This web page is the first in an introductory section that explains what meaningness is, and why you might want to read a book about it.

Every page in the book has a navigation box at the bottom. In this one, you can see the several web pages that make up the introduction.

You might like to read the "general explanation" in the navigation box now, too. Then you can go on to the next page.

An appetizer: purpose

Let's start this book in the middle. The main course is a ways off, and I want to give you a taste now.

Let's talk about *purpose*. (Purpose is one of the dimensions of meaningness discussed in this book.)

Especially at turning points in life, people ask questions like:

- Is there any purpose at all in living? Or is everything completely pointless?
- What am I supposed to do?
- How can I choose among the many ways I could spend the rest of my life?
- Does everyone's life have the same purpose, or does everyone have their own?
- Where does purpose come from? Does it have some ultimate source, or is it just a personal invention?

Various religions, philosophies, and systems claim to have answers. Some are complicated, and they all seem quite different. When you strip away the details, though, there are only a half dozen fundamental answers. Each is appealing in its own way, but also problematic. Understanding clearly what is right and wrong about each approach can resolve the underlying problem.

Let's go through these alternatives briefly. I will explain each one in detail in the middle part of the book.

Five confused attitudes to purpose

> Everything has a fixed purpose, given by some sort of fundamental ordering principle of the universe. (This might be God, or Fate, or the Cosmic Plan, or something.) Humans too have a specific role to play in the proper order of the universe.

This is the stance of eternalism. It may be comfortable. If you just follow the eternal law, everything will come out right. Unfortunately, it often seems that much of life has no purpose. At any rate, you cannot figure out what it is supposed to be. Priests or other authority figures claim to know what the cosmic purposes are, but their advice often seems wrong for particular situations.

For these reasons, even people who are explicitly committed to eternalism generally fall into other stances at times.

> Nothing has any purpose. Life is meaningless. Any purposes you imagine you have are illusions, errors, or lies.

This is the stance of nihilism. It appears quite logical. It might seem to follow naturally from some scientific facts: everything is made of subatomic particles; they certainly don't have purposes; and you can't get purpose by glomming together a bunch of purposeless bits.

It is easy to fall into nihilism in moments of despair; but, fortunately, it is difficult to maintain, and hardly anyone holds it for long. Nevertheless, the seemingly compelling logic of nihilism needs an answer. It turns out that it is quite wrong, as a matter again of science and logic. But because that is not obvious, three other stances try (and fail) to find a middle way between eternalism and nihilism.

> The supposed cosmic purposes are doubtful at best, but obviously, people do have goals. There are human purposes no one can seriously doubt: survival, health, sex, romance, fame, power, enjoyable experiences, children, beautiful things. Realistically, those are what everyone pursues anyway. You might as well drop the hypocritical pretense of "higher" purposes and go for what you really want.

This is the stance of materialism. Realistically, most people adopt this stance much of the time. However, at times everyone *does* recognize the value of altruistic and creative purposes, which this stance rejects. Moreover, most recognize that materialism is an endless treadmill: the enjoyment of new goodies wears off quickly, and then you are left craving the next, better thing.

> You can't take it with you. After you are dead, it is meaningless how many toys you had. What matters is how you live your life: whether you create something of beauty or value for others. You have unique capabilities to improve the world, and it's your responsibility to find and act on your personal gift.

This is the stance of mission. The problem is that no one actually has a "unique personal gift." God does not have plans for us. People waste a lot of time and effort trying to find "their purpose in life," and are miserable when they fail. Besides that, rejecting material purposes causes you to overlook genuine opportunities for enjoyment and satisfaction.

> Since the universe (or God) does not supply us with purposes, they are human creations. Mostly people mindlessly adopt purposes that are handed to them by society. You need to throw those off, and choose your own purposes, as an act of creative will.

This is the stance of *existentialism*.[1] It is based on the assumption that if purposes are not objective, or externally given, they must be subjective, or internally created. Existentialism holds out hope for freedom. But it is not actually possible to create your own purposes. Choosing at random would be pointless, and impossible; and what *purely* personal basis could you have for choosing one purpose over another?

Resolving confusion

Each of these confused stances treats meaning as fixed by an external force, or denies meaning or some aspect of it.

The central message of this book is that meaning is real (and cannot be denied), but is fluid (so it cannot be fixed). It is neither objective (given by God) nor subjective (chosen by individuals).

The book offers resolutions to problems of meaning that avoid denial, fixation, and the impossibility of total self-determination. These resolutions are non-obvious, and sometimes unattractive; but they are workable in ways the alternatives are not.

1. 1.Actually, it is more-or-less what existentialists called "authenticity." Using that term would be confusing, because existentialist "authenticity" hasn't got all that much to do with the everyday sense of the word.

37 Comments

Eternalism and *nihilism* are the simplest, and most extreme, stances toward meaningness.

- Eternalism says that everything has a definite, true meaning.
- Nihilism says that nothing really means anything.

Both these stances are wrong, factually. They are also unworkable, in their implications for living.

However, almost everyone falls into them at times, triggered by particular contexts. Each stance is based on genuine insights, and a powerful, emotionally appealing pattern of thinking. They also can seem to be the only possible alternatives, so we are forced into one by the repulsive qualities of the other.

Understanding the logic of eternalism and nihilism, and the resolution of the fundamental problem they address, is key to unlocking the material covered in this book. Because they are simple and extreme, the logic of these two stances is particularly clear. The other confused stances arise mainly as failing attempts to find some compromise between them.

This page is a brief introduction to eternalism, nihilism, and the third possibility that resolves them. I cover the same topics in much greater detail later in the book.

Eternalism and its discontents

Kitschy eternalism easily turns to vengeful self-righteousness

Eternalism and nihilism are both responses to the ambiguity of meaningness. In personal experience, meanings seem to resist focus, shift, and come and go. Moreover, people disagree about what things mean. Perhaps meanings are just a matter of opinion? Meaning is important enough that this uncertainty is emotionally unacceptable.

The strategy of eternalism is to deny the ambiguity. Despite appearances, it says, everything does have a clear and definite meaning, which is not merely subjective. We might not perceive it, or we might mistake it, but it exists.

If meanings are objective, not human creations, it may seem they must come from some ultimate, transcendent source. In many systems, that is a God. In others, it is an abstraction, like Fate or Reason or the Absolute. These are supposed to provide the sole source of meaning, purpose, value, and ethics. I refer to any such source as an eternal ordering principle or Cosmic Plan.

Luckily, there is no eternal ordering principle, so eternalism is false as a fact-claim. Arguments about that never seem to persuade anyone, however. So I take this hyper-atheism for granted, and instead ask: what are our options if eternalism is wrong?

Here it is helpful to understand what works, and doesn't work, about eternalism (and the other confused stances) *emotionally*, rather than in terms of truth.

The appeal of eternalism is that questions of life-purpose and ethics have clear, simple answers. If you act in accordance with this Cosmic Plan, you are guaranteed a good outcome. You can be assured that seeming chaos and senseless misery are all orderly parts of the will of an all-good principle.

Even if it were factually true, eternalism could not deliver on this sales pitch. The compelling emotional logic breaks down in some contexts. In those situations, adopting the eternalist stance makes you think and act in ways that lead to big trouble.

It is difficult to see how the suffering caused by earthquakes could be willed by a benevolent God, or meaningful, or anything other than disasters that *just happened*. The difficulty of maintaining willful blindness to meaninglessness is an obstacle to eternalism. It is hard not to fall into the confused stance that *most* things are God's will, but not the bad bits. Once you admit that *some* things are meaningless, the logic of eternalism starts to fall apart.

To defend against that, you have to hallucinate a pastel-colored Disneyfied world in which everything works out for the best in the end, there is a silver lining in every cloud, everyone is beautiful inside, and all the world needs is love.

Threats to this vision must be destroyed. Eternalist kitsch rapidly switches to self-righteous vengeance when contradicted.

Eternalism also requires you to submit to the Cosmic Plan, to do as it demands, rather than pursuing your own goals. It is often unclear what God wants you to do, and sometimes what he wants is insane and harmful. Then you either do the apparently right thing, which erodes your commitment to his ethical code, or you follow the prescription. If that has the expected bad result, you must blind yourself to that, and harden yourself against the temptation to weaken the code to fit reality.

Much good is left undone because eternalism did not recommend it, and much harm is done in its name. We also lose the freedom of courage: the freedom to risk, to take actions whose results we cannot predict. Armored eternalism condemns such creativity.

Nihilism and its discontents

> Nihilism comes out red and black: rage and depression
> Official nihilist flag

Nihilism starts from the intelligent recognition that eternalism is false and unworkable. Most events are meaningless; meaning is not objective; there is no Cosmic Plan.

Nihilism then simply inverts the core claim of eternalism: it says everything is really meaningless. Seeming meanings are illusory or arbitrary or subjective, and therefore unreal or unimportant.

This stance is unworkable. Meaning is obvious everywhere, and it takes elaborate intellectualization to explain it away. Attempting to live without significance, purpose, or value leads to rage, anguish, alienation, depression, and exhaustion.

Kitsch is worthy of contempt, but—through fear of being duped again—we extend contempt beyond kitsch to anything that affirms meaning. This makes defiant nihilism actively hostile to more-or-less everything, but particularly beauty, virtue, kindness, and whatever else makes life worth living.

Eternalism blinds us by a simple effort of will, or faith. Such simple stupidity is insufficient for nihilism: it is not possible to use mere force to fool ourselves that there is no meaning in the world. Instead, nihilism uses intelligence against itself to produce stupidity. Somehow meaning must be explained away by intellectual sleight-of-hand. A theory is needed that can distract us from the obvious. This theory has to get complicated quickly in order to be sufficiently confusing, or so brilliantly insightful as to dazzle us into submission. This intellectual stupidity masquerades as intelligence.

Denying meaning blinds one to beauty, making all reality dull gray. Denying purpose produces paralysis, with no possibility of choice and so no action. Denying significance suggests that there is no urgency to do anything about it.

In depression, you recoil from the overwhelming vastness and complexity of reality. You feel lost in space. You put yourself in a box to create comforting limits. Nihilism shuts down emotions to deny passion.

A false dichotomy, and failing compromises

When in the eternalist stance, it may seem that the only alternative is nihilism, and vice versa. Because each has obvious dire faults, we adopt whichever seems less bad in a particular situation. Because one looks worse, we try to stabilize ourselves in the other, declaring allegiance to it and viewing the opposite as the enemy. But this is impossible. Instead, we often squirm back and forth between the two in a sneaky, panicked way. It's common for people to switch between eternalism and nihilism repeatedly in the space of a few minutes. Once you start to see this pattern, and catch yourself doing it, it becomes funny.

An alternate strategy is to try to find a compromise. Without thinking about it carefully, we suppose that the world is somewhat governed by an eternal organizing principle (even if we are staunch atheists), and that the world is also somewhat horribly meaningless (even if we are committed eternalists). Some things, we suppose, have definite meaning, and others are definitely meaningless.

The various "confused stances" discussed later in this book arise in this way. Each is a bargain in which we reluctantly acknowledge meaninglessness in some parts of life, deny it in others, and try to get the world to accept that. But it doesn't; so every compromise causes new trouble, and fails.

The wrong idea underlying all confused stances is that things must be either definitely meaningful or else effectively meaningless. Or, if meaning is not objective, it must be subjective. But these are not the only possibilities.

Completion: meaningness

The complete stance of meaningness resolves the problems of eternalism and nihilism

I have coined the word "meaningness" to express the ambiguous quality of meaningfulness and meaninglessness that we encounter in practice. According to the stance that recognizes meaningness, meaning is real but not definite. It is neither objective nor subjective. It is neither given by an external force nor a human invention.

I call this a "complete stance" because it acknowledges two qualities: nebulosity or indefiniteness, and pattern or regularity. A complete stance does not deny or fixate any aspect of meaningness.

From point of view of the complete stance, eternalism and nihilism are each half right. Eternalism rightly recognizes that the world is meaningful to us, and that it must be accepted as it is. This is the acknowledgement of pattern: the world in all its variety, pain and pleasure alike. Nihilism rightly recognizes that there is no eternal source of meaning, so there is no ultimate basis or necessity for rejecting anything. This is the acceptance of nebulosity: the chaos and contingency of the world, and the recognition that we are free from divine law.

44 Comments

Diogenes of Sinope by Jean-Léon Gérôme

This book is about *meaningness*. "Meaningness" is a word I invented, referring to the quality of being meaningful and/or meaningless.

The word "meaning" has two quite different meanings in English. It can refer to the meaning of symbols, such as words and road signs. This book is not about that kind of meaning.

People also speak of "the meaning of life." That is the sort of meaningness this book is about. So I apply "meaningness" only to the sorts of things one could describe as "deeply meaningful" or "pretty meaningless." The book is about matters such as purpose, ethics, and selfhood.

Meaningness is a quality, not a thing. I don't think there is *a definite meaning* of life. Meaningness is always nebulous: indefinite, uncertain, ambiguous.

The suffix *-ness* constantly reminds one of this nebulosity. I mostly avoid the word "meaning," because it builds in the assumption that something meaning*ful* has one specific meaning. Often, that is wrong.

I use "meaningness" in three closely-related ways, referring to:

  • the quality of being meaningful and/or meaningless
  • the study of, or ideas about, this quality
  • a particular stance toward the quality: the one that acknowledges both meaninglessness and meaningfulness, avoiding both fixation and denial.

It should be clear from context which way I'm using the word in each case.

A curiously missing word

I invented the word "meaningness" because the topic of this book seemed to have no name. There seems to be no -ology or -osophy devoted to it.

There are various -ologies devoted to *meanings*. For example, semantics studies the meanings of words. This book is not about that.

The various dimensions of meaningness *are* discussed in religion and philosophy; but, strangely, the topic as a whole is never addressed.

Neither religion nor philosophy

My approach in this book is non-religious and non-philosophical. It is meant for readers who have rejected religious answers. Those who have figured out that philosophy also lacks answers may be even more intrigued.

It will be obvious that the book is non-religious. It's *anti*-religious to the extent that most religions are eternalist, and rejection of eternalism is one of my main themes. I take atheism as a given; it's barely worth mentioning, much less arguing for.

Less obviously, the book is also non-philosophical, and perhaps even anti-philosophical. It is meant as a practical manual. I hope it is useful to anyone who struggles with questions like "what should I do with my life?" and "how ethical should I be?" and "do I have a special destiny, or is my life going to have no meaning beyond the ordinary?"

Isn't it odd that philosophy has no branch devoted to meaningness? Especially since meaningness is exactly what regular people, who haven't studied philosophy, usually think philosophy is about?

In ancient times, philosophers did ask the big questions of meaningness. (I'm fond of Diogenes, whose picture heads this page.) Nowadays, big questions are considered embarrassingly naive. The proper job of a philosopher is to make tiny technical corrections in esoteric theories that probably have no connection with reality.

In recent philosophical history, existentialism was an exception. It was willing to ask the important questions. It avoided the error of eternalism, by rejecting definite, objective meanings. However, it wrongly supposed that meaningness is merely subjective, and thereby came to an acknowledged nihilistic dead end.

Particular branches of current philosophy address particular dimensions of meaningness. For instance, normative moral philosophy tries to answer some questions about ethics—one dimension of meaningness. Later in the book, I argue that nearly all current ethical theories are either eternalist or nihilist, and therefore wrong. The wrong answers come from asking wrong questions. I will suggest better questions, and beginnings of answers.

20 Comments

Existential suffering

I was inspired to write this book when I saw many of my friends struggling with the question "what is my true purpose in life?"

This struggle makes you miserable. Finding your "true mission" is difficult. It might seem that it ought to be obvious, but my friends seemed to fail repeatedly. There is no pragmatic, straightforward means to discover your mission; you need to use non-ordinary techniques, such as psychotherapy, divination, or dream work. At times they would be excited because they had finally found it—but a month or two later, they realized they had been mistaken. What they had thought was their true mission turned out not to be. Then they would lapse into depression, for months or years, during which they seemed to do nothing much—just surviving. Of course, they said, since they didn't know what they were *supposed* to be doing, it was not surprising that they weren't accomplishing anything.

I think the reason you can't find your mission in life is that there is no such thing. That answer seems unacceptable, though, if there is only one alternative: materialism.

If there is not something I was put on earth to do, perhaps all that's left is to join the rat-race of accumulation and personal gratification? But everyone understands that is unsatisfying: a dead end. We have tried materialism, and seen that it fails. You can pursue money, sex, popularity, and power for a while, but either you find you can't get enough, or it turns to cardboard in your mouth when you do.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't. Some people pursue mission relentlessly; others materialism. Most flip-flop. In any case, these alternatives both produce disappointment, depression, at times anguish.

This is an example of what we could call "existential suffering" or "spiritual suffering." It is suffering due to one's relationship with meaningness. Purpose is one dimension of meaningness.

I believe this kind of suffering is unnecessary. It is caused by wrong attitudes toward meaningness. Those can be replaced with accurate ones, and then you are freed from it.

