

*Joyful Pessimism 2:
Essays and More Sex Stories*

by Michael Ellsberg

This is draft material from a book in progress, as of March 12, 2023.

All writing is subject to change.

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¹ These are pieces of memoir writing (mostly sex stories) that didn't fit into the main narrative of *Joyful Pessimism*, but which I still think are worthwhile as standalone pieces and/or as extra layers of context for the main narrative.

Most names and identifying details in this memoir writing have been changed. One character in the memoir writing, my therapist "Shoshanna," is a composite of several therapists—I've had many! Thus, my conversations with "Shoshanna" are composites as well, based on many conversations I've had with different therapists.

For reference in the timeline, I was born on May 12, 1977.

Author's Note on Mental Health

When you know or suspect that the emperor (of life itself) wears no clothes, but have felt alone and isolated in this viewpoint, and scared to express it for fear of being misunderstood or ostracized, hearing someone else proclaim “The emperor is stark raving naked!” can feel joyful, refreshing, and freeing; it can make you feel less alone and crazy, and more sane (in an insane world). If, while reading this book, you find yourself nodding along, chuckling, and feeling seen, heard, and understood, you are my intended audience. This writing is a strong tonic. If the tonic makes you feel better, I mixed this drink for you.

Please note that my thinking gets extremely dark in some of this writing. I find my explorations darkly *comic*, in the spirit of gallows humor. However, if the emotional going gets too rough for you in the chapters below—particularly if my writing is exacerbating any depressed feelings within you... and *really particularly* if it is exacerbating any suicidal thoughts—please take care of yourself, and skip these pieces now. You can always come back to them when you feel more resourced. Maybe few or no other people in your life have been kind to you. You can start with you being kind to yourself.

I've struggled with depression for decades in my life, and have gone through bouts of suicidal ideation; I truly don't want to exacerbate these in anyone reading. I'm writing this book in part because these ideas have *relieved* my depression, by making me feel less crazy and alone, and by relieving tension through gallows humor. If I can have the same effect on any philosophically depressed people, I will be happy.

Please know that I'm not a missionary for my views. I do not believe the world would be “better” if more people held my views. I'm not trying to persuade anyone of anything. I think of

this book as philosophical entertainment and provocation. I'm more interested that this book makes you think (and hopefully, laugh), rather than agree.

Enjoy!

—Michael Ellsberg

Berkeley, CA, February, 2023²

² A note on citations, and footnotes vs. endnotes: since this is an electronic document, in order to cite things, I have in general simply linked to the relevant resource rather than providing formal citations.

I also include extensive (and sometimes obsessive) sub-commentary, and relevant additional quotes and references, in footnotes and endnotes. These are purely for your interest if you want to geek out on certain topics; it's totally fine to skip the notes if you don't find them adding to your reading experience.

In the eternal debate about which are better—footnotes vs. endnotes—I'm a “footnote” guy. I like reading authors' sub-commentary immediately, right under the main text, without having to flip to the back of the book.

In some cases, this leads to long footnotes that run onto the next page or even overtake the next page of text. This can be slightly confusing, but I still think the benefits of footnotes over endnotes outweigh this occasional annoyance. Just know that some footnote text at the bottom of a page might be a continuation of the footnote from the previous page. In the few cases where a footnote overtakes an entire page of text, if you don't want to read that footnote, just skip ahead to where the main text starts up again.

In the few cases where my commentaries run to multiple pages, I have put them in endnotes, which are marked by symbols such as * and †. I will put hyperlinks into these endnotes soon. For now, to find your way to an endnote, copy the relevant endnote's symbol and search for that in the text. Thank you.

The Glass is Half Full

(of Piss)

Arguably the most fundamental question of both philosophy and science is, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

Philosophers and physicists have filled books debating this question, over centuries. In turn, I’ve been haunted for years by an unusual variation on this age-old question:

Rather than asking, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” I ask myself, “Is it *good* that there is something rather than nothing?”

After many years contemplating this question—and countless hours with therapists who were well-qualified to help me with my romantic troubles, but not with my angst over this question, which was contributing significantly to the former—I have come to a firm conclusion:

No. It is *not* good that there is something, rather than nothing. I think it would be far better if there were nothing, rather than something.

Why?

Because, based on my observation of the one “something” we know of so far—the universe, or the multiverse or the simulation or whatever the hell we’re in—I know that when somethings exist, they have at least a *chance* of producing the fucked-up things commonplace in our world. And I think it would be better that *nothing* exist, rather than something, if the something includes—or has even a remote chance of including—these fucked up things.

What “fucked up things,” you ask?

Consider my very favorite quote, from philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, history’s arch-pessimist. In his 1851 essay “[On the Sufferings of the World](#),” he writes:

The pleasure in this world, it has been said, outweighs the pain; or, at any rate, there is an even balance between the two. If the reader wishes to see shortly

whether this statement is true, let him compare the respective feelings of two animals, one of which is engaged in eating the other.

In this example, one animal is having a pleasant—even delicious—meal, which will keep him going for a few more hours until he needs another one. In the same act, the other animal is suffering one of the most horrendous experiences you could possibly imagine: being eaten alive and shoved down the jaws of a monster, only to be broken down by stomach acids and then—adding insult to injury—turned into shit. On the one hand, lunch, and on the other hand, having your bones snapped alive and being digested into excrement. Can these truly be compared on the same scale?

I do not believe a phenomenon in which the cruelty of predation plays a crucial role can be redeemed. Life—on Earth, and likely anywhere else it may occur—is saturated with predation; predation is nearly as old as life itself. It is common [among bacteria](#) and [protozoa](#). If sentience did not exist, then there would be no moral issue with predation. But sentience does exist, and thus nearly all sentient beings are caught up in some part of the circle of predation. Not all sentient beings are predators—many are herbivores—but nearly all sentient beings are at risk for becoming predators’ lunch (particularly once hungry humans came on the scene). While we humans are not likely to become predators’ lunch anymore, many among us are at risk of becoming parasites’ lunch. And, as we’re learning anew, becoming the breeding ground for viruses.

Ernest Becker describes this order of affairs as a “nightmare spectacular.” In his book [The Denial of Death](#), he writes:

What are we to make of a creation in which the routine activity is for organisms to be tearing others apart with teeth of all types — biting, grinding flesh, plant stalks, bones between molars, pushing the pulp greedily down the gullet with delight, incorporating its essence into one’s own organization, and then excreting with foul stench and gasses the residue. Everyone reaching out to incorporate others who are edible to him. The mosquitoes bloating themselves on blood, the

maggots, the killerbees attacking with a fury and a demonism, sharks continuing to tear and swallow while their own innards are being torn out. . . . Creation is a nightmare spectacular taking place on a planet that has been soaked for hundreds of millions of years in the blood of all its creatures. The soberest conclusion that we could make about what has actually been taking place on the planet for about three billion years is that it is being turned into a vast pit of fertilizer.

Here's what I make of this creation: it would be better had it not been created.

It's Philosophical, Not Personal:

Pessimism About the Process of Life Itself, Not About "My Life"

But what of all the good things in life? The flowers and kittens and wedding days and babies' smiles? The ice cream cones and orgasms? Laughter with friends and family? Acts of compassion and kindness? Great Works of Art?

Yes, there are many good things in life. I have been privileged to enjoy more than my share. Sex, drugs, love, friendship, art. I've come to love my life, largely because of the loveliness of the people in it: they make it worthwhile. My pessimism is not a *personal* pessimism. By all means, go out there and try to improve your life. Try to be all you can be. Try to make the world a better place. There is no reason not to try to be happy and joyful while you're here. (Hence my title, "*Joyful Pessimism*.")

I am not pessimistic about my own life, per se, or yours; I am pessimistic about the *process* of life—specifically, the horrendous predation and violence that inevitably arises when self-reproducing sentient entities compete for the scarce resources with which to reproduce.

This is a philosophical pessimism, not a personal one. (Here's a lively [discussion about the distinction](#).) I can love and enjoy my own life (and be grateful for all the ways I am insulated

from cruelty) and at the same time be aware of this basic, morally-ugly fact about life: the only way I'm able to enjoy my life—and anyone is able to enjoy theirs—is by regularly dissociating from the extreme cruelty and gruesomeness that pervades the process of life itself from top to bottom. The only way we can enjoy even a moment of pleasure or beauty in this world is by averting our gaze (at least in that moment) from all manner of grotesque, violent tragedies occurring at any moment in the human and non-human world.

In general, we view turning one's back on the suffering of others as morally reprehensible. (Particularly when someone else's back is doing the turning.)

But in the “nightmare spectacular” of our world, so many creatures suffer in so many ghastly ways that it is impossible for us to avoid closing our hearts and numbing ourselves to a practically infinite array of suffering. When we turn to address the suffering behind us, we are turning our backs on the suffering in front of us. While we can pick some suffering human and non-human creatures somewhere around us to help, and there is moral beauty in doing so, we are bailing out the ocean with a bucket, while swimming in it.

Damned if You Save the Starfish, Damned If You Save the Crab

Here is where the optimist, ever committed to seeing the bright side, will trot out their old chestnut of motivational seminar speakers throughout the ages, the story about the girl and the starfish on the beach.

It goes like this: a man is walking on a beach full of starfish that have been washed up by a storm. He happens upon a little girl, throwing one starfish back into the sea, then another. “But you can't make a difference —there's too many starfish,” the man tells her. The girl picks up a starfish, throws it into the sea, and replies, “I made a difference for *that one*.”

What a heartwarming story. If I encountered this little girl, and I happened to be a mean person more concerned with imparting the harsh truths of life than with her emotional well-being, I would ask her, “Do you know what those starfish are going to do after you throw them back in the ocean?”

“What?” she would ask.

“They’re going to eat all kinds of small animals alive, like mollusks and crabs.”

“Ouch, they’re going to eat them alive?”

“Yes,” I say, as I pull out my phone. “Here’s a YouTube video, ‘[Starfish Eating a Crab](#).’ See that poor crab with its arm stuck in the starfish? See it hitting the starfish with its other claw, pathetically, to no avail? See its facial expression? I don’t know what crabs actually feel or think, but it seems to me he knows he’s stuck, and he’s going to die a slow, painful death being consumed by that starfish. He does not look like a happy crab. So I’ll bet the crabs out there in the ocean aren’t too happy that you’re throwing those starfish back.”

“So what should I do? Should we just leave the starfish out to die?” she asks.

“Well, if you leave the starfish to die, they suffer a slow and agonizing death, and if you throw them back in the water, the crabs and mollusks that they eat alive suffer a slow and agonizing death. If you open your heart to the starfish, you are cruelly closing your heart to the crab. And if you open your heart to the crab, you are closing your heart to the starfish. It’s one or the other; there’s no way to escape this excruciating choice.”

“What should I do then?”

“I don’t know, young lady. I’ve been trying to figure that out for a long time. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. A disappointing number of things in life are like that. The sooner you realize it, the more time you’ll have to find some way to make peace with it. And the less

therapy you'll need. Though therapy can't really solve your despair once you realize how evil and cruel the process of life itself truly is."

But, I'm not such a mean person, so if I encountered this girl, I would instead say, "Good job. This is very inspiring. So inspiring, in fact, that many people will want to hear about your compassion in motivational seminars for years to come."

And now, generations of bored middle managers, unmotivated at their jobs selling shlock to people who don't need it and can't afford it, get to learn about how this one little girl made a difference to the individual starfish she threw back into the sea, and about how they too can make a difference in the world, if they just complete their "life mission statement" on their notepads, under the bright fluorescent lights of the Oak Room at the Ramada Inn.

The Circle of Lunch

But as the little girl throwing starfish back in the sea would learn if the crabs and mollusks could cry out to her from the ocean, in this prison of predation called life, there is no act of helping others that does not harm still others. Ecologists wax poetic about the "circle of life:" predators keep populations of prey in check, preventing populations of prey from overpopulating to the point of starvation. How benevolent of life to offer these choices: be eaten alive, or mate so abundantly that you and your offspring starve. (At least life is kind enough to offer some fucking in between these gruesome bookends.)

The circle of life is often seen as an elegant balance. Ecologically-minded cultures and thinkers throughout the ages have deified this balance as a benevolent goddess: Mother Earth, or Mother Nature. But for the individual organisms who are sacrificed alive by their supposedly benevolent Mother, the balance is not so elegant or benevolent.

If you were being eaten alive by a shark, as your mangled legs were being sucked down this monster's hatch, and you saw its jaws closing above your head, and darkness began to envelop you, I feel confident your parting thought would not likely be, "I am so glad that this shark eating me is contributing to keeping the human population in check, so that the beautiful balance of nature can be restored."

There is a school of thinking called [antinatalism](#). This philosophical viewpoint, which I share, ascribes a negative value to procreation. While ecologists wax poetic about "the circle of life," one antinatalist thinker has called it "the circle of lunch."

Between predators and prey, the circle of lunch is a negative-sum game. In game theory and economics, negative-sum means that the total losses to all participants in an interaction (or series of interactions) are greater than the total winnings. If I am a lion and you are a gazelle, and I eat you alive, I win lunch, which is quite nice—and you lose your life, plus you lose your peaceful state of not having your limbs snapped one by one while you cry in agony as your guts are chomped out of you alive. It seems fair to say that my gain is less than your loss in this case.

When trapped in a circle of lunch—as all beings are—there is no supposedly "benevolent" act towards others that is not at the same time an act of malice towards still others; in a circle of lunch, benevolence and malice are two sides of the same coin. The value of heads or tails depends only on whose head is eating whose tail.

This gruesome coin-flip is no less inevitable for humans acting benevolently towards humans. I admit, as a human, to a species sympathy for (many) other humans and a desire to help them. I'm no Mother Teresa. (By the way, it turns out that [Mother Teresa was no Mother Teresa either](#).) But I'm far from devoid of benevolent action—including political action aimed to benefit strangers in my species. However, as a pessimist on the process of life, I do not believe these

actions are spreading any ultimate goodness in the world. The circle of lunch is a negative-sum game; anytime we humans help ourselves prosper, we are doing so at the expense of other species.

The Tribe of Non-Human Animals Has Spoken:

Humans, It's Time to Go

Suppose all species that have existed concurrently with humans were characters on a massive, planet-wide season of *Survivor*. (It's not that far off from the truth, minus the television cameras. According to Jews and Christians, there is even a manipulative producer of this reality show, stirring up drama from on high for his own twisted entertainment.)

In such a reality show, is there any doubt that almost all the other species would band together and vote homo sapiens off Earth Island? Has there ever been another species, in the history of life, that has been so uniformly destructive to almost all other species? True, dogs and cats would vote for us to stay, along with cockroaches, pigeons, and rats. But they would be feeble support in the face of the negative votes from the giant woolly mammoths, armadillos, sloths, mastodons, and other megafauna our early ancestors hunted out of existence tens of thousands of years ago, each time our species set foot on a new continent.³ We would of course

³ From the article "[What's the first species humans drove to extinction](#)" on LiveScience.com:

As [hominids] migrated out of Africa, you see this incredibly regular pattern of extinction,' said Felisa Smith, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of New Mexico, who studies how animals' body sizes have changed over the course of history. As she and her colleagues explained in a [2018 study](#) published in the journal *Science*, each time our ancestors set foot in new places, fossil records show that large-bodied species — the humongous prehistoric relatives of elephants, bears, antelope and other creatures — started going extinct within a few hundred to 1,000 years, at most. Such rapid extinction timescales don't occur at any other point in the last several million years (not since the non-avian dinosaurs were wiped out by an asteroid about 65 million years ago.) 'The only time you see it is when humans are involved, which is really striking,' Smith said."

also get voted off by the even greater number of species that Western civilizations have extinguished in their colonization of the planet—dodo birds and passenger pigeons—or driven to the brink, including blue whales (the largest creature currently on Earth) and American icons such as grizzly bears, buffalos, and bald eagles.

Our closest evolutionary kin on Earth Island, our fellow great apes, including gorillas, orangutans, bonobos, and chimpanzees, would relish the chance to vote us off; we've viciously betrayed our close family, driving these cousins to the brink of extinction (when we're not torturing the chimpanzees in experiments).⁴ Our next-closest relatives, the lesser apes (gibbons) and non-ape primates such as monkeys, lemurs, and macaques, would also gladly kick us off Earth Island. We've driven nearly all of the nineteen species of gibbons to [endangered or critically endangered status](#), and sixty percent of non-ape primate species to endangered status, mostly through industrial habitat destruction.⁵

The cows, chickens, and pigs would be our most vocal haters on the island. Even though we've multiplied their numbers, we've done so only to dine on their flesh, usually imprisoning them in cramped quarters and torturing them before doing so. Whichever talking animal was the

⁴ From "[Endangered Apes](#)":

Every one of the world's 22 species of apes [except humans], which include great apes and gibbons, is threatened with extinction. . . . Great apes all belong to the family Hominidae, which has seven species. Six of the Hominidae species are great apes, each endangered. The only animal in the Hominidae family that isn't an endangered species is humans."

⁵ From "[Impending extinction crisis of the world's primates: Why primates matter](#)":

Alarming, ~60% of primate species are now threatened with extinction and ~75% have declining populations. This situation is the result of escalating anthropogenic pressures on primates and their habitats—mainly global and local market demands, leading to extensive habitat loss through the expansion of industrial agriculture, large-scale cattle ranching, logging, oil and gas drilling, mining, dam building, and the construction of new road networks in primate range regions. Other important drivers are increased bushmeat hunting and the illegal trade of primates as pets and primate body parts, along with emerging threats, such as climate change and anthroponotic diseases."

host of the show would say to us humans (as the current human TV host says at the end of each episode): “The tribe has spoken, it’s time to go.”

Homo sapiens have been the most dominant predators in the history of life. This has been true at every phase of humans’ technological development, though obviously, the scale of destructiveness grows as the sophistication of the weapons grows. No species is a more effective pack hunter of such a wide range of other species. Furthermore, no other species ([besides ants](#) and other social insects) wages large-scale intra-species warfare. While human warfare is not usually predation in the sense of eating the victims, it is predation in the wider sense of massacring the members of the out-group to steal their resources. Those with bigger guns are bigger predators of other humans. Imperial powers both East and West (and the big civilizations of the pre-contact Americas during their heyday) have been the biggest predators, towards humans and non-humans alike.

Benevolence towards humans at the top and middle ranges of power structures is malice towards the other humans they are oppressing. But throughout history, the males of nearly all human cultures have massacred the men, women, and children of out-groups, however small scale the massacres are compared to those of the current imperial powers; any purely pacifist culture of humans that may have existed has long since been wiped out by their more violent neighbors. And while the scale of destructiveness varies by the level of technological power, all humans have been predators to other animals either directly or—in the case of the relatively recent development of veganism—indirectly through simply participating in the ecological ravishes of human civilization.

Despite our species being the apex predators of the planet throughout every phase of our history, I admit I am still partial to helping humans. Helping (some) other humans is perhaps an

inevitable instinct for all humans who aren't clinical sociopaths. But if I help humans who live in the in-group of my nation, then I am harming the humans who are victims of that in-group. And if I help any humans at all, I'm under no illusion that this is anything other than species chauvinism. In the circle of lunch, humans' gain is most other animals' pain.

“Hell on Earth” is Redundant

The phrase “hell on Earth” is redundant; Earth is a kind of hell, despite all the good and beautiful things on it.

“The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation,” writes Richard Dawkins in *River Out of Eden*. “During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease.”

There is something hellishly horrendous about a world in which the common affair is cruel monsters—and I include our own species in this category—chasing each other around and gobbling each other up. Vegans propose to get humans—the most dominant predators in the history of life—to relinquish predation. Some philosophers of animal suffering have even proposed that humans should intervene in non-human nature, killing off predators to stop the suffering they inflict on their prey—a kind of predation to end all predation. But predation has been here long before humans have existed, and it will be here long after we go the way of 99.99% of all species that have ever existed, towards extinction. (Mother Nature, with her relentless tossing of the species she creates into the dustbin of history—easy come, easy go—is the most genocidal predator of all.)

I see no value in any of this, and thus, I see no overarching value in the process of life itself. On the cosmic scale, it is meaningless, and on the local scale, it is pervaded by horrors that cannot be redeemed by any countervailing good.

If a child on a planet free from predation or extinction were to hear a fairy tale about a world in which such predation and natural genocide was not only commonplace, but fundamental to the operation of life, she would find it the most monstrous tale. If she were to hear that such a planet of flesh-eating monsters and regular species genocides actually existed, her sleep might be permanently disturbed with nightmares.

Alas, we live on such a hellish planet, and we can't escape. Even when we are eking out some local good for ourselves and others (often to the detriment of some human or non-human out-group), the suffering of sentient creatures in the world is so pervasive that every single moment of goodness and pleasure we experience is available to us only because we are numbing ourselves to this pervasive suffering around us.

Pleasure is a paradox, because to feel it, we must cultivate our sensitivity to those things that give pleasure, while at the same time anesthetizing ourselves to the immense suffering of countless other sentient beings—at least during that time we wish to experience pleasure. Love is a similar paradox: when you love someone and open your heart to them, you focus your attention on them, necessarily taking your attention away from (and thus closing your heart to) the suffering of countless others begging for your help; open your heart to one person, close it to many others. Such moral anesthetizing towards the suffering of countless others is understandable, and inevitable—but it is not *good*, in any moral sense.

How Many Dribbles of Diarrhea Before an Entire Wedding Dress is Ruined?

The good and the bad of the world cannot simply be measured against each other on the same scale to determine if the world is, on balance, a good or a bad place. Even if the good in the process of life was greater than the bad overall—which I do not believe, but let’s suppose it was—any enjoyment of that good at all, even for an hour, requires numbing oneself to vast quantities of suffering in order simply experience the enjoyment, which is morally bad. Either experience the bad, which is bad, or numb yourself to the bad, which is bad. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.

In contrast, optimists believe that good and bad can be measured against each other on the same scale, and that by this simple weighing, there is more good than bad in the world. But this ignores that there are certain types of bad that irredeemably taint the good.

“Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?” Under utilitarian conceptions of value, in which good and bad are weighed against each other, it would be possible for the performance of *American Cousin* that the Lincolns were watching on the night of April 14, 1865 to have been so magnificent, that Mrs. Lincoln’s answer would be “it was marvelous, thank you, I’m so glad we went.” But of course, even suggesting to a bereaved spouse that she might have received some amount of pleasure from watching the play at which her husband was murdered would be an unfathomable insult.

“Other than the natural genocide of 99.99% of all species that have ever existed via extinction, and the painful deaths of most of the feeling creatures among them, with [predation as the leading cause of death among non-human animals](#), young and old alike, followed by disease and starvation... how was the play (of life on Earth)?”

Macbeth, I think, had the right answer:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Optimists exhort us to “see the glass half full.”

Well, as a pessimist, I too see the glass half full. Of piss.

Suppose I poured most of this piss out, so that it was only $1/10^{\text{th}}$ full of piss. And suppose you had a glass almost full of, let’s say, organic apple juice. And suppose we decided to mix these two glasses. Would we now have a glass of $9/10^{\text{th}}$ apple juice, and $1/10^{\text{th}}$ piss?

No, we would have a full glass of apple-flavored piss. (Still organic).⁶

If we take the piss in my analogy as a stand-in for “horribleness” (apologies to golden shower fetishists), my argument is that the process of life is rife with kinds of horrors that can’t be compared against goodness, in a simple weighing, to determine whether life is on balance a good thing or a bad thing. With certain kinds of really bad bads, only takes a little bit of it to taint a whole lot of good irredeemably.

How many dribbles of diarrhea before an entire wedding dress is ruined?

No Exit

Many people believe the pervasive horrors of a world full of violent, competitive self-reproducers can be redeemed or escaped—through religion, capitalist or socialist development, or now, through bioengineering, AI, the metaverse, the singularity, or simply packing the whole

⁶ I borrow this formulation from legendary investor Charlie Munger, who [told a crowd in April 2000](#), just as the dot-com bubble was beginning to burst: “If you mix the mathematics of the chain letter or the Ponzi scheme with some legitimate development—like the development of the Internet—you are mixing something which is wretched and irrational and has bad consequences with something that has very good consequences. But you know, if you mix raisins with turds, they’re still turds.”

shit show onto a rocket helmed by those utterly redeeming characters of Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos and starting the human circus anew on the blank slate of Mars or some asteroid.

I don't find the slightest hope in any of these purported salvations. I absolve myself of the marketing requirement to conclude my book with—as the dust jackets say—“ultimately a message of hope,” stemming from “actionable solutions and a path forward.” I bring no such best-selling message of hope, nor do I see how anything could ever redeem the parade of violent atrocities called life, nor the universe that created it.

Count me out from optimism for the species, for life itself. For the multiverse, the singularity, the simulation, or whatever else turns out to be the nature of existence. As I said at the outset, I think it would be far better if there were nothing in existence, rather than something. Because the one existence we know of has produced this floating, violent circle of lunch on Earth. And given enough time, it will likely produce many others like it elsewhere in the universe, even if we don't end up ejaculating our own species onto other planets. I certainly hope we don't end up inflicting our kind onto innocent, undisturbed rocks elsewhere.

Can I be forgiven for saying “No thanks” to this world? Not “no thanks” in the sense of suicide. While certainly understandable in some circumstances—and I have been close during several mental crises—I do not believe suicide is generally a good response to realizing the irredeemable fucked-up-ness of the process of life. One of the most tragicomic aspects of this cruel joke of life is that exiting early, by our own accord, causes incalculable pain to those who love us and those we love. Staring down the various spiders of life, ready to consume us, we are—paradoxically—trapped in this spiderweb by filaments of love.

I would be devastated if anyone ruptured these filaments of love in their own life and offed themselves on account of absorbing my pessimism. (That's why I have “joyful” in front of

it.) My message is not intended to encourage anyone towards self-exit from the spiderweb of life in which we are entangled, even as I highlight the spiders of death and suffering staring us in the face.

For most of us there is, as the title of Sartre’s play suggests, *No Exit*.

If there is no decent escape—and suicide is in most cases not decent, for those who love us—then what is to be done?

Morality Isn’t So Moral...

While I say “no thanks” to loving this shit show of the process of life itself, I don’t say “no thanks” to trying to make things better, however futile such efforts might be within the circle of lunch. Like most decent humans (if you can call me decent), I have an instinct to help (some) other humans, including (some) altruism towards humans who aren’t kin. The “moral emotions” such as sympathy and empathy towards non-kin, which lead to altruism and other moral behaviors, seem to have evolved as a result of the benefits conferred to an individual by acting pro-socially in a group.⁷

⁷ I am not saying that an individual’s moral emotions help their in-groups *at ongoing net harm* to the individual. This is the thesis of “group selection,” which is widely discredited by evolutionary theorists. Rather, I am saying that an individual’s moral emotions help the in-group in a way that offers an *ongoing net benefit* to the individual. Individual humans generally stand to gain great benefits by participating in groups, and participating in groups requires pro-social, moral emotions. For more on this distinction, see Steven Pinker’s essay “[The False Allure of Group Selection](#).”

My key point here is that there is no *overarching* group towards which you can be pro-social. There’s no such thing as “generalized” pro-sociality. There’s only pro-sociality relative to specific groups, which inevitably have competing interests in relation to *other* groups. Humans are tremendously pro-social within their in-groups, but they typically have out-groups to which they are (at least) cruelly indifferent, and in many cases outright hostile and anti-social. Even if humans were to magically overcome all their inter-group conflict and exhibit full species solidarity, our species-wide in-group is still massively *anti-social* towards our out-groups of nearly all other species of animals.

Some ecologists say we should expand our in-group to include *everything*, that is, all of life, including the ecosystems in which life occurs: “[biocentrism](#)” or “[ecocentrism](#).” This would include support for policies that preserve biodiversity and allow it to flourish, as opposed to the industrialized monoculture of human eco-

The problem is, what is pro-social for one's in-group is almost always anti-social for some out-group. What is pro-social for my in-group of "sex-positive" people, for example (group sex, psychedelic sex, psychedelic group sex, polyamory, queerness, sex work, reproductive rights, etc.) is anti-social for my out-group of fundamentalist Christians (for whom all of these are moral travesties), and vice versa.

Morality is often a powerfully-motivating justification for inter-group competition for resources and political power. If you doubt this, consider the "morality" of some out-group in the world that wants people of your background or values dead. How many more "holy wars" (or wars for "democracy" or for "nation-building" or against an "axis of evil") before we see that morality is not always a fire extinguisher on the flames of aggression, division, strife and violence, but rather. . . a gas canister?

Whenever you encounter some group acting out of "moral righteousness," get your first aid kit ready! As Austrian novelist Marie von Ebner Eschenbach [put it](#), "Little evil would be done in the world if evil never could be done in the name of good." Or as [C. S. Lewis said](#):

Of all tyrannies a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience. They may be more likely to go to Heaven yet at the same time likelier to make a Hell of earth.

devastation. As someone who finds predation horrendous, I am of two minds on this. On the one hand, human civilization, as a whole, is tremendously predatory towards life in wild ecosystems. So curtailing civilized monoculture and expanding (relatively) wild ecosystems would be a reduction in human predation. However, the *expansion* of biodiversity and wild ecosystems means vastly more predation *within* those ecosystems, among wild animals.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't. That's the motto of philosophical pessimism. You always have to pick sides; there's no way out of this. So long as life is alive, we'll never get rid of predation.

As an atheist, however—unlike C. S. Lewis, who was a devout Christian—I do not believe there is some moral agent in the sky who provides an ultimate source for human morality. Localized morality among great apes—while it feels good to us—is the playing out of an instinct that has no more ultimate moral worth in the cosmic scheme of things than when great apes eat, fuck, or shit.

The existentialists point out the absurdity of being born as creatures that crave to make a difference in a universe indifferent to our existence. I would add that a major aspect of this absurdity is that we are endowed with sensitive morality and empathy in a brutally insensitive cosmos, and a planet full of predation. It's as if we were born as fish who were greatly pained emotionally by water. "Man is a tragic animal. Not because of his smallness, but because he is too well endowed. Man has longings and spiritual demands that reality cannot fulfill. We have expectations of a just and moral world. Man requires meaning in a meaningless world," [says](#) Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe.*

We were given a sensibility to feel anguish towards (some) suffering of human and non-human others—and boy does the world give us plenty to anguish about! If I am strapped to a chair in a torture chamber, with my eyes taped open, forced to watch a monstrous scene playing out in front of me with no escape and no chance of helping, wouldn't it be better had I been born without the very morality sensibility and empathy that would cause me to find this scene so horrendous? If I could somehow escape from the chair, perhaps I could use my morality and empathy to do something about it. But then nature simply provides another torture scene, then another, among some sentient creatures elsewhere.

Hell is described as a place of eternal torment. Nature, of which we are a part, is a place of eternal torment, for some large portion of the creatures inhabiting it, at any given time.

“[T]he world is Hell, and men are on the one hand the tormented souls and on the other the devils in it,” [writes](#) Schopenhauer. As are all predatory self-replicating sentient creatures.

The Joy of Anesthesia

“Why so grim?” you ask. “Your life is pretty good. Why fixate on the doom and gloom?” Yes, my life is about as good as a human life could possibly be. I am grateful for the many blessings I have enjoyed in life, including wonderful, loving parents, a safe and stable home life, no major traumatic experiences, plenty of good food, the greatest friends I could hope for, relative health, several deep visits with the mystery of romantic love, and the capacity to pursue my creative passions. Life doesn’t get much better than that.

But my relative insulation from the predations of life does not itself redeem the process of life that contains so much predation. Suppose the entire world consisted of one torture chamber with three people in it: a torturer, his victim, and you. Fortunately (or at least, relatively fortunately), you are in the corner, facing away from the scene, with an iPad for entertainment, regular servings of fine food and wine, and earplugs as needed. (Further suppose that there’s nothing you can do to stop the torture—the torturer will kill you instantly if you try.)

Surely it is better to be the one in the corner than the one being tortured. But does that make this imagined world *good*? If this were the extent of the world, I think it would be far better that this world never come into existence, even though one of the people in the world is relatively insulated from suffering. (And if, by AI or VR or whatever, we could play God and create such a world with sentient beings, we should refrain from doing so—a topic I take on later.) The pleasure you are experiencing in the corner watching your favorite Netflix shows on iPad is far more modest than the absolute hell the person being tortured is experiencing.

Furthermore, whatever pleasure you are experiencing in that corner is obtained via a certain moral ugliness: the ugliness of ignoring and hardening your heart to the horrendous suffering behind you.

Perhaps you could introduce some moral beauty in this world by *trying* to stop the torture, even if it meant certain death (or being tortured yourself). But I don't think that such a valiant but doomed effort—worthy as it is of a movie or myth or epic poem—would redeem this world overall. Nothing that I can imagine could redeem a world in which the hell of torture is routine.

On Earth, we're all in that room—if we're not the torturer or the tortured, then at least we're the ones in the corner.

My relative insulation from the predations of life doesn't redeem the process of life, full as it is of predation. A man writing under the moniker "[Antinatalist Outreach](#)" puts it best, in his monologue entitled "[This world is hell](#)":

All you optimists out there. . . . [may say] 'You don't really have it so bad, count your blessings.' There is certainly an element of truth to this one, because compared to most people in the world, you personally may not have it so bad at the moment. You may be literate, you may live in a free country. You come from a good home, you may have a lovely job, you may have plenty to eat, lots of good friends, good health, fulfilling work, no major tragedies in your life so far. We can count many blessings in our life—indeed we have to try, to get through it. But this does not negate many of the awful truths I have said about life in this world. The fact that my life may be less painful than most is hardly cause for gratitude. Why should I be thankful that I am sitting comfortably whilst a giant red-hot poker is being rammed up your asshole? Who can suffer less because another is suffering more? [O]nly a psychopath can take comfort in this worldview.

Right this moment, in some torture chamber somewhere in the world, someone is, in fact, having a red-hot poker rammed up their asshole, or some equally gruesome torment. This hell is not happening to us directly, but even just *witnessing* such hell on Earth would itself be a (lesser) form of hell, and might be enough to scar our psyches for life. (Those who inflict these tortures

have had their empathy so debased—often intentionally and systematically by their superiors—that their souls are already numb to what they are doing.) The only reason we are able to enjoy even a modicum of goodness in the world is that any number of horrors afflicting humans and non-humans throughout the world are hidden from our view, each and every moment; sometimes they are hidden from us by others, and sometimes—by looking away, denying, rationalizing, numbing, closing our hearts, or cultivating willful ignorance—we hide them from ourselves.

Averting our gaze, numbing, rationalizing, or denying to avoid seeing or feeling the torments of hell is understandable and inevitable. But we are avoiding hell at the steep price of moral ugliness: turning our backs and hardening our hearts to the suffering of others, at least during the period of time we are hoping to step away from hell.

In 1854, English writer John Ruskin [contemplated](#) how even enjoying something as simple as a dinner party requires ignoring a tremendous amount of suffering nearby in any given city:

[O]ne of the strange characters of the human mind, necessary indeed to its peace, but infinitely destructive of its power, that we never thoroughly feel the evils which are not actually set before our eyes. If, suddenly, in the midst of the enjoyments of the palate and lightnesses of heart of a London dinner-party, the walls of the chamber were parted, and through their gap, the nearest human beings who were famishing, and in misery, were borne into the midst of the company—feasting and fancy-free—if, pale with sickness, horrible in destitution, broken by despair, body by body, they were laid upon the soft carpet, one beside the chair of every guest, would only the crumbs of the dainties [delicacies] be cast to them—would only a passing glance, a passing thought be vouchsafed [given] to them? Yet the actual facts. . . are not altered by the intervention of the house wall between the table and the sick-bed—by the few feet of ground (how few!) which are indeed all that separate the merriment from the misery.

The most noble among us devote our lives to alleviating the suffering of such famished, destitute, sickly and despairing souls—and to rectifying the social inequalities that lead to such suffering. Yet still, even the most caring, concerned activist wants to have dinner with friends and family, and such dinners would be rendered impossible if the walls keeping out the near-

infinite suffering, hungry souls around were busted open for the duration of the dinner. Even for the most caring, Ruskin suggests, such walls are necessary for a certain degree of peace of mind.

Like most people, I have learned to anesthetize myself to the suffering of others at least enough to enjoy a bit of good cheer while the tortures of life ravish around me. I enjoy sex, love, friends, dancing, music, movies, writing, reading and drugs as much as the next person. (In the realm of drugs, I'm partial to psychedelic doses of ketamine, which is—appropriately to the theme of this book—literally an anesthetic.) These make my life not only tolerable, but enjoyable—even as I find no ultimate value in any of them.

I am also sticking around because my moral instinct tells me I can help others suffer less. In his [final interview](#), Kurt Vonnegut said, “I asked my son Mark what he thought life was all about, and he said, ‘We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is.’” This thing, whatever it is, made me a living, breathing, shitting, eating, fucking, loving great ape possessed with a moral instinct, trying to make it on a rock spinning around a ball of fire in a vast sea of indifference heading towards maximum entropy.

That excitable apes with big egos stuck on a speck of a spinning rock in an amoral universe are endowed with an instinct towards grandiose morality—and a tendency to believe that their own great-ape morality is “universal” in some cosmic sense—is an absurdity of the highest order. But this absurd moral instinct causes within me the unpleasant emotions of guilt and shame if I do nothing on its account. So I indulge my moral instincts and moral emotions, to whatever extent I can, even though I know that by helping some sentient beings, I am usually picking sides and harming others in the negative-sum circle of lunch in which we find ourselves trapped.

These are three basic modes available to us while trapped alive in this cruel joke of the process of life (they are not mutually exclusive, and most of us experience some mix of all three):

- (1) Suffer ourselves
- (2) Try to bail out the ocean of others' suffering while swimming in it
- (3) Numb ourselves to the suffering of others enough to experience some pleasure.

Despite trying to live in the latter two modes as much as possible, I still exercise the one middle finger I can to the cruel, indifferent universe which brought this hellscape of the process of life into existence and stuck me inside of it: I say "no thanks" to the optimists' requirement to feel grateful for being alive.

We can grieve and cry at the tragedy of this tragicomedy, at the cruelty of this cruel joke in which we sentient beings find ourselves. But we can also laugh at the comedy of the joke. This laughter is gallows humor, to be sure—but gallows humor has served an important function throughout the ages, anesthetizing the pain of seeing others' heads lopped off, as we wait for our own to roll next.

The Benefits of Philosophical Pessimism

The strange thing is, once I said no to the optimists' incessant demand that we feel grateful to be alive, I started to feel better about being stuck in this sack of meat, bones and shit, endowed with moral anguish on a planet of pain, for however many days or years I have remaining before I expire (not of my own accord, and hopefully not too young, so as not to cause any extra suffering for those I love and who love me).

Here are three basic benefits of philosophical pessimism:

1. Philosophical Pessimism Allows Space for Grieving

It allows room to grieve the horrors of life in a way that optimism does not. And allowing oneself to grieve is healing.

Grief involves accepting that something you wish wasn't true is in fact true. You wish your loved one hadn't died. You wish your marriage hadn't crumbled. But the loved one did die. The marriage did crumble. There is no way to grieve without acceptance.

More to the point of this book: we wish the world were not awash in blood and tears. But it is.

Optimism simply does not allow for accepting the depth of the horrors of life. It is committed to the idea that these horrors can be fixed, if we just adopt X, Y, or Z solution. Sometimes optimists are at least honest about how hard X, Y or Z will be to implement, but more often than not (being optimists) they present these as easy, quick fixes, just around the corner. No problem! Just jigger the public policy a bit, or vote in a new party, or adopt a new belief system, or implement this new technology, or adjust your lifestyle a bit. We'll patch the horrors of the process of life right up!

But there is no quick fix to predation. In fact, there is no fix at all, so long as sentient life exists. Predation is baked into the process of life, from the earliest bacteria and protozoa to insects to non-human vertebrates to humans—and it likely will be if humans create (and are superseded by) silicon-based sentient AI life in a technological singularity.

Optimism dissociates from this basic, painful, depressing fact about life in an ungrounded way, and thus, leaves no room to truly grieve the horrors of life. Grief requires acceptance, and

optimism simply cannot accept these horrible truths about the nature of life. A fix for this nature is just around the corner! (“[It’s just a flesh wound!](#)“)

My version of pessimism allows for dissociation—in fact, I think it’s necessary for even a modicum of sanity in this insane world. But it says: don’t dissociate from the miserable side of life until you have felt it as much as possible and grieved.

There is also a worthwhile intermediate between the two poles of suffering and dissociation: art or spiritual practice that takes in the grief and suffering of the world and transmutes it into beauty rich with the textures of both joy and pain. I am partial to a singer-songwriter-pianist [Adey Bell](#) who does this magisterially. (I recommend her album [Silver Wheel](#) for a deep dive into the richness and beauty that can come from absorbing the wisdom of grief and then passing through the other side.)

Nonetheless, producing such rich and sensitive art, or practicing a spirituality that involves attempting to take in the suffering of sentient beings and cultivate compassion for all (as in Buddhism) still requires *some* remove and dissociation from the predations of life. If we were stuck in a room with countless television screens broadcasting each and every violent horror that is presently befalling sentient beings at this moment on Earth, above us, below us, and on every side as far as we could see, we would not be able to produce art or practice spiritual compassion; rather, we would go insane, overwhelmed with gruesomeness and reduced to a puddle on the floor, covering our eyes and ears and begging and screaming like madmen to be released from this torture chamber. “Understanding even a tiny fraction of the suffering in the world would drive anyone *insane*,” [writes](#) David Pearce. “Any real insight into the horror of Darwinian life jeopardises mental health.”

To experience any semblance of what we could call a sane and decent life—even a life that attempts to feel and engage with the horrors of life, spiritually, morally, or artistically—we must turn off most of those TV screens at any given time, just to avoid going completely mad.⁸ Yet the reality that we must do something fundamentally indecent—tuning out most of the suffering of others—in order to live a life that feels even slightly sane is one of the tragicomic paradoxes of sentient life. To my heart, this reality itself is a significant subject for grief.

We must grieve for what we wished the world would be—a world that wasn't so bloody and violent and predatory—before we can integrate this awareness and pleasantly turn the volume down on its pain to some degree via dissociation. (Even if we avoid turning the pain down totally, so as to retain some moral, aesthetic, and spiritual fullness in our humanity; I'm not

⁸ Philosopher Bernard Williams said, [in a lecture](#):

What would it be like to take on [even for a few seconds] every piece of suffering that at a given moment any creature is undergoing? It would be an ultimate horror, an unendurable nightmare. And what would the connection of that nightmare to our actions be? . . . [I]f for a moment we got anything like an adequate idea of what that is, and we really guided our actions by it, then surely we would annihilate the planet, if we could; and if other planets containing conscious creatures are similar to ours in the suffering they contain, we would annihilate them as well.

This thought experiment has been discussed in academic philosophy circles as the question of the “[benevolent world-explorer](#).” The thought experiment contemplates whether it would be moral, hypothetically, to destroy the universe, in order to end all suffering within it. The suffering inherent to the process of life is so great that some philosophers say it would be justified to end it all—putting life itself out of its misery, so to speak.

If I could snap my fingers and have all existence disappear into nothingness instantly, with no suffering caused in the moment—so that there would be, in the end, “nothing rather than something”—would I? Well, I'd have to think about it. On the one hand, the one existence we know of has given rise to sentient self-replicators competing for scarce resources—inevitably leading to widespread predation of sentient beings—a process that I believe is supremely morally horrendous. So snapping my fingers would be getting rid of this (and all) moral horrors. Failing to snap my fingers would be allowing incalculable suffering to continue indefinitely.

On the other hand, if I did snap my fingers like that, I would have been the most genocidal being in history, by orders of magnitude, ending the lives of countless beings against their consent.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't. Once again, that's the tagline of philosophical pessimism. And it's the core emotional conundrum that philosophical pessimism explores: being incarnated as a moral being, trapped in a negative-sum game of replication and natural selection that is not and cannot be moral in any overarching way.

talking about becoming the fully-dissociated, happily-medicated zombies of *Brave New World*.) Going through the process of grief *before* we adopt an appropriate measure of dissociation allows us to re-access the pain and grief when called for (such as when consoling a loved one who is grieving) rather than exerting constant energy to deny that there's a river of pain running through our veins.

2. Philosophical Pessimism Fosters “The Joy of Low Expectations”

Another way that philosophical pessimism can—paradoxically—lead to feeling better about life is what I call “the joy of low expectations.” If one sees the horrors and predations of life not as aberrations, but as the nature of life itself, then they won't come as disappointments. In other words, pessimism can serve as a prophylactic to disappointment in life. Rather than be disappointed much of the time—the ironic fate of the optimist in a world of shit—I'd rather be pleasantly surprised once in a while.

As Schopenhauer, the father of philosophical pessimism, [puts it](#), in his typically cheery manner:

As a reliable compass for orientating yourself in life nothing is more useful than to accustom yourself to regarding this world as a place of atonement, a sort of penal colony. When you have done this you will order your expectations of life according to the nature of things and no longer regard the calamities, sufferings, torments and miseries of life as something irregular and not to be expected but will find them entirely in order, well knowing that each of us is here being punished for his existence and each in his own particular way. This outlook will enable us to view the so-called imperfections of the majority of men, i.e. their moral and intellectual shortcomings . . . without surprise and certainly without indignation: for we shall always bear in mind where we are and consequently regard every man first and foremost as a being. . . whose life is an expiation for the crime of being born.

Or, as he [counsels elsewhere](#), “[T]he safest way of not being very miserable is not to expect to be very happy.”

Søren Kierkegaard, for one, saw value in this approach (using an analogy that is eerily contemporary as I write this in 2022):

Just as during epidemics one puts something in one's mouth to avoid, if possible, becoming infected by breathing the disease-laden air, so one could recommend to students of theology. . . amid this nonsensical (Christian) optimism, that they ingest a little dose of Schopenhauer's Ethics every day to protect themselves against infection from this nonsense. [Quoted in [Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography](#), p. 713]

As Bertrand Russell's biographer Alan Wood [put it](#):

In this, I think, lay the essence of Russell's practical wisdom: to the end he remained true to the faith. . . that the beginning of any worthwhile creed of living must be a recognition of harsh and unpleasant truths. He said that "the secret of happiness is to face the face that the world is horrible, horrible, horrible. . . You must feel it deeply, and not brush it aside. . . You must feel it right in here"—hitting his breast—"and then you can start being happy again." Russell went beyond Christian morality in not only stressing man's insignificance compared with the universe, but in saying that the universe has no principle of justice at work in it. I call this practical wisdom because, if you give up believing in cosmic justice, then nothing can make you have a grievance against the world.

