weight of the sky on his shoulders.

Imagining preferable futures

Alternative Metaphor

"We Are All in It" — a metaphor that acknowledges the collective rush, while inviting us to slow down, reconnect with meaning, and release the compulsion to hide our vulnerabilities. It encourages us to **co-regulate** the societal pace and complexity, embracing interdependence rather than isolation.

Acknowledging non-human consciousness & patronizing protectionism

A large part of the time spent on this tension was devoted to controversies related to its interpretation, and in particular the interpretation of terms such as "consciousness", "non-human consciousness" and "patronizing protectionism". As a result, the CLA was not completed and specific items in the output were not accepted by all participants.

Headlines

- "We must have the bees!"
- "We are not the only ones having a consciousness!" [said condescendingly]
- "I need my animal protein."

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Systems

- Eating of animals.
- Industrial agriculture.
- Animal testing, domestication and exploitation.
- Jobs for animals.

Worldviews and beliefs

- Monotheistic religion. (And the so-called 'dominion theory'.)
- Progress comes from controlling nature.
- The human animal is the crown of evolution.
- AI simply cannot have consciousness.
- Humans are the stewards of the planet.

Metaphor(s)

- *The Kings of Creation* (Humans are…)
- *As long as you are under my roof…* (I know what's best for all)

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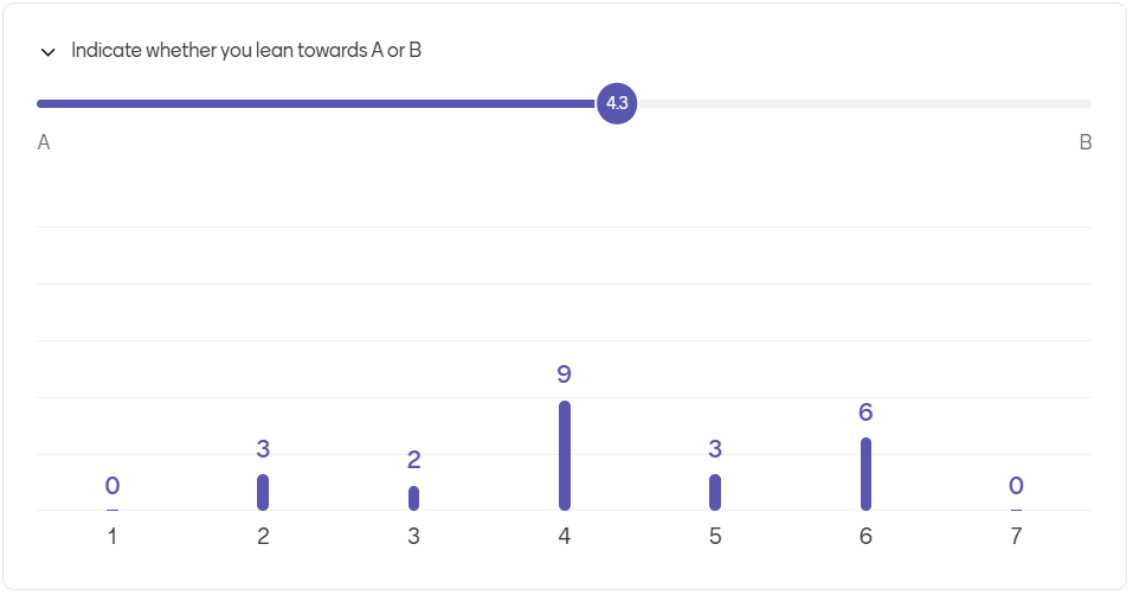
Results of the short survey

