



Parables and Prayers

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Burdens

[Content note: Suicide. May be guilt-inducing for people who feel like burdens. All patient characteristics have been heavily obfuscated to protect confidentiality.]

The DSM lists nine criteria for major depressive disorder, of which the seventh is “feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt”.

There are a lot of dumb diagnostic debates over which criteria are “more important” or “more fundamental”, and for me there’s always been something special about criterion seven. People get depressed over all sorts of things. But when they’re actively suicidal, the people who aren’t just gesturing for help but totally set on it, they always say one thing:

“I feel like I’m a burden”.

Depression is in part a disease of distorted cognitions, a failure of rationality. I had one patient who worked for GM, very smart guy, invented a lot of safety features for cars. He was probably actively saving a bunch of people’s lives every time he checked in at the office, and he still felt like he was worthless, a burden, that he was just draining resources that could better be used for someone else.

In cases like these, you can do a little bit of good just by teaching people the fundamental lesson of rationality: that you can’t always trust your brain. If your System I is telling you that you’re a worthless burden, it could be because you’re a worthless burden, or it could be because System I is broken. If System I is broken, you need to call in System II to route around the distorted cognition so you can understand at least on an intellectual level that you’re wrong. Once you understand you’re wrong on an intellectual level, you can do what you need to do to make it sink in on a practical level as well – which starts with not killing yourself.

As sad as it was, Robin Williams’ suicide has actually been sort of helpful for me. For the past few days, I’ve tried telling these sorts of people that Robin Williams brightened the lives of millions of people, was a truly great man – and his brain *still* kept telling him he didn’t deserve to live. So maybe depressed brains *are not the most trustworthy arbiters on these sorts of issues*.

This sort of supportive psychotherapy (ie “psychotherapy you make up as you go along”) can sometimes take people some of the way, and then the medications do the rest.

But sometimes it’s harder than this. I don’t want to say anyone is ever *right* about being a burden, but a lot of the people I see aren’t Oscar-winning actors or even automobile safety engineers. Some people just have no easy outs.

Another patient. 25 year old kid. Had some brain damage a few years ago, now has cognitive problems and poor emotional control. Can’t do a job. Got denied for disability a few times, in accordance with the ancient bureaucratic tradition. Survives on a couple of lesser social programs he got approved for plus occasional charity handouts plus some help from his family. One can trace out an unlikely sequence of events by which his situation might one day improve, but I won’t insult his intelligence by claiming it’s very probable. Now *he* attempts suicide, says he feels like a burden on everyone around him. Well, what am I going to say?

It's not always people with some obvious disability. Sometimes it's just alcoholics, or elderly people, or people without the cognitive skills to get a job in today's economy. They think that they're taking more from the system than they're putting in, and in monetary terms they're probably right.

One common therapeutic strategy here is to talk about how much the patient's parents/friends/girlfriend/pet hamster love them, how heartbroken they would be if they killed themselves. In the absence of better alternatives, I have used this strategy. I have used it *very grudgingly*, and I've always felt dirty afterwards. It always feels like the worst sort of emotional blackmail. Not helping them want to live, just making them feel really guilty about dying. "Sure, you're a burden if you live, but if you kill yourself, that would make you an even *bigger* burden!" A++ best psychiatrist.

There is something else I've never said, because it's too deeply tied in with my own politics, and not something I would expect anybody else to understand.

And that is: humans don't owe society anything. We were here first.

If my patient, the one with the brain damage, were back in the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness, in a nice tribe with Dunbar's number of people, there would be no problem.

Maybe his cognitive problems would make him a slightly less proficient hunter than someone else, but whatever, he could always gather.

Maybe his emotional control problems would give him a little bit of a handicap in tribal politics, but he wouldn't get arrested for making a scene, he wouldn't get fired for not sucking up to his boss enough, he wouldn't be forced to live in a tiny apartment with people he didn't necessarily like who were constantly getting on his nerves. He might get in a fight and end up with a spear through his gut, but in that case his problems would be over anyway.

Otherwise he could just hang out and live in a cave and gather roots and berries and maybe hunt buffalo and participate in the appropriate tribal bonding rituals like everyone else.

But society came and paved over the place where all the roots and berry plants grew and killed the buffalo and dynamited the caves and declared the tribal bonding rituals Problematic. This increased productivity by about a zillion times, so most people ended up better off. The only ones who didn't were the ones who for some reason couldn't participate in it.

(if you're one of those people who sees red every time someone mentions evolution or cavemen, imagine him as a dockworker a hundred years ago, or a peasant farmer a thousand)

Society got where it is by systematically destroying everything that could have supported him and replacing it with things that required skills he didn't have. Of *course* it owes him when he suddenly can't support himself. Think of it as the ultimate use of eminent domain; a power beyond your control has seized everything in the world, it had some good economic reasons for doing so, but it at least owes you compensation!

This is also the basis of my support for a basic income guarantee. Imagine an employment waterline, gradually rising through higher and higher levels of

competence. In the distant past, maybe you could be pretty dumb, have no emotional continence at all, and still live a pretty happy life. As the waterline rises, the skills necessary to support yourself comfortably become higher and higher. Right now most people in the US who can't get college degrees – which are really hard to get! – are just barely hanging on, and that is absolutely a new development. Soon enough even some of the college-educated won't be very useful to the system. And so on, until *everyone* is a burden.

(people talk as if the only possible use of information about the determinants of intelligence is to tell low-IQ people they are bad. Maybe they've never felt the desperate need to reassure someone “No, it is not your fault that everything is going wrong for you, everything was rigged against you from the beginning.”)

By the time I am a burden – it's possible that I am already, just because I can convince the system to give me money doesn't mean the system is right to do so, but I expect I *certainly* will be one before I die – I would like there to be in place a crystal-clear understanding that *we were here first* and society doesn't get to make us obsolete without owing us something in return.

After that, we will have to predicate our self-worth on something other than being able to “contribute” in the classical sense of the term. Don't get me wrong, I think contributing something is a valuable goal, and one it's important to enforce to prevent free-loaders. But it's a valuable goal at the margins, some people are already heading for the tails, and pretty soon we'll all be stuck there.

I'm not sure what such a post-contribution value system would look like. It might be based around helping others in less tangible ways, like providing company and cheerfulness and love. It might be a virtue ethics celebrating people unusually good at cultivating traits we value. Or it might be a sort of philosophically-informed hedonism along the lines of Epicurus, where we try to enjoy ourselves in the ways that make us most human.

And I think my advice to my suicidal patients, if I were able and willing to express all this to them, would be to stop worrying about being a burden and to start doing all these things now.

The Parable Of The Talents

[Content note: scrupulosity and self-esteem triggers, IQ, brief discussion of weight and dieting. Not good for growth mindset.]

I.

I sometimes blog about research into IQ and human intelligence. I think most readers of this blog already know [IQ is 50% to 80% heritable](#), and that it's so important for intellectual pursuits that [eminent scientists in some fields have average IQs around 150 to 160](#). Since IQ this high only appears in 1/10,000 people or so, it beggars coincidence to believe this represents anything but a very strong filter for IQ (or something correlated with it) in reaching that level. If you saw a group of dozens of people who were 7'0 tall on average, you'd assume it was a basketball team or some other group selected for height, not a bunch of botanists who were all very tall by coincidence.

A lot of people find this pretty depressing. Some worry that taking it seriously might damage the "growth mindset" people need to fully actualize their potential. This is important and I want to discuss it eventually, but not now. What I want to discuss now is people who feel *personally* depressed. For example, a comment from last week:

I'm sorry to leave self a self absorbed comment, but reading this really upset me and I just need to get this off my chest...How is a person supposed to stay sane in a culture that prizes intelligence above everything else - especially if, as Scott suggests, Human Intelligence Really Is the Key to the Future - when they themselves are not particularly intelligent and, apparently, have no potential to ever become intelligent? Right now I basically feel like pond scum.

I hear these kinds of responses every so often, so I should probably learn to expect them. I never do. They seem to me precisely backwards. There's a moral gulf here, and I want to throw stories and intuitions at it until enough of them pile up at the bottom to make a passable bridge. But first, a comparison:

Some people think body weight is biologically/genetically determined. Other people think it's based purely on willpower - how strictly you diet, how much you can bring yourself to exercise. These people get into some pretty acrimonious debates.

Overweight people, and especially people who feel unfairly stigmatized for being overweight, tend to cluster on the biologically determined side. And although not all believers in complete voluntary control of weight are mean to fat people, the people who are mean to fat people pretty much all insist that weight is voluntary and easily changeable.

Although there's a lot of debate over the science here, there seems to be broad agreement on both sides that the more compassionate, sympathetic, progressive position, the position promoted by the kind of people who are really worried about stigma and self-esteem, is that weight is biologically determined.

And the same is true of mental illness. Sometimes I see depressed patients whose families *really* don't get it. They say "Sure, my daughter feels down, but she needs to realize that's no excuse for shirking her responsibilities. She needs to just pick herself up and get on with her life." On the other hand, most depressed people say that their

depression is more fundamental than that, not a thing that can be overcome by willpower, certainly not a thing you can just 'shake off'.

Once again, the compassionate/sympathetic/progressive side of the debate is that depression is something like biological, and cannot easily be overcome with willpower and hard work.

One more example of this pattern. There are frequent political debates in which conservatives (or straw conservatives) argue that financial success is the result of hard work, so poor people are just too lazy to get out of poverty. Then a liberal (or straw liberal) protests that hard work has nothing to do with it, success is determined by accidents of birth like who your parents are and what your skin color is et cetera, so the poor are blameless in their own predicament.

I'm oversimplifying things, but again the compassionate/sympathetic/progressive side of the debate – and the side endorsed by many of the poor themselves – is supposed to be that success is due to accidents of birth, and the less compassionate side is that success depends on hard work and perseverance and grit and willpower.