Of course, most suffering is not existential, or spiritual. Most suffering is practical: concrete circumstances are unsatisfactory. I haven't got much to say about *practical* suffering, except that it often has practical solutions. *Spiritual* suffering is eradicated by replacing supposedly-spiritual problems (like "what is my life purpose?") with practical ones—which you may be able to make progress on.

Mission and materialism are not the only possibilities. You can, instead, do things that you enjoy *and* that are useful to others.

"But how do I know *what* to dedicate my life to?" Wrong question… a good question to ask instead is "What is something I can do now that will be both enjoyable and useful?" That's a practical problem. You can find answers without using religious or therapeutic voodoo.

It's an unattractive question, however. "What is my true mission in life?" promises that if only you can find the answer, and you throw your whole self into your mission, you will be a very special person. Along the way, you will have certainty, and when you die, you will die justified.

"What's something useful and enjoyable I can do now?" prompts the answer "Who cares—so what?" Mere usefulness and enjoyability doesn't sound *good enough*. This "complete stance"—of enjoyable usefulness—is emotionally unattractive at first. Once accepted, though, it does eliminate the anguish of an existential dilemma. If you can let go of the grandiosity that leads you to imagine that some *special task* awaits you, *and* the false hope that getting enough of what you want would make life satisfactory, you can be useful and enjoy yourself. That letting-go takes some doing; I will suggest ways to go about it.

This book addresses a series of dilemmas of this sort. I call them "dimensions of meaningness." Each dimension has a limited number of possible approaches, or "stances."

The commonly available confused stances are each unworkable, because they are based on misunderstandings of how meaning works. For example, it is easy to waste a huge amount of emotional energy trying to be special or ordinary; to while your life away in mindless conformity or unrealistic rebellion; to play the victim or fail when you attempt to take total responsibility for your world. Adopting those stances makes you miserable.

For each dimension, I suggest an uncommon, alternative stance that resolves the misunderstanding, and turns a spiritual problem into a practical one.

"Stances" are simple patterns of thinking and feeling about meaningness.

This part of the book explains what stances are and how they work in general.

The main part of *Meaningness* examines specific stances in detail.

Stances trump systems

Mostly, people *think about thinking about* meaning in terms of *systems*. (By "systems," I mean religions, philosophies, political ideologies, psychological frameworks, and so on.) But I think that is not how we *actually think about* meaningness.

When I say "think about thinking about," I mean that if you ask "How do you think about questions of meaning, value, purpose, or ethics," the answer is something like "I'm a Christian / existentialist / progressive / Jungian." Or more likely, nowadays when few people want to commit to a single system, they may mention several.

It seems to me that this is a mistake. In practice, when we actually need to make decisions, we do it mainly on the basis of stances, not systems.

Stances are simple, compelling patterns of thinking and feelings concerning meaningness. For example: "I'm an ordinary guy," or "the only real purpose in life is to squeeze as much pleasure out of it as you can before you die," or "good people follow the rules," or "everyone is responsible for their personal reality."

Whatever system, or systems, someone believes in, they probably often adopt stances that contradict it. For example, Christians, in everyday life, often act on the basis of materialism. (I have never been a Christian, but I know this by reading books by Christian pastors, who say this is a big problem.) Progressives also fall into materialism—another contradiction. Many professed Christians say that "all is one, really"—the stance of monism—which goes against the central teaching of Christianity.

Systems are big, complicated things with lots of details you are supposed to believe and do. Systems have salespeople, who argue passionately in their favor.

Stances are very simple, and don't require any specific beliefs or practices. No one explicitly promotes them. You pick them up automatically from our cultural "thought soup." They are the ways people talk about meaning in soap operas and cafes.

Confused stances are insidious, because they are unnoticed. Because no one argues for them, no one argues against them. They are memes, mental viruses that people propagate by talking, without awareness of them.

Systems *can* help stabilize particular stances. Christianity, for instance, tries to stabilize eternalism—the idea that everything has a definite meaning given by God. Its detailed ideology provides support for this idea. If you are Christian and wobbling out of eternalism, it provides things to say to yourself to counteract that.

This works only to a limited extent. The experience of Christians is that "everyone falls into temptation." That is not only the temptation of unethical actions—more seriously, it is acting on the basis of stances that contradict the religion's core teachings.

12 Comments

Unstable rock formation

Image courtesy Berkeley Robinson

In times of crisis, longing, or doubt, one is likely to express one's feelings to friends somewhat like this:

> A lot of the time I don't know what I should be doing. I mean, regular life is pretty meaningless, isn't it? I know I must have been put on earth for some reason. I'm an artist, really. I'm not one of those mindless drones who sleepwalks through life. I can see what's real; that's the artist's job. Discover yourself, discover reality. But I'm not sure what my artistic medium is meant to be.
>
> Life basically just sucks, mostly. It seems like there has to be a better way; we can't be meant to be miserable all the time. There has to be some ultimate purpose to existence.
>
> I guess I do believe in God. I mean, maybe not as some guy up in Heaven, but something way bigger than us. Stuff doesn't just happen; there has to be a reason for things. I mean, ultimately, it's all one, isn't it? I guess you could say I'm spiritual, sort of, but not religious. Organized religion is stupid. It's all phony niceness. Real life isn't like that. People walk all over you if you are too nice. You have to look out for yourself.
>
> A lot of the time I think, OK, I'll do a regular job, I can fit in, I can make a steady salary instead of being a starving artist. I've done that, you know? But the corporate world is all rigged against you. You can't get ahead. We should sweep that away and create a just society, one that works for real people, not the greedy CEOs and politicians. They are the ones making war and polluting the earth and stuff.
>
> I want to make the world a better place. I think most people do. I've got some friends who are political, you know, trying to change things. But I don't see that they are going to make any difference. And anyway, in the long run, what difference could it make? In a hundred years, we're all dead, and no one's going to care. Might as well live for the moment, you know!

Because the confused stances fail to match reality, they are all unstable. As mind-states, they come and go. We flip-flop between them.

The speaker in the monologue above goes through a dozen stances in a few minutes: nihilism, mission, true self, specialness, eternalism, monism, materialism, reasonable respectability, victim-think, romantic rebellion, and back to mission and materialism again. (You might like to re-read it and pick these out.)

This invented speech may be somewhat exaggerated; usually stances persist a little longer, and it would be unusual to get through so many in a single moan-session. (He sounds like he might have ingested some substance that makes mental states less stable.) But I have often listened

sympathetically as a friend in crisis has gone through several contradictory stances in an hour or so.

Because we aren't aware of stances at all, we don't notice this happening. We don't see how dramatically we contradict ourselves.

Once you are aware of relating to meaningness in terms of such stances, you can catch yourself (and your friends) sliding from one to another like this. The flip-flopping is often accompanied by anxiety, which can produce rebellious negativity or fake sweetness. Those are clues you are caught up in a confused stance. Stances allied to nihilism come with defiant hostility, and those allied to eternalism make you sound like a Hallmark greeting card.

Each confused stance tends to lead to one of a small number of following stances. Each stance has a logic that fails as you pursue it. As that becomes obvious, there is a natural next thought that slides you into a following stance without noticing.

For example, in the stance of respectability, it makes sense to have an ordinary job and fit in. But this involves cutting off your creativity, which is unacceptable. Recognizing this, you may move to the stance of victim-think, if you feel coerced into conformity. That makes you angry, and you think of forcibly changing conditions, in an unrealistic way: the stance of romantic rebellion.

This instability is one reason stances trump systems. No matter how determined you are to stick to a system, the stances that support it will slide out from under you.

Later in the book, I discuss each of the stances in detail, and as part of that I look at the logic that can lead from each to others. That lets you anticipate the wrong moves your thinking is likely to make, and helps counter them.

The antidotes to this whole process are the complete stances. Unfortunately, they too are unstable. They are unstable not because they fail to fit reality, but because they don't offer the emotional pay-offs the confused stances do.

Once one has decided that the confused stances are unworkable, and that the complete stances are accurate, one can work toward stabilizing the complete ones.

Also, one can work on further destabilizing the confused stances, so they do not persist. Simply recognizing them, and seeing the logic of how they flop from one to the next, is one way to do that.

7 Comments

Clouds and fields: nebulosity and pattern

"Nebulosity" means "cloud-like-ness." Meaningness is cloud-like. It is real, but impossible to completely pin down.

Nebulosity is the key to understanding confusions about meaningness. That is a central point of this book.

Cloud-like

"Nebulosity" refers to the insubstantial, amorphous, non-separable, transient, ambiguous nature of meaningness.[1]

- From a distance, clouds can look solid; close-up they are mere fog, which can even be so thin it becomes invisible when you enter it.
- Clouds often have vague boundaries and no particular shape.
- It can be impossible to say where one cloud ends and another begins; whether two bits of cloud are connected or not; or to count the number of clouds in a section of the sky.
- If you watch a cloud for a few minutes, it may change shape and size, or evaporate into nothing. But it is impossible to find an exact moment at which it ceases to exist.
- It can be impossible to say even whether there is a cloud in a particular place, or not.

Meanings behave in these ways, too.

The nebulosity of meaningness

"Meaning" can apply to many things: words, artworks, or "life," for example. The meanings even of words can never be fully specified. To varying degrees, they are ambiguous. Art is more extensively indefinite. The matters that might be called "spiritual"—which are major topics in this book—are still more nebulous.

As an easy middling case, let's consider the nebulosity of the meaning of an artwork, such as a piece of instrumental music:

- When you think of the work as a whole, its meaningfulness can seem quite solid. But when listening to it, you cannot say "this bit means this, and that bit means that." The meaning becomes thin and wispy, in a sense.
- It is very difficult to say anything about *what* instrumental music means—even when you are sure it is highly meaningful.
- Music comes in separate pieces (such as songs), maybe with separate meanings. But life does not come in well-defined chunks. Life-meanings are not clearly separable; they flow or shade into each other.
- What an artwork means can change over time. Some songs that were tremendously meaningful when I was fifteen seem quite meaningless now. The meaning of the carvings of the Rapanui people of Easter Island is mostly permanently lost.
- Meaningfulness and meaninglessness also shade into each other. It can be impossible to say whether something has meaning or not.

People often disagree about meanings. Sometimes one person is right and the other wrong. However, often the difficulty is not that we don't know what the true meaning is, but that it is *inherently* ambiguous. It is a feature of reality, not of knowledge. As we will see later, meaningness is not objective—but it is not *sub*jective, either.

Nebulosity is unwelcome

The nebulosity of meaningness causes various problems: practical, social, and psychological. (Much of this book describes such problems.) Often, people would like to get rid of nebulosity, or pretend that it is not there.

Confused stances are attitudes to meaningness that refuse to acknowledge nebulosity. One strategy is to fixate meanings, attempting to deny their nebulosity by trying to make them solid,

eternal, and unambiguous. Another is to deny meaningfulness altogether, or to say that it is not important, or cannot be known.

Because meaningness is both nebulous and real, these confused stances fail, and cause new, worse problems.

Complete stances acknowledge nebulosity, and its inseparable partner, pattern.

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1. 1.I will not give a precise definition of "nebulosity" here. Instead, I present analogies. I apologize if its meaning seems frustratingly nebulous at this point. Better understanding of the term should emerge gradually as we go along in the book.

21 Comments

Clouds with pattern

On the previous page, I explained that meanings, like clouds, are *nebulous:* insubstantial, amorphous, non-separable, transient, ambiguous. Meanings are also more or less *patterned:* reliable, clear, distinct, enduring, and definite.

Nebulosity and pattern might seem to contradict each other, but almost always they *come together*. Meaning is usually nebulous to some extent, and patterned to some extent.

It can be hard to accept that meaningness is a matter of degree, not either/or. This book is about the confusions that come from assuming meaning must be either totally patterned, or entirely non-existent.

Seeing pattern

Pattern is what makes the world interpretable—what makes it make sense. Perceiving pattern is needed for all effective action—whether you are a person or a bug. Our brains and senses evolved largely to find the patterns that make survival and reproduction possible.

Patterns are everywhere in our experience. The material world is full of patterns: shapes, processes, connections, similarities and differences. Society, culture, thought, and concepts are also patterned.

Since this book is about meaningness, patterns of meaning are particularly relevant.

Being mistaken about pattern

Cloud that looks like a submarine. Or maybe a shark wearing a hat. Or something.

Submarine. Or maybe a shark with a big hat. Or something.
(Wikipedia illustration of pareidolia.)

Psychological research shows that people frequently perceive patterns that are not actually there. The brain automatically interprets even completely random events as meaningful. This tendency is called "patternicity" or "apophenia".

Extreme apophenia is a symptom of psychosis, hallucinogenic drugs, and much of religious experience. But mild examples are universal. It is impossible *not* to see faces where there are none.

It is also possible, and common, to miss patterns that do exist. (Science, for instance, could be described as a search for non-obvious patterns.)

The brain, however, seems to be wired to give patterns the benefit of the doubt. It would rather make the mistake of seeing non-existent patterns than of rejecting real ones. (Maybe this is because, during evolution, missing real, dangerous patterns was worse than overreacting to imaginary ones.)

Patternicity, eternalism, and nihilism

GODBUNNY IS WATCHING YOU

The natural tendency to see meaningful patterns, even where there are none, makes humans vulnerable to eternalism. Eternalism is the stance that *everything is meaningful*. It is a cognitive form of apophenia (patternicity).

Eternalism is the core stance of most religions. Mistaken perceptions of meanings are a key to the psychology of religion. (A crude but amusing and particularly clear example is the veneration of supposed religious imagery miraculously arising in random shapes, such as the famous grilled cheese sandwich whose splotches looked like the Virgin Mary's face.)

The brain's unwillingness to overlook possible patterns is part of what makes nihilism less common than eternalism. Nihilism is the rejection of all meaning. Although nearly everyone sometimes adopts nihilism momentarily, it is difficult to maintain for long. Meaningful patterns are too obvious.

10 Comments

Next Page: Fixation and denial →

Standing on a raft floating in open ocean

There are two fundamental ways to try to reject nebulosity: by *fixating* or *denying* meaningness.

Fixation

Fixation is the strategy of insisting that meanings are clear, definite, permanent, discrete, and objectively certain.

Meaningness is like open ocean: vast, unpredictable, always in motion.[1] When meaningness appears murky, chaotic, and disputable, fixation is a natural response.

In fixation, you cling to relatively solid fragments of meaningness and try to lash them together into a raft. Standing shakily on a bundle of splinters, you visualize grass beneath your feet, and try not to feel the rocking of the sea. "Here we are on dry land," you proclaim. "Here we will build a fortress to keep us safe from the chaos of uncertainty."

You might as well try to build your castle on a cloud. Since meaningness *is* inherently nebulous, it cannot work. Whenever an unusually big wave comes along, it tips you off your raft and back in the sea. Later in this book, in the eternalism chapter, we'll look in detail at common ways you

may respond to these inevitable failures. Among these are sentimentality and self-righteous aggression.

Another common reaction: when your own attempts at fixation fail, you may invoke an eternal ordering principle, such as God. These are invented as omnipotent, external forces that fixate meaningness. "God works in mysterious ways. This senseless horror is all part of the Cosmic Plan, even though we cannot understand why."

Denial

Denial is the strategy of refusing to admit that meaningness exists, or insisting that it is unimportant, for example because it is purely subjective.

When it is obvious that certainty is impossible, that meanings can never be established objectively, that ultimately there is nothing to stand on, denial is a natural response. Meaningness seems too fickle to be relied on. Better to abandon it altogether. Better to try to live in the black emptiness of outer space.

Attempts at denial also always fail, when the pattern of meaningness becomes obvious. No matter how far you are from a planet, the sky is spangled by pinpoint lights of distant stars.

Again, in the nihilism chapter, we'll investigate common responses to failures of denial. These include defiant rage, intellectualization, and depression.

Mirror images

Fixation and denial are both rejections of nebulosity; and in a sense they are the *same* rejection. Each fixation is also a denial, and vice versa. Each fixation denies the opposite of what it fixates.

For example, the stance of ethical eternalism fixates a moral code; but that implies denying ethical ambiguity and freedom. Conversely, ethical nihilism denies all ethical imperatives, which implies fixating ethical uncertainty.

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1. 1.I have taken this metaphor from Will Buckingham's remarkable book *Finding Our Sea-Legs: Ethics, Experience and the Ocean of Stories*, about the failure of ethical eternalism.

15 Comments

Confused stances come in mirror-image pairs

Confused stances are strategies for avoiding accepting nebulosity. Each confused stance applies the basic methods of fixation and denial to different aspects of meaningness.

This means that these wrong ideas come in mirror-image pairs. In each pair, one stance fixates what the other denies, and vice versa.

Mirror images

Eternalism and nihilism are the simplest confused stances. Eternalism attempts to fixate *all* meaningness. Nihilism attempts to deny all meaningness.

Because meaningness is always both nebulous and patterned, eternalism and nihilism both always fail.

Each of the other confused stances denies some aspect of meaningness and fixates another.[1] Therefore, they are attempts at compromise between eternalism and nihilism. These increasingly complicated compromises also fail; every dimension of meaningness is both nebulous and patterned.