3. Philosophical Pessimism Supports Compassion for Self and Others

Lastly, I have found that pessimism about the process of life can lead to more compassion, for both self and others.

As is often the case with all things philosophically pessimistic, Schopenhauer [was already there](#):

The conviction that the world, and therefore man too, is something which really ought not to exist is in fact calculated to instill in us indulgence towards one another: for what can be expected of beings placed in such a situation as we are? From this point of view one might indeed consider that the appropriate form of address between man and man ought to be, not monsieur, sir, but fellow sufferer, *compagnon de miseres*. However strange this may sound it corresponds to the nature of the case, makes us see other men in a true light and reminds us of what are the most necessary of all things: tolerance, patience, forbearance and charity, which each of us needs and which each of us therefore owes.

Or as Clarence Darrow, the defense attorney in the Scopes Monkey Trial, also a hard-core pessimist, [put it](#):

All that we know is that we were born on this little grain of sand we call the earth. We know that it is one of the smallest bits of matter that floats in the great shoreless sea of space, and we have every reason to believe that it is as inconsequential in every other respect.⁹ On board the same craft, sailing the same seas, are all sorts of living things, fighting each other, and us, that each may survive. Most of these specimens are living on the carcasses of the dead. . . . Nature, in all her manifestations, is at war with life, and sooner or later will doubtless have her way. No one can give a reason for any or all of the manifestations which we call life. We are like a body of shipwrecked sailors clutching to a raft and desperately engaged in holding on.

Men have built faith from hopes. They have struggled and fought in despair. They have frantically clung to life because of the will to live. The best that we can do is to be kindly and helpful toward our friends and fellow passengers who are clinging to the same speck of dirt while we are drifting side by side to our common doom.

You live in a world of absurd, exuberantly cruel, meaningless predation and violence.

You didn't ask for this world to exist, or to be born into it.

It's not your fault.

It's the process of life's fault. And the fault of existence—rather than nothingness—

which led to the process of life arising

⁹ Oxford physicist David Deutsch strongly disagrees with the view that Earth is inconsequential in the grand scheme of the cosmos. From a non-theistic perspective, he argues that Earth is potentially massively important for the cosmos, as it is the first place (known to us) to contain explanatory knowledge, capable of causing transformations to large parts of the cosmos.

He lays out his argument in his book [The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations That Change the World](#), and in shorter form in his TED talks "[After billions of years of monotony, the universe is finally waking up](#)" and "[Chemical scum that dream of distant quasars](#)."

Deutsch is the first thinker to give me pause in my pessimism. Though ultimately, I still think the transformations Deutsch believes will take over the universe, wielded by knowledge-bearing agents like humans or our AI progeny, will suck. Because they'll still be rife with violence and predation.

So have some compassion for yourself. And maybe, even, for others.

Being Wretched, Together

This book offers no solutions, no redemption, and no glimmers of hope. (It does offer gallows humor, and compassion on tap.)

Why write a book that offers no solutions, redemption, or hope?

Commiseration, I guess: as an oft-depressed person, mulling around this grim view of life, I have found the writing of other people with similar viewpoints to be strangely comforting. *At least I'm not the only one who thinks this way.* This is the book I wish I would have had when I was an angsty, existentialist teenager, or a suicidal, bipolar twenty-something and thirty-something. (I'm 45 now, and on enough medication to not be actively bipolar or suicidal.)

Thus, while I offer no hope, I may offer solace to some, who share some version of these views, yet who feel confused, ashamed, or lonely because of them.

(Commiserate: from Latin *com*, "together," and Latin *miser*, "wretched." To be wretched, together. Misery loves company.)

While we're here, we might as well love, be kind, try to make things marginally less dismal for others where we can while we're here, and (if possible) find some humor in this sick joke, before we croak.

What else is there to do?

A Planet of Parasites and the Problem With God

The first time I realized that “No, I’m not just crazy”—and that there might in fact be something deeply and irredeemably fucked up about the process of life itself (not my own life in particular, but the existence of self-replicators competing for scarce resources) came when I read a letter Charles Darwin wrote to a friend.

In 1860, Darwin was corresponding with a friend on the topic of theodicy. Theodicy is the attempt by religious believers to explain—usually not very convincingly—how a supposedly all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God could create a world in which so many fucked things happen to so many innocent beings. This question is typically referred to as the “[problem of evil](#).”

Darwin [writes](#): “With respect to the theological view of the question [of the origin of life], this is always painful to me. I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidæ* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars. Or that a cat should play with mice.”¹⁰

Upon reading this, I looked up the *Ichneumonidæ*, and—Lord have mercy—I truly wished I hadn’t.

¹⁰ I’ve made minor changes to informal and non-standard punctuation Darwin used in the letter, for ease of reading here.

It's a type of wasp that lays its eggs inside a living caterpillar. It paralyzes the caterpillar, while keeping it alive, so that the poor caterpillar remains fresh as a stock of food for its larvae. Up to three thousand wasp larvae feed on the living but immobilized caterpillar, from the inside out, until the caterpillar dies, and the well-fed baby wasps climb out.

(Should you wish to see this grisly chain of events play out, you can watch a National Geographic video of the carnage, entitled "[Body Invaders](#)." Trigger Warning: retch-worthy wretchedness.)

We don't need to travel to foreign planets to find creatures eating their way out of other creatures, from the inside. (As in the infamous, and extremely grisly "[Chestburster](#)" scene in the original *Alien* film, 1979.) We've got plenty of that right here.

How many species of vertebrates do you think there are on the planet? (Vertebrates are the animals our mind tends to conjure when we think of "animals": birds, fish, reptiles, mammals, etc.) The answer is around 65,000.

Now, it turns out there is not just one species of ichneumonidæ, but many. How many?

Somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000 different *species* of ichneumonidæ. This means that for every species of creature that we normally think of when we think of "animals"—vertebrates such as birds, fish, reptiles, and mammals—there are nearly *one or two species* of parasitoid wasp whose larvae munch their way out on through the paralyzed, living flesh of their hosts.¹¹

¹¹ [Here is a description](#) of similar behavior in the mermithid worm:

Mermithid worms are internal parasites whose infective larvae enter spiders directly or via ingested food. Once inside the spider, the tiny worm obtains nourishment from its hosts body fluids, digestive glands, gonads ('parasitic castration') and muscles. As a consequence the spider becomes progressively more debilitated, but doesn't actually die. This is because the spider's vital organs usually remain intact, even though all of the abdomen, and occasionally part of the cephalothorax, may be filled with worm coils. Eventually in a scene reminiscent of the movie "Alien", the gorged worm bursts out of the body of the

It's not a planet of our fellow vertebrate animals. Comparatively speaking, it's a planet of chest bursters.

As philosopher John Fiske [writes](#), "In every part of the animal world we find implements of torture surpassing in devilish ingenuity anything that was ever seen in the dungeons of the Inquisition."

Created by God? Or by the Devil...

The "problem of evil" is the challenge believers face in explaining how an all-loving God would create and permit such horrors. It can be thought of as an attempt to redeem what would otherwise seem irredeemable: a planet in which much of creation is subjected to the most gruesome tortures.

Tennyson [writes](#), in the famous lines from his 1850 poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.*:

Who trusted God was love indeed
 And love Creation's final law—
 Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
 With ravine, shriek'd against his creed—

debilitated spider, which finally dies after this macabre event. Before it dies, however the spider often has to perform one more task for its deadly parasite. In some mermithids, the final free-living stage of the worm is aquatic, so that it is advantageous for the worm if its emergence can take place near a water body – a pond, a creek or puddle. To increase this likelihood, such worms seem able to induce their hapless hosts to seek water, spiders sometimes actually walking into the water before the worm emerges. This behavior may result from thirst-induced activity as the worm consumes the spider's body fluids. Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that the spider's water seeking behavior helps to ensure the parasite's survival and propagation.

One cannot help but feel pity for the poor spider. But then again, as we've all observed in fascinated horror, spiders are no saints either.

Should you wish to watch the final Alien escape of this mermithid scene play out in a YouTube video (set to heavy metal music) [click here](#). Warning: it is advisable not to watch this video an hour before or after eating.

Tennyson (the speaker in the poem) wrestles with how the pervasive shrieking at the hands of the bloody claws distributed extensively throughout nature—“Dragons of the prime / That tare each other in their slime”—can be reconciled with a God of love.

Five years later, in a letter to a friend, Darwin [wrote](#): “What a book a Devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low & horridly cruel works of nature!”

The Devil is neither all-loving nor all-powerful, nor is he the creator, so his chaplain would have a grand time writing a book about just how much the supposedly all-loving and all-powerful God sinned (sin = “miss the mark,” [according to](#) Christians), if indeed God’s intention was to hit the bullseye of a loving world. God’s arrow of creation didn’t even hit the target; it flew way past the target into the lake (of fire) behind.

In turn, what kind of book would an all-loving God’s chaplain write about how the present world is an expression of God’s infinite love? It would be a book full of hypocrisies, absurdities, and “logic” tortured beyond the worst tortures of hell. Oh, wait...

“Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled,” [wrote](#) Thomas Paine in 1794, “it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the Word of God. It is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my own part, I sincerely detest it, as I detest everything that is cruel.”¹²

¹² Kierkegaard writes: “A View of Christianity which, so far as I know, has never been proposed before, is that Christianity is the invention of Satan, calculated to make human beings unhappy with the assistance of the imagination. Just as the worm and the bird seek out the finest fruit, Satan has taken aim at superior people, those with a great deal of imagination and feeling, in order to lure them astray by means of the imagination, getting them to make themselves unhappy, and if possible, the others as well. This view at least deserves a hearing.” (Quoted in [Soren Kierkegaard: A Biography.](#))

Paine was speaking specifically of the Bible, not nature itself. He was a deist, which meant he still believed in a distant creator god who set the world in motion, but not the benevolent, personal god of revealed religion. In turn, in his 1874 essay "[On Nature](#)," John Stuart Mill—a staunch atheist—suggested that, if you had to pick between two possibilities, it seems nature was more likely the work of a demon than a benevolent god:

If there are any marks at all of special design in creation, one of the things most evidently designed is that a large proportion of all animals should pass their existence in tormenting and devouring other animals. They have been lavishly fitted out with the instruments necessary for that purpose; their strongest instincts impel them to it and many of them seem to have been constructed incapable of supporting themselves by any other food. If a tenth part of the pains which have been expended in finding benevolent adaptations in all nature had been employed in collecting evidence to blacken the character of the Creator, what scope for comment would not have been found in the entire existence of the lower animals, divided, with scarcely an exception, into devourers and devoured, and a prey to a thousand ills from which they are denied the faculties necessary for protecting themselves. If we are not obliged to believe the animal creation to be the work of a demon, it is because we need not suppose it to have been made by a Being of infinite power.

Of course, Arthur Schopenhauer has something to say on the subject as well. In 1831, he fled from Berlin to Frankfurt due to a local outbreak in the [second global cholera pandemic](#), which took many hundreds of thousands of lives around the world. That year, he kept a manuscript notebook, which he titled the [Cholera Book](#) “because it was written on the run from cholera.” The mass misery and death of a global pandemic could not have been far from his mind when he wrote, in this notebook: “[T]his world could not be the work of an all-good being, but rather that of a devil who had summoned into existence creatures, in order to gloat over the sight

of their agony.” Elsewhere, he added: “If God made the world, I would not be that God, for the misery of the world would break my heart.”¹³

Clarence Darrow, the defense attorney in the Scopes Monkey Trial, entertained similar ideas in his [1932 autobiography](#):

Probably few people of any sense or decent feeling would damn a race because an ancestor ate an apple when he was told that he should not. Such a God would be a devil, and could be worshipped only for fear. Neither could anything but a demon put a man to death for gathering sticks on Sunday, or drown all living things, or rain fire and brimstone on a city, or create a hell in which to torture human beings for all eternity. If I were afraid of the wrath of God, I should fear his vengeance more for believing that he is such a monster than I would because I insisted on thinking that he must have some of the commonplace virtues of men, and therefore could not have committed the deeds that his disciples charged him with.

...

Life cannot be reconciled with the idea that back of the universe is a Supreme Being, all merciful and kind, and that he takes any account of the human beings and other forms of life that exist upon the earth. Whichever way man may look upon the earth, he is oppressed with the suffering incident to life. It would almost seem as though the earth had been created with malignity and hatred.¹⁴

¹³ *Cholera Book* (Vol. 4, p. 119). “If God made the world”: *Manuscript Remains*, Vol. 3, cited in [Historical Dictionary of Schopenhauer's Philosophy](#), p. 242.

¹⁴ Darrow's passage goes on:

If we look at what we are pleased to call the lower animals, we behold a universal carnage. We speak of the seemingly peaceful woods, but we need only look beneath the surface to be horrified by the misery of that underworld. Hidden in the grass and watching for its prey is the crawling snake which swiftly darts upon the toad or mouse and gradually swallows it alive; the hapless animal is crushed by the jaws and covered with slime, to be slowly digested in furnishing a meal. The snake knows nothing about sin or pain inflicted upon another; he automatically grabs insects and mice and frogs to preserve his life. The spider carefully weaves his web to catch the unwary fly, winds him into the fatal net until paralyzed and helpless, then drinks his blood and leaves him an empty shell. The hawk swoops down and snatches a chicken and carries it to its nest to feed its young. The wolf pounces on the lamb and tears it to shreds. The cat watches at the hole of the mouse until the mouse cautiously comes out, then with seeming fiendish glee he plays with it until tired of the game, then crunches it to death in his jaws. The beasts of the jungle roam by day and night to find their prey; the lion is endowed with strength of limb and fang to destroy and devour almost any animal that it can surprise or overtake. There is no place in the woods or air or sea where all life is not a carnage of death in terror and agony. Each animal is a hunter, and in turn is hunted, by day and night. No landscape is so beautiful or day so balmy but the cry of suffering and sacrifice rends the air. When night settles down over the earth the slaughter is not abated. Some creatures see best at night, and the outcry of

the dying and terrified is always on the wind. Almost all animals meet death by violence and through the most agonizing pain. With the whole animal creation there is nothing like a peaceful death. . . .

Man furnishes no exception to the rule. He seems to add the treachery and deceit that the other animals in the main do not practice, to all the other cruelties that move his life. Man has made himself master of the animal world and he uses his power to serve only his own ends. Man, at least, kills helpless animals for the pleasure of killing, alone. He breeds horses and dogs, and fixes a gala day which is a society occasion when both men and women dress for the event, whereupon they turn loose a puny fox and set on its trail a pack of hounds trained for the chase. The noble men and women, riding at a mad pace, follow over hill and dale until, after hours of effort, the exhausted fox is unable longer to escape them, and with great glee they see it torn to pieces by the hounds.

Even intellectual men and presidents go to Africa for the purpose of hunting big game. They cannot run so fast as the deer and the giraffe, and they are no match for the lion, the panther, and the tiger. But they have invented a means where-by they can stand at a safe distance and kill them without giving them a chance of defense or escape. Man cares nothing for the pain of any animal when his pleasure is involved. He plans and spreads nets for the unwary creatures passing through the fields. He sets traps in whose sharp teeth the unsuspecting fur-bearing kinds are caught; and after prolonged sufferings they die, and he takes the pelts off the wild animals' carcasses and uses them to cover his own. He carefully raises herds of cattle, and at the allotted time takes the calf from its mother, cuts its throat for veal, and drinks the mother's milk. He builds great slaughter-houses in which to kill animals by the million, that he may use them for food. He raises sheep that he shears in the spring to weave into cloth to cover himself, and then, according to his desires, kills them and eats their flesh. He makes a shambles of the earth in order to satisfy his appetites and give him joy. . . . Man is only a part of nature, and his conduct is not substantially different from that of all animal life. . . .

Nature knows nothing about right and wrong, good and evil, pleasure and pain; she simply acts. She creates a beautiful woman, and places a cancer on her cheek. She may create an idealist, and kill him with a germ. She creates a fine mind, and then burdens it with a deformed body. And she will create a fine body, apparently for no use whatever. She may destroy the most wonderful life when its work has just commenced. She may scatter tubercular germs broadcast throughout the world. She seemingly works with no method, plan or purpose. She knows no mercy nor goodness. Nothing is so cruel and abandoned as Nature. To call her tender or charitable is a travesty upon words and a stultification of intellect. No one can suggest these obvious facts without being told that he is not competent to judge Nature and the God behind Nature. If we must not judge God as evil, then we cannot judge God as good. In all the other affairs of life, man never hesitates to classify and judge, but when it comes to passing on life, and the responsibility of life, he is told that it must be good, although the opinion beggars reason and intelligence and is a denial of both.

Emotionally, I shall no doubt act as others do to the last moment of my existence. With my last breath I shall probably try to draw another, but, intellectually, I am satisfied that life is a serious burden, which no thinking, humane person would wantonly inflict on some one else. The strange part of the professional optimist's creed lies in his assertion that if there is no future life then this experience is a martyrdom and a hideous sham.

Elsewhere in his autobiography, Darrow writes:

But Nature knows nothing about rights in the sense of human conception. Nothing is so cruel, so wanton, so unfeeling as Nature; she moves with the weight of a glacier carrying everything before her. In the eyes of Nature, neither man nor any of the other animals mean anything whatever. The rock-ribbed mountains, the tempestuous sea, the scorching desert, the myriad weeds and insects and wild beasts that infest the earth, and the noblest man, are all one. Each and all are helpless against the cruelty and immutability of the

In Mark Twain's *Letters from the Earth* (published posthumously in 1939), Satan sends a series of reports from Earth to the archangels Michael and Gabriel. In Letter VI, Satan marshals the evidence to call God a "malevolent lunatic":

[God] has almost bankrupted his native ingenuities in inventing pains and miseries and humiliations and heartbreaks wherewith to embitter the brief lives of Adam's descendants. Think of the diseases he has contrived for them! They are multitudinous; no book can name them all. And each one is a trap, set for an innocent victim. . . .

For each one of these thousands of [bodily] mechanisms the Creator has planned an enemy, whose office is to harass it, pester it, persecute it, damage it, afflict it with pains, and miseries, and ultimate destruction. Not one has been overlooked.

From cradle to grave these enemies are always at work; they know no rest, night or day. They are an army: an organized army; a besieging army; an assaulting army; an army that is alert, watchful, eager, merciless; an army that never relents, never grants a truce.

It moves by squad, by company, by battalion, by regiment, by brigade, by division, by army corps; upon occasion it masses its parts and moves upon mankind with its whole strength. It is the Creator's Grand Army, and he is the Commander-in-Chief. Along its battlefield its grisly banners wave their legends in the face of the sun: Disaster, Disease, and the rest.

Disease! That is the main force, the diligent force, the devastating force! It attacks the infant the moment it is born; it furnishes it one malady after another: croup, measles, mumps, bowel troubles, teething pains, scarlet fever, and other childhood specialties. It chases the child into youth and furnishes it some specialties for that time of life. It chases the youth into maturity, maturity into age, age into the grave.

With these facts before you will you now try to guess man's chiefest pet name for this ferocious Commander-in-Chief? I will save you the trouble—but you must not laugh. It is Our Father in Heaven! . . .

The Christian begins with this straight proposition, this definite proposition, this inflexible and uncompromising proposition: *God is all-knowing, and all-powerful.*

resistless processes of Nature.

This being the case, nothing can happen without his knowing beforehand that it is going to happen; nothing happens without his permission; nothing can happen that he chooses to prevent.

That is definite enough, isn't it? It makes the Creator distinctly responsible for everything that happens, doesn't it?

Then, having thus made the Creator responsible for all those pains and diseases and miseries above enumerated, and which he could have prevented, the gifted Christian blandly calls him Our Father!

It is as I tell you. He equips the Creator with every trait that goes to the making of a fiend, and then arrives at the conclusion that a fiend and a father are the same thing! Yet he would deny that a malevolent lunatic and a Sunday school superintendent are essentially the same.

Richard Dawkins writes, in my second-favorite quote in the world (my first being the Schopenhauer quote at the beginning of the previous essay), in his book [*The God Delusion*](#): “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”¹⁵

In the poem “[The City of Dreadful Night](#)” (1874) by Scottish poet James B.V. Thomson (whose biographer called him the “Laureate of Pessimism”) the speaker quotes an stranger overheard saying:

¹⁵ I would add to Dawkins’s quote that the God of the New Testament, including in his incarnation as Jesus, is no better. He is supposedly the same God, but not only does he *not* atone for any of his genocide or other evils in the Old Testament in any way, but in his new incarnation as Jesus, he commits genocide anew, towards all infidels, in Revelation. Like father, like son.

In a wonderful book entitled [*God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*](#), Dan Barker—a former ordained minister turned atheist—fleshes out the case for all of these charges against the character of God, consisting mostly of copious disturbing quotes from the Old Testament. As the quip among atheists goes: when Christians want to be reaffirmed in their faith, they read the Bible; when atheists want to be reaffirmed in their atheism, they too read the Bible.

"Who is most wretched in this dolorous place?

I think myself; yet I would rather be

My miserable self than He, than He

Who formed such creatures to His own disgrace.

"The vilest thing must be less vile than Thou

From whom it had its being, God and Lord!

Creator of all woe and sin! abhorred

Malignant and implacable! I vow

"That not for all Thy power furled and unfurled,

For all the temples to Thy glory built,

Would I assume the ignominious guilt

Of having made such men in such a world."

"As if a Being, God or Fiend, could reign,

At once so wicked, foolish and insane,

As to produce men when He might refrain!¹⁶

¹⁶ The poem continues:

"The world rolls round for ever like a mill;

It grinds out death and life and good and ill;

It has no purpose, heart or mind or will.

Or as my father, who at age 91 has devoted the last half-century to understanding and counteracting the violent predations of imperial militaries headed by great apes armed with omniscient nuclear weapons, particularly the imperial power of his own country, puts it, reflecting on the mad mass violence he has studied and witnessed:

“I’m an atheist, with doubts. Sometimes I believe there *might* be a God, but that he’s just like the God of the Old Testament—a total asshole.”

Is There Any Meaning to This Shit Show?

Optimists generally feel a strong need to believe in a *benevolent universe*. Hey, I get it. The idea that we live in a universe that is pitiless and meaningless in its indifference, full of things out to get us (and out to get every living thing) is a bitter pill to swallow. It would be so much nicer to believe that we live in a benevolent universe, looking out for us and helping us

"While air of Space and Time's full river flow
The mill must blindly whirl unresting so:
It may be wearing out, but who can know?"

"Man might know one thing were his sight less dim;
That it whirls not to suit his petty whim,
That it is quite indifferent to him.

"Nay, does it treat him harshly as he saith?
It grinds him some slow years of bitter breath,
Then grinds him back into eternal death."

along. But how can one believe in a benevolent universe that contains such extreme, pervasive, gratuitous violence, predation, and suffering?

Optimists have many methods by which they can retain their belief—which seems to be flatly contradicted by the profusion of seemingly pointless suffering around the world—in a benevolent universe:

1. Ignore/deny how much bad there is in the world. [Always Look on the Bright Side of Life!](#)

2. Yes, there's a lot of bad in the world, but there's *more* good. And it's only getting better. Progress is being made! (Often unstated here is a belief that this balancing towards the good is not just contingent and accidental in the universe, but *inherent*—there's something about the universe that *tends* towards goodness and progress, as part of an overall-positive evolutionary process with ever-brighter prospects.)¹⁷

3. Yes, there's a lot of bad in the world, but there's a good *reason* for it. (God created it for a reason. Or, among new agers, “the universe is trying to teach us something,” or “the universe is a reflection of ourselves,” or “it's all part of the process the universe has in store for us,” etc.)[†]

I touched upon (1) in the previous essay. Here, I'll be focusing on (2) and (3).

The optimist is charged with looking upon this blood-strewn field of composting carcasses called life, whose horrors are so aptly described in the quotations above, and making a convincing case that it can be redeemed by a greater good.

¹⁷ I got into many good-natured debates on this topic with my late aunt, [Barbara Marx Hubbard](#), who devoted her life to sharing a version of this optimistic world view from her spiritual perspective, in her lectures and teaching, and in her books such as [Conscious Evolution](#). I don't think there's ever been a more polarized debate match-up between extreme optimism and extreme pessimism as in the dinner-table debates between my aunt and me. Fortunately, she was a joyful optimist, and I am a joyful pessimist; we loved each other across our vast philosophical divide.

If it cannot be redeemed by a greater good, then it seems fair to ask—as I did at the outset of this book: why is it *good* that something so horrendous came into existence? It seems to me that, given a choice between nothing existing, and the existence of a planet chock full of the most gruesome tortures, without any purpose or meaning, the former—nothingness—would be far preferable to the latter. (Even though, by definition, there would be nothing to judge this nothingness superior.)¹⁸

¹⁸ In his book [*The End of the World: The Science and Ethics of Human Extinction*](#), philosopher John Leslie includes in his book several lists of “Threats to the Survival of the Human Race.” He includes in one of these lists, amazingly, “Schopenhauerian pessimism” (!). Leslie writes:

In attacking religion, many writers put such emphasis on the Problem of Evil—the existence of poisonous snakes, earthquakes, plagues, cancer, Nazi death camps, and so on—that they in effect agree with Schopenhauer, who wrote that it would have been better if our planet had remained like the moon, a lifeless mass. It is then only a short step to thinking that we ought to make it lifeless.

‘Ol Schopenhauer, I’m sure, would be quite surprised to hear that purposefully annihilating the world is “only a short step” from his philosophy. It is, on the contrary, a *long* step from his philosophy (and mine), and Leslie’s comment strikes me as deeply unfair to Schopenhauer.

As an analogy, I have chosen to get a vasectomy, in order to refrain from bringing sentient life into existence; bringing such life into existence, I believe, necessarily entails inflicting the inevitable sufferings of life on a being that didn’t ask for it or consent to it. (I am, in other words, an anti-natalist.) It is not a short step, but a very long one, to go from wanting to refrain from *creating* beings that will undergo the miseries of life, to suggesting that *currently-existing* beings should, without their consent, be put out of their misery. The latter position has multiple problems with it, the main one being that it is *murder*—and no anti-natalists that I know of advocate murder.

The question will become more pressing if/when it becomes possible to create computer simulations that include simulated sentience. As I point it later in this chapter, it is possible to imagine such worlds that *should not* come into existence. It’s not hard to imagine such a world—created, let’s say, by a bored, sadistic teenager at his bedroom computer—that is so awful that it *should* be “put out of its misery” by pressing the “Delete” button on that world. Insofar as the sentient beings in these simulated worlds are conscious enough that killing them can be considered “murder,” then this would be the mass murder of an entire world full of beings. I can’t really imagine what it would be like to be in this situation (aware of the suffering of sentient simulations I or someone else like me created, and wondering if it would be best to put them out of their misery). So it’s hard for me to say whether I would advocate pushing the “Delete” button on such a simulated sentient hellscape.

In *this* world, here and now, there are a few anti-natalists who have entertained fantasies that humans will universally adopt anti-natalist views, and move towards voluntarily extinguishing themselves, all while devising a technological system (nuclear or otherwise) that the remaining humans could press the button on, taking themselves out, and all life with them. While not genocidal towards humans (in this fantasy, humans have let themselves die off by not reproducing, and the last ones voluntarily kill themselves) this fantasy is nonetheless genocidal towards all other species.

Even as it would be a “final solution” to the problems I describe in this book, I cannot allow myself to take this philosophical step and entertain this fantasy. Putting aside the thought experiment discussed above—and discussed later in this chapter—of a purely hellish simulated universe created by a sadistic teenager on a computer: in the here

We cannot change that it *did* come into existence, says the pessimist (aka me), but we can at least spare ourselves the philosophical humiliation of trying to put lipstick on a field of dead, decomposing, shit-strewn pigs. And, instead of trying to find good cheer in all of this through denial and pollyannaism, the tools of the optimist, we can find good cheer (which I do believe is worthwhile) through compassion and gallows humor—far richer and more honest tools towards joy, in my experience, than denial and pollyannaism.

This conclusion of the negative value of a planet rife with all manner of meaningless bloody torture is a stiff drink to swallow. (I have accustomed myself to this drink over three decades of unrelenting existential crisis, since I was fifteen, and have even come to find its dark texture relatively soothing. Though I admit, it's an acquired taste.)

and now, I can't see how becoming the most predatory beings in history is a good response to predation. Fantasies of "the war to end all wars" have not typically worked out well. I'm a pessimist, and my pessimism includes (and in part stems from) a sense of the overall futility of trying to solve the problem of predation among self-reproducing sentient entities competing for scarce resources; I simply don't see a good overall solution. Nuking our planet is surely not one of them.

I would not be happy if, for example, members of a doomsday cult got their fingers on the trigger American nuclear arsenal.

Shit—too late!

In 1983, Ronald Reagan said, to the executive director of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee: "You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if—if we're the generation that's going to see that come about . . . Those prophecies . . . certainly describe the times we're going through."

Statements such as these caused so much alarm that—the Washington Post [reported](#)—in 1984,

more than 100 religious leaders—Roman Catholic, evangelical and mainstream Protestant and Jewish—. . . called on presidential candidates to repudiate the increasingly popular theory that a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, leading to the Day of Judgment, is foretold in the Bible. The religious leaders said they fear the political implications of the theory that is prevalent among much of the Christian right wing. If carried to its logical conclusion, arms negotiations would be pointless because nuclear war with the Soviet Union is seen as inevitable.

Because most people find this drink—recognizing the ultimate pointlessness of a planet of torture—a bit too stiff, they understandably try to sweeten it up with saccharine notions that try to find a positive point to nature’s blood-tipped pincer points.

Typically, optimists of various stripes have attempted to argue for the overall *positivity* of the world via two main avenues, which involve what we might call “quantity of good” and the “quality of good.” These are generally associated with approaches (2) and (3) above, respectively.

Continuing with our stiff drink analogy, the “quantity of good” approach—a form of utilitarianism—involves the idea that there is currently enough sweetness in the world (or there will be given current rates of progress) that the sweetness can *drown out* the bitter. In this model, there’s nothing good about the bitter, but enough sweetness can overpower it, making it irrelevant or even unnoticeable.

In the the previous essay, I outlined my objection to this approach to optimism, and will fill it out more in later chapters. But in short, I believe that simply comparing quantities is not adequate because, even if the good outweighs the bad, certain kinds of bad *taint* the good irredeemably. As I analogized in the Introduction: if you had a glass of apple juice, and you were forced to hold it in front of a drunk guy named Tony who needed to relieve himself after a long night at the bar, how many squirts from Tony’s cock into your cup before you judged that, for all intents and purposes, you no longer had a cup of apple juice, but rather, a cup of Tony’s piss? Perhaps just a few drops?

How many Great Novels, how many Shakespeare plays, how many Mozart symphonies, how many works of charity, how many physics theories about the nature of reality, would it take to balance out the transatlantic slave trade, the European and American genocide of indigenous

peoples, Stalin's Great Terror, the Holocaust, nuclear weapons, and anthropogenic mass extinctions, and make this mixture seem, in balance, good overall? The mere question is repugnant, and this is why utilitarian approaches to optimism in the face of evil fail.¹⁹

The second optimistic response to all the evil in the world has to do not just with the quantity of good in the world—as utilitarians focus on—but also with its *quality*. Certain types of good, this school of thinking goes, inherently require some evil in the world to constitute them. Continuing the flavor analogy (and this is my own analogy, but I think it describes the viewpoint accurately), certain bitter flavors in a stew would be intolerable on their own, but are actually *necessary* for the overall quality of the stew.

The two main types of good which are thought to require some evil to make them valuable are the good of *free will*, which by definition requires the capacity to commit evil, and the good of *spiritual growth*, which by definition involves a transformation from a lesser state of development to a higher one.

Theo-Idiocy

Invoking these two goods, free will and spiritual growth, allows optimists to cling to their belief in the overall benevolence of the universe, in the face of what philosopher Jonathan Erhardt calls the “[widespread horrendous suffering](#)” of the world. These two goods correspond to the two major theodicies religious thinkers put forward to defend belief in an all-loving God in the face of the problem of evil. They are known as the “[free will defense](#)” and the “[soul-making](#)”

¹⁹ The idea that certain kinds of bad cannot be outweighed by *any* amount of good is discussed within academic philosophy as the concept of “[value lexicality](#).”

[defense](#).” The word defense—as in a legal defense against charges—is appropriate, as [Etymonline says](#) that the word “theodicy” stems from a sense of legalistic defense against charges of God’s injustice:

“‘[V]indication of divine justice,’ 1771, from French *théodicée*, title of a 1710 work by Leibniz to prove the justice of God in a world with much moral and physical evil, from Greek *theos* ‘god’. . . + *dike* ‘custom, usage; justice, right; court case.’”

According to the free will defense, God granted humans free will, so that their faith in God and obeying of his laws would be meaningful, since they also have the option to disbelieve.²⁰ Free will also makes the good in humanity that much better, the argument goes, because it was freely chosen, not simply brute instinct. The other side of the coin, however, is that free will entails the freedom to sin and commit evil, thereby facing God’s wrath.

The “[soul-making defense](#),” in turn, holds that when people face suffering, it builds character, teaches valuable lessons, and leads to moral growth in a way that would not have been possible without the evil.

Theodicy is optimistic philosophy, in that it tries to see the glass of the world as more than half full. Theologians practicing theodicy are like medieval alchemists attempting to transmute lead into gold—though in this case, they are trying to transmute toxic sewage into gold.[‡] Understandably, they are desperate to find some meaning in the madness of life. This is an impulse we all have: “The overwhelming suffering of the world can’t be *entirely* pointless. That

²⁰ Why then does God, in the Bible and through his followers, exert so much effort coercing people into belief via threats of punishment in this world and in the afterlife? I thought the whole point of free will, from a theological perspective, was to make faith in God a chosen act—not a compelled act—and therefore more meaningful? I haven’t heard a believer try to reconcile God’s desire to be assured that faith in him is freely chosen, with his (and his followers’) violent coercion of the faithless towards faith? As one Twitter commentator [puts it](#), “‘Worship me or burn in hell’- does that sound like free will to you?”

would be just *too* depressing. There must be *some* redeeming quality or meaning to all this suffering and evil.” Any satisfying answer to these longings would cause for optimism. ’

If any religious thinker in history has been up to the task of bestowing meaning on the slavery, racism, war and genocide of the world by invoking God’s divine love and justice, it would be Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., among the greatest moral minds and hearts that has ever graced our human kind. As it happens, Dr. King attempted theodicy publicly at least twice that we know of in the record, once in a sermon entitled “[How to Believe in a Good God in the Midst of Glaring Evil](#),” and once in a paper entitled “[Religion’s Answer to the Problem of Evil](#).”

In his paper, Dr. King employs versions of both the free will defense and the soul-making defense:

In a world where good is to be achieved, there must be freedom. This is most obvious in the case of man. In reality the whole idea of morality and religion presupposes the existence of freedom. Thomas Huxley once said that “if some great power would agree to make me think always what is true and do what is right on condition of being turned into a sort of clock, I should instantly close with the bargain. The only freedom I care about is the freedom to do right; the freedom to do wrong I am ready to part with.” But freedom to do only what is right is not freedom; it is mechanical coercion. A being incapable of wrong is also incapable of right; he is not a human being at all but an automatic machine. . . .

It is from the misuse of this freedom that the dark shadow of moral evil appears. . . . Yet if God’s purpose is to be achieved freedom must be maintained. Just as a child cannot learn to walk without the possibility of falling, man cannot learn the ways of God without the possibility of going wrong. Dr. Whale has put this whole idea in words well worth our quoting. He says, “freedom—though it involves grievous error and pain—is the very condition of our being human. There can be no other way for men and women called of God to vindicate the moral order. We cannot have it both ways. It is only in a world where the horror of war, slavery, and prostitution can happen, that the learning of self-sacrifice, fellowship, and chivalry will happen. Indeed if God were to suppress the possibility of moral evil, He would be doing evil, for He would be preferring the worse to the better.”

It’s disorienting and disconcerting to have say this about a piece of writing by Dr. King—a moral and intellectual giant among mortals—but Dr. King’s reasoning in this instance is not only absurd, but grotesque. There is unfortunately no other way to put it.

Dr. King's free will theodicy displays two major glaring flaws common to all free will theodicies:

First, it trivializes, justifies, and uncritically accepts inconceivably monumental amounts of collateral damage. The freedom that God supposedly granted to enslavers to commit evil, for example, didn't just mean the enslavers "misused" their freedom or made a "grievous error" in a way only relevant to them (the way one might "misuse" alcohol or make a "grievous error" that offended someone). Rather, enslavers "misused" their freedom by raining terror, torture, and murder on innocent victims, including children, something Dr. King was aware of more than most.

Where is the justice, where is the love, where is the benevolence in a God who would allow one group's free will at the expense of another group's slavery and massacre? Also, how widely were enslaved people able to express the range of their God-given free will while enslaved? Why did God prioritize the free will of the enslavers over the free will of the enslaved? Dr. King is essentially saying that enslaved people were sacrificial lambs and collateral damage for some higher moral purpose of God. This dynamic is not and cannot be the source of moral goodness in the world.

The second glaring flaw in free will theodicy in general—including Dr. King's attempt—is what I call the "Firefighting Arsonist Problem." Basically, it's the problem of God *creating* moral evil in order to create moral goodness in response to that evil.

Suppose a mother whose baby daughter was just burned to death in a fire committed by an arsonist asked God, "Why did you allow people to become arsonists? What overarching good was achieved by that? And how would that have justified the burning to death of my baby?" And suppose God answered:

“Well, I’m sorry about your loss ma’am, and indeed I could have predestined that humans would never commit arson. However, this would mean that humans’ free will (which entails the freedom to commit any kind of action, including, unfortunately, arson) would have been curtailed. Curtailing that freedom would make humans mechanically automatons, not free agents. And *that* would mean that humans’ abstention from arson, and their act of putting out fires, while good, would not be *morally* good. (Because the action of mechanically-determined automatons is neither good nor bad morally, it just is.) True *moral* goodness requires that humans have free will, which by definition includes the choice to commit evil acts like arson. The evil act of arson that killed your baby, while certainly regrettable, was an inevitable byproduct of giving humans the opportunity to *freely choose* good over evil. Giving humans this choice means that when humans choose to commit good acts, it’s not just good but *morally* good (because freely chosen). Ultimately, the firefighters who risked their lives to put out the fire started by the arsonist—even though they were not successful in saving your child’s life—were showing *morally good* heroism, and that makes the loss of your daughter’s life all worthwhile.”²¹

Do you think the mother, holding the charred remains of her baby, would find this answer satisfying? This is essentially the answer Dr. King is asking us to accept. In my example, God is creating the possibility and likelihood of arson (which inflicts very tangible collateral damage on

²¹ God could also add a soul-making theodicy here: “Building character requires overcoming challenges. How could the mother grow into a better person without having face this fire? Of course it is unfortunate that the baby had to burn in the fire, but hell, without fires people couldn’t grow! Also, I’m happy to report that the arsonist has given up his arsonist ways, has atoned for his sins, begged mercy, and I’ve forgiven him. Now he’s even redeemed himself by becoming a firefighter. And he’s a *morally good* firefighter at that, because—having the capacity to commit evil—now he’s freely choosing the good. I do have to remind him regularly, however, that if he doesn’t praise and worship me daily for forgiving him for arson—the very arson I gave him the capacity to commit, via giving him free will—then I will have to toss him into my own fire that I created, where I will keep him alive after death so he can burn eternally, for the sin of not having praised and worshipped me enough during the blip of time he was alive before death. That’s the deal.”

innocent victims), so that the firefighters' response to the arson fulfills some abstract property called "moral goodness," which could not exist without the possibility of the moral evil that is arson. Personally, I'm with Thomas Huxley on this point (quoted negatively in Dr. King's paper). I'd prefer that we have no arson, no slavery, no war, no massacre, no torture, no rape, no genocide, or any other human-caused evil, and therefore no need for anyone to respond to these evils, rather than the widespread existence of all these human-caused evils just so that humans can respond to them in (usually ineffective) ways that are "morally good."

Furthermore, free will theodicy asks us to *praise* and *worship* God for creating moral goodness in the universe, when most of the moral goodness he created in humans involves responding to the evil he also allowed to come into being via humans' free will. As described by Dr. King and other free will theodicians, God is like a firefighter arsonist, who starts fires surreptitiously so he can then get moral credit for putting them out.

(By the way, did you know that about [100 firefighters a year](#) are arrested in America for causing fires? In a phenomenon called "[hero syndrome](#)," or "[vanity crime](#)," many of them do it for the glory and recognition of having saved the lives that they themselves put in danger. However, we usually put these delusional, dangerous and vain madmen in jail, rather than founding religions around them and worshiping them, based on their threats to burn us alive eternally us if we don't worship them for their vanity saviorism.)²²

²² From a 2014 [law enforcement report](#) on the Hero Syndrome:

The term "Hero Syndrome" began receiving notoriety in the early 1980's when Los Angeles police officer Jimmy Wade Pearson planted a fake bomb on the Turkish Olympic team's bus near the Los Angeles airport, during the summer Olympics. Pearson then "miraculously" was the officer who not only located the explosive device, but ripped the wires from it and ran with the device across the airport tarmac and deposited it in a safe location. As Officer Pearson's story began to unravel, he was subsequently arrested and charged with multiple felonies after confessing to creating the entire event as a hoax to become the "hero." At Pearson's sentencing in July 1985, eleven months after the event, Pearson's motive was announced; he wanted a transfer. Pearson stated he wanted transferred out of the metro division and knew it

Free will theodicians say that, without freedom there could be no moral good (because compelled action is not morally good). But a mechanism that requires the likelihood and eventuality that millions of innocent people, including young children, will be tortured, enslaved and massacred, in order to achieve “moral good,” is not and cannot be morally good. Does that really need to be said? Rather, such a divine mechanism would be reprehensible and should be resisted. If God existed, he would be worthy of exactly the kind of mass protest, civil disobedience, and principled noncompliance against evil, to which Dr. King devoted his life.[§]

Dr. King’s soul-making theodicy in his paper is, unfortunately, even more head-spinning. Comparing slavery to the inevitable stumbles of children learning to walk? Really? What exactly did enslavers learn via enslaving millions of people? Did they learn, as Dr. King suggests, “self-sacrifice, fellowship, and chivalry”? As Dr. King knew more than almost anyone in modern times, after enslavers were forced to stop, they did not atone, make amends, or grow morally in any way (not that such moral growth on the part of enslavers could have justified the God’s permission of slavery, as Dr. King astonishingly suggests.) Rather, they instead instituted Jim Crow, the very system that Dr. King spent his life fighting against.

And was slavery really necessary for enslaved people to “learn” something important or grow morally in some way? This is the repellent type of reasoning common to all soul-making theodicies. Couldn’t God, the all-powerful and all-loving creator of the universe, have come up with a wee-bit more compassionate way for them to learn? And what about the enslaved people,

would not happen unless he was a “hero” officer and the department recognized his “value.” (L.A. Times, 7/16/85) In all actuality though, the “Hero Syndrome” goes back as far as human record. For as long as mankind has stood up armies and clashed upon battlefields, so have there been instances where individuals have created false realities to further their personal “hero” story.

including children, who were tortured to death in the process? What character is built in people who are murdered?

I kept rereading Dr. King's essay, and [steel-manning](#) it in my mind (reconstructing it as strongly as possible, so as to avoid straw-manning), to make sure I wasn't missing something. But no, I wasn't; on this theological point, the emperor unfortunately wears no clothes. Through his approving quotation at the end of the passage, Dr. King is suggesting that if God prevented slavery and war—and it seems to me like “preventing slavery and war” is a pretty low bar for an all-powerful God aiming to spread love—then “He would be doing evil, for He would be preferring the worse to the better.” Um, no, sorry. Try again.

The unsolvability of the problem of evil for religious believers can be shown by just how thoroughly this problem reduces Dr. King—a moral and intellectual giant among mortals—into sounding about as convincing as a conservative high school freshman writing a term paper justifying slavery.

Any high school history teacher would scrawl a big fat red “F” across any paper analogizing slavery to a child learning to walk, or arguing that slavery served the enslavers or enslaved to “learn” something or grow in some way.

While I have not gone through every theologian's theodicies to grade them—there have been thousands throughout the millennia—I think it's fair to say that if Dr. King gets a big fat F here, all the rest likely would too. Is there any thinker or moral actor who would be *more* up to the task than Dr. King?

At the end of his paper, Dr. King effectively admits that his own answers to the problem of evil fail: “[W]e still come to a point beyond which we cannot go. Any intellectual solution to the problem of evil will come to inevitable impasses. The ultimate solution is not intellectual but

spiritual. After we have climbed to the top of the speculative ladder we must leap out into the darkness of faith.”

This is known as the “[mysterious ways](#)” theodicy. Comedian Jim Jeffries [has the best answer](#) I’ve seen to the “mysterious ways” theodicy:

Religious people will forgive God for *fucking anything*. In their mind, he does good things — rainbows, children's laughter, shit like that. Right? But when he does *bad* things — like hurricanes, AIDS, cancer, children's slaughter, child molestation—then we just go “Oh, well... God works in mysterious ways.” What type of an excuse is that? What is mysterious about acting like a *fucking arsehole*? That is like *the least* mysterious activity since the dawn of time!

Evil is. We do not know why this world full of evil, exists, but it does. Most of the evil within it is meaningless and senseless, with no rhyme or reason, serving no higher purpose, and offering no redeeming value. All we can do is grieve it, and try to counteract it where we can²³, while managing as best we can to stay sane in an insane world.