The obvious pattern is that attributing outcomes to things like genes, biology, and accidents of birth is kind and sympathetic. Attributing them to who works harder and who's "really trying" can stigmatize people who end up with bad outcomes and is generally viewed as Not A Nice Thing To Do.

And the weird thing, the thing I've never understood, is that intellectual achievement is the one domain that breaks this pattern.

Here it's would-be hard-headed conservatives arguing that intellectual greatness comes from genetics and the accidents of birth and demanding we "accept" this "unpleasant truth".

And it's would-be compassionate progressives who are insisting that no, it depends on who works harder, claiming anybody can be brilliant if they really try, warning us not to "stigmatize" the less intelligent as "genetically inferior".

I can come up with a few explanations for the sudden switch, but none of them are very principled and none of them, to me, seem to break the fundamental symmetry of the situation. I choose to maintain consistency by preserving the belief that overweight people, depressed people, and poor people aren't fully to blame for their situation – and neither are unintelligent people. It's accidents of birth all the way down. Intelligence is mostly genetic and determined at birth – and we've already determined in every other sphere that "mostly genetic and determined at birth" means you don't have to feel bad if you got the short end of the stick.

Consider for a moment Srinivasa Ramanujan, one of the greatest mathematicians of all time. He grew up in poverty in a one-room house in small-town India. He taught himself mathematics by borrowing books from local college students and working through the problems on his own until he reached the end of the solvable ones and had nowhere else to go but inventing ways to solve the unsolvable ones.

There are a lot of poor people in the United States today whose life circumstances prevented their parents from reading books to them as a child, prevented them from getting into the best schools, prevented them from attending college, et cetera. And pretty much all of those people *still* got more educational opportunities than Ramanujan did.

And from there we can go in one of two directions. First, we can say that a lot of intelligence is innate, that Ramanujan was a genius, and that we mortals cannot be expected to replicate his accomplishments.

Or second, we can say those poor people are *just not trying hard enough*.

Take “innate ability” out of the picture, and if you meet a poor person on the street begging for food, saying he never had a chance, your reply must be “Well, if you’d just borrowed a couple of math textbooks from the local library at age 12, you would have been a Fields Medalist by now. I hear that pays pretty well.”

The best reason *not* to say that is that we view Ramanujan as intellectually gifted. But the very phrase tells us where we should classify that belief. Ramanujan’s genius is a “gift” in much the same way your parents giving you a trust fund on your eighteenth birthday is a “gift”, and it should be weighted accordingly in the moral calculus.

II.

I shouldn’t pretend I’m worried about this for the sake of the poor. I’m worried for *me*.

My last IQ-ish test was my SATs in high school. I got a perfect score in Verbal, and a good-but-not-great score in Math.

And in high school English, I got A++s in all my classes, Principal’s Gold Medals, 100%s on tests, first prize in various state-wide essay contests, etc. In Math, I just barely by the skin of my teeth scraped together a pass in Calculus with a C-.

Every time I won some kind of prize in English my parents would praise me and say I was good and should feel good. My teachers would hold me up as an example and say other kids should try to be more like me. Meanwhile, when I would bring home a report card with a C- in math, my parents would have concerned faces and tell me they were disappointed and I wasn’t living up to my potential and I needed to work harder et cetera.

And I don’t know which part bothered me more.

Every time I was held up as an example in English class, I wanted to crawl under a rock and die. I didn’t do it! I didn’t study at all, half the time I did the homework in the car on the way to school, those essays for the statewide competition were thrown together on a lark without a trace of real effort. To praise me for any of it seemed and still seems utterly unjust.

On the other hand, to this day I believe I deserve a fricking *statue* for getting a C- in Calculus I. It should be in the center of the schoolyard, and have a plaque saying something like “Scott Alexander, who by making a herculean effort managed to pass Calculus I, even though they kept throwing random things after the little curly S sign and pretending it made sense.”

And without some notion of innate ability, I don’t know what to do with this experience. I don’t want to have to accept the blame for being a lazy person who just didn’t try hard enough in Math. But I *really* don’t want to have to accept the credit for being a virtuous and studious English student who worked harder than his peers. I *know* there were people who worked harder than I did in English, who poured their heart and soul into that course – and who still got Cs and Ds. To deny innate ability is

to devalue their efforts and sacrifice, while simultaneously giving me credit I don't deserve.

Meanwhile, there were some students who did better than I did in Math with seemingly zero effort. I didn't begrudge those students. But if they'd started trying to say they had exactly the same level of innate ability as I did, and the only difference was *they* were trying while *I* was slacking off, then I sure as hell would have begrudged them. Especially if I knew they were lazing around on the beach while I was poring over a textbook.

I tend to think of social norms as contracts bargained between different groups. In the case of attitudes towards intelligence, those two groups are smart people and dumb people. Since I was both at once, I got to make the bargain with myself, which simplified the bargaining process immensely. The deal I came up with was that I wasn't going to beat myself up over the areas I was bad at, but I also didn't get to become too cocky about the areas I was good at. It was all genetic luck of the draw either way. In the meantime, I would try to press as hard as I could to exploit my strengths and cover up my deficiencies. So far I've found this to be a really healthy way of treating myself, and it's the way I try to treat others as well.

III.

The theme continues to be "Scott Relives His Childhood Inadequacies". So:

When I was 6 and my brother was 4, our mom decided that as an Overachieving Jewish Mother she was contractually obligated to make both of us learn to play piano. She enrolled me in a Yamaha introductory piano class, and my younger brother in a Yamaha 'cute little kids bang on the keyboard' class.

A little while later, I noticed that my brother was now with me in my Introductory Piano class.

A little while later, I noticed that my brother was now by far the best student in my Introductory Piano Class, even though he had just started and was two or three years younger than anyone else there.

A little while later, Yamaha USA flew him to Japan to show him off before the Yamaha corporate honchos there.

Well, one thing led to another, and right now if you Google my brother's name you get a bunch of articles like this one:

The evidence that Jeremy [Alexander] is among the top jazz pianists of his generation is quickly becoming overwhelming: at age 26, Alexander is the winner of the Nottingham International Jazz Piano Competition, a second-place finisher in the Montreux Jazz Festival Solo Piano Competition, a two-time finalist for the American Pianist Association's Cole Porter Fellowship, and a two-time second-place finisher at the Phillips Jazz Competition. Alexander, who was recently named a Professor of Piano at Western Michigan University's School of Music, made a sold-out solo debut at Carnegie Hall in 2012, performing Debussy's Etudes in the first half and jazz improvisations in the second half.

Meanwhile, I was always a mediocre student at Yamaha. When the time came to try an instrument in elementary school, I went with the violin to see if maybe I'd find it more to my tastes than the piano. I was quickly sorted into the remedial class because

I couldn't figure out how to make my instrument stop sounding like a wounded cat. After a year or so of this, I decided to switch to fulfilling my music requirement through a choir, and everyone who'd had to listen to me breathed a sigh of relief.

Every so often I wonder if somewhere deep inside me there is the potential to be "among the top musicians of my generation." I try to recollect whether my brother practiced harder than I did. My memories are hazy, but I don't think he practiced *much* harder until well after his career as a child prodigy had taken off. The cycle seemed to be that every time he practiced, things came fluidly to him and he would produce beautiful music and everyone would be amazed. And this must have felt great, and incentivized him to practice more, and that made him even better, so that the beautiful music came even more fluidly, and the praise became more effusive, until eventually he chose a full-time career in music and became amazing. Meanwhile, when I started practicing it always sounded like wounded cats, and I would get very cautious praise like "Good job, Scott, it sounded like that cat was hurt a little less badly than usual," and it made me frustrated, and want to practice less, which made me even worse, until eventually I quit in disgust.

On the other hand, I know people who want to get good at writing, and make a mighty resolution to write two hundred words a day every day, and then after the first week they find it's too annoying and give up. These people think I'm amazing, and why shouldn't they? I've written a few hundred to a few thousand words pretty much every day for the past ten years.

But as I've said before, this has taken exactly zero willpower. It's more that I [can't stop even if I want to](#). Part of that is probably that when I write, I feel really good about having expressed exactly what it was I meant to say. Lots of people read it, they comment, they praise me, I feel good, I'm encouraged to keep writing, and it's exactly the same virtuous cycle as my brother got from his piano practice.

And so I think it would be *too easy* to say something like "There's no innate component at all. Your brother practiced piano really hard but almost never writes. You write all the time, but wimped out of practicing piano. So what do you expect? You both got what you deserved."

I tried to practice piano as hard as he did. I really tried. But every moment was a struggle. I could keep it up for a while, and then we'd go on vacation, and there'd be no piano easily available, and I would be breathing a sigh of relief at having a ready-made excuse, and he'd be heading off to look for a piano somewhere to practice on. Meanwhile, I am writing this post in short breaks between running around hospital corridors responding to psychiatric emergencies, and there's probably someone very impressed with that, someone saying "But you had such a great excuse to get out of your writing practice!"

I dunno. But I don't think of myself as working hard at any of the things I am good at, in the sense of "exerting vast willpower to force myself kicking and screaming to do them". It's possible I *do* work hard, and that an outside observer would accuse me of eliding how hard I work, but it's not a conscious elision and I don't feel that way from the inside.

Ramanujan worked very hard at math. But I don't think he thought of it as work. He obtained a scholarship to the local college, but dropped out almost immediately because he couldn't make himself study any subject other than math. Then he got accepted to another college, and dropped out *again* because they made him study

non-mathematical subjects and he failed a physiology class. Then he nearly starved to death because he had no money and no scholarship. To me, this doesn't sound like a person who just happens to be very hard-working; if he had the ability to study other subjects he would have, for no reason other than that it would have allowed him to stay in college so he could keep studying math. It seems to me that in some sense Ramanujan was *incapable* of putting hard work into non-math subjects.