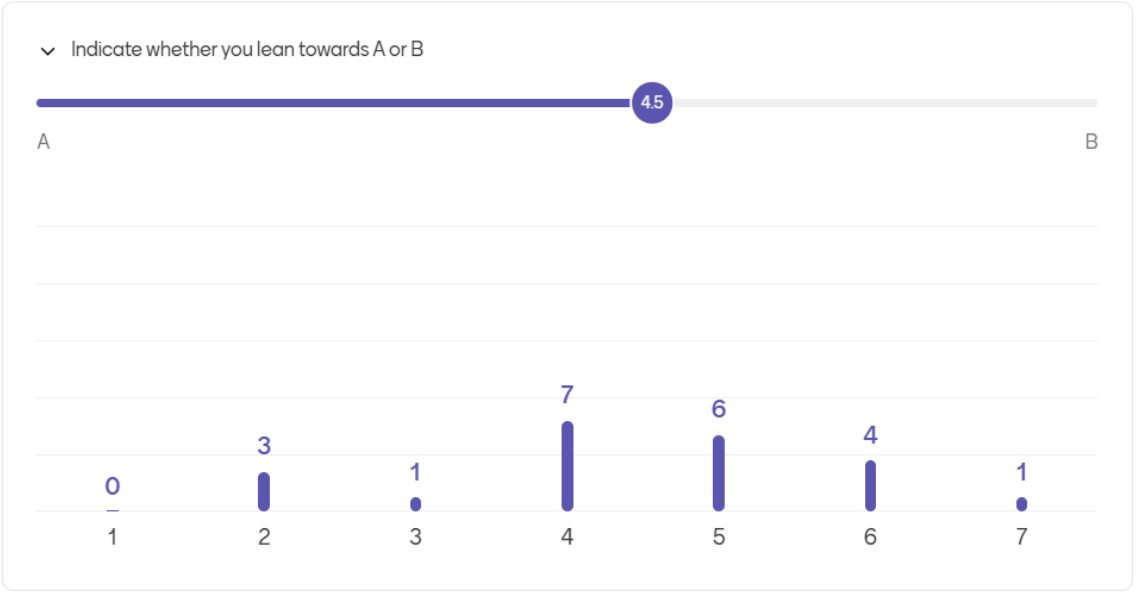
Emotions are A) internal, private experiences or B) relational processes, networked, and performative

23



Emotions are A) universal and discrete (e.g., anger, joy) or B) shaped by culture and experience

22



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Emotions are A) separate from rational thought or B) intertwined with thinking, perception, and meaning-making

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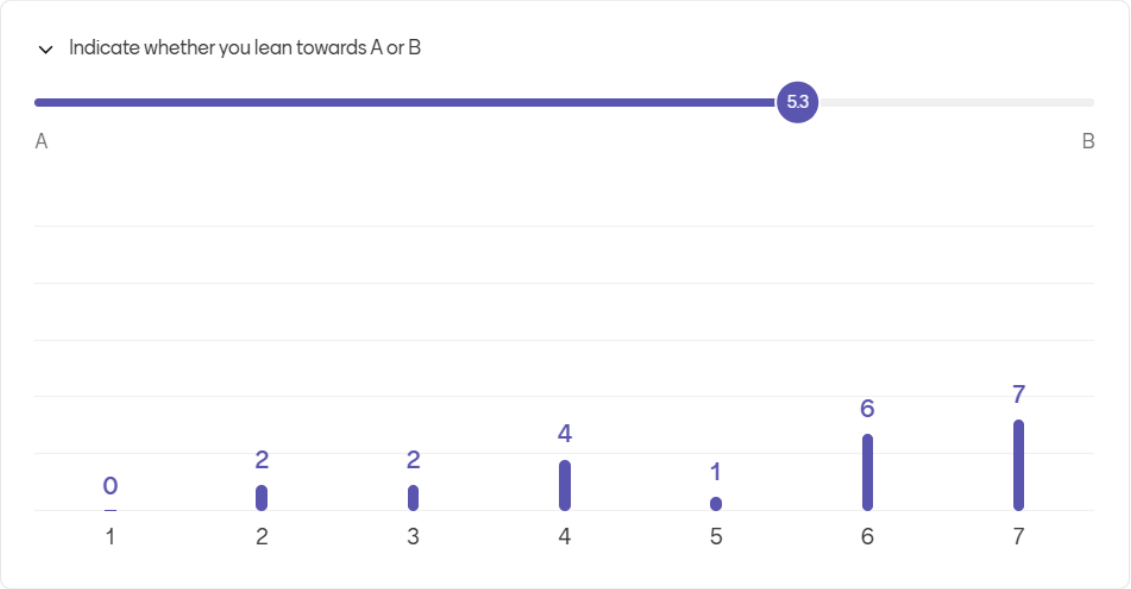