A Violent Rat-Cat Orgy

²³ The challenge here is that most efforts to counteract evil are viewed as evil by some other human group. My efforts to counteract homophobia, for example, are viewed as evil by fundamentalist Christians, who view homosexuality as evil. Fundamentalist Christians believe they have God on their side. But what is on my side? Some judgment derived from one school of Western philosophy or another, such as consequentialism or deontology, which not even Western philosophers have been able to agree on despite thousands of years of trying? And still, I continue to view homophobia as wrong, and continue to fight for its eradication, even if I can’t ground that sense of wrongness in any universally-accepted objective moral principle.

Generally, speaking, I view morality not as any set of universal principles, but as our *passionately-held preferences regarding people’s behavior towards others*, combined with varying degrees of willingness to sacrifice and/or fight to uphold these passionate preferences.

The typical retort to the view that human moralities are systems of differing *preferences* held by different people is something like, “So you think that opposing the torture is a *mere preference*, just like preferring chocolate ice cream vs. vanilla?” My answer: “Yes, my opposition to torture is a preference, but unlike chocolate vs. vanilla, it’s a preference I feel with a passion down to my bones, and which I would sacrifice significantly to uphold.”

The word “mere” in the typical retort is doing too much work; it suggests that all preferences are trivial and inconsequential for the person holding them, like one’s preference for ice cream flavor. Whereas in fact, many of our preferences (including moral and political preferences) are some of the deepest, most consequential, and most defining aspects of our existence.

As we have seen, theological attempts over millennia to give meaning to the vast, gratuitous, seemingly pointless suffering of countless humans get bogged down in embarrassing absurdity. However, attempts to give meaning to the extreme and pervasive suffering of *non-human* animals fare even worse, since non-human animals are not presumed to have free will or to be capable of moral or spiritual growth in ways relevant to traditional theodicies.

As Darwin [wrote in his autobiography](#):

That there is much suffering in the world no one disputes. Some have attempted to explain this in reference to man by imagining that it serves for his moral improvement. But the number of men in the world is as nothing compared with that of all other sentient beings, and these often suffer greatly without any moral improvement. A being so powerful and so full of knowledge as a God who could create the universe, is to our finite minds omnipotent and omniscient, and it revolts our understanding to suppose that his benevolence is not unbounded, for what advantage can there be in the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time? This very old argument from the existence of suffering against the existence of an intelligent first cause seems to me a strong one.

The vast majority of attempts at confronting the problem of evil over the past millennia have focused on *humans* as the victims of evil and suffering. However, one of the most devastating lines of critiquing of optimistic philosophy is this: how do you put an optimistic spin on the immense and often extravagantly grotesque suffering non-human animals inflict upon each other in the wild? (This is often referred to as the problem of “[wild animal suffering](#).”) Optimists are mostly silent on this problem, because they have nothing even remotely plausible to say about it.

Musing on Darwin’s theism-killing *Ichneumonidæ*, Richard Dawkins writes, in *River out of Eden*:

[W]hen the utility function—that which is being maximized—is DNA survival, this is not a recipe for happiness. So long as DNA is passed on, it does not matter who or what gets hurt in the process. It is better for the genes of Darwin’s ichneumon wasp that the caterpillar should be alive, and therefore fresh, when it

is eaten, no matter what the cost in suffering. Genes don't care about suffering, because they don't care about anything.

If Nature were kind, she would at least make the minor concession of anesthetizing caterpillars before they are eaten alive from within. But Nature is neither kind nor unkind. She is neither against suffering nor for it. Nature is not interested one way or the other in suffering, unless it affects the survival of DNA. It is easy to imagine a gene that, say, tranquilizes gazelles when they are about to suffer a killing bite. Would such a gene be favored by natural selection? Not unless the act of tranquilizing a gazelle improved that gene's chances of being propagated into future generations. It is hard to see why this should be so, and we may therefore guess that gazelles suffer horrible pain and fear when they are pursued to the death—as most of them eventually are. . . .

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. As that unhappy poet A. E. Housman put it:

For Nature, heartless, witless Nature

Will neither care nor know.

DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.

And dance we will, especially if we happen to be a snail infected with a certain type of parasitic worm, which turns us into crawling psychedelic “[disco zombies](#).”

If you're ever out walking and encounter a snail that looks like it's trying to go to a Grateful Dead show, with day-glo multicolored eyestalks pulsating like a tie-die t-shirt (see [astonishing video here](#)), don't worry, the snail hasn't raided your stash of shrooms.

Rather, the poor snail has been infected with *Leucochloridium*, a parasitic worm that invades and engorges the eyestalks of the snail, and makes the eyestalks look like two bright, colorful caterpillars, pulsating rapidly to attract the attention of birds who prey on caterpillars.

The birds, who wouldn't normally eat a snail, in this case rip off and munch down the infected snail's eye stalks, thinking they're yummy caterpillars. Thus the parasitic worms get

passed into the birds, where the worms take up home and reproduce in the bird's asshole. From there the worms' eggs get shit out by the bird, distributing them over the bird's range of flight. Then new snails eat the bird shit and eggs and get infected themselves, starting the whole psychedelic zombie shit show over again. Bad night at the rave!

Almost as astonishingly, the worms manage to hijack the nervous system of the snail, making the snail move towards sunlight—where its caterpillar-imitating day-glow pulsations will more likely be seen by predator birds. This is an example of a phenomenon known as “[parasite manipulation](#),” or parasite “[mind control](#)”—National Geographic calls them “[mindsuckers](#)“: parasites that alter the behavior of their hosts, in ways that are self-destructive for the host but help the parasite spread and reproduce.

Another infamous example of parasite mind control occurs when a male rat or mouse is infected with the single-celled parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. This parasite hijacks the rodent's scent, fear, and sexual responses in its brain, not only making the rodents less afraid of cats, but also turning the smell of cats into an aphrodisiac for the rodents, thus making them lust to approach their own predators.

Joanne Webster, the professor who discovered this type of parasitic mind control, dubbed it “[fatal feline attraction](#).” In the book [This Is Your Brain on Parasites: How Tiny Creatures Manipulate Our Behavior and Shape Society](#), Kathleen McAuliffe writes:

[W]hen an infected animal catches a whiff of cat odor, the smell fires up. . . neurons that are activated by the enticing scent of a mate and tell the animal to approach. Put simply, said [Stanford parasite researcher Robert] Sapolsky, “toxoplasma makes cat odor smell sexy to male rats.” The confused male often advances only to discover he's courting a cat.

In short, the parasite turns rats and mice into what science writer Ed Yong [calls](#) a “cat-seeking missile.” These “rat-missiles” end up right in the jaws of cats, where they are eaten alive.

Then the parasites sexually reproduce inside the cats' guts, get shit out, and then find their way into soil where fresh rats eat them to begin the macabre cycle anew.

In a *Scientific American* article entitled "[Bugs in the Brain](#)," Sapolsky writes of his surprise learning that this highly-specific behavioral change is the *only* difference the parasite causes in the male rat: "This is flabbergasting. This is akin to someone getting infected with a brain parasite that has no effect whatsoever on the person's thoughts, emotions, SAT scores or television preferences but, to complete its life cycle, generates an irresistible urge to go to the zoo, scale a fence and try to French-kiss the pissiest-looking polar bear."

But wait—that's not all! *Toxoplasma gondii* also takes hold in the male rat/mice testicles, jacking up its testosterone production and making it hornier for its regular partners, female rats/mice as well. And, it lodges into the male rodents' sperm, infecting the female rodents and then getting passed on to her progeny. What's more, once inside the female rats or mice, it makes them *way hornier* for infected male rats as compared to healthy rats. (This is likely one of the only instances in nature of animals being *more* attracted to parasite-infected mates).

Basically, the parasite has hijacked the entire rat sexual system and turned it into a big violent rat-cat orgy.

There's something diabolical about DNA, evolution, and natural selection. That it could create, through endless trial and error, something so extravagantly vicious as this complex system of parasitic mind control, worthy of alien movies, makes me feel, as a fellow possessor of DNA, well... alienated? What, exactly, is good about genetic replication, if parasitic mind control is one of the grotesque things it leads to?

"[If God does not exist. . . everything is permitted](#)," says Dmitri in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as a paraphrase of his brother Ivan's views.

Well, it seems that if God exists, he permits a whole hell of a lot. He permits all the evils we are familiar with in human life: war, slavery, torture, rape, genocide. And in nature, he permits a bunch of horrors we're probably less familiar with: parasites that turn snails into psychedelic zombies to get eaten by caterpillar-seeking birds, and parasites that make female rats sexually attracted to male rats who are sexually attracted to the very cats that will devour them limb from limb... the ultimate violent love triangle.

If God exists, what absurd atrocity does he *not* permit?

The Most Popular Lifestyle on Earth

A parasite can be thought of, roughly, as a predator that lives *within* its prey. Celebrated biologist E. O. Wilson [defines](#) parasites as “predators that eat prey in units of less than one.” In contrast, one lion eats many gazelles. But *Taenia solium*, tapeworms that can [parasitize your brain](#) hundreds at a time in “wormholes” so numerous that they make a CT scan of your brain look like a [“starry sky,”](#) are kind enough to eat only *part* of your brain each, leaving some for the others. (No doggie bags.)

While no one knows the exact percentage of parasites versus “free-living” organisms (those that don't live inside other organisms), scientists are confident that there are more parasitic species than free-living ones. This is because most free-living organisms examined have many parasite species within them—sometimes hundreds—and many of these species are host-specific, meaning they only exist in one free-living species. Humans, for example, are [prey to about 300 species of parasitic worm](#).

Professor Paul Schmid-Hempel writes in his textbook [Evolutionary Parasitology](#): “The majority of all living organisms are parasites This sounds like an exaggeration. However. . .

. [i]n all, for every host species, there are dozens or even hundreds of parasite species, and not every parasite, in turn, uses a similar number of host species. Indeed, there are more parasitic species than host species living on our planet.”

In the *International Journal for Parasitology*, biologist Donald Windsor [writes](#), “The implications of parasites being the majority are very revolutionary for the entire field of biology. . . . Biologists must now view the world upside down and inside out, shifting their paradigm so that free-living species are viewed as devices used by parasites to propagate themselves.”

Or, as Kevin Lafferty, a marine ecologist for the US Geological Survey [puts it](#), “Parasitism is the most popular lifestyle on Earth.”

So popular, in fact, that many parasites are themselves prey to their own parasites. In a phenomenon called “hyperparasitism,” parasites are invaded by parasites that are invaded by still more parasites. These Russian dolls of internal flesh-eating have been observed to five levels down, which one article [describes as](#) “an endless progression of interspecies abuse”:

Seth Bordenstein, a microbiologist at Vanderbilt University, studies a five-tiered system that starts with a fledgling bird. Blowflies infest the bird’s underside with bloodsucking larvae, which then drop off and fall prey to hyperparasitic wasps. The wasps, in turn, carry a parasitic bacterium called Wolbachia, which has evolved to modify its host’s reproductive system. The bacteria are subject to their own invasion, though, from tiny viruses known as bacteriophages, which hijack Wolbachia’s cellular machinery to expand their population.

Just how small can parasites get? The final layer of these systems might be the transposon, which is a roving bit of nucleic acid—a single, parasitic gene. Transposons have been discovered inside viruses that infect other viruses, which in turn infect amoebas that infect human beings. “I think it’s difficult to see where one organism begins and another one ends,” Bordenstein says.

Or as Jonathan Swift [puts it](#) in a 1733 poem:

The vermin only tease and pinch
 Their foes superiour by an inch.
 So, naturalists observe, a flea

Has smaller fleas that on him prey;
 And these have smaller still to bite ‘em,
 And so proceed *ad infinitum*.

Think about this for a moment. Can you think of anything more gross, or more fucked up, than one species dining upon the living flesh of another species from within?

I can: one species dining upon the living flesh of another species from within another species that is itself dining upon the living flesh from within yet another species, and on and on.

This is not just an incidental occurrence within life. If we are judging by the number of species who feed themselves this way, the act of eating living flesh from within is no mere side-dish at the restaurant of life; it’s the main course.

As science writer Ed Yong (whose excellent TED talk “[Zombie roaches and other parasite tales](#)” I highly recommend) writes in *National Geographic*:

It’s easy—hopeful, perhaps—to think of [parasites] as oddities of nature, as grisly outliers that we would only encounter through extreme bad luck. But as I noted in my TED talk, parasitism is the rule rather than the exception. . . . Forget elephants, hummingbirds, whales, and tortoises—pick a random animal, and it’s far more likely to be a blood-sucker, disease-carrier, host-castrator, or flesh-devourer.

(When Yong tweeted this article out to his audience, he added, [in a subtweet](#), “In writing this piece, I did a Google image search for ‘myiasis’. I beg you not to do this. Never. Do. This.” Of course I couldn’t resist, and thus I regretfully did what I now call The Thing You Should Never, Ever, Under Any Circumstances Do Ever in Your Entire Life: a Google image search for “myiasis.” It’s a parasitic infection of fly larva—maggots—in the flesh, including in the human mouth, face, ears and eyes. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.)

Who invented this shit? What twisted fucker would think it was a good idea to create things that are alive, and then to create other things that make their living by eating their way

through the first living things from the inside? And then to create other living things eating their way through the insides of *those* living things at the same time?

Exuberantly, Extravagantly, Flamboyantly, Baroquely Evil

It's not hard to understand why Darwin considered the existence of widespread parasitism to rule out the possibility of a "beneficent and omnipotent God" who created it. There is something not just evil, but exuberantly, extravagantly, flamboyantly, baroquely evil about parasites, and about parasites within parasites within parasites "ad infinitum."**

(Of course, I'm not saying that the parasites themselves—lacking consciousness, intentionality or choice—are committing evil. I'm using this term on the sense of "natural evil" discussed by theologians: things that we humans see and experience as evil within nature—such as diseases, natural disasters, and non-human animals suffering terribly in the wild—that are not caused by humans willing them. See footnote 13 for further elaboration.)

The tendency of the problem of evil to reduce adult minds to reasoning that even children see as absurd is well known, as inquisitive children have intuitively been stumping their parents with questions about the problem of evil (without calling it that) for as long as parents have tried to ram religious dogma down children's throats.

In his 1908 story "Little Bessie," Mark Twain illustrates just how easy it is for a child to lay ruin to religious belief with the problem of evil by simply referencing some of the things that go on in nature every moment, at one point specifically referencing both the ichneumonidæ and

the cat playing with mice, the two examples in Darwin's letter.²⁴ (Likely Darwin didn't even know, at that time, that some of those mice being torn to shreds by cats may have been converted into zombie "cat-seeking missiles" by parasites.)

Twain's story (I highly recommend [reading the whole story](#), one of the more amusing ten minutes you'll spend) consists primarily of dialogue between Bessie, an intellectually precocious three-year-old who is "much given to thinking out the reasons of things and trying to make them harmonise with results," and her devout Christian mother. The story begins with Bessie asking her mother, innocently enough, "Mamma, why is there so much pain and sorrow and suffering? What is it all for?"

As with all defenders of religion confronting the insurmountable problem of evil, Bessie's mother's answers to her child's pointed questions become more and more absurd.

[Bessie asks:] "Mama, only think! Mr. Hollister [an irreligious neighbor] says there isn't a bird or fish or reptile or any other animal that hasn't got an enemy that Providence has sent to bite it and chase it and pester it, and kill it, and suck; its blood and discipline it and make it good and religious. Is that true, mother—because if it is true, why did Mr. Hollister laugh at it?"

"That Hollister is a scandalous person, and I don't want you to listen to anything he says."

"Why, mamma, he is very interesting, and I think he tries to be good. He says the wasps catch spiders and cram them down into their nests in the ground—*alive*, mamma!—and there they live and suffer days and days and days, and the hungry little wasps chewing their legs and gnawing into their bellies all the time, to make them good and religious and praise God for His infinite mercies. I think Mr. Hollister is just lovely, and ever so kind; for when I asked him if he would treat a spider like that, he said he hoped to be damned if he would; and then he—"

"My child! oh, do for goodness' sake—"

²⁴ I learned of this story, as well as the influence Darwinism had on Twain, including Darwin's quote about the wasp and cat predation as evidence against a benevolent God, from Harold K. Bush's fascinating paper "[Nature Shrieking' and Parasitic Wasps: Mark Twain, Theodicy, and the War of Nature.](#)"

“And mamma, he says the spider is appointed to catch the fly, and drive her fangs into his bowels, and suck and suck and suck his blood, to discipline him and make him a Christian; and whenever the fly buzzes his wings with the pain and misery of it, you can see by the spider’s grateful eye that she is thanking the Giver of All Good for—well, she’s saving grace, as he says; and also, he—”

“Oh, aren’t you ever going to get tired chattering! If you want to go out and play—”

“Mama, he says himself that all troubles and pains and miseries and rotten diseases and horrors and villainies are sent to us in mercy and kindness to discipline us; and he says it is the duty of every father and mother to *help* Providence, every way they can; and says they can’t do it by just scolding and whipping, for that won’t answer, it is weak and no good —Providence’s way is best, and it is every parent’s duty and every *person*’s duty to help discipline everybody, and cripple them and kill them, and starve them, and freeze them, and rot them with diseases, and lead them into murder and theft and dishonor and disgrace; and he says Providence’s invention for disciplining us and the animals is the very brightest idea that ever was, and not even an idiot could get up anything shinier. Mamma, brother Eddie needs disciplining, right away: and I know where you can get the smallpox for him, and the itch, and the diphtheria, and bone-rot, and heart disease, and consumption, and -- Dear mamma, have you fainted! I will run and bring help! Now this comes of staying in town this hot weather.”

As Mr. Hollister in the story points out to Bessie, Mother Nature leaves no surface area free from predation, not even our insides when we’re alive. Nearly all her creatures are fed upon from without and within, and many from within within within. Life, taken as a whole, is an indivisible orgy of self-predation.

In Goethe’s novel [*The Sorrows of Young Werther*](#) (1774), Werther expresses a similar sentiment in a letter to his friend:

There is not a moment but preys upon you,—and upon all around you, not a moment in which you do not yourself become a destroyer. The most innocent walk deprives of life thousands of poor insects: one step destroys the fabric of the industrious ant, and converts a little world into chaos. No: it is not the great and rare calamities of the world, the floods which sweep away whole villages, the earthquakes which swallow up our towns, that affect me. My heart is wasted by the thought of that destructive power which lies concealed in every part of universal nature. Nature has formed nothing that does not consume itself, and every object near it: so that, surrounded by earth and air, and all the active powers, I wander on my way with aching heart; and the universe is to me a fearful monster, for ever devouring its own offspring.

Imagine a teenage fan of gross-out movies—whose all-time favorite movie scene was the chestburster segment in *Alien*—got access to a video game in which he could create simulated worlds populated with millions of species, many of them sentient, for his sick entertainment.

Would that world look significantly different than our own?

God Almighty?

Or Bored, Sadistic Teenager Playing Video Games In His Basement?

Let's run with the thought experiment suggested above, and imagine that in the future, 13-year-olds can walk into a futuristic GameStop shop, plunk down their bitcoin for a cartridge, stick it into their consoles in their bedrooms, and be off to the races creating simulated worlds with unlimited sentient beings they can manipulate however they please.

This thought experiment is valuable for the purposes of this book, because it allows us to examine the question I posed at the outset of the previous essays—"is it *good* that something exists, rather than nothing"—without any of the traditional religious baggage that is often invoked in answering it. Somehow, the question seems different, when contemplating the hypothetical scenario that a bored, somewhat psychopathic teenager (that is, a normal teenager) created our universe, or perhaps some artificially-intelligent robot, rather than "God."

While not deities in a traditional or supernatural sense, these 13-year-olds creating universes full of sentience would very much be "playing God," and would in fact be gods in the sense of being what amount to omnipotent creators of little universes.

It turns out, such speculations are not entirely idle. A number of well-respected scientists and technologists think the development of simulated sentience is possible within the next few

decades, and some even believe we may ourselves be products of some kind of “Matrix”-like simulation.

(Note: by recounting their views below, I am not putting forward my own opinion about simulated sentience. I lack the scientific or philosophical knowledge to evaluate this possibility, and thus am agnostic about it. I am simply noting that some serious-minded people, who *do* clearly possess widely-recognized scientific knowledge, take the possibility of simulated sentience seriously, and some even think it’s likely that *we* are in fact sentient simulations.)

Speculations that we may be in some kind of [dream-like illusory state](#) have appeared throughout the ages, from the Hindu concept of [Maya](#), to Plato’s [Allegory of the Cave](#), to the famous “[Butterfly Dream](#)“ story in the foundational *Zhuangzi* text of Taoism. Metaphors of [life as a dream](#) appear [throughout Shakespeare](#). (“We are such stuff / as dreams are made on, and our little life / is rounded with a sleep”) Descartes used the possibility that his entire sensory experience was an illusion being fed him by an “[evil demon](#),” as the starting point for his philosophy. Of course, the most famous exploration of simulated consciousness in contemporary times has been *The Matrix*. (*The Truman Show* explored similar themes the year before²⁵, and *Westworld* and *Ready Player One* years did years later.)

²⁵ Jim Carrey, the star of *The Truman Show*, expounds on the idea that “none of this is real,” in one of the most [entertaining video clips I’ve seen](#), from an interview of him by *E!* live on the red carpet at New York Fashion Week 2017.

Of course, I’m philosophically sympathetic to Carrey’s view of the meaningless absurdity of it all expressed in the video. However, even as I nod in agreement with this view, it is also worth keeping in mind Bertrand Russell’s words, in [The Conquest of Happiness](#), as he critiqued the view in Ecclesiastes that “All is vanity”:

If your child is ill, you may be unhappy, but you will not feel that all is vanity; you will feel that the restoring of the child to health is a matter to be attended to regardless of the question whether there is ultimate value in human life or not. A rich man may, and often does, feel that all is vanity, but if he should happen to lose his money, he would feel that his next meal was by no means vanity.

To my knowledge, the first scientifically-minded thinker to put forward the idea that we are not just possibly in a computer simulation now, but *almost certainly* in one, is Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom, in his seminal 2003 paper “[Are You Living in a Computer Simulation](#).” Bostrom’s argument, now known as the “simulation hypothesis,” has spawned [lively debate](#) for two decades, and the belief that we are likely in a computer simulation has proliferated within tech circles. The transhumanist author David Pearce has said that “The Simulation Argument is perhaps the first interesting argument for the existence of a Creator in 2000 years.”††

One famous adherent of the simulation hypothesis is Elon Musk. An audience member at a tech conference in 2016 asked Musk directly, “I need to know. Are we in a simulation?”, Musk [answered](#):

The strongest argument for us probably being in a simulation is the following. Forty years ago we had [the video game] Pong—two rectangles and a dot. That was what games were. Now, forty years later, we have photo-realistic 3D simulations with millions of people playing them simultaneously, and it’s getting better every year. And soon we’ll have virtual reality, augmented reality. If you assume any rate of improvement at all, then the games will become indistinguishable from reality. . . . Then you say, “OK, let’s imagine it’s ten thousand years from now,” which is nothing in the evolutionary scale. . . . There would probably be billions of such computers or set-top boxes, it would seem to follow that the odds that we’re in base reality is one in billions. . . . [I think] there’s a one in billions chance that this [around us] is base reality.

In 2017, Larry King asked astrophysicist Neal deGrasse Tyson if he agrees with Musk that we’re likely living in a computer simulation. Tyson [said he does agree](#) with Musk:

I find it hard to argue against [the possibility that we are living in a computer simulation]. You look at our computing power today. And you say, “I have the power to program a world inside of a computer.” Well imagine in a future where you have even more power than that, and you can create characters that have, for example, free will. Or their own perception of free will. So this is a world, and I can program in the laws that govern that world. That world will have its own laws of physics and chemistry and biology.

Now [suppose] you're a character in that world, and you think you have free will, and you say, "I want to invent a computer," so you do. "Hey, I want to create a world in my computer." And then that world creates a world in its computer. And then you have simulations all the way down.

So now you lay out all those universes, and throw a dart. Which of these universes are you most likely to hit? The original one that started it? Or the countless daughter simulations that unfolded thereafter? You're going to hit one of the simulations.

Statistically, based on that argument, which first appeared by a philosopher named Nick Bostrom. . . it's hard to argue that all of us are not just the creation of some kid in a parents' basement, programming up a world for their own entertainment.

And then, every time something weird happens in the world, some disruptive leader takes charge, I wonder if that programmer just got bored, and had to stir the pot. Throw somebody in there just for their own entertainment.²⁶

²⁶ In Stanley Elkin's novel *The Living End*, God addresses the crowd at a gala in heaven:

"You have wondered," [God] said, "why things are as they are. . . . You have questioned My motives. . . . 'Why,' the philosophers ask. . . . 'the carrot and why this stick? Why a serpent, why a tree? And ain't exile cruel and unusual punishment when there's no place to go? And then a flood. *A flood!* The whole earth disaster area. . . .'"

"So," God said. . . . "what do you think of Me, eh? What do you make of Me Who could have gotten it all right the first time, saved everyone trouble and left Hell unstocked? Do you love Me? Do you forgive and forget as easily as I do? Do you?"

"Yes," [the gala attendees] cried. "Yes!"

"Why do I do it then? Why?"

"So we might choose," said one of the saved. . . .

"*Never*," God thundered. "What do I care about the sanctity of your will? *Never!*"

"Goodness," a saint shouted. "You get off on goodness."

"On goodness? *Me?* God laughed. "On goodness? Is that what you think? Were you born yesterday? You've been in the world. Is that how you explain trial and error, history by increment, God's long Slap and Tickle, His Indian-gift wrath? *Goodness?* No. It was Art! It was always Art. It works by the contrasts and metrics, by beats and the silences. It was all Art. *Because it makes a better story is why.*"

In his piece "[What Has God Wrought?](#)", anarcho-pessimist writer Laurance Labadie contemplates God as a bored shit-stirrer:

Sometimes I wonder what God was doing during the eons and eons, back into infinity, before he suddenly conceived the idea of creating a globule and populating it with lunatics. I wonder, too, why he chose us. It really furnishes an unending source of wonder why such an individual (or is it three?), with infinite power,

For me, that's some of the best evidence that we live in a simulation.

Because this happens every time there's peace and tranquility in the world.²⁷

Elsewhere, Tyson has said that he gives the possibility that we live in a simulation (though not necessarily that this simulation is being run by a bored kid in a bedroom) "[better than 50-50 odds](#)." For sake of argument, let's suppose Neal deGrasse Tyson's speculation is true—that we are the products of a video game being programmed and played by a bored kid “stirring the pot” for their own entertainment.

If this were true, it would be fair to ask, “Is it good that our world was created?”

My guess is that you (understandably) thought this was a rather absurd question to ask when I first posed it in the Introduction. It seemed like an absurd question because, if you don't believe in a creator, then it's absurd to ask if it's “good” if something that inevitably exists does exist (just as we don't ask if it's “good” if the sky is blue or the Earth goes around the sun). And

infinite knowledge, and infinite goodness did not use these qualities in his work. Was he tired? Did he need amusement? Has he sadistic impulses? Was he bored by the long years of nothingness?

Why did he send his own son to this planet to be murdered and eaten? That seems to be an unusual idea. Does God tire of perfection and want to observe incongruity in action? No, that cannot be, because, knowing everything, he must see the results beforehand.

Perhaps he has in his day made many worlds. Square worlds, Triangular worlds. Dry and wet worlds; light and dark ones. Perhaps he has made them of sorts of which we cannot even imagine. What urges is he satisfying in his endless experiments? Yet he must know, since he knows everything.

It must be terribly boring to be God. . . .

²⁷ Larry King replied, “But if it's true, what can we do about it? It's like the Truman movie.”

Tyson: “Well he can try to escape, in the Truman movie, to go through the barrier. But if you are programmed by somebody, no, there's nothing you can do.”

King: “So what difference does it make if I'm programmed by someone, since I don't know it?”

Tyson: “I guess it doesn't make any difference at all.”

those who *do* believe in a creator, usually believe—absurdly, in my view—that their creator was superlatively benevolent and loving in creating the world exactly as it is. So to them, for different reasons, it is equally absurd to ask if it is *good* that the world exists; it is good, in their view, because God created it, and God created it because it is good.

But if we imagine (for the sake of argument) that our world was a simulation, created by some entity other than an all-loving God, then all of the sudden it makes much more sense to ask whether it was *good* that our world came into existence.

After all, one can imagine Tyson’s bored kid creating a world that was *far worse* than ours—a world that was *nothing* but torture and torment among simulated sentient beings, with no redeeming qualities. (Many video game worlds that kids and teenagers create and play in already seem that way, though fortunately the characters lack sentience—as of now—while they get blown to bits and their blood gets splattered everywhere.)²⁸

²⁸ One Twitter user wrote a thread explaining why, if life were programmed as a video game, it would be a shitty video game. User Alpha-minus, who describes himself as “Just another consciousness, stuck in a slowly decaying body in the midst of an uncaring universe,” [writes](#):

The game of life (normally called "life") sucks, It includes a bunch of shitty mechanics that would be deemed terrible if used in any video game. Life as an MMORPG [massively-multiplayer online role playing game] would never pass 3/10 on [review site] Metacritic. Consider the following parts of the game of life:

You have no clear winning condition, no matter what you are going to do you are going to lose (die) at some point. The main campaign (study-work-family) is very meh, and you mostly forced to navigate the meaningless open world and invent your own storyline. . . .

You cannot pick your character/stats (IQ, looks, etc..) or spawning server (country). The stats you get are completely unbalanced and random, some players get awesome stats and some get shitty stats although these stats are crucial for your game experience and success.

In general, the game seems to be extremely unbalanced some spawning servers provide it, players, extreme advantages and easy playing difficulty (think Norway) while other have terrible gameplay and nightmare difficulty level (think sierra leone)

When you spawn all the available resources in the game are already owned by other players (land and capital), the only way for you to get the in-game currency ("money") is by completing boring and shitty tasks for other players (exception to spawning with "golden spoon" perk)

In such an instance, I think it's straightforward to say that it would *bad* for that kid to bring that world into existence. Maybe his parents would even *tell him* it's bad—"Johnny, are you torturing innocent sentient consciousnesses again? Quit that and come to dinner!" Not that Johnny would listen, or that his parents could stop him. (He's already figured out how to bypass the "No Sentient Simulation Creation" lock his parents put on the iPhone 1000 they gave him; any tech savvy five-year-old can bypass that lock that their geezer parents put on.)

Here's a more pressing question: if, as many technologists believe, it will become possible to create simulated sentience in the next few decades, *should* this technology be

In general, the game seems to be way more focused on not fun parts: Shitty grinding tasks (McJobs, taking care of hygiene, house chores). Many parts are just boring or even worse - cause you intense suffering and heartbreak.

The fun parts are much less fun than the most shitty parts are shitty (kidney stones vs Sex)

The game is full of high-level players exploiting and manipulating low-level players for profit (MLM, slavery, binary options scams, the state)

In most games, you become stronger and better as the game progresses, in life your character peaks somewhere in the middle of the game, and from there you experience a constant decline in all of your stats until you eventually become fragile and lose the game (usually painfully)

Instead of the difficulty level rising as you improve, and becom[ing] easier as you fail. It actually works just the opposite way - if you're a weak player in a bad situation the game is way harder than if you're a strong player in a good situation. . . .

Even if you play really well you can always randomly lose or suffer severe long-lasting damage due to some [random] event (choke while you sleep when a baby, plane crash, cancer etc).

You have no "lives" in the game and no respawn ability, many mistakes will outright make you lose while many others will cripple you for the rest of the entire game without any ability to load saved checkpoint or undo

It's much easier to fuck up in the game than to actually achieve something. You can work on something for years just to lose it due to one single mistake or bad [random] event - most of the [random] events are negative while only very few are positive

Lack of reliable ways to quit the game, Most ways to quit the game are either risky or painful. Many times you are forced to continue playing the game even if you fucking hate it.

Overall really good graphics and fun minigames (sex and sports are pretty cool) don't compensate for what would be really a crappy fundamental game design. I would definitely recommend avoiding the game of life and to-never-be-born.

created? I believe the answer is an obvious emphatic “No.” Simply put, I do not believe it would be a good idea to give thirteen-year-olds the unlimited capacity to torture, maim, mow down, and blow up sentient beings. If you do not believe they would do this, then you have never either (a) been a thirteen-year-old boy, or (b) observed a thirteen-year-old boy playing video games.

Now, suppose that a different, more kind-hearted teenager (or the same one, after some moral awakening) decides instead to create a simulated world full of perfectly happy sentient creatures. Sure, there might be a few peccadillos (from the Spanish word *peccadillos*: “little sins”) here and there, just to spice things up and give people good stories to tell over beers. But overall, everything was joyous and blissful and peaceful and kind in this world.

Would it be *good* that this teenager created this world? Sure, why not. But it still would be *bad* that the technology existed, because of the *near-certainty* that it would get into the hands of less kind-hearted (i.e., more normal) teenage boys. No amount of good created by the kind-hearted people who created simulations could make up for the evil that the average teenage boy would create. Imagine Internet trolls on 4Chan with the capacity to create sentient life within their message boards. That’s what we’re talking about.

Unlike the purely evil world and the purely good world posited above, our world is neither purely evil nor purely good. So if it’s conceivable that a bored teenage programmer (or some other intelligent, non-supernatural entity) did create our sentient world, we can ask the same question as in the previous two examples: “Is it good that this entity created our world?” Since our world obviously contains a mixture of good and bad, the answer is more complicated than the obvious answers for the purely evil and purely joyous examples.

Nonetheless, despite the undeniable quantity of truly good and beautiful things there are in this world, I cannot look upon this “disordered fantasia of carnage,” this “festival of

massacres,” this “chaos at feast,”²⁹ this “immense altar on which every living thing must be immolated, without end, without restraint, without respite,”³⁰ and think that it was *good* that it

²⁹ These first three phrases are Thomas Ligotti’s from his book [The Conspiracy Against the Human Race](#). Ligotti uses them to paraphrase the views of 19th-century German pessimistic philosopher Julius Bahnsen. Ligotti writes that, to Bahnsen, the force of reality was

monstrous in nature, resulting in a universe of indiscriminate butchery and mutual slaughter among its individuated parts. . . . From the beginning, it was a play with no plot and no players that were anything more than portions of a master drive of purposeless self-mutilation. In Bahnsen’s philosophy, everything is engaged in a disordered fantasia of carnage. Everything tears away at everything else . . . forever. Yet all this commotion in nothingness goes unnoticed by nearly everything involved in it. In the world of nature, as an instance, nothing knows of its embroilment in a festival of massacres. Only Bahnsen’s self-conscious Nothing can know what is going on and be shaken by the tremors of *chaos at feast*.

Ligotti continues on a more psychological note, which struck a chord with me:

As with all pessimistic philosophies, Bahnsen’s rendering of existence as something strange and awful was unwelcome by the self-conscious nothings whose validation he sought. For better or worse, pessimism without compromise lacks public appeal. In all, the few who have gone to the pains of arguing for a sullen appraisal of life might as well never have been born.

³⁰ This phrase is from the “Senator” character in [St. Petersburg Dialogues](#) by Joseph De Maistre (p. 217). Here is the striking passage from which it comes:

In the vast domain of living things, there reigns an obvious violence, a kind of prescribed rage that arms all creatures to their common doom. As soon as you leave the inanimate kingdom, you find the decree of violent death written on the very frontiers of life. . . . As soon as you enter the animal kingdom, the law suddenly becomes frighteningly obvious. A power at once hidden and palpable shows itself continuously occupied in demonstrating the principle of life by violent means. In each great division of the animal kingdom, it has chosen a certain number of animals charged with devouring the others; thus, there are insects of prey, birds of prey, fish of prey, and quadrupeds of prey. There is no instant of time when some living thing is not being devoured by another.

Above all these numerous animal species is placed man, whose destructive hand spares nothing that lives. He kills to nourish himself, he kills to clothe himself, he kills to adorn himself, he kills to attack, he kills to defend himself, he kills to instruct himself, he kills to amuse himself: a superb and terrible king, he needs everything and nothing resists him. He knows how many barrels of oil he can get for himself from the head of a shark or whale; with his sharp pins he mounts for a museum display the elegant butterfly he caught in flight on the summit of Mount Blanc or Chimborazo; he stuffs the crocodile and embalms the hummingbird; in his command, the rattlesnake dies in preserving fluids to show itself intact to a long line of observers. The horse carrying its master to the tiger hunt struts under the skin of this same animal. Man demands everything at the same time; he takes from the lamb its entrails to make his harp resound, from the whale its bones to stiffen the corset of the young girl, from the wolf its most murderous tooth to polish his pretty works of art, from the elephant its tusks to make a child’s toy; his tables are covered with corpses. The philosopher can even discover how this permanent carnage is provided for and ordained in the great scheme of things. But will this law stop at man? Undoubtedly not. Yet who will exterminate him who exterminates everything else? Man! It is man himself who is charged with slaughtering man. . . .

Thus, from the maggot up to man, the universal law of the violent destruction of living things is unceasingly fulfilled. The entire earth, perpetually steeped in blood, is nothing but an immense altar on which every living thing must be immolated without end, without restraint, without respite. . . .

was created—whether the creator was a bored teenager in a basement, an advanced AI computer, an abstract physical process, or a supernatural and self-delusion ally “all-loving” God.

Why not?

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan says it as well as can be said. He delivers this verdict about the world in the course of telling his brother Ivan about a little girl he heard about, who was beaten and abused in the most horrendous ways by her parents. After describing, in gruesome detail, the abuses this girl suffered at the hands of her parents, Ivan asks his brother Alyosha:

Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand that, friend and brother, you pious and humble novice? Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'! I say nothing of the sufferings of grown-up people, they have eaten the apple, damn them, and the devil take them all! But these little ones!

Ivan then asks his brother:

Tell me yourself, I challenge you—answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth.³¹

³¹ In an 1891 [lecture](#), William James contemplates a similar unsavory bargain:

If the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's Utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a specific and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?

Coda:

Are Humans the Redeemers of Nature?

As we have seen, religious theodicy is an optimistic attempt to find some meaning and redemption in the unrelenting carnage of life, via the inscrutable blessings of an all-loving God. Many people, however, who can no longer come to believe with a straight face in the idea of an all-loving God as the creator of this slaughterhouse called Earth, nonetheless still cannot accept that it is, in fact, a pointless bloody shit-ball in an uncaring universe. They try to season this bloody shit-ball with the redemptive sweetness purportedly bestowed upon life by the arrival on this multi-billion-year battlefield of one supposedly benevolent and elevated creature in particular: life's self-appointed savior and redeemer, the human.

I call this line of thinking “humanistic theodicy.” Though its practitioners may be secular or even atheists, it nonetheless has a distinctly religious flavor and intention, with Man playing the role of the saccharine shit-sweetener otherwise played, in traditional religious theodicy, by God.

One proponent of what I am calling “humanistic theodicy” was Charles Darwin. Though he likely did more to destroy *religious* theodicy than any other thinker in history, not everyone can swallow the entire bitter pill regimen that counteracts the stultifying effects of saccharine optimism—transforming it into honest pessimism—all at once. Darwin swallowed more of this

The Brothers Karamazov was published serially in Russia between 1879-1880. However, it was not translated into English until 1912. So it's doubtful James had come across Dostoyevsky's expression of this bargain when he formulated his own.

The thought experiment has been contemplated by high school freshman in America for half a century, via Ursula LeGuin's story “[The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas](#).” LeGuin has said that this story was inspired by James's quote.

regimen than most, and did more than anyone ever did to cause others to swallow it as well, even though he remained both religious and optimistic.

In the end, however, Darwin could not accept the plain pessimistic truth that the phenomenon he explained—self-replicators evolving by violent natural selection—has no overarching point, purpose, or meaning. He did more than any other human to destroy the idea that this meaning and purpose was provided by God. However, in his view, the “war of nature” and the “struggle for existence” that he described did in fact have a point, and that point was... Man.

After surveying the violence of natural selection in the natural world, for hundreds of pages in *On the Origin of Species* (subtitled *By Means of Natural Selection, Or The Preservation of Favoured Races By Means of the Struggle for Life*), Darwin attempts to tie a pretty bow on this blood-strewn field of carcasses and wiped-out genetic lineages. In the very last lines of his book, he writes:

“Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows.”

Do the “higher animals,” and particularly humans, the production of which is the “most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving,” truly redeem the unrelenting slaughter and genocide of the natural world?

Let us find out...

The Sociopathic Species

A Misanthrope's Brief

[Author's note, 2023: Before I conceptualized my book as *Joyful Pessimism*, the original title and book concept when I started this project 2021 was *The Sociopathic Species: A Misanthrope's Brief*. Below is the initial manuscript. While writing *The Sociopathic Species*, I widened my philosophical views from singling out humanity for particular scorn—i.e., misanthropy—towards a negative evaluation of the *process* of life itself. I call the latter stance “biomisias,” or hatred of the process of life. (After I made the philosophical jump from misanthropy to biomisias, I joked to myself that “misanthropy puts too fine a point on it.”) Biomisias is the basis of my philosophical pessimism. That said, I still hold onto a special dislike of humanity: familiarity breeds contempt.]

“In individuals, insanity is rare; but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule.”

—Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

This is a depressing book, which offers no solutions for the problems discussed, and no glimmers of hope.

Why write a book that offers no solutions or hope?

Commiseration, I guess. As an oft-depressed person myself, mulling around this grim view of life, I have found reading other people with similar viewpoints to be strangely comforting. *At least I'm not the only one who thinks this way.*

Thus, while I offer no hope, I may offer solace to some, who share misanthropic views, yet who feel confused, ashamed, or lonely because of them.

(Commiserate: from Latin *com*, “together,” and Latin *miser*, “wretched.” To be wretched, together. Misery loves company.)

It may seem paradoxical for a misanthrope to wish to help other people overcome their loneliness. Why would a misanthrope, who supposedly hates humans, want to help other humans? And if those other humans are themselves misanthropes, why would *they* want to relieve their loneliness by feeling kinship with fellow humans of misanthropic ilk? Isn't

loneliness, and a distaste for helping or associating with others, in some ways the *point* of misanthropy?

This is a common view of misanthropy, shared by most non-misanthropes, and likely by most of that exceedingly small group to which I belong: people who self-identify as misanthropes.‡‡

“Miso” is an ancient Greek root for “hatred” or “hater,” and “anthro” is an ancient Greek root for “mankind.” Most popular conceptions of misanthropy interpret this hatred *interpersonally*, that is, directed at whatever humans happen to be around you. Some dictionaries, such as the Cambridge Dictionary, [define the word](#) in precisely these interpersonal terms: “the fact or quality of not liking other people.”

Yet more commonly, dictionaries define the word in terms of not liking humanity *overall*. [According to Merriam-Webster](#), misanthropy is “a hatred or disgust of humankind.” [Dictionary.com defines it](#) as “hatred, distrust, or dislike of humankind.”

These two conceptions of misanthropy—interpersonal vs. generalized—might seem like a distinction without a difference. But I believe there is an important difference, in theory and in practice, which will manifest throughout this book. To me, misanthropy does not mean that I hate all or even most human beings *as individuals*. To me, it means I hate the collective behavior and effects of the human species.

I like to say: *I love humans, but I hate humanity.*

(I came up with this formulation before I read Jonathan Swift expressing the same thing two hundred years before me: “I hate and detest that animal called ‘man,’ though I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth.”)§§

For me, the distinction means: there are many specific humans I love, and whose company brings me joy, and whom I relish in helping and supporting. It's when humans come together in *large self-identified groups*, that the trouble with humanity begins, in my view.³² Hence Nietzsche's famous line in the epigraph.

Though I do not believe she was inspired by Nietzsche's quote, and though she is most decidedly *not* a misanthrope like her son, my mother Patricia once made a great observation along these lines.

My mother was giving a lecture following one by anthropologist Angeles Arrien. In her lecture, Arrien said, "There are four basic human taboos, universal to all known cultures: lying, stealing, murder, and incest."

In my mother's subsequent talk, she said: "With the exception of incest, these basic human taboos are what we call 'foreign policy.'"³³

³² As for the apparently paradoxical idea of grouping with other misanthropes, I generally do find comfort, solace, even joy in associating with other philosophical misanthropes. We share so much in common, have a lot to talk about, and are able to provide each other mental and emotional support, in a world that doesn't understand us and views us as evil.

And, despite our reputation for moodiness and somber seriousness, we can also be quite funny, in a gallows-humor sort of way. Comedians have a disproportionate number of misanthropes among their ranks. If this is your view in life, what else is there to do but marvel at the absurdity of it all? At least laughter is palliative. (I've expressed my misanthropy comedically in my first comedy performance "[Freudian Kink](#)." However, in this present work I'm focusing on clarity, precision and depth of expressing the ideas, rather than making them palatable with humor. Sorry!)

However, I would steadfastly resist developing any kind of strong in-group identity among misanthropes, or any formal organization as such. The tendency towards Nietzsche's "group madness" is just too strong. (Organizations are where the real trouble begins, for us humans.)

I would particularly resist any in-group identity of misanthropes that—beyond some good-natured comedic jabs—would seek to cause harm or suffering those in the out-group of philanthropes. *That* would be an instance of the very behavior that drives my tendency towards misanthropy, and I'm not having it.

³³ In my research, I found two other pithy versions of the sentiment. In 1938, biologist [Jean Rostand](#) wrote: "Kill one man, and you are a murderer. Kill millions of men, and you are a conqueror. Kill them all, and you are a God." And in 1939, a [Wisconsin newspaper item](#) opined (perhaps influenced by Rostand's line): "If you shoot one person you

Yes indeed.

We are a species prone to intense in-group/out-group rivalries. Some current in-groups have vastly more power than others, and thus are far more oppressive than other groups at present.

With that said, I retain my general skepticism towards humans organized in groups. I have no confidence that there is some group of currently-oppressed humans who—if roles were reversed and they were given same kind of centralized power that current oppressors possess—would use this centralized power more wisely, equitably, charitably, kindly, or safely than current oppressors. We are all humans, and I believe that no group of humans has a monopoly on idiocy, folly, self-delusion, greed, self-aggrandizement, resource-grabs, cultish thinking, or susceptibility to corruption if given the means and opportunity.

Maintaining membership in large groups that act horribly is as human as eating and shitting—except in this case, instead of flushing the shit down the toilet, we fling it at others.