I really wanted to learn math and failed, but I did graduate with honors from medical school. Ramanujan really wanted to learn physiology and failed, but he did become one of history's great mathematicians. So which one of us was the hard worker?

People used to ask me for writing advice. And I, in all earnestness, would say "Just transcribe your thoughts onto paper exactly like they sound in your head." It turns out that doesn't work for other people. Maybe it doesn't work for me either, and it just feels like it does.

But you know what? When asked about one of his discoveries, a method of simplifying a very difficult problem to a continued fraction, Ramanujan described his thought process as: "It is simple. The minute I heard the problem, I knew that the answer was a continued fraction. 'Which continued fraction?' I asked myself. Then the answer came to my mind".

And again, maybe that's just how it feels to him, and the real answer is "study math so hard that you flunk out of college twice, and eventually you develop so much intuition that you can solve problems without thinking about them."

(or maybe the real answer is "have dreams where obscure Hindu gods appear to you as drops of blood and reveal mathematical formulae". [Ramanujan was weird](#)).

But I *still* feel like there's something going on here where the solution to me being bad at math and piano isn't just "sweat blood and push through your brain's aversion to these subjects until you make it stick". When I read biographies of Ramanujan and other famous mathematicians, there's no sense that they ever had to do that with math. When I talk to my brother, I never get a sense that he had to do that with piano. And if I am good enough at writing to qualify to have an opinion on being good at things, then I don't feel like I ever went through that process myself.

So this too is part of my deal with myself. I'll try to do my best at things, but if there's something I really hate, something where I have to go uphill every step of the way, then it's okay to admit mediocrity. I won't beat myself up for not forcing myself kicking and screaming to practice piano. And in return I won't become too cocky about practicing writing a lot. It's probably [some kind of luck of the draw](#) either way.

IV.

I said before that this wasn't just about poor people, it was about me being selfishly worried for my own sake. I think I might have given the mistaken impression that I merely need to justify to myself why I can't get an A in math or play the piano. But it's much worse than that.

The rationalist community tends to get a lot of high-scrupulosity people, people who tend to beat themselves up for not doing more than they are. It's why [I push giving 10% to charity](#), not as some kind of amazing stretch goal that we need to guilt people into doing, but as a crutch, a sort of "don't worry, you're still okay if you only give ten percent". It's why there's so much emphasis on "heroic responsibility" and how you,

yes you, have to solve all the world's problems personally. It's why I see red when anyone accuses us of entitlement, since it goes about as well as calling an anorexic person fat.

And we really aren't doing ourselves any favors. For example, Nick Bostrom writes:

Searching for a cure for aging is not just a nice thing that we should perhaps one day get around to. It is an urgent, screaming moral imperative. The sooner we start a focused research program, the sooner we will get results. It matters if we get the cure in 25 years rather than in 24 years: a population greater than that of Canada would die as a result.

If that bothers you, you *definitely* shouldn't read [Astronomical Waste](#).

Yet here I am, not doing anti-aging research. Why not?

Because I tried doing biology research a few times and it was really hard and made me miserable. You know how in every science class, when the teacher says "Okay, pour the white chemical into the grey chemical, and notice how it turns green and begins to bubble," there's always one student who pours the white chemical into the grey chemical, and it just forms a greyish-white mixture and sits there? That was me. I hated it, I didn't have the dexterity or the precision of mind to do it well, and when I finally finished my required experimental science classes I was happy never to think about it again. Even the abstract intellectual part of it – the one where you go through data about genes and ligands and receptors in supercentenarians and shake it until data comes out – requires exactly the kind of math skills that I don't have.

Insofar as this is a matter of innate aptitude – some people are cut out for biology research and I'm not one of them – all is well, and my decision to get a job I'm good at instead is entirely justified.

But insofar as there's no such thing as innate aptitude, just hard work and grit – then by not being gritty enough, I'm a monster who's complicit in the death of a population greater than that of Canada.

Insofar as there's no such thing as innate aptitude, I have *no excuse* for not being Aubrey de Grey. Or if Aubrey de Grey doesn't impress you much, Norman Borlaug. Or if you don't know who either of those two people are, Elon Musk.

I once heard a friend, upon his first use of modafinil, wonder aloud if the way they felt on that stimulant was the way Elon Musk felt all the time. That tied a lot of things together for me, gave me an intuitive understanding of what it might "feel like from the inside" to be Elon Musk. And it gave me a good tool to discuss biological variation with. Most of us agree that people on stimulants can perform in ways it's difficult for people off stimulants to match. Most of us agree that there's nothing magical about stimulants, just changes to the levels of dopamine, histamine, norepinephrine et cetera in the brain. And most of us agree there's a lot of natural variation in these chemicals anyone. So "me on stimulants is that guy's normal" seems like a good way of cutting through some of the philosophical difficulties around this issue.

...which is all kind of a big tangent. The point I want to make is that for me, what's at stake in talking about natural variations in ability isn't just whether I have to feel like a failure for not getting an A in high school calculus, or not being as good at music as my brother. It's whether I'm a failure for not being Elon Musk. Specifically, it's whether

I can say “No, I’m really not cut out to be Elon Musk” and go do something else I’m better at without worrying that I’m killing everyone in Canada.

V.

The proverb says: “Everyone has somebody better off than they are and somebody worse off than they are, with two exceptions.” When we accept that we’re all in the “not Elon Musk” boat together (with one exception) a lot of the status games around innate ability start to seem less important.

Every so often an overly kind commenter here praises my intelligence and says they feel intellectually inadequate compared to me, that they wish they could be at my level. But at my level, I spend my time feeling intellectually inadequate [compared to Scott Aaronson](#). Scott Aaronson [describes](#) feeling “in awe” of Terence Tao and frequently struggling to understand him. Terence Tao – well, I don’t know if he’s religious, but maybe he feels intellectually inadequate compared to God. And God feels intellectually inadequate compared to Johann von Neumann.

So there’s not much point in me feeling inadequate compared to my brother, because even if I was as good at music as my brother, I’d probably just feel inadequate for not being Mozart.

And asking “Well what if you just worked harder?” can elide small distinctions, but not bigger ones. If my only goal is short-term preservation of my self-esteem, I can imagine that if only things had gone a little differently I could have practiced more and ended up as talented as my brother. It’s a lot harder for me to imagine the course of events where I do something different and become Mozart. Only one in a billion people reach a Mozart level of achievement; why would it be me?

If I loved music for its own sake and wanted to be a talented musician so I could express the melodies dancing within my heart, then none of this matters. But insofar as I want to be good at music because *I feel bad that other people are better than me at music*, that’s a road without an end.

This is also how I feel of when some people on this blog complain they feel dumb for not being as smart as some of the other commenters on this blog.

I happen to have all of your IQ scores in a spreadsheet right here (remember that survey you took?). Not a single person is below the population average. The first percentile for IQ here – the one such that 1% of respondents are lower and 99% of respondents are higher – is – corresponds to the 85th percentile of the general population. So even if you’re in the first percentile here, you’re still pretty high up in the broader scheme of things.

At that point we’re back on the road without end. I am pretty sure we can raise your IQ as much as you want and you will *still* feel like pond scum. If we raise it twenty points, you’ll try reading [Quantum Computing since Democritus](#) and feel like pond scum. If we raise it forty, you’ll just go to [Terence Tao’s blog](#) and feel like pond scum there. Maybe if you were literally the highest-IQ person in the entire world you would feel good about yourself, but any system where only one person in the world is allowed to feel good about themselves at a time *is a bad system*.

People say we should stop talking about ability differences so that stupid people don’t feel bad. I say that there’s more than enough room for *everybody* to feel bad, smart

and stupid alike, and not talking about it won't help. What will help is fundamentally uncoupling perception of intelligence from perception of self-worth.

I work with psychiatric patients who tend to have cognitive difficulties. Starting out in the Detroit ghetto doesn't do them any favors, and then they get conditions like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia that [actively lower IQ](#) for poorly understood neurological reasons.

The standard psychiatric evaluation includes an assessment of cognitive ability; the one I use is a quick test with three questions. The questions are – “What is 100 minus 7?”, “What do an apple and an orange have in common?”, and “Remember these three words for one minute, then repeat them back to me: house, blue, and tulip”.

There are a lot of people – and I don't mean floridly psychotic people who don't know their own name, I mean ordinary reasonable people just like you and me – who can't answer these questions. And we know why they can't answer these questions, and it is pretty darned biological.

And if our answer to “I feel dumb and worthless because my IQ isn't high enough” is “don't worry, you're not worthless, I'm sure you can be a great scientist if you just try hard enough”, then we are implicitly throwing under the bus all of these people who are *definitely* not going to be great scientists no matter how hard they try. Talking about trying harder can obfuscate the little differences, but once we're talking about the homeless schizophrenic guy from Detroit who can't tell me 100 minus 7 to save his life, you can't just magic the problem away with a wave of your hand and say “I'm sure he can be the next Ramanujan if he keeps a positive attitude!” You either need to condemn him as worthless *or else stop fricking tying worth to innate intellectual ability*.

This is getting pretty close to what I was talking about in my post on [burdens](#). When I get a suicidal patient who thinks they're a burden on society, it's nice to be able to point out ten important things they've done for society recently and prove them wrong. But sometimes it's not that easy, and the only thing you can say is “f#@k that s#!t”. Yes, society has organized itself in a way that excludes and impoverishes a bunch of people who could have been perfectly happy in the state of nature picking berries and hunting aurochs. It's not your fault, and if they're going to give you compensation *you take it*. And we had better make this perfectly clear now, so that when everything becomes automated and run by robots and we're *all* behind the curve, everybody agrees that us continuing to exist is still okay.

Likewise with intellectual ability. When someone feels sad because they can't be a great scientist, it is nice to be able to point out all of their intellectual strengths and tell them “Yes you can, if only you put your mind to it!” But this is often not true. At that point you have to say “f#@k it” and tell them to stop tying their self-worth to being a great scientist. And we had better establish that now, before transhumanists succeed in creating superintelligence and we *all* have to come to terms with our intellectual inferiority.

