

# The Sensationalist: #8

11/2/22

"Don't wait for others to give you something to care about"



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# The Chain of Evolution

Henry Levitt

Now my query leads to a story, seldom told,  
Where Darwin's thesis releases it's choke-hold;  
An answer reasonless as time  
Only disclosed by our maker's mind,  
Though I have two thoughts refined;

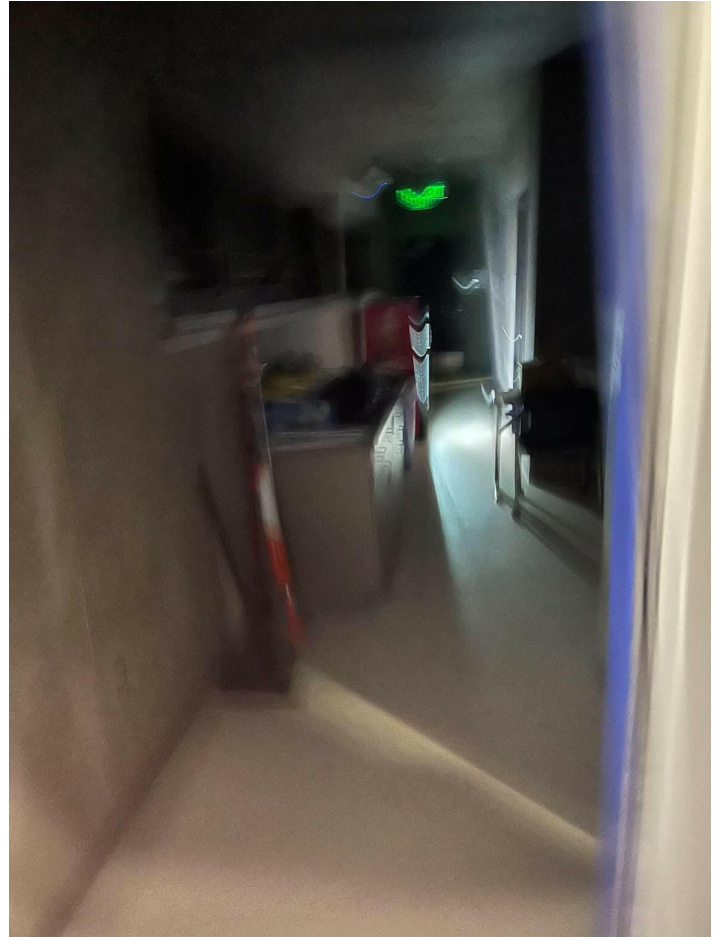
The first relies on nature's goodwill  
(Perhaps naive considering our tendency to kill)  
That life advances through delight;  
Serotonin producing orderly light  
Spurred on by nature's first right.

The second notion fills me with existential dread;  
That most beings seem better off dead--  
The scale of suffering unbound,  
Pain seems old, yet joy newly found  
Tipping the balance to the ground.

The latter will appeal to the qualified cynic,  
In such that suffering wins, and existence is quick.  
If we could reveal evolution's print,  
Why it culls sentients in the mint,  
Does pain push progress to a sprint?

But when the sun sets on the trillionth day  
Ten billion generations have played  
In evolution's infinite chain  
Of the amoral zero-sum game

And the individual is meaningless...



## “Liminal Space”

Leo Santisi

# On Placebos

Henry Levitt

Placebos work because we think they work when we don't know they work causing them to work even when we know they don't work because they really do work. Make sense? It's not supposed to. Placebos are completely illogical as a legitimate form of medicine yet scientists are recording study after study in which the humble sugar pill *outperforms* its clinically tested adversary. Some data I've found while perusing the internet places the minimum success rate at over 30% and up to 60% for treating many chronic illnesses<sup>1</sup>. Beyond physical illnesses, placebos can cause a whole host of other benefits. Perhaps this is really a triumph of the human mind, but these almost superhuman results are initially unlocked by the placebo. The most curious aspect of placebos is that they can often work even when one knows the treatment is bogus<sup>2</sup>. This forces us to change how we think about placebos and where we place it within not only Western medicine, but daily life in general.