If any of these ideas resonate with you at all, then I wish to say that you—fellow misanthrope—are not alone. And, while you may be crazy for other reasons, you are not crazy for these reasons—that is, for holding misanthropic views.

are a murderer. If you kill a couple persons you are a gangster. If you are a crazy statesman and send millions to their deaths you are a hero.”

If you do not already hold a dark view of life and humanity—and particularly if you're attached to a cheerful outlook on human potential—I see no strong reason why you should read this book.

I'm not trying to persuade anyone of anything. I don't think much can be done about our folly and fate as humans, so what is there to persuade?

(I do think some harm and suffering can be mitigated in the short run. While worthy of discussion and action—and I write about such things and engage in advocacy and action elsewhere—that's not what I'm focused on here.)

Even if you aren't a misanthrope, however, and aren't inclined to become one, you *might* find this book interesting and instructive. For the same reason that some people find it interesting and instructive to read books espousing political viewpoints they disagree with. (In fact, I've found reading books by people I disagree with to be some of my most educational reading.)

Misanthropy is a decidedly minority viewpoint—a lonely dissent. Not only is it rarely held (on account of it being so depressive). But those few people who do hold it rarely share it, because sharing it generally incurs large social costs and opprobrium. (Try telling your next job interviewer, or your next date, that you hate humanity. In the latter case I have in fact done so—and I can assure you it did not go well.)

Thus, in my view, misanthropy has the distinction of being one of the *most* defensible philosophies that gets articulated the *least*. (As opposed to poorly-defensible philosophies that get articulated frequently—such as, in my opinion, all religions.) Attempts to articulate misanthropy as a robust, coherent philosophy have been relatively rare—though mine is certainly not the first.***

This book may, at least, spur you to think more deeply about why you are *not* a misanthrope, and why you *are* a “philanthrope.”

The term “philanthrope” is an archaic form of the modern word “philanthropist.” Both have their [etymological roots](#) in the concept of *love for humanity*. (“Philo” is an ancient Greek root for “loving.” For example, “philosophy” stems from “love of wisdom,” as “sophia” is the ancient Greek root for wisdom and knowledge.)

I use the term “philanthrope” as a counterpart to “misanthrope.” With this term “philanthrope”—not currently in common use—I do not mean to invoke the modern sense of “philanthropist,” as in giving money away to benefit others; not everyone who loves humanity has the means to express this love financially.

Few people who are philanthropes ever have occasion to examine their beliefs, as it’s generally “the water we swim in” as humans. Thus, if you’re a philanthrope, this is a book about the water you swim in. Might the philosophical oxygen you breathe, but never think about, be interesting to read about?

In fact, this book might make you a *better* swimmer in these philanthropic waters, enhancing your love of humanity. It might do so by making you think more deeply about your views. Usually people think more deeply about their views are better able to advance them, and to act upon them effectively.

If this book has such an effect on you, that’s fine with me. I’m not *against* being a philanthrope. I don’t really care if people are misanthropes, or philanthropes.

To me, we’re all people. Which means, we’re all fucked.

Humans vs. Invadopods

Imagine some species of animals evolved, seemingly overnight, that emitted around 40 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere per year. (That's about the weight of 40,000 aircraft carriers per year, and 60 times more than the amount of carbon all active volcanos on the planet emit per year.)

Let's call this species "invadopods," because they seem to us like a dangerous invasion on the planet. (If you want a visual, perhaps think of some giant, squid-like creature that talks, and roams the land and sea.) Their carbon emissions are so extreme that CO₂ levels in the atmosphere have risen about 46% in just 170 years, from around 284 parts per million (ppm) in 1850, to around 414 ppm in 2020. The last time atmospheric CO₂ levels were above 400ppm was in the early Pliocene Epoch, from around 5.3-2.6 million year ago. This was millions of years before humans existed. Global average temperatures were around 3-4°C (5.4-7.2°F) hotter, there was almost no ice on the planet, the sea level was 60-100 feet higher, and trees grew at the South Pole.

(Other estimates suggest atmospheric carbon hasn't been above 400 ppm since the early Miocene, 23 million years ago, before the ape ancestors of humans had split apart from the ape ancestors of chimpanzees. Millions—or tens of millions—of years of all-time atmospheric carbon records, broken in just 170 years, thanks to the invadopods.)

Aside from their prodigious carbon emissions, indavadops are also remarkably versatile predators of other animals, on land and at sea, reveling in tearing apart the flesh of almost any animal for food; so long as it has flesh, it's fair game. (They even hunt for sport, and relish inflict cruelty on other animals for entertainment.)

Invadopods destroy other animals' habitats through damming rivers and sawing down entire forests, like beavers. They chop down forests at a rate of about 112,000 square miles a

year, an area the size of Italy. Since they evolved, they chopped down about 46% of the original forest cover on the planet, turning much of it to barren land or even full deserts.

Human children love reading, seeing and learning about “lions and tigers and bears.” But invadopods are ruining all that. Due to the habitat invadopods have destroyed via the climate change and deforestation they’ve already caused, and their enthusiastic predation and hunting, many of the largest and most beautiful animals on the planet are near extinction.

Only about 23,000 wild lions remain in Africa, down about 88% since invadopods first arrived on the scene. Only about 3,800 wild tigers remain in the world, down 97%; many species of tiger have already been driven to extinction. The grizzly bear has been a symbol of America, but now there are only about 1,300 grizzlies remaining in the lower 48 states, down about 97%.

The giant panda is the national animal of China; the Chinese mint cranks out up to 50,000 per year of its official gold bullion coins, called the “Gold Panda,” with an image of the furry creature. But invadopods have killed most of the real (non-gold) pandas in the country; only 1,800 remain in the wild.

The largest creature on Earth, the blue whale, is no match for the invadopod environmental calamity; as few as 10,000 blue whales remain, invadopods having slaughtered 176,000 of them in just 60 years. Once plentiful, the North Atlantic right whale is now clinging for its existence, with only 300-350 remaining.

Perhaps most poignantly, nearly all of our closest evolutionary cousins, the great apes, are either endangered or critically endangered. Only around 8,500 eastern lowland gorillas remain in the wild, in one zone of forest where invadopods are warring with each other as well as

poaching the gorillas. Only 1,000 mountain gorillas remain in the wild, in a few strips of nature preserve upon which invadopods are inexorably encroaching.

In 2017, a new species of orangutan was discovered, the Tapanuli of northern Sumatra; unfortunately, fewer than 800 remain in a shred of forest 20 miles square, rapidly being burned down by the invadopods. (If the Tapanuli orangutans become extinct soon, as it's looking like they will, they'll be the first great ape species both discovered and extinguished in one human lifespan.)

In their short existence, invadopods have already destroyed 83% of the total population of mammals (our own class of species) in the wild. Overall, since 1970, a nanosecond in the history of life, the total population of *all* vertebrate wildlife (mammals, birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians) has declined by fully 68%, due to invadopod predation, toxicity, habitat destruction and climate change. The biomass (combined weight) of all mammals in the sea has declined by 80% since invadopods came on the scene.

Now the biomass of all invadopods is six times more than the biomass of all wild mammals (on land and in sea) and birds combined. And if you add up invadopods and their domesticated food animals (most of them being tortured by invadopods in horrendous conditions), they comprise about 95% of all the biomass of vertebrate land animals.

Invadopods are no kinder to plants than they are to animals. In their short existence on Earth, invadopods have destroyed about 50% of the plant biomass here. Since plants comprise the vast majority of biomass, this destruction translates into the reduction of close to half the total biomass on Earth, all by one species, the invadopods.

Invadopods' cumulative destructive effect on the other living things on the planet has led scientists to say that we are close to a new period of mass extinction.

There has only been one other time in the history of life on Earth that living organisms (let alone just one type of organism) caused so much destruction to other life forms around them. [Around 3 billion years ago](#), cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) developed on the ocean surface and started spewing out a then-toxic waste product: oxygen. For half a billion years or so, the Earth absorbed this toxic waste product without much of it getting into the atmosphere, where it would kill anaerobic bacteria (for whom it is a poison.)

But around 2.5 billion years ago, the amount oxygen the blooming algae populations were pumping out overwhelmed the Earth's capacity to absorb it, and the proportion of oxygen in the atmosphere started to rise sharply.

The vast majority of the life that existed before algae—anaerobic bacteria—perished. It's called the "[Great Oxidation Event](#)," and one scientist [has referred to it](#) as "one of the most deadly disasters in Earth's history" and "an apocalypse. . . global in scale."

From our perspective looking back, this was a happy apocalypse: the oxidation of the atmosphere allowed for the great expansion and diversification of oxygen-loving animal life two billion years later, the "[Cambrian explosion](#)." This development, about 541 million years ago, was essentially the starting place of most species that we would call "animals" today.

Since the Cambrian explosion of animal life, there have been [five mass extinctions](#), defined as a relatively rapid extinction of at least 75% of species. The most notorious, which brought about the extinction of the dinosaurs 66 million years ago, was brought about by an asteroid. The previous four were likely brought about by volcanic eruptions, and their attendant lava flows, CO₂ emissions, and global warming.

Scientists say that invadopods are now causing another rapid extinction period, with extinction rates hundreds of times higher than normal. If invadopods keep it up their carnage of

other species for another 240-540 years, we will have entered what scientists are calling the “sixth mass extinction.”

If this happens, it will be the first mass extinction caused by a lifeform, since the blue-green algae caused the Great Oxidation Event 2.5 billion years ago—and back then, there weren’t animals to kill off yet, just anaerobic bacteria.

The cataclysmic scope of the invadopods’ wreckage of our environment (including CO2 emission rates that rival the volcanic activity and global warming that likely caused the first four post-Cambrian mass extinctions) has led scientists to suggest that the geological epoch in which invadopods exist should be given its own name. A working group within the International Commission on Stratigraphy—the panel that determines when the geological periods such as the Jurassic and Pleistocene start and end—voted for declaring that the Holocene epoch has ended, and that we’re now in the “Invadopocene epoch.”

Oh, and by the way: invadopods have also created weapons that, if used by one overly-angry or jumpy invadopod against another, in one of their endless intra-species turf wars, could end all human life, and perhaps all complex life, on Earth.

If such a species were to arise, is there any doubt we would view invadopods as an evil pest, a plague upon the land, a threat to the entire planet, worthy only of extermination and extinction immediately?

By now, you've likely caught on that I've chosen the effects of invadopods to be exactly the same effects that humans are having, collectively, on the rest of life on Earth.³⁴

³⁴ The general thought experiment of “imagine another species having the same effect on the planet as humans—what would we do?” has been presented elsewhere in ecological and anti-natalist writing. See, for example, David Benatar’s chapter “The Misanthropic Argument” (for anti-natalism), in [Debating Procreation: Is it Wrong to Reproduce?](#) by Benatar and David Wasserman (Oxford UP, 2015):

We have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of a species that cause (and will likely continue to cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death. . . .

Here it is important to note how widely [this] premise would be accepted if the species were *not* human. Imagine, for example, that some people bred a species of nonhuman animal that was as destructive (to humans and other animals) as humans actually are. There would be widespread condemnation of those who bred the animals. Or imagine that some scientists replicated, and released, a virus that caused as much suffering and death as humans caused. Again, there would be little hesitation in condemning such behavior.” (pp. 101-102)

Aside from the general concept of the thought experiment, the examples statistics I employ here, as well as the name “invadopods,” are my own selection. (By the way, there are things in nature already called “invadopodia”—but they aren’t genocidal sociopathic creatures; they are structures on the outer membrane of some cells.)

Here are references for the statistics I’ve presented of “invadopod”/human ecological destruction:

[Humans emit 40 billion metric tons of CO2 per year; 60 times volcanos](#)

[40,000 aircraft carriers](#)

[1850-2020 atmospheric CO2](#) (accessed 8/15/20)

[Last time CO2 this high was during Pliocene—trees grew at South Pole](#)

[Last time CO2 this high was during Miocene](#)

[Humans deforest 112,000 square miles per year](#)

[The size of Italy](#)

[Humans have cut down 46% of all original trees on the planet](#)

[3,800 tigers remain in the wild, down 97%](#)

[23,000 lions remain in the wild, down 88%](#)

[1,300 grizzly bears remain, down 97%](#)

[50,000 gold pandas](#)

[1,864 pandas remain in the wild](#)

[10,000 blue whales remain](#)

[176,000 blue whales slaughtered in 60 years](#)

Why would we be so clear that invadopods should be wiped out, while we lionize the value of humans and work tirelessly in all kinds of ways for the continuation and expansion of our species (soon, perhaps, throughout the solar system)?

[300-350 North Atlantic right whales remain](#)

[1,000 mountain gorillas remain](#)

[8,500 eastern lowland gorillas remain](#)

[800 Tapanuli orangutans discovered/remain](#)

[Killed 83% of wild mammals](#)

[68% reduction on total population of vertebrate wildlife since 1970](#)

[Biomass of marine mammals down 80%; human biomass 6 times more than wild mammals and birds; humans and livestock 95% of vertebrate land biomass.](#) (Humans: .06 gigaton of carbon biomass; livestock: .1 gigaton; wild mammals: .009 gigaton; wild birds: .002 gigaton.)

[Humans have destroyed 50% of plant biomass, and therefore almost 50% of total biomass.](#) “A worldwide census of the total number of trees, as well as a comparison of actual and potential plant biomass, has suggested that the total plant biomass (and, by proxy, the total biomass on Earth) has declined approximately twofold relative to its value before the start of human civilization,” Also alarming: “While the total biomass of wild mammals (both marine and terrestrial) decreased by a factor of ≈ 6 , the total mass of mammals increased approximately fourfold. . . due to the vast increase of the biomass of humanity and its associated livestock.” Our fat asses, and the fat animals we breed to sink our teeth into, have taken over everything.

[Sixth mass extinction \(Holocene or Anthropocene extinction\)](#)

[240-540 years.](#) P. 55: “[I]f all ‘threatened’ species became extinct within a century, and that rate then continued unabated, terrestrial amphibian, bird and mammal extinction would reach Big Five magnitudes in ~ 240 to 540 years (241.7 years for amphibians, 536.6 years for birds, 334.4 years for mammals). Reptiles have so few of their species assessed that they are not included in this calculation.”

[Anthropocene epoch](#)

[Nuclear weapons possibly ending all complex life on earth \(p. 339\)](#)

It's like the Monroe Doctrine, but for the entire planet: nobody gets to fuck up planet Earth but us. If any species other than us—terrestrial or extraterrestrial—ever tried to fuck it up, we'd wipe them out so we could continue fucking it up ourselves.

I will address humans' strikingly differential evaluation of ourselves versus various other animal species—and the self-aggrandizing delusions of these evaluations—extensively in this book.

But for now, let's remain with the invadopod thought experiment for a moment:

Suppose we were able to converse with invadopods, and we pointed out to them the harm they were causing to us humans, and all other species. And suppose, in response, they indicated that, on some level, they understood they were causing harm. But they just didn't care.

Suppose they engaged in a number of [DARVO](#) tactics. (This is an acronym for “Deny, Attack, Reverse the Victim and Offender,” a common psychological tactic of abusers when confronted over their harm.)

In response to our charges, they denied and minimized their harm: “It's really not that bad in the scheme of things.” Or “it used to be worse—we're getting a lot better.”

They attacked us verbally, and paint themselves as the victims: “You are the ones who want to harm us. We need to amass these resources to protect ourselves.”

Or suppose they supplied a justification for this harm that we find wholly unconvincing: “Our God Invadodon, the One and Only True God, told us that we are His chosen creatures, we were made in His image, and we shall have dominion over all other creatures.”

Or, imagine that invadopods actually had the nerve to say their harm was *benefitting* their victims: “We’re making the world a better place.” “We’re on the leading edge of the evolution of life.” “We are the stewards of the land.”

Or, perhaps they just shrugged their invadopod shoulders, and said “Eh.” Or crossed their invadopod arms: “Whaddya gonna do about it?”

We might, after these conversations, decide that invadopods were not just a destructive species, but a *sociopathic species*.

The official term for sociopathy, in the psychiatric profession, is “antisocial personality disorder.” In the past, [the clinical term used to be “psychopathy,”](#) but in the 1920s, a psychologist named George Partridge suggested “sociopathy” would be a better term, as it emphasizes the antisocial aspects of the condition.³⁵ In 1952, the first version of American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), the bible of the American (and much of the world’s) psychiatric profession, [used the term](#) “sociopathic personality disturbance” instead of the previously common “psychopathy.”

Some mental health professionals [maintain that there is a distinction](#) between sociopaths and psychopaths, [sometimes claiming](#) that the former results from childhood circumstances and the latter is innate. However, this is not a distinction recognized officially by the American Psychiatric Association. The DSM-V (the current version, published in 2013) states that antisocial personality disorder “has also been referred to as *psychopathy, sociopathy, or dyssocial personality disorder*” (p. 659, emphasis in original.) In lay usage, “psychopathic” and

³⁵ Reference needed

“sociopathic” can be used interchangeably. (I use the latter in this book, simply because of the convenient alliteration with “species”!)

So, what is sociopathy, a.k.a psychopathy, a.k.a antisocial personality disorder, in a clinical sense? The DSM-V states:

Individuals with antisocial personality disorder frequently lack empathy and tend to be callous, cynical, and contemptuous of the feelings, rights, and sufferings of others. They may have an inflated and arrogant self-appraisal. . . .

They may be indifferent to, or provide a superficial rationalization for, having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from someone (e.g., ‘life’s unfair,’ ‘losers deserve to lose’). These individuals may blame the victims for being foolish, helpless, or deserving their fate (e.g., ‘he had it coming anyway’); they may minimize the harmful consequences of their actions; or they may simply indicate complete indifference. They generally fail to compensate or make amends for their behavior. They may believe that everyone is out to ‘help number one’ and that one should stop at nothing to avoid being pushed around. [pp. 659-660.]

Back to our invadopods, the conversation with them was necessary for us to come to the judgment that they were not just a destructive species, but a sociopathic one. Judging someone as sociopath depends on supposing that that person at least has (or could come to have) *awareness* that they are causing others serious harm. It also depends on imagining that they could act otherwise.

For example, sharks, snakes and alligators behave in a way that—if humans were to behave that way—would be called sociopathic. Indeed, we often speak of sociopathic humans as

“sharks” or “snakes” or “reptilian.”³⁶ But we do not typically call sharks, snakes or alligators themselves sociopaths.

Why not? Because we do not suppose that a shark, snake, or alligator *clearly understands* what it means to *cause harm to another being*—just as we don’t suppose young children have a clear understanding of such things. Furthermore, we don’t suppose that sharks, snakes, alligators, or young children could do otherwise. That’s why we don’t hold them morally culpable for their actions.

We also don’t generally hold schizophrenic or otherwise totally delusional people morally responsible for their actions. Suppose a man shoots another man in the street randomly. In his defense, the shooter says, “I killed that guy because God put puppet strings on me and commandeered my arms to lift the gun and pull the trigger.” And suppose, after some inquiry, we came to believe this man was being sincere about his mental state.

At this point, we might decide the killer could not have acted otherwise. Not because we believe he had divine puppet strings attached to him. But because—since *he* believed he had divine puppet strings attached to him—we might conclude that he was so deluded he no longer possessed moral agency; he was simply in the grips of psychosis.³⁷

Unlike our divine-puppet-strings madman, if a being uses DARVO tactics precisely-tailored to deny guilt and ward off shame (rather than just blathering off random psychotic

³⁶ See, e.g., [*Snakes in Suits: Understanding and Surviving the Psychopaths in Your Office*](#) by Paul Babiak and Robert Hare (2019).

³⁷ Interestingly, if the killer said, “God ordered me to do it,” without mention of the puppet strings, I notice my instinct would be to hold him morally culpable. I inquired within myself as to why I feel there’s a distinction. Is it because I would deem him less delusional? No. I’m an atheist. I think believing in any commandments from God is 100% delusional. So what’s the difference? Upon reflection, I realized: within the second delusion, the killer could have done otherwise. He could have *disobeyed* God’s commands. “I was just following orders” is not a valid justification for murder, whether it’s Hitler issuing the orders, or Yahweh.

nonsense), that seems evidence of enough mental prescience to conclude they could have chosen *not* to commit the harm.

For example, a client defending themselves *pro se* in court would have a difficult time arguing for the insanity defense, if they were expressing this defense cogently and clearly. This “[Catch 22](#)” was famously dramatized in Joseph Heller’s novel by that name. A pilot, Orr, is trying to portray himself as insane, so as to get out of his dangerous duties. The army psychiatrist, Doc Daneeka, tells Orr that there’s a catch: “Catch-22. Any one wants to get out of combat duty isn’t really crazy.”

If, in relation to awareness of the massive harm they are causing (or willful ignorance of it), a person simply doesn’t care, and continues causing massive harm, we might begin to think of this person as sociopathic (either in a clinical sense, or in a broader, colloquial sense): they know what society means by “right” and “wrong,” but they simply lack any conscience or empathy that would constrain them from committing moral wrong.

Along these lines, as I’ve suggested, based on our above-positing conversations with invadopods, we would likely decide that invadopods were not only a massively destructive species, but a *sociopathic species*.

Since our collective effect is exactly the same as the invadopods—and since we are aware of these massive harms, or could choose to make ourselves aware—I believe the same judgment applies to us.

The thesis of this book is that the human species is collectively—towards other species, and among competing groups within our own species—sociopathic.

The word *collectively* is crucial. We must always keep in mind Nietzsche's observation, quoted as the epitaph of this book, which I repeat here: "In individuals, insanity is rare; but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule."

I am not a fan of the trend—ever increasing in the age of social media "call outs"—to toss around clinical diagnoses such as "narcissist" or "sociopath" willy-nilly. These words have become synonyms, in colloquial usage, for "selfish," "asshole" or "abuser." However, the population of selfish, asshole abusers is much larger than the population of clinical narcissists or sociopaths. Though all sociopaths are the former, not all the former are sociopaths.

Thus, when someone calls another person a "sociopath," simply as a synonym for that person being selfish, an asshole, or a run-of-the-mill (and all-too-common) abuser, I think: *you've never met a true sociopath*. Not to excuse selfish, asshole, or abusive behavior. But words have meanings, and as soon as one dilutes the meaning of the word, one dilutes the usefulness of the word.

I want to be absolutely clear here: by my title and thesis—"The Sociopathic Species"—I do not mean that all or even most humans are sociopathic in a clinical sense. I mean that when we organize in large, self-identified groups—as is inevitable for humans—most *groups* end up behaving sociopathically, sooner or later, to at least some out-group, whether that out-group is non-human or human. (And also, groups often end up behaving sociopathically to some of their own members—particularly those members who become alarmed by and do anything to call out or stop the group's collective sociopathic behavior.)

Human *groups*, as entities, frequently behave sociopathically, even if none of the individual members would be diagnosed by a mental health professional as a clinical sociopath.

In such a world, the main question becomes: which sociopathic in-group has the most money, the biggest guns, and the most powerful ideology and propaganda to climb to the top of the sociopathocracy?

Man's (In)Humanity to Man:

Passive Inhumanity

So far, I've only addressed man's (in)humanity to other species, which—in my view—the thought experiment about invadopods establishes beyond any reasonable doubt. We will be returning to this topic frequently throughout the book.

But now, in this overview, let's turn to man's (in)humanity to man.

Throughout this text, I will use the term “(in)humane” to draw attention to the reality that the creature after which the term “humane” is named, frequently acts in ways that are, by the standards of that term, extremely *inhumane*. Which calls into question the fairness of the term. Perhaps a better term for kindness would be koala-ane? Panda-ane? Blue-whale-ane? Horse-ane? Giraffe-ane? Bonobo-ane?

Perhaps “humane” would be more apt term for *cruelty*. Of course, the eponymous creature of the term “humane”—used as a synonym for kind and compassionate—is prone to extreme over-estimation of his own inherent goodness, so this propagandistic, unwarranted self-aggrandizement comes as no surprise.³⁸

³⁸ The words here are my own. But the basic idea of “humane-ness” being an incorrect and self-deluded word used by humans, is something my father repeatedly stressed to me as I was growing up, and I thank him for this insight. Here is some writing he did on the topic, in unpublished notes about a month after 9/11. All words following are a quotation from Daniel Ellsberg:

It is time for us to face something about ourselves, we humans. In truth, it is well past time, it is very late in the day. But perhaps not yet too late. It is certainly not too soon.

It's this: as a species, we are very much less inhibited about slaughtering each other, other humans, than we tell ourselves, or imagine. We are almost unique among species in this respect. And we remain almost entirely oblivious to this as a species-wide characteristic, and to its being near unique among animals.

“We” humans? Yes, I do address us very broadly, in our broadest sense of species, as individuals and together. We, collectively, and nearly every one of us, reacts to concrete descriptions of a new instance of massacre of humans with shock. That is, with a combination, first, of horror and revulsion, and, second, of surprise and incomprehension. The first part is appropriate (after the World Trade Center, as after every such mass murder); the second is not. It reflects willful ignorance, long participation in deliberate denial, not just about our own “civilization” but about our species.

We ask: “How could anyone—any human—do such things?”

Who do we think have been doing these massacres, every one of them? Animals? That is, other forms of animal?

That's what we imply by what we say about the perpetrators. The generic term for such behavior is “inhuman.” “Like animals.” “Animalistic.” Monsters: brutes. “Brute behavior.” Brutal, brutish. But which species of brute are we talking about? What other animal species behaves to other members of its own species like this? (Or more generally—toward other species, except to eat them, that is, to survive, to satisfy a primal physical hunger?)

We are, after all, almost the single species that kills other animals—including other humans, or another species—for reasons other than to eat them. (We are joined in this by a few strains of ants; and of chimpanzees, our closest cousins genetically.) And we are almost the only one that regularly kills others of our own species at all—never, in fact, or almost never, to eat them. In this last point, only, we are like nearly every other species. . . .

But unlike other species, we do not have an instinctual inhibition against killing our own. Nor do we have a social tabu against killing humans that is remotely comparable in effectiveness to the tabu against cannibalism. There is, of course, a tabu against “murder” in virtually all human societies, but that has a very flexible definition, a matter for argument and subjective application in almost every case of homicide, and obviously fails to prevent a very large number of murders. More significantly, the very concept is regarded as inapplicable to the vast majority of homicides (which take place in wars and other social conflicts).

It is, to a very good approximation, only humans who do this, who kill both other species on a wide scale and, our own for reasons other than eating. We are the animals that do this.

But are not the humans who act this way—the perpetrators of massacre—different from “us,” in socialization, culture, civilization? Their behavior is commonly described as “savage,” “primitive,” uncivilized.” “barbarian.”

So we thought of the Germans in World War II. Indeed, the Nazis liked terms like that about themselves. “Blond brutes.” They appealed to deep impatience with the restraints of civilization, the supposed weakening, un-manning bonds of law and civility. They appealed to Germans to raise this barbaric, tribal energy. But how much of this was just propaganda, rhetoric, theater, like the theatrical costumes that Hitler designed for the SS, or the avenues of tall banners designed by Speer for the Nuremberg Rallies?

Germany, barbaric? What culture in Europe by the late nineteenth century was more advanced in technology, in music, in philosophy, poetry, more educated and literate, more acculturated to orderly life? If Germans could do such things—we Americans might have asked ourselves, but rarely did (they were at the time an “enemy” in a war)—who couldn't?

(I have not yet fully addressed the stark differences in how destructive different *cultures* have been towards their non-human cohabitants of Earth throughout history. For now, I'll reiterate one more time, and after this I'll stop adding this proviso every time: it's obvious that cultures with access to bigger firepower have blown bigger holes through the ecosystems and other cultures. I do not believe humans' impact on the environment or on each other is monolithic. Nor do I believe that this varied impact negates my overall thesis that humans act sociopathically in large groups. There are large differences in destructiveness between sociopathically-behaving in-groups armed with nuclear weapons, versus sociopathically-behaving groups armed with spears.³⁹

So now, on to man's (in)humanity to man.

Well, we Americans. So I thought, as much as my friends and neighbors, growing up in World War II, watching in newsreels bombs falling on Coventry and London, bombing housing and apartment buildings filled with families and children. I recall my horror at the notion that Germans used on civilian targets magnesium bombs that burn through flesh and cannot be put out with water. Yet we proceeded to drop ten to a hundred tons of bombs for every ton by the Germans, much of it incendiaries, on families in Hamburg, Cologne, Dresden, and Tokyo.

It is not that, after all, we humans often behave "like animals," like other animals. We are the animals who behave like this, almost the only ones—entirely the only ones who do it on the scale we do, and with organization and planning—and the ones who do it with, very often, deliberate cruelty. Killing is not the whole of it: there is torture, imprisonment and enslavement, all unique to our species.

In pointing these truths out, am I a self-hating human? Actually, no, not at all. As I know, we are also the species more capable than any other of empathy, compassion, self-sacrifice, altruism, love and creativity. I can say "patriotically": I love humanity. I am proud to be a human. I imagine the challenge: "Come on—how can you 'love' people who do such things as you describe?" Well, actually, I do love America, and I'm happy to be American—although I do know such things about us.

³⁹ As a counterpoint, though: in the [Rwandan genocide](#), the Hutus managed to achieve high marks on the historical collective sociopathy scale, armed mostly with machetes. They slaughtered between a half a million and a million Tutsis, mostly civilians, within the space of around three months in 1994, much of this at arms' length via machete.

One aspect of being “humane” (in the common usage, not the reverse usage I pondered above) is *caring* about the suffering of our fellow humans. And to whatever degree possible, *doing* something about it once this care arises.

Once we learn of the suffering of others (or, more commonly, overcome our willful ignorance about it), the degree to which we “do something” about this suffering is a fair measure of how much we actually care.

To “care” about someone, it seems to me, is to be willing to make a sacrifice to help them when in need. If someone claimed they “cared” about you, but was utterly unwilling to lift one finger to help you when you were in need, how much faith would you have in their alleged “care”?

(This is why the automated phrase “Thank you for your patience; we care about you as a customer,” blasted ad nauseum over an interminable wait time for a customer service representative, rings so hollow. If they truly cared, they would make the short-term financial sacrifice of hiring more service representatives to reduce the wait time.)

There are two basic ways to be inhumane to others, which might be called “passive” and “active” inhumanity. I’ve already mentioned the “passive” version—not lifting a finger to help someone when in need. Another version of passive inhumanity is failing to alter one’s behavior in a way that might reduce the incidental, unintentional (“collateral”) suffering it causes.

This passive inhumanity includes, for example, not altering our lifestyles so as to reduce the harm we cause to other people (and species) via pollution and climate change. And it also includes passive complicity in harmful social structures and policies, generally by those who stand to benefit by these policies. (“If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” “White silence is violence.”)

In later chapters we will talk about “active” inhumanity, which is intentionally and directly acting to harm others. Or acting with “reckless disregard” for others: knowing (or willfully disregarding) the risks one’s actions have in harming others, but doing them anyways. In practice, these various forms of passive and active inhumanity can bleed into each other, and may be distinctions without a difference. But for discussion’s sake, it’s useful to analyze passive vs. active inhumanity separately.

The vast majority of inhumanity most of us humans engage in is passive. There are 7.8 billion humans on the planet as of this writing, and among these humans, unfathomable suffering, from disease, war, poverty, hunger, and all manner of oppression and human rights abuses. It’s a lot easier for a person to *disregard* the suffering of billions of other people, than to directly cause significant harm to billions of other people. (The latter would require nuclear weapons.)

In fact, not only is it easier to disregard the suffering of countless others. But doing so seems necessary, to some degree, to live what anyone might call a “normal” day-to-day life.

For example, I live in the San Francisco Bay Area, and over the last fifteen years or so (roughly since the rents in San Francisco started exploding, due to local tech and social media companies’ skyrocketing valuations) there has also been an explosion of tent cities in the area.

An urban tent city seems to be among the most horrendous conditions a modern human could live, short of war zones. No access to water, food or sanitation. Where do you shit or wash your hands? Where do you shower? Where do you wash your clothes? Living among trash heaps, rodents, and overwhelming smells of human waste. And now, rampant risk for a literal plague due to unsanitary conditions.

Packed-in densely among fellow people who are disproportionately suffering from severe mental illness or drug addiction—if you’re not suffering from these yourself. You can barely leave your place to try to seek essentials, without fear of all your stuff getting stolen. Physical and sexual assault running rampant, with no recourse to police or legal protection (for what’s that worth—which as most Americans are finally seeing, is often worse than nothing, especially for the poor and non-white).

What’s more, once you’re trapped in one of these encampments, it’s difficult to pull yourself out. Let’s say you want a job to have some income to get out. Where would you put as your address for the job application? How would you access clean clothes, a shower and grooming supplies to go to the job interview? Even if you had a cell phone where they could call you back, where would you charge it? All of these logistical issues (which most of us housed people take for granted, but which become insurmountable for unhoused people) make it nearly impossible to get a job. Which means even more impoverishment, which means fewer still resources to get out. And down and down, in a vicious spiral.

If I were to find out a friend were at risk for spending even *one night* in a tent city, I would be horrified, would stop whatever I was doing, and would do whatever I could to prevent this.^{†††}

And yet, when I was living in Alameda (a large residential island off the shore of Oakland), I would drive right by tent cities each day, right at the Oakland side entrance/exit to the tunnel on my way out of and onto the idyllic island. And I wouldn’t pay a moment’s thought beyond, “Damn, it’s *awful* that people need to live in these.” (That, plus \$3,500 a month, would

get each victim of poverty in that tent city a studio apartment in the Bay Area.) Sometimes even that minor thought of concern eluded me, as these tent cities have simply become part of the normalized backdrop of driving in the Bay Area—to be psychologically blotted out in order to pay attention to one’s Bluetooth cellphone conversation while driving.

Am I an uncaring human being? In an obvious sense, yes. How could I drive by people *living on the streets in fucking tents, and not fucking do something?*

Does this striking lack of empathy for these people in extreme suffering right outside my car window make me a sociopath? I’ve engaged in neurotic levels of self-inquiry in my life. And while I have definitely been a bipolar nut-job at various times in my adult life—and I do believe I was in a clinical psychosis for a period of about one month during my worst-ever bipolar mania, more on which later—I do not believe I’m a clinical sociopath. (Of course, you may have your own judgment.)

But either way, every single day I exist in the Bay Area, I am exhibiting, in spades, a hallmark sociopathic trait: a stunning lack of empathy for the suffering of others right in front of my face. Of course, I am not alone in this behavior; nearly everyone who drives in the Bay Area or walks around San Francisco engages in this passive extreme inhumanity daily.

Our collective sociopathic-level lack of empathy for the tent-city-dwellers in our midst reached its apotheosis in a now-infamous [2016 open-letter](#) to San Francisco mayor Ed Lee, written by tech entrepreneur (“tech bro”) Justin Keller:

“Every day, on my way to, and from work, I see people sprawled across the sidewalk, tent cities, human feces, and the faces of addiction. The city is becoming a shanty town... Worst of all, it is unsafe,” Keller wrote.

Up until this point, Keller’s letter is simply factually true—this is what most people in San Francisco see on their way to and from work. “Shantytown” is a perfectly accurate way to describe how many people in San Francisco are living. But here’s where the sociopathic level of non-empathy gets turned up many notches:

[T]he reality is, we live in a free market society. The wealthy working people have earned their right to live in the city. They went out, got an education, work hard, and earned it. I shouldn’t have to worry about being accosted. I shouldn’t have to see the pain, struggle, and despair of homeless people to and from my way to work every day.”⁴⁰

I, along with much of the Internet during that outrage cycle, [found this letter utterly repugnant](#). As many critics pointed out, Keller’s concern was having to *see* the pain, struggle, and despair of his fellow humans, not that they were *in* pain, struggle, and despair.

Out of sight, out of mind.

⁴⁰ Three years earlier, another San Francisco tech bro named Greg Gopman penned a [similarly-appalling Facebook post](#), which also went outrage-viral:

Just got back to SF. I've traveled around the world and I gotta say there is nothing more grotesque than walking down market st in San Francisco. Why the heart of our city has to be overrun by crazy, homeless, drug dealers, dropouts, and trash I have no clue. Each time I pass it my love affair with SF dies a little.

The difference is in other cosmopolitan cities, the lower part of society keep to themselves. They sell small trinkets, beg coyly, stay quiet, and generally stay out of your way. They realize it's a privilege to be in the civilized part of town and view themselves as guests. And that's okay.

In downtown SF the degenerates gather like hyenas, spit, urinate, taunt you, sell drugs, get rowdy, they act like they own the center of the city. Like it's their place of leisure... In actuality it's the business district for one of the wealthiest cities in the USA. It a disgrace. I don't even feel safe walking down the sidewalk without planning out my walking path.

You can preach compassion, equality, and be the biggest lover in the world, but there is an area of town for degenerates and an area of town for the working class. There is nothing positive gained from having them so close to us. It's a burden and a liability having them so close to us. Believe me, if they added the smallest iota of value I'd consider thinking different, but the crazy toothless lady who kicks everyone that gets too close to her cardboard box hasn't made anyone's life better in a while.”

But the main difference between Keller and the rest of us—aside from his totally unreconstructed social Darwinism—was his willingness to *voice* the degree to which “out of sight, out of mind” operated in his psyche.

Our outrage at Keller overlooks—and serves to cover up—the degree to which “out of sight, out of mind” is almost a *necessary* defense mechanism for all of us, to live anything approaching what might be called a “normal” day-to-day life in the Bay Area: sleeping peacefully, going to work, eating dinner, hanging out with family and friends, looking oneself in the mirror. It would be impossible for almost anyone to live any semblance such a “normal” life if we were to *actually respond*, in an emotionally appropriate manner, to the reality of people living in hellish conditions just beyond our windows.

How many of us expressing outrage, horror and shock at Keller on the Internet, express the same level of outrage, horror and shock when we—like Keller—walk or drive by hundreds of humans living permanently in tent cities every day?

In his first major work, [*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*](#) (1759), Adam Smith points out the great amount of fret we feel over personal concerns which are, in the grand scheme of things, minor in comparison to the vast suffering beyond our lives. Writing from the perspective of a Scottish citizen, he proposes a thought experiment. (I’ve kept original spelling in. And for ease of reading, I’ve added paragraph breaks that were not in the original):

Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connexion with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity.

He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would, too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this

disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general.

And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance.

If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.”

Smith’s thought experiment is shocking. But it rings true to me. If you knew you were going to have your finger sawed off tomorrow morning (painfully, without anesthesia), would you lose more sleep over that than—say—millions of people starving to death? We already know the answer, since millions of people we don’t know personally *are* currently starving to death in various parts of the world, and most of us find a way to sleep through the night just fine, in relation to this starvation. (We would get little sleep indeed if persistent mass starvation were a major source of our ongoing insomnia.)

Right after this thought experiment, Smith then goes on to distinguish between what I’ve been calling here “passive inhumanity” versus “active inhumanity” [emphasis added]:

To prevent, therefore, this paltry misfortune to himself, would a man of humanity be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them? Human nature startles with horror at the thought, and the world, in its greatest depravity and corruption, never produced such a villain as could be capable of entertaining it.

But what makes this difference? When our *passive* feelings are almost always so sordid and so selfish, how comes it that our *active* principles should often be so generous and so noble? When we are always so much more deeply affected by whatever concerns ourselves than by whatever concerns other men, what is it which prompts the generous, upon all occasions, and the mean upon many, to sacrifice their own interests to the greater interests of others?”

The obvious solution to the passive inhumanity nearly all of us exhibit in the face of this morally horrendous state of affairs in our midst—taking into consideration the extreme disruption it would require for each of us as individuals to confront or solve these horrors on a 1-by-1 basis—is for society to handle the problem collectively.

I would be happy—and I’m sure many other Bay Area residents would be happy--to pay higher taxes if we knew these taxes would solve this moral shame in our midst, and get these victims decent housing, support for employment opportunities, access to mental health care and drug counseling for those in need, etc.⁴¹

This is precisely what collective policy solutions to social problems are for. To allow citizens of all stripes to go on living normal lives, going to work each day, etc., while using some portion in their earnings from this work (in the form of taxes) to express humanity to those in need. This is a much better solution than relying on people to massively disrupt their day-to-day lives to deal with problems individually, less effectively than the society could collectively through proper policy.

⁴¹ In fact, even Keller possibly suggested as much, in his own horrendously-expressed way. Later in his open letter, he wrote: “I don’t have a magic solution... It is a very difficult and complex situation, but somehow during Super Bowl, almost all of the homeless and riff raff* seem to up and vanish. I’m willing to bet that was not a coincidence. Money and political pressure can make change. So it is time to start making progress, or we as citizens will make a change in leadership and elect new officials who can.”

The “solution” via government spending he envisioned was left unspecified. It’s likely he just wanted the tent cities to be broken up, and the people forcefully relocated out of the city, out of sight. (His phrase “up and vanish” suggests this.) But it’s also possible he would support the city spending this money for actual solutions.

(*He later did at least write: “I want to apologize for using the term riff raff. It was insensitive and counterproductive.” As far as I can tell, he faced no other serious consequences for his letter, besides Internet opprobrium.)

Alas, that collective effective action never seems to come. It certainly hasn't arisen in relation to homelessness in the Bay Area. This is one of the most acute, morally horrendous, and visible social problems the Bay Area (and most cities in California) have been facing for decades, with no solution in sight.

Daniel Duane writes, in his 2016 *New York Times* article "[The Tent Cities of San Francisco](#)":

In an exquisite illustration of California's core political neurosis — the tension between our attachment to the pretty view and our desire to care for the least among us without personal inconvenience, even as our population and economy explode — we San Franciscans voted yes on [propositions] Q and J [banning sidewalk camping so long as tent-dwellers are offered indoor shelter, and *proposing* a \$50 million fund raised from a small sales-tax increase to pay for the shelters], and no on K [which would have actually *passed* the sales tax increase that would fund the shelters]. The people spoke, in other words, and we said, 'Get rid of those filthy tents and set aside heaps of money to make sure it's done in a compassionate way so I don't have to feel guilty, but don't squeeze me for a dime.'"

It would be easy to blame the homeless problem on individual, wealthy Mission-district-gentrifying tech-bro lords of SF like Justin Keller and Greg Gopman (see my footnote to the Keller story for the Gopman outrage); these men do seem to exhibit sociopathic levels of selfishness and callousness towards the suffering of their fellow humans.

But I've promised not to pin the blame for humanity's problems on individuals acting like sociopaths; while certainly relevant in specific cases, I don't think that's the most fruitful level of analysis overall. This is a book about the way that human collectives act sociopathically, even if most of the individuals in that collective display relatively normal levels of kindness and caring towards others in their lives.†††

What's the Point When There is No Point?

In his 1799 book *The Vocation of Man*, German idealist philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte [asks](#) a series of pressing questions:

Shall I eat and drink only that I may hunger and thirst and eat and drink again, till the grave which is open beneath my feet shall swallow me up, and I myself become the food of worms? Shall I beget beings like myself, that they too may eat and drink and die, and leave behind them beings like themselves to do the same that I have done? To what purpose this ever-revolving circle, this ceaseless and unvarying round, in which all things appear only to pass away, and pass away only that they may re-appear unaltered;—this monster continually devouring itself that it may again bring itself forth, and bringing itself forth only that it may again devour itself?

These questions (which Fichte asked rhetorically) can be summed up as the depressed and existentially-anxious person's perennial cry: "What's the point?" After all, a *point* is not a point if the point itself will disappear. So if you believe all things are [ashes to ashes and dust to dust](#), with *no* afterlife or other lasting impact, then yes, "what's the point?"

A typical response to this type of existential despair is illustrated in a scene from the film *Annie Hall*. The [scene](#) (worth watching) is a flashback to the main character Alvy's childhood. In it, Alvy's mother takes the boy to see Dr. Flicker, a psychiatrist:

Mother: He's been depressed. All of the sudden, he can't do anything.

Dr. Flicker: Why are you depressed, Alvy?

Alvy: The universe is expanding. . . . Well the universe is everything, and if it's expanding, someday it will break apart, and that will be the end of everything.

Mother: What is that your business? [To Dr. Flicker] He's stopped doing his homework.

Alvy: What's the point?

Mother: What has the universe got to do with it? You're here in Brooklyn. Brooklyn is not expanding!

Dr. Flicker: It won't be expanding for billions of years, Alvy. And we've got to try to enjoy ourselves while we're here, eh? Eh? [Laughing]

Dr. Flicker's response makes sense. After all, pleasure is its own reward; it does not need some deeper meaning to provide it value. When you're in the throes of sexual ecstasy, receiving the best oral sex of your life, you don't usually think, "Yeah, but what's the *point* of this?" (Unless, like me, you've got some weird kind of philosophy kink.)

That is, *in the moment* of sexual ecstasy, you don't usually think "What's the point of this?" But there's a reason that orgasm has been referred to in French as *la petit mort*— the little death. There's a reason sex without cuddling afterward can often leave one feeling hollow and disconnected. There's a reason, during that post-coital cuddling, people sometimes wonder (if it's a new relationship, or if it's on the rocks), "What is this relationship? Where is it heading? What are we doing here?"

That reason is that pleasure, while pleasurable, can feel *empty* afterward. It is its own reward *during*, but afterward, it admits of the question, "What was the point of that?" As anyone who has woken up with a hangover and an empty bed after a one night stand can attest— however ecstatically Dionysian that one-night stand was during the night of its oneness.

"What does it all mean?" "Where is it all heading?" "Is this all there is?" "Should I just do as much drugs and fuck as much as possible before the apocalypse?" These are the perennial questions of the existential crisis.

Meaning for Mortals

The meaning of "meaning," when used in phrases like "what's the meaning of life?" or "what's the meaning of *my* life?" is difficult if to pin down. After all, what's the meaning of a

rock? What's the meaning of a tree? Humans, like rocks and trees, were not created as symbols or expressions, so it's difficult to understand what "meaning" even means when applied to them.

Of course, religious people believe that humans, rocks, and trees *were* created to mean something. Specifically, they were created to reflect the glory of God. [Psalm 19](#) of the Bible illustrates this view clearly, suggesting that while the skies have no literal voice, they nonetheless speak volumes about the glory of God:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

In [Ephesians 1:4-6](#), Paul proclaims that God "chose us in him before the foundation of the world. . . he predestined us. . . according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace. . . ." In other words, before God created anything in the world at all, he predestined us to praise him for creating the world and for creating us within it.