As a simple example, the stance of true self fixates personal continuity. It insists that there is a mental thing within us that is stable, well-defined, and fully separate: the self. It denies personal nebulosity: the inaccessibility, incoherence, variability, transience, and patchwork quality of this supposed self. The mirror-image stance of no-self fixates personal discontinuity. It denies the pattern of the self: the personality quirks, projects, memories, and relationships that make up an individual.

As a more complicated example, the stances of mission and materialism both fixate personal purpose. However, they agree that purposes can be divided into "eternal" and "mundane" ones. Mission then fixates eternal purposes and denies mundane ones. Materialism fixates mundane purposes and denies eternal ones.

Each of these pairs polarizes meaningness into two unworkable extremes. Because both sides of the polarity refuse to recognize nebulosity (in opposite ways) both fail. Surely the truth lies somewhere in-between? Unfortunately, no: finding the middle ground cannot resolve these dilemmas.

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1. 1.One can say that even eternalism and nihilism do this, in a sense. Eternalism attempts to deny meaninglessness, and nihilism attempts to fixate it.

2 Comments

No middle way

Wrong ideas about meaningness show up as pairs of polarized, opposite stances. These appear to be extreme views. Surely the truth can be found somewhere between?

Unfortunately, no. The error underlying all confused stances is their refusal to allow nebulosity. Even if some middle ground could be found, it too would reject nebulosity, and so would also be unworkable.

In fact, it's usually impossible to find a "middle" position anyway. In each pair of confused stances, one categorically denies what the other fixates.

For instance, the stance of true self holds that there is a mysterious essence of the person; the stance of selflessness holds that there is none. The reality of selfness might be described as "between" these extremes, once it is found. But "in the middle" is not a helpful hint for where to look. What is halfway between existence and non-existence?[1]

To resolve confusions about meaningness, the helpful instruction is to head in the direction of nebulosity. Since both true self and selflessness are evasions of nebulosity, that direction is at right angles to the line between them.

Muddled middles

Some confused stances do arise as attempts at compromise, or at balancing or synthesizing two extremes. I call these "muddled middles."

Here's an example.

- The stance of mission holds that only "higher" purposes are really meaningful. Its emotional payoff is that you get to feel morally superior and special for pursuing only lofty goals. Its cost is a failure to engage with the mundane aspects of life. Those aspects can be highly satisfying, and can become messy problems for yourself and others if neglected.
- The mirror-image stance, materialism, holds that only "mundane" purposes are really meaningful. Its emotional payoff is the simplicity and directness of pursuing your own pleasures. Its cost is losing the benefits of higher purposes, for oneself and others.
- The muddled middle mingles materialism and mission, and fixates both of them. It is the attempt to satisfy both higher and mundane purposes simultaneously. For example, you might pursue fame leading a media campaign to save starving Africans, or pursue groupies and a lucrative recording contract as an "alternative" "rebellious" musician.

In fact, most motivations are mixed. When pursuing higher purposes, one usually hopes for some mundane reward, even if it is only a casual compliment from a friend. This is often sleazy and covert. Authentic compassion and creativity are possible; but there is generally a self-aggrandizing tendency operating at the same time.

This muddled middle preserves both the self-righteous justification of mission and the self-indulgent, self-protective grasping of materialism. So it combines the emotional payoffs of its parent stances. But it also combines their costs. It tends to lose the uncomplicated enjoyment-value of animal satisfaction (because you have to pretend that is not what you seek), and also the unselfconscious compassionate joy of accomplishing higher purposes (because you have subordinated those to a materialist agenda).

The complete stance that resolves the mission-materialism polarity also recognizes both higher and mundane purposes. However, it allows both to be nebulous. It strips both sorts of purposes of their selfish emotional payoffs, and also avoids the unnecessary emotional costs of both mission and materialism.

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1. 1.Buddhism often speaks of a "middle way" between extremes, including the extremes of existence and non-existence. Although this can be useful when understood in specific Buddhist contexts, it seems unhelpful and potentially confusing elsewhere. For instance, in Western thought, based in Christianity and Ancient Greek philosophy, *moderation in all things* is often recommended. I am not a great fan of moderation; that is not the resolution I recommend in this book. The "complete stance" I advocate accepts and incorporates extremes. In this, my approach is more similar to those of Nietzsche and Vajrayana Buddhism than to the Western or Buddhist mainstreams.

25 Comments

Clouds are not so bad, after all..

The core of this book is a method for resolving confusions about meaningness.

The method can be applied to many sorts of issues. Any topic that involves meaning and meaninglessness I call a "dimension of meaningness." (These include, for instance, ethics, purpose, and value.)

For any dimension, the method asks:

- How does nebulosity affect the subject? That is, what makes the issue ambiguous, uncertain, changeable, or impossible to categorize?
- Why is this nebulosity unattractive? What negative emotions does it provoke?
- How are fixation and denial used to avoid acknowledging nebulosity? These two strategies try to nail the issue in place, or deny that it exists at all. They produce pairs of "confused stances," or wrong attitudes to the subject. Why are fixation and denial appealing in this area?
- How do fixation and denial fail? (You cannot nail clouds down, but they are still real.) What are the consequences of this failure?
- Consider the possibility that the nebulosity is unavoidable. This means abandoning fixation and denial. It produces the "complete stance" for this dimension of meaningness. What are the consequences of the complete stance?
- Typically, the complete stance is more accurate and helpful than the confused ones, but it seems less attractive. How can one overcome this emotional barrier, in order to adopt the complete stance?

This explanation may seem conceptual and abstract at this point. *Meaningness* is meant to be useful in everyday life practice. Most of it consists of detailed applications of the method to different dimensions of meaningness.

As we go along, I hope you will gain an intuitive, concrete understanding of the method, through reading examples. Also, we will revisit it with more precision and detail later in the book, when additional relevant concepts will be available.

1 Comment

G.W.F. Hegel

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

You might misinterpret the method of resolution I presented on the last page as a "general dialectic," or means of resolving all false oppositions.

(If you didn't think that, or if the last sentence made no sense, skip this page. It's for logic geeks only.)

General dialectics are a big deal in Continental philosophy, particularly in German Idealism. They are popularly associated particularly with Hegel. The system is usually described in terms of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.[1]

The method of resolution used in this book critically involves the concept of nebulosity. It proceeds by eliminating mistaken fixations and denials of nebulosity. This method cannot resolve false oppositions in which rejection of nebulosity is not the underlying problem.

It is possible that this method could be seen as an *instance* of some general dialectical system. I would not find that interesting. It is nebulosity, not dialectic, that interests me.

Dialectics are also a big deal in Buddhist philosophy. The central example is Nagarjuña's explanation of emptiness in terms of "not existence, non-existence, both, or neither."

There is probably some sort of connection between nebulosity and emptiness. However, I think non-existence is mostly a red herring, and Nagarjuña's four-fold logic has no obvious similarity with the method I present.

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1. 1.According to the Wikipedia, Hegel himself had a different formulation.

Clouds taste metallic

Earlier, I observed that misunderstanding meaningness makes many miserable. I suggest that shifting from confused stances to complete stances can eliminate this "spiritual" suffering.

That is the point of this book. I hope it can help accomplish a positive transformation of your experience of meaningness. It is not meant to be an academic, philosophical analysis.

A couple pages back, I described a method for resolving confusions about meaningness. That explanation may have seemed dry and abstract.

On this page, I sketch one example. Although the discussion here is brief, I hope it is concrete enough that you begin to see how and why the method might work to replace unnecessary misery with joy.

An example: ethics

Let's look at the dimension of *ethics*. Here are brief answers to the series of questions asked in the method of resolution.

(I will give much more detailed answers later in the book. I've also written more about this approach to ethics elsewhere.)

How does nebulosity manifest in ethics?

We are often faced with moral dilemmas, in which it is unclear what we should do. Usually these are situations in which different ethical norms conflict. For example, one should usually be truthful, but sometimes telling the truth would result in harm.

There doesn't seem to be any general way of resolving such problems. Similar situations often seem to have dissimilar ethical implications; right action seems to have unlimited dependence on the context.

Why is this unattractive?

We want to do the right thing, but don't always know what that is. This uncertainty can provoke intense anxiety.

Often we do harm that later we bitterly regret, and punish ourselves accordingly. However, we may not see how we could have avoided it, given ethical uncertainty.

How are fixation and denial used to avoid acknowledging the nebulosity of ethics?

One can try to fixate ethics by formulating totalitarian ethical codes that are supposed to tell you what to do in every situation. This is attractive because it suggests that it is possible to avoid ever being morally culpable—so long as you always follow the code.

Or, one can deny that ethics are meaningful at all, and refuse to take moral responsibility for your actions. This is another way of avoiding culpability.

How do these confused stances fail?

Ethical situations are unboundedly complex and variable. Any finite, fixed set of rules will sometimes require actions that are obviously harmful, for no reason beyond "that's the rule." In such cases, you are faced with the horrible choice of violating rules you believed sacred, or creating needless suffering by obeying them.

A fixed code also will fail to promote some beneficial actions in situations that present unusual opportunities.

Refusing to acknowledge ethical imperatives can sometimes work to one's personal advantage. Obviously, it tends to harm others, though.

It also seems that humans are incapable of consistent ethical nihilism. Humans evolved to be ethical; that is just how our brains work. It's usually impossible to avoid all shame and guilt. Even sociopaths, whose brains lack ethical function, do not often seem to have satisfactory lives.

What if ethics were unavoidably nebulous?

This opens the possibility of ethical responsiveness coupled with ethical freedom.

If ethics are unavoidably nebulous, in many situations there is no one "right thing" to do. Instead, there are alternatives with subtle trade-offs. We have the duty to pay close attention to the details, while also maintaining openness to the situation as a whole.

We also often have the privilege of choice. Where there is no definite right answer, we are free. We can choose at will. We also have room for creative improvisation: finding ethical solutions that are not applications of general principles.

This stance requires letting go of the fantasy that we could always avoid culpability. We have to accept that, inevitably, we will sometimes make ethical mistakes.

Regretting ethical mistakes makes us less likely to repeat them. However, acknowledging their inevitability means that we can let go of ethical anxiety. Ethical maturity is measured by the ability to find good-enough solutions to ethical problems, not by the amount you punish yourself.

What helps adopt the complete stance?

We need to *destabilize* the confused stances, by understanding their defects, and *stabilize* the complete one, by understanding its advantages.

In this case, confusion is destabilized by understanding that it is not feasible to achieve blamelessness, either by following the rules or by denying ethics altogether. Both approaches inevitably cause needless harm to oneself and others.

The complete stance is stabilized by understanding that ethical freedom can be a source of benevolent joy, not mean-spirited selfishness. It is stabilized by understanding that ethical responsiveness eliminates anxiety, and is not an intolerable burden of infinite responsibility without control.

5 Comments

Breaking the chain of confusion

Mistaken ideas about meaningness inhibit creativity, constrict your life, and make you miserable. This book is meant as a practical manual for overcoming these confused stances, liberating you from their negative effects. It offers specific antidotes for particular confusions.

Thinking differently

A "stance" is a pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting. Each of the three reinforces the others two, and helps maintain the stance.

Most methods in this book introduce conceptual understandings that change thinking. However, I'll make some suggestions about working with feelings and actions too.

The main method is to become familiar with the thoughts, feelings, and patterns of activity characteristic of each confused stance, so that you notice them as they occur; and then choose to think, feel, and act differently. Simply *remembering* that there is a better alternative—a complete stance—is often most of the battle. However, it's also necessary to understand how and why this alternative is better, and that can take some work. If the complete stances were *obviously* better, no one would adopt the confused ones.

"Accepting nebulosity resolves confusions" sketched the method briefly. The next page explains further, in terms of various "aspects" of each stance. *Meaningness* presents increasingly detailed and complex versions as it goes along.

Similar methods

Cognitive restructuring

Cognitive restructuring is the central method of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Cognitive restructuring is also a practice of "thinking differently," by noticing patterns of dysfunctional, emotion-laden thought, and replacing them with more accurate and functional ones. CBT, like *Meaningness*, suggests that patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior reinforce each other. Interestingly, like my approach, CBT draws on Eastern religion and Western philosophy.

The specific patterns of thinking/feeling/acting CBT works with, called cognitive distortions, have almost no overlap with my confused stances. So the method is similar, but the content is mainly quite different. (One point of commonality: CBT aims to overcome "absolutism," perhaps similar to eternalism. In place of absolutism, it promotes "flexibility," perhaps similar to the complete stance's attitude toward nebulosity.)

Unlike CBT, *Meaningness* is not intended as therapy, and is not concerned with psychopathology. However, because the method is similar, the two might be complementary or synergistic. Perhaps *Meaningness* offers CBT practitioners an expanded set of dysfunctional patterns to address; I'm not qualified to say.

Rationalism

Several communities aim to improve normal (non-psychopathological) thinking, using a similar method. They identify common patterns of dysfunctional thought; each can be replaced with a better alternative. Among these communities are the rationalist, skeptical, and critical thinking movements.

In early versions, these movements concentrated on logical fallacies—errors in thinking alone. Increasingly, they have recognized the importance of cognitive biases, many of which involve emotions distorting thought.

The lists of these errors (linked in the previous paragraph) have little overlap with my list of confused stances. It seems likely that rationalism, skepticism, and critical thinking can be synergistic with the *Meaningness* approach. (That is my experience, anyway!) However, rationalism can sometimes slide into eternalism, a dysfunctional, confused stance. I'll discuss later how to avoid that danger.

Recently, insights about cognitive biases have crossed over with CBT, as cognitive bias modification therapy. Maybe a three-way synergy is possible!

Meditation

This book grew partly out of my engagement with Buddhist philosophy. That philosophy is closely related to Buddhist meditation methods. I have found that the two support each other—as Buddhism says.

In meditation, you watch yourself thinking, without interfering. Then you discover *what* you are thinking, and *how*. It comes as a shock to most people to realize that they actually didn't know—and another shock to learn the typical contents of their thoughts.

Because meditation reveals the process and content of your thoughts, it's probably synergistic with any of the three "think differently" methods (*Meaningness*, CBT, and rationalism). And, indeed, meditation is increasingly combined with CBT to create various crossover therapies. There's also considerable interest in meditation in the rationalist community.

According to Buddhist theory, meditation eventually allows you to experience "emptiness," which is closely related to my "nebulosity"; and after that "the nonduality of emptiness and form," which is related to the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern. That inseparability is the hallmark of the complete stances.

Action

Confused stances make you miserable directly; but even worse, they make you take dysfunctional actions that harm yourself and others. Some helpful interventions can replace dysfunctional actions with functional ones. These include both individual activities and social or group practices.

My current (July 2014) plan for this book does not include much material about action, but I'm coming to think it should. So, this may change.

5 Comments

Dancer taking a peculiar stance

Each stance, or basic attitude toward meaningness, is a transient pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting. The *Meaningness* practice involves learning to recognize these patterns. Then you know what stance you are in at any moment, and ways to shift from any confused stance to a complete one.

I describe each stance in terms of a series of *aspects*. This page explains what the aspects are, and how noticing them is useful.

In the main part of this book, I provide a "schematic overview" page for each dimension of meaningness. The overview includes a table, with rows corresponding to the aspects of the different stances for relating to that dimension.

The discussion on this page may seem unhelpfully abstract. It will probably be useful to go back and forth between reading it and looking at an example schematic. You can see one here, covering eternalism and nihilism—the two most basic confused stances.

If you haven't already read my introduction to eternalism and nihilism, it would be good to do that first.

The mistaken metaphysical assumption

A confused stance is based on an underlying mistaken metaphysical assumption. The assumption is usually unthought: not understood, or entirely outside awareness. Typically the assumption draws a distinction that is a false dilemma; so confused stances mainly come in pairs, which share the underlying assumption but take opposite sides of it.

Surfacing the assumption, and seeing how it is wrong, makes it possible to understand and adopt the corresponding complete stance.

What it denies and what it fixates

Each confused stance wrongly denies something about meaningness, and fixates something else. Stances allied with eternalism deny the nebulosity of a dimension of meaningness, and fixate a pattern. Stances allied with nihilism deny the pattern and fixate the dimension's non-existence.

Recognizing how nebulosity and pattern work together moves one into the complete stance for that dimension.

Pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting

When you adopt a stance, a characteristic texture of thinking, feeling, and acting comes with it. The stance makes that way of being seem sensible. Also, that way of being makes the stance seem sensible.

For example, nihilism usually dulls your thinking, makes you feel depressed, and inhibits productivity activity. Likewise, when your brain is fogged, you feel hopeless for whatever reason, or you can't seem to get anything done, nihilism may seem obviously right.

Sales pitch and emotional appeal

The "sales pitch" is a slogan that encapsulates the language used to promote the stance.

A confused stance's emotional appeal is the reason it is attractive. Each confused stance plays to some need for security, excitement, or self-aggrandizement.

Noticing that you are getting sucked in by the emotional promise made by a confused stance, and knowing that it cannot deliver on them, helps free you from it.

