



NICK BARTER  STUART MCMILLEN

# METAPHORS

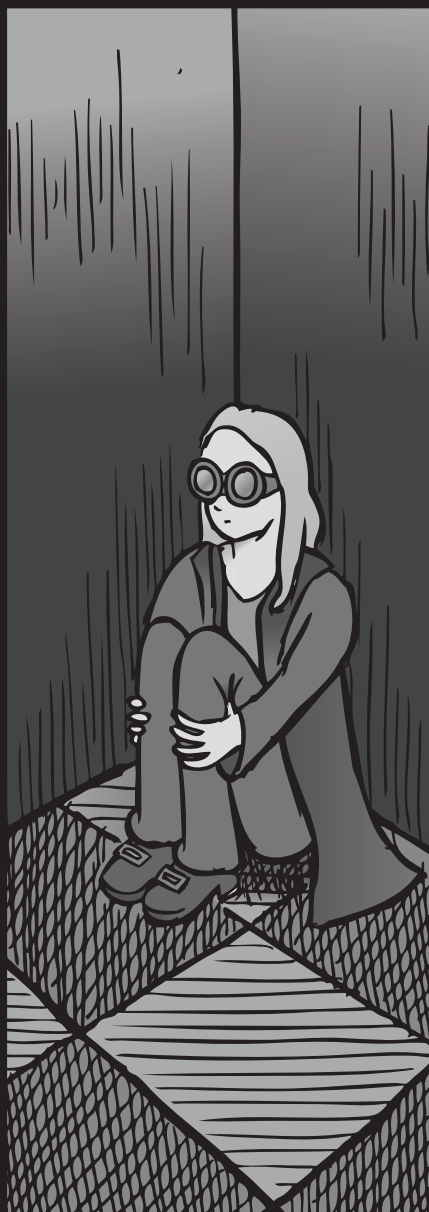


THE LENSES WE USE  
TO INTERPRET AND  
UNDERSTAND OUR  
 REALITY 

Metaphors are  
the lenses we use  
to interpret  
and understand  
our reality.



"A heart  
of gold".

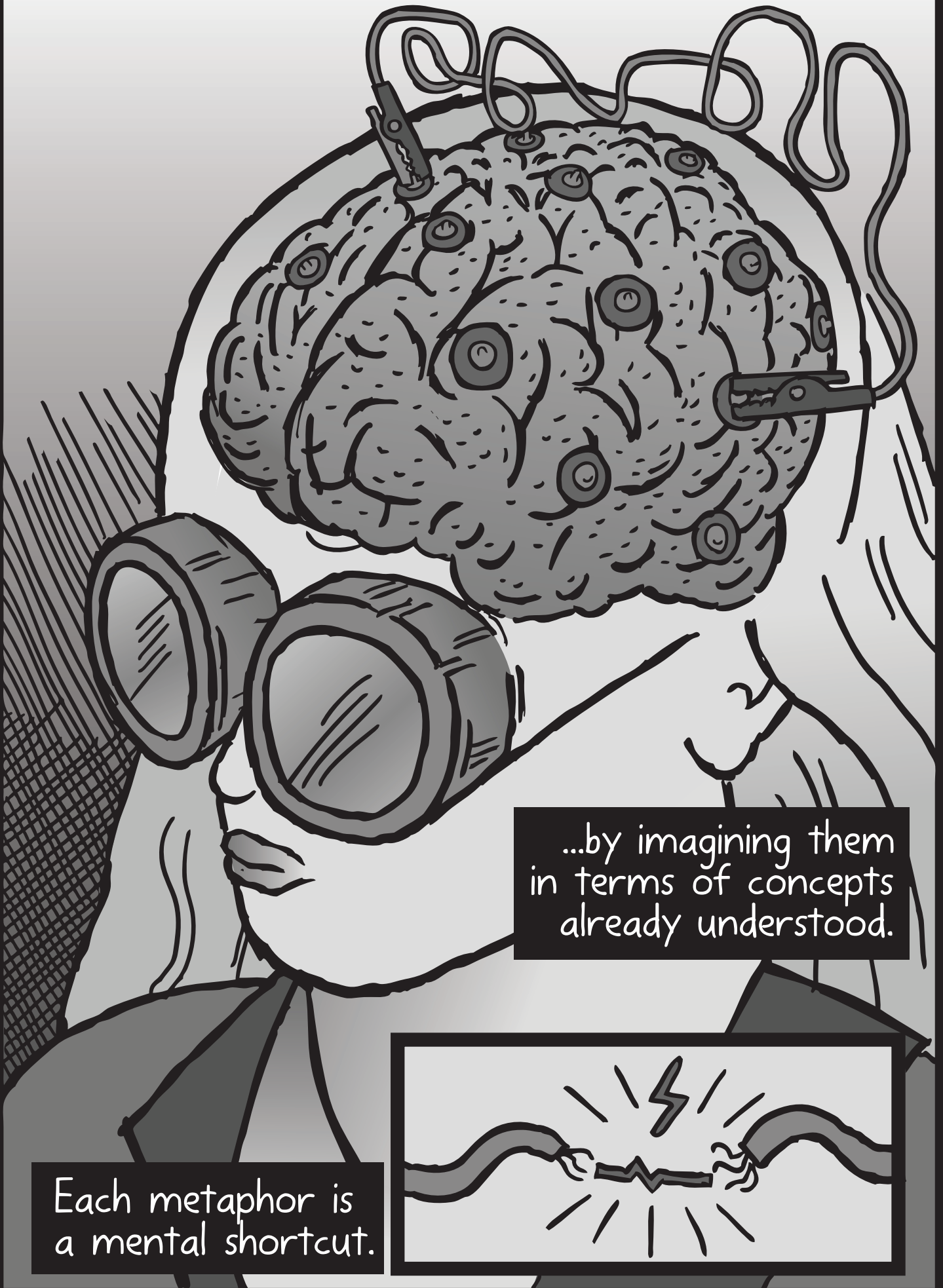


"Being kept  
in the dark."



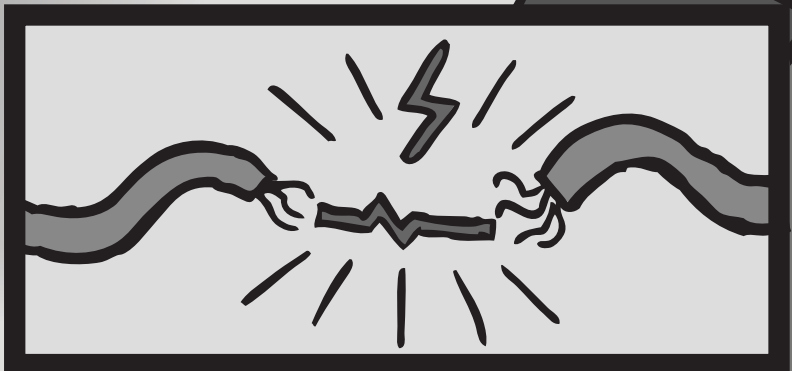
"Turning  
the corner."

Metaphors allow us to grasp unfamiliar concepts...



...by imagining them  
in terms of concepts  
already understood.

Each metaphor is  
a mental shortcut.



But the shortcuts pose hidden dangers.

Metaphors obscure or distort our understanding, because the new is not the old.



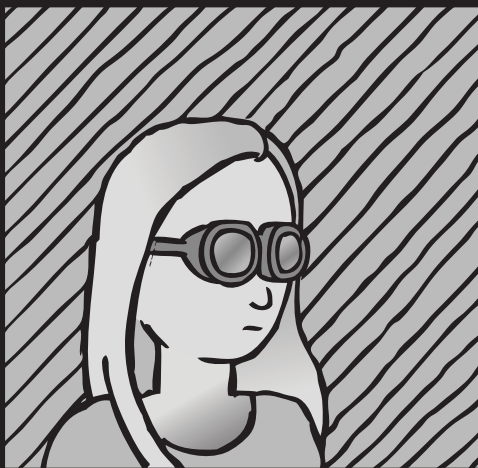
A pitfall which can cause us to think and act in bizarre ways.



Like eyeglass  
lenses we wear,  
the metaphor  
lenses of  
our minds are  
not with us  
from birth.