Emotions are A) automatic, reactive responses or B) proactive simulations guiding adaptive behavior

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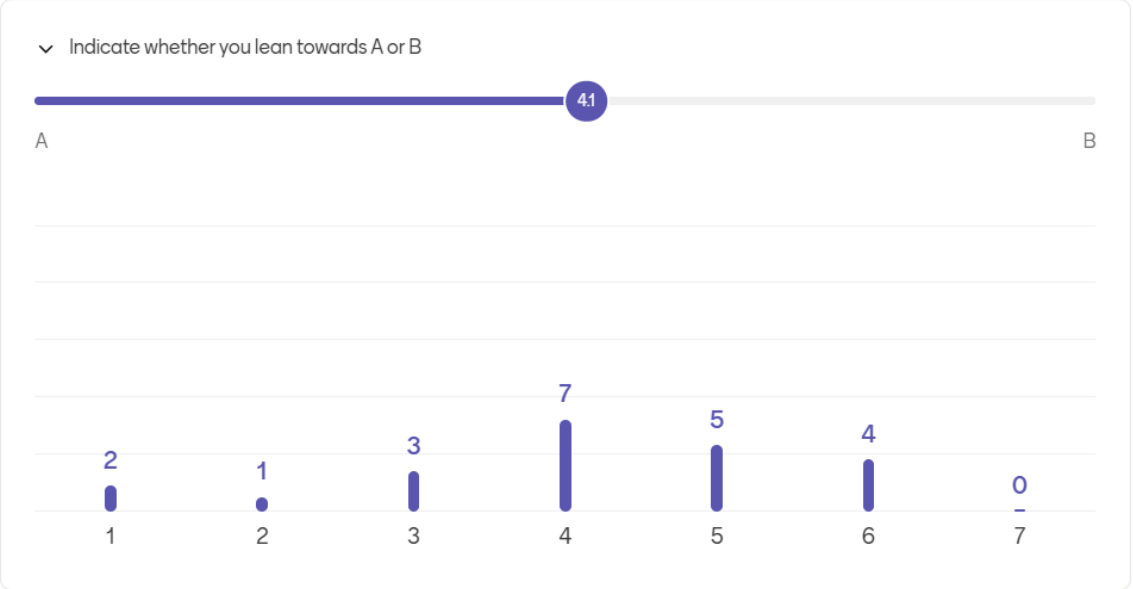

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Emotions are A) short-lived, passing states or B) enduring & reflective of temperament or long-term patterns (e.g., melancholia, optimism)