The complete stances are, unfortunately, less emotionally appealing. (Otherwise, we'd adopt them easily.) However, they are more realistic.

How a confused stance causes suffering

Confused stances distort experience by fixating and denying particular sorts of meaningness. When these mistaken perceptions collide with reality, emotional pain results.

Each confused stance produces a characteristic pattern of misunderstanding and misery.

Obstacles to maintaining a stance

The confused stances constantly collide with reality. It is impossible not to see this, and impossible not to suffer the consequences. This makes it impossible to remain consistently in a confused stance; they are always unstable.

A confused stance's patterns of collision with reality—the obstacles to maintaining it—are resources for switching into a complete stance.

Unfortunately there are obstacles to adopting the complete stances, as well. Generally, complete stances are conceptually obscure, and appear emotionally unsatisfying.

Likely next stances

Because stances are unstable, we frequently stumble from one to another, without being clearly aware that we are doing this. In fact, all of the confused stances described in this book will be thoroughly familiar to every reader.

When a particular obstacle to maintaining one stance arises, there are typical routes into likely next stances. Knowing this, one can recognize an upcoming transition into a confused stance, and re-direct oneself into a complete stance instead.

Antidotes and counter-thoughts

These are ways of getting yourself out of a confused stance.

Simply recognizing that you are caught in one, and remembering that there is a better alternative, is often most of the battle.

Beyond that, one can notice particular confused patterns, and cut through them with specific counter-thoughts.[1] Counter-thoughts can work in two ways. Some move from a confused stance

to the complete stance. Others destabilize the confused stance, to make it less attractive so that you are more likely to jump to the complete stance spontaneously. (In those cases, though, one needs to guard against simply moving to a different confused stance.)

Intelligent features of a confused stance

Each confused stance is intelligent in some way. If it did not have a powerful logic to it, an almost-truth, we would not get stuck in it. Each approximates a complete stance, which is actually correct.

Noticing how the confused stance you have adopted is *nearly* right is helpful in several ways:

- It avoids "I'm a bad person because I fell into a confused stance again," which is discouraging, and more likely to make you abandon the practice than to continue.
- It lets you see *why* you've adopted it.
- It helps point the way to a complete stance that shares the same accurate insight.
- It is the basis for appropriation—the use of a confused stance to communicate the corresponding complete stance.

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1. 1.This is similar to "cognitive shifting," a psychotherapeutic approach. Apparently its development was influenced by Eastern religion—as *Meaningness* also was.

6 Comments

Adopting a karate stance

A stance is a basic attitude toward meaningness. A stance is a tool for understanding, from which you may act. This pages defines a series of terms that describe ways you can take up such a tool.

Adopting

To *adopt* a stance is to use it, at a particular moment, as a way of addressing a problem of meaningness.

For example, to adopt the stance of materialism means to think about purpose in terms of "mundane" or personal benefit.

As I explained earlier, stances are unstable. Frequently one adopts a stance only for a few seconds or minutes, before abandoning it for another one.

Mostly, people are not aware of the stances they adopt.

Maintaining, committing, rejecting, and stabilizing

To *maintain* a stance is to adopt it continuously for a longer period.

To *commit* means to decide to maintain a stance consistently in the future. For example, you might resolve always to adopt mission as an approach to purpose, rather than materialism.

The various stances that concern a particular dimension of meaningness contradict each other, and are mutually exclusive. Committing to one implies *rejecting* the others. For example, committing to thinking of yourself as ordinary implies rejecting the stances of specialness and nobility.

To *stabilize* a stance means putting in place structures and strategies that support your commitment to it by making it easier to maintain.

Commitment via systems

Although people *actually* think about meaningness in terms of stances, mostly they *think* they think about meaningness in terms of "systems." Systems include religions, philosophies, ideologies, spiritual and psychological frameworks, and so forth.

Because people are mostly not aware of stances, it is somewhat unusual to commit to a stance directly. Instead, people commit to systems, which in turn demand certain stances.

An obvious example: most Western religions require the stance of eternalism. To be a good Christian, you are supposed to adopt eternalism whenever questions of meaningness arise.

Two more examples: some psychological ideologies require the stance of true self; some political ideologies require the stance of romantic rebellion.

Accomplishing

To *accomplish* a stance means that you actually *do* consistently adopt it, every time its dimension of meaningness becomes an issue. For example, accomplishing nihilism would mean that you *always* regard everything as meaningless.

Accomplishing a stance is difficult. Obvious, everyday evidence constantly contradicts all the confused stances. The complete stances are subtle and emotionally unsatisfactory.

In most cases, I think accomplishment is impossible in practice. Human beings are not actually put together in a way that makes it possible to see everything as meaningless. (Or everything as meaningful, as would be required to accomplish eternalism.)

Wavering, antidotes, and resolution

If you have committed to a stance, and have not accomplished it, you must apply effort to adopt it in cases in which it doesn't seem to fit; and you often fail. I call this *wavering*.

Wavering causes emotional and cognitive problems. I explain what these problems are, for each specific stance, in the main part of this book. For complete stances, I show how to overcome the difficulties. For confused stances, I provide antidotes.

Antidotes destabilize a confused stance with patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that reveal its errors and harms, and that guide you toward adopting the corresponding complete stance instead.

Complete stances *resolve* confusions by eliminating the tacit metaphysical assumption that produced them.

Appropriating

Each confused stance, although mistaken and often damaging when adopted, is based on a valuable insight. (Otherwise, it would not be attractive at all.)

For example, monism, the idea that "all is One," is based on the accurate insight that we are not isolated individuals, that there is no hard boundary between self and other, and that things are connected in innumerable ways, many of which we cannot know.

When one adopts a complete stance, the intelligent aspects of confused stances can be *appropriated* as tools. A complete stance is "complete" in that it incorporates the intelligent parts of the opposed confused stances for that dimension of meaningness. From the standpoint of the complete stance, the confused stances (which everyone understands) can be used to communicate the complete insight, and to draw others to it.

For example, although it is not true that "all is One," the language of monism may be useful in explaining that things are non-separate—which is true.

2 Comments

Three silly stances: a hair metal trio

Complex ideologies are based on collections of simple stances: fundamental attitudes toward meaningness. Some stances (addressing different dimensions of meaningness) work together well; others clash. Most systems align with one of three common combinations.

These combinations are:

- Dualist eternalism: everything is given a definite meaning by something separate from you. Christianity and Islam are based on this combination; God is what gives everything meaning.
- Monist eternalism: you, God, and the universe are a single thing, which is definitely meaningful. Advaita Hinduism is monist and eternalist, as is much current pop spirituality.
- Dualist nihilism: we are isolated individuals, wandering in a meaningless universe. Existentialism, postmodernism, and scientism tend to dualist nihilism.

Each of the three primary combinations typically comes with a corresponding collection of secondary stances; I'll get to that in a minute.

The apparent lack of alternatives

Regarding the fundamental questions of meaning—does it exist, and where does it come from?— these three are the only well-known possibilities. I think all three are wrong; this book advocates a fourth combination of stances (about which I'll say something at the end of this page).

Each of the Big Three has serious, obvious defects. However, people often commit to one of them primarily because it looks less bad than the other two.

Understanding this, you can see that much of the rhetoric supporting systems boils down to "less bad":

- "God must exist, because otherwise there is no purpose in living, and you have no way of telling right from wrong."
- "A God who is someone somewhere else cannot end your alienation from other beings. Enlightenment is possible only here, now. Only by *being* God can you overcome the isolation and limitations of material embodiment."
- "You have to admit that everything is meaningless, because we know God is a fairy tale."

No monist nihilism

Considering the two primary axes eternalism/nihilism and monism/dualism, there is a fourth possibility: monist nihilism. That is the view that "all is One, and it is meaningless." Although this is conceptually coherent, it has few (if any) advocates. Apparently it is not emotionally attractive in the way the other combinations are.[1]

So, in practice, monism always implies eternalism, and nihilism always implies dualism. In the rest of this book, I'll often speak simply of "monism" or "nihilism," and you can take the eternalism and dualism for granted.

Other stances in the Big Three combinations

In addition to the four stances to fundamental questions of meaningness, there are stances to more specific dimensions such as purpose, ethics, and the nature of the self. These are commonly folded in with the Big Three combinations when people build ideological systems.

In some cases, the choices are forced. If you think nothing is meaningful (nihilism) then you have to accept that there can be no ethics (ethical nihilism).

More often, the choices of stance toward specific dimensions of meaningness are *logically* independent. For example, both reasonable respectability and romantic rebellion are logically consistent with eternalism.

However, each of the Big Three has a typical *emotional texture*, which may be more or less compatible with other stances. Dualist eternalism generally combines with reasonable respectability, *not* romantic rebellion; that is far more likely to go along with nihilism. Dualist eternalism has meaning coming from some Cosmic Plan, and you had better obey what it says.

Most (if not all) systems are somewhat incoherent, and one system may take opposing stances to different specific cases. The psychological instability of stances reinforces this.

Dualist eternalism: typical combinations

The typical[2] emotional texture of dualist eternalism is *self-righteousness*. You are validated by the eternal ordering principle.

Typically, dualist eternalism combines with:

- Mission: your purpose is to carry out the Cosmic Plan.
- Ethical eternalism: the eternal ordering principle says what is right and wrong.

- Reasonable respectability: society is a reflection of the Cosmic Plan, and you should obey authority.
- Religiosity: the eternal ordering principle says what is sacred and what is profane.

Nihilism: typical combinations

The typical emotional texture of nihilism is *defiant negativity*. It sucks that the universe is meaningless, but you hate (and want to shout down) eternalists who proclaim the lie of meaningfulness.

Typically, nihilism combines with:

- Materialism: since there is no real purpose to life, you might as well get stuff you want.
- Ethical nihilism: ethics are as meaningless as everything else.
- Romantic rebellion: society is an oppressive, meaningless fiction.
- Secularism: nothing is sacred.

Monism: typical combinations

The typical emotional texture of monism is *smug stupidity*. Convinced you are God, you believe you understand everything effortlessly, so you don't need to try to figure anything out.

Typically, monism combines with:

- Mission: your purpose is to realize your Godhood, and then help others realize theirs.
- True self: your essential nature is indivisible from God.
- Total responsibility: as God, you create the entire universe.
- Specialness: as God, you are the only valuable thing in existence.

Complete stances align with each other

This book advocates a fourth combination of stances: the ones I describe as complete.

Its typical emotional texture is *appreciative curiosity*.

Here's how some complete stances align:

- Meaningness: things may be meaningful, meaningless, or may be ambiguously between. It's worth investigating meanings, but you can't always expect answers.
- Participation: there is no one right way of drawing boundaries; things can be connected in many different ways, and can also have no significant connection. Finding unexpected connections and redrawing boundaries is often valuable; so is recognizing irrelevance.
- Intermittently continuing: selfness is valuable and should not be rejected; it can usefully be explored, but it has no essential nature.
- Enjoyable usefulness: purposes are co-created in an appreciative, compassionate dance with the world.
- Ethical responsiveness: ethics are not a matter of personal or cultural choice, but are fluid and have no definite source.

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1. 1.You might enjoy working out some consequences of monist nihilism. If you are a philosophy geek, you might also wonder whether there are any historical figures who fit the category.

2. 2.These textures are tendencies, not absolutes. Some committed dualist eternalists are free from self-righteousness, for instance.

41 Comments

This page is a schematic overview of the main part of the book *Meaningness*. It briefly describes the various stances one can take to each of the dimensions of meaningness.

The meanings of the rows in the tables are explained in "The psychological anatomy of a stance."

Meaning and meaninglessness

Stance	Eternalism	Nihilism	Meaning/ness
Summary	Everything is given a fixed meaning by an eternal ordering principle (Cosmic Plan)	Nothing is really meaningful	Meaning is nebulous, yet patterned; meaningfulness and meaninglessness intermingle
What it denies	Nebulosity; meaninglessness	Pattern; meaningfulness	
What it fixates	Meaning	Meaninglessness	
The sales pitch	You are guaranteed a good outcome if you follow the rules	You don't have to care! Don't get fooled again	Accurate understanding of meaningness allows both freedom and purpose
Emotional appeal	Certainty; understanding; control. Reassurance that if you act in accordance with Cosmic Plan, everything will be well.	Intelligence. Also, nothing means anything, so not getting what you want is not a problem.	
Pattern of thinking	Deliberate stupidity; sentimentality; self-righteousness	Contempt; rage; intellectualization; depression; anxiety	Joyful realism
Likely next stances	Mission	Materialism	
Accomplishment	Unify your self with Cosmic Plan	Total apathy	Wizardry
How it causes suffering	Action based on imagined meanings fails; narrowed scope for action; Cosmic Plan makes insane, harmful demands	Have to blind self to meaningfulness; undermines any practical action	

Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Difficulty of blinding oneself to manifestations of nebulosity, and submitting to Cosmic Plan	Difficulty of blinding self to manifestations of pattern, and abandoning all desires	Unappealing due to complexity and uncertainty
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Curiosity; realism; intelligence; enjoyment of nebulosity, meaninglessness, un-knowing	Enjoyment of pattern; recovery of passion	
Intelligent aspect	There is meaning, and it is not merely subjective, so nihilism is wrong	There are no inherent, objective, or eternal meanings, so eternalism is wrong	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Respect for pattern is a compassionate aspect of realism	Recognition of nebulosity is a wisdom aspect of nihilism; nearly-correct understanding of defects of eternalism	

Unity, diversity, and separateness

Stance	**Monism**	**Dualism**	**Participation**
Summary	All is One	Everything is clearly distinct from everything else. Especially me	Reality is indivisible but diverse
What it denies	Differences, boundaries, specifics, individuality	Connection, dynamic interplay, unbounded responsibility	
What it fixates	Unity; also over-emphasizes connection	Boundaries, separateness, limitations, definitions	
The sales pitch	You are God	Clarity gives you control	
Emotional appeal	I am all-powerful, all-knowing, immortal, invulnerable	I am not contaminated by other beings, and have only specific, limited responsibility for them	
Pattern of thinking	Willful stupidity	Distrust	Engagement
Likely next stances	Eternalism, mission, true self, specialness	Can combine with either eternalism or nihilism	
Accomplishment	Directly perceive all things as One	Perfect independence	Phenomena (including oneself) understood as neither distinct nor identical

How it causes suffering	Have to blind self to diversity of physical reality	Alienation due to being cut off from world and others	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Obviousness of diversity	Obviousness of connection	Difficulty of understanding the complete stance
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Appreciation of diversity	Appreciation of connectedness	
Intelligent aspect	Non-obvious connections are common and often important; all categories are somewhat nebulous	The world is endlessly diverse	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Provisional understanding of indivisibility	Points toward appreciation of diversity	

Purpose

Stance	**Mission**	**Materialism**	**Enjoyable usefulness**
Summary	Only higher purposes are meaningful	Only mundane purposes are meaningful	All purposes are meaningful, when they are. Do things that are useful and enjoyable.
What it denies	Value of mundane purposes	Value of higher purposes	
What it fixates	Value of higher purposes	Value of mundane purposes	
The sales pitch	Find and follow your true mission, and the universe resonates with you	He who dies with the most toys, wins	There is no scoreboard
Emotional appeal	Exciting, personal, transcendent purpose lifts you out of mundanity	Get what you want	
Pattern of thinking	Fantasy; non-ordinary methods for seeking the supposed true mission	Grim self-interest	Flow
Likely next stances	Eternalism; specialness, true self	Nihilism; ordinariness	Nobility, intermittently continuing
Accomplishment	Sacrifice all mundane purposes to eternal mission (saintliness)	Exclusive self-interest	Rennaisance person
How it causes suffering	Can never find your supposed true mission; neglect mundane aspects of life	Can never get enough; alienation from others and from authentic creativity	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Reasonable self-interest	Compassion, creativity	Is that it? No hope of completing purpose, so no

			hope for salvation or basis for self-congratulation
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Mundane purposes matter to me	I do care about others, and about creative work	
Intelligent aspect	Higher purposes are valid; materialism is unsatisfying	Mundane purposes are valid; mission is a fantasy	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Creativity and generosity are aspects of enjoyable usefulness	Material satisfaction and accomplishment are aspects of enjoyable usefulness	

Self

Stance	**The authentic, true, deep self**	**Selflessness**	**Intermittently continuing**
Summary	The hidden, true self is directly connected to the Cosmic Plan, bypassing social constrictions	There is, or should be, no self	Selfness comes and goes; it varies over time and has no essential nature
What it denies	Nebulosity of self	Patterns of self; the self/other boundary; natural self-interest	
What it fixates	The patterns of selfness; the self/other boundary	Discontinuity; absence of self/other boundary	
The sales pitch	Your true self is much more exciting than your yucky regular one	You can get rid of your yucky regular self	The patterned self is unproblematic once its nebulosity is accepted
Emotional appeal	I'm much better than I thought I was	I have nothing to lose	
Pattern of thinking	Romantic idolization of fantasy self	Willful blindness to continuity and self-interest	Humorous affection for one's foibles; absence of anxiety
Likely next stances	Eternalism, monism, specialness	Nihilism, ordinariness	Nobility, enjoyable usefulness
Accomplishment	Authenticity in sense of living from true self instead of regular self	Egolessness	Conjuring supple, playful magic in the shared self/other space
How it causes suffering	Attempts to retrieve supposed true self fail; attempts to live up to it fail	Neglecting practical personal affairs	

Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Non-existence of true self	Manifestations of regular self	Fear of discontinuity; cannot repair or remove self
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	No essential nature, no coherent true self	I have much in common with who I was and will be	
Intelligent aspect	Recognizes negative social conditioning & possibility of spontaneity	Recognizes lack of essential nature or durable continuity	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Points toward power of nobility: we can be much more than we generally pretend	Points toward generosity of nobility	

Personal value

Stance	**Specialness**	**Ordinariness**	**Nobility**
Summary	I have a distinct and superior value given by the eternal ordering principle	My value comes from being like everyone else	Developing all my abilities in order to serve others
What it denies	Shared humanity	Unusualness	
What it fixates	Personal value	Personal value	
The sales pitch	You are better than they are	Don't put on airs	Be all you can be
Emotional appeal	Reinforces ego	No need to live up to potential	
Pattern of thinking	Disdain; self-aggrandisement	Fearfulness, laziness	Impeccability
Likely next stances	Mission, true self	Materialism	Enjoyable usefulness
Accomplishment	Autoapotheosis	Baaaaaa	Heroism
How it causes suffering	Ego-trips; role anxiety; need for constant confirmation	Suppression of individuality	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Familiarity of experience; maintaining image is exhausting	Unusual impulses; cannot conform to herd	Selfishness; fear; laziness
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Recognition of shared humanity	Recognition of potential and uniqueness	
Intelligent aspect	Recognition of potential and uniqueness	Recognition of shared humanity	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Nobility does rise above the ordinary	Humility is an aspect of nobility	

Capability

Stance	**Total responsibility**	**Victim-think**	**Light-heartedness**
Summary	We each create our own reality and are	It's not my fault and I am too weak to deal with it	Playfully co-create reality in

	responsible for everything that happens in it		collaboration with each other and the world
What it denies	Contingency, limits	Responsibility, capability, freedom	
What it fixates	Responsibility	Overwhelming power of circumstances	
The sales pitch	Perfect circumstances can be achieved with sufficient effort	You are oppressed and therefore blameless	
Emotional appeal	Fantasy of control over future	No need to make any effort	No need for self-criticism or for anxiety
Pattern of thinking	Aggressive, paranoid	Fearful, depressed, emotionally manipulative	Effortless accomplishment
Likely next stances	Specialness, true self, mission	Ordinariness, materialism	Nobility, ethical responsiveness
Accomplishment	King of the Universe	Have all needs met by exploiting others' pity	Effortless creativity
How it causes suffering	Hypervigilance; can't meet infinite requirements with finite capacity	Resentment, depression, neglect of opportunities	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Obviousness of limits	Obviousness of opportunities	Hard to let go of need to be reassured about outcomes
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Letting go of fantasies of accomplishment; willingness to fail	Gratitude; letting go of payoffs; walking away; practical action	
Intelligent aspect	Recognition of possibility	Recognition of limits	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Experience depends more on our own perception & action than is usually thought	Because we have finite capabilities, we can cut ourselves some slack	

Ethics

Stance	**Ethical eternalism**	**Ethical nihilism**	**Ethical responsiveness**
Summary	The Cosmic Plan dictates a fixed ethical code according to which we ought to live	Ethics is a meaningless human invention and has no real claim on us	Ethics is centrally important to humans, and is not a matter of choice, but is fluid and has no definite source
What it denies	Ambiguity of ethics; freedom; courage; creativity	Ethical imperativeness	
What it fixates	Ethical code (rules/ laws)	Absence of ethical absolutes	
The sales pitch			

	Cosmic justice guarantees reward/ punishment if you obey/defy the ethical code	Do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law	Ethical anxiety is unnecessary
Emotional appeal	Avoiding blame; preventing others from harming/offending you	Take what you want; don't let morality get in the way	
Pattern of thinking	Self-righteousness	Arrogance	Light-hearted concern
Likely next stances	Religiosity, mission	Secularism, materialism	Light-heartedness, nobility
Accomplishment	Remorseless soldier of God	Sociopathy	Ethical maturity
How it causes suffering	Harmful actions are sometimes required by the supposed rules; beneficial ones may not be promoted	Without ethics, harmful actions are just rational self-interest	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Situations in which ethical rules are unclear or promote obvious harm	Natural concern for others	Requires close attention to particulars; no guarantee of blamelessness
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Allowing ethical ambiguity	Respecting ethical imperatives	
Intelligent aspect	Recognizes the importance of ethics	Recognizes the ambiguity of ethics	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Points toward nobility	Points toward ethical maturity	

Social authority

Stance	**Reasonable respectability**	**Romantic rebellion**	**Freedom**
Summary	Contribute to social order by conforming to traditions	Make an artistic statement by defying authority	Value social order as a resource; satirize it as an impediment
What it denies	Nebulosity of social order	Value of social order	
What it fixates	Social order	Heroic status of the counter-culture	
The sales pitch	Law'n'order	Death to the oppressors!	
Emotional appeal	It's safe	It's sexy	
Pattern of thinking	Emotional constriction	Confused romantic passion, testosterone poisoning	Political maturity
Likely next stances	Ordinariness; dualism	Specialness; mission; nihilistic rage; true self	Nobility, light-heartedness, kadag

Accomplishment	Pillar of society	Romantic martyrdom	
How it causes suffering	Complicity in oppression; abandoning of responsibility and moral maturity	Opposes realistic action to ameliorate conditions; justifies violence	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Social conventions stifle expression and opportunity	Silly; doomed by definition	Urgency of social imperatives
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Who cares what they think?	I'm being silly and just striking a pose to look cool	
Intelligent aspect	Recognizes value of social order	Recognizes arbitrary and restrictive character of social order	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Points toward kingly qualities of nobility; society as a beneficial structure	Points toward warrior qualities of nobility; charismatically involving; makes splendid art	

Sacredness

Stance	**Religiosity**	**Secularism**	**Kadag**
Summary	The sacred and the profane are clearly distinct in the Cosmic Plan	Sacredness is mere superstition; nothing is sacred	Because nothing is inherently sacred, everything can be sacred
What it denies	Nebulosity of sacredness; vastness	Sacredness; vastness	
What it fixates	The sacred	Arbitrariness of perception of sacredness	
The sales pitch	Avoid contamination through ritual purity	Freed from religion, we can get on with practical projects	The good bits of religion without the dogma
Emotional appeal	Personal superiority through religious conformity; minimize uncanniness of vastness by codifying it	Don't have to think about that uncomfortable religion stuff; pretend you don't see vastness and hope it goes away	Can neither dismiss nor grab onto sacredness
Pattern of thinking	Self-righteousness	Pretending not to care about meaning; apathy	Awe
Likely next stances	Reasonable respectability, mission, specialness	Materialism, ordinariness	Freedom
Accomplishment	Perfect ritual purity	Total inability to experience awe	Ability to experience anything as sacred

How it causes suffering	Paranoia about contamination; resources and opportunities wasted; tribalist vilification	Flatness of existence in the absence of the sacred	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Obvious mundanity of religious forms	Spontaneous religious feelings	Innate reactions of disgust
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Purity is a matter of perception, not truth	I do sometimes experience awe	
Intelligent aspect	Recognition of sacredness	Recognition that nothing is inherently sacred	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Sacredness matters	Narrow religion is harmful; something better is available	

14 Comments

This book is based on the idea that meaning can be real but nebulous: ambiguous, variable, and context-dependent. This is an uncommon stance.

The more common stances are eternalism (that meanings are fixed and well-defined); and nihilism (that meaning is entirely non-existent). This chapter explains the psychological dynamics of these confused stances in detail.

The mistaken assumption shared by eternalism and nihilism is that meaning must be *objective* to be real. Existentialism took an alternative stance, that meanings are *subjective* and personal. This chapter begins to explain why that is also a mistake. A detailed account must be postponed into the next chapter, which investigates issues of the inside/outside boundary, mind and world, self and other. The view of *Meaningness* is that all these distinctions are nebulous, and that meaning is *neither subjective nor objective*. Instead, it is an interaction that crosses all these boundaries.

This chapter also begins to explain the complete stance, which allows for nebulous meaning. It only makes a beginning, because the nebulosity of meaning involves concepts that I can introduce only gradually. Understanding of the nature of meaning will, I hope, accumulate throughout your reading of the book. Ultimately, meaningness is itself a nebulous concept, and cannot be specified with complete precision.

Hands with wedding rings

Two years ago, well into a mainly happy marriage, you began a secret affair.

The attraction was overwhelming. The sex was scalding. You loved with a passion you had never felt before.

Your lover—also married—understood parts of you that your spouse did not. You were able to be a different person. You explored aspects of your personality that you had never been able to express before. You made different sorts of jokes. You went on adventurous dates, trying things your spouse—who you knew was sweet but a bit dull when you got married—would never have agreed to do.

After a year and a bit, the passion waned. Your secret meetings began to feel slightly repetitive. You found that your personalities would not be compatible in the long term. You wanted quite different things out of life.

It began to seem you were going through the motions. You had one meaningless fight about nothing. Then you discussed the future, and agreed to end the affair on good terms.

Now, you wonder: *what did that mean?*

Where did the meaning go?

In the beginning, the affair seemed enormously significant. By the end, it had slid into a casual friendship plus sex.

Were you wrong to think it was meaningful at the start? Was it always meaningless? Or did it have a meaning that it lost?

Perhaps the original meaning lives on in memory, and in the changes in you? You know that the effects of the affair will reverberate for years to come. But what meaning will it have in ten, twenty, thirty years, when life has moved on to other dramas? What could it mean after everyone involved is dead?

How could meaningfulness come and go? To be more than just an opinion, or a feeling, shouldn't meanings stay the same eternally?

The ethical dimension

"Eternal" reminds you uncomfortably that, of course, there is an ethical dimension to adultery. From the beginning, and all through the affair, you could not ignore that.

You grew up Christian, and you know that any pastor would say that adultery is always wrong. But you left the Church in your teens, when you decided you had to say what was right and wrong in the Bible, not the other way around.

You also have friends who say a married affair is definitely OK—so long as some conditions are met.

But you yourself find it hard to decide whether this one was right, or wrong, or perhaps somehow somewhere in-between.

It was mostly a remarkable and enjoyable experience (with some slightly yuck moments toward the end). If it were not for the ethical concerns, you certainly wouldn't regret it.

More importantly, you think, its lasting consequences were mainly good. Your lover was quite different in bed from anyone you had been with, and you learned to be more open when making love yourself. That has improved sex in your marriage; your spouse is happy about that.

On the other hand, if you had been caught, it would have hurt several people besides you. Putting innocents at risk must be part of the moral equation.

And there is another lasting effect. You aren't sure if it is good or bad. Your affair confirmed that something important is missing in your marriage—something you will never get from your spouse. Before, you suspected; now you know. Now, you cannot un-know that.

That is bad for the marriage; but maybe it is good for you. Maybe even for your spouse, in the long run.

You cannot help wondering about other possibilities. Is it realistic to want lasting passion *and* compatibility?

You do not want to become a serial adulterer in an attempt to find out.

Ethics: what are they good for?

You are introduced to a rather odd woman at a cocktail party. She is deathly pale, with a black leather miniskirt and extensive, spiky tattoos. She sounds normal enough, though, and explains that she teaches philosophy at a local university.

"Oh? That's interesting," you say. "What kind of philosophy?"

"Well, um, ethics, actually."

"Ah," you say. "Um—I wonder if I could ask you a professional question?"

"Well, if you want personal advice—" she begins, frowning.

"No, sorry! Not like that. You see, I got really interested in ethics recently. I kind of geeked out on it, actually. I read a bunch on the web, and then a couple books. So I learned all about virtue ethics and deontology and consequentialism and stuff. But what I don't understand is how you would use all that to figure out what to do in a real-life ethical quandary. It seems awfully abstract."

"Oh dear," she says, grinning. "You have discovered our dirty little secret."

"What?"

"Well, you know, most ethicists have the same problem. Our professional work usually isn't much help when ethical push comes to practical shove."

"Oh," you say.

"How does that make you feel?"

You call your friend Susie. After some small talk, you come around to the point. "Susie—I'm not sure how to ask this, but—you remember you told me once about a therapist who was helpful to you?"

She laughs. "Yes, of course. After my first was born—"

"Sam," you remember.

"Right, Sam. Can you believe he's in second grade now? Anyway, I had post-partum depression, and Janet was really helpful. Are you OK? Do you want me to give you her number?"

"Yeah, I'm OK, I think. I mean, there's nothing wrong with me—"

"You don't have to be crazy to see a therapist, you know!"

"Yeah, I know. But what I remember is your saying that everything seemed meaningless. And—"

"I had all these expectations about what being a mother would be like. And the reality wasn't anything like that. She helped me figure out how I felt about that."

"Right, so I'm kind of wondering what something in my life means, I mean meant, so I thought —"

"Sure, of course. Hang on and I'll look her up. If I can just figure out how this damn phone works…"

Talking with the therapist doesn't go as smoothly.

"How does that make you feel?" is her mantra. After answering that dozens of times, over several sessions, you finally rebel. "I *know* how it makes me feel. What I want to know is what it *means*."

"Well, what does it mean to *you*?" she asks.

"But that's just it," you say. "I want to know what it *actually* means. Not just to me. I mean, meaning isn't just a feeling. Ethics can't be like that. Some things are just right or wrong, no matter what you feel about them."

"That seems like quite a polarizing view," the therapist says. "Maybe things aren't so black and white… I see our hour is almost up. Next time, perhaps it would be helpful for you to tell me about your parent's marriage."

You decide there won't be a next time.

Meaningness is not mostly ethics

Ethics, you realize, couldn't answer the question "what did that mean?" anyway. Even if you could be sure whether the affair was right or wrong, the one word "right" or "wrong" would hardly begin to express the meaning of the relationship. Even an explanation of *why* it was right or wrong would still ignore most of what seemed to matter about it.

The meaning of the affair seems to have many dimensions besides ethics. Yet you find it hard to say what those would be.

Certainly, *how you feel about it* is another dimension. And how your former lover feels too.

But what it *says about you* seems more important. You didn't think you were the sort of person who would cheat—and you still don't. But apparently you are—because you did.

What else does that imply about you? Are you less trust-worthy than you thought, in other ways?

You felt, in the initial rush, that you had no choice. You tried as hard as you could, you thought, to resist your feelings, and failed. *Could* you have done differently? Is it just sleazy self-justification to say that you would have had to have been a different person to have chosen differently—and that it is not possible to be anyone other than you are?

But now, in fact, you are *not* the same person you were. The affair changed you; and that is another dimension of its meaning. Your risk-loving lover gave you a confidence you did not have before. And the affair exposed parts of yourself you were only vaguely aware of. Now those often come into play as you think and feel and relate.

Beyond all that, you suspect there are dimensions of meaning that transcend the personal; that go beyond the effects on anyone involved.

Marriage is a sacrament, according to the Church. It is a contract with God as well as another person. You don't exactly believe in God any more… but marriage doesn't seem to just be an agreement between two people, either. Maybe it is society, not God, to whom you are responsible? Marriage is a foundation of society. But whose business is it what you do, if it has no consequences for them?

Besides which, the affair itself seemed at first to have a sacred dimension. Sometimes, making love, the sense that you were separate people dropped away. There was simply intense sensation and exquisite action—with no one there to feel or act. And then sometimes it seemed that it was the entire universe making love. Awareness extended into infinity, and there was the presence of the God you don't believe in.

But surely that was an illusion. This is just self-justification, isn't it? It makes no sense at all to talk of self-indulgent pleasure as sacred.

A life lesson

During the affair, you told no one. It was a private thing, just for you and your lover. But now, needing perspective, you confide in two close friends.

Over lunch, you tell Chris the short version. You want to be clear that you are not looking for sympathy or support or advice. You need help figuring out what it meant.

"It's a life lesson," says Chris. "The universe always sends you the exact experiences you need to develop your true self. It's the way you find out what you were really meant to do."

"But what's the lesson, then?" you ask. "What *am* I supposed to do?"

"That's up to you," says Chris. "You are totally responsible for your own reality, you know. But you have to use your intuition. I think you think too much, sometimes. I mean, really, reading philosophy books is not going to help you find the meaning of an affair! If you go deeply into your feelings, you will find the answer. Maybe that's the lesson, in itself!"

Lunch ends a little awkwardly. Chris has fit your experience to a generic spiritual story. Nothing in it takes account of any of the details, of the complex texture of your relationships and your life. What you want to know about is *the meaning of your affair*, not about meaning in general. You are a bit annoyed that Chris doesn't understand, or is ignoring what you care about; and you can't completely hide it. Chris always was a bit of an airhead, you think. In retrospect, not the right person to consult.

You are aware that Chris, in turn, is a bit annoyed, because you are dismissing valuable spiritual insight. You seem excessively skeptical, materialistic, and self-involved.