Of course, as an atheist, if I were to ask, "what is the meaning of my life?" and someone were to answer, "the meaning of your life is to reflect and praise the glory of a narcissistic, vindictive, bloodthirsty, infanticidal, megalomaniacal, racist, homophobic, misogynistic

genocidal ethnic cleanser in the sky,” I would scratch my head and ask, “HmMMM... And why is my participation in *that* mess preferable to, say, jumping off of a bridge?”⁴²

If you are a non-believer, then you can’t hold that that the fact of your birth was an *expression* of anything, other than (perhaps) your parents’ love. (For those who were brought into the world with less forethought, it could also be an expression of one’s parents’ drunkenness, horniness, and lack of using a condom.)

Nonetheless, of course, *you* can express many things while you’re alive. Thus, your life can in fact be an expression of something that matters to you, and thus . Perhaps it is an expression of love, or your values, or what you care about, or some difference you’d like to see in the world.

If your life can be an expression of something that matters to you, then what are you expressing, and why does it matter to you? If you can answer these questions, you will be well on your way to figuring out what your life *means*—to yourself and others around you.

Yet, for a philosophical pessimist such as myself, the question still remains: if everything is going to perish, what difference does it make if I express something that matters to me or not? Eventually, unless I become legendary for some reason, everything I ever express will be forgotten. And at some point, everything *humans* express will be forgotten, at least by humans themselves, as humans will cease to exist.

Maybe our expressions will be remembered by artificially intelligent entities, up in “the cloud” (a secular version of “the heavens”?) But it’s not even clear that these entities will be

⁴² The adjectives here are from Richard Dawkins’s wonderful quote about God, in his book [The God Delusion](#): “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

conscious, and even if they are, they will be so alien to us it's unclear why we should care what they think about us (and if they do, it's probably not positive).

The memories of our expression, all those drunken photos we posted on Instagram, all those ramblings, rants, and tirades on TikTok, will simply be bits (or quantum qubits) stored in a memory substrate, selectively wiped out when the server farms get full and fresher data needs to be stored, and perhaps being mined for data to run simulations.

Maybe these simulations will exist to teach the AIs how to avoid their own civilizational apocalypse. Or maybe reconstructions of you will be run and digitally projected as holographic entertainment—perhaps with your face deepfaked onto galactic porn. Until the heat death of the universe, when even this deepfaked galactic porn (or whatever the memories of your expressions are being used for by the AI entities that supersede us) will be shut down.

At any rate, at some point, all our expressions in life and their attendant meanings will disappear. So what's the point of making them? We could say, "to help others." That feels meaningful. But then we must ponder the [1923 quip](#) of British comedian John Foster Hall: "We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don't know." If we're all just here to help others, then why are *any* of us here? As another [quip goes](#), we can't all live by "taking in each other's washing."

My pet theory of religion (influenced by Ernest Becker from his book *The Denial of Death*) is that people believe in God primarily because they want to be *remembered*. Being *forgotten* is depressing—perhaps even more depressing than death. After all, when we die, we know that we may be remembered by friends and family. But at some point, all of the friends and family who knew us while we were alive will be dead too, and then we will die to living memory. Maybe our non-living memory will remain in a generation or two of our family

members, in the stories about us they've passed on to younger generations. But it's doubtful those memories will last more than a generation or two. How much do you really know (and how often do you think) about your great-great-grandparents? Sure, anyone who's curious can Google whatever random traces you've left on the Internet. But who will be curious?

The idea of simply *disappearing* from memory feels depressing, even to a philosophical pessimist like me, who is comfortable and has made peace with all kinds of depressing thoughts. I think that religion serves as a balm to this depressing thought. Not only will we get to live forever with all our friends and family, if we're good little boys and girls and do as Daddy in the Sky tells us, but just as meaningful—and perhaps *more* meaningful: we will be *remembered lovingly* forever, by our fellow heaven dwellers, and most magnificently of all, by our loving Father.

God, as eternal and infinite being, has eternal memory and infinite attention. Basically (so goes my pet theory) believers are competing to get into God's good graces so that they can secure a bit of space in that memory, and a bit of his loving attention towards those memories, so that believers will never be forgotten; that makes life feel meaningful to them, as their expression will continue to have meaning (in God's mind) forever.

Of course, God has a lot else on his mind, but since his mind is infinite, he still has attention available to remember all the times we couldn't resist the Devil in our fingers and gave into temptation and whacked off, repenting after we came, and begging forgiveness for our sins, recommitting to our path of sanctity (before the next whack off the next day)... this whole repetitive charade earning us our loving place in God's eternal memory. Our lives meant so much!

For those of us who don't believe in God or his eternal loving memory, however, we still have to wrestle with why the expressions of our life will mean anything, if the memory of these expressions will eventually disappear.

What's the point when all points will disappear?

In a 1948 essay entitled "[On Living in an Atomic Age](#)," C.S. Lewis, the devout Christian author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, attempts to drive a knife into any hope that a nonbeliever might have for leading a meaningful life without God and the afterlife. He was reflecting on the widespread existential dread that the advent of potentially world-ending nuclear weapons. Addressing nonbelievers, he asks—glibly, in my opinion—why we nonbelievers might have any concern for the end of human civilization at all. I quote this passage at length, as it's so vivid:

What did you think all this effort of humanity was to come to in the end? The real answer is known to almost everyone who has even a smattering of science. . . . And the real answer [for non-believers]. . . is that, with or without atomic bombs, the whole story is going to end in NOTHING. The astronomers hold out no hope that this planet is going to be permanently inhabitable. The physicists hold out no hope that organic life is going to be a permanent possibility in any part of the material universe. Not only this earth, but the whole show, all the suns of space, are to run down. Nature is a sinking ship. . . . Nature does not, in the long run, favour life. If Nature is all that exists—in other words, if there is no God and no life of some quite different sort somewhere outside Nature—then all stories will end in the same way: in a universe from which all life is banished without possibility of return. It will have been an accidental flicker, and there will be no one even to remember it. No doubt atomic bombs may cut its duration on this present planet shorter than it might have been; but the whole thing, even if it lasted for billions of years, must be so infinitesimally short in relation to the oceans of dead time which precede and follow it that I cannot feel excited about its curtailment. . . .

We see at once (when we have been waked) that the important question is not whether an atomic bomb is going to obliterate 'civilisation'. The important question is whether 'Nature'—the thing studied by the sciences—is the only thing in existence. Because if you answer yes to the second question, then the first question only amounts to asking whether the inevitable frustration of all human

activities may be hurried on by our own action instead of coming at its natural time. That is, of course, a question that concerns us very much. Even on a ship which will certainly sink sooner or later, the news that the boiler might blow up now would not be heard with indifference by anyone. But those who knew that the ship was sinking in any case would not, I think, be quite so desperately excited as those who had forgotten this fact, and were vaguely imagining that it might arrive somewhere.

It is, then, on [this] question that we really need to make up our minds. And let us begin by supposing that Nature is all that exists. Let us suppose that nothing ever has existed or ever will exist except this meaningless play of atoms in space and time: that by a series of hundredth chances it has (regrettably) produced things like ourselves—conscious beings who now know that their own consciousness is an accidental result of the whole meaningless process and is therefore itself meaningless, though to us (alas!) it feels significant.

Lewis then says that a nonbeliever might have three responses to the belief that nature is all that exists, and that life has no future in nature. His ultimate point is that none of these responses are satisfying, so we must all become believers in God and the afterlife. Of course, I disagree with this view, but I do think his outline of the three basic responses nonbelievers have to existential dread is solid, so it is from these responses I must fashion some thread of meaning and satisfaction in a dying universe. And the first response posits no meaning or satisfaction at all; it's the cessation of meaning or any hope for satisfaction.

Lewis writes:

- (1) You might commit suicide. Nature which has (blindly, accidentally) given me for my torment this consciousness which demands meaning and value in a universe that offers neither, has luckily also given me the means of getting rid of it. I return the unwelcome gift. I will be fooled no longer."

Ouch... strike 1 for meaning! Lewis's second response of the nonbeliever is where pleasure comes in:

- (2) You might decide simply to have as good a time as possible. The universe is a universe of nonsense, but since you are here, grab what you can. Unfortunately, however, there is, on these terms, so very little left to grab—only the coarsest sensual pleasures. You can't, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of

psychic phosphorescence arising from the behaviour of your genes. You can't go on getting any very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion, that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it. You may still, in the lowest sense, have a 'good time'; but just in so far as it becomes very good, just in so far as it ever threatens to push you on from cold sensuality into real warmth and enthusiasm and joy, so far you will be forced to feel the hopeless disharmony between your own emotions and the universe in which you really live.⁴³

This is the response I want to focus on, because it expresses so clearly religious believers' argument for why life without God is meaningless.

If This Be Idolatry, Make the Most of It

Lewis's quote above, about love and music, is idiotic. Think of your favorite absolute favorite song, album, or musician. Is there anything you could learn about *why* you like that music that would make you less passionate about it, or make it feel any less meaningful to you?

⁴³ Theists frequently hold that atheism (and [naturalism](#), which I think is a more useful term for roughly the same complex of ideas), robs the cosmos of wonder and awe. Atheists and naturalists emphatically disagree, holding that wonder and awe at the cosmos, and appreciation of the beauty within it, are entirely compatible with atheism and naturalism.

The strongest statement of this reply from atheists/naturalists I've encountered comes from naturalist thinker Thomas W. Clark in a chapter entitled "[Naturalism and Well-Being](#)." In this chapter, he introduces a lovely term, which lit up a flash of recognition in me when I saw it: "existential astonishment." Here's Clark on existential astonishment:

We of course didn't ask for any of this [in the cosmos] - we simply find ourselves present in the cosmos, which according to naturalism exists precisely for no discernable reason. Therefore, we exist, ultimately, for no discernable reason. But strangely enough, the naturalistic subtraction of ultimate meaning and purpose can generate a genuinely spiritual response to the human condition. Although it takes a little getting used to, appreciating the sheer unguided facticity of the cosmos can be the gateway to existential wonder and amazement. It isn't as if existence as a whole is meaningless - that's to project our parochial demand for meaning onto it, and find it rebuffed - rather, it altogether escapes the meaningful-meaningless distinction: it just is. Seeing that we can't expect nature to have a meaning, we are left, finally, existentially astonished - to be alive and aware, participants in a grand mystery that necessarily transcends any ascription of purpose.

My favorite musician in the world is the singer-songwriter-pianist [Adey Bell](#). As much as anyone has been a fan of anyone's music *ever in the history* of music and fandom, *that* is how much of a fan I am of Adey Bell's music. ([A la Wayne's World](#): "I'm not worthy! I'm not worthy!")

Suppose I discovered that the reason I like Adey Bell's music is because I was infected with a parasite that selectively causes people to like Adey Bell's music. What would I think? Here's what I would think: *I'm glad I got infected with that parasite!*

And if an antibiotic were offered to me that would kill the parasite, but would also kill my love for Adey Bell's music, I would refuse the antibiotic.

C.S. Lewis is deeply confused about the difference between our *passions* and the *sources of our passions*. Our passions are, by definition, animating to us. They are animating to us *no matter where they came from*, and *no matter how aware we are of these sources*.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Related to this issue, in the quote above Lewis displays a glaring example of the "[fallacy of composition](#)": the fallacy that, if something is true (or not true) of a thing, it must be true (or not true) of larger groups, collections, or wholes composed of that thing. A classic example the fallacy: atoms are not alive, therefore, nothing composed of atoms is alive.

In Lewis's case, the fallacy of composition is: atomic and genetic processes on their own (without God) are meaningless, and thus, everything arising from just atomic and genetic processes (without God) is meaningless. Lewis wants to argue this, because he believes it is only God that gives things meaning. (Personally, I've never understood that view. Why would a crusty old genocidal prude who sends his only son to get slaughtered bestow meaning on my life?)

At any rate, to see why Lewis's argument is a fallacy of composition, consider the following: Would you like to eat some raw flour? How about some baking soda? How about a butter stick? Or some 100% bitter chocolate? Or a raw egg?

None of these are very appetizing on their own: but if you mix them together and bake them, they *become* something very appetizing indeed: a chocolate cake!

The whole is other than the sum of its parts; meaning is other than the sum of its parts.

The same goes for romantic love as for music fandom. When I'm in love with someone, I don't care *where* that love came from. My love is compelling to me, *no matter its source*, and *no matter how aware I am of this source*.⁴⁵

Ultimately, if I'm in love with a woman, the *source* of why I'm in love with her matters to me even less than do any passersby when I'm gazing into her eyes.

⁴⁵ If I'm in love with a woman, I can list a hundred reasons why I'm in love with her: her character, her intellect, her values, her sense of humor, her beauty, how she makes me feel around her, the wildness of the sex we have together.

But this list is simply a *description* of why I love for her; it is not an *explanation*. To see the difference, consider the following thought experiment. Imagine listing the top 12 reasons you are romantically attracted to your current partner (if you have one) or a partner you've had in the past, or just anyone you've had a crush on. You can write in detail about their values, their personality, their sense of humor, why you're physically attracted to them, etc.

Now, imagine we gathered 100 people with roughly similar qualities (similar values, character traits, sense of humor, physical attributes, etc.), and gave your list to a stranger, whom we tasked with finding *your specific* beloved out of that room.

My guess is that the stranger wouldn't have much luck picking *your* beloved out of the crowd. Why not? You've written in detail about why you love your beloved. Those qualities contributed to you falling in love with your beloved. They helped *you* pick your beloved out of a crowd of people you could have fallen in love with. (And I'm sure that your beloved would hope that if *you* were in that room with 100 similar people, you wouldn't just view the others as interchangeable with your beloved!)

Why isn't this list enough for the stranger to identify your beloved out of the crowd of similar people? The crux of the matter is that, while we can list and describe countless reasons why we fell in love with a particular person, these reasons don't amount to a causal explanation of why we fell in love with that person. There is a certain *je ne sais quoi* about falling in love, that we can't explain.

If it were explainable why we fell in love with someone, then it would be predictable. And as anyone who has fallen in or out of love knows, it is anything but predictable. They call it "falling in love"—and not "conscientiously walking down the stairs of love"—for a reason.

I used to be in a relationship with a professional matchmaker, and I supported her in finding and making matches. From observing the matchmaking business up-front, I got a special window into just how unpredictable "chemistry" can be.

Of course, we would try to find matches that check off most of a client's boxes for traits and qualities they were looking for (compatibility, life, career and relationship goals, age, appearance, lifestyle, personality, etc.) But we could find someone who checked off all the boxes "on paper," and yet who left our client feeling cold on the first date.

My point is not that finding a match is so unpredictable that it's "anything goes." People tend to match with people in similar ranges and backgrounds of attractiveness, career success, education, values, etc. But no matter how detailed you get on matching specifics, within those specifications, unpredictability still reigns supreme.

The princess rarely kisses the frog, but that doesn't mean it's easy to predict which prince the princess will fall for, or which fellow frog the frog will croak for.

When I'm gazing into my beloved's eyes, I don't care if my love for her came from my genes' program for self-reproduction, or from my need to resolve psychological traumas of childhood, or from some way my beloved reminds me of my mother, or from the cultural programming I got all those cheesy 90's rom-coms and sappy love songs, or from Cupid's arrow, or from God's grace and His plan to create a love within me worthy of Him, or from her being a witch and she cast a love spell on me (actually, I have a slight preference for that one, that would be pretty cool), or from her being the first person I gazed upon after Shakespeare's Puck sprinkled flower juice on my eyelids.⁴⁶

Lewis says that you can't truly be in love with someone if you "know (and keep on remembering)" the causes of that love. (For example, causes relating to the interactions of atoms, chemicals, or genes.)

But this is disingenuous. The phrase "keep on remembering" is doing too much work here, in a sneaky way. The problem is not that *knowing* the causes of your love makes it impossible to love. The problem is that if you are constantly *thinking* about these causes (i.e., remembering them) while you are with your beloved, then you are thinking about something *other* than your beloved when you are with them. You aren't being *present* with the person in front of you and the experience of love between you.

This applies just as much if the cause of our love is God, as if the cause of our love is atoms, chemicals and genes. A person who "keeps on remembering" *Jesus*, when their beloved

⁴⁶ We've all had, no doubt, a few instances of past romantic love that—after it faded—had us shaking our heads and asking ourselves (and our therapist) "What was I thinking?" Things that felt meaningful and motivating in the moment can seem hollow and illusory in retrospect.

But that is surely just as true of a brokenhearted Christian as it is a brokenhearted atheist. The Christian, unfortunately, has the added challenge of producing a theodicy for this particular bit of suffering and misery: "Why did God put me through this?"

was in front of them, instead of their beloved, would be just as guilty of a lack of presence as someone who keeps on remembering atoms or genes, or anything else other than the person in front of them.

In C.S. Lewis's novel *The Great Divorce*, the character named "the Teacher" says:

There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him. And the higher and mightier it is in the natural order, the more demoniac it will be if it rebels. It's not out of bad mice or bad fleas you make demons, but out of bad archangels. The false religion of lust is baser than the false religion of mother-love or patriotism or art: but lust is less likely to be made into a religion.

Of course, views expressed by characters in novels don't necessarily reflect the views of the author, but in this case—based on Lewis's pronouncements elsewhere, and knowing that he generally wrote allegorically—it is clear this view expressed by the Teacher is shared by Lewis.

Lewis's view here is religiously passionate—but it's not *romantically* passionate. He would say, "Exactly: romantic love is a false religion." And I would say, "Well then, bud, you must not have had the kind of romance I've had."

If someone wants to have all their love on earth—including romantic love—mediated through their love of God, more power to them. But it bothers me when theists such as Lewis can't imagine how someone could find meaning by loving something other than God *on its own terms*, not as a mere prop in a play about God.

It's very simple how we find meaning in a world without God: we love the people and things we care about on earth *for their own sake*—precisely the type of love that believers are committed to avoiding (because they view such love as false religion, i.e., idolatry.)

In his 1580 essay "On Friendship," Michel de Montaigne says of his best friend, the writer Etienne de La Boétie: "If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I."

That's the kind of friendship I want; all of us should be so lucky to have one or two friendships in life that reach this inexplicable depth. I would infinitely prefer a friend say *that* about our friendship, over them saying that they love me because God God something something.

If this be idolatry, make the most of it.

A Rebellion Against Meaninglessness?

As I mentioned above, C.S Lewis posits one possible third option that non-believers have for creating meaning in their lives, when they contemplate that (absent God and the afterlife) everything they care about will eventually perish.

(3) You may defy the universe. You may say, “Let it be irrational, I am not. Let it be merciless, I will have mercy. By whatever curious chance it has produced me, now that I am here I will live according to human values. I know the universe will win in the end, but what is that to me? I will go down fighting. Amid all this wastefulness I will persevere; amid all this competition, I will make sacrifices. Be damned to the universe!” You hold up your own human standards against the idiocy of the universe.

This is the stance of the existentialists. It is the stance of Camus in [*The Rebel*](#): “The final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe.” Elsewhere in the book, Camus writes:

Metaphysical rebellion is the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation. It is metaphysical because it contests the ends of man and of creation. . . . [T]he metaphysical rebel declares that he is frustrated by the universe. . . .

Human insurrection, in its exalted and tragic forms, is only, and can only be, a prolonged protest against death, a violent accusation against the universal death penalty. . . . The rejection of death, the desire for immortality and for clarity, are the mainsprings of all these extravagances, whether sublime or puerile. Is it only a cowardly and personal refusal to die? No, for many of these rebels have paid the

ultimate price in order to live up to their own demands. The rebel does not ask for life, but for reasons for living. He rejects the consequences implied by death. If nothing lasts, then nothing is justified; everything that dies is deprived of meaning. To fight against death amounts to claiming that life has a meaning, to fighting for order and for unity.

But given that, as John Maynard Keynes [writes](#), “in the long run we’re all dead,” what is the point of all this fancy metaphysical rebellion? Given that all will be forgotten anyway, what is the point of this metaphysical protest that will be forgotten as well? It seems just as pointless as the pointlessness against which it rebels.

The Door to More Doorways

In life, if you find yourself asking “What’s the point?” it’s probably because you haven’t found something that is, for you, *its own point*.

The word “autotelic” comes from the Greek roots *auto* (“self”) and *telos* (“end, goal”). An activity is autotelic for you if engaging in that activity is its own goal; the activity is not a means towards any other end or goal, beyond itself.

For me, the most consistent example of an autotelic activity in my life has been my thirty-year devotion to writing (I started taking writing seriously when I was fifteen, and I am now—in 2022—forty-five.)

I admit, throughout most of this period, in addition to the autotelic rewards I received from the activity itself (creativity, learning, mental expansion), there were many external rewards I was seeking from writing. These could be called “exotelic” rewards, from the Greek root *exo* (“outside of, external”): fame, notoriety, widespread recognition of my unrecognized brilliance and creativity as a struggling twenty-something writer, and the romantic and sexual opportunities I thought would come from these.

Ironically, in order to write the present book, I needed to give all of these extrinsic rewards. Philosophical pessimism is not exactly a popular position. For years I struggled with the tension between my intrinsic motivations for writing (the joy of creativity, and of exploring and penetrating deeper layers of truth and reality) and my extrinsic motivations (basically, the desire to get laid because of my publicly-signaled creativity.)

Maybe it was some deep commitment to truth—or maybe it was just getting older and my sex drive mellowing out and no longer feeling the need or desire to “make an idol out of sex” (as religious people might put it)... but my desire to write what felt true for me, rather than what was attractive within my dating pool, won out. (If your dating pool has been optimistic, cheery “personal growth” type people, as mine has, then writing a work of philosophical pessimism is very much like taking a dump in your pool.)

I’ve never been happier though. The reason I dive into writing and thinking, is to dive even deeper into writing and thinking. Each bit I learn (and write about) opens up branching channels for deeper learning, thinking, and writing. For me, writing and thinking have become as close to purely autotelic activities as I’ve experienced.

(Sure, I wouldn’t mind if my work became widely read, or if I got dates because of it—but I really don’t care and that’s not why I’m writing anymore. One exotelic result I do care about, however, is getting the writing into the hands of those existentially depressed and anxious people—as I was in my twenties and thirties—for whom it might provide some comfort and solace, make them feel less alone and crazy, and maybe even lead to some joy.)

As I read, write, and think about the topics of this book, each door I unlock leads to more doors, for which I now want and need to discover the keys.

For me, writing is the door to more doorways—and all want to do is open them all!

Feeding the Monster vs. Feeding the Mystery

How do you find your own autotelic activity? In other words, how do you find your activity that is its own goal?

How do you find your door to more doorways?

I think it's useful to distinguish between two types of "autotelic" activities, one of which is a subset of the other.

These two types are "self-rewarding" activities, and a subset of these are "self-amplifying" activities.

A self-rewarding activity is any activity that is enjoyable in itself, and not as a means to some other end. For example, going for a walk because you love going for walks is self-rewarding—but going for a walk because your doctor told you that you need to do so for the health of your heart is exotelic. (That doesn't mean the latter is less worthwhile, it just means that it's not its own reward; it is serving a different reward, which is health.)

A subset of self-rewarding activities consists of which become *more* enjoyable for you as you do them more. I call these "self-amplifying" activities, because doing them gives you the capacity to do them, in a deeper, better, and more satisfying way. In a sense, self-amplifying activities "build on themselves."

For example, learning to play music provides self-amplifying enjoyment. It is self-rewarding, in that playing music provides its own reward. But also, the enjoyment is self-amplifying, because learning to play some amount of music allows you to play *more* and *better* and *more interesting* music. The pleasure you get from it *expands* as you do it.

The point is not just that you get *more* pleasure out of doing the activity as you do it more, but that the pleasure takes on a quality that I call "richness."

Richness, when used in a phrase such as “richness of flavor,” does not mean that there is a great abundance of one quality. It means there are a lot of different elements at work, enhancing each other, “bringing each other out.” Table sugar is not a rich flavor. And, if you already have some table sugar, adding more table sugar will not get you more richness of flavor. A fine chocolatier, however, can combine some sugar with some cacao powder, cacao butter, vanilla extract and other ingredients and bring out the most marvelously rich flavors.

Similarly, a phrase such as “the richness of the novel’s language” does not mean that there is a great abundance of one word. It means, there is a great diversity of elements—vocabulary, diction, nuances, connotations—each enhancing the each other. The same goes for phrases such as “a rich cultural heritage” or “a rich musical tradition.” In ecology, “species richness” refers to the diversity of different species in a given ecosystem.

Self-amplifying activities expand enjoyment not by simply adding *more* of the same simple enjoyment together (More sex! More drugs!) Rather, they expand enjoyment by adding and interconnecting more and different elements to create a richer experience.

Other examples of potentially self-amplifying activities include:

- Friendships and relationships: the deeper you go into a relationship, the more shared history you have, the more experiences you can recall together, the more ups and downs you’ve been through, the richer the relationship feels.
- Any kind of learning (skills or knowledge): the more you learn, the more you *can* learn. Each bit of learning ups up vistas towards more advanced and complex things to learn, which allows you to experience the full richness of the field or activity.
- Art and creativity: these feed on themselves, in that each creation can be the basis of the next and the next, until a rich tapestry of creation has been woven within the artist’s work.

The point here is not that simple, straightforward pleasures like sex and drugs are necessarily bad. The point is that, on their own, the satisfaction one derives from them tends to diminish. The enjoyment can be expanded greatly if they are taken as part of a wider tapestry of

richness, interconnected to various parts of life. (And by drugs here, I'm talking mostly about psychedelics—which in my experience provide diminishing returns on their own, but expanding returns when taken in moderation in the context of an ever-interconnected creative, intellectual, romantic, sexual, spiritual and social life.)

I think the distinction between simple self-rewarding pleasure, and its subset of *self-expanding* pleasure is important, because it's possible (and in fact common) for self-rewarding activities to become *less* enjoyable as you do them more.

The most obvious example is addictive drugs: snorting coke is its own reward. But snorting coke doesn't lead you to get *more* enjoyment the next time you snort coke; on the contrary, you develop tolerance and eventually will need more and more just to feel normal. (Furthermore, the negative physical, psychological, and social side-effects grow, at the same time the reward diminishes.)

A more mundane example is binge-watching television, or obsessively scrolling on social media. A bit of TV or phone-scrolling can be a pleasurable way to take your mind off things and unwind after a long and stressful day at work. But I think we've all experienced that "zombie" feeling after the third, fourth, or tenth hour of mindlessly pressing "next" on the TV or "refresh" on our social media. It's anything but refreshing!

Of course, that doesn't mean that all self-rewarding activities have this feature of diminishing returns. When you go for a pleasant walk, that doesn't mean that going for tomorrow's walk will be any less pleasant. But many self-rewarding activities do in fact have this feature of diminishing returns.

In contrast, activities that are self-expanding activities lead to a feeling of, well... *expansiveness* as you engage in them more over time. You feel like the world is expanding as

you do them. (And in a good way, not in Alvy's existentially dreadful way, as in the *Annie Hall* quote above!) You start to see more and more of your life and the world reflected in the self-expanding activity—and that activity starts to feel like more of a metaphor for your life (“life imitates art”), and guide for you as you navigate the world beyond.

I call this “feeding the monster” versus “feeding the mystery.” Feeding the monster is engaging in any self-rewarding activity that, while pleasurable in its own right, starts to provide significantly diminishing returns. You have to keep feeding the monster just to placate it, until—at worst—the monster completely consumes you and you are living (or dying!) inside its belly.

Whereas I refer to engaging in self-expanding activities as “feeding the mystery.” I call it this because, the deeper you go, the deeper it gets; the wider you go, the wider it gets; the higher you go, the higher it gets. Until you feel as though, through your immersion in the expanding richness of the activity over time, you have a glimpse—and maybe even a grand vista—of the infinite. Once you have that glimpse, either the answer to the question “what’s the point of my life?” will become obvious... or you’ll simply be bored by the question as it distracts you from your favorite self-expanding activities. Either way, you’ll be happy.

Fornicate, Replicate, Indoctrinate:

Families Are Cults... Cults Are Families

Imagine you discovered that someone you care about, let's call her Sally, fell into an abusive relationship with a couple, let's call them Arnold and Lucy: a ménage of sorts, in which extremely troubling power dynamics were at play. And by power dynamics, I don't mean those freely chosen in a consensual kinky Dominance/submission type relationship. In this case, Sally was not consulted on any of these arrangements, nor did she ever consent to any them. These power dynamics were forced upon her. Some of the power dynamics include:

- Sally has no income or money of her own; Arnold and Lucy control all the finances
- Sally lives there at their house, provisional on her following their rules; she is completely dependent on Arnold and Lucy for housing
- Sally can't afford her own food, so she is completely dependent on Arnold and Lucy for food. They sometimes have their own idea about what Lucy should eat and how that relates to her body, and they exercise control over her diet
- Arnold and Lucy exert physical dominance over Sally, and have the capacity to inflict overwhelming physical force on Sally if she disobeys
- Sally is sometimes stripped down while Arnold and Lucy inflict sexualized humiliation and sexual assault on her as punishment and discipline if she disobeys their commands
- Arnold and Lucy enjoy a massive informational asymmetry and a capacity to censor Sally from learning or talking about a lot of things relevant to her life;

because of this asymmetry and control, Sally depends on Arnold and Lucy for information flows, and is vastly less informed about the world than they are. This calls into question Sally's capacity to give true, informed consent to the situation she's in

- Arnold and Lucy are partisans to various religious and political belief systems, and delight in indoctrinating and mind-fucking Sally into these belief systems. They use many classic cult mind control tactics to instill their belief systems into Sally: love bombing, shaming, tightly controlling who Sally may associate with and keeping her away from "negative influences" that might cause her to question the faith, and withdrawing love if Sally strays from the proscribed beliefs.

If you discovered that Sally was in such a relationship, you would be horrified, and if you discovered she was *about* to enter into such a relationship, you would do anything you possibly could to prevent Sally from falling into this trap, wouldn't you?

Well, if there are ever any potential Sallys in your life, there is a very simple thing you can do to prevent this situation:

Don't have children.

It's that fucking easy. Just lay off the procreation. Sally's position is exactly analogous to almost every child's position in relation to their parents, and Arnold and Lucy's position is exactly analogous to almost all parent in relation to their children. Could there be an easier way to avoid the tragedy of more Sallys being caught in this situation? Could anything be easier in order to avoid becoming Arnold or Lucy inflicting such domineering dictatorship on the world's

next poor little Sally? All you've got to do is use a condom or other birth control, or get a vasectomy or tubal ligation (or if you're exclusively having same-sex sex, just avoid artificial insemination). That's it, and there will be no more future Sallys in the world. The world will be free of Sally's oppression!

The Dictatorship of the Old Over the Young

Every one of these things listed above, if inflicted by one adult on another without their consent (i.e., outside of consensual power play and Dominance/submission type relationships between adults) would be considered clear-cut abuse.

Yet all of these things are par for the course for children. The “sexual assault” and “sexual humiliation” I mention in the list above is also known as *spanking*. With copious amounts of media attention rightly devoted to instances of sexual assault in which powerful people merely *touch* an unwilling adult's (clothed) butt, it's surprising that we don't as a culture overall view the *repeated hitting* of an unwilling person's *nude* butt, with the intent to induce pain, fear, crying, and submission, while the victim is being physically restrained and is unable to escape, as a form of sexual assault—because it's a child on the receiving end, and because it is supposedly done, as the parent says as they sexually assault (spank) the child, “for your own good.” “This hurts me more than it hurts you,” says the parent, as if that justifies sexual assault. (“[I'm only doing this because I love you](#),” says the abusive husband to the wife he hits—adding mindfuck to physical injury.)⁴⁷

⁴⁷ According to a [2015 survey](#) by NORC at the University of Chicago, seventy percent of American adults agree with the statement “a “good, hard spanking is sometimes necessary to discipline a child.” Imagine if seventy percent of American men agreed with the statement “a good, hard spanking is sometimes necessary to discipline a woman” or if seventy percent of bosses agreed with the statement “a good, hard spanking is sometimes necessary to

Putting spanking and corporal punishment aside (which is no longer universal and many parents strongly oppose): every other behavior practiced by Arnold and Lucy in the list above would be considered wildly abusive if inflicted on an adult victim (or even towards a child not their own), but is standard from parents towards their own children.

Most of the things on the list are inherent to the parent-child relationship, and are therefore inevitable: differentials in power, size, resources, intelligence, and information, as well as the need to control children in one way or another and impose rules.

There are some philosophies of modern parenting that intentionally try to minimize and counteract the power dynamics listed above. These include: “[Taking Children Seriously](#),” “[Bare Minimum Parenting](#)” (subtitle: “The Ultimate Guide to Not Quite Ruining Your Child,”) “[unschooling](#),” and “[free range kids](#).”⁴⁸

Conservative parents will simply call of all these parenting styles “permissive parenting.” While I’m biased against strict parenting and towards “free range parenting,” my point here is not to advocate any particular style of parenting. I’m not a parent thus have no qualifications to

discipline a worker.” Victims and their allies would be up in arms, demanding accountability, laws, and mass cancelations.

A 2021 World Health Organization [report on corporal punishment](#) around the world states: “Around 60% of children aged 2–14 years regularly suffer physical punishment by their parents or other caregivers. In some countries, almost all students report being physically punished by school staff.”

If roughly six out of ten children “regularly suffer physical punishment by their parents,” that means that roughly six out of ten parents who brought a child into this world knew (or could be reasonably expected to know) that they or their partner was going to physically punish (i.e., beat, i.e., physically abuse) the child they were bringing into the world.

⁴⁸ For what it’s worth, I was an *extremely* free-range kid. I’m grateful for this, because my parents gave me mental and emotional space to experiment with and develop my own philosophies of life, which have always been way outside the [Overton window](#)—the range of acceptable thought—for most people. Depending on whether you love this book or are horrified by it, you can judge for yourself how well this free-range experiment turned out for me.

do so. I have a vasectomy and I generally try to avoid snot-nosed vectors of colds and flus that throw tantrums and destroy my peace and quiet, no matter how old they are; the best way I've found to avoid such miniature human devils is to not bring them into existence. This has the added benefit of mostly keeping me isolated from their insufferable parents.

No, I'm not advocating one parenting style over another; as important as such debates are on one level, they are, from the perspective of this book, surface issues. My deeper point is that the human experience inherently involves dictatorship of the old over the young in their custody. In many cases (such as with out-and-out abusive parents or guardians) this dictatorship reaches the level of brutal control found in any strong-man dictatorship. Some intensely religious or cultic upbringings even reach the level of all-encompassing mind control typical of totalitarianism. In kinder, gentler families, it's more of a "benevolent dictatorship." But any family or caretaking relationship—no matter how brutal or benevolent—is unavoidably a dictatorship of some form or another over the children.

Even counting those of us lucky to grow up in a relatively free, democratic society, *almost all humans grow up for many years in a totalizing authoritarian dictatorship*: the one imposed by parents or other guardians. Even if we grew up in extremely loving families (as I did), we still grew up for many years completely dependent on god-like figures, towering over us many times our height and weight, who controlled all of our feeding, our cleaning, our schedules, our socializing, our information flows, and who even intimately involved themselves in our cycles of peeping and pooping. This is far beyond the level of control that even totalitarian governments are able to exert on most of their citizens. (Hitler and Mao never personally wiped their citizens' asses. It's amazing how much control you can exert over someone if they depend on you to wipe their ass.)

There is something inherently oppressive about the parent-child relationship. Here, many parents will ask, “If raising children is inherently oppressive, then what are your alternatives?”

Right. There are none. We can fiddle with childrearing one way or another to make it *less* oppressive, but you’ve got to admit, in any other realm, if one party had: all the money; ownership (or lease) of the living space, with few to no alternatives; control of the distribution of food and water; massive physical dominance and the capacity to inflict overwhelming physical force; cultural and legal sanctioning for sexualized corporeal discipline and punishment; knowledge and information beyond anything the less powerful party could even begin to comprehend; free reign to install religious, political, and moral ideology; cultural and legal sanctioning for forced labor⁴⁹; backup support from networks of fellow dictators in neighboring fiefdoms⁵⁰ re-enforcing the legitimacy and inescapability of the ruler/ruled relationship... all this would be considered a power differential beyond any possibility of fair relating.

(“Life’s not fair,” I can hear parents replying. Right—so why bring innocent children into this world of unfairness, where they will be subject to a great deal of it?)

And all this is just in the “healthy,” culturally-sanctioned forms of dictatorship. Add the unhealthy varieties including physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and (much more commonly) emotional incest, and the dictatorships quickly turn from “benevolent” to malevolent...

“But parents are well-intentioned!” Yes, most are. I’m not talking about or blaming individual parents here. I’m talking about an existential condition of being human. We are raised

⁴⁹ In this case, academic labor. That the compulsory labor is seen as “for their own good” does not make it any less compulsory or laborious.

⁵⁰ Teachers, principals, religious authorities, police, and of course, fellow parents, organized informally and formally into networks.

under dictatorship—hopefully, a “benevolent” one—and then most of us go on to raise others under a dictatorship.

And then we wonder why dictatorship is so common among our kind.⁵¹

The Uber-Meme: “Family”

The aspect of the dictatorship of the old over the young that I find most philosophically interesting is the installation of worldviews, values, and belief systems. The level of mental and emotional penetration most parents are able to achieve among their children, if they want to, reach levels that make totalitarian and religious leaders envious.⁵² “Give me the boy for the first seven years and I will give you the man” (This has been [attributed as a Jesuit maxim](#).) As Schopenhauer [writes](#), “There is no absurdity so palpable but that it may be firmly planted in the human head if you only begin to inculcate it before the age of five, by constantly repeating it with an air of great solemnity. For as in the case of animals, so in that of men, training is

⁵¹ A central ideology of dictatorship is there is an adult—or group of adults—in the room, and everyone else, more or less, are children. “Trump is Dad,” [says conservative commentator DeAnna Lorraine](#):

Doesn’t Trump feel like a dad? He feels like a dad to me. He feels like a dad to our country, and really to the world. He’s like the dad of the world. He’s tough. You know, he’s tough love. A good dad is someone who has tough love, he has boundaries, he has firm punishments. When he says, ‘You violated this, you crossed the line,’ then he punishes, because that’s what good dads do. But he’s also loving.

(The irony here, of course, is that no American president has been seen as childish by so many people. No president has had the phrase “tantrums,” or “meltdown,” or “whining” or “crybaby,” or “where are the adults in the room?” thrown at him so frequently. That said, Lorraine taps into a key part of Trump’s appeal to his base: his perceived capacity to enforce boundaries, and his eagerness to punish those who cross them. No American presidential campaign before has ever focused around a physical boundary: “Build The Wall!”)

⁵² It’s not for nothing that Marx and Engels called for the “Abolition of the family!” in the [Communist Manifesto](#). They wanted to get their hands on those young minds, and out of the grasp of their parental rulers, as fast and pervasively as they could. In a draft of the Manifesto ([quoted here](#) on p. 665), Engels called for “The raising of children together in national institutions and at national expense, from that moment on, in which they can dispense with the first motherly care.”

successful only when you begin in early youth.”⁵³ Parents or guardians typically have daily, prolonged access install programming into the child’s mind and emotional system in those first seven years (and beyond), much more intensively than even churches or governments.

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins writes:

At Christmas-time one year my daily newspaper, the *Independent*, was looking for a seasonal image and found a heart-warmingly ecumenical one at a school nativity play. The Three Wise Men were played by, as the caption glowingly said, Shadbreet (a Sikh), Musharaff (a Muslim) and Adele (a Christian), all aged four.

Charming? Heart-warming? No, it is not, it is neither; it is grotesque. How could any decent person think it right to label four-year-old children with the cosmic theological opinions of their parents? To see this, imagine an identical photograph, with the caption changed as follows: 'Shadbreet (a Keynesian), Musharaff (a Monetarist) and Adele (a Marxist), all aged four.' Wouldn't this be a candidate for irate letters of protest? It certainly should be. Yet, because of the weirdly privileged status of religion, not a squeak was heard, nor is it ever heard on any similar occasion. Just imagine the outcry if the caption had read, 'Shadbreet (an Atheist), Musharaff (an Agnostic) and Adele (a Secular Humanist), all aged four.' Mightn't the parents actually be investigated to see if they were fit to bring up children?

I am repulsed by parents using children as receptacles for the reproduction of whatever religious memes have made the parents’ their bitch so thoroughly that parents are moved to make their children the same memes’ bitch as well.

However, beyond religion, the main “meme” that most families spread is *family* itself—that is, a glorification of the expansion and strengthening of blood relations through genetic

⁵³ Leading up to this, Schopenhauer writes:

We know that man is in general superior to all other animals, and this is also the case in his capacity for being trained. Mohammedans are trained to pray with their faces turned towards Mecca, five times a day; and they never fail to do it. Christians are trained to cross themselves on certain occasions, to bow, and so on. Indeed, it may be said that religion is the *chef d'oeuvre* of the art of training, because it trains people in the way they shall think: and, as is well known, you cannot begin the process too early.

reproduction. “Family” is the uber-meme because (via the genetic reproduction the meme encourages) it creates its own biological carriers of memetic reproduction.

Cohesive families vary widely around the world on which religious memes they are passionately infecting their children with, but they are remarkably similar in one type of memetic inculcation: the desirability of the children one day finding the right partner, getting married, and starting their own family. Show me a family without some form of strong memetic indoctrination on these points, and I’ll show you a family that sputters out in a generation or two.⁵⁴

One Family’s Education is Another Family’s Indoctrination

This topic of parental dictatorships’ indoctrination of children gets truly spicy when different parental dictators (belonging to rival communities) behold the horrifying ways other parental dictators are indoctrinating children in the rival group. “Shit, they’re breeding and

⁵⁴ My immediate family confirms this statement, in an unusual way. My parents spared me the intense indoctrination about the need to have children that most other families force-feed their children. They weren’t “anti-natalists” per se (it’s hard to imagine parents encouraging their children *not* to have children). But, quite different than most parents, they were not *natalist* either; they didn’t *encourage* me to want or have kids. This lack of natalist ideological indoctrination that most parents foist on their kids—combined with certain pessimistic outlooks about humanity I absorbed from my father—made it easier for me to accept anti-natalist ideology (an opposition to procreation) when I came upon it. My anti-natalism led to my vasectomy, which means my immediate family line will sputter out once I croak, as I’m my mother’s only child. (My father has two children by his first marriage, five grandchildren, and now a great-grand-daughter, so his bloodline will do just fine!) I memorialize my mother’s legacy in this book, as she—bless her joyful heart—is the main reason there is any “joyful” aspect to my “joyful pessimism” at all. I get most of my “pessimism” from my father, for which I am also grateful. They’ve made a good pair for over half a century; opposites attract.

As my example illustrates, anti-natalism is at a distinct disadvantage in spreading, and therefore is unlikely to gain wide traction compared to natalistic “family-friendly” ideologies, as it necessarily foreswears genetic reproduction. One of the main reasons natalistic ideology spreads and dominates memospace so thoroughly (in addition to genetic influences on the desire to reproduce) is that it encourages and legitimates the production of fresh memetic vehicles (i.e., children’s brains) to indoctrinate with itself. Thus, natalism (in all its “pro-family” varieties) is in some ways the “uber-ideology,” as it not only encourages its own spread via memetic replication, but also, via genetic replication of its own future memetic carriers. I call this the model of ideological expansion “fornicate, replicate, and indoctrinate.” It’s extremely effective.

brainwashing more _____.” Insert your most hated ideology in the blank. This is an unseemly way to think, but I maintain that virtually everyone has an entry for _____ that troubles them.⁵⁵

One group’s “values,” “worldview,” and “education” are another group’s “ideology,” “indoctrination,” or “brainwashing.” If you really want to see parents freak out, behold what happens when they fear that their children’s minds are being infected with ideological indoctrination from a hated out-group, especially in schools. (More on this later.)

In fact, the rivalry between communities and their worldviews can be so intense, sometimes one group’s “education” and “care” for their children is another group’s *child abuse*. From my perspective as an atheist, I stand with Dawkins in seeing the indoctrination of children into religion as horrific. (Just as Christians see my atheism as horrific indoctrination by Satan, and would see me as an agent of Satanic ideology if I were to install godless “critical thinking” in children in my care.) From my vantage point, I will go so far to say that I believe certain forms of religious “education,” including forms common in the United States, are in actuality—not just metaphorically—forms of child abuse.

In her book [*You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity*](#), Jamie Lee Finch recounts that as a girl:

I frequently imagined visions of people I knew and loved burning in a lake of fire for an unending length of time. When I was thirteen, I wrote a poem imagining a not-so-distant future where my best friend died in a car accident and screamed at me from her eternal torture that her fate was all my fault because I hadn’t done enough to save her.”

⁵⁵ My fill-in-the-blank is fundamentalist religious believers in general, and more specifically, fundamentalist Christians in America. (I’m sure the feeling is mutual.) Given how fecund fundamentalist Christian families are, and how effective the cult mind control of their children is, and how influential these large cults are on our national politics, my country gives me plenty to angst about.

In her teenage poem, Finch's writes of her unconverted friend, "I could just imagine seeing her there / Her soul burning in eternal hell / I could see her reaching out to me / And I could hear her yell."

Let me be blunt: training a child to believe that her friends are going to be tortured eternally if she does not evangelize them to particular theological beliefs, to the point where she's having vivid nightmarish images of her friends engulfed in flames, is not just noxious indoctrination; it's child abuse. It is *socially-sanctioned* child abuse, which makes the parents less remarkable, or morally or legally culpable. But it is child abuse nonetheless, literally and not figuratively.⁵⁶

Of course, Finch's parents (and Finch at that time herself) did not believe this child-torturing god was imaginary; for them, he was as real as their hands and feet, as was the eternal fire facing unsaved friends if they didn't convert.⁵⁷ Thus, from the parents' perspective, it would have been child abuse to *not* train Finch to convert her friends: after all, this was the only way for Finch's friends to avoid burning in hell, and for Finch to avoid hearing their screams. For Finch's parents, training Finch to evangelize and save her friends, and invoking lurid imagery of her

⁵⁶ This should be uncontroversial, if we just change the context a little. Suppose Finch's parents told her: "If you don't get your friend Jenny to convert, we will walk over to her house with you, pour gasoline on her, light the fire, and force you to watch her burn in agony. All because *you* didn't save her." This would count as clear-cut child abuse, yes? (Even if the parents had no intention of carrying out the threat.) So why do parents like get a moral hall-pass for the same threats dressed in religious garb? Why does it suddenly become *not* child abuse when the threat of torturing Finch's friend, conveyed to Finch as a form of coercion to get her to try to evangelize to the friend, is outsourced to an imaginary god?