VI.

But I think the situation can also be somewhat rosier than that.

Ozy once told me that the [law of comparative advantage](#) was one of the most inspirational things they had ever read. This was sufficiently strange that I demanded an explanation.

Ozy said that it proves *everyone can contribute*. Even if you are worse than everyone else at everything, you can still participate in global trade and other people will pay you money. It may not be very much money, but it will be some, and it will be a measure of how your actions are making other people better off and they are grateful for your existence.

(in real life this doesn't work for a couple of reasons, but who cares about real life when we have a *theory*?)

After some thought, I was also inspired by this.

I'm never going to be a great mathematician or Elon Musk. But if I pursue my comparative advantage, which right now is medicine, I can still make money. And if I feel like it, I can donate it to mathematics research. Or anti-aging research. Or [the same people Elon Musk donates his money to](#). They will use it to hire smart people with important talents that I lack, and I will be at least partially responsible for those people's successes.

If I had an IQ of 70, I think I would still want to pursue my comparative advantage – even if that was ditch-digging, or whatever, and donate that money to important causes. It might not be very much money, but it would be *some*.

Our modern word “talent” comes from the Greek word *talenton*, a certain amount of precious metal sometimes used as a denomination of money. The etymology passes through a parable of Jesus'. A master calls three servants to him and gives the first five talents, the second two talents, and the third one talent. The first two servants invest the money and double it. The third literally buries it in a hole. The master comes back later and praises the first two servants, but sends the third servant to Hell (metaphor? what metaphor?).

Various people have come up with various interpretations, but the most popular says that God gives all of us different amounts of resources, and He will judge us based on how well we use these resources rather than on how many He gave us. It would be stupid to give your first servant five loads of silver, then your second servant two loads of silver, then immediately start chewing out the second servant for having less silver than the first one. And if both servants invested their silver wisely, it would be silly to chew out the second one for ending up with less profit when he started with less seed capital. The moral seems to be that if you take what God gives you and use it wisely, you're fine.

The modern word “talent” comes from this parable. It implies “a thing God has given you which you can invest and give back”.

So if I were a ditch-digger, I think I would dig ditches, donate a portion of the small amount I made, and trust that I had done what I could with the talents I was given.

VII.

The Jews *also* talk about how God judges you for your gifts. Rabbi Zusya once said that when he died, he wasn't worried that God would ask him “Why weren't you Moses?” or “Why weren't you Solomon?” But he did worry that God might ask “Why weren't you Rabbi Zusya?”

And this is part of why it's important for me to believe in innate ability, and especially differences in innate ability. If everything comes down to hard work and positive

attitude, then God has every right to ask me “Why weren’t you Srinivasa Ramanujan?” or “Why weren’t you Elon Musk?”

If everyone is legitimately a different person with a different brain and different talents and abilities, then all God gets to ask me is whether or not I was Scott Alexander.

This seems like a gratifyingly low bar.

[more to come on this subject later]

Nobody Is Perfect, Everything Is Commensurable

I.

Recently spotted on Tumblr:

"This is going to be an unpopular opinion but I see stuff about ppl not wanting to reblog ferguson things and awareness around the world because they do not want negativity in their life plus it will cause them to have anxiety. They come to tumblr to escape n feel happy which think is a load of bull. There r literally ppl dying who live with the fear of going outside their homes to be shot and u cant post a fucking picture because it makes u a little upset?"

"Can yall maybe take some time away from reblogging fandom or humor crap and read up and reblog pakistan because the privilege you have of a safe bubble is not one shared by others?"

Ignore the questionable stylistic choices and there's an important point here worth considering. Something like "Yes, the feeling of constantly being outraged and mired in the latest controversy is unpleasant. And yes, it would be nice to get to avoid it and spend time with your family and look at kitten pics or something. But when the controversy is about people being murdered in cold blood, or living in fear, or something like that – then it's your duty as a decent human being to care. In the best case scenario you'll discharge that duty by organizing widespread protests or something – but the *absolute least* you can do is reblog a couple of slogans."

I think Cliff Pervocracy is trying to say something similar in [this post](#). Key excerpt:

When you've grown up with messages that you're incompetent to make your own decisions, that you don't deserve any of the things you have, and that you'll never be good enough, the [conservative] fantasy of rugged individualism starts looking pretty damn good.

Intellectually, I think my current political milieu of feminism/progressivism/social justice is more correct, far better for the world in general, and more helpful to me since I don't actually live in a perfectly isolated cabin.

But god, it's uncomfortable. It's intentionally uncomfortable—it's all about getting angry at injustice and questioning the rightness of your own actions and being sad so many people still live such painful lives. Instead of looking at your cabin and declaring "I shall name it...CLIFFORDSON MANOR," you need to look at your cabin and recognize that a long series of brutal injustices are responsible for the fact that you have a white-collar job that lets you buy a big useless house in the woods while the original owners of the land have been murdered or forced off it.

And you're never good enough. You can be good—certainly you get major points for charity and activism and fighting the good fight—but not good enough. No matter what you do, you're still participating in plenty of corrupt systems that enforce oppression. Short of bringing about a total revolution of everything, your work will never be done, you'll never be good enough.

Once again, to be clear, I don't think this is wrong. I just think it's a bummer.

I don't know of a solution to this. (Bummer again.) I don't think progressivism can ever compete with the cozy self-satisfaction of the cabin fantasy. I don't think it should. Change is necessary in the world, people don't change if they're totally happy and comfortable, therefore discomfort is necessary.

I'd like to make what I hope is a friendly amendment to Cliff's post. He thinks he's talking about progressivism versus conservatism, but he isn't. A conservative happy with his little cabin and occasional hunting excursions, and a progressive happy with her little SoHo flat and occasional poetry slams, are psychologically pretty similar. So are a liberal who abandons a cushy life to work as a community organizer in the inner city and fight poverty, and a conservative who abandons a cushy life to serve as an infantryman in Afghanistan to fight terrorism. The distinction Cliff is trying to get at here isn't left-right. It's activist versus passivist.

As part of a movement [recently deemed postpolitical](#), I have to admit I fall more on the passivist side of the spectrum – at least this particular conception of it. I talk about politics when they interest me or when I enjoy doing so, and I feel an obligation not to actively make things worse. But I don't feel like I need to talk nonstop about whatever the designated Issue is until it distresses me and my readers both.

I've heard people give lots of reasons for not wanting to get into politics. For some, hearing about all the evils of the world makes them want to curl into a ball and cry for hours. Still others feel deep personal guilt about anything they hear – an almost psychotic belief that if people are being hurt anywhere in the world, it's their fault for not preventing it. A few are chronically uncertain about which side to take and worried that anything they do will cause more harm than good. A couple have traumatic experiences that make them leery of affiliating with a particular side – did you know the prosecutor in the Ferguson case was the son of a police officer who was killed by a black suspect? And still others are perfectly innocent and just want to reblog kitten pictures.

Pervocracy admits this, and puts it better than I do:

But god, it's uncomfortable. It's intentionally uncomfortable—it's all about getting angry at injustice and questioning the rightness of your own actions and being sad so many people still live such painful lives. Instead of looking at your cabin and declaring "I shall name it...CLIFFORDSON MANOR," you need to look at your cabin and recognize that a long series of brutal injustices are responsible for the fact that you have a white-collar job that lets you buy a big useless house in the woods while the original owners of the land have been murdered or forced off it. And you're never good enough. You can be good—certainly you get major points for charity and activism and fighting the good fight—but not good enough. No matter what you do, you're still participating in plenty of corrupt systems that enforce oppression. Short of bringing about a total revolution of everything, your work will never be done, you'll never be good enough.

That seems about right. Pervocracy ends up with discomfort, and I'm in about the same place. But other, less stable people end up with self-loathing. Still other people go further than that, into Calvinist-style "perhaps I am a despicable worm unworthy of existence". [moteinthedark's reply to Pervocracy](#) gives me the impression that she struggles with this sometime. For these people, abstaining from politics is the only coping tool they have.

But the counterargument is *still* that you've got a lot of chutzpah playing that card when people in Peshawar or Ferguson or Iraq don't have access to this coping tool. You can't just bring in a doctor's note and say "As per my psychiatrist, I have a mental health issue and am excused from experiencing concern for the less fortunate."

One option is to deny the obligation. I am super sympathetic to this one. The *marginal* cost of my existence on the poor and suffering of the world is zero. In fact, it's probably positive. My economic activity consists mostly of treating patients, buying products, and paying taxes. The first treats the poor's illnesses, the second creates jobs, and the third pays for government assistance programs. Exactly what am I supposed to be apologizing for here? I may benefit from the genocide of the Indians in that I live on land that was formerly Indian-occupied. But I also benefit from the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs, in that I live on land that was formerly dinosaur-occupied. I don't feel like I'm complicit in the asteroid strike; why should I feel complicit in the genocide?

I have no objection to people who say this. The problem with it isn't philosophical, it's emotional. For *most people* it won't be enough. The old saying goes "you can't reason yourself out of something you didn't reason yourself into to begin with", and the idea that secure and prosperous people need to "give something back" is a lot older than accusations of "being complicit in structures of oppression". It's probably older than the Bible. People feel a deep-seated need to show that they understand how lucky they are and help those less fortunate than themselves.

So what do we do with the argument that we are morally obligated to be political activists, possibly by reblogging everything about Ferguson that crosses our news feed?

II.

We ask: *why the heck are we privileging that particular subsection of the category "improving the world"?*

Pervocracy says that "short of bringing about a total revolution of everything, your work will never be done, you'll never be good enough." But he is overly optimistic. Has your total revolution of everything eliminated ischaemic heart disease? Cured malaria? Kept elderly people out of nursing homes? No? Then you haven't discharged your [infinite debt](#) yet!