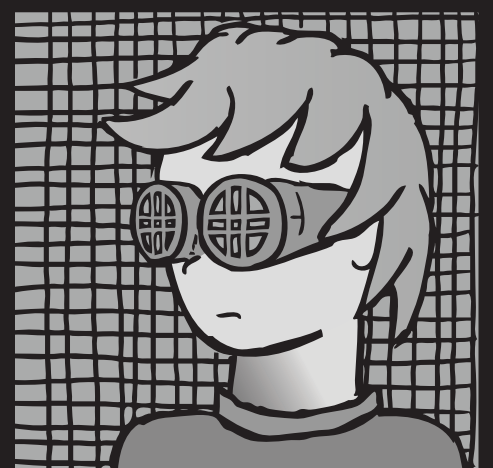
We take our  
metaphors  
from the  
society  
and culture  
around us...



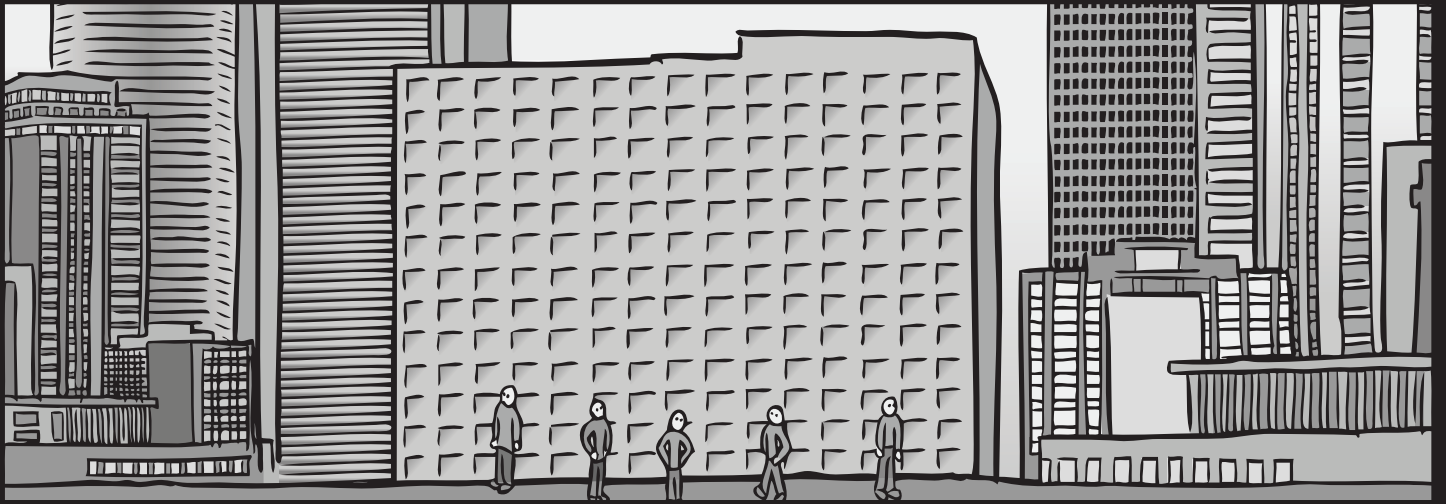
...and, without  
realizing we  
are looking  
through them...



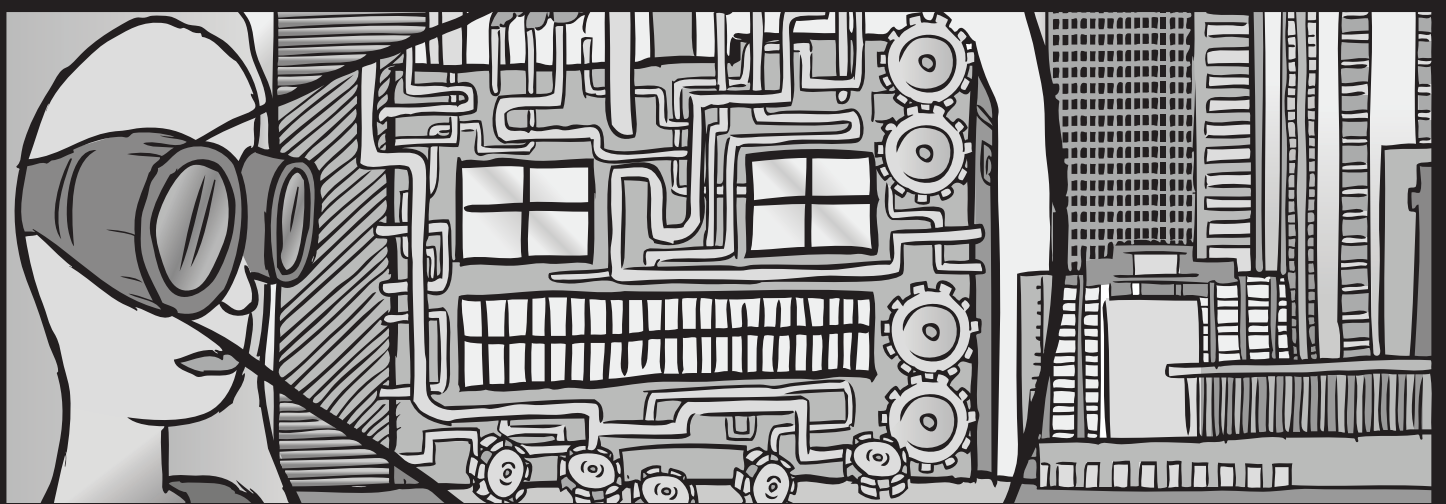
...we use them  
to interpret  
and act  
in our world.







To what extent do metaphors shape the way we conceive our world?



To what extent do metaphors mask our surroundings, and alter our perception of the world?



How much of our understanding is constructed purely from imagination through metaphors?

Our society is heavily influenced by organizations.



Corporations.

Government  
institutions.

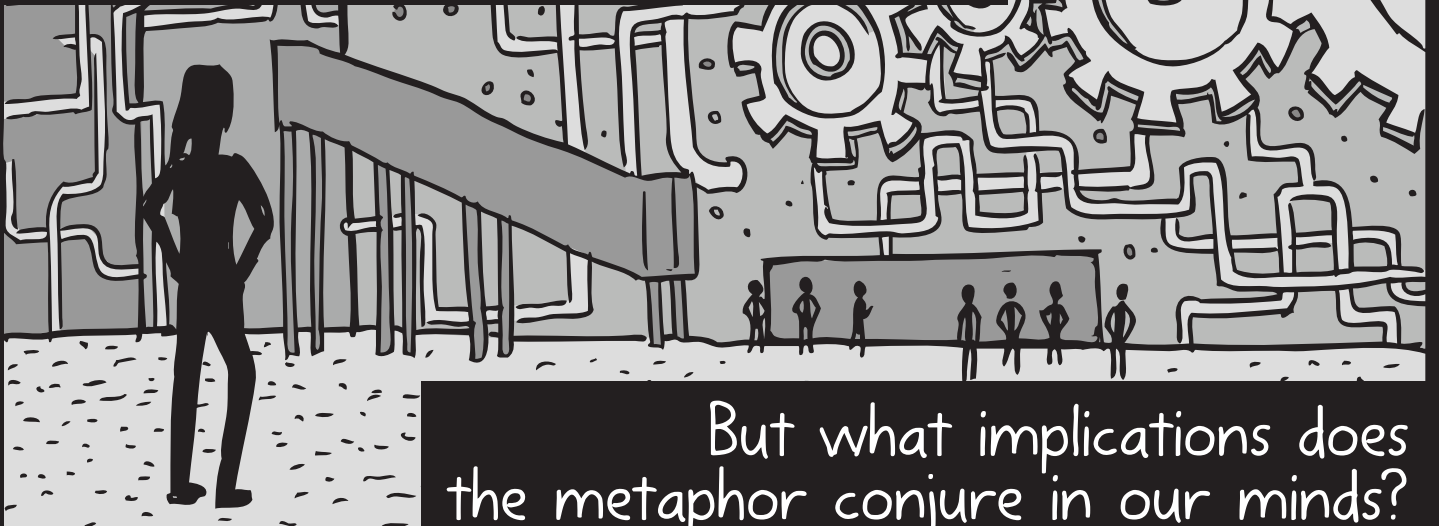
Religions.

Yet much of their influence comes purely from  
the metaphors we use to conceive them.

A common metaphor for imagining organizations is as self-contained entities: 'machines' which exist in their own right.



