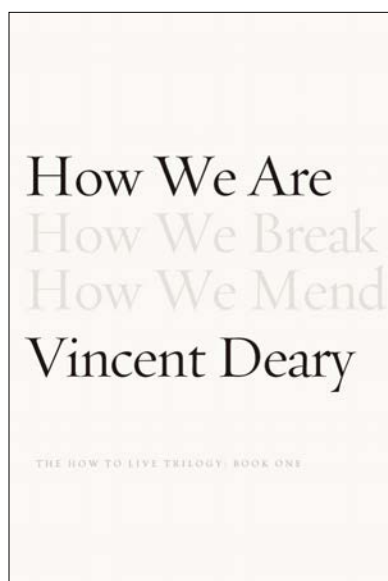
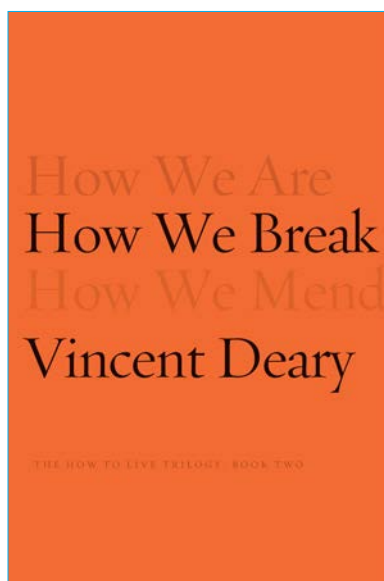


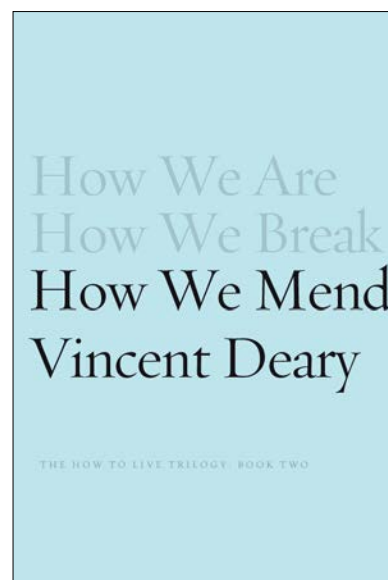
A profound and ambitious work about what it means to be human: the HOW TO LIVE trilogy



How We Are • January 2015
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How We Break • January 2017
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How We Mend • January 2019
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About the Trilogy

As a therapist, Vincent Deary has a ringside seat at the theater of change, having witnessed firsthand how it's done, and what it is that gets people stuck. As a researcher and reader, he knows that there are centuries of thought about habit and change, from the most ancient ethical and spiritual writings up to the most modern schools of psychotherapy and neuroscience. Deary's three free-standing books bring these insights together, synthesizing them to produce a coherent vision of what human beings are like—how we work, how we break, and how we mend.

At the heart of these books is the insight that most of our lives are lived automatically. Consciousness has, on the whole, little to do with daily life. Moment to moment, we rely mostly on the vast store of automated practices that are “the cognitive unconscious” of modern neuroscience. This “cognitive unconscious” is distributed not only through our nerves and muscles, but also through our environment, our social network, and our culture. Human existence is, as such, largely reliant on “scaffolding,” an intricate supporting framework of cognitive prosthetics, both personal and communal. The purpose of the *How to Live* trilogy is to bring these hidden mechanisms to light and to show them at work beneath our daily life, in all our wounding and our healing.

Book One, *How We Are*, describes the role of habit and the process of change in normal life. Book Two, *How We Break*, will describe how the same processes that enable habit and change are also at the root of our suffering. Book Three, *How We Mend*, will draw on research-based therapy, wisdom literature, and virtue ethics to show how we might use these same processes to mend.



Book One: *How We Are*

The key insight of the “cognitive unconscious” research goes something like this, according to the neuroscientist Gerhard Roth:

The brain is constantly trying to automate processes, thereby dispelling them from consciousness; in this way its work will be completed faster, more effectively, and at a lower metabolic level. Consciousness, on the other hand, is slow, subject to error, and ‘expensive.’

