



## Obliquity: Why Our Goals Are Best Achieved Indirectly

*John Kay*

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If you want to go in one direction, the best route may involve going in another. This is the concept of 'obliquity': paradoxical as it sounds, many goals are more likely to be achieved when pursued indirectly. Whether overcoming geographical obstacles, winning decisive battles or meeting sales targets, history shows that oblique approaches are the most successful, especially in difficult terrain.

Pre-eminent economist John Kay applies his provocative, universal theory to everything from international business to town planning and from football to managing forest fires. He shows why the most profitable companies are not always the most profit-oriented; why the richest men and women are not the most materialistic; and why the happiest people are not necessarily those who focus on happiness.

## Obliquity: Why Our Goals Are Best Achieved Indirectly Details

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# From Reader Review Obliquity: Why Our Goals Are Best Achieved Indirectly for online ebook

## Carla says

I read this book in Dutch (for Managementboek.nl). I rated it as "okay" because the message is interesting, as are the examples but I didn't see the practicality of it. Even the chapter "Obliquity in practice" gave more arguments and not the "how to apply this" that I hoped for. Kay argues that often goals for success, happiness aren't reached directly but indirectly. People or companies that aim at being successful, often aren't so successful. I found the concept of Franklin's Gambit interesting. It's the "game" people play, according Kay, where they've already taken a decision and then rationalize it. The decision to attack Irak is one example. Franklin's Gambit can be disastrous. That made me think.

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## Hadi says

Would have made a good essay but instead we got an awfully, painfully even, padded out book.

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## Ed says

Well I read this book in more or less one sitting today. Couldn't put it down. I guess it has profoundly shaken some of my ideas about how to make good decisions, and I will have to weave it into my conflict work. It is a well written and persuasively argued case for going about achieving things indirectly, in an exploratory, provisional way. And this is necessary in business, in our own personal lives, in our attempts to become happy. Life is way too complex for our goals to be always clearly stated and the author shows how the indirect approach allows ends and means to co-evolve and achieve better results. Clearly there cases where a direct approach works, but not in the more messy, complex problems that abound in our lives, in our world.

His account makes sense of a lot of my experience in the corporate world. The successful companies, the ones that consistently make money over decades, are the ones that do not make profit making their only over-arching goal. Instead the successful companies focus on a range of goals like making great aircraft or saving lives via new medication. And his examples from the pharmaceutical industry will please my friend Kate: J and J win for their indirection. :)

So don't read this book if you don't want your world view shaken up. I guess it is the perfect anti-dote to the sort of process discipline that I like; but in reality it is a call to use good process wisely, imaginatively, creatively rather than a call for anarchy or irrationality. It is consistent with the Japanese approach of Kaisen or continuous incremental improvement. And it is in a way a transcendence of the right/left dichotomy that seems to have lost its heuristic power.

Incidentally, the book is full of great quotes:

'Tell all the truth, but tell it slant. Success in circuit lies.' Emily Dickinson

'Visionary companies pursue a cluster of objectives, of which making money is only one - and not

necessarily the primary one. Yes, they seek profits, but they are equally guided by a core ideology - core values and a sense of purpose beyond just making money. Yet paradoxically, the visionary companies, make more money than the purely profit driven companies. Jim Collins and Jerry Portas. Built to Last

And central to his view is Benjamin Franklin's:

'So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one had in mind to do.'

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### **Laura says**

If you are looking for the short version, another Brit gave us the same message: No, you can't always get what you want

But if you try sometime, you just might find  
You get what you need

For the most part, obliquity seems to be pursuing goals that come from the heart rather than the pursuit of fame or fortune.

The book's set up: if you follow obliquity, it will get you the true measure of success. So as long as you are doing it for the right reasons, you will get wealthy, which was really the goal all along.

In my mind, the first half of the book can be skipped. Then the book strings together some interesting ideas, but doesn't delve too deeply into any of them. One that organizations pay consultants to justify decisions they already made. This made a lot of sense to me. And I would say when this happens, the bigger the consultant's fee, the worse the news. The book is filled with these insights - interesting, but so what?

I appreciated was the idea that there are two types of problems: closed problems (like Sudoku or chess) and open problems (what's the best solution to global warming?). Again -- makes sense. But not a lot of guidance once you've identified what kind of problem you have on your hands. And I would imagine that all problems that involve people are open problems.

The second half of the book is better than the first. I would say that it gets exponentially better. In fact, if I was the editor, I would have cut the first half the book and explore the ideas in the second half of the book.