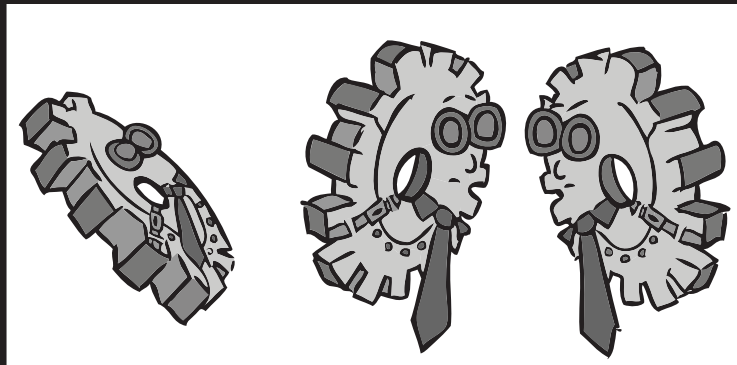
The 'machine' metaphor helps us imagine and grasp the abstract concept of an organization.



But what implications does the metaphor conjure in our minds?

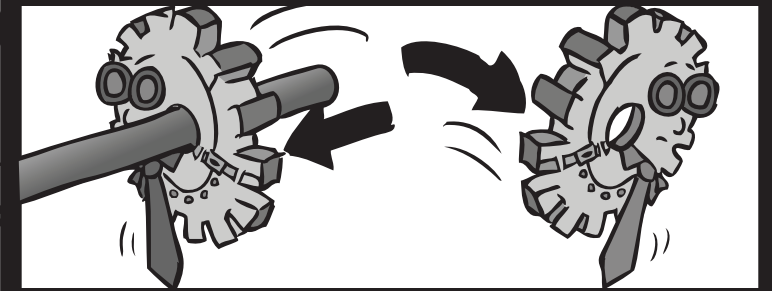


If organizations  
are 'machines'...



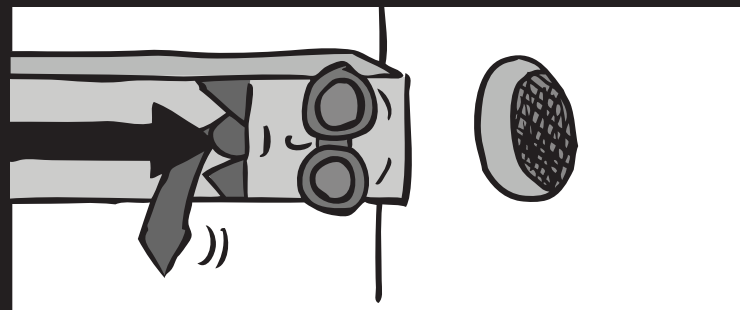
...are the people inside an  
organization merely 'parts'?

Should defective parts of  
the machine be replaced?  
How does this happen?



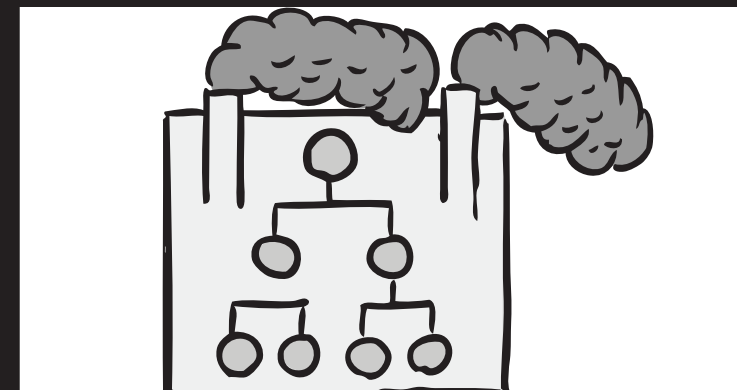
What happens to  
defective parts?

Should the human  
dimensions, human needs  
beyond the parts  
requirements be ignored?



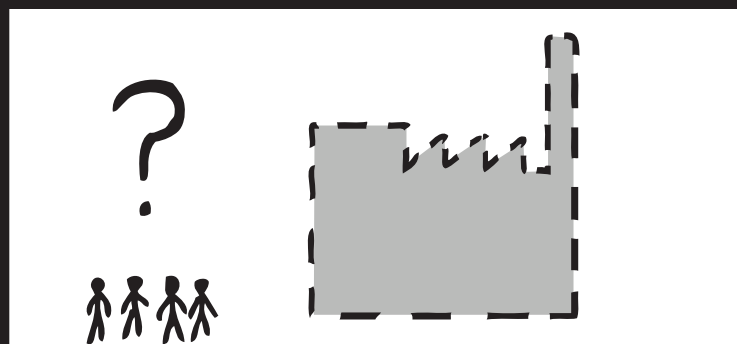
Hammered out?

Does anyone truly work  
'in' an organization,



or do they all work  
'for' the master machine?

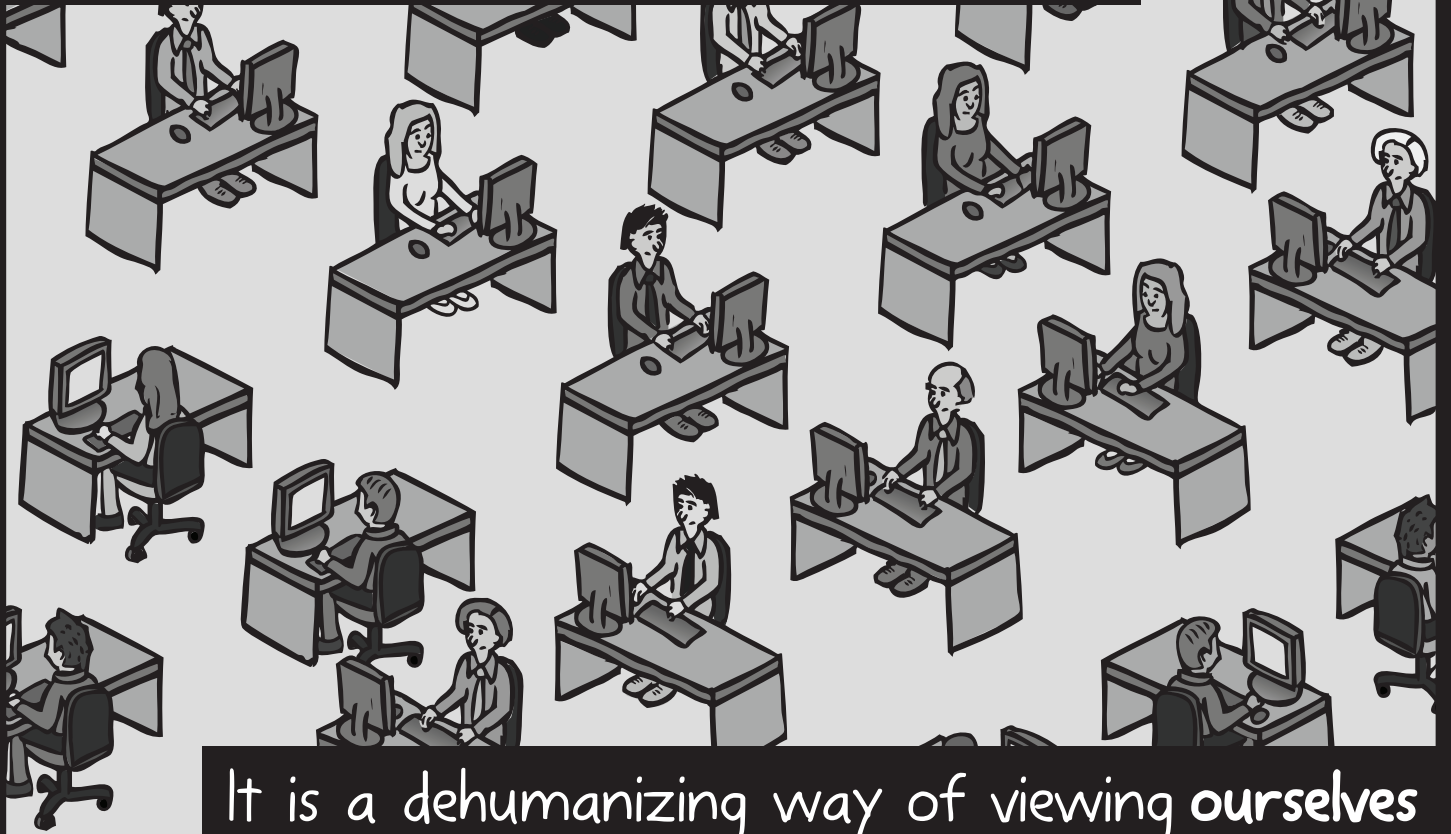
Is the machine an entity  
in its own right?