There is an unspoken agreement: "we won't talk about this again—and we'll avoid other topics that would expose our different takes on life."

Life is for living

You meet Kim for drinks after work. Kim is sensible, and you know won't get mystical on you.

At first, the discussion seems to go well. Unlike Chris, Kim wants to know about the details. *Exactly* what was so great about the sex? Where did you go on dates? How did you keep the secret?

After an hour, you start again to be a bit frustrated. What you want to know is *what it meant*. The details matter—but not *every* detail matters. It would take a year to tell the total story of a year-long affair; and then what? The story itself is not what matters; it is what it means.

"Why does it have to 'mean' something?" asks Kim. "Why can't you just let it be what it was?"

"Well, that's the question, isn't it?" you say. "What *was* it?"

"It's just life," says Kim. "Life is for living, I guess."

"What does that mean?" you ask. "That's what I want to know—*how* should I live life?"

"You mean, like, is it wrong to have an affair?" asks Kim.

"Well, that's part of it," you say.

"Geez, I don't know," says Kim. "I guess you only get one life, and the point is to enjoy it. So you have to look out for yourself, and get what you want, some of the time. And, of course, you have to have some kind of ethics. But no harm, no fault. Anyway, it's over now—why worry about it?"

You nod agreement, but silently you think: *That seems too easy*.

"So when you did it in the stairwell at Chez Jean's, were you, like, standing against the wall, or lying down on the landing, or what?" asks Kim.

What kind of world is this?

Neither of your friends' views was helpful. Chris has a big-picture theory of meaning, which probably came out of some self-help book, but it doesn't seem to explain anything about your affair. Kim isn't interested in any meaning beyond the mundane and obvious.

Neither view seems exactly *wrong*, but both seem to miss what is important. You wonder if somehow they could be combined. Is there a way to understand meaning that takes account of both the big picture and the details?

To be useful, a big picture story has to help make sense of specifics. But, it occurs to you, the meaning of the specifics says a lot about what the big picture has to be.

The world is a very different place depending on whether your affair was definitely wrong (or right), or if that is just a personal opinion—or a cultural agreement.

The world is a very different place depending on whether "the universe" sends you ideal life lessons, or "the universe" is some rocks and gas scattered through vast empty space.

The world is a very different place depending on whether you *could* have chosen not to begin the affair, or if (being who you are) you could not have acted differently.

The world is a very different place depending on whether somehow the meaning of the affair could become perfectly clear—or if it was inherently nebulous.

Hot topic

This page is about the nebulosity of meaningness. In the story, the meaning of the secret affair seems "nebulous": ambiguous, uncertain, changing as it unfolds and then recedes into the past.

The page is *not about* adultery. It just uses that as an example, of nebulosity.

You may have a definite opinion about whether or when adultery can ever be ethical. Nevertheless, you also know that other people have different opinions.

And, I hope you agree that "right" or "wrong" cannot capture all the meaning of a relationship. It has many dimensions that remain nebulous even if the ethics seem unambiguous.

I wrote about a married affair because it is something everyone understands. It is familiar from gossip and fiction, if not personal experience. The puzzle of *what did that mean?* is instantly recognizable.

The topic is not ideal, though, because it is emotionally hot, and the ethical issue may crowd out other points.

There is a danger here of misunderstanding me as offering an ethical opinion. Because the page does not take a clear position, you might misunderstand me as suggesting that the affair should not be judged as either right or wrong. I am not.

This page is *not about* ethics, either. It's about the puzzling quality of *not knowing*, and not knowing how anyone could know. My opinion about the ethics of the affair is irrelevant. What matters is that its overall meaning could be unclear, at least *to some people*.

You might wonder whether the story is autobiographical, or based on some particular affair I heard about. It isn't. I myself have never been married, and have never had a secret affair outside my main relationship. However, I have certainly had relationships whose meaning I didn't understand (and still don't). And I have faced other difficult issues in sexual ethics.

5 Comments

No accounting for the vagaries of coke machines

Some things are meaningful; some are meaningless. Some are vaguely in-between.

This is our constant, natural experience in everyday life. It is only in religion, spirituality, and philosophy that people insist that everything is meaningful, or that nothing is.

Insisting that everything is meaningful is *eternalism*. Insisting that nothing is meaningful is *nihilism*.

Eternalism and nihilism are the simplest confused stances. Understanding what is wrong with them, and how the complete stance avoids their confusion, is key to the rest of this book.

Everyday meaninglessness

Some happenings are meaningless. If you looked *very* closely, you'd see your shoelaces are a slightly different shape every time, because they flop around. You don't, because that's meaningless.

Some are pretty much meaningless, even though they have some positive or negative effect on you. Your usual bus left two minutes late. The Coke machine mistakenly gave you an extra coin in change. You spilled some soda on your shirt. There were no further consequences.

So what? Such things just happen, for no particular reason. They're effectively random. You forget them moments later.

Everyday meaningfulness

If you haven't eaten in a couple days, then the meaningfulness of food is obvious. This isn't a sophisticated case of meaning, but it's one that's hard to deny. We share it with other animals; it's in our biology, not some arbitrary personal or social choice.

Different foods have different meanings; there's fancy food and boring food and comfort food. What foods have which meanings vary somewhat from person to person and culture to culture, but some food is fancy enough that nearly everyone will agree it's fancy.

On a busy sidewalk, your eyes lock for an instant with those of a cute stranger coming toward you, and then they pass. You stop and look back over your shoulder and see that they have done the same. You can see that this is meaningful—even if it's not *exactly* clear what it will mean—and an attentive third person would see the same.

You go for a hike alone in the desert, and your arm gets trapped between two rocks. You cannot free it, and after waiting several days for an improbable rescue, you realize you have the choice of cutting off your own arm with a dull knife, or dying of thirst.

Although an accident, this is a meaningful choice. If you survive, you will remember it as a meaningful experience. Though it was an entirely personal adventure, with no direct effect on anyone else, millions of other people are likely to find it meaningful as well.

We speak of "major life events"—marriage; giving birth; death of parent, child, or spouse; life-threatening illness; financial triumph or catastrophe. These are experiences most people would agree were highly meaningful.

So what?

Some things are more meaningful than others, evidently. You might say that meaningfulness and meaninglessness are a matter of degree, not either/or.

That's not quite right, either, though. In many cases, it is difficult to say how meaningful an event was. This might not be a problem with *knowing* how meaningful it was, but an inherent nebulosity of the situation itself.

None of this is mysterious, or should be controversial. In fact, in ordinary circumstances, probably everyone would agree.

Still, there are situations that make it tempting to say that everything is meaningful, or that nothing is. These situations give rise to eternalism and nihilism. The rest of this chapter explains why these temptations arise, why we should resist them, and how.

Many people believe in UFOs because they make life meaningful

Why would anyone want to claim that everything is meaningful, or that everything is meaningless, defying our everyday experience that some things are meaningful and some not?

Here I'll give an example of extreme meaninglessness, and one of extreme meaningfulness. Because it is difficult to deny their meaninglessness and meaningfulness, these help uncover the reasons people might want to do that.

Fear of meaninglessness motivates eternalism

A tiny gray pebble slides half an inch down a slope on a lifeless planet a million light-years from the nearest star. No being ever knows about this, and nothing happens as a result of it.

If anything is meaningless, this is it. So why on earth would you claim this must be meaningful? Only if it is important that *absolutely everything* is meaningful. And why would that be?

This insistence is motivated by fear: the fear that *perhaps everything is meaningless*.

If we could *definitely* say which things are meaningful and which are meaningless, there would be no problem. The meaninglessness of the pebble's slide would not threaten the meaningfulness of our own lives.

But we cannot always say what has meaning and what does not. We have no hard-line test. Meaningfulness is frustratingly unreliable; transient, uncertain.

There are clues. In everyday experience, it seems that things are meaningful only if they are meaningful *to someone*. And, mostly things are meaningful only if they have some effect, positive or negative, on someone. The pebble's slide is meaningless because it fails those tests.

But what about your own life? Things happen that *seem* meaningful to you. But often they do not seem meaningful to other people—especially if they affect only you. And it is certainly possible to be mistaken about meaningfulness—to suppose things have meanings that they don't. So isn't it possible that you are entirely mistaken about meaningfulness? Isn't it possible that life itself is completely meaningless? That is a profoundly depressing idea.

"Nonsense," you think. "I know that my life is meaningful *to me*." But what good is that? No one else cares about your life the way you do. Maybe your supposed "meaningfulness" is a delusion. Maybe it is purely subjective, and exists only in your own mind. And then, so what? That seems like a meaningless kind of "meaning."

This is a slippery slope you don't want to slide down. Since there seem to be no definite criteria for meaningfulness, you cannot rely on *anything* to have meaning. There is no solid ground under foot, once you admit the nebulosity of meaningness.

Better to stick a stake in the ground at the top of the hill. If *everything* is meaningful, then there is no need to sort out what is or isn't. There is no need to grapple with ambiguity and uncertainty. There is a reliable foundation on which you can build a meaningful life.

This is the stance of *eternalism*. Eternalism provides a reassuring firmness, certainty, definiteness to meaning. It says: you are right to care about what you do, because it is *truly* meaningful.

But what makes everything meaningful? What could give meaning to the pebble?

Here, you must invoke a Cosmic Plan. There has to be a universe-spanning intelligence that knows everything, and that gives everything meaning. (What meaning? That is not always for humans to know.)

The supposed meaningfulness of the pebble and the Cosmic Plan are mutually reinforcing. The pebble couldn't be meaningful without the Cosmic Plan. If seemingly meaningless things were not really meaningful, the Cosmic Plan would have no work to do, and we would have no reason to imagine it.

Since usually things are meaningful only to someone, who likes or dislikes them, you might personalize the Cosmic Plan. God is the "someone" to whom all things are meaningful, and whose preferences gives positive or negative value to all things.

Fear of excessive meaning motivates nihilism

A gigantic spaceship arrives. Astonishingly beautiful aliens emerge, and announce that they are on a diplomatic mission from the Universal Federation of a billion planets.

Humankind, they explain, has reached the point of sophistication where we can join the Federation. We will not, however, join as junior partners. Human beings have a unique spiritual ability not found anywhere else in the universe. This ability is latent in us now, but can easily be developed with tools the aliens will provide.

Unfortunately, the entire universe, with its billions of inhabited planets, will be destroyed just a few years from now. A tiny flaw in the fabric of reality is about to spread across the universe in an instant, like a pin-prick in a balloon, and the whole of space-time will evaporate.[1]

Only the specially-developed spiritual abilities of human beings can prevent this.

The aliens will make us immortal and vastly more intelligent than any human has ever been—a necessary prerequisite to this spiritual development. Naturally, this will make us radically different from the way we were; we will no longer be human.

Having saved the universe, humanity will lead all other intelligent species to a triumphant destiny, a culmination of the ultimate purpose of existence that is now utterly inconceivable.

However, since the aliens do not wish to force anyone to do anything, it is up to us to decide whether to undergo the transformation.

This is a meaningful choice. The fate of the universe, and billions of billions of beings, hangs in the balance.

Suddenly, your nagging back ache, your promotion review at work, and the credit card company's screw-up that is causing all kinds of havoc—all highly meaningful yesterday—seem totally meaningless. Political parties, religious differences, wars, economics, favorite songs—even these become meaningless by comparison.

The only way to say "this choice would not really be meaningful" is to insist that, no matter how many beings are affected, the apparent meaning is still just subjective. It's only in the minds of a

bunch of random life-forms, who are (after all) just blobs of matter; swirls of subatomic particles. Therefore, it is illusory.

Implicit here again is the view that *real* meaningfulness could only be objective, and could only be provided by something external to the universe. There is no Cosmic Plan, so nothing is truly meaningful.

This is the stance of *nihilism*. Nihilism's improbable insistence on meaninglessness is also motivated by fear. It is the mirror-image fear of eternalism.

The fear is that, if you admit *anything* is meaningful, then perhaps *everything* has a fixed meaning —or at least everything in your life.

You don't want the responsibility of dealing with the intricacies, implications, and imperatives of all that meaningfulness. And if everything had a specific meaning, there would be no room for creativity. You would have no freedom.

Perhaps worst of all, you might have to accept a lot of sentimental claptrap—the nonsense eternalists spout in a desperate attempt to justify their delusions.

Meaningness without a Cosmic Plan

Eternalism and nihilism exist only out of fear of each other. There is a better alternative—what I call the complete stance.

I suggest that meaningfulness is *not* provided by a Cosmic Plan. There is no Cosmic Plan; but that does not mean that nothing is meaningful.

I suggest that some things are meaningful, and some things are not. That is true even though we have no definite criteria to decide which is which.

I suggest that meaningness is neither objective, nor subjective.

Accepting these suggestions allows you to let go of the unrealistic fears that motivate both eternalism and nihilism.

This complete view of meaningness has its own implications. They may seem to make life more complicated. However, the complete stance also eliminates the many troubles eternalism and nihilism cause.

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1. 1.This possibility is somewhat less silly than it sounds. It's called a "false vacuum collapse," and appears to be compatible with current physical understanding.

19 Comments

Galaxy

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Deep down in our hearts, we all know that the universe has a plan. There is something—maybe not God, but some sort of cosmic consciousness or highest

principle—that is the ultimate source of meaning. We know there is more to life than the mundane rat race, and that in the end nothing can really be random. We must have a true calling, a reason we were put here on earth. That is our part to play in the grand plan. When we find it and embrace it, everything falls into place and we discover profound inner peace. Acting in accordance with our proper role gives life an extraordinary appeal, the wonderful feeling that we are in sync with reality and fulfilling the promise of something transcendent. Resisting this deep purpose causes only pain, struggle, and heartache.

I hope you are feeling slightly nauseous now. This is an inspiring vision. It is also utterly, disastrously wrong.

Not only is there no God to order the universe, there is no other eternal, transcendent principle or force that provides meaning to the world and to our lives. The universe and everything in it are "nebulous," meaning that nothing can be permanent, external, or unambiguously defined.

We cling to the idea that there must be a cosmic plan because we fear that without one everything would be meaningless. But this is mistaken; which means that most ideas about meaningfulness and meaninglessness are mistaken. Fortunately, life is meaningful *without* any cosmic plan or ultimate source of meaning.

Next Page: So how does meaningness work? →

Machinery

This far into the book, you may be impatient. I've said a lot about how meaningness *doesn't* work. But how *does* it work? I have said almost nothing, other than that it is nebulous. How unsatisfactory!

I would love to tell you exactly what meaning is. I'd love to explain Life, The Universe, and Everything in a way that solves all your problems.

Unfortunately, I can't—and neither can anyone else. That sucks; but **this is the actual situation we are in**.

We have a choice of explanations of meaningness: ones that are simple, clear, harmful, and wrong; or ones that are complex, vague, helpful, and approximately right. I prefer the latter.

It seems to me that:

• No one can say quite how meaning works.
• Theories that pretend to explain are either eternalist or nihilist, and both are wrong and harmful.[1]
• We aren't likely to get a full explanation any time soon.
• We can't wait for a perfect understanding of meaning, because we have to live life *now*.
• So we have to accept that our understanding is incomplete, and do the best we can. Life is fired at us point-blank;[2] issues of ethics and purpose won't wait for someone to find a perfect theory.
• We *can* form a partial understanding of meaningness. We are not entirely ignorant, and vague understanding is better than none.
• Incomplete understanding is not a huge obstacle to sensible action—which is another reason waiting for a perfect theory would be senseless.

This book will, eventually, say a lot about how meaningness works. Some of that will be intuitive and impressionistic. I hope understanding will accumulate as you read brief partial explanations, and examples in passing.

Some other discussions will be quite technical; perhaps most readers will want to skip over those. In any case, I am postponing most into the chapter on monism and dualism, which develops some necessary concepts.

But here's a preview.

The natural human view is that meanings are inherent in external things. Thunder means the gods are angry, and that's a fact about thunder and gods, not about people. So on this view, meanings are objective: external to us. They are the same for everyone.

When "same for everyone" ran into differences of opinion, monotheism moved all meanings into God instead. God gives everything ultimate meanings, that no one may disagree with. God is external, so monotheistic meaning is also objective.

Then God died, and the world was disenchanted, so objects all became inherently meaningless dead matter. That meant meanings can't be objective. The obvious alternative—developed in the 1700s—was that meanings are subjective. They live in the minds of individual people.

250 years later, versions of this idea are still taken for granted by most sophisticated people. Unfortunately, the subjective theory of meaning doesn't work. It verges on nihilism—outright denial of all meaning. Fortunately, the theory is also not true.

When you are hungry, the meaning of food is not subjective. You, personally, are hungry, but the meaning is shared with everyone else (and probably all other vertebrate animals). It's not particularly "mental"; it's as much in your sensory organs, and digestive system, as in your brain. And it's in the actions of your hands and mouth as you eat.

The meaning of a handshake is partly arbitrary, but it is not subjective. You can't redefine it to make it mean what you want. When you shake hands, the meaning depends on a huge amount of cultural background, involving millions of people. It probably also depends on evolved biological functions we don't know much about.