By the time we reach adulthood, most of our life is already decided, and most of our mind is already made up. Much of who we are is “second nature.” A telling phrase, for this reminds us that what now feels natural was in fact acquired; that the vast array of practices and ways of being that constitute our adult selves were accumulated over time. *How We Are* describes this hidden underbelly of daily life, the invisible hand of servitude that, in the phrase of another neuroscientist, “does most of the heavy lifting for us.” The book draws upon literature, popular culture, and science to paint a version of the human creature that has not, as yet, been coherently stated in a popularized form.

Not only do we off-load much of our thinking to our own inner set of automatic agents, we also delegate a great deal of it to our environment. The first part of this book shows how we rely on props to think—props such as lists, filing systems, desks, studies, computers, and language itself. These cognitive prosthetics greatly enhance our thinking power. The book considers this phenomenon at the individual, societal, and interpersonal levels. We see how our civilized environment—the unique habitat of our human lives—is a vast repository of established ways of doing things, an automatic collective of practices and solved problems that each new generation inherits. We then draw on anthropology, network theory, and the emerging research on the “social mind” to describe the small world in which individuals live their lives, their actual networks of flesh-and-blood familiars.



Book Two: *How We Break*

Now we move away from the journey of normal change, with all its resistance and excitement, and focus on the journeys that get derailed, dealing with the common ways in which we break: trauma, anxiety, depression, doubt, despair, or simply getting into a rut. Book Two shows how the human animal gets stuck, not because of some “pathology,” but because of the nature of the creatures that we are and the kinds of processes that constitute our being. It shows that these derailments are a normal part of being human. The last chapter, “Escape Velocity,” will discuss the tension between our inertia and our need for change, and thereby sets the scene for Book Three, where we look at deliberate change and where we watch people getting better.

Book Three: *How We Mend*

Book Three finds the answer to our mending not in some external set of processes, but in the very nature of the beast described in Books One and Two. The book draws on the “third wave” of cognitive behavioral therapy, and a set of related research and therapeutic practices that are currently altering the way distress is conceptualized and treated. These approaches promote the idea that the most feasible therapeutic goal is not the elimination of distress but the development of the capacity to tolerate distress and carry on with our chosen course regardless. Although very much at the cutting edge of research, these theories have deep affinities with Western virtue ethics. The three faculties of heart, mind, and will, which were discussed in light of their pathologies in Book Two, are rehabilitated here in light of their virtues. The seven virtues—the four cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice and the three supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and love—are used to structure this discussion of how we might get back on course and move forward with our lives. As with the other two books, this one will draw on common, daily experience and reclaim the theories and language of experts for common use.



How We Are

Introduction

We live in small worlds. At the beginning of most movies, we are shown a status quo, more fully a *status quo ante bellum*, the state of things before the war. We are shown a routine and comfortable life, a small world, one that is soon to end. In screenwriting parlance, this normal, soon-to-be-over world is known as Act One, and the “inciting incident” is the event that precipitates the move into Act Two, into a war of change and adjustment. Usually we prefer to maintain ourselves in the status quo, in comfort and predictable ease. It takes a lot to get us out of this state—a compelling call, an overwhelming imperative. Or maybe we are pushed. But things change. The movies like to end Act One fairly quickly and move into the spectacle of change and adjustment. That’s where the drama is; that’s what we pay to see.

In life, as in this book, the balance is different. Our Act Ones, our normal lives, tend to last far longer. We like it that way. We are creatures of habit, and we live in small worlds. Small enough for us to come to know their ways and to establish familiar ways within them. Unless we are uneasy, unless something disturbs us from within or without, we tend to work to keep things the way they are. That is the subject of this book’s Act One—“Saming”—how we creatures of habit work to establish and maintain our ways of life.

These ways of life, these routines, are not just habits of thinking and doing the same things in the same way, though of course that is part of it. But our habits are not only established internally, in muscles and nerves. As birds feather their nests, so we embed our ways of life in the places where we do our living. We beat paths through our environment and we surround ourselves with others: our tribes, who act as mirrors to remind us who we are and what we do. These, then, are the elements of our small worlds; the habits, routines, people, places, and things that we have become accustomed to and comfortable with. That’s the terrain of Part One of this book; that’s where the journey starts. If we wanted to be scientific—and we will be at points, but not dauntingly so—we could call this part “Homeostasis.” But let’s think in terms of movies. As in a movie, Act One of this book shows us how this world is before anything happens, before the disturbance or unease of an inciting incident forces us to begin the difficult work of deliberation and adjustment.