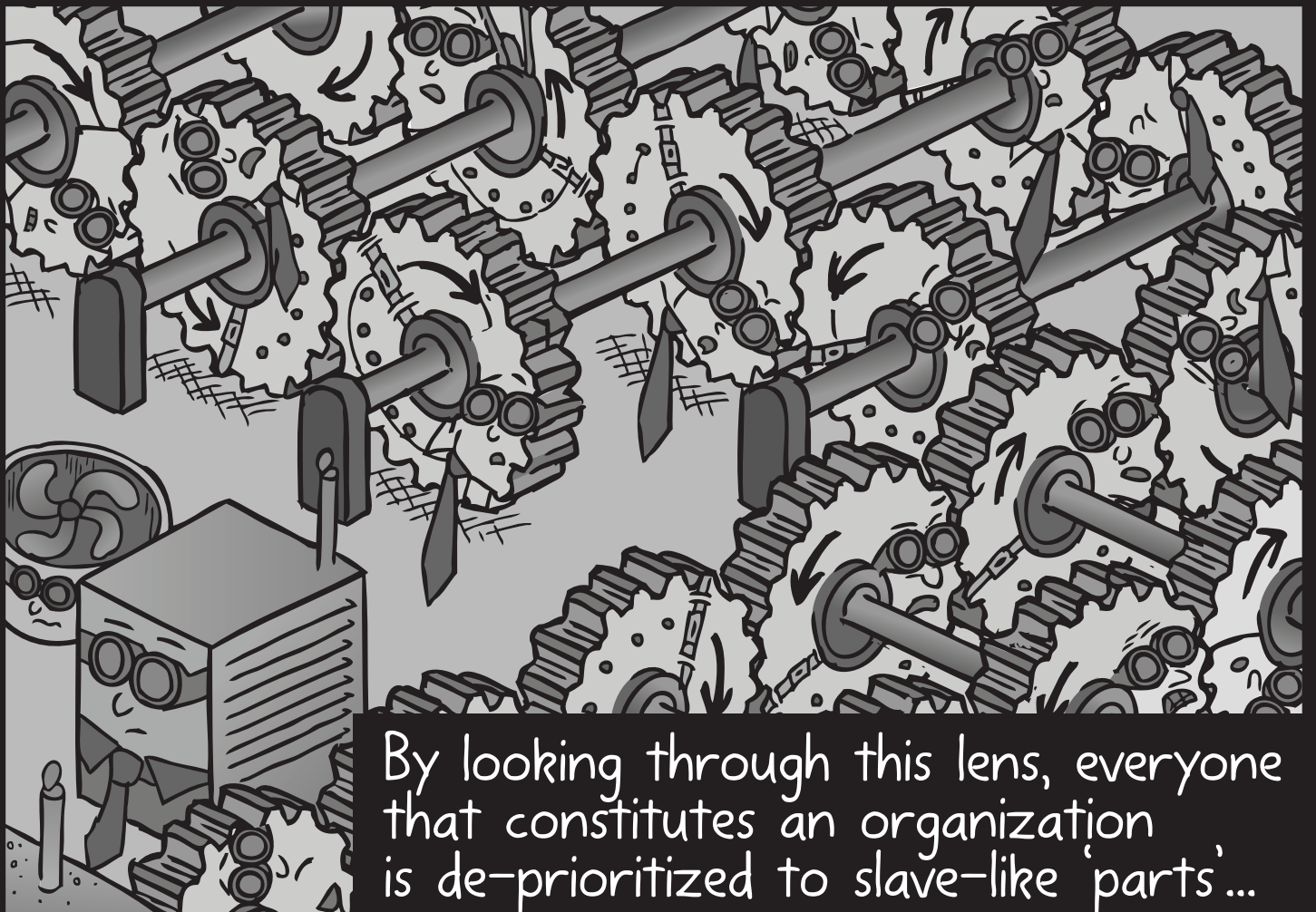
Should the machine  
continue operating  
no matter what?



This 'machine' metaphor is a dehumanizing way of viewing organizations.



It is a dehumanizing way of viewing ourselves



By looking through this lens, everyone that constitutes an organization is de-prioritized to slave-like 'parts'...



...wired into a master machine  
that supersedes all workers.



An imaginary entity  
that controls...



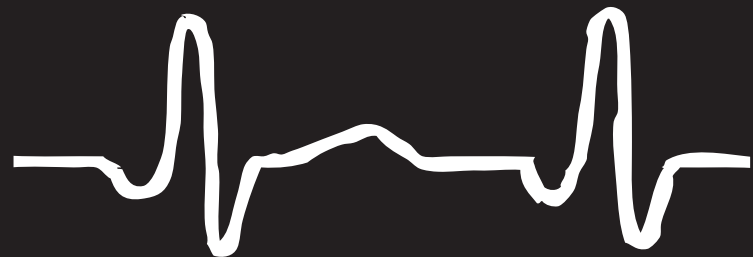
...yet exists only in the minds of the metaphor's users.

An alternative to the 'machine' perspective  
describes organizations as living organisms.

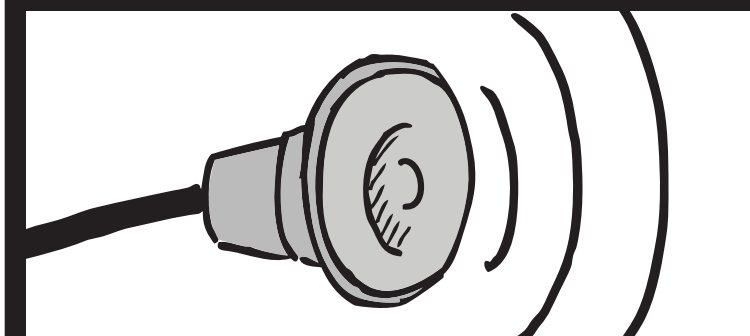
This metaphor raises questions of its own:



Should we think of organizations as being 'alive'?

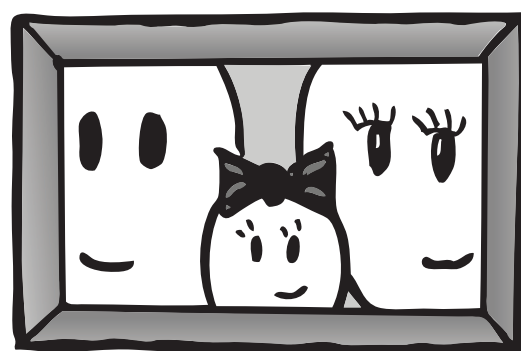


Does the organism speak for itself?



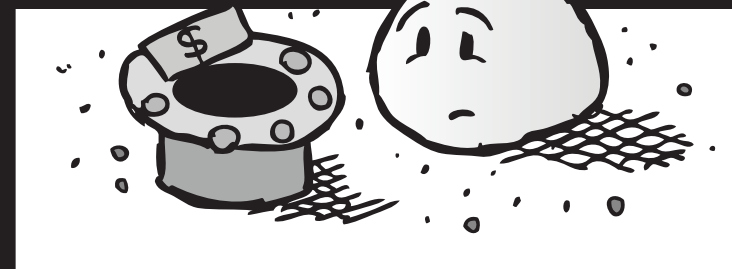
How?

How was the organism born?



What created it?

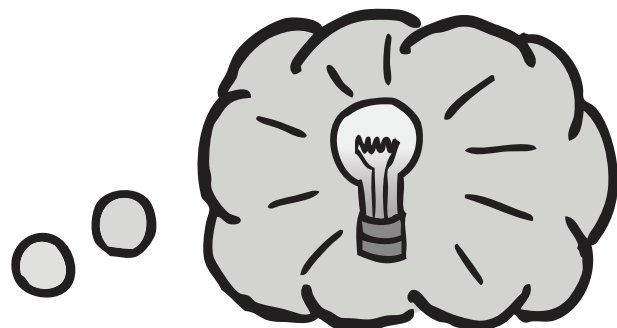
Should we care about organizations in the same way we care for living things?



Is it a 'being'?



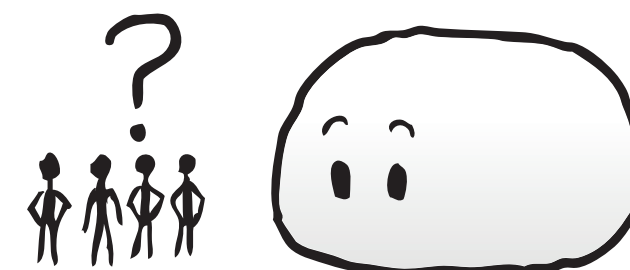
What does the organization think about?



Does it have goals?