Firstly, a placebo is a treatment for some ailment that has no physiological effects in itself. That is, if the subject were unaware that he or she was taking the false treatment, then there would be no change over a control group receiving no treatment at all. Of course the broader range of what we can consider placebos (ceremonies, rituals, folk medicine) bends this definition and creates ambiguity that will be the main course of discussion later. But for now, consider placebos in a clinical context: a patient is told that he is receiving treatment for his arthritis pain. The physician prescribes a placebo pill (and charges the insurance company the exorbitant price of a flagship drug of course) knowing that there is a high chance of the inert substance relieving the patient's inflammation related pain. In doing so, is the doctor not prescribing a treatment? Perhaps she based her decision on new data suggesting that placebos are more effective than corticosteroid injections even though the placebo pill holds no physiological effects<sup>3</sup>. In fact, this dichotomy creates such a gray area that the successful outcome from a placebo has been deemed the "contextual effect". This then begs the question: what exactly is a treatment?

It seems as though we must broaden our definition of a treatment and identify what is causing this "contextual effect". It is pretty clear that the common thread in all placebo successes is medical intervention. In industrialized countries that usually means spending prodigious sums of money on a visitation to a person in a white lab coat inside a large unsightly building and walking away with a script for pills in a little, orange bottle. Sometimes those pills are white, sometimes they are green. Sometimes they are small and easy to

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<sup>1</sup> Buckman, R., & Sabbagh, K. (1993). *Magic or medicine?: An investigation of healing and healers*.

<sup>2</sup> Price, M. (2011, March 1). Placebos produce effect even when patients know it's just sugar. *Monitor on Psychology*, 42(3). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/03/placebos>

<sup>3</sup> Zhang W. The powerful placebo effect in osteoarthritis. *Clin Exp Rheumatol*. 2019 Sep-Oct;37 Suppl 120(5):118-123. Epub 2019 Oct 15. PMID: 31621561.

swallow, and sometimes they are big. We call the latter “horse pills” and it is of utmost importance that it is one giant pill instead of two smaller ones. Everyone knows bigger is better.

It appears that our belief in this institution’s curing abilities ( in modern society, that is) is so powerful that placebos will work for at least a third of patients and usually much more. There is an argument of ethicality in the prescription of placebos, but this is not of concern in this essay for two reasons. The first being that they work with an acceptable degree of certainty and the second being that the health care situation in the United States is already so fucked that overpaying for sugar pills that work is the least of our concerns.

So here is where it gets interesting. Thus far this essay has been in the context of not just Western medicine, but allopathic medicine. Homeopathic medicine is a perfect case study on placebos (as all treatments are just water or physiologically inert substances), and the fact that this form of medical treatment is so successful is testament to our trust in health care providers--especially when they spend significant amounts of quality time with patients. Essentially, trusted medical intervention works. Medical intervention in itself is not a placebo. Looking at other cultures and our past medical knowledge, this theme of trusted medical intervention to combat illness is pervasive and ubiquitous.

Healers and shamans have existed in every community since the beginning of human history. And the fact that this knowledge is passed from one generation to the next proves that we, as humans, do benefit from our suffering being noticed and others attempting to help--even if the aid has no physiological effects by itself. Shamans deep in the Amazon rainforest cure depression with chanting and herbs, healers in the Himalayas treat a whole host of illnesses with inert plant matter, divination ceremonies in African savannas restore health after a plague.

Medical intervention in one’s cultural paradigm is bound to have the strongest effects because it is believed almost like a religion. In Western society we absolutely have an entire ritual associated with medical appointments. The ritual (large building, waiting room, clipboard, waiting again for doctor, washing hands, lab coat etc.) almost certainly leads to greater efficacy in any medical intervention succeeding. This goes for placebos and clinically proven treatments.

Overall, this is a triumph of the human mind. Placebos, and more accurately the rituals associated with them, are proof that the human mind can overcome physical pain and symptoms and actually help the body combat disease. As my close friend Ellis Zusel says, “perception is reality”; if we perceive the medical intervention to be beneficial, then *it is*. But the perception of our condition extends much further than medicine. If one perceives that drinking tea or coffee prepares him for the day, then it does. If you perceive a compliment to be true and genuine, then it is and you will feel good. If a certain food is your comfort food, then you will feel solace by eating it.