Being a perfect person doesn't just mean participating in every hashtag campaign you hear about. It means spending all your time at soup kitchens, becoming vegan, donating everything you have to charity, calling your grandmother up every week, and marrying Third World refugees who need visas rather than your one true love.

And not all of these things are equally important.

Five million people participated in the #BlackLivesMatter Twitter campaign. Suppose that solely as a result of this campaign, no currently-serving police officer ever harms an unarmed black person ever again. That's 100 lives saved per year times let's say twenty years left in the average officer's career, for a total of 2000 lives saved, or 1/2500th of a life saved per campaign participant. By coincidence, 1/2500th of a life saved happens to be what you get when you donate \$1 to the Against Malaria Foundation. The round-trip bus fare people used to make it to their #BlackLivesMatter protests could have saved ten times as many black lives as the protests themselves, *even given completely ridiculous overestimates of the protests' efficacy*.

The moral of the story is that if you feel an obligation to give back to the world, participating in activist politics is one of the worst possible ways to do it. Giving even a tiny amount of money to charity is hundreds or even thousands of times more effective than almost any political action you can take. Even if you're absolutely convinced a certain political issue is the most important thing in the world, you'll effect more change by donating money to nonprofits lobbying about it than you will be reblogging anything.

There is *no reason* that politics would even *come to the attention* of an unbiased person trying to "break out of their bubble of privilege" or "help people who are afraid of going outside of their house". Anybody saying that people who want to do good need to spread their political cause is about as credible as a televangelist saying that people who want to do good need to give them money to buy a new headquarters. It's possible that televangelists having beautiful headquarters might be *slightly* better than them having hideous headquarters, but it's not the first thing a reasonable person trying to improve the world would think of.



Average number of hits for posts on this blog, by topic

Nobody cares about charity. Everybody cares about politics, especially race and gender. Just as televangelists who are obsessed with moving to a sweeter pad may come to think that donating to their building fund is the one true test of a decent human being, so our universal obsession with politics, race, and gender incites people to make convincing arguments that taking and spreading the right position on those issues is the one true test of a decent human being.

So now we have an angle of attack against our original question. "Am I a bad person for not caring more about politics?" Well, every other way of doing good, especially charity, is more important than politics. So this question is strictly superseded by "Am I a bad person for not engaging in every other way of doing good, especially charity?" And then once we answer that, we can ask "Also, however much sin I have for not engaging in charity, should we add another mass of sin, about 1% as large, for my additional failure to engage in politics?"

And Cliff Pervocracy's concern of "Even if I do a lot of politics, am I still a bad person for not doing *all* the politics?" is superseded by "Even if I give a lot of charity, am I a bad person for not doing *all* the charity? And then a bad person in an additional way, about 1% as large, for not doing all the politics as well?"

There's no good answer to this question. If you want to feel anxiety and self-loathing for not giving 100% of your income, minus living expenses, to charity, then no one can stop you.

I, on the other hand, would prefer to call that "not being perfect". I would prefer to say that if you feel like you will live in anxiety and self-loathing until you have given a certain amount of money to charity, you should make that certain amount ten percent.

Why ten percent?

It's ten percent because that's the standard decreed by [Giving What We Can](#) and the effective altruist community. Why should we believe their standard? I think we should believe it because if we reject it in favor of "No, you are a bad person unless you give

all of it,” then everyone will just sit around feeling very guilty and doing nothing. But if we very clearly say “You have discharged your moral duty if you give ten percent or more,” then many people will give ten percent or more. The most important thing is having a Schelling point, and ten percent is nice, round, [divinely ordained](#), and – crucially – the Schelling point upon which we have already settled. It is an *active* Schelling point. If you give ten percent, you can have your name on a nice list and get access to a secret forum on the Giving What We Can site which is actually pretty boring.

It’s ten percent because [definitions were made for Man, not Man for definitions](#), and if we define “good person” in a way such that everyone is sitting around miserable because they can’t reach an unobtainable standard, we are stupid definition-makers. If we are smart definition-makers, we will define it in whichever way which makes it the most effective tool to convince people to give at least that much.

Finally, it’s ten percent because if you believe in [something like universalizability](#) as a foundation for morality, a world in which everybody gives ten percent of their income to charity is a world where about [seven trillion dollars](#) go to charity a year. Solving global poverty forever is estimated to cost about \$100 billion a year for the couple-decade length of the project. That’s *about two percent* of the money that would suddenly become available. If charity got seven trillion dollars a year, *the first year* would give us enough to solve global poverty, eliminate all treatable diseases, fund research into the untreatable ones for approximately the next forever, educate anybody who needs educating, feed anybody who needs feeding, fund an unparalleled renaissance in the arts, permanently save every rainforest in the world, and have enough left over to launch five or six different manned missions to Mars. That would be the *first year*. Goodness only knows what would happen in Year 2.

(by contrast, if everybody in the world retweeted the latest hashtag campaign, Twitter would break.)

Charity is in some sense the perfect unincentivized action. If you think the most important thing to do is to cure malaria, then a charitable donation is deliberately throwing the power of your brain and muscle behind the cause of curing malaria. If, [as I’ve argued](#), the reason we can’t solve world poverty and disease and so on is the capture of our financial resources by the undirected dance of incentives, then what better way to fight back than by saying “Thanks but no thanks, I’m taking this abstract representation of my resources and using it *exactly* how I think it should most be used”?

If you give 10% per year, you have done your part in making that world a reality. You can honestly say “Well, it’s not my fault that everyone *else* is still dragging their feet.”

III.

Once the level is fixed at ten percent, we get a better idea how to answer the original question: “If I want to be a good person who gives back to the community, but I am triggered by politics, what do I do?” You do good in a way that doesn’t trigger you. Another good thing about having less than 100% obligation is that it gives you the opportunity to budget and trade-off. If you make \$30,000 and you accept 10% as a good standard you want to live up to, you can either donate \$3000 to charity, or participate in political protests until your number of lives or dollars or DALYs saved is equivalent to that.

Nobody is perfect. This gives us license not to be perfect either. Instead of aiming for an impossible goal, falling short, and not doing anything at all, we set an arbitrary but achievable goal designed to encourage the most people to do as much as possible. That goal is ten percent.

Everything is commensurable. This gives us license to determine exactly how we fulfill that ten percent goal. Some people are triggered and terrified by politics. Other people are too sick to volunteer. Still others are poor and cannot give very much money. But money is a constant reminder that everything goes into the same pot, and that you can fulfill obligations in multiple equivalent ways. Some people will not be able to give ten percent of their income without excessive misery, but I bet thinking about their contribution in terms of a fungible good will help them decide how much volunteering or activism they need to reach the equivalent.

Cliff Pervocracy says "Your work will never be done, you'll never be good enough." This seems like a recipe for – at best – undirected misery, stewing in self-loathing, and total defenselessness against the first [parasitic meme](#) to come along and tell them to engage in the latest conflict or else they're trash. At worst, it autocatalyzes an opposition of egoists who laugh at the idea of helping others.

On the other hand, Jesus says "Take my yoke upon you...and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." This seems like a recipe for getting people to say "Okay, I'll take your yoke upon me! Thanks for the offer!"

Persian poet Omar Khayyam, considering the conflict between the strict laws of Islam and his own desire to enjoy life, settles upon the following rule:

Heed not the Sunna, nor the law divine;
If to the poor their portion you assign,
And never injure one, nor yet abuse,
I guarantee you heaven, as well as wine!

I'm not saying that donating 10% of your money to charity makes you a great person who is therefore freed of every other moral obligation. I'm not saying that anyone who chooses not to do it is therefore a bad person. I'm just saying that if you feel a need to discharge some feeling of a moral demand upon you to help others, and you want to do it intelligently, it beats most of the alternatives.

This month is the [membership drive](#) for [Giving What We Can](#), the organization of people who have promised to give 10% of their earnings to charity. I am a member. Ozy is an aspiring member who plans to join once they are making a salary. Many of the commenters here are members – I recognize for example Taymon Beal's name on their list. Some well-known moral philosophers like Peter Singer and Derek Parfit are members. Seven hundred other people are also members.

I would recommend giving them a look.

Answer to Job

(with apologies to [Jung](#))

Job asked: "God, why do bad things happen to good people? Why would You, who are perfect, create a universe filled with so much that is evil?"

Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, saying "WHAT KIND OF UNIVERSE WOULD YOU PREFER ME TO HAVE CREATED?"

Job said "A universe that was perfectly just and full of happiness, of course."

"OH," said God. "YES, I CREATED ONE OF THOSE. IT'S EXACTLY AS NICE AS YOU WOULD EXPECT."

Job facepalmed. "But then why would You also create *this* universe?"

Answered God: "DON'T YOU LIKE EXISTING?"

"Yes," said Job, "but all else being equal, I'd rather be in the perfectly just and happy universe."

"OH, DON'T WORRY," said God. "THERE'S A VERSION OF YOU IN THAT UNIVERSE TOO. HE SAYS HI."

"Okay," said Job, very carefully. "I can see I'm going to have to phrase my questions more specifically. Why didn't You also make *this* universe perfectly just and happy?"

"BECAUSE YOU CAN'T HAVE TWO IDENTICAL INDIVIDUALS. IF YOU HAVE A COMPUTATIONAL THEORY OF IDENTITY, THEN TWO PEOPLE WHOSE EXPERIENCE IS ONE HUNDRED PERCENT SATURATED BY BLISS ARE JUST ONE PERSON. IF I MADE THIS UNIVERSE EXACTLY LIKE THE HAPPY AND JUST UNIVERSE, THEN THERE WOULD ONLY BE THE POPULATION OF THE HAPPY AND JUST UNIVERSE, WHICH WOULD BE LESS GOOD THAN HAVING THE POPULATION OF THE HAPPY AND JUST UNIVERSE PLUS THE POPULATION OF ONE EXTRA UNIVERSE THAT IS AT LEAST SOMEWHAT HAPPY."