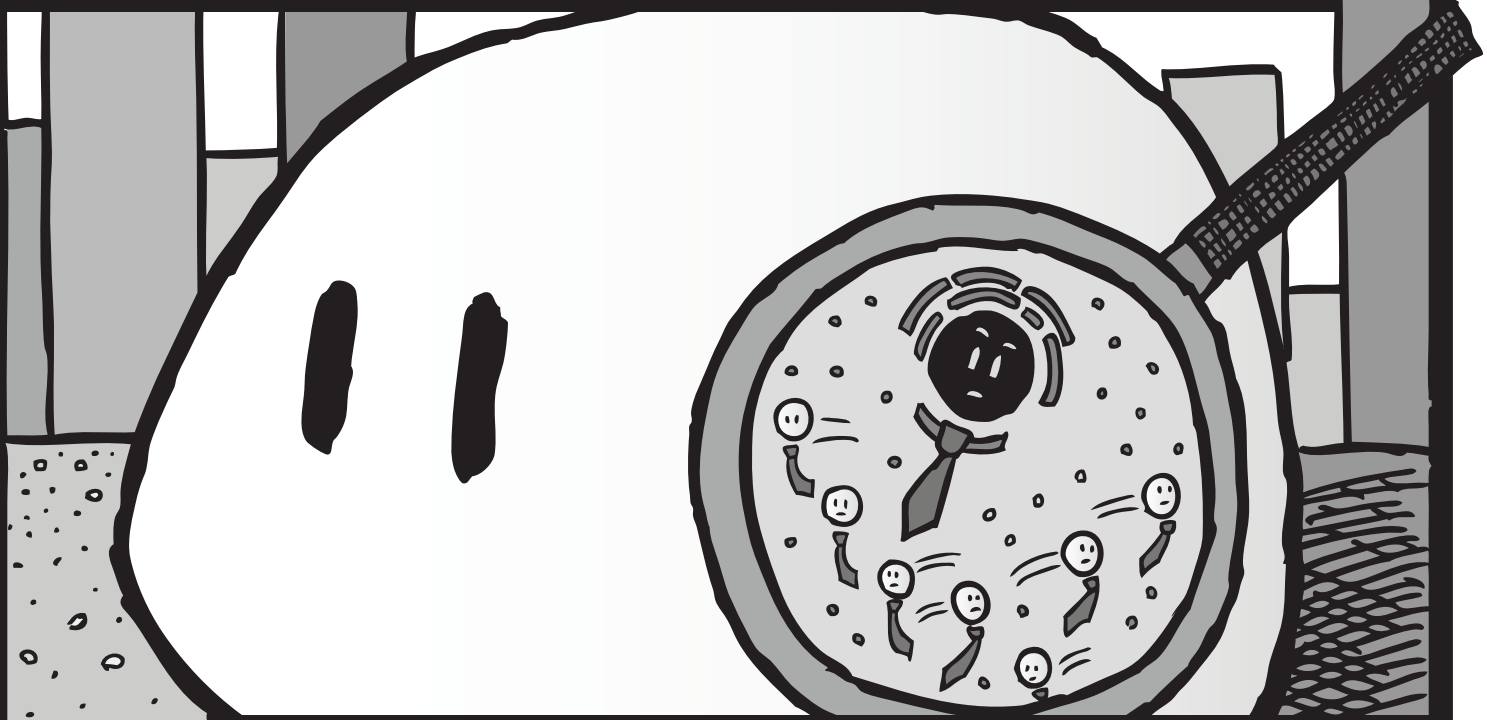
What roles do employees play within this 'living' organism?



Would it live without us?



On the surface, biological imagery seems warmer and more suitable than that of machinery...



...but the metaphor still paints human employees as subservient to a master entity.

Also, by borrowing words associated with organisms...

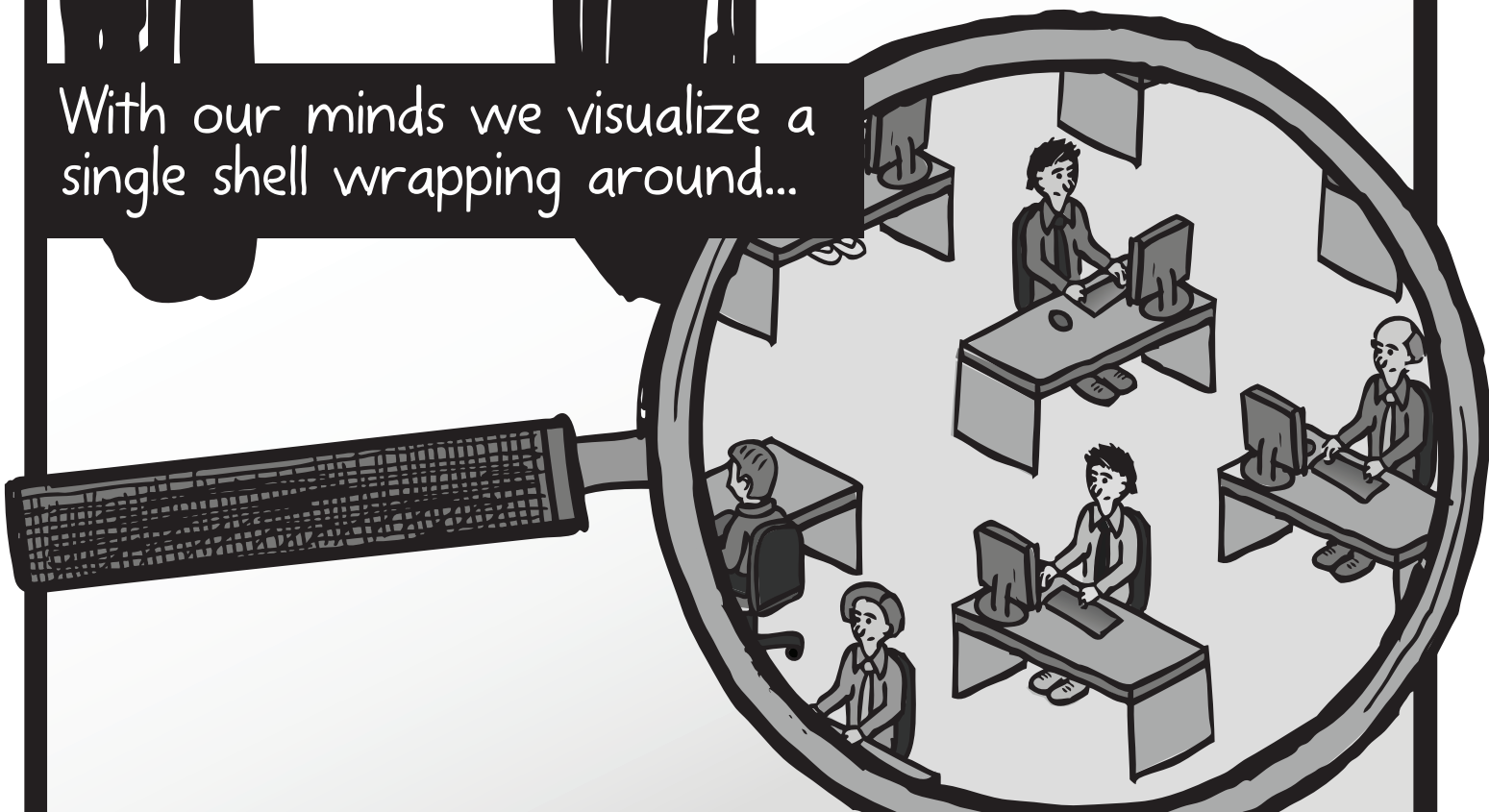


...organizations are unwittingly raised to the status of living creatures worthy of concern.