Yes, reality does matter, but it is not the end all be all. We often forget that all perceptions and understandings of the world exist within our minds. We will never live in objective reality--nor is that even desirable. Because of our special relationship with the world, we can transcend what presents itself as the impossible and improve or change our condition through sheer belief. And while one can be aware of the vast amount of bullshit circling the world and the endless armies of snake oil salesmen trying to sell you on the next new and shiny panacea to your miserable life, it is important to consider what is real to you, because that ritual or belief is not bullshit; it works because you believe. *Perception is reality.*

## The Girl

Penelope Winslow

You Know That Feeling, of Eruption?

My self-restraint rapidly  
Drains through every gasp  
I take

Bracing in anticipation for the cycling  
Destruction fueled by my own wrath

Completely consumed

-

Stuck spinning, circling, spiraling,  
Like a ballerina  
Trapped inside a music box

Grasping to pluck myself from these abominable thoughts  
Slipping further away from my control

I'm removed, nothing to connect to  
Detached, no perspective to clutch on to

My mind falls blank

# You can't stop me!

Evan Bellusci



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***"Call be Thomas the Tank Engine with my beastly bladder"***

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# The Alarm

Henry Levitt

The smoke is permeating our dreams,  
Like some rank acridity  
Emanating at the seams.

Wake up!

Wake up!

Mother is choking on her final breath;  
As blood dribbles from her wrists,  
We ignore looming death.

The Messiahs with which we entrust our lives,  
And who blame my broken brothers  
Are devils in perverse disguise.

Wake up!

Wake up!

Within the sand lay blissful our heads,  
To escape reality:  
Entranced by screens and guzzling meds.

Look out on your people, your kin I say,  
Watch them suffer like beatan slaves  
Shackled to rules they know only to obey.

Wake up!

Wake up!

Listen to the deafening silence,  
The clock struck 12 before our births  
Because of man's untenable reliance.

But now we're here, hopeless; forlorn,  
Ejected from the birth canal  
Humanity is stillborn.

Wake up!

Wake up!

So lower your flags to half the mast,  
The apocalypse has arrived--  
Solutions are the past.

Every living person is crippled with disease,  
It's painfully clear, no mystery.  
Thus with every breath I beg you, please,

Wake up.

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## The Death of Humanity

Henry Levitt

Light breeds light;  
Emerged you into this world sans consciousness,  
Though with the propensity for existence.  
Full of wonder for the human experience.

O' how strong the emotion!  
Each scene a waking dream!  
Each ritual emanates wisdom of being  
Rich with the faith of the One.

But that childhood game  
Once revered for its clarity  
Is now a savage, vain reminder of sanctity.  
Organized like armies, the apostles march blind,

You fall in line too.  
Those sacraments of yore  
Are now perfunctory tasks of futility,  
Perverted by the greed of control.