The subjective theory of meaning is not full-blown nihilism, but tends to slide into it. That's because we actually *can't* mean anything much by ourselves; meaning is mostly a social and cultural activity. Narrowing one's focus to supposedly personal meanings leads to social and cultural alienation, and then to nihilistic depression.

A meaning is neither subjective nor objective; it is not inside your mind, nor outside. It requires both subjects and objects, and it doesn't dwell in either. It takes time and space, but it is not precisely located.

Especially, a meaning does not live in your brain. That popular pseudoscientific idea is the "representational theory of mind." It is internally contradictory and unworkable. Meaning may require a brain, but usually many brains, and also non-brain stuff.

Meaningness is a dynamic, interactive process. Any particular meaning involves a complicated history of many creatures and things; a network of involvement that we only ever partly understand.

A meaning always *appears* nebulous to us, because we never know everything about it. This is, in philosophical terms, a epistemological fact: about us. I believe that meanings are also *actually*

nebulous. That is an ontological theory, about meaningness. I'll discuss this technically, later in the book. However, epistemological nebulosity is enough for practical purposes.

We have to live *as if* meaningness is nebulous, whether it ultimately is or not. This book is about how.

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1. 1.Eternalist theories pretend to have detailed understandings that are, in fact, mistaken. Acting on these wrong understandings has bad results—as you'd expect. Nihilist theories suggest that, since full understanding is impossible, we should pretend that everything is meaningless. That would allow us to evade responsibility for our lives; but we can't actually get away with that, either.
2. 2."We cannot put off living until we are ready. The most salient characteristic of life is its coerciveness: it is always urgent, 'here and now,' without any possible postponement. Life is fired at us point-blank." —Jose Ortega y Gasset

6 Comments

Obviously meaningfulness is either outside your head ("objective"), or else inside your head ("subjective").

There are excellent reasons to believe it is not outside your head. There are excellent reasons to believe it is not inside your head. (This is the essential argument for nihilism!)

But what if meaningfulness is not either inside or outside, but does exist? How could that be?

Where are meanings? A false choice

Kumquats

Three facts seem true:

1. Meanings are not objective.
2. Meanings are not subjective.
3. Meanings exist.

All common stances toward meaning assumes these three together form a contradiction. In that case, one of them must be false:

1. Denying the first fact is eternalism: the stance that meanings are objectively fixed.
2. Denying the second fact is existentialism: the stance that meanings are subjective, and so can be chosen at will.
3. Denying the third fact is nihilism: the stance that nothing means anything.

Each of these confused stances is mistaken and harmful. The proper and useful conclusion from the three facts is that meaning is neither objective nor subjective.

Kumquats are neither just nor unjust—and yet, amazingly, they exist! Kumquats are neither triangular nor square—yet, astonishingly, they exist! How on earth can this be!

Kumquats are not a sort of thing that *can* be just or unjust. Meanings are not a sort of thing that *can* be objective or subjective.

Triangular and square are not the only shapes. There is also oval. Objective and subjective are not the only ways of being. There is also interactive.

Physical analogies for meaningness

> Marbles in and out of a jar

Concepts about meaningness all rest on physical analogies.[1] Physical analogies are the basis both of physical explanations of meaning, and of theories that deny meanings are physical.

Unfortunately, these analogies are misleading. That is not because meaningness is non-physical—the explanations I give later in the book *are* physical. They are misleading because the wrong sorts of physical phenomena get used as analogs.

Confused stances toward meaningness rest on a bad analogy: that meanings have definite locations, like little physical objects. A marble is either in the jar, or out of the jar. Meanings, most people assume, are either inside your head, or outside your head.

But meanings are not specifically located. Neither are some better-understood physical phenomena: reflections, rainbows, and mirages, for instance. At the end of this page, I'll suggest these are better (though still imperfect) analogies for meaning.

Putting meanings in things

> Rum cake
> Soaked in meaning

A natural view is that meanings are objective: inherent in things. Consider *purpose*, for instance, one of the main dimensions of meaningness. The purpose of a pot is cooking. The purpose of wheat is nutrition. The purpose of your stomach is digestion.

This is the way everyone thinks about purpose most of the time, because it's simple and mostly works. If we left it at that, it would rarely cause problems (despite being wrong). Unfortunately, there are philosophers, and they want to make up stories about how things work. So how do inherent meanings work?

Well, humans make things for purposes. So apparently the maker of a pot gives it its purpose. But what about natural things like wheat? Here, we need God, who created the natural things, and gave them purposes. In the Medieval worldview, all things had fixed, intrinsic purposes, according to their kind. Things not obviously useful were created by God to provide moral lessons. The pelican, for example, stabs its own breast to draw blood to feed its children:[2] a paradigm of compassionate self-sacrifice.

Likewise, every kind of object has an intrinsic degree of value, according to the Great Chain of Being decreed by God.

On this view, God puts meanings in objects, like marbles in a jar. Or, a better analogy would be the jelly in a jelly donut: you can't see the meaning just by looking.

Actually, if you cut things open, you can't find the meaning inside. It doesn't ooze out. So maybe meaningfulness is more like a fluid that suffuses objects. If you soak a sponge cake in rum, that invisible essence pervades the dessert, and you can't specifically locate it—although you can taste it.

How does this work? God works in mysterious ways, but how exactly does a human potter put the meaning in the pot? What is this meaning made of, and where do you get it from? If a potter puts a pot-meaning into a hammer, what then? If you always use a pot to hold marbles, instead of for cooking, have you changed its inherent purpose?

As the scientific worldview developed, it became clear that physical objects are "just atoms and the void." There's no place inside objects for meanings to hide.

Nothing is inherently meaningful. Nihilism is quite right about that.

This does *not* mean everything is inherently meaningless! Meanings are not a sort of thing that can be inherent, because they have no specific location. As we shall see.

Putting meanings in minds

Fortune cookie: Zhuangzi say, meanings not in your head

A potter cannot put a purpose in a pot; but the potter *knows* the purpose of the pot. Perhaps the purpose is inside the potter, not the pot. The potter can explain the purpose of pots to their users, and then it lives inside them too.

Probably in their heads. Like marbles. Although, if you cut open people's heads, you can't find any.

So, we invented "minds," which are metaphysical jars for putting meanings in. Despite being immaterial, the mind is also somehow in the head. Maybe it's one of those subtle fluids, which pervades the brain, like rum.[3]

The problem with putting meanings in people's heads is that people disagree. If meanings were in objects, we could resolve conflicts by determining the objective truth. But disagreement is fatal for all subjective accounts of meaning. This is most obvious in ethics. If I consider eating people OK and you consider it morally wrong, and if what it *means* to be right or wrong is nothing other than our opinions, then we cannot even begin a discussion. We cannot state any reasons, and there is no way to change someone's mind. (How would this work in educating children? "Stop biting your sister!" "Subjectively, it is right for me to do so.")

So, we could put the marbles in God's head. His job was to keep track of all the meanings for us; and it was jolly decent of him to work so hard at it. Sadly, after a protracted illness, he died in the 1880s. A series of attempts to construct other eternal ordering principles, as replacement meaning-keeping golems, all failed.

Since God joined the choir invisible, most people have held individualistic, subjective theories of meaning.[4] Two popular ones are *existentialism* and the *representational theory of mind*.

Existentialism says you have to craft your own marbles by hand. It's frightfully important that yours be different from everyone else's. You must be creative and artistic and intuitive when making your very own meanings. Also, romantically rebellious and resolute and heroic and stuff. Unfortunately, this project proves impossible: at most, a tiny fraction of personal meanings can be distinctive.

The representational theory of mind says that meanings are like little slips of paper, with the meanings written on them, that live in your head. A cookie fortune is meaningful if you can read it and what it says creates a new relationship between you and the world. Who reads the meanings in your head? How do they create relationships? It takes a billion tiny spooks to do that.

If you are a nihilist, you have understood—correctly—that subjective theories of meaning cannot work. Subjective meaning is none at all.

If you believe in a subjective theory, you may balk at that claim. I'll give detailed arguments later in the book. Few of those are new or likely to surprise you, though. Subjectivism appears plausible only when it seems the least bad of the three bad alternatives.

So, you may be better persuaded by explanations of how meaning can be *neither objective nor subjective*, but interactive. Like… a rainbow.

Like a rainbow

Photographer with rainbow

A rainbow is a three-way interaction among the sun, water droplets, and an observer.

A rainbow is a physical phenomenon, but not a physical object. It has no specific location. Two observers standing a hundred feet apart will see "the rainbow" in different places. If you drive toward a rainbow, it appears to recede just as fast, so you can never get to it.

Rainbows are pretty fully understood, and guaranteed 100% metaphysics-free.

Although an observer is necessarily involved, a rainbow is not subjective. It is not "mental," not an illusion, and does not depend on any magical properties of brains. The observer can just as well be a camera.

The rainbow is not in your head, or in the camera. But it is also not an object-out-there. It is not in the mist, and not in the sun, although both are required for a rainbow to occur.

A rainbow is not "objective" in the sense of "inherent in an object." It *is* "objective" in a different sense: the presence of a rainbow is publicly verifiable. Rational, unbiased observers will generally agree about whether or not there is a rainbow.[5]

To make the analogy explicit, meanings:

- are interactions among people and circumstances
- are physical phenomena, but not physical objects
- have no definite locations (whether inside or outside heads)
- are observer-relative, to varying extents
- are usually well-understood, and 100% metaphysics-free
- are mostly not subjective, mental, illusory, or dependent on magical properties of brains
- are not inherent in objects
- mostly *are* publicly verifiable, so reasonable observers mostly agree about them.

This analogy makes plausible the claim that meanings can be non-objective, non-subjective, and existent. That makes it plausible that eternalism, existentialism, and nihilism could all three be wrong.

In nearly every other way, meanings are unlike rainbows, so it's important not to take the analogy literally. One important difference is that a rainbow's observer (whether animate or artificial) is mainly passive.[6] Observation does not affect the sun or mist. Meanings are activities, in which causality typically runs in all directions.

Rainbows once seemed magical, mysterious, and metaphysical. Now we have a pretty complete understanding of them. Meanings may now seem magical, mysterious, or metaphysical. They're more complicated than rainbows—but I think we can gain a pretty complete understanding of them too.

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1. 1.Later in the book, I suggest that metaphysical intuitions about matters other than meaning are also misplaced physical intuitions. This may explain why people defend metaphysical intuitions so strongly, despite their often differing dramatically from person to person, and despite their having no empirical basis.
2. 2.Or so it was believed. Presumably no one has ever observed a pelican doing this, but that doesn't seem to have been a problem.
3. 3.The mental fluid idea goes back at least as far as Galen, in the second century AD, who called it "psychic pneuma." Descartes promoted a similar model of "animal spirits": "a fine wind, or lively and pure flame." That was highly influential, although conceptually incoherent and anatomically ignorant even for his day. Maybe no one *believes* this theory now, but it's still a common way of thinking. For instance, explanations of the extended mind theory are commonly misunderstood as promoting some sort of ectoplasm that oozes out of your skull and goes on astral adventures.
4. 4.Many religious people do commit to the marbles-in-the-mind-of-God theory, of course. I gather that living in a predominantly secular culture makes this difficult to maintain consistently, however. Slipping into a relativist, subjective view is a constant danger.
5. 5.Later, I'll explain how nihilism and eternalism exploit such ambiguities in "objective" and "subjective" to render plausible reasoning that would otherwise seem plainly false.
6. 6.Although, perception is actually an active process. This turns out to be important in understanding how meaningness does work, and I'll come back to it in the discussion of objects and boundaries later.

17 Comments

This table summarizes three stances one can take to the most fundamental questions of meaning.

For an introduction to these stances, see "Preview: eternalism and nihilism." The main discussion begins here.

The meanings of the rows in this table are explained in "The psychological anatomy of a stance."

Stance	Eternalism	Nihilism	Meaning/ness
Summary	Everything is given a fixed meaning by an eternal ordering principle (Cosmic Plan)	Nothing is really meaningful	Meaning is nebulous, yet patterned; meaningfulness and meaninglessness intermingle
What it denies	Nebulosity; meaninglessness	Pattern; meaningfulness	
What it fixates	Meaning	Meaninglessness	
The sales pitch	You are guaranteed a good outcome if you follow the rules	You don't have to care! Don't get fooled again	Accurate understanding of meaningness allows both

			freedom and purpose
Emotional appeal	Certainty; understanding; control. Reassurance that if you act in accordance with Cosmic Plan, everything will be well.	Intelligence. Also, nothing means anything, so not getting what you want is not a problem.	
Pattern of thinking	Deliberate stupidity; sentimentality; self-righteousness	Contempt; rage; intellectualization; depression; anxiety	Joyful realism
Likely next stances	Mission	Materialism	
Accomplishment	Unify your self with Cosmic Plan	Total apathy	Wizardry
How it causes suffering	Action based on imagined meanings fails; narrowed scope for action; Cosmic Plan makes insane, harmful demands	Have to blind self to meaningfulness; undermines any practical action	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Difficulty of blinding oneself to manifestations of nebulosity, and submitting to Cosmic Plan	Difficulty of blinding self to manifestations of pattern, and abandoning all desires	Unappealing due to complexity and uncertainty
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Curiosity; realism; intelligence; enjoyment of nebulosity, meaninglessness, un-knowing	Enjoyment of pattern; recovery of passion	
Intelligent aspect	There is meaning, and it is not merely subjective, so nihilism is wrong	There are no inherent, objective, or eternal meanings, so eternalism is wrong	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Respect for pattern is a compassionate aspect of realism	Recognition of nebulosity is a wisdom aspect of nihilism; nearly-correct understanding of defects of eternalism	

3 Comments

Kitschy romantic postcard image

Eternalism is the stance that everything has a fixed, clear-cut meaning. That's an attractive fantasy, but it inevitably runs into the reality that meaningness is nebulous: variable, vague, and context-dependent. That collision can cause serious trouble.

This section provides tools for noticing when you have assumed the eternalist stance; for seeing how it is harmful; and for shifting into the complete stance instead.

If you haven't already read "Preview: eternalism and nihilism" in the book's introduction, you may want to do that first.

Eternalism is wrong and harmful, yet appealing

It's obvious that many things are meaningless, and most meanings are somewhat vague. In other words, we all know that eternalism is wrong. We're only tempted to adopt eternalism at times when meaninglessness or ambiguity is emotionally threatening. (See "Extreme examples" for a preview.)

Since it's *obviously* wrong, I won't argue against eternalism in detail. That would not be particularly helpful. We always already know it's mistaken, and yet we fall into it anyway. (If you are committed to an eternalist system, I send good wishes, and suggest that you won't find this book to your taste.)

Even if you specifically reject eternalism, you will find that you adopt it at times, unwittingly. (Or I do, anyway!) This is particularly true for those who waver in their relationship with eternalism. That includes agnostics, spiritual seekers, and miscellaneous "other"s who remain uncommitted to any stance.

Understanding why we are vulnerable to eternalism is the first step toward avoiding it. These emotional dynamics are independent of specific beliefs or commitments. I'll start with a funny story about a time I got suckered by eternalism. Then I'll explain more generally its emotional appeal.

Then I'll point out ways it fails to deliver on its emotional promises, and causes harm and suffering. This can be hard to accept, because eternalism seems to offer hope, solace, purpose, ethical certainty, and all manner of other desirable meaning-goods. It promises control over your life—but cannot deliver. Seeing through this deceptive game lets you escape playing it.

Eternalism depends on a series of ploys to make it seem plausible. These are tricks we play on ourselves, and each other, to avoid seeing eternalism's failures. I will explain how to recognize and disarm each of these tactics.

This is (mostly) not about religion

Religions—especially fundamentalist ones—are the most obvious forms of eternalism. However, eternalism is more basic than religion, or any other system. It's not about specific beliefs; it is a fundamental attitude to meaningness. It can show up unaccompanied by any conceptual system. It can show up in non-ideological popular attitudes to meaning—for example, in idealized conceptions of romance, illustrated at the top of this page.

So, although parts of my discussion of eternalism may sound similar to familiar criticisms of religion, it applies to atheists, skeptics, and rationalists too. We are not immune. Dropping religious beliefs is only a first step towards freeing ourselves from eternalism.

Political ideologies—especially extremist ones—insist on fixed meanings. So do various other systems, including some brands of rationalism, psychotherapy, scientism, and so on. The final part of this chapter discusses these non-theistic forms of eternalism.

4 Comments

Gambling addiction trades on the illusion that winning is meaningful

I'll begin with a story about a time I fell under the spell of eternalism, with ridiculous results.

Then, I'll draw some serious conclusions about the way eternalism works.

How I discovered The Ultimate Meaning Of Being

The point of gambling was lost on me.

I am not especially risk-averse. As a businessman, I often made decisions in which millions of dollars, and the survival of the enterprise, were at stake. Nowadays, I pursue outdoor sports in which death is a definite possibility.

On the other hand, I do not enjoy risk for its own sake. I see no point in taking risks unless the expected rewards are greater.