⁵⁷ Finch writes:

This fear over where other human beings could potentially end up for all of eternity was often the fuel for my fire of "sharing the gospel" or evangelism. . . . We were taught and trained to knock on neighbor's doors, walk up to strangers in shopping malls, and fervently proselytize our own friends and family members in an effort to save their souls. These activities felt uncomfortable and invasive, but also somehow of dire importance, and I was consumed with the reality of the danger that was waiting for all people on the other side of death if I didn't save them.

friends' impending eternal torture as extra motivation, was literally no different than training Finch and her friends to look both ways before crossing the street (and telling them what might happen if they didn't). In their view, it was far from child abuse; it was their duty as responsible parents.⁵⁸

Viral Vectors for Intergenerational Meme Replication

(i.e., Parents)

A central and sinister aspect of the “spiritual and religious abuse” Finch’s parents inflicted upon her (that’s her term, and it seems fair to me) went beyond merely instilling into her terrifying false beliefs about her friends being tortured if they didn’t convert. Finch’s parents didn’t install these terrifying images willy-nilly, perhaps as some accidental “spillover” in which

⁵⁸ Here is where atheists like me often fail to truly understand the experience religion. For those of us who were not raised religious, we cannot imagine what it would be like hold such absurd beliefs. Therefore we cannot grasp the simple fact that religious believers *really believe* their beliefs. It seems to us like religious belief must be some kind of “pretend” belief, held with a wink, as when parents talking about Santa Claus with the kids. Or perhaps, we atheists imagine, religious belief is like rooting for one’s home team as “the greatest team ever” when the record states other wise. But still, it’s good cheer to believe it.

But true believers aren’t just spouting these beliefs in front of the kids, with a wink, and they’re not just holding these beliefs (which seem beyond absurd to us atheists) for good cheer. *This is their reality*. We can lambast them for believing in a *fake* reality, but people act on what reality *seems* like to them, not what it actually is.

The same dynamic is at play when my fellow pro-choice people express surprise that pro-life activists sometimes commit violence at abortion clinics, or when pro-choicer people say, “You can’t legislate morality.” Yes, we do legislate morality all the time, such as the morality of not murdering newborn infants. We cannot fully grasp that to pro-life people, abortion is literally baby-murder, no different than if you or I bashed a newborn’s brain in with a hammer.

In 2015, a man named Robert Dear shot three people to death and injured nine at a Colorado Springs abortion clinic. At his hearing, [he declared to the court](#): “I am a warrior for the babies. . . . You’ll never know what I saw in that clinic. Atrocities. The babies.”

We pro-choicers cannot imagine how Dear and others like him could believe that vacuuming out a few clumps of cells or a little shrimp of an embryo is *equivalent* to murdering a newborn baby. But *they* believe that, whether we can fathom they believe it. Given their belief that this is literal baby murder, what’s surprising is that pro-lifers don’t commit *more* shootings of staff at abortion clinics to prevent them from “baby murder.” What would *you* feel was the appropriate action if you believed someone in your city was, for example, slicing up dozens of living babies daily in their basement?

Finch just happened to absorb the their beliefs. Rather, her parents installed these painful beliefs intentionally, with a well-defined, pre-meditated purpose in mind: to turn Finch into a proselytizer for these same beliefs.

Beyond the pain of the beliefs themselves, Finch’s parents added the further insult and injury of reducing their daughter to a mere vessel for their grander ideological end, which was gaining recruits to their doomsday ~~cult~~ religion.⁵⁹ Having reproduced themselves genetically in Finch, they were now using her to further reproduce memetically.

Uppercase Cults vs. lowercase cults

I’ve been tossing the words “cult” around here. I am aware that the more one broadens the definition of a concept, the less substantive that concept becomes, partly because it becomes less falsifiable. (For example, if everyone is or could be considered a narcissist—as seems to be the case when people use that term as an insult back and forth on social media—then it’s hard to argue establish any particular person is *not* a narcissist, in which cases the distinction becomes indistinct and loses its force.)

However, here I’m not concerned with defining cults formally in the sense of being able to draw a clear demarcation between cult and non-cult. I’m concerned more with analogy. I think most human groupings have strong cult-like aspects, even if they are not formally cults. (Just as one could point to strong narcissistic tendencies within most humans, even though most humans are not clinical narcissists.)

⁵⁹ As the atheist quip goes: “What’s the difference between a religion and a cult? About a hundred years.” And: “a cult is a new religion; a religion is an old cult.”

Additionally, I think far more organizations that are not usually considered cults, actually could pass the bar of more rigorous definitions of cults. For example, I think that most religions, as well as the US military, could pass more rigorous definitions of cults—it's just that most people are so indoctrinated into religious and military ways of thinking that they don't see it that way. "Cults" are for *other* people, not us.

Thus, as in many cases in this book, I distinguish between an "uppercase" version of a Bad Thing, and a "lowercase" version. The uppercase version is the version that most of us think about when we think of that thing. (For example, Scientology and Jim Jones's People's Temple are Cults.) Uppercase Bad Things transgress the day-to-day ethics that most of us hold, and we consider the perpetrators of them to have violated widely-held normal that make them morally and in many cases legally culpable.

In contrast, lowercase versions of a bad thing are commonplace instances in which core dynamics of the Bad Thing play out in everyday circumstances. These are so common and normalized that extending the definition of the Bad Thing to include them would render the definition of the Bad Thing meaningless. If everything is the Bad Thing, then nothing is. For example, if everything is a Cult, then nothing is. That said, I believe that many everyday phenomena, such as families, religion, corporations, political causes, political parties, and schooling (which we will focus on shortly, as it is so relevant to childrearing) have cult-like dynamics baked into them, to a degree that it's meaningful to talk about them as lowercase cults. The lowercase version is a commonplace version, to which many or most people could be considered to belong to. It is illuminating, but it should be taken with a grain of salt, as its not *really* the Bad Thing, and even comparing it to the Bad Thing==though useful as food for

thought—runs the risk of trivializing the very real harm that the actual Bad Thing does to its victims.⁶⁰

Schooling as a lowercase cult

Closely tied to the lowercase cult of family is the lowercase cult of schooling. One of the main foci of families, during the time the children around 5 years old to twenty-two, is schooling.

Schooling is, I would say, a lowercase cult, in a fairly robust way. It's also a training-ground for joining other lowercase cults, like corporations and militaries, after graduation; the most forceful thing schooling trains is the capacity to join, maintain membership, add value, and rise through the ranks of a lowercase cults.

What do I mean when I say schooling is a lowercase cult?

Well, what are the traits of a good potential recruit (“prospect,” “mark”) for a cult? To answer this question, let's look at what traits make good recruits for classic uppercase Cults?

⁶⁰ It is illuminating, for example, to look at humanity from the lens of “most humans are narcissists.” This is a class to which I will readily admit belonging—which causes me little trouble, because I'm in good and wide company.

But this should be taken with a grain of salt, because the sense in which that is true depends on a concept of Narcissism that is watered down. Most humans also display many non-Narcissistic traits that are incompatible with a true definition of Narcissism.

Furthermore, if you ever get called a Narcissist online (the chances of which approach certainty, the more you debate with enemies—sort of a Godwin's Law of Narcissism), you will likely find that your accuser is using a definition so broad as to be unfalsifiable; almost everyone fits the definition and this it's nearly impossible to prove one's innocence. Being accused of unfalsifiable negative traits is an unpleasant experience, especially when the accusations carry the emotional weight of falsifiable ones (that is, the weight of accusations that actually could be disproven and thus would be highly meaningful if true.)

In a like manner, I believe most humans—including myself—are members of cults, but not Cults.

These are not exhaustive, nor are they all crisply distinct categories. But a solid initial list includes:

1. *A need to belong.* Cults offer, above all else, belonging. Someone who feels a strong sense of belonging elsewhere (or someone who is a loner or maverick and doesn't really feel the need to belong) is not a good mark.

2. *Malleability.* If a prospect is not malleable into the Cult's ideology, then they're not a prospect.

3. *Submission.* If a Cult member is not willing to submit to the will of the leader, and follow orders—however taxing or absurd they may be—he's won't be a member of that Cult for long. Tests of submissiveness usually come after Love Bombing, which is the well-documented period of "unconditional" love Cult members shower upon marks and new recruits, to feed into their need to belong. Once the recruit feels they belong—and how could they not, being showered with so much love—then it's time to test a deeper sense of belonging: will the new recruit submit to orders, in order to remain a member of the group?

4. *Poor boundaries.* No one with a strong sense of their own boundaries, and a willingness to enforce them, will last long in a Cult. Willingness to allow one's own boundaries to be invaded is a good start. Developing some kind of submissive turn-on from the leader's invasion and penetration of one's boundaries is even better. But for more advanced levels of Cult membership, neither of these will do. The complete abandonment of personal boundaries (or, functionally the same, dissociation from and forgetting of them) is necessary to advance through the ranks. Which brings us to...

5. *Self-sacrifice.* A Cult does not want selfish people (at least, not selfish on an individual level.) The Children of God Cult asked female members to sexually gratify whichever male

member desired such gratification—and later, potential recruits—regardless of whether the women were attracted to male recruits or not. Presumably, the women who went along with this believed (while they were in the cult) that this was for the good of the collective. If they did not believe that, then they were at least so motivated by a need to belong, and their boundaries were so weakened by other cult dynamics, that that they were willing to make these self-sacrifices during the time of their membership, despite their misgivings.

5. Eating shit and liking it. Self-sacrifice is good, from the perspective of a Cult. Even better, however, is adopting the aims of the Cult so completely that it doesn't even *feel* like sacrifice. I call this “eating shit and liking it” (ESALI). If a Cult needs you to eat shit, willingness to do so despite one's repulsion (i.e., self-sacrifice), is valuable to the Cult. But the ability to overcome one's repulsion to the smell and taste of shit, and come to revel in it (ESALI), is even better, providing the Cult with more motivated and enthusiastic shit-eaters.

4. *Work ethic.* Related to self-sacrifice and eating shit and liking it (ESALI), is work ethic. Groups require members to work for their growth; memetic viruses such as cult ideologies require the memes' hosts to work hard for the memes' mass infection. If someone is not willing to work hard, they are not a good Cult member. This is why many sixties communes—which had many other good makings of Cults—did not turn into full-blown Cults: there were too many freeloaders among their ranks.

5. *Skills.* Cults need ditch-diggers—people willing to roll up their sleeves and do the dirty work. (See all the literal ditch-digging that went on to construct Jonestown. [And to construct Rajneeshpuram](#), the Rajneesh Cult's town of 7,000 that was built quickly from scratch on barren land in Oregon.) Cults need carpenters, electricians, agriculturalists, etc. Not to mention

salespeople with good persuasive communication skills, for use both on prospects, and on newer, less-indoctrinated members. A fresh recruit who already has these skills is a boon to the Cult

Now, let's examine schooling the lens of some of the traits above. The most insidious trait that school teaches, in my experience, is eating shit and liking it (ESALI). But that's an advanced stage of the cult of school. Leading up to ESALI, of course, are submission, poor boundaries, and work ethic.

The overwhelming thing schooling teaches (and then certifies), particularly through high school, is submission.

No kid wants to sit in class all day. The main submission involved in schooling is simply the act of sitting indoors, at desks, all day. That is simply not a natural activity for children; they must be forced into it. And if they don't submit, all manner of punishment awaits them, including corporal punishment, which is [still legal](#) in public schools in 19 states, and legal in private schools in every state except New Jersey and Iowa. Blue states disfavor corporal punishment these days, increasingly preferring to break kids in and induce submission—when necessary—through forced medication.

As soon as homework sets in, a new level of submission arrives. Now schooling does not simply want you to submit to enforced desk-sitting during the day within its walls, but also beyond its walls, in the afternoons and evenings. Homework is when the totalitarian (lowercase totalitarian) aspects of schooling creep in. Now schooling doesn't want just part of your waking attention, devotion, and submission. It wants all of it.

I must have had homework in elementary school, but I don't remember it much; it must have been relatively minimal.

My first distinctly negative memory of homework came the summer before 7th grade. Never had a school asked me anything of my summers before; in summers I was free to play, and thus, they are a strong part of why I have generally positive and idyllic memories of my youth up until 7th grade.

Then, that summer, the bad omens came in. I was switching to a new school—a very preppy school—and my future 7th grade English class wanted me to write a report on an assigned book, due the first day of class. This struck me as a great injustice. What the fuck (and I do think I was starting to use that word around 6th grade) business was it of my future English teacher to tell me what to do with my beloved summer? I felt she was reaching back from the upcoming school year to snatch away my joy, and control me.

As it was, the book wasn't all bad. I remember it distinctly. It was [*Ordeal by Hunger*](#), about the Donner party. What 12-year-old wouldn't want to read real-life accounts of children eating children?

Nonetheless, despite the pleasure in reading of these calamities, I did not take pleasure in writing a report about them. I wanted to be outside, shooting skateboarding and shooting BB guns. That this damn English teacher would force me otherwise, before she even met me, seriously pissed me off, on an almost *soul* level.

Starting that year, I developed an intense distaste, even hatred, for my schooling. A distaste that, with a few exceptions here and there, persisted through high school. (College was a more mixed bag for me, though skewing towards the negative.)

One of the things I hated most was the sleep deprivation. When I had to haul my 13-year-old ass out of bed at to go sit at a desk under fluorescent lights for a beyond-boring 9th-grade geometry class starting at 7:30 AM, I felt like I was in the pits. Not one fiber of my 13-year-old

being wanted to be sitting in a class, being forced to study the fucking properties of triangles, at 7:30 AM. The fun's over, kid. It's time to join the real world. Let the shit-eating begin.

My main memory of my entire education, indeed my entire teen years—from middle to high school—was fatigue, and an overwhelming desire to nap. If I did not nap after school, I could barely get through my my further submission to the dictates of school beyond its walls (i.e., homework). The problem with napping after school, however, was that it would made it more difficult for me to go to sleep, thus setting me up for another cycle of fatigue when I had to wake up early and show up and sit at a desk for pointless shit-eating at 7:30 AM the next morning.

Remember, sleep deprivation is a classic (in fact, near-universal) aspect of Cult indoctrination. It increases submission and porous boundaries. And so it is for the cult of schooling (and for the cult of corporations, for which schooling trains you).

What we are “taught” in school is that it's normal to sacrifice every aspect of your own desires—in fact, sacrifice your very own physical and mental health—to follow dictates that have no obvious benefit to oneself, simply because an authority figure ordered it, on pain of various types of punishment should your submission not be total. “Self”? What is “self” in such a situation? The self—as defined by being able to decide upon and enforce one's personal boundaries—does not exist in the cult of school.

[To Be Continued. . .]

The Matchmaker and the Misanthrope

[This was the first piece I wrote that explored in detail the main themes of the works that became *Joyful Pessimism*, in 2019.]

LUCINDA: Hi, Michael, thank you so much for choosing Lucinda Lakeside Matchmaking. I'm Lucinda Lakeside, the founder & CEO. Why don't you have a seat. Please, take your coat off, and make yourself comfortable.

MICHAEL: Oh, thank you so much Lucinda, so great to meet you. [Takes jacket off, has a "Seroquel" t-shirt underneath.]

L: Seroquel, that's interesting. What's Seroquel?

M: It's an anti-psychotic medication.

L: Oh I see. Are you a psychiatrist?

M: No.

L: A pharmaceutical executive?

M: No.

L: A scientist?

M: No.

L: A sales rep?

M: No

L: Then why are you wearing that shirt?

M: Because I take Seroquel.

L: What do you take Seroquel for?

M: I told you, it's an anti-psychotic medication.

L: Why would you need to take that?

M: I'm bi-polar. And when I'm manic and I think I'm channeling Dionysus, the Greek God of wine and orgies, or Ishtar, the Babylonian Goddess of Harlots, that stuff brings me right back down to Earth.

L: And you wear a shirt about it?

M: Yeah, I'm really grateful for it. I'm big fan. If I wasn't on Seroquel, I wouldn't be here, ready for my match. It's good for both of us, right?

L: OK, well, thank you for taking me up on this introductory consultation. And we do have some women in our network who are interested in Greek mythology, so that might be a possibility. Tell me, what brings you in to see a matchmaker today?

M: Well, Lucinda, I've been doing a lot of work on myself, and I feel like I'm finally ready to meet my match, the One I'm going to spend the rest of my life with.

L: Oh, that's so wonderful. Congratulations Michael. Now, I'm going to ask you some intake questions, a few of them might be quite personal, but it's important you answer honestly, so we can find you just the right woman in our network of intelligent, highly-motivated singles.

M: Oh, I'm an open book. Ask away.

L: So, what do you do for work, Michael?

M: I'm an author.

L: Oh, an author, great! Anything I would have read?

M: No, probably not.

L: Well, what do you write?

M: I'm working on a book, it's kind of a meditation on suicidal depression, and the tragedy of the human condition. I'm trying to revive philosophical pessimism, in the tradition of

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. I think pessimism gets a bad rap, and I think it can be really comforting for depressed people. Nietzsche had this term I like, "Dionysian pessimism."

L: Dionysus, like, your Greek God of orgies?

M: Yes.

L: So, orgies and pessimism?

M: Yeah, that would be a fair description

L: OK. What's the book called?

M: It's called Existential Forgiveness: Learning to Forgive the Universe for Making Life Shit, and Still Have Fun While You're Here

L: OK. And has this been published?

M: Oh no, no. It's been rejected by 20 or 30 publishers so far. I'm starting to send it out to more of the more niche publishers to see if it gets any bites.

L: OK, so if it hasn't been published, how do you make a living as an author?

M: Oh, make a living! I'm sorry, I misunderstood. No, I don't make a living as an author.

L: So, how do you make your living?

M: I'm in the cannabis industry.

L: Oh, we have some great clients in the cannabis industry now! It used to be so taboo, but now with legalization, there are some real entrepreneurs making a wonderful living in the industry. Do you run a dispensary?

M: No.

L: Are you creating a new brand of cannabis-infused soft-drink?

M: No.

L: CBD doggie treats?

M: No.

L: So what exactly do you do in the cannabis industry?

M: Well, let's just say, I make the plant available to people in my social circle who want it.

L: So you're a drug dealer?

M: I like to say, plant-availability specialist.

L: OK, well, let's put a bookmark on employment, and we'll come back to it. Next, this one is really important. In fact, it's pretty much a deal-breaker on the checklist of most women.

You *are* looking for monogamy, right? It's so hard to run a matchmaking agency in the Bay Area, with all of these alternative polyamory dudes running around. So, monogamy, yes?

M: Actually, no, I think I'm more interested in an open relationship.

L: Oh God. An open relationship. What does that mean to you?

M: It means, we'd both love each other, we'd be committed to each other, we'd live together, we'd spend our lives together. But we'd both give each other permission to get some action on the side. Maybe we'd have some threesomes together. I'd really love to find a woman who would go out and *find* the threesomes for us. That would be my dream scenario. I have it on my vision board. Do you think you have any women in your network who would be into that?

Or, two women maybe?

L: No, we don't. Listen, Michael, I don't think you're a good fit for Lucinda Lakeside Matchmaking. We're a family-oriented business here, and it seems like you're wanting some kind of wild-and-swinging lifestyle. That's just not what we offer here.

M: OK, I get that. But I did pay for a full 30-minute initial consult, and it's only been 5, so we have 25-minutes left. I'd love to finish the consult.

L: OK, fine. What religion are you?

M: I'm an anti-theist.

L: An atheist? We can't match an atheist.

M: No, no, I'm not an atheist, I'm an anti-theist.

L: What on God's green earth is an anti-theist?

M: It means that I don't just not believe in religion, which is what being an atheist means.

I'm against all religions which means I'm an anti-theist.

L: Why are you against all religion?

M: Because I think making up a story about hell, and telling kids they'll burn there for eternity if they don't follow a bunch of stupid rules that the adults made up--like not thinking lustful thoughts or not masturbating--is a form of socially-accepted mass child abuse.

L: OK, I'm not even going to go there. Next, since you seem to be so concerned about the welfare of children, let's talk about kids. Most women out there on the dating and mating market are looking to have kids. If they just wanted to have some threesome fun on the carousel of polyamorous hook-ups, they would go to a bar or Tinder. They come to a matchmaker because they want to find a man who's ready to have kids soon. That's a bottom line. You at least want to have kids, don't you?

M: No, I have a vasectomy.

L: A vasectomy? Do you have children already?

M: No.

L: Why did you get a vasectomy, if you don't have children?

M: Because I'm not interested in perpetuating the human species.

L: Excuse me?

M: The human species. I just don't think it's worth it.

L: What are you talking about?

M: I think humans are a swarm of locusts upon the rest of the planet's ecology and all the other species. We're a noxious species of walking, talking invasive weeds.

L: Did you *smoke* weed before you came into this meeting?

M: Well, since you asked, why yes, I did. Right in the alley behind there.

L: Get out of here! I do not do intake interviews with people who are high on drugs!

M: Lucinda, I paid \$97 for this intake interview, and nowhere do you have it posted in your terms and conditions that the potential client can't get high before an interview. I'm a medical cannabis patient, and I have been diagnosed with anxiety, bipolar disorder with psychotic tendencies and severe depression, all of which are helped by cannabis. Kicking me out would be discrimination against a mentally ill patient for seeking medicinal, herbal relief for a condition diagnosed by a trained medical professional. Just the thought of me having to bare my soul to you for this interview sent me into anxious fits. So I self-medicated before I came. In your back alley.

L: Fine. So what the hell is this business about humans being an invasive weed species? Is this some vision you had while you were getting high in my alley?

M: Do you garden Lucinda?

L: Yes, a little.

M: What do you think of when you think of the concept of an invasive weed species?

L: I guess a weed species is a plant that knocks out other species, reproduces aggressively, provides no value to the rest of the garden?

M: Exactly. Ding ding. Just like humans. Have you ever heard the term “The Anthropocene Age” Lucinda?

L: No, what is it?

M: You know how different geological periods and epochs have different names, like the Jurassic and the Pleistocene?

L: Yes.

M: Well, just recently, a working group within the International Commission on Stratigraphy—the panel that determines when the geological periods start and end—voted for declaring that the Holocene epoch has ended, and that starting in 1950, [we’re now in the Anthropocene Age](#).

L: What’s that?

M: It means that humans have fucked up the planet so widely and thoroughly, that within the lifetimes of our parents, we’ve now gotten a geological age named after us. Radioactive debris from nuclear tests and Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ocean acidification, exponentially-higher species extinction that we’ve caused, epochal and apocalyptic disruptions in climate, glaciers disappearing, and oceans rising, are now a permanent part of the sedimentary record, and it’s all our fault.

In fact, over the last 50,000 years, Lucinda, a blink of an eye in evolutionary time, humans have gone from being an insignificant piss-ant little species of overgrown chimps, to a species that, along with our domesticated animals like cows, pigs sheep and chickens, take up [97% of the biomass of land-based animals](#). Leaving only 3% for wild animals. How long before we take over the other 3%? And then we all collapse!

And we humans caused all of this. Of course, some far more than others. Mega-corporations, the 1% richest people, and the governments who cater to them, are vastly more responsible than the Global South. But pretty much all humans now, save for a few isolated and uncontacted tribes, have been colonized and subsumed into a vast globalized network of technology-enhanced imperialism and predation towards those last remaining holdouts of non-human animals. Like I said, some more than others, but hardly anyone's hands are entirely free of blood now.

L: Well why don't you come up with some solutions then, instead of sitting around complaining?

M: It's all futile Lucinda. It's too late for that. We're just in the denial and bargaining phase of grief about the end of our species. We should all be going into the grief, getting right with death.

Of all species that have ever existed since life began 4 billion years ago, Lucinda, what percentage do you think have gone extinct?

L: I don't know, like 20%?

M: 99.99% of species that have ever existed since the first cells of life began have gone extinct. Do you think we're going to be part of that 1/10th of 1 percent life that doesn't get thrown in the waste-bin of evolution, saved alongside the hearty tardigrades? Maybe the next intelligent species that evolves after the nuclear holocaust creates will be some giant walking tardigrades descended from the microscopic ones that can survive nuclear radiation.

In fact, I keep a picture of tardigrades on my phone, because they've stuck around for 500 million years through hell or highwater. To me, it's a symbol of hope for the future. Want to see?

L: No, not really.

M: No, come on—check this out. Isn't that cute? They're also known as water bears, or moss piglets. They'll probably be better bosses on the planet than we've been.



L: Gross!

M: Experts say our species will likely not survive another 1,000 years. Surprise! Our whole species, the human race, was just one giant squirt of cum in the hands of the evolutionary whack-off. It felt good at first—and seemed like it was making progress as it flew through the air—but then it just hit the sink. Splat. Frankly, I think the world will be a lot better off when we're finally washed down the drain of evolution, dead in the sewer. From my perspective, it can't happen fast enough.

L: You sound like a real misanthrope, Michael.

M: Hey, I'm not a misanthrope. Don't insult me like that.

L: Why is that an insult? It seems pretty straightforward from what you're saying. You hate humans. *Mis* is hate, *anthro* is humans. Mis anthrope.

M: Do you think I'm stupid? I don't hate *just* humanity. Misanthropy puts too fine a point on the matter. There are so many other species to hate. In fact, pretty much all of them. I'm more of a... biomisian.

L: A biomisian? What in the hell is that?

M: *Mis* is hate, *bio* is life. [Biomisian](#): one who hates life itself.

L: Why do you hate life itself? Life is beautiful. Life is the best thing going in the universe. Cheer up a little bit for Christ's sake.

M: It's not just humans who are fucked up to other humans, and to other animals. Pretty much all animals—with the exception of koalas, pandas, horses, and other herbivores—are fucked up to other animals. In fact, Darwin put it best as to why I hate life so much.

L: Darwin, the greatest biologist in history, hated life itself. I don't think so. I think he loved life.

M: Yes, he loved life. But he explained perfectly why *I* hate it so much. Listen to this quote. It's my favorite quote in the world. Taking up the question of God, in 1860 he wrote to a friend: "With respect to the theological view of the question [of life]; this is always painful to me. I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidæ with the

express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars. Or that a cat should play with mice.

L: Hey, what's wrong with cats? They're pretty much the cutest thing about life itself!

M: Of you think cats are so cute, do you? Your cute little kitten, the one you post all the photos on Facebook—it's one of the most vicious predators that's ever been. To a mouse, your little kitty-cat is the very incarnation of evil. And you're sitting there petting it like it's a little angel.

L: I don't care about mice!

M: Exactly! That all that life is! In groups and out-groups. The in-groups are our friends. The out-groups are our lunch. There's a zero-sum competition between most organisms, or societies of organisms, fighting over matter itself. The matter they're made of could be the matter we're made of, and that's why we all conquer and subsume each other at the earliest opportunity.

Nature is fundamentally amoral. There are small, localized moralities within nature—specifically among human in-groups. But morality evolved among humans as a tool to create in-group cohesiveness and cooperation, the better for warring against, dominating, subjugating, colonizing, conquering, and exterminating rival groups of humans and non-human animals. Morality is the great justifier of murder. Just like history is always written by the victors, morality is always the morality of the vanquishers.

L: You are evil, Michael.

M: I call it like it is Lucinda.

L: We'll I'll call it like it is too, Michael. And the way I'm calling it is, I'm damn glad we only have fifteen minutes left in this session, I can't wait.

M: Well I can't wait for it to be over soon too then, Lucinda. You are mightily unpleasant. Besides, I have to get to my VHEMT meeting.

L: You're becoming an EMT? I thought you wanted humans dead, not alive.

M: No, [VHEMT](#) – the Voluntary Human Exctinction Movement. The meeting is over in Berkeley and I have to get over the Bay Bridge in traffic.

L: What is this, some kind of death cult?

M: It's not a cult, Lucinda. It's a movement of very sane individuals who think that the best answer for the world's problems is for humans to voluntarily choose not to reproduce. That's it. No Kool-Aid.

L: Well, I think you drank some cyanide Kool-Aid of the soul. What happened to you? How did you get so bitter? Were you abused as a kid or something?

M: No, I was not abused. But at some point I was *disabused* about just how positive life itself is. You probably won't believe this, but I used to be one of those spiritual nature worshipper types, bandying on about how beautiful this pure, innocent Mother Earth. But then I realized, I was projecting all the benevolence onto Mother Earth that other people project onto an all loving God.

And I already knew the idea of an all-loving God was bullshit. It's like Richard Dawkins said, in *The God Delusion*. Aside from the Darwin quote, I think these are the finest 43 words ever written in history: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

L: Maybe you should smoke some more weed, Michael, and chill the fuck out.

M: I always knew that was true about God. But I wanted an escape valve. Like most people, I needed desperately to believe there was something good in the universe. So I took all the positive benevolence people usually ascribe to God, and just projected it onto Mother Nature instead.

But at some point, I realized: When you're looking at those beautiful nature scenes—what you're really looking at is a vast pit of carnage. They're both fucked up, Father God and Mother Earth. As Sam Keen put it, "Mother Nature is a brutal bitch, red in tooth and claw, who destroys what she creates."⁶¹

L: Hey, I love Mother Earth. I hike on Mt. Tam every day. What got you so down about Mother Earth?

M: Really, it was learning about the Ichneumonidæ that Darwin was talking about.

L: What is an Ichneumonidæ?

M: It's a species of wasp.

L: And what do wasps have to do with anything?

M: It lays its eggs inside a living caterpillar. Up to 3,000 wasp larvae feed on the living caterpillar, from the inside out, until the caterpillar dies, and the happy baby wasps climb out. Like in *Aliens*. We don't need to go to foreign planets to find feeding on the inner flesh of other creatures and then breaking out. We have them right here, on this hell-hole called Earth.

L: Well, that's just a wasp. You shouldn't judge all of God's creation just on one stupid species of wasp.

⁶¹ In his Foreword to [*The Denial of Death*](#) by Ernest Becker.

M: Well if God actually created “God’s creation,” he’s a sadistic, twisted fucker, that’s for sure. Because it’s not just *one* species of wasp.

L: What are you talking about?

M: Just out of curiosity, Lucinda, how many species of vertebrates do you believe there are on the planet? You know, birds, fish, reptiles, mammals.

L: I don’t know, like, a million?

M: No, actually only around 60,000.

L: Where are you going with this? And remind me, how exactly is all of this relevant to you finding a romantic partner? Are you looking for an academic expert on insects for a partner? Maybe someone who studies insects is the perfect partner for you. Because they should study *you*, Michael. *You* are a moral insect.

M: Lucinda, how many species of Ichneumonidae wasps do you think there are? Not individual organisms, but species.

L: I don’t know, 10?

M: Between 50,000-100,000, Lucinda. That means for every single species of vertebrates—birds, fish, reptiles, mammals, basically anything we think of as an animal—there are somewhere between *one* and *two* different species of wasps that lay their eggs inside the living flesh of another creature in order to eat their way out, like Aliens.

If you judge by numbers of species, it’s not a planet of beautiful animals. It’s a planet of brutal parasites. Fuck God. And Fuck Mother Earth too. God and Mother Earth can take their brutal, violent, sadistic creations and stuff it up their all-powerful asses. The universe would be better without their living “creation.” At least a bunch of dead rocks can’t parasitize and eat each other alive.

L: How do you even live with such a depressing view on life, Michael?

M: It's easy. I meditate.

L: What, like Vipassana? Kundalini?

M: No, it's simple. I just repeat one simple phrase, and reflect on it.

L: Oh, like a mantra?

M: Not exactly.

L: Well what's the phrase then?

M: I just repeat, again and again, in a mindful state: "The process of life itself is horrendously predatory. And I am a part of it. There is no escape."

I find it quite comforting, actually. Here, repeat after me: The process of life...

L: No! I'm not repeating that! Let's move on. At this point, dude, I'm just finishing the interview to get you out the door. Hurry up, let's go to the next question. What is your range of net worth? 0-\$100,000. \$100,000-\$500,000. \$500,000-\$1 million. \$1 million to \$5 million. \$5-10 million. Or above \$10 million?

M: 1 million, 500 thousand...

L: Oh finally something good.

M: Grams of canned tuna.

L: Excuse me?

M: 1 million, 500 thousand grams of canned tuna. My net worth.

L: Why in God's name do you have so much canned tuna, and what the frick does that have to do with your net worth?

M: Lucinda, Lucinda, let me ask you something. Take one of your big shot male clients, let's say one of your corporate lawyer or investment banker type dudes, who's got a cool 10 mil

in the bank. Or maybe he's a Silicon Valley hotshot who just had a big exit, and he's got a 100 mil. He's the cream of the crop of your eligible bachelors. All your ladies want to date him. Well, how useful do you think all of those millions will be, for this him and his sparkling new bride you set him up with, when banks aren't functioning?

L: When banks aren't functioning? Excuse me?

M: Yes. When the shit hits finally hits the fan from our mass species extinction. When the bill finally comes due for the orgy of carbon we've been sucking up from the ground and pumping into the sky, and there's mass dislocation due to climate change, and civil unrest that will make the Civil War look like a game of lawn bowling. What do you think your fancy millionaire dreamboat will do then?

There's been a run on the banks, all the hard cash is gone, the banks are shuttered. Your hotshot CEO's net worth is all tied up in his stock account. But the stock market has halted too, all trading has stopped, because of cyber-attacks that have brought the entire Internet, our electric grid and water, and all other infrastructure to a stand-still. Poof—one global cyber-attack brings us back to the Stone Age – except we stopped learning how to hunt and forage hundreds of years ago.

L: Michael, you're actually scaring me now.

M: Tell your ladies, you've got an eligible bachelor who's investing in real wealth here. A bachelor who will be with them for the long haul. Through thick or through thin? When the US dollar crashes, along with all the phony paper fiat currencies of the world, your potential brides and grooms are going to be real thin indeed. What do you think they're going to do with their paper bank statements, eat them? They'll be living off of whatever squirrels and possums they can catch on their run-down mansion properties.

Whereas, me and my lady? We'll be fattening ourselves up on all those meal-ready-to-eat bars and canned tuna I've been stocking up on for when Armageddon hits. Because I had the foresight to invest in real value—things you can actually eat and survive on—and not all this stock market hokum pokum. I'll be the *real* millionaire, and your fake millionaires in your matchmaking network will all be coming to my place wishing they could trade their entire stock portfolio for one of my cases of canned tuna and a jug of water!

And if any of your billionaire heartthrobs comes to my compound to try to eat my food after they're done roasting their squirrels and possums they scavenged for, you know what they're going to get? POP POP POP right in their head—because you know what I've been investing in? The most precious metal of all... lead in, backed by gunpowder. Worth even more than gold when the going gets rough.

L: I think this interview is over.

M: Lucinda, we still have 10 minutes by my count. You don't have to match me with anyone, but if I don't get my full 30 minutes of consulting, you're going to get a nasty Yelp reviews.

L: [Picks up desk phone] John, cancel my next appointment please. I'm going to need to go out and get some fresh air after this appointment. Oh and, could you bring me a vodka tonic?

M: Lucinda, I have a question for you.

L: What is it?

M: What are the top three qualities your women say they're looking for in a match?

L: Well, it's hard to boil it down to just three. But if I had to choose, I'd say, honesty, communication skills, and commitment. Oh, and let's add one more, sense of humor.

M: Alright, well, let me break these down for you Lucinda. Let's start with communication skills. Now, I know I'm a little rough around the edges, but, wouldn't you say there are at least a few women out there who prefer a guy who talks straight and calls it as he sees it, rather than pussyfooting around the issues or talking all meek and mealy-mouthed?

L: Yes, I'd say that's fair.

M: Well, wouldn't you say I've demonstrated that?

L: OK, Michael, I'll give you that.

M: Great. One out of four. Now let's go to honesty. I know my views are a bit extreme, but would you say there's no merit to them whatsoever? Can you really read the news today and believe that life is all ponies and roses? Don't you think there are at least a few women out there who, like me, are more inclined to seeing to the unvarnished truth of life, and dealing with it as-is, rather than making up some Hallmark-card delusion of the world? After all, if you have glass with liquid in it, but that liquid happens to be fermented horse piss, isn't it good to have a few people around who see the glass as half-empty, rather than half-full?

L: Well, I'll grant you that. But only a few women like that. Not too many.

M: Well, I only need to find one woman like that, for my primary partner at least. So now I'm 2 for 4. So, let's get to the next one. Commitment. Now, imagine you had my outlook on life. You don't have to agree with it, but just think of what it would be like to believe what I believe.

L: I'm trying. That's why I have this vodka tonic in my hand.

M: So, you're walking around the world like me. Can you imagine what a commitment it is to just not off myself?

L: No, I can't.

M: Viewing the world as I do, can you imagine how much commitment I have to have, not to fling myself off the Golden Gate? Or just slit my wrists in the bathtub? Or put myself in my garage with the car engine on? Or take a 12-gauge...

L: OK, OK, I get it...

M: The only reason I don't do it is because it would devastate my parents, right while they're in retirement. They've been kind and loving to me. That would be a shitty thing to do to them. And to my friends, who would suffer a great deal if I did that to them. Every day, I want to do it. And it's kind of fucked up, I have this thing I want to do so badly in life—which is to call it quits and get out of this hell-hole—and I can't, just because I love my friends and don't want to hurt them. That, Lucinda, is commitment. Three of four.

Plus, I'd say I'm pretty funny. So there you go. Four out of four.

L: Gallows humor I guess. By the way, you mentioned your friends. *You* have friends? Who *are* these people?

M: Sure, I have plenty of friends. I like to say, I hate humanity, but I love humans.

L: What do you mean?

M: I don't like the impact humanity has on the rest of the tree of life. We're like Paul Bunyan for the tree of life. We see a new branch of that shit growing away from us, and we're like, "Oh, something that exists independently of us—chop it down!" But, there are individual humans I love.

L: *You're* capable of love?

M: Yes, indeed I am, Lucinda. In fact, my outlook on life gives me a unique philosophy of love.

L: Pray tell.

M: Lucinda, the way I see love... love is... love is like... it's like this program. It's this program that evolution installed in us. And the purpose of this program is, it's like, when you see another human, and you're attracted to them, and you're falling in love with them... but then you realize that basically we're all just sacks of shit with moving lips, right? And the only thing... the only thing, that could get us to put up with one of these talking, singing sacks of shit, long enough to reproduce with them, and then stay together long enough to raise the offspring until they're old enough to wipe their own ass, without you wanting to strangling the kids first and throw them off a cliff. Love is...

L: OK, OK Michael, I think I'm good on your philosophy of love.

M: No, stick with me here, Lucinda. Let me ask you something. If you were going to fall down, would you rather fall while standing on a giant Corinthian column, or while standing on a step stool?

L: Well, a step stool, I suppose.

M: Right. But what do we do when we're looking for romantic partners? We climb right on top of a grand Greek marble column. And we say, "Look at me, look at how grand I am on this tall Greek column!" And then we look for other partners who have put themselves up on columns too across from us. And you know what happens then?

L: What?

M: We fall. And then we shatter, and our partner shatters, because we fell from so high. Whereas, if we just put ourselves on a step stool, when we fall, we're probably not going to shatter. My philosophy of love is based on the idea of a low center of gravity.

L: What do you mean by that?

M: Do you know where the word "human" comes from, Lucinda?

L: No.

M: It comes from the proto-indo-european root word *dhghem*, which is also the root of the words humble, humiliation, and humus.

L: Humus, like, pita bread?

M: No! Humus is the decomposed plant and animal matter found in topsoil. *Dghem*, the root of humus, and humble, and humiliation, and humans means “Earth,” and also “lowly,” as in, not heaven. We *humans* are lowly creatures. Of Earth, not heaven. *Humble*. Easily *humiliated*. And in my view, when we can recognize this, when we realize that we are like *humus*, dark, constantly decomposing, full of bugs, and snakes, and shit in our souls... and when we get in the mud, and we’re like, “Oh, you’re so fucking dirty! You’re a filthy fucker aren’t you!”...

If *that’s* what we’re used to, then if by chance the rains come down, and cleanse us of this mud, and we get to see our beloved for just one single day with purity and clarity, *that* is true love.

L: OK, I kinda see that.

M: If you’ve got diarrhea, Lucinda, would you rather be wearing white pants, or black pants? Well, that’s what humans have--diarrhea of the soul. So let’s just put on our black pants and then it’s not so shocking to us when some specks miss the mark. Whereas, with white pants, one little speck of poop and the whole thing’s ruined. So fuck these facades of purity. They’re fragile. They’re not robust. Give me and my match some nice black outfits, and let us crawl together in the mud, and if we can love each other there, we can love each other anywhere. And we won’t split the second the white dress gets some dookie juice on it.

You know how I like to date, Lucinda?

L: Oh, please, tell me.

I like to put all my flaws out first. It gives us a lot to talk about on our first date. And the second, and the third. There's a lot of them.

And then, I like to see who's still there. Because if she sticks around after that, we're less likely to run away when our demons come out. It's just that, most of us spend so much time hiding our demons, from ourselves, and from our partners, that when they finally do come out, our partners freak out, because it's like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I just start with Mr. Hyde, and I want her to show me Ms. Hyde, right out of the gate. Because, frankly, I think Mr. and Ms. Hyde have probably have much hotter sex than Mr. and Ms. Jekyll.

L: OK, well, our time is up. I can tell you, Michael, our slogan at Lucinda Lakeside Matchmaking is, "There's a Match For Everyone." And I'm very sorry, but after talking to you, I think we're going to have to change our slogan.

M: Well, thank you for your time, Lucinda. I've been looking for my match for years, and I guess I'll just keep looking.

L: You might want to look in a therapist's office first.

M: You mean, like, date my therapist? I've always had a fantasy about that.

L: Michael, we're done here. I hope you find what you're looking for, and I hope you have a very nice life.

M: OK Lucinda, well, thank you for hearing me out. I appreciate it. [Starts walking out the door.]

L: Hey Michael, before you go... I think I've got something for you.

M: You've got a match for me?

L: No, no, I definitely don't have a match for you. But... I think you should go on the Internet. There's someone out there on the Internet for everyone. Lord knows. And I just thought of the headline you should use in your dating profile.

M: OK, hit me up

L: I can see it, in big headline letters...

M: Well, what is it?

L: Loving Misanthrope Seeks Fellow Freak to Ride Out the Apocalypse Together

M: You know Lucinda, that's a good one. I got my money's worth. You're getting 5 stars on Yelp.

L: Well thank you, Michael. I worked hard for them today.

M: You did indeed. Thank you so much Lucinda. Bye now.

L: Bye!

Three days later, at Lucinda's therapy session...

L: Uh, Dr. Schwartzman?

D.S.: Yes Lucinda?

L: Well, Dr., you know the theme we've been exploring for the past three or four years?

D.S.: Which one are you referring to, Lucinda? There's a quite a few.

L: You know, my pattern of being attracted to unavailable bad boys who have trouble written all over them...

D.S.: Yes, Lucinda, I'm very aware of that pattern. What happened this time?

L: Well, Dr. Schwartzman, I'm afraid to say... three days ago... I met a bad boy.

The Non-Incarnation Association

MAC: Hello, Multiverse Meandering Travel, Mac speaking. How may I help you?

ALLISON: Hi, my name is Allison, and I'm thinking about sending my baby girl Sklyar down to Earth to incarnate as a human, and I wanted to inquire about your prices on flights.

MAC: Earth, why would you want to send Skylar to Earth? And as a human no less. What are you, some kind of sadist?

ALLISON: No, I am not a sadist. Quite the contrary. I heard they have very good schools down on Earth. The best in in the multiverse, in fact.

MAC: Well that may be true, lady. But that's like saying they also have some of the best prisons in the Multiverse. Which indeed they do, simply by virtue of having the only prisons in the multiverse. That's what Earth is, mostly. A planet of prisons, and schools that are like prisons.

ALLISON: Schools that are like prisons? Excuse me?

MAC: Yeah, down on Earth, they got this crazy system. In order for Sklyar to prove that she's worthy of having food and a place to live as an adult, she's gotta spend the first two decades of her life, the very best years of her life, sitting still in rows of desks, memorizing and reciting facts about which humans slaughtered which other humans, when and where.

ALLISON: Little Skylar would have to memorize facts about who slaughtered whom? Instead of playing outside in the fresh air with her friends?

MAC: Oh, if you send her down to Earth, Skylar won't be playing too much. Maybe when she's 22 and out of the school-slash-prison you send her to. But then she'll be stuck in an

unpaid internship. Maybe when she's 25? No, then she'll be taking orders from some sociopathic boss to make busywork. All just so she can eat and have a place to rest her head!

ALLISON: Well, I hear there are very nice toys on Earth.

MAC: Plastic! They're all made out of plastic! The same plastic that's piling up in the oceans and killing all the fish. And now microplastic shards are so spread out the Earth that they'll get into Skylar's tissues.

ALLISON: Plastic? In tissues? On Earth their Kleenex is made out of plastic?

MAC: No, your baby will be made out of tissue!

ALLISON: My baby will be made out of Kleenex? What kind of place is Earth?

MAC: No, no, ma'am. Tissue, living tissue. It's this stuff that humans are made of. It's kind of a soft and goeey material on the inside, with a wrapping and some small hairs on the outside. Sort of like a snot burrito wrapped in a sheepskin rug. Sorta.

ALLISON: Eww, gross.

MAC: If human tissue was just gross, it wouldn't be so bad. But it's much worse than gross, ma'am. Human tissue is painful.

ALLISON: Painful?