Then, inevitably, something interrupts our routine lives, some News from Elsewhere. The war begins. The end of our small world can take many forms—more likely the gaining or losing of a job or a relationship than the mass geopolitical catastrophes of the movies—but end it will. And so, with some ingrained physiological inertia and reluctance, we leave normal and begin the uphill struggle of change, Act Two, the second part of this book.

Act Two—“Changing”—always begins with the difficult first moves of adjustment, those clumsy early days and first nights of becoming accustomed to a new way of being. It really is hard at first; that’s why we resist it. Beginnings and ends are terrible times. Now we are in the process of

allostasis, of trying to reach stability in the face of change, to reach a new set point of comfort and familiarity. Heightened arousal and attention are the hallmarks of these times of transition. They always accompany our attempts to adjust to the rhythm of the new, putting us under constant internal pressure to get back to normal, a new normal, as quickly as possible. During such difficult times it is often easier to fall back on the consolation of old habits, even though these will not get the job of change done. And it is here we glimpse the roots of much of our suffering. We are sometimes too keen to reach the end of the process of change, or not to begin it at all, or to avoid it while in it. We trot out our old responses when something new is called for; we keep saming when we ought to be changing. This is the ground we will cover in Act Two, following the arc of the drama of change through to Act Three, the establishment of the new normal, the new small world.



It's a daunting prospect. There is a whole book ahead of me, of us. For my journey, like a climber off to scale a mountain, a general to battle, I prepared a detailed campaign. I knew early on that I wanted to draw attention to the act of dedication that is necessary to initiate and sustain something as fundamentally improbable as the writing of a book. Only recently the notion came to me of swimming upstream, against the tide of decay and degradation, the slow and subtle ebbing away of order; the way that every day in every way you and I are getting worse, losing ground, memory, teeth, and the battle just to stay as we are, let alone get better. And this book is all about getting better. I could even call it *Getting Better*. That would do. People, things, do get better. It's unlikely, against nature and in the teeth of the second law of thermodynamics—the inevitability of disorder—but just occasionally, things improve. I believe that.

As a therapist I have seen it, worked with it, seen people move upstream, struggle uphill. The physics of these metaphors is spot-on—to work against the prevailing forces of habit, inertia, and gradual decay, you need to really put in some effort. And that's not easy, not right at the start. The first steps are all effort and no reward. Something else needs to keep you going until reward kicks in, until the road begins to rise up to meet you. A cussed mixture of faith in the process, hope for change, and a devotion to a purpose not dictated by the prevailing conditions. In sum, dedication. It's hard at first.

So why bother? What makes us change? Well, sometimes we have to, and sometimes we just see that things could be better than they are. We get a glimpse or have a vision of a future that is not just a continuation of the present. And if that vision is compelling enough, then desire kicks in, the yearning for things to be other than they are. You're off to a good start there, with the vision and the desire. With them comes a quickening of energy, the beginnings of an urgency, the impulse to change. That's quite a trio now—vision, desire, and urgency. Quite a team. But even then you could let it lie. Let the impulse die, the desire fade, the perception dim. They will stop bothering you eventually if you ignore them. How much choice we have there is a subject that we can come to, but for the moment let's just say it feels like there are little moments when everything is in place

and all we need to do is *act*. Do something about it. “Well, if that’s how you feel, why don’t you do something about it?” You know those moments—we’ve all had them or seen them on television. A moment of decision. “Okay, I will.” And you do, you *will*. You manifest your will in an action, and things change. Maybe not much at first, but definitively. Things have changed. Something has passed from potential to actual: you’ve started something new, brought something into the world. It’s magical and relatively rare. Beginnings are terrible times, and so are ends.



Vincent Deary is a health psychologist at Northumbria University who specializes in helping people change their lives for the better. This is his first book.