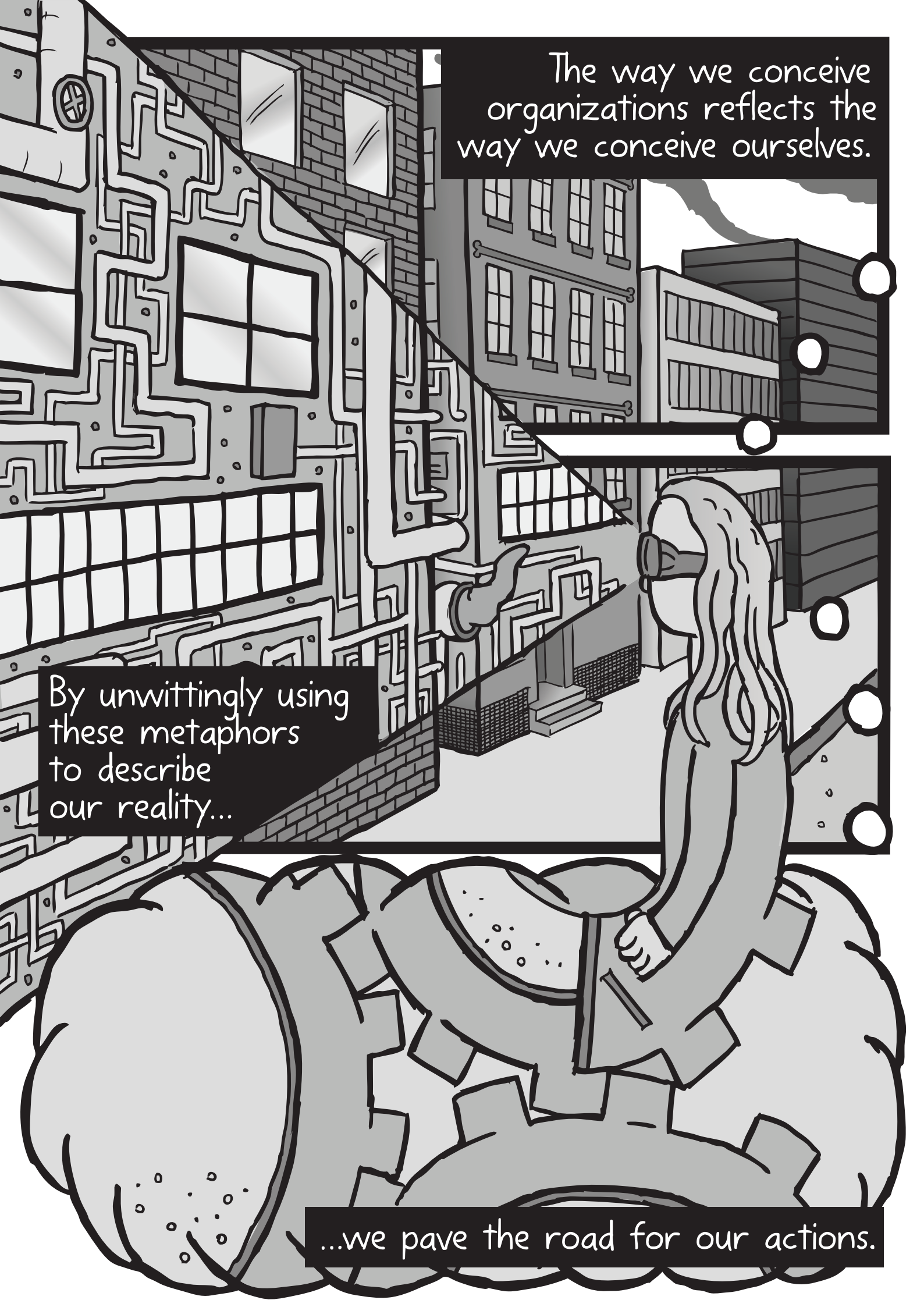
Though we may 'know' that organizations are not living creatures...

...loosely using expressions about a company's 'survival' and 'death' takes our minds into the zone of the organism metaphor.

With our minds we visualize a single shell wrapping around...



...what is really a group of people.

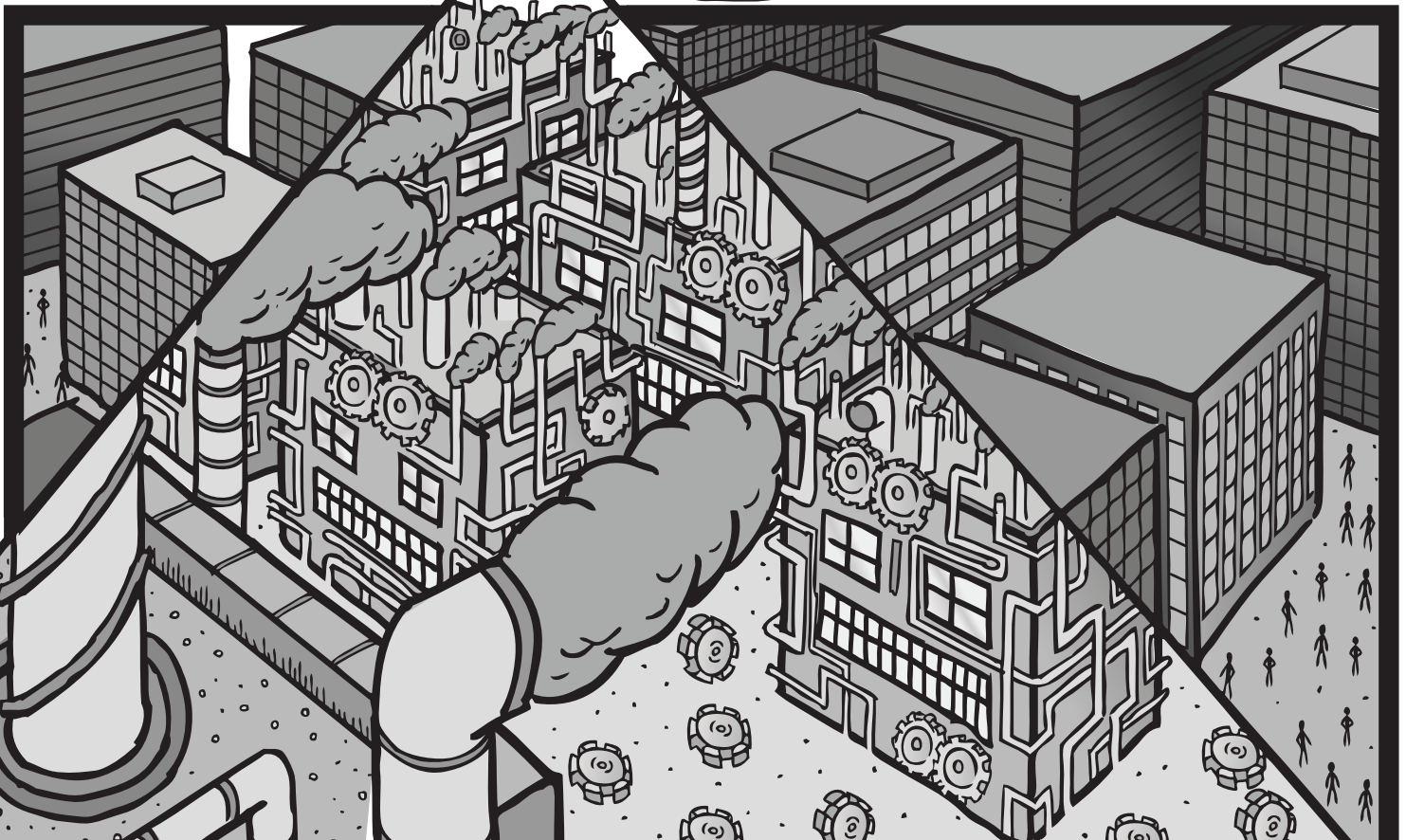
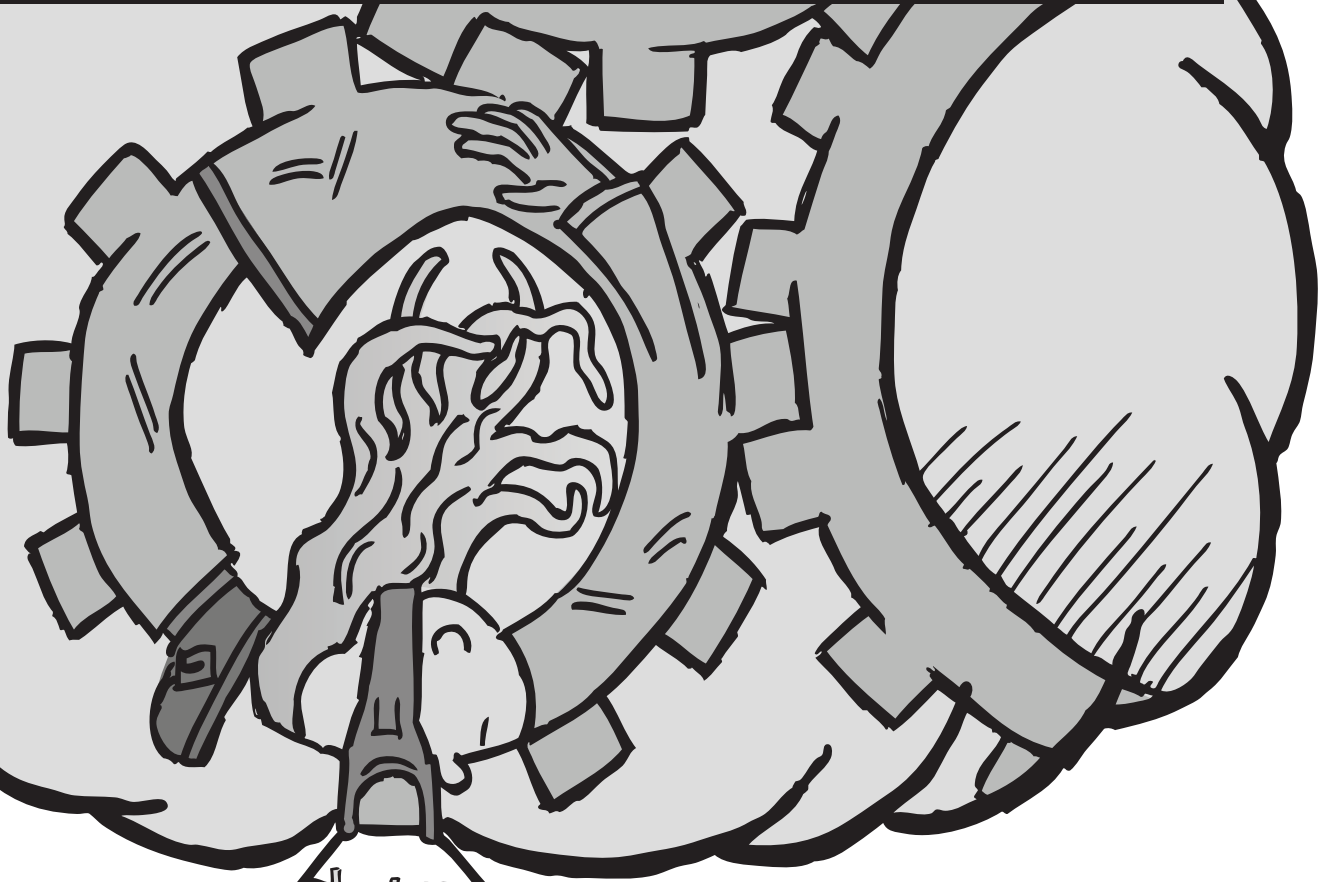