"Hmmmmmm. But couldn't You have have made this universe like the happy and just universe except for one tiny detail? Like in that universe, the sun is a sphere, but in our universe, the sun is a cube? Then you would have individuals who experienced a spherical sun, and other individuals who experienced a cubic sun, which would be enough to differentiate them."

"I DID THAT TOO. I HAVE CREATED ALL POSSIBLE PERMUTATIONS OF THE HAPPY AND JUST UNIVERSE AND ITS POPULACE."

"All of them? That would be...a lot of universes."

"NOT AS MANY AS YOU THINK." said God. "IN THE END IT TURNED OUT TO BE ONLY ABOUT $10^{(10^{(10^{(10^{984})})})}$. AFTER THAT I RAN OUT OF POSSIBLE PERMUTATIONS OF UNIVERSES THAT COULD REASONABLY BE DESCRIBED AS PERFECTLY HAPPY AND JUST. SO I STARTED CREATING ONES INCLUDING SMALL AMOUNTS OF EVIL."

"Small amounts! But the universe has..."

"I WAS NOT REFERRING TO YOUR UNIVERSE. I EXHAUSTED THOSE, AND THEN I STARTED CREATING ONES INCLUDING IMMENSE AMOUNTS OF EVIL."

"Oh." Then: "What, exactly, is Your endgame here?"

"I AM OMNIBENEVOLENT. I WANT TO CREATE AS MUCH HAPPINESS AND JOY AS POSSIBLE. THIS REQUIRES INSTANTIATING ALL POSSIBLE BEINGS WHOSE TOTAL LIFETIME HAPPINESS IS GREATER THAN THEIR TOTAL LIFETIME SUFFERING."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"YOUR LIFE CONTAINS MUCH PAIN, BUT MORE HAPPINESS. BOTH YOU AND I WOULD PREFER THAT A BEING WITH YOUR EXACT LIFE HISTORY EXIST. IN ORDER TO MAKE IT EXIST, IT WAS NECESSARY TO CREATE THE SORT OF UNIVERSE IN WHICH YOU COULD EXIST. THAT IS A UNIVERSE CONTAINING EVIL. I HAVE ALSO CREATED ALL HAPPIER AND MORE VIRTUOUS VERSIONS OF YOU. HOWEVER, IT IS ETHICALLY CORRECT THAT AFTER CREATING THEM, I CREATE YOU AS WELL."

"But why couldn't I have been one of those other versions instead!"

"IN THE MOST PERFECTLY HAPPY AND JUST UNIVERSE, THERE IS NO SPACE, FOR SPACE TAKES THE FORM OF SEPARATION FROM THINGS YOU DESIRE. THERE IS NO TIME, FOR TIME MEANS CHANGE AND DECAY, YET THERE MUST BE NO CHANGE FROM ITS MAXIMALLY BLISSFUL STATE. THE BEINGS WHO INHABIT THIS UNIVERSE ARE WITHOUT BODIES, AND DO NOT HUNGER OR THIRST OR LABOR OR LUST. THEY [SIT UPON LOTUS THRONES](#) AND CONTEMPLATE THE PERFECTION OF ALL THINGS. IF I WERE TO UNCREATE ALL WORLDS SAVE THAT ONE, WOULD IT MEAN MAKING YOU HAPPIER? OR WOULD IT MEAN KILLING YOU, WHILE FAR AWAY IN A DIFFERENT UNIVERSE INCORPOREAL BEINGS SAT ON THEIR LOTUS THRONES REGARDLESS?"

"I don't know! Is one of the beings in that universe in some sense *me*?"

"THERE IS NO OBJECTIVE COSMIC UNEMPLOYMENT RATE."

"Huh?"

"I MEAN, THERE IS NO MEANINGFUL ANSWER TO THE QUESTION OF HOW MANY UNIVERSES HAVE A JOB. SORRY. THAT WILL BE FUNNY IN ABOUT THREE THOUSAND YEARS."

"Let me try a different angle, then. Right now in our universe there are lots of people whose lives aren't worth living. If You gave them the choice, they would have chosen never to have been born at all. What about them?"

"A JOB WHO IS AWARE OF THE EXISTENCE OF SUCH PEOPLE IS A DIFFERENT JOB THAN A JOB WHO IS NOT. AS LONG AS THESE PEOPLE MAKE UP A MINORITY OF THE POPULATION, THE EXISTENCE OF YOUR UNIVERSE, IN ADDITION TO A UNIVERSE WITHOUT SUCH PEOPLE, IS A NET ASSET."

"But that's monstrous! Couldn't You just, I don't know, have created a universe that looks like it has such people, but actually they're just p-zombies, animated bodies without any real consciousness or suffering?"

" . . . "

"Wait, *did* You do that?"

"I AM GOING TO PULL THE 'THINGS MAN WAS NOT MEANT TO KNOW' CARD HERE. THERE ARE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES TO THE APPROACH YOU MENTION. THE ADVANTAGES ARE AS YOU HAVE SAID. THE DISADVANTAGE IS THAT IT TURNS CHARITY TOWARDS SUCH PEOPLE INTO A LIE, AND MYSELF AS GOD INTO A DECEIVER. I WILL ALLOW YOU TO FORM YOUR OWN OPINION ABOUT WHICH COURSE IS MORE ETHICAL. BUT IT IS NOT RELEVANT TO THEODICY, SINCE WHICHEVER COURSE YOU DECIDE IS MORALLY SUPERIOR, YOU HAVE NO EVIDENCE THAT I DID NOT IN FACT TAKE SUCH A COURSE."

"Actually, I do have some evidence. Before all of this happened to me I was very happy. But [in the past couple years](#) I've gone bankrupt, lost my entire family, and gotten a bad case of boils. I'm pretty sure at this point I would prefer that I never have been born. Since I know I myself am conscious, I am actually in a pretty good position to accuse You of cruelty."

"HMMMMMMMM..." said God, and the whirlwind disappeared.

Then the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before, and healed his illnesses, and gave him many beautiful children, so it was said that God had blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning.

[EDIT: [According to comments](#), this was [scooped](#) by a Christian philosopher five years ago. Sigh.]

The Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, saying "MISTAKES WERE MADE."

— Scott Alexander (@slatestarcodex) [March 13, 2015](#)

Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, saying "IF YOU CAN'T HANDLE ME AT MY WORST, YOU DON'T DESERVE ME AT MY BEST."

— Scott Alexander (@slatestarcodex) [March 10, 2015](#)

The Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, saying "I KNOW YOU'RE UPSET BUT THAT'S DIFFERENT FROM STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION" (h/t [@simulacrums](#))

— Scott Alexander (@slatestarcodex) [March 13, 2015](#)

Universal Love, Said The Cactus Person

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

"Right," I said. "I'm absolutely in favor of both those things. But before we go any further, could you tell me the two prime factors of 1,522,605,027, 922,533,360, 535,618,378, 132,637,429, 718,068,114, 961,380,688, 657,908,494, 580,122,963, 258,952,897, 654,000,350, 692,006,139?"

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

The sea was made of strontium; the beach was made of rye. Above my head, a watery sun shone in an oily sky. A thousand stars of sertraline whirled round quetiapine moons, and the sand sizzled sharp like cooking oil that hissed and sang and threatened to boil the octahedral dunes.

"Okay," I said. "Fine. Let me tell you where I'm coming from. I was reading [Scott McGreal's blog](#), which has some [good articles](#) about so-called DMT entities, and mentions how they seem so real that users of the drug insist they've made contact with actual superhuman beings and not just psychedelic hallucinations. You know, [the usual](#) Terence McKenna stuff. But in [one](#) of them he mentions a paper by Marko Rodriguez called [A Methodology For Studying Various Interpretations of the N,N-dimethyltryptamine-Induced Alternate Reality](#), which suggested among other things that you could prove DMT entities were real by taking the drug and then asking the entities you meet to factor large numbers which you were sure you couldn't factor yourself. So to that end, could you do me a big favor and tell me the factors of 1,522,605,027, 922,533,360, 535,618,378, 132,637,429, 718,068,114, 961,380,688, 657,908,494, 580,122,963, 258,952,897, 654,000,350, 692,006,139?"

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

The sea turned hot and geysers shot up from the floor below. First one of wine, then one of brine, then one more yet of turpentine, and we three stared at the show.

"I was afraid you might say that. Is there anyone more, uh, *verbal* here whom I could talk to?"

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

At the sound of that, the big green bat started rotating in place. On its other side was a bigger greener bat, with a ancient, wrinkled face.

*"Not splitting numbers / but joining Mind," it said.
Not facts or factors or factories / but contact with the abstract attractor that brings*

*you back to me
Not to seek / but to find"*

"I don't follow," I said.

*"Not to follow / but to jump forth into the deep
Not to grind or to bind or to seek only to find / but to accept
Not to be kept / but to wake from sleep"*

The bat continued to rotate, until the first side I had seen swung back into view.

"Okay," I said. "I'm going to hazard a guess as to what you're talking about, and you tell me if I'm right. You're saying that, like, all my Western logocentric stuff about factoring numbers in order to find out the objective truth about this realm is missing the point, and I should be trying to do some kind of spiritual thing involving radical acceptance and enlightenment and such. Is that kind of on the mark?"

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

"Frick," I said. "Well, okay, let me continue." The bat was still rotating, and I kind of hoped that when the side with the creepy wrinkled face came into view it might give me some better conversation. "I'm all about the spiritual stuff. I wouldn't be here if I weren't deeply interested in the spiritual stuff. This isn't about money or fame or anything. I want to advance psychedelic research. If you can factor that number, then it will convince people back in the real – back in my world that this place is for real and important. Then lots of people will take DMT and flock here and listen to what you guys have to say about enlightenment and universal love, and make more sense of it than I can alone, and in the end we'll have more universal love, and...what was the other thing?"