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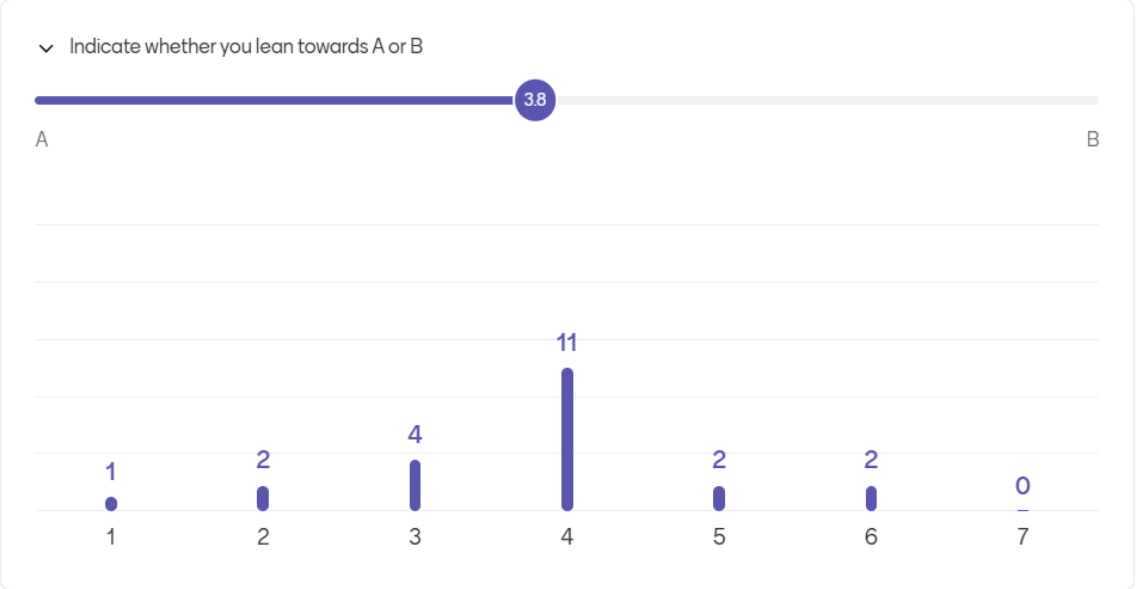

Emotions are A) visceral, energetic (e.g., rage, desire) or B) gaining meaning within narrative frameworks & personal history

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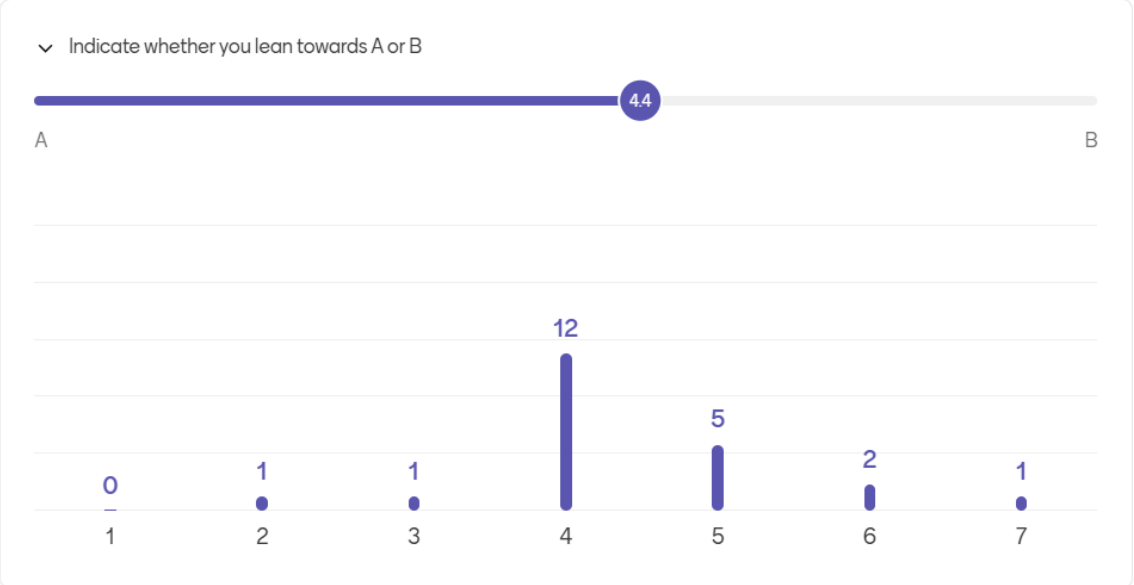

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