MAC: Yeah, if you send Skylar to incarnate on Earth—don't you even know what incarnate means lady? The etymology of "incarnate" comes from the Latin word carne, flesh. It's like a chile carne asada, except Skylar's going to be the carne, one way or another. Car accidents, for example. One of the leading causes of death on Earth. Humans strap themselves into these individual vehicles they think they can drive, and it's like fuckin bumper cars down there on Earth. And if Skylar doesn't get her carne asada in a fucking car accident, there's always heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer, dementia, viruses, pandemics. In fact, Earth is such a hell hole,

Skylar might just knock herself off first, to wake up from the fucking nightmare you've put her into. Boom, bullet to the head. That'll put some salsa on the fucking carne. Trust me, don't send her to incarnate down on Earth. It's like sending a pig to a fucking spit roast.

ALLISON: Listen, I called you, because I wanted an objective opinion on where I should send Skylar for her very first incarnation. And you don't sound objective at all. You sound uniformly negative about Earth. Are you on the payroll of one of Earth's competitors?

MAC: Well, ma'am, we do take some funding from the Non-Incarnation Association. But I take umbrage at your implication that our funding would in any way prejudice the recommendations I'm making to you. I wouldn't never recommend something to you I don't follow myself. Ma'am, in my entire life—in multiple lifetimes in fact—I have never, ever sent one of my own babies to incarnate on Earth. You'll never catch me doing it.

ALLISON: Well where do you send your babies then?

MAC: I told you, ma'am, I'm part of the Non-Incarnation Association? Down on Earth, there's a lot of people who don't believe in re-incarnation. Well, I'll tell you, I don't believe in incarnation. Period. I think it's a better deal for the babies to just remain in the spirit realm, like us. Not as many hassles.

ALLISON: But people do go about their lives down there on Earth, and seem pretty cheerful, despite all the risks. There must be ways to keep Skylar safe down there.

MAC: Parents of humans are always freaking out about the safety of their children. Oh, the kids are going to get exposed to this, they're going to get exposed to that. Oh my God, little Billy's only 8, just five years after he stopped sucking on his mom's breasts, he's gonna see some other woman's tits on the Internet. Oh my God, he's gonna to be traumatized for life!

ALLISON: They think it's traumatizing that children see images of nude humans on Earth?

MAC: Yeah, it's fucked up down there. They can see as many human bodies as they want being ripped to shreds in movies and video games, no problem. In fact, the parents take the kids to see the violent action and war movies! It's a nice family outing. And a character gets shot up or blown up, or ripped open with a fucking sword, and the kids'll be just fine, according to the parent. And if that same movie character was lying on the ground with their naked guts hanging out after being violently eviscerated, but at the same time you could also their fucking wiener or twat, that would be the body part the parents would freak out about, and think the kid's going to get traumatized over. Not the fucking naked guts oozing onto the ground next to it. On Earth, nude body parts just fine, as long as it's the nude inner organ hanging out your side, and so long as it came about from someone being violently eviscerated.

ALLISON: Wow, those humans really seem to have things backwards there.

MAC: Same thing about body fluids ma'am. If the kid is surfing around the internet, curious about the facts of life, as kids generally are, and they happen upon some pornography, and they happen to see some jizz, or some vaginal lubrication, the parents are going to have a fucking hissy fit. They're gonna write articles about what a fucking dangerous world for kids, and press their government for Internet censorship. But the kids can see all the blood they want. The parents give them the videogames for Christmas, with photo-realistic blood spewing everywhere. The body fluids that usually come about from someone having pleasure and love, you know, the creamy and clear ones, nah, that'll traumatize the kids. But the red body fluid, which you usually see only after an act of gruesome violence or extreme pain, that's good clean family entertainment.

ALLISON: Mac, I have to say. Earth seems like a really messed up place.

MAC: Topsy turvy, ma'am. Topsy turvy. The thing I want to ask prospective parents of humans is, if you care so fucking much about your child's safety, why are you bringing a child into an inherently unsafe world? Earth's no fucking place for children. It's barely a place for adults! The only way you can be certain, abso-fuckin-lutely certain that your little precious Skylar doesn't get hit by a car, or have her dog die, or have childhood cancer, or get bullied, or get depressed and fucking off herself, or get sexually abused by whatever fuckin asshole you remarry after you divorce her cheatin' dad, or go crazy and need serious psych meds just to function, or end up in some dead-end job flipping burgers, or get married, cheated on, betrayed, divorced, have her heart broken, or any of the other myriad tragedies that routinely afflict the human condition, is to just not have the baby in the first place. When it comes to kids, just say no. Why is that so fucking complicated for people?

ALLISON: They have heartbreak down on Earth?

MAC: Oh yeah. But people on earth romanticize it. They're like, "Oh isn't it so romantic that I've desperately wanted someone to love me back for years and all I get from them is a pat on the back, but mostly just ignore me. I'm gonna go right now and write a poem or a song or a fucking novel about it, isn't this unrequited love so tragically romantic?" You know what's romantic? Diving into the unfolding white light that envelops you in infinite potentiality, as if your bathing in pure honey elixir... not this pining away for unrequited love bullshit. That's just for overgrown, hysterical human flesh monkeys. It's the stories humans tell themselves to mollify their pathetically tragic lives.

ALLISON: OK, listen. I would believe you more if you at least had something positive to say about Earth. I mean, it's got 457 million positive reviews on Yelp Multiverse. It can't be *all* bad.

MAC: Nah, it's not all bad on Earth.

ALLISON: It isn't? Well that's surprising to hear you say, Mr. Sour Puss.

MAC: Yeah, there are a few good things.

ALLISON: Like what?

MAC: They've got some really good drugs on Earth. It's like a fuckin' pharmacy down there.

ALLISON: Drugs? You're saying Skylar would take drugs down on Earth?

MAC: Yeah, they got this thing called Oxycontin. That's some good shit!

ALLISON: What's Oxycontin?

MAC: You've never heard of Oxycontin? Ma'am, maybe *you* should go to Earth and score some. Bring a little back for me, I'll make it worth your while. When your little Skylar finally gets through the miserable quagmire that is childhood, and reaches sixteen or seventeen, and she's going through all the emotional pain of waking up to what a shitty fucking world you brought her into. Then all she's gotta do is pop one of them Oxycontin that her little high school friends stole from their parents' medicine cabinets. She'll feel like she's in heaven for a few hours.

ALLISON: But we're already *in* heaven now!

MAC: I know, it's ironic, isn't it? People down there always clamoring for heaven. And if they hadn't incarnated, they wouldn't be clamoring for it, they'd already be there. I guess sometimes you don't appreciate what you have til you lose it. It's like, if you haven't fucked for

two or three years, and then you get up in there, it's almost worth the multiyear wait just to have that fuckin atomic bomb orgasm.

ALLISON: Eww, gross!

MAC: Hey, if you're so squeamish about sex, lady, you really shouldn't send Skylar down to Earth.

ALLISON: Why not?

MAC: It's like a fuckin orgy down there. Well, a guilt and shame orgy.

ALLISON: What do you mean, a "guilt-and-shame orgy"?

MAC: They really do a number on the children down there. They make them start to sexually mature around twelve or thirteen. They don't teach you anything about your own body or your budding sexuality; they tell you it's all wrong, and shameful, and dirty, and sinful. You can't even fuckin whack off when you're a kid without some fucking parent or preacher telling you you're going to burn in hell if you do.

And the irony is, they're already in hell, on Earth. That's the hell-hole of the multiverse. But in order to make it seem tolerable, so they can keep pumping out babies, the priests and pastors make up this ridiculous story about some hell that's even worse than Earth, as if such a thing were possible, where the little children are going to go and be burned and tortured for eternity if they touch their own ding-dong or va-vay-vay. Parents and preachers scaring kids that they're going to burn in hell for engaging in the normal, natural, healthy bodily function of masturbation is a form of child abuse, if you ask me.

ALLISON: Wow, that must really mess the kids up. What happens to them when they grow up?

MAC: Then when they're eighteen, after they've been shamed and guilt-tripped and controlled and purposefully kept in the dark about their own sexuality for five years or so, then it's off to college, and now boom, you can fuck whoever you want. But the kids haven't had any fucking education. It's like giving a kid car keys without any drivers education, and then being surprised and angry when they crash into a fuckin' tree and total the car and injure someone.

The kids get shit-faced hammered binge-drinking hard liquor at frat parties, and start hooking up with whoever's else is wasted around them, because it's the first time they're away from their fucking controlling parents.

Then some kid wakes up, realizes they barely remember what the fuck happened the night before, goes crying to some fucking college administrator, who launches a Stalinist tribunal to try to figure out which shit-faced drunk college kid did what to some other drunken kid at some fucking party, and then everyone wonders why these kids got into such messes.

I'll tell you why they got into such messes, it's because their parents are such messes.

You know, Allison, they say insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results. So the parents are insane, but they think if they just make carbon-copies of themselves, they're going to have non-insane kids. That's the real insanity.

If you send Skylar down to Earth to incarnate as a human, you better start saving up for her fucking therapy fund. She's gonna need it more than her college fund, I'll tell you that.

ALLISON: OK, well, you're making some good points. I just think that, maybe Sklyar could do some good down there on Earth. Maybe she could make a difference, and help solve some of those problems.

MAC: Look, ma'am, I'm sure Skylar is a very nice kid. But, no offense, she's still going to be a human. That's like saying a piece of dogshit is going to be an air freshener. You really don't want that for Skylar. What about sending her to, uh, Alpha Centauri. They have some nice playgrounds for disembodied spirit kids there.

ALLISON: I don't want a disembodied spirit kid in Alpha Centauri. I want a real, flesh-and-blood human child on Earth!

MAC: Well fine, I can get you a ticket to go down to Earth yourself. SpaceX is having a discount on parent-only tickets right now. Earth doesn't need any new kids, but there are plenty of kids on Earth who need new parents.

You know, most parents don't put much thought into why they want to bring new sentient beings into a life of suffering. Did you know that about 30% of births on Earth were unplanned?^{§§§} That means about 30% of Earthlings are simply an unplanned byproduct of fucking. Existence by accident. Being by boinking.

Basically the lowest common denominator for bringing a child into the world is two people who are attracted to each other for at least ten minutes, and who fuck because of it.

ALLISON: Ten minutes?

MAC: I know, that's optimistic in some cases, isn't it? Can you think of a lower bar, for anything? To get a job, you usually need to study for 13 year or 17 years in one of them prison schools to get a diploma first. To drive a car you gotta to take a test and get a license. And if you're drunk, and you drive, you get your license taken away. But if you're an alcoholic, for example, you know there's a 100% chance your child is going to grow up as the kid of an alcoholic. But you don't get your license to have kids taken away. Because they don't have any licenses to have kids down on Earth.

ALLISON: They don't have licenses to procreate down on planet Earth?

MAC: No ma'am. To bring a child in the world, all you need to do is have unsafe sex with someone you met at a bar at 2AM. The only safety equipment you need is beer goggles. No wonder sentient, incarnated life on Earth is so fucked up. Fucking is what got them there! Now don't get me wrong, I love fucking as much as the next guy. But I don't exactly think getting your rocks off with whomever you happen to be horny for in the moment is a great basis for creating conscious, embodied beings.

ALLISON: They even let child abusers procreate down there?

MAC: Yep. And you know what else? Sometimes the mother knows the father is a bona fide child abuser—because she sees him beat the shit out of the kids right in front of her. But then she goes and willingly gives this child abuser more kids to abuse. In that case, not only is the father an abusive asshole, but frankly so is the mother—because she's subjecting a currently non-existing kid to a 100% certainty of having the shit beat out of it, just because she couldn't put a lid on her fucking babymaking. It's like a fucking addiction for these humans. They just can't wean themselves from one more hit from the baby heroin needle. And so, the wheel of suffering continues, and continues on, with no end in sight.

ALLISON: But the thing you don't understand, Mac, is that giving birth is a miracle.

MAC: You know, parents of humans are always talking about what a miracle their little shit-bags are. And they then want their little walking balls of puke to transcend their incarnation and ascend up to heaven.

But given Skylar already is a miracle, and she already is in heaven, why would you put her through a hellish incarnation on Earth, just to get back here? It doesn't make any sense. Why

not just keep her non-incarnated? Why not let Skylar remain the incorporeal, immaterial, ethereal, non-eventuated, vibrationally-potentiated, divine, sublime star-baby you've always dreamed of? In fact, you can talk to this little invisible spirit baby just like you talk to an invisible God, because she is God already. That's the real miracle.

ALLISON: Well, Mac, you're very convincing. I've decided, from speaking with you, that I would never inflict such cruelty on my little Skylar, as bringing her into this awful place you've been describing. I'd much rather just keep her as a nice, happy, undisturbed spirit baby.

MAC: Well ma'am, I'm so glad to hear that. We won another one over. We saved your little baby from a human lifespan of suffering.

ALLISON: Thank you so much, Mac. How can I repay you?

MAC: We don't charge any money for our services. But, if you're so inclined, we do appreciate if you become a member of the Non-Incarnation Association.

ALLISON: What does the Non-Incarnation Association do?

MAC: We've got a missionary project down on Earth. We're focusing on the men first. 'Cause they're the ones who can't keep their ding-a-lings in their pants. We're calling it the Vasectomy for Victory campaign. Catchy, eh?

ALLISON: Well yes, that is catchy!

MAC: Our message is, when you're in a hell-hole, you don't bring babies into hell. Just live the rest of your days out, peacefully in hell, with your friends and family, without creating more families. Take some drugs if you have to to make life a little more pleasant, have plenty of contracepted sex with willing partners. But for God's sake, please don't procreate. Save the souls of the unborn.

ALLISON: Save the souls of the unborn? Isn't that what the anti-abortion activists say?

MAC: Yeah, but they got it backwards. What do you think is going to save the soul of the unborn more—forcing it to be born into Earth by a mother who doesn't want it, to face all the pains attendant to the human experience? Or saving the souls from the misery of being incarnated as a human in this latrine pit called Earth in the first place?

ALLISON: Well, it all makes sense, but this must be a tough pill for humans to swallow.

MAC: I'll be honest with you, it is a tough pill, but we're going to go easy on them first. We're trying to politely persuade all the human men to get vasectomies.

ALLISON: And what happens if you can't persuade them?

MAC: Well, if we can't persuade them... we're gonna have to move to something more extreme.

ALLISON: What's that?

MAC: Neutering.

ALLISON: Neutering?

MAC: Yeah, I hope it doesn't come to that. Fortunately, the humans are already neutering themselves, for all intents and purposes. They're pumping so many chemicals into the environment, men barely have any swimmers in their splodge anymore. And if they don't do themselves in that way, they're going to wipe themselves out with climate change, or nuclear war, or artificial intelligence that treats them the same way they treat all the other animals. Humans are done for it, one way or the other.

We're just trying to help them make a graceful exit. Sing a nice swan song, then get the fuck outta there. If all men got vasectomies, the whole nightmare would be over in just one short generation.

Part 2:
Sex Stories, Etc.

Energy Sex

I was on a massage table in San Francisco. I'd found Catalina on the Web advertising therapeutic massage. I liked the language she used in her ad—"surrender," "softness," "slowing down," "presence," "embodiment." I could already tell, minutes after she put her hands on my back, that she was one of the best bodyworkers I had ever experienced. Her touch was soft and compassionate, yet precise and penetrating.

I'd recently been invited to my first "play party," thrown by my friend [Philippe Lewis](#), who was known as one of the best play party organizers in the Bay Area. I was going to the party the next day. My wife Jena was in New York, and I was going solo, with her blessing. I felt I needed to "get in my body," as they say in California, in order to fit into the party, which was why I was getting the massage.

I'd never been to a play party. But from what I gathered from online reading, these were parties where guests were invited to explore all aspects of their sensuality. Some people compared them to "orgies" or "swinger parties," but participants in the play party scene said there was an important difference: at play parties, people were welcome just to flirt, or make out, or talk dirty, or dance suggestively. There was more of an intention that people connect emotionally, not just have sex with strangers, as compared to swinger parties, where the focus was entirely on fucking. Sex was welcome at play parties as well—and there was plenty of space to do so. But it was not expected or even encouraged; it was a space of "high possibility, and low expectation."

As Catalina's hands worked my back, we were in a conversation that meandered from topic to topic. It was a more conversational experience than most massages I'd received, but it was flowing smoothly, and eventually our wide-ranging discussion meandered to sex.

"I've been feeling really shut down sexually lately," she volunteered. I was surprised she was being so vulnerable with me, after we'd just met, but I appreciated it, and went with it.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"I think I have a lot of sexual shame still, that I haven't worked through."

We talked more about some of the details. Eventually, I became convinced that attending Philippe's party, and meeting his merry band of warriors against sexual shame, might be the perfect thing for her.

"OK, I have a crazy proposal," I said. "You're totally free to say 'no thanks.' But I just want to put it out there."

"What is it?"

"I'm going to a private play party in Bolinas tomorrow night. It is organized by my friend Philippe Lewis. It's for his birthday. It will just be friends, and friends-of-friends."

"Yeah, I've heard of Philippe," she said. "I've been wanting to go to one of his parties for a while."

"Great. The intention of the party is to create a place where people can explore their sexual selves, without shame. Given what you told me, I really think you would enjoy and benefit from being there, and meeting Philippe's whole crew.

I continued: "Now, I know this is completely strange for a stranger to invite you to a play party for the next night. But I want you to know something." I slowed down my speech, and looked her in the eyes. "If you came with me, my complete priority would be on your comfort. I

would make sure you felt totally safe with me, and with everyone else around you at the party. I would put zero—and I mean absolutely zero—pressure on you to act any particular way with me.”

“That sounds amazing,” she said. “It sounds like just the right thing for me. I need to think about it for a night. But I’ll definitely consider it. Can I let you know tomorrow?”

After the massage, as I was about to leave, Catalina said, “I need you to know something.”

“Yes?” I asked.

“I haven’t had sex for three years.”

“That’s a long time. Was that intentional?”

“Yes. I’ve intentionally chosen to be celibate these past three years,” she said.

“What inspired that choice?”

“I haven’t been able to find a way for men to show up in my life sexually that feels right to me. So I decided to take some space from sex, and from men.”

A mental image came to me: Catalina ending her celibacy, one day, with a man she loved. What a powerful, romantic, emotional moment that would be.

But I also knew I wouldn’t be that man—certainly not after knowing her for one day. I imagined us getting swept away at the party, having wild, passionate sex. Then I imagined her tensing up the next day, feeling she had given up her journey so abruptly, with a man she didn’t even know; I imagined, then, her time with me leaving a bad taste in her soul. I certainly didn’t want to foster that experience in yet another woman.

So, I did something I had never done before. I put a boundary on our sexual activities, *before* she did.

I knew that going to a play party with a stranger was already a risk for her, and that she was probably nervous about the idea. I wanted to show her that I respected her choice to be celibate, and that I wanted to take responsibility for her comfort.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a bit disappointed when I heard she was celibate. I was attracted to her; I had hoped the night would at least hold out the *possibility* of sex. But I was also in a newfound period of trying to not be a doofus when it came to women and sex. Trying to have sex, after she had been celibate for three years, and after I had told her I'd put no pressure on her at the party, would be the epitome of a doofus move. So for the first time ever, I took it off the table, proactively.

"One thing seems for certain," I said. "Even if we do go to the play party together tomorrow night, let's decide that we won't have intercourse there. No way."

She let out a deep exhale, and her body relaxed. "Thank you for saying that," she said. "We can definitely dance, and play, and find a flow that works for us. But no, I'm not open to intercourse with you tomorrow night, if I go with you."

"Deal," I said, holding out my hand to shake. "No intercourse."

"Deal," she said, with a smile and an eye-sparkle, shaking my hand.

The next morning, the day of the party, I awoke to this email:

Yes. . . this event sounds great, and I'm excited to meet your community. I am committing to go on this journey/ adventure/dance with you. I already shared with you some of my hard

boundaries so I trust that I will be safe. I am looking forward to movement/ play/ dance/ exploration with you, within that safe container.

I feel the magic unfolding and am open to its many gifts.

xoxo

Catalina

That evening, I picked Catalina up, on the way to the play party.

Though she seemed totally relaxed, I was nervous. I'd never been to a play party, much less with a woman I'd just met a day before. We were driving at night along country roads that were illuminated only by our headlights, on our way to a sex party. Even though Catalina showed no signs of nervousness, I felt there might be a certain "axe-murderer" fear in the corner of her mind, being enclosed in a car with a near-stranger in the dark on country road. So I tried to keep the conversation light and neutral. We talked about family, books, movies, travel, and so forth.

At the party, we were shown to a small, womb-like room with a futon taking up the entire floor; our room for the night.

We set our stuff down. She came towards me, and we embraced in the room. We'd moved beyond the party being a theoretical possibility. Now we were at the party, our bodies touching.

I felt how dynamic her body was. She was a bodyworker and a dancer; supremely attuned to her body. Her touches melted me, and my melting further softened her body.

Our bodies started lowering down in the dance, and soon we found ourselves on the floor's futon. We started rolling around playfully. I landed on top of her. I looked her in the eyes, to make sure this was all OK with her.

Her eyes seemed inviting, excited, and she let out a soft moan. I nuzzled my thighs between hers, which were now open wide. We began grinding. We stayed grinding. And grinded some more.

Normally, in my still-boyish enthusiasm to get laid, I would have left the “grinding” station long before, en route to later, “better” stations—that is, stations farther along the track towards getting laid.

But I had made a commitment to Catalina, and I was going to honor that commitment. And so, grinding was the main option available. I decided to see what it had to offer, beyond the cursory preamble I had always taken it to be.

We went deeper and deeper into it, with more and more focus and presence, letting go of any agenda, or any sense that this was “heading somewhere” other than where we were, right in the moment. Soon, our pants and shirts were off, and we were in a full-on, passionate underwear grind.

Within about twenty minutes of this grinding—which was about nineteen minutes more than I would have spent on it normally—something happened that changed my life.

I began to feel something I can only describe as “sexual energy” within me, entering her, penetrating her. I felt her receiving it, and giving it back to me, with hers. I felt my own energy adding to hers, giving it back to her, back and forth, back and forth.

What was this “sexual energy”? I've thought about how to describe what I experienced, in a way that doesn't sound hopelessly New Age. The best I have come to is this: when you are

receiving oral sex, if it is really good, you can feel waves of pleasure running throughout your whole body. In some sense, the oral sex is pleasuring the entire body, even though there is only physical contact with the genitals. The rest of the body is being pleased with the excited tingling of “sexual energy” running up and down. This is exactly what was happening—intensely pleasurable sexual energy was pulsating through our entire beings—but without the oral sex part, just the grinding.

In that instant, something shifted in my awareness, and I finally understood two concepts I’d heard bandied about in my California personal growth circles but had never really “[grok](#)ked” on a visceral level (“grokking” being another California word): “presence” and “embodiment.” I realized in that moment that they were really the same thing.⁶²

This is how I felt with Catalina. In one “a-ha” moment, I finally *got* these vague California concepts. I had never experienced anything like this before in sex; that moment is still imprinted in my brain.

⁶² What did these words even mean? Here’s my best way to describe them, in retrospect. Imagine sitting on the shore of a beach, wondering what it might be like to be in the water. You wonder how warm or cold the water is, which direction the current is running, what the waves will feel like against your skin. And, suppose you’re thinking about a few other things as well—how much time you have left in your parking spot, whether you left your laptop and other valuables in plain sight in the car, the calls you have to make when you leave the beach. This is what California personal growth type people call “being in your head.” You’re primarily relating to a bunch of thoughts, not to the sensory information of your immediate surroundings.

Now, imagine you step into the water. All of your wondering about the water ends. You feel the coolness of the water sending enlivening shivers up your spine. You feel the waves crashing upon your skin. You feel the bubbles fizzing on your skin.

All your thoughts of the parking and the valuables and the calls disappear in your delight. You submerge your head, and all of the sudden, you feel immersed in an all-encompassing, alternate reality. You feel your *entire* body, not just your thoughts. You are taking in the experience, as if your body was one large antenna for sensation. And the *only* thing in your field of awareness is what’s happening *right now*, not worries or memories about the past or plans about the future. *This* state is what the California types refer to as “embodiment” and “presence.”

In a break from the energy-sex-grinding, we were cuddled up on the futon. “You know,” I said to her, “I’m really grateful for your boundaries.”

She let out a small gasp, and smiled. “No man has ever said that to me before. Why are you grateful for my boundaries?”

“We’re having this amazing experience, and I don’t think we would be having it had intercourse been an option. I would have been so excited by the possibility, all my regular patterns and programs around sex would have been activated. On some level, however subtly, I would have been guiding, leading, seducing towards the direction of fucking. But knowing that that wasn’t an option, and removing any ‘goal’ for the night, allowed me to slow down, and discover all the pleasure we can have, without penetration.”

“It’s amazing how hot we can get, without having sex,” she said.

I nodded. And then, I realized: “Actually, we *are* having sex.”

“Yes, we are,” she said, as we started grinding again, in the excitement of our conversation.

“Energy sex,” I said.

“Energy sex,” she replied.

An hour into our energy sex, we had both completely lost sense of our normal, day-to-day selves. We felt as though we had dematerialized into vortexing flows of sexual energy, spiraling in and out each other.

It was one of the most profound sexual experiences I’d ever had—all with our underwear on.

Catalina started weeping gently.

I stopped what we were doing, and held her. After a few minutes had passed, I asked her, “What is going on for you?”

She waited a few moments to respond. “You’ve proven to me that you are going to respect my boundaries the whole night, and that allows me to let go and run free sensually in all the other ways I have been longing to with a man for so long. I’ve never had that experience with a man before. I feel as though you are healing a deep mistrust I have towards men. Thank you, Michael. You are a powerful man. You are a powerful healer.”

At that point, I could not hold back, and started sobbing myself. I’d never been called a “powerful man” before. It simply wasn’t my self-image. And I’d certainly never been called a “healer.”

Before that moment, my own sexuality had occurred to me primarily as an itch that needed to be scratched. Something that was pleasurable, but that was basically like quenching a thirst or satisfying a hunger, every few days. I didn’t have the slightest idealism about it. I had no conception that my own sexuality could be a healing force for a woman.

My own sexuality contributing to a woman? Other than giving her some temporary pleasure (at the same time as I sought my own) and showing her a good time? I had never even considered it.

Until Catalina told me. In that moment, a new world of my own sexuality opened up to me. I told her that, by allowing my own sexuality to support her in her healing with men, she was also healing me. She was getting me to see that my sex was powerful, and had value beyond a mere basic drive. “We are healing each other,” I said. She nodded.

Exorcism by Spanking

As we began to arise from our post-energy-sex bliss and our puddle of tears, Catalina looked at me a little nervous and said, “I have something to tell you.”

“Yes?”

“Well, there’s this thing I like, and I haven’t told many people I like it.”

“What is that?”

“I really like being spanked,” she said. “One of my gigs, other than bodywork, is being a professional spankstress: I give spankings to men for money.”

“Really?” I asked.

“You’d be surprised how many men want this service. But... my little secret is I want this too. I’ve been fantasizing about finding a man who could spank me, without trying to get sex after. Would you be willing to try it?”

This was the very beginning of my curve of understanding kink. At that time, I thought this was strange. I didn’t judge her for it—I was already past judging her for anything—but I just didn’t “get it.” Why would a grown person possibly want to be spanked, by a lover? “Isn’t that humiliating?” I wondered to myself.

“Why do you like being spanked so much?” I asked.

“I don’t know. A lover of mine did it to me once, and it turned me on like crazy. I’ve always wanted it since then.”

I didn’t really understand it. But I figured, millions of women had read *50 Shades of Grey*. There must be something to it. I wanted to make Catalina happy. So I was willing to give it a shot.

“How do I do it?” I asked.

Catalina leaned forward and pulled her panties up tight, exposing her dancer's booty. "Just try it," she said. "Give it your best shot."

I had never spanked anyone in my life. I raised my hand above her butt and brought it down with a harsh THWACK. Catalina let out a minor frown, and showed no signs of pleasure. "Softer," she said. I did as she told me, but a few more attempts were met with grimaces. Soon I said, "Why don't we try this again another time." She didn't disagree.

After we had been in the room for ninety minutes or so, we realized it was time to re-join the party, with our newly-expanded sexual selves. Catalina reached into her bag, and pulled out a long, rectangular wooden paddle. It had the light density of a classroom ruler, but it was wider.

"What are you going to do with that?" I asked.

"You'll see," Catalina said.

We exited the room, to find ourselves in the basement living room, which was functioning as the main "sex room" of the party—with other rooms being used for lighter fare. About a dozen people were engaged in all kinds of explicit sexual acts. Catalina and I found ourselves on a bed, chatting up some of the other partygoers.

Ten minutes later, nearly all the activity and sound in the room came to a halt, and all that remained was the sound of lightweight wood smacking flesh, and a woman's orgiastic screams, emanating right behind me on the bed.

I turned around. Catalina's hand was like a vibrator, shuddering the paddle on a petite woman's ass—tight like crisp apples—as the woman writhed and moaned and screamed. It seemed like the woman receiving Catalina's spanking was going through some kind of emotional

exorcism; amidst the screams of pleasure were tears, wails, sighs, and the sounds of a woman wailing in both joy and grief at the same time.

Though people in the room had been proceeding as if they were out to offend every religion on the planet at once, this performance stole the show. We were all transfixed for ten minutes straight—a long span of attention in a room otherwise full of people engaged in frenzied group sex—as Catalina smacked layers and layers deeper into this woman’s emotional being, through her emotional bottom.

Finally, Catalina began to slow down, and traced the paddle over the woman’s ass and the rest of her body sensually. Then, she put the paddle down, and started nourishing the woman’s skin on her ass with a soft touch, as if wiping in powder on a baby’s bottom. Then she laid next to the woman and held, caressing her body. The woman lay in a spent puddle, weeping and gasping softly. After a moment of silence, the room burst into applause.

Catalina later told me that for her, this scene was a dream come true. She had been doing this work on men, for pay, but she had never been witnessed by anyone other than her male clients, and her interest in spanking was something she hardly talked about with anyone else. It had been a secret thing she did on the side. She wanted to give and receive this with lovers, but didn’t know how to ask for it. She said she didn’t know how to create boundaries to explore other options. She didn’t want to give a male lover the impression that—just because she spanked him or vice versa—therefore they were also going to have sex.

“The experience with you, that night, taught me that I could express my boundaries, and I could actually get what I wanted, without having to do the other stuff I didn’t want to do.”

I was so happy to hear that. She continued, “This emboldened me to get more of what I wanted after, which was to have my spanking witnessed by others. And also to spank a girl. I had always wanted to spank a girl. That night was my first time.”

It was a night of many firsts.

Lessons From a Spankstress

“First, get me in the right position. There are several positions that work,” Catalina said.

It was a few weeks after Philippe’s play party.

Catalina demonstrated in front of me:

“I can be kneeling on all fours in front of you, either facing away from you, or with you to my side. I can bend down onto my elbows and forearms, for more angle. Or I can even rest my whole upper body and head on the floor for even a sharper angle of booty into the air. Another option is over your knee.”

With that, she positioned me sitting on the floor, with one of my knees pointing out. She folded face down with her belly over that knee. Her panty-clad butt popped up in front of my chest.

“Now, it is very important to warm up the booty,” Catalina said, rubbing her own glutes gently all over, and then motioning me to follow suit. “A spanking without that is like plunging into ice-cold water with no preparation.

“Next, when you’re ready to start spanking, start very gently. Little pats on the bum, just to continue the warm up.” She demonstrated on herself again, and then I tried. “Very good,” she said. This wasn’t so hard, I thought.

“Now, you’re ready to get into the more substantial spanks. There are basically three strokes you can use. The first is primarily with your outstretched fingers, like the way you would slap your wrist. It has a sharp, stingy feeling to it.” She demonstrated on herself, and then I tried it. SMACK! I was proud of that smacking sound; it seemed like the sound a spank should make.

But Catalina let out a gasp, and buckled forward. “That’s way too hard for starters,” she said. I realized I was repeating the same patterns I had exhibited with Jena, which had been the subject of many therapy sessions—habitually going too hard, primarily because I thought that’s what sex was supposed to be.

I had a lot of unlearning to do, I realized. I said sorry, and she shrugged it off. I was grateful that Catalina was willing to take the hit, literally, for me to learn this and to overcome my patterning from the past; few men get such an opportunity.

I gave her softer spanks with my stiffened fingers. Catalina sank deeper into my knee, and moaned softly. “Be sure to work different areas of the butt,” she said. “The central flesh, the sides, the bottom fold, even the crease into the inner thighs. Just be sure not to spank the pussy, or the lower back, because those hurt like hell and will probably end the spanking session if you do it unexpectedly.” I spanked all the suggested areas, and Catalina seemed happy. “You can even go down the back of the thighs, and even the calves and bottom of the feet.”

“Bottom of the feet?” I asked. “I thought the whole point was to mimic a spanking like we got when we were kids. I definitely didn’t get spanked on the calves or bottom of the feet.”

“Not all spankings are punishment roleplays,” Catalina said. “I’m into that sometimes, but other times I just like the sensation of it. People get all worked up about spanking, like it’s demeaning or degrading. But it’s not always this big psychological deal. I like to think of it as a ‘percussive massage.’”

I kept giving Catalina the “percussive massage,” and from her moans and the deepening relaxation of her body language, I felt like I was finally getting the hang of it.

As I was practicing, I said, “I’m super curious: how did you get so into spanking? And, I know this is a really cliché question, but... were you spanked as a kid?”

“Yeah, my dad used to spank me a lot when I was a little girl. And before I really even knew what ‘turned on,’ was, I was turned on by it. I used to do naughty things like leave a mess or refuse to go to bed, to try to provoke him into spanking me.”

This seemed vaguely Freudian to me. But I guess all sexuality is Freudian to some extent—mixed up with our earliest experiences of nudity, bodily functions and fluids, parental nurturance, and the power imbalances of childhood discipline.⁶³ These, I surmised, are some of the common roots of kink and BDSM. They just get expressed in different ways in different people. Some people have breast fetishes—suggestive of a return to maternal nurturance—other people have mommy or daddy fetishes, other people have spank fetishes.

Catalina kept up with her lesson: “It’s important to alternate cheeks, so you don’t overdo it on one side. It’s also important to smooth out the spanks with some gentle rubbing for a few moments, every thirty seconds or minute or so. This will make the spanking session last much longer, which makes me happy.”

“You’re a spank addict!” I teased.

“Yup. I can’t get too much,” she said.

“The next stroke is a slap with your full hand, with fingers and palm combined. This can also give a stinging feel, and is much more forceful than just fingers alone, so you have to calibrate the intensity really well.” I erred on the side of softness this time. But it seemed at this point she was already warmed up. “You can go a go a little harder,” she said. I did as she said. “Even a bit harder.”

⁶³ See my 2018 comedy performance [Freudian Kink](#).

I knew I was at the right zone when Catalina's body melted; she sank deeper into her position and started moaning loudly. At this point, he seemed to forget about the lesson, and seemed to go into some kind of trance as I spanked her. I alternated cheeks, going between my fingers and full hand, and smoothing out the flesh every thirty seconds or so before going back into the spanks. "Faster!" she said as she sank deeper into her moaning reverie.

I alternated, one smack to each butt check, and we got into a rhythm in which each smack corresponded to one of her moans, which were starting to sound more and more orgasmic with each smack. I speeded up, smoothing out the spanks quickly every thirty seconds in order to keep going, until her moans reached a fever pitch. Her pelvis started quivering, then shaking, and then erupted into spastic jolts on my knee as she screamed out in pleasure.

After Catalina cooled down and caught her breath, I asked her, "Did you just come?" She nodded yes. "From spanking?" She nodded again. "Wow, I didn't know you could come from spanking," I said.

"I come from spanking all the time," Catalina said. She motioned for us to keep going with the lesson. "The third stroke is with the base of the palm only. Rather than the stinging, slapping feeling of the other two strokes, this gives a dull thud. It feels particularly good pressed into the base of the sit bones, deep where the inner thigh meets the glutes meets the groin." She pointed to the spot and I gave it a good thump with the base of my palm. "Yes, that's it!" she moaned. "Mix a few of those in there every few minutes and you'll look like a pro."

"Now, there's one more very good thing you can do from this position," she continued. "And that is, reach under my thigh with your non-spanking hand and cup my pussy. Over my panties!" I did as she told, and she moaned. "You can synchronize squeezes of the pussy with your spanks, and even use your middle finger to push against the clit. That makes me go over the

top so quick. Especially when your knee is pushing into my inner thigh. All that, with the spansks, and it's..." I started doing it again. She started building up into orgasm again quickly.

She came again. After she cooled off, Catalina said, "There's one final thing I need to teach you to become a master spanker, and it's very important. It's called aftercare. You've basically been hitting me for twenty minutes straight. That's what I wanted, and it turned me on. But now, my body needs something softer. I need to feel your love and care in gentler way. So just hold me, caress me, cuddle me. Make me feel taken care of, safe and protected. Calm my nerves down." I held her in the bed, stroking her body softly. We collapsed into a deep nap.

Stay tuned for more.

Email me at morewriting@ellsberg.com if you'd like to receive more of my writing as I release it. I also welcome feedback, comments, praise, and polite critique at that email address. I may not reply to all email personally, but I do appreciate, read, and welcome your correspondence about Joyful Pessimism. Thank you for reading my writing.

ENDNOTES

I haven't entered hyperlinks between the main text and the endnotes yet. To find your way back to the main text that refers to a specific endnote here, copy the relevant endnote's symbol (such as *) and search for that in the text. Sorry for the inconvenience; I will add hyperlinks in soon!

* In *The Foundations of Belief* (1895), Arthur James Balfour explores similar terrain powerfully:

Man, so far as natural science by itself is able to teach us, is no longer the final cause of the universe, the Heaven-descended heir of all the ages. His very existence is an accident, his story a brief and transitory episode in the life of one of the meanest of the planets. Of the combination of causes which first converted a dead organic compound into the living progenitors of humanity, science, indeed, as yet knows nothing. It is enough that from such beginnings famine, disease, and mutual slaughter, fit nurses of the future lords of creation, have gradually evolved, after infinite travail, a race with conscience enough to feel that it is vile, and intelligence enough to know that it is insignificant. We survey the past, and see that its history is of blood and tears, of helpless blundering, of wild revolt, of stupid acquiescence, of empty aspirations. We sound the future, and learn that after a period, long compared with the individual life, but short indeed compared with the divisions of time open to our investigation, the energies of our system will decay, the glory of the sun will be dimmed, and the earth, tideless and inert, will no longer tolerate the race which has for a moment disturbed its solitude. Man will go down into the pit, and all his thoughts will perish. The uneasy consciousness, which in this obscure corner has for a brief space broken the contented silence of the universe, will be at rest. Matter will know itself no longer. "Imperishable monuments" and "immortal deeds," death itself, and love stronger than death, will be as though they had never been. Nor will anything that is better or worse for all that the labour, genius, devotion, and suffering of man have striven through countless generations to effect.

It is no reply to say that the substance of the Moral Law need suffer no change through any modification of our views of man's place in the universe. This may be true, but it is irrelevant. We desire, and desire most passionately when we are most ourselves, to give our service to that which is Universal, and to that which is Abiding. Of what moment is it, then (from this point of view), to be assured of the fixity of the moral law when it and the sentient world, where alone it has any significance, are alike destined to vanish utterly away within periods trifling beside those with which the geologist and the astronomer lightly deal in the course of their habitual speculations? No doubt to us ordinary men in our ordinary moments considerations like these may seem far off and of little meaning. In the hurry and bustle of every-day life death itself—the death of the individual—seems shadowy and unreal; how much more shadowy, how much less real, that remoter but not less certain death which must some day overtake the race! Yet, after all, it is in moments of reflection that the worth of creeds may best be tested; it is through moments of reflection that they come into living and effectual contact with our active life. It cannot, therefore, be a matter to us of small moment that, as we learn to survey the material world with a wider vision, as we more clearly measure the true proportions which man and his performances bear to the ordered Whole, our practical ideal gets relatively dwarfed and beggared, till we may well feel inclined to ask whether so transitory and so unimportant an accident in the general scheme of things as the fortunes of the human race can any longer satisfy aspirations and emotions nourished upon beliefs in the Everlasting and the Divine.

For a contrasting view on the ultimate significance of humanity and Earth in the cosmos, from a non-theistic perspective, see *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations That Change the World* by David Deutsch, and in shorter form, his TED talks "[After billions of years of monotony, the universe is finally waking up](#)" and "[Chemical scum that dream of distant quasars.](#)"

† In a hilarious video, comedian JP Sears gives satirical advice for “[How to Be Ultra Spiritual](#).” In one [segment](#), entitled “Become exactly what you’re rebelling against,” he says, “Rebel against dogmatic religious terminology by dogmatically using spiritual terminology. You’ll want to keep your eyes closed extra tight on this one, so that you don’t see that you’re actually still subscribed to the exact same belief system that you’re rebelling against, because now you’re expressing the same concepts, just with new words.” He illustrates this overlap by playing two characters, a square-looking Christian guy with a Bible, and a groovy-looking new age guy with a headband, with intercut lines.

Christian guy: Jesus loves you.

New age guy: The universe supports you.

Christian guy: I’ll pray for you.

New age guy: I’ll send you white light.

Christian guy: God will provide for you.

New age guy: The universe is abundant.

Christian guy: It’s all about getting into heaven.

New age guy: It’s all about getting back to oneness.

(Or as my friend [Jeremy Sherman](#) likes to say, “Same bullshit, different brand.”)

New agers also frequently subscribe to a contemporary version of [pantheism](#), that holds that “God is the universe and the universe is God” or “God is everything, and everything is God,” or “we are all God, and God is all of us.” This pseudo-profound insight is somehow supposed to be optimistic, uplifting and comforting.

Long before the existence of the new age, here’s what Schopenhauer had to say about this type of pantheistic thinking, in his essay “[A Few Thoughts on Pantheism](#)“:

The chief objection I have to Pantheism is that it says nothing. To call the world “God” is not to explain it; it is only to enrich our language with a superfluous synonym for the word “world.” It comes to the same thing whether you say “the world is God,” or “God is the world.” . . . [If] you start from. . . the world, and say, “the world is God,” it is clear that you say nothing, or at least you are explaining what is unknown by what is more unknown. . . .

Taking an unprejudiced view of the world as it is, no one would dream of regarding it as a god. It must be a very ill-advised god who knows no better way of diverting himself than by turning into such a world as ours, such a mean, shabby world, there to take the form of innumerable millions who live indeed, but are fretted and tormented, and who manage to exist a while together, only by preying on one another; to bear misery, need and death, without measure and without object, in the form, for instance, of millions of negro slaves, or of the three million weavers in Europe who, in hunger and care, lead a miserable existence in damp rooms or the cheerless halls of a factory. What a pastime this for a god, who must, as such, be used to another mode of existence!

It is absolutely absurd to think that a being endowed with these qualities [“the highest power and the highest wisdom”] should have put himself into the position described above. . . . Pantheism. . . assumes that the creative God is himself the world of infinite torment, and, in this little world alone, dies every second, and that entirely of his own will; which is absurd. It would be much more correct to identify the world with the devil.

‡ In their attempts at moral alchemy, theologians have typically made an important distinction between two types of toxic sewage they wish to transmute into gold: “moral evil” and “natural evil.” Moral evil is that which perpetrated

intentionally by humans, such as murder or slavery; because humans could (presumably) choose not to commit the evil act, there is a moral dimension to the harm caused.

[Natural evil](#) (also sometimes called “physical evil”) refers to harms and suffering which were not brought about by a morally-responsible agent. Natural evil includes all manner of natural disaster, disease, and accidents.

Theologians tend to ignore that, by their own theology, God brings much of this natural evil about directly himself, as in countless instances of famines and floods and disease in the Old Testament—which also includes countless instances of God committing what we would straightforwardly call moral evil if committed by humans, such as commanding his subordinates to genocide. And even in cases where he doesn’t intervene directly, he created *all* evil indirectly, by having created the world with foreknowledge of all the moral and natural evil that would happen. This also makes him morally culpable. Inexplicably, however, believers and theologians give God an absence-slip from moral responsibility. In a delightful 1983 usenet rant entitled “[Even if I DID Believe](#),” now legendary among atheists, Tim Maroney lambasts this moral absence-slip that believers give God:

[Christians say] ‘You can’t judge God by the same standards as man.’ In that case, why is it that I keep getting told that God is good? Are there two meanings of the word ‘good,’ one of which forbids murder, deliberate starvation, infecting people with disease, and so on, and another which allows these things? I suggest that there is already a word for the second meaning. That word is ‘evil.’ If you think that it’s OK to worship an evil god, that’s your business, but you can’t expect me to do the same.”

Non-human animals are also constantly the victims of evil, and the evils they suffer can also fit into the natural/moral distinction. When a zebra is eaten by a hyena, that can be considered “natural evil.” (For the zebra; for the hyena it’s just lunch.) It’s not a moral evil because presumably the hyena could not have done otherwise and thus there’s no moral dimension to its behavior. Whereas, when a circus trainer abuses a lion or tiger, that can be considered a moral evil, because the circus trainer could have found different work, and the circus producer could have simply not used lions or tigers in their shows. Vegans say that meat-eating is a moral evil, and I agree, though meat-eaters typically (and unsuccessfully) generally argue that it’s “justified” by nutritional necessity. More on this debate later.

(In case you’re wondering, as of now, eat some meat, not sourced from factory farms, for nutritional reasons I have experienced extensively having to do with my [long-standing bipolar mental health issues](#). I was vegan, for ethical reasons, for six years, but in experimenting with how to overcome my bipolar issues, I found that a diet with close to zero carbohydrates—which I did not find possible to maintain as a vegan—helped stabilize my mood. There is now some [scientific data](#) pointing to the benefits of an extremely low-carb diet for bipolar people, and more bipolar people are [starting to try it](#). Mental health has been hard to come by in my life, so I take any aids where I can get them. However, I don’t attempt to morally justify in any way the atrocity of eating other sentient beings, and I support efforts to abolish factory farming, i.e., mass industrialized torture of animals—one of the greatest moral atrocities in the history of life. I believe vegans are on the right side of this issue, and I laud their efforts. In choosing my own mental health over avoiding eating the flesh of other sentient creatures, I am in some way evil. So is every human, in one way or another. I am also a misanthrope, and thus, as I will argue in [Outtake #3], the phrase “evil human” is redundant.)