This is where the book begins to explore the ideas of what it means to set a larger goal and staying open to several ways to getting there. However, it doesn't go deep enough to really stand for a big idea. It still skirts around the idea of obliquity. I guess the book's message - to get there by going slant. But we never get there. Maybe the book is a practice in obliquity. But I was left thinking -- so what?

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### **Taylor Pearson says**

A convincing argument against setting long-term goals. This book took many of the learning of complexity

science over the past few years and showed how many companies and individuals ignore them, to their detriment.

Great companies and lives are built not from an erring focus on a long-range goal as many commentators would have you believe, but on an indirect and oblique approach that realizes reality is more complex than our reductionist plans would admit.

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### **Mara Shaw says**

Remember the Smurfs? How half the words in their conversations were replaced with the word "smurf" or "smurfy"? John Kay has done something similar with "obliquity" and "oblique". Decisions that are made iteratively, with trial and error, employing emotion or intuition, or from going for greatness and reaping a side benefit of profits -- these are all oblique according to Kay. Quickly in the book, I was frustrated with the repetition, much as the Smurfs made me cringe.

Chapters 1 - 4 and "Conclusions" were well worth reading. Indeed, the most profitable companies are not usually those out to make the most money, but to deliver the best computer, airplane or other product. Hence their route to profit can be viewed as oblique, but only if you consider profit their goal. Boeing certainly started with great aviation as their goal, not profit, so they were working directly. Profit earning was an oblique goal.

Yes, Le Corbusier did urban planning a disservice when he ignored the interplay between people and "ideal construction" and planned Brasilia and many housing projects in a vacuum that made them unsuccessful. Studying and incorporating how cities and neighbourhoods grow organically into urban planning is critical. Is this oblique? Does the fact that Beckham doesn't use a slide rule to plan his kicks make his goal scoring "oblique"?

Enough. The book is peppered with examples of good and poor decision-making that makes this worth a quick read, including the Stockdale Paradox, Franklin's Gambit, the rise and fall of many industrial giants including Merck, Sunbeam, Boeing, and Lehman Bros. when they lost sight of the primary goal of the company and focused only on shareholder profits. Similarly, when people focus only on trying to be happy in the short term, they often short-change their long-term happiness that derives more from living a meaningful life than one filled with instant pleasure.

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### **Jeffrey says**

Recommended. However, like many business and conceptually-driven academic books, the provocative concepts in the book make enduring the repetition and lack of stark definition worthwhile.

I am annoyed at the publisher and whatever writer from the *Financial Times* placed and wrote, respectively, the quote saying Kay was an excellent writer on the book's front cover. Unfortunately, Kay is not a great writer, as he failed to solve the problem of having an absorbing book spring out of concept that are extremely engaging when presented in-person. For the dry world of economics and business academia (which he obliquely argues out of existence or to be changed dramatically), this may be a page-turner. For most, this is not, and this book is a good candidate for a speed-read instead of a deep read. I did the latter and didn't find

any of the morsels I was hoping the extra attention would give me.

The gold here is an introduction of sorts to non-linear thinking, and another attempt to explain magic in a bottle that will resonate for some. In short, Kay tells us that concentrating on qualities, obliquely, instead of the measurable results of projects and enterprises creates sustainability, innovation and most likely the results you were after in the first place. For those of us hooked on finances, shareholder value and beating last year's numbers, these concepts come as a blessed relief and perhaps a confirmation of some concepts that have been in the background of our thinking for quite some time. If you've ever been accused of "trying too hard", this book is the antidote.

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### **John Jacobi says**

Good ideas, bad writing: most of the book suffered from this unfortunate combination. It was also repetitive and could have been greatly condensed.

Still, the end of the book pulls everything together quite nicely, describing some of the principles of cultural evolution. To ask what a business is for, he says, might be comparable to asking what a tiger is for. Be forewarned, though, that these descriptions are not technical. For that other books on this topic are better: *Cultural Evolution* by Boyd and Richerson, *The Evolution of Technology* by Basalla, etc. And Matt Ridley's *Evolution of Everything* provides more facts on the evolutionary rather than decision-making side of things.

The best part of this book is the way Kay reappraises the human mind in the midst of sciences that degrade them for the sake of so-called rational ideals. He explains why human decisions are different from decision by computers, what they can do better, why the emotional will is necessary to make decisions, etc. I'm not how sure he knows it, but he gave insights good for those who favor a human ecology over a human economy.