The way we conceive  
organizations reflects the  
way we conceive ourselves.

By unwittingly using  
these metaphors  
to describe  
our reality...

...we pave the road for our actions.

A pattern emerges where we act in ways consistent with our distorted view of reality...



...and then look at our self-created world as 'evidence' that our perceptions must be true.



Both of these metaphor lenses skew the ways in which we think and act.



As workers, as voters, and as humans.

There is an alternative.

A solution which involves removing the distorting lenses we use to conceive organizations...



...and replacing them with helpful metaphors which do not marginalize or de-prioritize us.

A solution which involves returning to the root definition of the word 'organization'.

**organization**  
derived from the Greek  
word 'organon' meaning  
instrument or tool  
**organize**  
the act or process of  
planting



What if we we built upon the root meaning behind the word and viewed organizations as tools to help humanity.



A platform which acknowledges that organizations do not, can not exist without the people that constitute them.

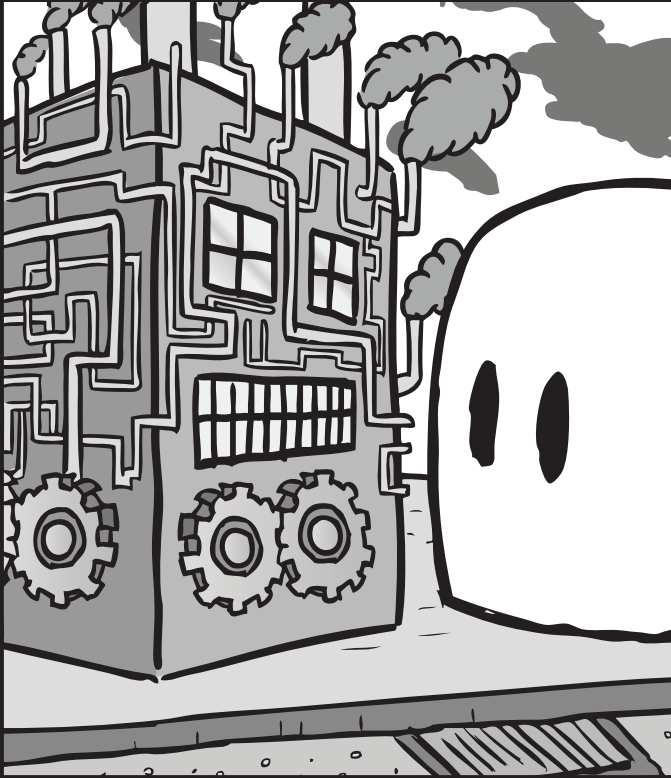
By seeing organizations as tools we use to help each other...



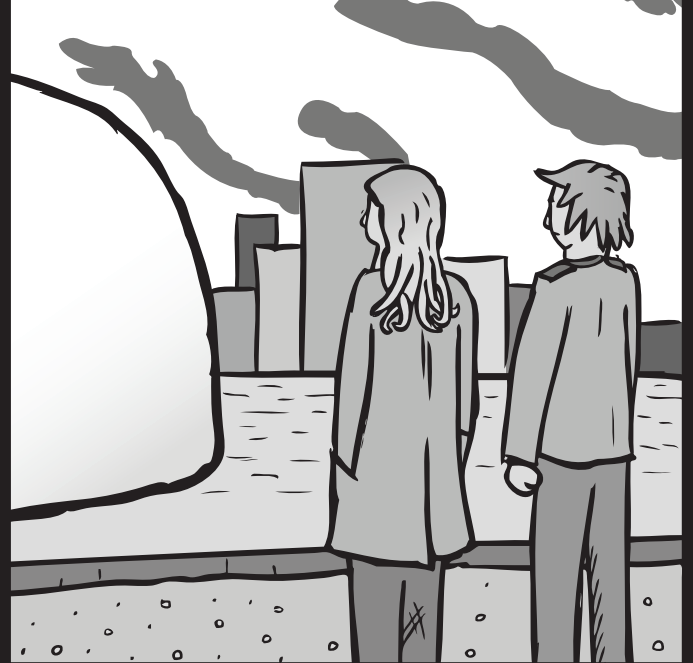
...a cascade of possibilities is revealed to our eyes.



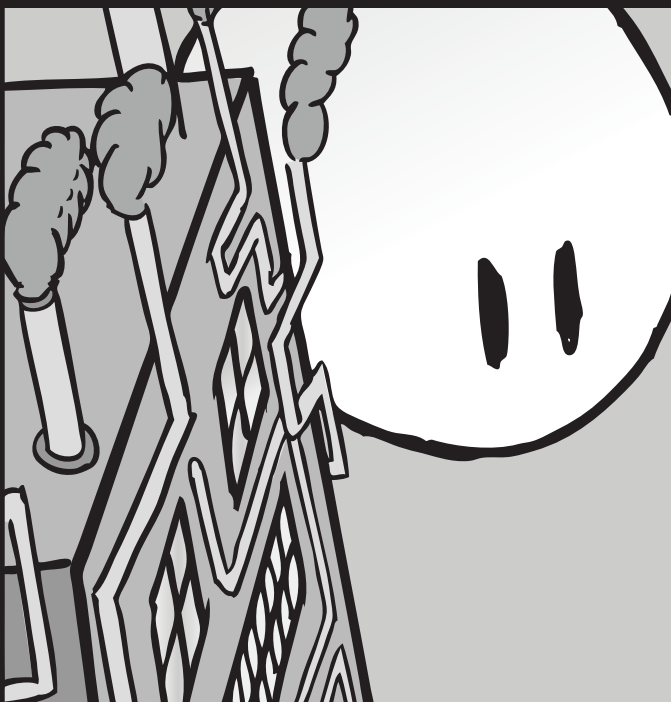
From a view which  
imagines organizations  
as entities in themselves...



...to an understanding  
that organizations  
are the product  
of the people  
that constitute them.