With these distinctions in place (moral evil vs. natural evil, humans as victims vs. non-human animals as victims) we can map out the different patches of the sewage of life that theologians have tried to turn into fields of divine gold. Typically, as I discuss later in this chapter, theologians have focused almost exclusively on moral and natural evil experienced by humans, as the evil experienced by animals—particularly the widespread natural evil that occurs in the wild—is near impossible to respond to theologically.

Recently, some theologians have ventured into the terrain of trying to explain the problem of why an all-loving God would create wildlife suffering. These attempts typically contain more tortured reasoning than the wild animal torture they describe. See the recent field of “[evolutionary theodicy](#),” which proclaims, laughably, that God is all-powerful but also, somehow, couldn’t have made the world without the shocking violence of evolution by natural selection. For what it’s worth, the Bible flatly contradicts the idea that God could not have avoided creating predation. In [Genesis 1:29-30](#), God makes both humans and animals herbivores:

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

It’s not until after Noah’s flood (which was exactly 1,656 years after Adam, Houston Baptist University helpfully tells us) that God makes humans meat eaters, in [Genesis 9:2-3](#). By the way, God also never mentions why he had to make this shift, nor does he mention why or when he changed his original peaceful design of non-human animals and made most of them predators. But if he was able to avoid making humans and non-human animals predators at the outset, why couldn’t he have just kept them that way?

Books by Christians purporting to provide answers to the problem of wild animal suffering include [Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering](#) by Michael J. Murray, [Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil](#) by Nicola Hoggard Creegan and [Animal Suffering and the Darwinian Problem of Evil](#) by John R. Schneider.

See also, most absurdly, [The Problem of Animal Pain: A Theodicy For All Creatures Great And Small](#) by Trent Dougherty, who [writes](#):

I will defend the thesis that a class of animals . . . will not only be resurrected at the eschaton, but will be deified in much the same way that humans will be. That they will become, in the language of Narnia, ‘talking animals.’ Language is the characteristic mark of high intelligence. So I am suggesting that they will become full-fledged persons (rational substances) who can look back on their lives—both pre- and post-personal—and form attitudes about what has happened to them and how they fit into God’s plan. If God is just and loving, and if they are rational and of good will, then they will accept, though with no loss of the sense of the gravity of their suffering, that they were an important part of something infinitely valuable, and that in addition to being justly, lavishly rewarded for it, they will embrace their role in creation. In this embrace, evil is defeated.” (p. 3)

Do you see now why I am a misanthrope? Non-human animals, for all their flaws, are not susceptible to this uniquely human kind of delusion, nor do they excrete their delusions in words such as these that we may end up reading.

Schopenhauer [writes](#): “The doctor sees man in all his weakness; the lawyer sees him in all his wickedness; and the theologian sees him in all his folly and stupidity” (p. 604). And, man often sees his folly and stupidity reflected right back at him from the theologian.

[§] As a thought experiment, suppose a corporation created an AI robot that displayed a level of autonomous behavioral variability and unpredictability that gave the robot something approaching “free will.” (I’m not saying *actual* free will in AI is necessarily possible—I’m not even sure what that would mean—but certainly a level of variability that makes its behavior unpredictable to us humans, and thus from our perspective acting “freely,” is theoretically possible.)

Now suppose this robot went around enslaving, torturing, and murdering children. In response to public outcry, the CEO of the company releases this statement:

While we regret the pain and loss of innocent life, as any decent humans would, you must understand, our intention was to make AI robots who can commit *moral good* in the world. In a world where moral good is to be achieved by AI robots, there must be freedom. Freedom to do only what is right is not freedom; it is mechanical coercion. An AI robot incapable of wrong is also incapable of right; it is not a free robot at all but an automatic machine.

It is from the misuse of this freedom that the dark shadow of moral evil appears. Yet if our purpose is to be achieved freedom must be maintained, despite the regrettable collateral damage. Just as a child cannot learn to walk without the possibility of falling, our AI robots cannot learn to use their free will without the possibility of going wrong. Our chief scientist has put this whole idea in words well worth our quoting. He says, “Freedom—though it involves grievous error and pain—is the very condition of our robots having

free will. There can be no other way for AI robots to achieve morally good actions, for if they were not free, their actions would be compelled and therefore, by definition, not ‘morally good.’ We cannot have it both ways. It is only in a world where the horror of our AI robots enslaving, torturing, and murdering innocent children happens, that they will also learn to do morally good things, like organizing to stop slavery, torture, and murder. Indeed, if we were to suppress the possibility of moral evil, we would be doing evil, for we would be preferring the worse to the better.

Furthermore, we expressly deny all legal liability and moral culpability for the behavior of the murderous AI robots we created, because we created them with free will. Their behavior is squarely and exclusively their responsibility, not ours. Our lawyers will defend vigorously against any charge that we are responsible for the regrettable loss of life associated with the behavior of the robots. Please direct all communications to our PR department.

Would you find this statement convincing? Of course, if a CEO made such a statement, he would be instantly “cancelled,” and rightly so. He would also be the subject of mass protest, and corporate and personal civil lawsuits, and even criminal prosecution.

This statement from the CEO defending the benevolence of his action of creating free-willed robots, is—minus the legal flourish at the end—*exactly analogous* to Dr. King’s statement defending the benevolence of God creating humans as free-willed beings. (You probably noticed that, with a few exceptions, the language was taken directly from Dr. King’s theodicy paper.)

With God as CEO of the world, what is the mechanism for suing and prosecuting God? He’d need a really defense good lawyer. (Alan Dershowitz?) If anyone ever deserved to go to that everlasting jail of hell he built, it is God himself.

** Darwin likely didn’t know about *Toxoplasma gondii* or the violent rat-cat orgy phenomenon. However, as we saw at in his quote at the outset of this chapter, just plain-old cat predation of mice was enough to make Darwin question the idea of a benevolent creator: “I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created. . . . that a cat should play with mice.”

We humans generally consider kittens to be the very embodiment of innocent cuteness and all that is good on Earth. In fact, the proverbial “alien anthropologist” might conclude that the entire Internet, smartphone industry, Silicon Valley social media economy, and much of our attention [are devoted to sharing information about and memorializing](#) small feline predators that we worship.

Yet as Darwin suggests, they are hardly so innocent, cute or good... *if you’re a mouse*.

The phrase “[cat and mouse](#)” indicates a cute, playful game akin to hide-and-seek or peekaboo. It’s so cute and playful there’s even a cartoon series celebrating this chase. It has been going strong for 80 years, beloved by children across the world: *Tom and Jerry*.

Or, perhaps, *not* so cute. As the [Wikipedia entry for this cartoon series](#) reads (accessed July 5th, 2020):

The cartoons are known for some of the most violent cartoon gags ever devised in theatrical animation: Tom [the cat] may use axes, hammers, firearms, firecrackers, explosives, traps and poison to kill Jerry [the mouse]. On the other hand, Jerry’s methods of retaliation are far more violent, with frequent success, including slicing Tom in half, decapitating him, shutting his head or fingers in a window or a door, stuffing Tom’s tail in a waffle iron or a mangle, kicking him into a refrigerator, getting him electrocuted, pounding him with a mace, club or mallet, letting a tree or electric pole drive him into the ground, sticking matches into his feet and lighting them, tying him to a firework and setting it off, and so on. Because of this, *Tom and Jerry* has often been criticized as excessively violent.

Sounds like just the kind of cute fun most kids love!

In real life, outside of the cartoons, the cat and mouse chase is characterized by just as much violent fun and games ... *for the cat*.

Instances of non-human animals inflicting pain on other animals just for the fun of it (the way some sadistic humans do to humans and non-humans alike) appear to be relatively rare.

(Schopenhauer wrote, in [Essays and Aphorisms](#): “[M]an is the only animal which causes pain to others with no other object than causing pain. The other animals do it in the cause of appeasing their hunger or in the rage of battle. No animal ever torments another for the sake of tormenting; but man does so, and it is this which constitutes the /diabolical/ nature which is far worse than the merely bestial.”)

One seeming exception is something millions of pet owners have witnessed with their own eyes: the way cats seem to—for lack of a better term—“fuck with” mice and rats before slaughtering them and eating them.

Videos of such apparent feline sadism are popular sub-genre of cat videos on YouTube. Watch this one, entitled, appropriately, “[Cat Catches Mouse. Cat Plays With Mouse. Cat Eats Mouse.](#)” In it, a pet owner films her cat “Splash” tormenting a terrified mouse around the back patio. At numerous times, Splash has the mouse fully in his jaws, and easily could put the mouse out of its misery. But instead, seemingly for shits and giggles, Splash lets the increasingly bedraggled and bloodied mouse out of its grasp, so the mouse can (pitifully) try to get away. Only so Splash can continue running the mouse in circles, pawing it around like Ronaldo dribbling a soccer ball. Finally, *four minutes* into this sadistic torment, Splash does the deed and sinks his fangs into the mouse for good.

In another video, entitled “[Rat Eaten by Cat – Big Fat Rat.](#)” the cat seems to be more of a mixed martial artist than a soccer player. Look at him at minute 1:35: he looks exactly as a mixed martial artist would in the octagon, taking ruthless, poised swipes at the rat, making bloody marks on the rat with each swipe of the claws. The rat seems to be stunned, dazed, unable to figure out what is going on. With the rat in this shocked state, the cat seemingly could finish the rat off at any time, but he doesn’t. He just keeps tossing the live rat around the bathroom, taking bloody sucker punches like this for *twelve minutes*, before finally putting the rat out of its misery and sinking its fangs into the rat’s neck to suck blood and flesh like a vampire.

(By the way, cats’ “playing” with mice before killing them isn’t pure sadism, appearances to the contrary. Cat experts [theorize](#) that the cats are tiring the rodents out before moving in for the kill. Rodents have claws too, and can cause infections in cats with just one well-place gash before the cat moves in for the final kill, so the cats prefer worn-down rodents before biting. Humans, it seems, remain unchallenged among animals in the capacity for *pure sadism* towards members of our own species and others.)

These videos all seem like good cheer if you’re a cat, or a cat lover. *But what if you’re a mouse?*

Typical house cats are around 1.5 feet, and weigh about 10 pounds. Typical mice are around 3 inches long and weigh about 1.5 ounces. That means a typical cat is about 6 times longer, and 106 times heavier, than the typical mouse it’s chasing.

To get a sense of just how massive that size differential is: if you were a woman of globally-average height and weight (around 5’3” and 135 pounds), and a feline predator with that size differential were chasing you, you’d be running from a predator that was about 31.5 feet head-to-hind, and that weighed 6.75 tons. With eyes—and claws—just for you.

(By comparison, various translations of the Bible [put Goliath at somewhere between 6.5 and 9.5 feet.](#))

To us, cats are little furry bundles of joy—representing everything that’s right and sweet about the world. To mice, however, house cats are 32-foot long, 7-ton furry Jack the Rippers.

Which view is correct? Of course, it depends on where you stand. But why do we stand with the “cute innocent fuzzy bundle of love” view of cats rather than the mice’s “furry Jack the Ripper” view?

Because cats are part of our in-group, and mice are part of our out-group.

Yet there is one highly-relevant and specific in-group to which we all—mice, rats, cats, and humans—belong: mammals. We are choosing to empathize with one mammal we like, and ignore the suffering of mammals we don’t like.

In a lovely essay in the *New York Times* entitled “[Why I Identify as a Mammal](#),” Randy Laist explains why he chooses to identify not *primarily* as a human, nor any sub-identity of human, nor as a primate, nor an animal... but specifically as a *mammal*:

I accept on principle that I have a lot in common with a tuna or a mosquito, but the acknowledgment doesn't compel me on a visceral level. When I consider what I have in common with a bear, however, or a squirrel, or a whale, I recognize an inherent sympathy that is at the center of my being.

I get a warm and fuzzy feeling.

There are deep-seated joys associated with our mammalian nature. The satisfaction of working up a good sweat. The infantile pleasure taken in soft, furry things. A tasty swig of milk. The warm and fuzzy feeling itself — one of the most basic descriptors of human contentment — is essentially mammalian, referring to the body heat of the ancestral burrow that we all still remember in our bones and seek to recapture in various ways throughout our lives.

(The heartwarming accompanying illustration, by Ariana Vairo, depicts a child snuggling in a cloth blanket, with the blanket morphing into a cuddling bear on the other end of the bed. There's a reason that teddy bears are more common than teddy wasps.)

Laist's point is not that we should have no concern for non-mammalian species. Rather, he argues for the value of choosing to identify with an animal group larger than humans, but that we can still *relate* to—a “family of fellow creatures whose resemblance to ourselves is perennially surprising, seductive and suggestive,

This, he says, allows us to get outside of our human-centric chauvinism towards the rest of the world, in a way that still feels *familiar* (i.e., of family). “Thinking of ourselves not as human, but as mammals, provides an accessible path to a greater awareness of what we have in common with other species. . . . Placing an emphasis on our mammalian identity is a reasonable compromise between a restrictive anthropocentrism and a vapid all-inclusiveness. . . . pushing the borders of affiliation so far out that they no longer have any resonance.”

It's certainly easy to identify with the “[unofficial ‘mascot of the Internet,’](#)” our friends the cats. (So easy, in fact, that the greatest human organ by far was named after them.) But if Laird's view is correct—that our proper family identity in the tree of life is mammals—then we must also consider the lowlier members of our family tree, the cat's perennial plaything, the mouse. (And the rat.)

Insect minds are so foreign to us, it's hard to know to what degree they are sentient or suffer. The way bugs treat other bugs, while undeniably grisly, does not tend to move our heartstrings as much as the way mammals treat other mammals. While any creature with a nervous system has some *awareness* about its surroundings, it's exceedingly difficult to imagine what a wasp or caterpillar might be experiencing. When it comes to mammals, though, even mice, it's not as difficult to put ourselves in other mammal's shoes (or paws).

However, our primary relation to rats (beyond exterminating them from sewers, landfills and basements) is torturing them as lab rats for cruel scientific studies that help us. Mice are in roughly the same position—though at least they get a famous cartoon in their likeness, who drives billions of revenue from children, while Mickey's real-life brethren are subjected to tortures in dungeons far from the view of the castles of the Magic Kingdom.

Do mice feel pain? Absolutely. In fact, one of the reasons they're so widely used by scientists as test subjects is *because* they feel pain, a characteristic useful in a wide range of investigative contexts, such as studying motivation, side-effects and analgesics.

Indeed, mice's capacity to feel pain is so useful to scientists, that one group of scientists came up with a “mouse grimace scale (MGS)” in a 2010 *Nature* paper entitled “[Coding of facial expressions of pain in the laboratory mouse](#).”

Researchers identified five mouse facial expressions that might indicate pain: “orbital tightening” (squinting the eyes), “nose bulge,” “cheek bulge,” “ear position,” and “whisker change.” They then injected “noxious chemical

compounds” which created in the mice something called an “intra-plantar or intraarticular zymosan and cyclophosphamide-induced bladder cystitis.” This was basically a mouse urinary tract infection.

Photographs were taken of the mice “writhing” in pain (their word) from this chemical-induced urinary tract infection. The first group of researchers then had a second group rate the severity of these pain-related facial expressions, on a three-point scale. (0 indicated that the facial expression was “not present,” 1 indicated “moderate”, and 2 indicated “severe.”)

(I have fortunately only had a urinary tract infection once—but let me tell you, when I was peeing blood from it, any researcher a mile away from my toilet could have seen my eyes squinting, my cheeks bulging, and my whiskers stand on edge from my writhing.)

The researchers also tested out the mice’s pain grimaces to live abdominal and hind-paw incisions (undertaken with anesthesia that soon wore off). And to a “tail-clip test (TC), a binder clip applying 700 g of force. . . ~1 cm from the base of the tail.” They also tested applying painful heat to the tails. Finally, they inflicted something called a “spared nerve injury” surgery on some mice, which sounds extremely painful. This place was fully decked-out in ways to inflict pain on mice; in terms of precision, a medieval torture dungeon had nothing on this place.

It turns out, when given just an hour of training, humans can detect pain in mouse faces almost as clearly as we can detect it in cat faces, dog faces, and baby faces. The researchers write:

Darwin famously asserted that [nonhuman animals are capable of expressing emotion](#) (including pain) through facial expression, and that such expression may be both innate and adaptive. Observations that a similar facial expression of pain is displayed by neonates [human babies] and even by the congenitally blind lend support to this notion. The ability to communicate one’s pain experience to others may benefit both the sender and receiver, such that help might be offered or a warning signal heeded. . . .

Facial expressions of virtually every common emotion, including pain, have been well characterized in humans, and can be reliably coded using the anatomically based ‘action units’ of the facial action coding system. Similar scales have been adapted and have become useful tools in the assessment of pain and analgesia in clinical populations in which verbal communication is limited or nonexistent, such as infants and those with cognitive impairments.

Despite evidence that nonhuman mammals including rats exhibit facial expressions of other emotional states, [until now] there has been no study of facial expressions of pain in any nonhuman species.

Now, from this study, we know that mice communicate their pain to each other through facial expressions, just as much as we humans do. In fact, the researchers point out, “given that mice can be affected by the pain status of a familiar conspecific [i.e., a fellow mouse] and that female mice prefer to maintain close proximity to familiars in pain, it is also conceivable that this social modulation is mediated by attending to the facial expression of other mice.” In other words, just like human mamas with their babies, mouse mamas learn of, care about, and attend to the suffering of babies via facial expressions.

This last dynamic points to a central characteristic Randy Laist (the author of “Why I Identify as a Mammal,”) believes is central to our experience as and kinship with mammals: our relation to our mothers. (This Jewish mammal can agree.)

Laird writes:

[T]he other elemental substance that makes us mammals is mother’s milk. Birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish can all be loving parents, but the mother-child bond among mammals is particularly striking on a purely physiological level. Not only does the mammalian talent for live birth involve a skin-to-skin intimacy between mother and child, but mammal mothers actually become sources of nourishment in themselves, oozing life-giving sustenance from their very bodies.

The importance of reproductive biology to mammalian identity makes it a rather gynocentric way of seeing, which may be one of the reasons the mammalian perspective is generally unvoiced and devalued in

our historically patriarchal society. But the original attachment to our mothers lays the groundwork for a complex and intense network of familial relationships that most mammals are fated to be involved in throughout their lives.

We mammals love our mothers. Which is a huge part of what makes us mammals. And which is part of why it's so sad when a mammal dies (or is painfully ripped to shreds by another animal): the pain of the animal dying is often surpassed only by the pain of the mother grieving. If you watch these cat videos, there sure must have been some grieving mouse mothers and rat mothers.

Scientifically, we do know that mice suffer. Yet still, most of us—except for the most dedicated and vocal animal rights advocates—don't care about mice's extreme suffering. We don't care about it, because to most of us, they're an out-group, and we often don't care one iota about the suffering of out-groups.

How very human (and animal) of us.

†† Why am I an atheist towards traditional religious creation theories, but agnostic towards the simulation hypothesis? I am an atheist in regards to the God of the Bible, meaning that I feel as confident as I can possibly be of anything that this god does not exist. One of the main reasons I feel so confident (though not the only one) is just how intellectually pathetic most religious believers become, even the most formidable minds among them such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when addressing the problem of evil. In short, I believe the problem of evil conclusively rules out the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving creator. I am also an atheist in regards to any religion or belief system that posits any supernatural deities or events whatsoever, for the all the well-known reasons related to the rational and evidential problems with supernatural explanations.

In contrast, the simulation hypothesis is consistent with the laws of physics, and does not rely on any supernatural assumptions. Evaluating it is a matter of computer science, physics, and the science and philosophy of consciousness. I'm not technically versed enough in these fields to make a judgment. As I like to say, the question of the simulation hypothesis is “above my paygrade.” Thus I remain agnostic about it.

Even as I remain agnostic about the simulation hypothesis, there's another, more philosophical reason I am intrigued by: while it posits a creator (the simulators, whoever or whatever they are), it does not at all suggest that the creator is all-loving. The simulators could be a mix of benevolent and malevolent, or wholly malevolent, or (more likely) entirely indifferent to us, to the same degree we are indifferent to ants (until ants annoy us, and then we massacre them).

Insofar as the simulator can be analogized to a god in its capacity to “play god” by creating universes, the simulation hypothesis is in certain respects a “secular religion.” And a “[dystheistic](#)” religion at that. Dystheism means belief in gods are not wholly good, possessing at least some evil. (Cold indifference on the part of simulators to the suffering that they created in our simulated world would count, from our perspective, as cruel and evil, even if the simulators were not actively malevolent towards us.)

The coinage of “dystheism” comes from Professor Robert Koons, who [distinguished](#) between dystheism and “eutheism”—that latter being religions, including classical monotheisms, which posit a wholly-benevolent god. By this definition, many pagan religions are dystheistic. (It would seem that Christianity is also polytheistic and dystheistic, in that it posits a supernatural entity called Satan, powerful at least to be a serious adversary to God and his followers. But that is a whole other can of worms.) “Malthesim”—a subset of dystheism that only exists in fiction, or as a hypothetical construct for the sake of argument—posits that god is *wholly* evil and malevolent.

Any dystheism that posits supernatural entities fails for the typical reasons that all supernatural explanations fail. However, dystheism—in both its traditional supernatural form (i.e., various forms of paganism), and in the new “secular dystheism” of the simulation hypothesis—does not fail on account of the problem of evil; the existence of evil poses no philosophical problem for worldviews whose gods may have evil (or at least cruel indifference) running through their veins. RationalWiki [states](#):

Malthesim. . . is the idea that God is just out to get us and that he or she or it is malicious, [like a kid who keeps removing the pool ladders in *The Sims*](#). . . . While just as conjectural and unproven (and indeed unlikely) as all other forms of theism, malthesim boasts the notable feature of solving the otherwise show-

stopping problem of evil. Further, several other major problems with a theistic God, such as the propagation of several contradictory divine messages (with recommendations of holy war to resolve the dispute), God’s failure to provide any clear evidence whatsoever for His own existence, the wasteful and sometimes incompetent design choices made in creation, etc. all become unproblematic facts of life once the maltheistic assumption is made — that God *really is* a deranged intergalactic Joker with a Stalinist streak. [accessed Jan. 10, 2021]

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, atheist thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Schopenhauer have used the thought experiment of maltheism to destroy belief in a benevolent god, by pointing out that the world we know seems more consistent with having been created by a devil than by an all-loving God. RationalWiki calls this rhetorical stance “hypothetical maltheism.”

We also saw that Mark Twain, who remained a Christian but was *extremely* skeptical, employed a form of hypothetical maltheism, suggesting in *Letters From the Earth* and elsewhere that, if the God of the Bible did create the world, he was not all-loving but rather akin to a “malevolent lunatic.” And many atheists such as Richard Dawkins, and Tim Maroney in a celebrated (among atheists) usenet post entitled “[Even if I DID Believe...](#)” have used hypothetical maltheism successfully in their arguments.

A Google search for “God is more evil than Satan” will lead to some interesting reading too. One Reddit post I found from this search, entitled “God is way more evil than Satan in the Bible,” reads, employs hypothetical maltheism brilliantly:

Our culture depicts Satan as this evil mastermind while ignoring the fact that God is WAY worse. Satan unfairly gets treated like the villain of the Bible but he acts more moral than the God of the Bible.

For starters Satan is directly responsible for 12 deaths in the Bible. God on the other hand is directly responsible for over 2 million recorded deaths in the Bible. That number is actually low when you take into account God’s rage fueled flood that drowns the entire earth. Satan never commanded child sacrifice (Abraham and Isaac) like the God in the Bible did. Satan also never encouraged slavery and treating people like property. Just on face value alone Satan isn’t that bad of a guy.

I’m sure people will say well “what about hell”. According to the Bible God directly sends people to hell not Satan. God also created hell and is the one who also created Satan thus making him more immoral than Satan yet again.

The Bible (especially the Old Testament) depicts God a genocidal ruler while Satan is just guilty of “tempting” people. It’s clear to see who the villain is here.

The most philosophically rigorous exposition of hypothetical maltheism has been the “[evil god challenge](#)” by philosopher Stephen Law. His [original paper](#) on this topic is brilliant and well worth reading. [Here](#) is a short and entertaining animated video on the challenge, narrated by Law. Here is my paraphrase of his argument in a nutshell: The world obviously has both good and evil in it. So why is the idea of a good god who wants only good in the world but for some reason permits evil (the stance of classical monotheism) any more plausible than an evil god who wants only evil in the world but for some reason permits good? Both views are equally implausible, Law argues.

In the latter case, the problem of explaining why an evil god permits good would be called “the problem of good.” Nearly all the traditional answers that religionists give to the problem of evil—such as the free will defense and the soul-making defense discussed earlier—could be inverted and applied to the “problem of good.” For example, an evil god created free will, so that humans *freely choose* to commit evil to please him, even though that means they can also sin against him and commit good. Or an evil god wants humans to learn and grow as evil-doers, from the inferior state of doing good to the superior state of doing evil.

Law concedes that the evil god hypothesis sounds ridiculous to *everyone*, religious and atheist alike, and *no one* believes it, including himself. The challenge he poses to believers in a good god, however, is this: why is your belief in a good god *any* more supported by the mixed-bag of good and evil in the world, than the (ridiculous) belief in an evil god? His answer is, there is no difference; they are equally ridiculous beliefs, equally unsupported by the mixed-bag world we live in.

‡‡ A dislike of associating with fellow humans, along with frequently wishing ill upon them, are the general outlook expressed by Florence King in her book [With Charity for None: A Fond Like at Misanthropy](#) (St. Martin's, 1993).

On the cover, she describes herself as “an unreconstructed people-hater.” The book is filled with shock-jock lines along the lines of: “If ever you meet someone who cannot understand why solitary confinement is considered punishment, you have met a misanthrope,” she writes. (p. 19). “Involuntary euthanasia is a closet misanthrope’s fantasy at the moment, but I predict it will catch on.” (p. 29. Yes, Ms. King—it did catch on. In Nazi Germany.)

For years, King wrote a column for the conservative *National Review* called “The Misanthrope’s Corner,” which the magazine [described](#) as “serving up a smorgasbord of curmudgeonly critiques about rubes and all else bothersome to the Queen of Mean.

To my knowledge, *With Charity Towards None* was the first non-fiction book that expressed misanthropy, self-identified as such, as a distinct worldview. Unfortunately, it set a bad precedent. The book is a strange mish-mash of observations that can be summarized as ‘people are dumb and annoying and I don’t want to be around them,’ mixed with expression of uncharitable desires for her fellow humans intended to shock (she really means her title), all with a socially conservative bent.

One reason she’s bothered by humanity now, for example, is that she feels men have become too wimpy and feminized: “Our feminized niceness keeps us from solving our most pressing problems, such as crime. . . . The only way to handle the criminal is to whip his ass till his nose bleeds buttermilk, but the few unequivocal souls who are willing to unleash such curative measures shun politics. . . . Captive of female priorities, America instinctively shrinks from the only kind of personality capable of solving the problems we constantly deplore.” (p. 36)

The racist dog whistles in this statement (whipping criminals) become regular whistles soon enough: “Affirmative action is our French Revolution, goading us into misanthropy. . . . Copious tears have shed over despairing rage in the ghetto, but there’s more than one kind of despairing rage, and more than one kind of ghetto. The talented student who cracks the books to get into college, only to be passed over for someone less deserving, thinks *what’s the use?* and then feels the twist in the belly.” (pp. 64-65, emphasis in original)

Whatever version of misanthropy King is serving up in her book, I find repugnant. I want nothing to do with it.

§§ Here’s the full passage, from a [letter to Alexander Pope in 1725](#):

I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities; and all my love is toward individuals: for instance, I hate the tribe of lawyers, but I love counsellor such a one, and judge such a one: It is so with physicians, (I will not speak of my own trade) soldiers, English, Scotch, French, and the rest. But principally I hate and detest that animal called man; although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth. This is the system upon which I have governed myself many years (but do not tell) and so I shall go on till I have done with them. I have got materials toward a treatise, proving the falsity of that definition animal rationale [rational animal], and to show it should be only *rationis capax* [capable of reason]. Upon this great foundation of misanthropy (though not in Timon's manner) the whole building of my travels is erected; and I never will have peace of mind, till all honest men are of my opinion” [Note: [Timon of ancient Athens](#) was perhaps the original misanthrope, and certainly the most notorious in history. He was the subject of Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*.]

Interestingly, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a converse formulation is expressed. In Chapter 1, “the elder” [recounts to Alyosha a conversation she had with "a doctor"](#):

“‘I love humanity,’ [the doctor] said, ‘but I wonder at myself. *The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular.* In my dreams,’ he said, ‘I have often come to making enthusiastic schemes for the service of humanity, and perhaps I might actually have faced crucifixion if it had been suddenly necessary; and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with any one for two days together, as I know by

experience. As soon as any one is near me, his personality disturbs my self-complacency and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours I begin to hate the best of men: one because he's too long over his dinner; another because he has a cold and keeps on blowing his nose. I become hostile to people the moment they come close to me. But it has always happened that the more I detest men individually the more ardent becomes my love for humanity.” [Emphasis added. The enclosing double quotation marks are in the original.]

*** By “coherent philosophy,” I mean, various premises, inferences and conclusions that work together as a unified system of thought and argument, subject to potential falsification and defensible against rational critique.

I use this term “philosophical misanthropy” to distinguish it from general, diffuse feelings/thoughts/tendencies of hatred of humanity as a collective and/or interpersonal hatred of the human beings around oneself. The latter unstructured tendencies, particular the interpersonal version, are what most people mean by “misanthropy” (including, it seems, most people who identify as misanthropes). But these diffuse tendencies are not the only versions of misanthropy, and certainly not the ones I subscribe to or defend here.

Andrew Gibson’s *Misanthropy: The Critique of Humanity* (Bloomsbury, 2017), is an erudite, illuminating, survey of misanthropic *themes* throughout the history of literature, philosophy, and religion. In his book, however, Gibson denies that a coherent *philosophy* of misanthropy (as opposed to the fragmentary expressions of misanthropic themes he explores), could even *exist*. The cover copy of the book reads:

“Misanthropy is not strictly a philosophy. It is an inconsistent thought. . . . Human beings have always nursed a profound distrust of who and what they are. This book does not seek to rationalize that distrust, but asks how far misanthropy might have a reason on its side, if a confused reason.”

In the book, Gibson continues:

[T]he categorical misanthropic judgment would mean contempt for all humanity, everyone, including the individual who passes the judgment. Misanthropy, it would seem, is an intellectual attitude that is extremely difficult if not impossible to sustain. In his or her very declaration of misanthropy, the misanthropist stands self-condemned, the prisoner of a fundamental contradiction. . . . If misanthropy is a form of thought, it is not a rigorous but an inconsistent one—inconsistent, that is, or incomplete, always trammelled in the world it **pretends** to escape. . . .

However, paradoxically, the incoherence of misanthropy by no means disqualifies it from serious attention or makes it less seductive in its appeal or formidable as an object of critique, because it thrives on its very own contradictions. Misanthropy is a kind of proto-philosophy or sub-philosophy, a strange form of adulterate but vital thought that may actually have a more stubborn and indomitable life and a broader hold on minds than many philosophies themselves.” (pp. 2-5, emphasis added)

In declaring the near-impossibility of philosophical misanthropy, Gibson makes two errors.

First, he takes misanthropy to be a kind of logically incoherent [self-refuting idea](#), such as “this statement is false” or “All my statements are lies.” (The latter is a version of the “[Epimenides paradox](#),” and has been studied extensively throughout the history of Western philosophy.) If these statement are true, they are false, and if they are false, they are true. Trippy!

No, actually, misanthropy is not necessarily self-referentially invalid or logically incoherent. One way of stating my thesis is this: “Humanity, as a collective, has good things about it and evil things. But the evil far outweighs the good, because of the harm humans, organized in large self-identified groups, cause to the rest of the planet, and to each other. Organizing in large self-identified groups with harmful in-group/out-group dynamics is endemic to humanity, and thus the evil that comes of such self-organization is inevitable. Hatred of things that are more evil than good is warranted.”

I am presenting what I believe to be justified *reasons* for my negative evaluation of humanity overall, reasons which you can agree with or not. (That I don't happen to *care* whether you agree with these reasons or my conclusion, is neither here nor there. I do care that, should you choose to invest your time reading my work, you find what I write thought-provoking, and entertaining. But I do not take it upon myself to care what *you* think or feel about humanity; that is your business, not mine.)

Gibson implies that misanthropy must be an all-or-nothing thing. One drop of fondness for any other human, and you're an incoherent hypocrite!

But misanthropy, just like any value judgment, need not be all-or-nothing. For example, in my extensive travels, I've visited one city that I truly came to *hate*, and found *massively overrated*. (I won't say which one.) Despite multiple people, and a cultural allure, telling me what an amazing city this was, I found it noisy and polluted. Everyone chain smoked and drank too much, people felt cold and rude, and I hated the music they listened to. However, I didn't hate *everything* about the place. The food happened to be absolutely fantastic. But to me, this truly good feature was not enough to keep me from hating the place overall, nor to keep me from wishing never to return.

Does that mean I hate the inhabitants as *individuals*? No. Does that mean I believe they are an *inferior* kind of people? No. Does that mean I wish ill upon the inhabitants, or wished they died? No. Does that mean I wished the city were destroyed, or that I would support policies to destroy it? Of course not.

It simply means that I hated the *collective* properties of this city, and I think it's vastly overrated as a city. Much like I hate the *collective* properties of humanity, and I think we're way overrated (that is, we generally overrate *ourselves*) as a species.

Misanthropy is like a negative movie review, except the reviewer is a part of the movie. And the negative movie review is itself (for the reviewer, at least) part of the plot. Oh so meta! But meta-commentary is not necessarily inconsistent nor incoherent.

Gibson's second error leading to his view that philosophical misanthropy is "inconsistent," "confused," "extremely difficult if not impossible to sustain," self-contradictory, "incomplete," paradoxical, incoherent, etc., is his mistaken view that misanthropy *must* be characterized by a desire—or a "pretend" desire—to "escape" the world and other humans. That is, a desire to be alone, bearing some begrudging interpersonal view of fellow humans as individuals.

This is a common misconception, which I addressed in more detail above on pp 1-3 above. Philosophical misanthropy, as I've presented it here, is not inconsistent with socializing with and even liking and loving *many* individual humans—particularly when those humans are not organized into the large self-identified groups that form the bulk of my gripes. Nor is philosophical misanthropy inconsistent with a *lack of enmity and ill-will*, and even with positive *compassion* and *well-wishes* towards those individual humans whom I don't know or happen to personally like or love.

In Gibson's view, misanthropy is essentially a synonym for a disgruntled loner or ascetic—or more likely, Gibson surmises, a *performative* disgruntled loner or ascetic, who wants to show off loner-ness without really practicing it.

Gibson repeatedly points to various misanthropes who do in fact end up associating with other humans, as if this were some sort of "Gotcha!"

He writes: "Rousseau tells the story in his confessions of how, the more he gained a 'reputation for misanthropy', the more he became an object of almost insatiable curiosity. ('My room was never empty of people.') Humanity has an uncanny way of roping back into the fold, willy-nilly." (p. 4)

He also writes:

In possibly the greatest and certainly the most famous European work on misanthropy, Molière's *Le misanthrope*, the playwright grasps a . . . basic feature of the misanthropic attitude. . . : its incoherence. The misanthropist declares a comprehensive rejection of the object of his or her loathing. But, though Molière's misanthropist Alceste asserts that he will. . . break violently with the whole of humankind, the complete break is necessarily implausible or unachievable; true misanthropy is finally impossible. . . . The logic of

Alceste’s position suggests that he should announce an end to human relations of every kind. In fact, he remains vitally tied to the world he **affects** to despise, most notably in the case of his love for the coquette Celiméne.” (pp. 2-3, emphasis added.)

In Gibson’s view, misanthropy is basically an affectation, a pretense—it could only ever be some kind of hipster “I hate everyone” pose, usually displayed (hypocritically) to gain the very social attention it purportedly rejects. And while many hipsters have no doubt struck this pose, the idea that misanthropy could *only* ever be a “proto-philosophy,” and not a rigorous articulation of a coherent philosophical viewpoint, is empirically false.

Two years before Gibson’s book was published, [David Benatar](#) published “The Misanthropic Argument for Anti-Natalism” (a chapter in the anthology [Permissible Progeny? The Morality of Procreation and Parenting](#), edited by Sarah Hannan and Samantha Brennan, Oxford UP, 2015). This chapter is, in my opinion, the most tightly-argued argument for a philosophically misanthropic viewpoint ever written. Benatar, the world’s preeminent exponent of philosophical anti-natalism (the view that it is morally wrong to procreate), is director of the Bioethics Centre in the University of Cape Town’s department of Philosophy. Regardless of whether you agree with him, Benatar is a formidable professional analytic philosopher (I would not wish to be on the wrong side of a philosophical debate with him); the extreme level of logical rigor he demands of his own arguments makes Gibson’s analytic argument rejecting the possibility of philosophical misanthropy look like a wet towel by comparison. (Gibson’s book, despite its incorrect conclusions about *philosophical* misanthropy, still has value as an exposition of misanthropic *themes* in literature, religion, etc.)

The year following Gibson’s book, David E. Cooper, emeritus professor of Philosophy at Durham University (UK), published [Animals and Misanthropy](#) (Routledge, 2018). This is an analytically-rigorous, tightly-argued defense of a version of philosophical misanthropy, from an animal rights perspective.

At the 2020 Philosophy Now Festival in London, the University of Nottingham philosophy professor Ian James Kidd presented an [overview of philosophical misanthropy](#). In his talk, Kidd de-emphasizes the active *hatred* of humankind implicit in the Greek *miso* root of the word, defining misanthropy instead as “a negative, critical *verdict* or *judgment* on humankind, human forms of life, human existence, in the broadest sense.” (03:55, emphasis added).

Kidd defends misanthropy as “one reasonable response to the facts of human beings and what we are like.” (02:49). The understatement of the century.

††† I faced a version of this situation, with someone who was a distant acquaintance at that point in my life, rather than a friend. I did help immediately—though eventually I decided I needed to prioritize support I was giving to my close friends rather than get involved deeply in an acquaintance’s ongoing life problems.

I’ll call this person “Steve.” A decade earlier, we had been friends in the same social circle, but we had lost touch with each other after I moved to the opposite coast, and then back again years later. We had since been “Facebook friends”—more acquaintances by this time—with little interaction for around a decade.

Out of the blue one day, I received an urgent text from Steve. “I need to go to the emergency room, and I have no one else to call, can come right away and take me?” Of course I dropped what I was doing, and drove to Steve’s stated location, which turned out to be an RV he was living in about half an hour away from me. By the time I got there, his immediate danger (a manifestation of a serious chronic illness, though I don’t recall exactly what it was) had settled down and he no longer felt he needed to go to the ER.

We sat talking, catching up. It soon became clear that Steve was in extreme dire straits. The effects of the chronic illness, which apparently had been caused by medical malpractice, had set into motion a severe downward spiral in his life: losing his job and insurance, exhausting the couches and financial support of friends and his estranged family. Now he was living in this run-down RV, not sure where his next meal would come from. He even facing his RV being impounded for lack of energy to deal with complicated DMV issues.

I drove him to the DMV and he managed to fix his issues. I then drove him to Trader Joe’s and bought him \$300 worth of groceries. He thanked me profusely.

A week or so later, a potential living and work situation fell through for him, and he called he again needing urgent funds for groceries. I gave him another \$200.

Then, a week later, another call needing more funds, and time and support dealing with complicated medical, logistical, and legal issues in his life.

I realized that I was soon going to become Steve's sole support system. (Apparently, whatever social support local or state agencies was able to offer, had been exhausted). And taking this on, deeply intertwining our lives with me as a sole caretaker, seemed overwhelming to me. I didn't really know Steve at this point; he had become a distant acquaintance.

I consider myself a generous friend. And I was already providing support to several friends, much closer to me than Steve. Helping friends is not *entirely* selfless, as it builds a relationship that is ideally as worthwhile to oneself as it is to one's friends. Nonetheless, real friendships are also far from selfish. They entail commitments, and I did not wish to sacrifice those commitments to get seriously involved with the life of someone who was essentially now a "Facebook friend." I was also at that time contributing significant time and financial resources helping other strangers in a social/political cause I care deeply about.

I agonized over this conundrum for a day. I faced the choice of continuing as planned the support I was already providing to others closer to me, and to a cause I cared about, or suddenly devoting what could be a major focus of that year's time and finances, pulling this one acquaintance out of a serious life hole. It was not an easy choice.

I decided that I just did not want to take this situation on. I wrote Steve a polite but firm note, saying that I was glad I was able to provide some support so far, but I not going to be an ongoing support system for him. (I was inclined to say "could not be," but this would have been an evasion; of course I could have. I chose to prioritize other relationships.)

I did not hear back from Steve, and I do not know what happened to him. I haven't followed up, for fear of being sucked back into a caretaker role I chose not to take on.

Callous? Inhumane? In one sense, obviously, yes.

Yet it seems to me this is the type of callousness and inhumanity that is inevitable for humans, particularly in the digitally-connected age, in choosing how to devote our time and resources to help others. Our time and money are not infinite, yet now our quantity of "Facebook friends" is, for practical purposes, infinite. Facebook is a strange development in human life, as it puts us in touch with the (often) intimate details of far more (and far more distant) people than we could ever keep track of in real life; truly caring for even a fraction of our "friends" there—that is, actually showing up as a real friend—would spin our lives into incoherence.

Yet prioritizing the care of people closer to you might literally mean letting any number of strangers or distant acquaintances, whom we could have helped instead, die.

‡‡‡ That I and others would care intensely about a close friend who might have to live in one of these encampments, and drop everything to prevent that, does nothing to lessen an evaluation of me (and others) as callous towards strangers at a society-wide level. A friendship is usually, after all, some form of a reciprocal relationship. This does not mean that friendships should be coldly-calculating tit-for-tat affairs, with close accounting of who's getting what. ("I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine.") That's a relation of convenience (often *very* convenient to have, in multiple contexts) but not a friendship in any substantive sense.

Still, a friendship in which there is *no* reciprocation over time is not a healthy friendship. A quality friendship should be characterized by a give-and-take of caring, over time. Yes, it is also characterized by taking *pleasure* in caring for the other—a wonderful symbiosis—but that does not mean it's healthy or wise for the caring always to go one way; such arrangements put the friendship in the "danger zone." (When the giving is too one-sided, for too long, resentments build, and the supposed "friend" on the receiving end of this one-sided care is turning into something more like a mooch, leech or "energy vampire.")

So, while I would genuinely care about a close friend facing a stay in the tent city and I would go a great distance to avoid that outcome (as opposed to a distant acquaintance, whom—as I recount above—I eventually pulled away from after less effort), it's not accurate to characterize such care to a friend as totally unselfish. I bestow this care within the context of an ongoing relationship in which I do receive many benefits, and the acts of care help strengthen that relationship—even if no direct benefit would come to me from that one specific act of care.

The literature on pure altruism—incurring significant costs to help total strangers, with no likelihood of any reciprocation whatsoever—is vast, and I won't dive into it here. Suffice it to say, pure altruism among humans—while it absolutely exists, with many moving and notable examples—is far from overwhelming, compared to what we might call “social altruism”—the kindness, care and help we extend towards others in our close social groups. (Where our care might “come back to us” one day.)

And on some sad level, it must be. A person who tried to directly care for even a fraction of the suffering lives in their city, would—simply put—have no life in their own. The sea of human suffering is just too vast. Even if we don't have the means or inclination to build yachts to insulate us from the waves of others' suffering, we must at least build lifeboats.

And—even if we're not as selfish as those on the Titanic lifeboats, who [rowed away at half capacity](#), leaving their fellow passengers to drown in icy water—only so many people can fit in any given lifeboat.

While in my experience, poorer people are much kinder, caring, and sharing 1-on-1 to strangers in need than richer people*, on some level everyone needs to block out others' suffering to a large degree, as there are over 700 million people living in extreme poverty in the world. As the saying goes, “A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.”**

Lacking empathy for the extreme suffering of others is central feature of sociopathy. In this respect then, living in a world with virtually infinite suffering, to some degree we must all be sociopathic to stay sane.

* In high school, I drove around town once collecting door-to-door donations for a holiday food pantry. The donations from the rich neighborhoods were paltry in comparison to those from the poorer neighborhoods, in absolute terms. And, relative to their wealth levels, the generosity gap was even more pronounced.

**This line is almost always attributed to Stalin. However, [according to the Quote Investigator](#), there's no solid evidence he ever said it.

§§§ According to a 2022 [UN report](#), about 50% of all pregnancies worldwide were unintended, and about 60% of unintended pregnancies end in abortion. These rates imply that about 30% of babies born were unintended.

Along similar lines, 2020 [study in the Lancet](#) found that, between 2015-2019, worldwide 48% of all pregnancies were unintended. Of unintended pregnancies, 61% ended in abortion. Presumably, few intended pregnancies are aborted, but the study found that about 16% of intended pregnancies during that period ended in fetal loss (miscarriage or stillbirth). Putting all these percentages together works to the same estimate as implied by the UN report: about 30% of babies born were conceived unintentionally.

Here's the math I used to come to that 30% figure from the *Lancet* data: 48% of pregnancies were unintended, and 39% of those unintended pregnancies were *not* aborted, which implies that about 18.72% births came from unintended pregnancies. (This figure overlooks unintended pregnancies that end in miscarriage or stillbirth, which are presumably few, because so many of these pregnancies end in abortion first.)

Meanwhile, 52% percent of pregnancies were intended, and 16% of those ended in miscarriage or stillbirth, which implies that 43.68% of births stemmed from intended pregnancies. (This figure overlooks intended pregnancies which end in abortion, which are presumably few.)

Thus, according to this data, about 62.4% of pregnancies led to births, and 18.72% of births came from unintended pregnancies, which implies that about 30% of births came from unintended pregnancies. Or, put another way, nearly one third of human existence is by accident.