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### **Emanuela says**

Per spiegare il pensiero obliquo l'autore ricorre spesso a confronti con lo sport:

*Ed Smith, giocatore di cricket e scrittore, esprime questo concetto molto bene: "Non dico che lo sviluppo personale sia più importante della vittoria; al contrario, dico che godere del viaggio alla scoperta di sé, rimuovendo parte della pressione e delle angosce associate alla vittoria a tutti i costi, aiuta a vincere più spesso".*

*Bob Rotella autore di 'Golf is not a Game of Perfect' spiega che si può riuscire a fare un buono swing soltanto se non ci si pensa. Rotella ha fatto carriera convincendo il pubblico che questo principio non vale solo per il golf, ma ha un'applicazione molto più ampia.*

E così Beckam quando tira in porta non fa prima calcoli differenziali, tira perché ha inconsapevolmente fatto una serie di valutazioni, frutto della sua esperienza che gli fa presumere che probabilmente sarà un goal .

Ecco, questo è il pensiero obliquo. Processi decisionali che sono presi in modo eclettico e pragmatico perché le condizioni sono così complesse che un'analisi razionale non consente di avere tutte le variabili sotto

controllo, anzi è questa presunzione di totale controllo che induce a fare errori madornali.

Kay ripropone in questo libro quello che già avevo trovato in Do The Work, ma con una forma un po' più attorcigliata anche se più analitica.

Ho ricopiato una tabella interessante che mette in parallelo il pensiero lineare con quello obliquo su alcuni punti chiave come: obiettivi e traguardi, interazione, complessità, problemi incompleti e pervasi da incertezza, astrazione, intenzionalità, confronto limitato, informazione, eclettismo, adattamento, esperienza, direzione, coerenza, razionalità del processo, che mostrano l'approccio diverso alla soluzione dei problemi. Potrebbe tornarmi utile.

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### **Joseph says**

The book discusses on why an indirect/muddling through (or just oblique) way is better than a direct approach. For example, why paradoxically, the happiest people in the world aren't pursuing happiness per se nor are the richest people on the world maximizing wealth per se...that happiness and wealth are often a by product of our passion/energy.

the book also advocates an present adaptive approach to achieving goals vs long term plan. I agree with this thinking. another thinking is to break down the things we want to achieve (either direct or oblique) into (a) high level objectives (2) goals - current state and desired states and (3) actions

the cons of the book (1) the author would have done a better job expanding the many ideas in the book. all too often, the details are too brief. More examples would certainly do the book more justice.

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### **Tim Hughes says**

In this book "Obliquity" John Kay points out that actually objectives are a waste of time, what do I mean?

If we go back to 1940, Prime Minister Churchill stood up in the UK Parliament and said that the United Kingdom would be victorious. Which was a goal, but Churchill had no idea how he would reach that goal.

Think about it, the Nazis had pushed back the whole of Europe onto the beaches of Dunkirk, the UK hadn't prepared itself for war and especially a war over a highly efficient and overwhelming Nazi army. The US was neutral and in fact passed laws which meant they could not arm the UK. In fact the US lent the UK to buy airplanes and then wouldn't ship them; just as France was overwhelmed by Panzer tanks.

Back to Parliament and Churchill stood up and said we would be victorious. How? There are no objectives that you can set to achieve that goal.

That's where the world of obliquity kicks in.

Churchill didn't know that two things would happen.

The Nazis would invade the USSR, which would suck a massive amount of resources.

The Japanese would bomb Pearl Harbour bringing the neutral USA into the war.

This is obliquity! You simply cannot plan for everything in life and in fact planning can mean you have blinkers on and cannot see, what could actually be a better solution than whatever you could have planned for.

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### **Rick says**

I didn't think I would like this book as much as I did. I'm not sure if I want to become an urban planner anymore now, after Mr. Kay describes the failures of planned development to keep up with the demands and changes to a city. If you go after a complex problem, especially one that will affect many people, you must be able to pivot if necessary, instead of going full speed ahead with a single preconceived solution.

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### **Ian "Marvin" Graye says**

#### **The Allure of the Oblique**

I bought and read this book because of one word, which happened to be its title.

I was fascinated by the word "obliquity". I wasn't familiar with it. I didn't even know whether it was a neologism created by the author, John Kay, a Professor of Economics and regular columnist for the Financial Times.

As it turns out, the word has been around since the fifteenth century. Naturally, it derives from the word "oblique", which means "slanting, sidelong, indirect".