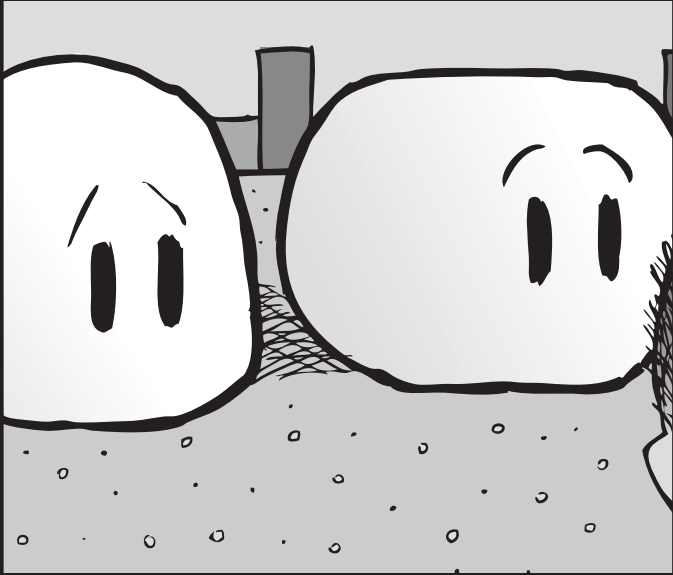
From a world populated  
with organizations  
chartered to serve  
their own purposes...



...to a world of people  
using organizations as  
tools to serve the  
goals of humanity.



From a mindset  
concerned with  
the perpetual operation  
of organizations...

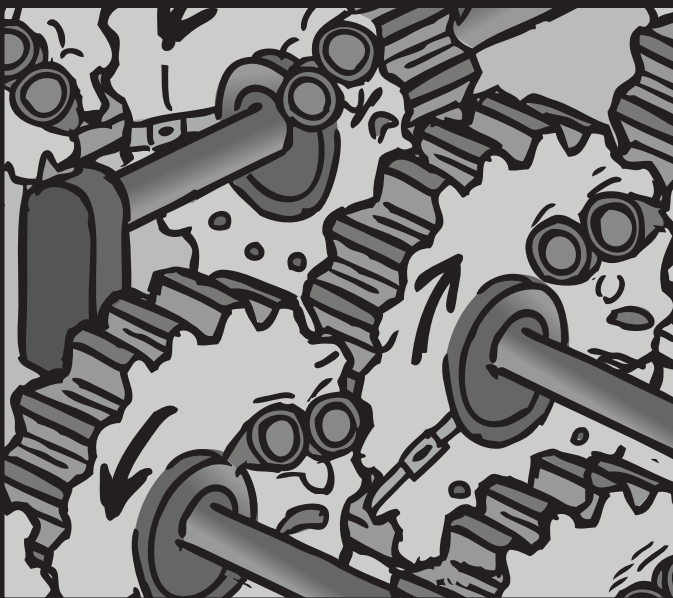


...to a world where  
organizations are  
established for  
specific ends...



...and those ends are only pursued for as long  
as they are helpful and necessary to all humans.

From metaphors  
which point us toward  
dehumanization,  
suppression and an  
unraveling of  
moral concern...



...to metaphors  
which can help  
us pursue the  
full potential  
of humans.



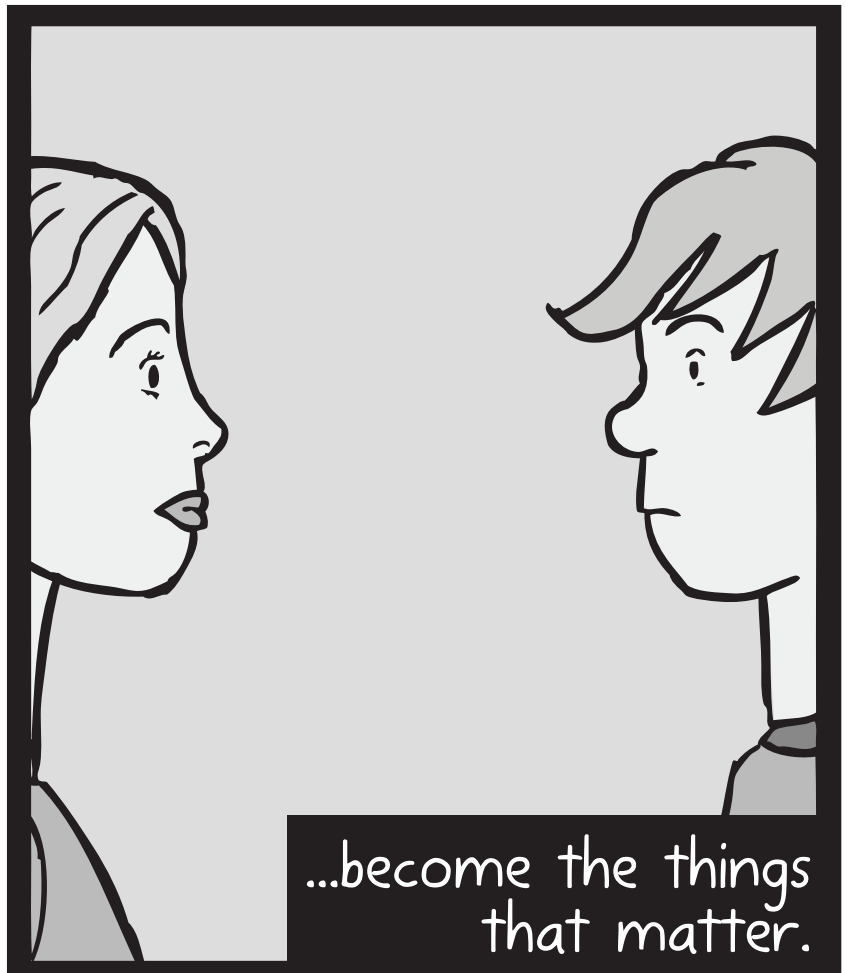
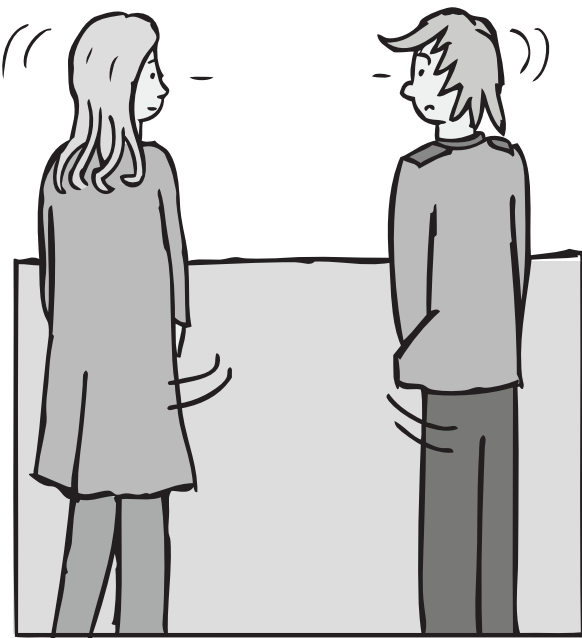
With a change to the lens  
through which we view the world...



...the things we thought  
were there vanish like desert mirages.

And the things  
that remain...

...the people  
that remain...



...become the things  
that matter.

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### **General Support Note**

This work attempts to convey how metaphors distort our perceptions and understandings and in so doing may lead to outcomes that do not recognize the value of all humans. The 'Metaphors' graphic story was sparked via a conference paper produced by Dr Nick Barter.

The conference paper is approximately 10,000 words long and as such is 'text heavy'. Given this, there was a desire on Nick's part to explore the dissemination of academic ideas via a different format, in particular a graphic format, partly because Nick is a fan of graphic novels. The aim and hope of delivering what are essentially academic ideas in a graphic format is that it makes the ideas more accessible to the audience (a graphic novel is easier to read than 10,000 words). In so doing the aspiration is that this format will lead readers into picking up academic articles of 10,000 words to explore ideas, in this instance the distorting ability of metaphors, in more depth.

In order to complete this graphic novel format, after meeting by chance, Nick shared the original article with Stuart. Stuart and Nick then developed a storyline together, with Stuart also drawing the illustrations.

The original conference paper that was the seed for this story can be referenced as follows:

- Barter, N, (2011) 'Metaphors that facilitate Organisational Understanding: Reaching for the New and How Machine and Organism Metaphors do not enable Sustainable Development,' Australasian Conference on Social and Environmental Accounting Research, Launceston, Australia, 4 - 7 Dec, 2011

[http://www.utas.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/188432/barter.pdf](http://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/188432/barter.pdf)

([Mirrored copy at stuartmcmillen.com](http://www.stuartmcmillen.com))

This paper had approximately 67 references and as such it captures and weaves together the ideas of others, not just the author. Thus in terms of the cliché, this work stands on the shoulders of others.

Correspondence regarding the 'Metaphors' story should be directed to Nick Barter.