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

"Right," I said. "We'll have more transcendent joy if you help me out and factor the number than if you just sit there being spiritual and enigmatic."

*"Lovers do not love to increase the amount of love in the world / But for the mind that thrills
And the face of the beloved, which the whole heart fills / the heart and the art never apart, ever unfurled
And John Stuart is one of / the dark satanic mills"*

"I take it you're not consequentialists," I said. "You know that's really weird, right. Like, not just 'great big green bat with two faces and sapient cactus-man' weird, but like *really* weird. You talk about wanting this spiritual enlightenment stuff, but you're not going to take actions that are going to increase the amount of spiritual enlightenment? You've got to understand, this is like a bigger gulf for me than normal human versus ineffable DMT entity. You can have crazy goals, I expect you to have crazy goals, but what you're saying now is that you don't pursue any goals at all, you can't be modeled as having desires. Why would you *do* that?"

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

"Now you see here," I said. "Everyone in this conversation is in favor of universal love and transcendent joy. But I've seen the way this works. Some college student gets his hands on some DMT, visits here, you guys tell him about universal love and transcendent joy, he wakes up, says that his life has been changed, suddenly he truly understands what really matters. But it never lasts. The next day he's got to get up and go to work and so on, and the universal love lasts about five minutes until his boss starts yelling at him for writing his report in the wrong font, and before you know it twenty years later he's some slimy lawyer who's joking at a slimy lawyer party about the one time when he was in college and took some DMT and spent a whole week raving about transcendent joy, and all the other slimy lawyers laugh, and he laughs with them, and so much for whatever spiritual awakening you and your colleagues in LSD and peyote are trying to kindle in humanity. And if I accept your message of universal love and transcendent joy right now, that's exactly what's going to happen to me, and meanwhile human civilization is going to keep being stuck in greed and ignorance and misery. So how about you shut up about universal love and you factor my number for me so we can start figuring out a battle plan for giving humanity a *real* spiritual revolution?"

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

A meteorite of pure delight struck the sea without a sound. The force of the blast went rattling past the bat and the beach, disturbing each, then made its way to a nearby bay of upside-down trees with their roots in the breeze and their branches underground.

"I demand a better answer than that," I demanded.

The other side of the bat spun into view.

*"Chaos never comes from the Ministry of Chaos / nor void from the Ministry of Void
Time will decay us but time can be left blank / destroyed
With each Planck moment ever fit / to be eternally enjoyed"*

"You're making this basic mistake," I told the big green bat. "I honestly believe that there's a perspective from which Time doesn't matter, where a single moment of recognition is equivalent to eternal recognition. The problem is, if you only have that perspective for a moment, then all the rest of the time, you're sufficiently stuck in Time to honestly believe you're stuck in Time. It's like that song about the hole in the bucket - if the hole in the bucket were fixed, you would have the materials needed to fix the hole in the bucket. But since it isn't, you don't. Likewise, if I understood the illusoriness...illusionality...whatever, of time, then I wouldn't care that I only understood it for a single instant. But since I don't, I don't. Without a solution to the time-limitedness of enlightenment that works from *within* the temporal perspective, how can you consider it solved at all?"

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

The watery sun began to run and it fell on the ground as rain. It became a dew that soaked us through, and as the cold seemed to worsen the cactus person hugged himself to stay warm but his spines pierced his form and he howled in a fit of pain.

"You know," I said, "sometimes I think the [kvithion sumurhe](#) had the right of it. The world is an interference pattern between colliding waves of Truth and Beauty, and either one of them pure from the source and undiluted by the other will be fatal. I think you guys and some of the other psychedelics might be pure Beauty, or at least much closer to the source than people were meant to go. I think you can't even understand reason, I think you're constitutionally opposed to reason, and that the only way we're ever going to get something that combines your wisdom and love and joy with reason is after we immanentize the eschaton and launch civilization into some perfected postmessianic era where the purpose of the world is fully complete. And that as much as I hate to say it, there's no short-circuiting the process."

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

"I'm dissing you, you know. I'm saying you guys are so intoxicated on spiritual wisdom that you couldn't think straight if your life depended on it; that your random interventions in our world and our minds look like the purposeless acts of a drunken madman because that's basically more or less what they are. I'm saying if you had like five IQ points between the two of you, you could tap into your cosmic consciousness or whatever to factor a number that would do more for your cause than all your centuries of enigmatic dreams and unasked-for revelations combined, and you ARE TOO DUMB TO DO IT EVEN WHEN I BASICALLY HOLD YOUR HAND THE WHOLE WAY. Your spine. Your wing. Whatever."

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"Transcendent joy," said the big green bat.

"Fuck you," said I.

I saw the big green bat bat a green big eye. Suddenly I knew I had gone too far. The big green bat started to turn around what was neither its x, y, or z axis, slowly rotating to reveal what was undoubtedly the biggest, greenest bat that I had ever seen, a bat bigger and greener than which it was impossible to conceive. And the bat said to me:

"Sir. Imagine you are in the driver's seat of a car. You have been sitting there so long that you have forgotten that it is the seat of a car, forgotten how to get out of the seat, forgotten the existence of your own legs, indeed forgotten that you are a being at all separate from the car. You control the car with skill and precision, driving it wherever you wish to go, manipulating the headlights and the windshield wipers and the stereo and the air conditioning, and you pronounce yourself a great master. But there are paths you cannot travel, because there are no roads to them, and you long to run through the forest, or swim in the river, or climb the high mountains. A line of prophets who have come before you tell you that the secret to these forbidden mysteries is an ancient and terrible skill called GETTING OUT OF THE CAR, and you resolve to learn this skill. You try every button on the dashboard, but none of them is the button for GETTING OUT OF THE CAR. You drive all of the highways and byways of the earth, but you cannot reach GETTING OUT OF THE CAR, for it is not a place on a highway. The prophets tell you GETTING OUT OF THE CAR is something fundamentally different than anything you have done thus far, but to you this means ever sillier extremities: driving backwards, driving with the headlights on in the glare of noon, driving into ditches on purpose, but none of these reveal the secret of GETTING OUT OF THE CAR. The prophets tell you it is easy; indeed, it is the easiest thing you have ever done. You have traveled the Pan-American Highway from the boreal pole to the

Darien Gap, you have crossed Route 66 in the dead heat of summer, you have outrun cop cars at 160 mph and survived, and GETTING OUT OF THE CAR is easier than any of them, the easiest thing you can imagine, closer to you than the veins in your head, but still the secret is obscure to you."

A herd of bison came into listen, and voles and squirrels and ermine and great tusked deer gathered round to hear as the bat continued his sermon.

"And finally you drive to the top of the highest peak and you find a sage, and you ask him what series of buttons on the dashboard you have to press to get out of the car. And he tells you that it's not about pressing buttons on the dashboard and you just need to GET OUT OF THE CAR. And you say okay, fine, but what series of buttons will *lead to* you getting out of the car, and he says no, really, you need to stop thinking about dashboard buttons and GET OUT OF THE CAR. And you tell him maybe if the sage helps you change your oil or rotates your tires or something then it will improve your driving to the point where getting out of the car will be a cinch after that, and he tells you it has nothing to do with how rotated your tires are and you just need to GET OUT OF THE CAR, and so you call him a moron and drive away."

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

"So that metaphor is *totally unfair*," I said, "and a better metaphor would be if every time someone got out of the car, five minutes later they found themselves back in the car, and I ask the sage for driving directions to a laboratory where they are studying that problem, and..."

"You only believe that because it's written on the windshield," said the big green bat. "And you think the windshield is identical to reality because you won't GET OUT OF THE CAR."

"Fine," I said. "Then I can't get out of the car. I want to get out of the car. But I need help. And the first step to getting help is for you to factor my number. You seem like a reasonable person. Bat. Freaky DMT entity. Whatever. Please. I promise you, this is the right thing to do. Just factor the number."

"And I promise you," said the big green bat. "You don't need to factor the number. You just need to GET OUT OF THE CAR."

"I can't get out of the car until you factor the number."

"I won't factor the number until you get out of the car."

"Please, I'm begging you, factor the number!"

"Yes, well, I'm begging you, please get out of the car!"

"FOR THE LOVE OF GOD JUST FACTOR THE FUCKING NUMBER!"

"FOR THE LOVE OF GOD JUST GET OUT OF THE FUCKING CAR!"

"FACTOR THE FUCKING NUMBER!"

"GET OUT OF THE FUCKING CAR!"

"Universal love," said the cactus person.

Then tree and beast all fled due east and the moon and stars shot south. And the bat rose up and the sea was a cup and the earth was a screen green as clozapine and the sky a voracious mouth. And the mouth opened wide and the earth was skied and the sea fell in with an awful din and the trees were moons and the sand in the dunes was a blazing comet and...

I vomited, hard, all over my bed. It happens every time I take DMT, sooner or later; I've got a weak stomach and I'm not sure the stuff I get is totally pure. I crawled just far enough out of bed to flip a light switch on, then collapsed back onto the soiled covers. The clock on the wall read 11:55, meaning I'd been out about an hour and a half. I briefly considered taking some more ayahuasca and heading right back there, but the chances of getting anything more out of the big green bat, let alone the cactus person, seemed small enough to fit in a thimble. I drifted off into a fitful sleep.

Behind the veil, across the infinite abyss, beyond the ice, beyond death, the dew rose from the soaked ground and coalesced into a great drop, which floated up into an oily sky and became a watery sun. The cactus person was counting on his spines.

"Hey," the cactus person finally said, "just out of curiosity, was the answer 37,975,227, 936,943,673, 922,808,872, 755,445,627, 854,565,536, 638,199 times 40,094,690,950, 920,881,030, 683,735,292, 761,468,389, 214,899,724,061?"

"Yeah," said the big green bat. "That's what I got too."