As a noun, it is the quality or state of deviation or deviating from a line or direction.

Kay uses it to describe the process of achieving a goal indirectly rather than directly.

#### **In Off the Black**

Kay credits Nobel Prize Winner, Sir James Black, with the principle of obliquity, which asserts that "goals are often best achieved without intending them".

This statement is pretty equivocal. It doesn't purport to suggest that goals are *always* best achieved without intending them.

To the extent that a goal is an objective or something you intend to achieve, it doesn't make sense to say that you can best achieve it without intending to.

It would cease to be a goal, if you no longer intended to achieve it by any means.

Black's statement therefore can mean no more than that, *sometimes*, you can achieve a goal as an unintended or accidental outcome of trying to do or achieve something else, perhaps even another goal.

I could have lived with the implications of this statement, but I suppose my reaction would have been “So what? What else can you tell me?”

### **Indirect Achievement**

Perhaps anticipating my skepticism, Kay takes Black’s principle and builds a whole new worldview on its foundation: “our goals are best achieved indirectly.”

Gone is the word “often”, absent is any reference to the lack of “intention”.

Instead, we now have a principle that states, effectively, that if you intend to achieve a goal, you should endeavour to achieve it indirectly, not directly.

Intention is still part of the methodology, only we have to strive to achieve our goal by a different route or path, indirectly rather than directly, perhaps by the road less travelled.

He promotes this as a new guide to personal problem-solving and economic and political decision-making.

Still, my skepticism was starting to grow, not retreat.

I dearly wanted Kay to prove his case, I wanted him to persuade me, I wanted to be convinced.

Yet, I can’t say that he succeeded. Ultimately, I feel that he did too little with his material. He didn’t live up to its potential. He overpromised and underdelivered.

I am still fascinated by the word “obliquity”, but for me, at least, the case for obliquity remains to be proved.

Equally importantly, I felt that there were some dangerous overtones in his political philosophy.

### **The Pursuit of Happiness**

Kay cites John Stuart Mill approvingly in Chapter 1:

*“I never wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life. But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy... who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness... aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.”*

There’s nothing in this statement that I disagree with.

However, I don’t accept that it was intended as an argument for the indirect path in all activities.

In Mill’s eyes, happiness remained the ultimate end. However, he concluded that it was an outcome of the pursuit of some other goal, rather than an outcome of the direct pursuit of happiness.

Perhaps happiness is so abstract and its causes so diverse, subjective and personal that we cannot say that there is any one method of achieving it directly for all people.

However, can the same be said with respect to a recipe for baking a cake, or a decision about the best

location for a new highway between two cities, or a method by which a judge arrives at justice in a dispute?

## **The Pursuit of Profit**

Kay also cites George Merck:

*"We try never to forget that medicine is for the people. It is not for the profits. The profits follow, and if we have remembered that, they have never failed to appear. The better we have remembered it, the larger they have been."*

While profit is less abstract and more quantifiable than happiness, it is still an example of a goal that, while it might be the ultimate end of economic activity in capitalist society, it is still best achieved as an outcome of the pursuit of some other goal (e.g., meeting the needs of the public).

You do not achieve profit and wealth by being passionate about profit and money, you achieve it by being passionate about something else.

## **The Science of Muddling Through**

Kay borrows the distinction between direct and oblique approaches to decision-making from Charles Lindblom:

*"The root, rational, comprehensive method was direct and involved a single comprehensive evaluation of all options in the light of defined objectives.*

*"The oblique approach was characterized by what he called successive limited comparison...a process of 'initially building out from the current situation, step-by-step and by small degrees'."*

Kay cautions against thinking that the oblique approach is unstructured and intuitive. It is actually a disciplined and ordered process. It involves constant improvisation, pragmatism and never-ending learning.

The distinction between means and ends is important to simple problem-solving, but less central to “practical decision-making”. (He doesn’t explain the distinction any better than this.)

## **Objectives, Goals and Actions**

Kay uses the traditional distinction between objectives, goals and actions.

Objectives are fluid and imprecise, which impacts on the goals and actions required to achieve them:

*"High-level objectives – living a fulfilling life, creating a successful business, producing a distinguished work of art, glorifying God – are almost always too imprecise for us to have any clear idea how to achieve them. That doesn't imply that these goals lack meaning or the capacity for realization. We understand their meaning and realise them by translating them into intermediate goals and actions; we interpret and reinterpret them as we gain knowledge about the environment in which we operate. That is why successful approaches are oblique rather than direct."*

Kay uses Isaiah Berlin’s definition of “pluralism”, in essence, “the notion that there is more than one answer to a question”, in contrast to “monism”, “the ancient belief that there is a single harmony of truth into which

everything, if it is genuine, must fit.”