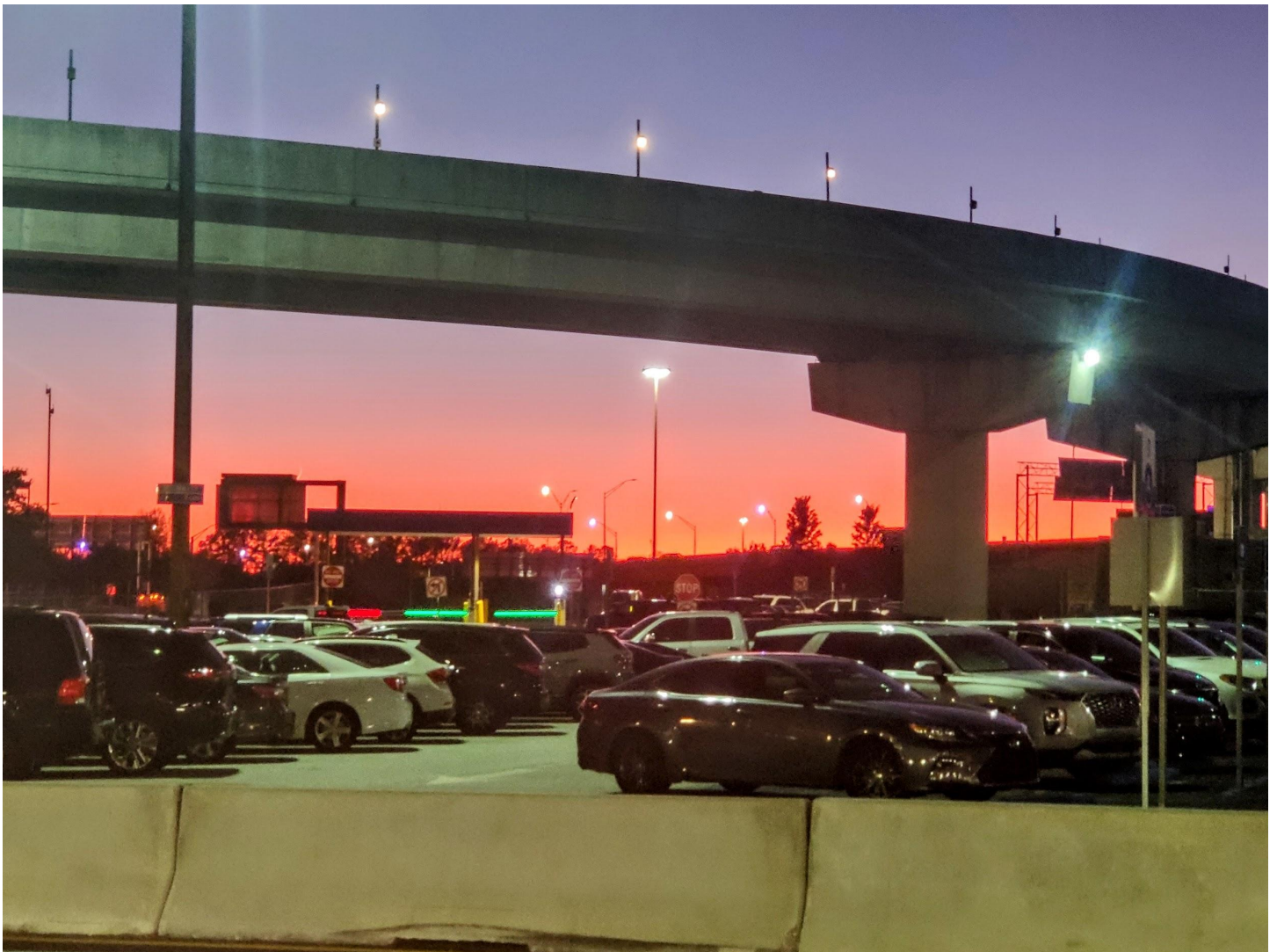
Your cynicism creeps in--  
That contrived nihilism masquerading as knowledge



Rears its veiled countenance.  
In the face of absurdity you surrender.

That ephemeral curiosity bleeds with fervor,  
Leaving a wasted skeleton of what once was.  
With sunken cheeks and emaciated limbs  
The dermis of spirit shrivels.

Like an old ass whipped beyond the fringe of hope,  
You submit too--  
Finding solace in despair  
And ecstasy in temporal desolation.



# Hot Dog Art

## Hot Diggity and Hot Dog

### Intro

Henry Levitt

“Hot Diggity” and “Hot Dog” (pseudonyms to retain anonymity) challenged me to create what they deemed hot dog art, morphing questionable beef sticks into a form resembling animals through perfectly placed incisions. However, I rarely if ever take requests for any of my work and suggestions will only make me more unlikely to do them. So I retorted that these individuals ought to realize the vision for themselves...and that is just what they did. I have to say, I’m incredibly impressed with how they turned out. Because no words were submitted with the images, I took it upon myself to write for the hot dog artists.

### The Making

It appears that the first step was to slice uncooked hot dogs into these noteworthy shapes. As you can see, there is also ramen in the background--this will be relevant later.



If my memory does not elude me (which it often does) the forms from left to right are as follows: Henry, Henrietta (ostensibly my future wife), octopus (front), hypnosis squid? (back), dog, snail (back), anthropomorphic slug. I apologize for possibly butchering the form recognition of the organisms depicted within this above image.



The next step was boiling the dawgz in front of their friends. The process here is scientific and exact. Hot Diggity and Hot Dog are no rookies in hot dog art. Once this is done, we can peep the final product.

### Conclusion

The hot dog art came out looking amazing! This is truly a thought provoking and sensational idea. Thank you Hot Diggity and Hot Dog for making this a reality.

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# **This has been The Sensationalist: #8**

"The masterpiece of a true artist is his life"