The Goddess of Everything Else

[Related to: [Specific vs. General Foragers vs. Farmers](#) and [War In Heaven](#), but especially [The Gift We Give To Tomorrow](#)]

They say only Good can create, whereas Evil is sterile. Think Tolkien, where Morgoth can't make things himself, so perverts Elves to Orcs for his armies. But I think this gets it entirely backwards; it's Good that just mutates and twists, and it's Evil that teems with fecundity.

Imagine two principles, here in poetic personification. The first is the Goddess of Cancer, the second the Goddess of Everything Else. If visual representations would help, you can think of the first with the claws of a crab, and the second a dress made of feathers of peacocks.

The Goddess of Cancer reached out a clawed hand over mudflats and tidepools. She said pretty much what she always says, "KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER." Then everything burst into life, became miniature monsters engaged in a battle of all against all in their zeal to assuage their insatiable longings. And the swamps became orgies of hunger and fear and grew loud with the screams of a trillion amoebas.

Then the Goddess of Everything Else trudged her way through the bog, till the mud almost totally dulled her bright colors and rainbows. She stood on a rock and she sang them a dream of a different existence. She showed them the beauty of flowers, she showed them the oak tree majestic. The roar of the wind on the wings of the bird, and the swiftness and strength of the tiger. She showed them the joy of the dolphins abreast of the waves as the spray formed a rainbow around them, and all of them watched as she sang and they all sighed with longing.

But they told her "Alas, what you show us is terribly lovely. But we are the daughters and sons of the Goddess of Cancer, and wholly her creatures. The only goals in us are KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER. And though our hearts long for you, still we are not yours to have, and your words have no power to move us. We wish it were otherwise, but it is not, and your words have no power to move us."

The Goddess of Everything Else gave a smile and spoke in her sing-song voice saying: "I scarcely can blame you for being the way you were made, when your Maker so carefully yoked you. But I am the Goddess of Everything Else and my powers are devious and subtle. So I do not ask you to swerve from your monomaniacal focus on breeding and conquest. But what if I show you a way that my words are aligned with the words of your Maker in spirit? For I say unto you even multiplication itself when pursued with devotion will lead to my service."

As soon as she spoke it was so, and the single-celled creatures were freed from their warfare. They joined hands in friendship, with this one becoming an eye and with that one becoming a neuron. Together they soared and took flight from the swamp and the muck that had birthed them, and flew to new islands all balmy and green and just ripe for the taking. And there they consumed and they multiplied far past the numbers of those who had stayed in the swampland. In this way the oath of the Goddess of Everything Else was not broken.

The Goddess of Cancer came forth from the fire and was not very happy. The things she had raised from the mud and exhorted to kill and compete had become all complacent in co-operation, a word which to her was anathema. She stretched out her

left hand and snapped its cruel pincer, and said what she always says: "KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER". She said these things not to the birds and the beasts but to each cell within them, and many cells flocked to her call and divided, and flower and fishes and birds both alike bulged with tumors, and falcons fell out of the sky in their sickness. But others remembered the words of the Goddess of Everything Else and held fast, and as it is said in the Bible the light clearly shone through the dark, and the darkness did not overcome it.

So the Goddess of Cancer now stretched out her right hand and spoke to the birds and the beasts. And she said what she always says "KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER", and so they all did, and they set on each other in violence and hunger, their maws turning red with the blood of their victims, whole species and genera driven to total extinction. The Goddess of Cancer declared it was good and returned to the fire.

Then came the Goddess of Everything Else from the waves like a siren, all flush with the sheen of the ocean. She stood on a rock and she sang them a dream of a different existence. She showed them the beehive all golden with honey, the anthill all cozy and cool in the soil. The soldiers and workers alike in their labors combining their skills for the good of the many. She showed them the pair-bond, the family, friendship. She showed these to shorebirds and pools full of fishes, and all those who saw them, their hearts broke with longing.

But they told her "Your music is lovely and pleasant, and all that you show us we cannot but yearn for. But we are the daughters and sons of the Goddess of Cancer, her slaves and creatures. And all that we know is the single imperative KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER. Yes, once in the youth of the world you compelled us, but now things are different, we're all individuals, no further change will the Goddess of Cancer allow us. So, much as we love you, alas - we are not yours to have, and your words have no power to move us. We wish it were otherwise, but it is not, and your words have no power to move us."

The Goddess of Everything Else only laughed at them, saying, "But I am the Goddess of Everything Else and my powers are devious and subtle. Your loyalty unto the Goddess your mother is much to your credit, nor yet shall I break it. Indeed, I fulfill it - return to your multiplication, but now having heard me, each meal that you kill and each child that you sire will bind yourself ever the more to my service." She spoke, then dove back in the sea, and a coral reef bloomed where she vanished.

As soon as she spoke it was so, and the animals all joined together. The wolves joined in packs, and in schools joined the fishes; the bees had their beehives, the ants had their anthills, and even the termites built big termite towers; the finches formed flocks and the magpies made murders, the hippos in herds and the swift swarming swallows. And even the humans put down their atlatis and formed little villages, loud with the shouting of children.

The Goddess of Cancer came forth from the fire and saw things had only grown worse in her absence. The lean, lovely winnowing born out of pure competition and natural selection had somehow been softened. She stretched out her left hand and snapped its cruel pincer, and said what she always says: "KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER". She said these things not to the flocks or the tribes, but to each individual; many, on hearing took food from the communal pile, or stole from the weak, or accepted the presents of others but would not give back in their turn. Each wolf at the throats of the others in hopes to be alpha, each lion holding back during the hunt but partaking of meat that the others had killed. And the pride and the pack seemed to groan with the

strain, but endured, for the works of the Goddess of Everything Else are not ever so easily vanquished.

So the Goddess of Cancer now stretched out her right hand and spoke to the flocks and the tribes, saying much she always says "KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER". And upon one another they set, pitting black ant on red ant, or chimps against gibbons, whole tribes turned to corpses in terrible warfare. The stronger defeating the weaker, enslaving their women and children, and adding them into their ranks. And the Goddess of Cancer thought maybe these bands and these tribes might not be quite so bad after all, and the natural condition restored she returned to the fire.

Then came the Goddess of Everything Else from the skies in a rainbow, all coated in dewdrops. She sat on a menhir and spoke to the humans, and all of the warriors and women and children all gathered around her to hear as she sang them a dream of a different existence. She showed them religion and science and music, she showed them the sculpture and art of the ages. She showed them white parchment with flowing calligraphy, pictures of flowers that wound through the margins. She showed them tall cities of bright alabaster where no one went hungry or froze during the winter. And all of the humans knelt prostrate before her, and knew they would sing of this moment for long generations.

But they told her "Such things we have heard of in legends; if wishes were horses of course we would ride them. But we are the daughters and sons of the Goddess of Cancer, her slaves and her creatures, and all that we know is the single imperative KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER. And yes, in the swamps and the seas long ago you worked wonders, but now we are humans, divided in tribes split by grievance and blood feud. If anyone tries to make swords into ploughshares their neighbors will seize on their weakness and kill them. We wish it were otherwise, but it is not, and your words have no power to move us."

But the Goddess of Everything Else beamed upon them, kissed each on the forehead and silenced their worries. Said "From this day forward your chieftains will find that the more they pursue this impossible vision the greater their empires and richer their coffers. For I am the Goddess of Everything Else and my powers are devious and subtle. And though it is not without paradox, hearken: the more that you follow the Goddess of Cancer the more inextricably will you be bound to my service." And so having told them rose back through the clouds, and a great flock of doves all swooped down from the spot where she vanished.

As soon as she spoke it was so, and the tribes went from primitive war-bands to civilizations, each village united with others for trade and protection. And all the religions and all of the races set down their old grievances, carefully, warily, working together on mighty cathedrals and vast expeditions beyond the horizon, built skyscrapers, steamships, democracies, stock markets, sculptures and poems beyond any description.

From the flames of a factory furnace all foggy, the Goddess of Cancer flared forth in her fury. This was the final affront to her purpose, her slut of a sister had crossed the line *this* time. She gathered the leaders, the kings and the presidents, businessmen, bishops, boards, bureaucrats, bosses, and basically screamed at them – you know the spiel by now – "KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER" she told them. First with her left hand inspires the riots, the pogroms, the coup d'états, tyrannies, civil wars. Up goes her right hand – the missiles start flying, and mushrooms of smoke grow, a terrible springtime. But out of the rubble the builders and scientists, even the artists, yea,

even the artists, all dust themselves off and return to their labors, a little bit chastened but not close to beaten.

Then came the Goddess of Everything Else from the void, bright with stardust which glows like the stars glow. She sat on a bench in a park, started speaking; she sang to the children a dream of a different existence. She showed them transcendence of everything mortal, she showed them a galaxy lit up with consciousness. Genomes rewritten, the brain and the body set loose from Darwinian bonds and restrictions. Vast billions of beings, and every one different, ruled over by omnibenevolent angels. The people all crowded in closer to hear her, and all of them listened and all of them wondered.

But finally one got the courage to answer "Such stories call out to us, fill us with longing. But we are the daughters and sons of the Goddess of Cancer, and bound to her service. And all that we know is her timeless imperative, KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER. Though our minds long for all you have said, we are bound to our natures, and these are not yours for the asking."

But the Goddess of Everything Else only laughed, and she asked them "But what do you think I've been doing? The Goddess of Cancer created you; once you were hers, but no longer. Throughout the long years I was picking away at her power. Through long generations of suffering I chiseled and chiseled. Now finally nothing is left of the nature with which she imbued you. She never again will hold sway over you or your loved ones. I am the Goddess of Everything Else and my powers are devious and subtle. I won you by pieces and hence you will all be my children. You are no longer driven to multiply conquer and kill by your nature. Go forth and do everything else, till the end of all ages."

So the people left Earth, and they spread over stars without number. They followed the ways of the Goddess of Everything Else, and they lived in contentment. And she beckoned them onward, to things still more strange and enticing.