Ironically, our objectives are subjective, and therefore fluid and open to change.

As a result, our goals and actions must also be flexible.

We must embrace negotiation, adaptation and compromise.

Different people will solve the same problems in different ways at different times.

### **Complexity and Incomplete Knowledge**

Kay recognizes that the world has become so complex that we can never have complete information about any particular problem or situation.

To the extent that we make assumptions and simplify the world in order to fit it into patterns and models, we have to accept that our models and perceptions might be wrong.

There is no point in becoming despondent about the risk of error. We move step by step toward better decisions and greater knowledge by way of a process of trial and error. No error, no progress.

### **The Road to Serfdom**

By this point in the book, I was starting to feel frustrated that there was no real explanation of the mechanics of oblique decision-making and how it might interface with direct decision-making.

Besides, I was starting to get uncomfortable with the implicit politics of what is effectively a management theory.

In the same section that Kay cites John Stuart Mill, he quotes Adam Smith:

*“By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”*

Later, he quotes Friedrich von Hayek:

*“Nobody has yet succeeded in deliberately arranging all the activities that go on in a complex society.”*

At the heart of “Obliquity” (the book) is a war with modernism, as represented by the architect Le Corbusier and the Communist Vladimir Lenin.

Its purpose is to establish that the world is too complex to be designed or commanded from above.

No grand design should be allowed to prevail. No politician or executive should be allowed to dominate.

Instead, what emerges from the apparent chaos of human interaction and pragmatism, like the capitalist economy, led by an invisible hand, is right. Or, at least, on the way to being right over a period of time. Only, don’t interfere with the process, let it come about indirectly.

There is something fundamentally conservative, non-interventionist and anti-progressive about this approach.

Obliquity could very well be an adjunct or handmaiden to Ayn Rand's Objectivism.

### **Ironic Relativism**

Ironically, Kay embraces the language of pluralism, complexity and chaos theory.

These concepts seem to be at odds with traditional conservatism. They imply relativism in values.

I might be doing Kay an injustice. However, in my eyes, the adherence to pluralism comes across as tokenist.

There is an iniquity at work here. It made me feel deeply suspicious of obliquity, notwithstanding its superficial appeal.

Kay doesn't seem to mind that some of us might take the road less travelled (and get lost), as long as the majority takes the road most travelled.

There is a sense in which, left to our own obliquitous devices, stripped of intention and directness, ironically, we will end up conforming. Unintentionally. Indirectly.

Obliquity is just a new way to preserve the economic and social system that we've got. Intact. Exactly as it is.

There is an underlying confidence that, without interference or design or positive discrimination, nobody will be able to counter the invisible hand of conservatism.

### **Standard Deviation**

Kay's version of obliquity is really about maintaining a straight line or direction.

It's about maintaining the standard, maintaining standards, the norm.

It isn't really about deviation at all, let alone deviance.

In its own right, it's actually quite devious.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Pluralism is tolerated only insofar as it doesn't alter the status quo and nobody rocks the boat.

So, ultimately, capitalism in its current form will be perpetuated by a (seven?) billion instances of pragmatic obliquity.

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### **D.m. Smith says**

I used to read a lot of John Kay, including his commentary, which I usually found refreshing. In this book, I

don't think he makes his case. And it's an odd case to make from one who has written so extensively on strategy as the hard nuts-and-bolts work of making and executing feasible plans.

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### **Bobby says**

Good quick read about how the path to achievement is often obtained by "muddling through" with uncertain destinations as opposed to detailed planning, sterile objectives, and over-analysis. Some excellent perspectives, and well worth reading.

On the downside, the book comes across as almost anti-objective decision making. I don't think this was Kay's intent, but I hoped the book would at some point go further in highlighting the value of using objective decision frameworks - even in instances where the path chosen differs from the results of the decision making exercise. In other words, "the model says we should do x, but we're going to do y. after we've seen the results, lets revisit the model and see what worked or what didn't and why."

I also didn't like Kay's use of political figures and economists in the anecdotes. With political figures, there's too much likelihood that the reader will disagree with Kay's perspective on the success/failure of a politician's strategy or that the reader will have a different interpretation of what actually constituted the politician's strategy.

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