The puzzling thing about casino gambling is that it has "negative expected value." Over time, gamblers almost always lose more money than they make. In fact, the modern conceptual framework for "rational action" was invented to explain why gambling is a bad idea. So what's the point?

A decade ago, I started passing through Reno airport regularly, and sometimes spent the night in hotels there. They all have enormous casinos on the ground floor, laid out so that you cannot avoid walking past innumerable flashing, blooping slot machines on the way to your room.

Being curious about human motivations, I used to watch the gamblers, trying to figure out what they were feeling.

I had some guesses; but I thought I ought to try betting, to see if I could experience the same thing. My guess was that I couldn't. It seemed likely that gamblers gambled because they were stupid, or did not understand negative expectation value, or had some sort of superstitious belief that they were special, so randomness did not apply. I couldn't adopt their wrong beliefs, so I wouldn't be able to have the experience they did.

I had also heard it said that you can only understand gambling by wagering a sum large enough that losing it would be a serious problem for you. I wanted to understand, but not that badly.

Applying rational decision theory, I resolved to obtain as much information as I could at the least possible expected cost. (That strategy is automatic for me.) I looked for the lowest-stakes slot machine, and found one that would let me bet a single cent on each round.

So I fed it a dollar—the least it would accept—and pulled the handle. I immediately won five cents. And ten cents on the next try! Then several losses in a row.

I upped my bet from one to five cents—and won again.

As I consistently won more than I lost, I was gradually suffused with a warm glow. I felt safe and at home in the world. What a blessed relief!

I realized that *the universe loved me*, and that everything was going to come out well after all. My ever-present nagging sense of vague *wrongness* disappeared, and I recognized that it had always been a misunderstanding. Everything is as it should be; everything is connected; everything *makes sense*; everything is benevolently watched over by the eternal ordering principle.

This was eternalism *straight-up*, purely at a bodily, felt level.

I'm disposed to nihilism; so, at the same time, I was running a sardonic mental commentary. The cognitive dissonance between *feeling* unquestioned confidence in the All-Good Cosmic Plan, and

my *intellectual* confidence that casino operators ensure that their slot machines are a losing bet, was extremely funny. That humorousness fed back into my bodily enjoyment.

It didn't take long to conclude that I had gained all the knowledge I had asked for, and far more. The universe, in its infinite generosity, had gifted me with profound insight. To finish the charade, I increased my bet to 25 cents, and then 50 cents.

I walked back toward my hotel room grinning like the village idiot, unspeakably happy.

As I entered the elevator, a sexy lady jumped in with me.

"Lucky night?" she asked.

(It dawned on me only as I was writing this that she was a professional. I'm kind of clueless about such things. A guy in a suit, leaving a casino floor accompanied only by a gigantic grin, is surely a fine business opportunity.)

"No!" I exclaimed, beaming. "At one point I was up by thirty-seven cents, but in the end I lost the whole dollar!"

Her face closed; she turned away, and wouldn't look at me for the rest of the elevator ride.

There's something *wrong* with anyone who's that excited about thirty-seven cents.

Eternalism is an addiction

Actually, winning thirty-seven cents was not going to make a *such* a big difference in my life.

Discovering universal love would. That was a *really great* feeling. Experiencing that all the time—the way some mystics supposedly do—would be fabulous.

That sense of safety, understanding, and certainty could be addictive. I think that's part of why we all frequently fall into the eternalist stance—even when we know better.

Eternalism *feels right*—absolutely right. And when we lose it, we'll do almost anything to get it back. We'll pretend not to see obvious randomness, and take up arms to destroy evidence of it.

Eternalism and patternicity

"Patternicity"[1] is the brain's built-in tendency to perceive patterns that don't exist. An example is the experience of seeing a face in the light and dark patches on a rock, or splotch of paint, or piece of toast. It's often impossible to *not-see* them, even when you are undeceived, and know perfectly well there's no face there.

Eternalism is patternicity for broad dimensions of meaning—purpose, value, ethics—rather than physical objects. Our brains seem to have evolved to find patterns of meaning, too. In the casino, the intellectual understanding that my feelings were ridiculous did not make them any less profound. Runs of unexpected good or bad luck trigger the eternalist stance automatically.

Meaningness is not merely subjective

Some claim that meanings are merely subjective: matters of personal opinion, or at most cultural conventions. Unfortunately, this slides rapidly into nihilism. Fortunately, meanings are not merely subjective. I will explain both this in detail later in the book, but:

If meaningness was merely subjective, it would not be possible to be wrong about it. However, my felt beliefs about meaning, in the grip of a run of good luck, were definitely outright wrong.

Eternalism and dopamine

The joy of winning, patternicity, addiction, mania, and religion are all connected by the neurotransmitter dopamine.[2] Dopamine plays a key role in motivation and reward. It spikes in response to *unexpected success*, and is experienced as pleasurable and energizing.

Dopamine reinforces your discovery of a valuable connection, with a new practical understanding of the world. It's your brain telling you you finally got things right, for once—so pay attention, remember this, and do it again!

Random gambling wins are unexpected, and therefore cause dopamine release. Unfortunately, that increases patternicity, because the brain treats dopamine as evidence of insight. Gamblers typically believe in "luck" as something that comes and goes, and "streaks" of wins or losses that they can detect. When "on a winning streak," they expect it to continue; but they also believe a losing streak must be balanced by future winnings. Either way, perceptions of non-existent patterns keep them playing.

Stimulant drugs, such as nicotine, cocaine, and speed, raise dopamine levels, mimicking the reward effect of unexpected success. Stimulant addiction and gambling addiction are, therefore, believed to work in much the same way.

Mania—the "up" phase of manic depression—is similar to an cocaine high, and may also be dopamine-mediated.[3,4]

Hyper-religiosity is common in mania. The manic feels full of cosmic realization, spiritual vision, confidence, and charisma. Many religious leaders probably experience stable hypomania—the only mildly-delusional form that doesn't interfere much with life.

Eternalism straight-up

Eternalism is most obvious in systems that reinforce it with concepts. For example, Christianity reinforces eternalism with beliefs about God, who makes everything meaningful.

My slot-machine experience was eternalism *straight-up*, with no conceptual framework. God was not in the picture, because I'm a life-long atheist, and thirty-seven cents was not enough to change my mind about Him. Probably if I *had* believed in God, my mental commentary would have been about my relationship with Him, though.

Instead, I had just a vague feeling about my relationship with the Non-Me. When I say I felt that "the universe loves me," this did not involve any concept of "the universe" as a thing; rather, a vague omnidirectional feeling of being loved.

Eternalism and systems

It's easy to see how experiences similar to mine in the casino (but more intense or frequent) can grow into eternalist systems. Put a name on the feeling, make up some theories about it, and you've founded a religion, self-help movement, or alternative therapy. Your vague certainty that *everything now makes sense* justifies your metaphysical speculations.

Established eternalist systems can also co-opt such experiences, and use them to reinforce their conceptual dogmas. Whenever someone feels something like I did, the system's representative can say "Yes! You got it! That was God's love / psychological integration / enlightenment / healing energy / *etc.*"

And when, inevitably, it dissipates, he or she will tell you what you need to do to get it back. Eternalist systems relentlessly exploit this addictive dynamic.

Critics of eternalist systems usually attack their beliefs. False beliefs are mostly not what make eternalism compelling, though—it's the emotional dynamics. Addiction is only one of those.

To free yourself, or others, from eternalism, addressing the emotional dynamics is even more important than refuting concepts.

Eternalism makes you miserable

Unfortunately, we can't experience *unexpected* success very often; we'd come to expect it. Trying to prolong the dopamine high usually makes you miserable instead.

Gamblers almost all lose money in the long run. Coming off of cocaine is depressing. Then it takes bigger and bigger doses to get you equally high, with increasingly nasty side-effects. Mania ends in crippling depression.

Eternalism also always lets you down. It seems to offer hope and solace, but in the end it always runs into the brick wall of reality. Then, when it's impossible to ignore nebulosity, you feel abandoned by the eternal ordering principle. That's the profoundest possible betrayal.

Even nihilism feels better at such times.

And so, automatically, we swing back and forth between the two.

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1. 1.More formally, patternicity is called "apophenia."
2. 2.This is according to current neuroscience, which is always subject to revision. I think the connection between gambling, patternicity, addiction, mania, and eternalism holds regardless of the mechanism.
3. 3.The science of this isn't yet clear, as of 2013. Other neurotransmitters are also involved.
4. 4.Depression is closely connected with nihilism, just as hypomania is connected with eternalism. Depressives experience below-average patternicity, and diminished pleasure and motivation from unexpected successes.

16 Comments

Smarmy guy

Eternalism is the most attractive of all stances.[1] It's simple and easy to understand. It promises everything you could want from meaning: certainty, safety, understanding, and control. It offers solid ground; a foundation on which you can build a meaningful life.

Eternalism guarantees that everything is under control, meaningness-wise. Meanings are clear and fixed; they won't slide out from under you. Ethics won't change with fashion; your purpose in life won't suddenly become pointless; you are not going turn into someone other than the person you truly are and have always been.

If you play your part in the Cosmic Plan, everything will be well. You are guaranteed a good outcome if you follow the rules. Even when your life *seems* to be a chaotic disaster, even when you doubt whether it means anything—even then, it is all part of the Cosmic Plan, and there is nothing to worry about. Conflict and uncertainty, all sorts of messiness about meaning—these are only illusions.

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1. 1.Eternalism seems also to be the most biologically natural stance. Something like it is automatic; our brains just go there by default. See the discussions of patternicity earlier, and magical thinking later. More precisely, the innate human worldview is probably animism, which is not *quite* eternalistic. Animism makes everything meaningful, but does not make explicit *that* everything is meaningful—which is part of my understanding of eternalism.

1 Comment

Certainty: the mythical holy grail

What we want most from meaning is *guarantees*.

Life is nebulous: chaotic, risky, and confusing. Efforts that should work fail. The good suffer and wrong-doers prosper. The world does not make sense. Each of us is torn by uncertainties, conflicting desires, and impossible decisions.

We want assurance that this is all just an illusion. We want to hear that the real world is—somehow—orderly and consistently meaningful. We want *answers*—sometimes desperately.

Eternalism promises to deliver those answers, and to guarantee them. It cannot; and so it lies.

Eternalism pretends to offer certainty. It pretends that behind apparent chaos, there is a perfect pattern that explains everything. It pretends to end all doubt, and the suffering, confusion, and anxiety that comes with it.

Eternalism can be exhilarating! It cannot deliver accurate answers, but it can deliver a *feeling* of certainty—temporarily. You adopt the eternalist stance by blinding yourself to nebulosity; by pretending not to see contradictions.

It's a huge relief, an occasion of joy, to set aside all doubts. Adopting eternalism frees all the energy that was tied up by internal divisions; power struggles within the self.[1] Certainty about life-purpose and ethics ends confusion about what to do and how to live; full of confidence, you can make rapid progress in life.

Eternalism is now typically packaged in systems. Sometimes raw eternalism can provide certainty without specifics—as in my casino experience. Usually, though, we need a web of

justifications, of canned answers, to not-see nebulosity. That's what ideologies—religions, political theories, secular cults—provide. These justifications frequently fail, when nebulosity contradicts them.

When the fantasy of absolute answers is threatened by evidence, eternalism responds with various psychological ploys. These include, for instance, suppressing dissenting thoughts, physically removing yourself from contradictory situations, kitschy sentimentality, blind faith, mystification, and arming yourself against perception.

Eternalism is at its most glorious in a conversion experience, during the honeymoon after you have first committed to a system. That can last for a few weeks to a few years; for as long as you can silence your internal voices of doubt. Eventually it becomes impossible to not-see the evidence against the system. You may remain committed, but it can only be a wavering commitment. The honeymoon turns into a warm memory, cherished on Sunday mornings but increasingly distant from everyday experience.

Alternatively, seeking renewed certainty, you may search for a new system. Some people become serial conversion junkies. But as with opiate addiction, it becomes harder and harder to recreate the first high. And the periods of doubt between commitments, like heroin withdrawal, turn increasingly into nihilistic anxiety and despair. This pattern was particularly common in the California Bay Area in the late 20th century. It afflicted many of my friends, and that was my initial motivation to write this book. Since I started writing, more than a decade ago, new patterns have emerged—but they are no less dysfunctional.

In the 21st century West, there are hundreds of competing eternalist systems. Although they all have the same fundamental stance toward meaning, and the same emotional dynamics, they disagree sharply about specifics. This adds to the chaos and confusion that eternalism tries to dispel. Further, there is widespread understanding that *none* of the systems can provide certainty. The search for the One True System no longer seems credible.

In fact, the kinds of answers we want cannot be had, anywhere. Accepting this fact may lead to nihilism, the denial of all meaning. That is a bad outcome—but not a necessary one.

The complete stance recognizes that certainty is impossible, but that meaning is real. If we set aside the futile hope for absolute answers, we can find patterns of meaning that are usually good enough to navigate our lives. No ultimate, perfectly reliable foundation for morality or purpose is possible—but we *do* regularly solve problems of ethics and direction; and therefore we *can*!

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1. 1.Kramer and Alstad's *The Guru Papers* provides a penetrating analysis of the joy of eternalist self-blinding, particularly in the case of American pop religion, but also in eternalist political systems such as Communism.

3 Comments

Can opener

Total understanding—the feeling that *everything makes sense*—is one of the most seductive promises of eternalism. The feeling is wonderful, but unfortunately the understanding is illusory.

Recent research shows how illusions of understanding arise, what their effects are, and how they can be dispelled. Most concretely, this includes studies of illusory understanding of everyday physical causality: common natural phenomena and household devices. That isn't directly

relevant to *Meaningness*. However, the same patterns of illusory understanding also apply to issues of meaningness, such as ethics and politics.

Understanding and explanation

Certainty, understanding, and control are closely linked promises of eternalism.[1] If you are certain an explanation is correct, you have a stronger feeling of understanding. If you have an explanation for why something means something, it increases your certainty that it does mean that. If you understand something, you feel that you can control it. Psychology experiments show that people *feel* they can control events they definitely can't, so long as they understand them.

Personal accounts of conversion to communism—an eternalist political ideology—provide fine examples of the emotional power of illusory understanding. Conversion brings newfound optimism, joy, insight, and all-encompassing comprehension.

> The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull; the whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There is now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past—a past already remote, when one had lived in dismal ignorance in the tasteless, colorless world of those who *don't know*.[2]

After all, every minute aspect of daily life *is* caught up in systems of material production, and therefore can be subjected to Marxist analysis. Waiting at the bus stop, the scheduled times for three buses go by, and then two appear all at once. Why? Because of capitalist exploitation. *Everything* is because of capitalist exploitation.

(Exercises for the reader: (1) Figure out why capitalist exploitation explains this common pattern of bus arrivals. (2) Figure out a better, non-Marxist explanation.[3])

Marxism, like Catholicism, is an extremely well-worked-out system. Countless brilliant intellectuals, working for centuries, have already figured out explanations for everything. Well, almost everything. If you are willing to swallow a few camels, Jesuits will strain out all the gnats for you. In other words, if you accept a few giant absurdities, they can give coherent, logical explanations for all details.

Newer, less-elaborated ideologies—UFO cults, for example—may provide a strong, if vague, *feeling* of understanding. However, they have few explanations to back that up. This is one reason they mostly only work as closed subcultures. If you are a communist or Catholic, you can talk to outsiders without your belief system collapsing, because you have answers to their objections.

Illusions of understanding: everyday causality

Leonid Rozenblit and Frank Keil, in an influential 2002 paper, showed that people believe they understand familiar manufactured objects (such as can openers) and natural phenomena (such as tides) much better than they actually do. The researchers had subjects rate their understanding of various objects and phenomena, and then asked them to give an explanation. After that, the subjects rated their own understanding again. Their second ratings were *much* lower. Most subjects were surprised to find, after trying and failing to explain, that they understood much less than they had thought.

You might like to try this before reading on. On a scale of 1 to 7, how well do you think you understand a can opener? 1 would mean you know what it is for, but have basically no idea how it

works. 7 means you know everything that anyone would know, short of being a can opener designer.

Now, explain how a can opener works. You could write this out in words, or draw a can opener from memory. Label the parts with what they do. (No fair looking at the picture at the head of this page! And for a fair trial, you need to do this on paper or screen; as we'll see, it's almost impossible not to cheat if you do it in your head.)

When you are done: has your estimate of your depth of understanding changed?

Now go look at an actual can opener, and at least put it up against a can as if you were about to open it. Turn the handle and watch how the mechanism moves. Then re-rate your written understanding. And how well do you think you understand now, after examining the reality?

I did this after reading the Rozenblit paper, and was surprised to find that my explanation had some details wrong, and significant missing parts. I also discovered, after playing with two ordinary manual crank-turning can openers, that they worked on completely different principles. I've used both types a million times, and never noticed this, because you *use* them exactly the same way. My rating of my original understanding went from 6 to 3. I'm estimating my new understanding at 6, but I'm worried I'm still overconfident!

It turns out that for most everyday objects, we have some vague mental image, but not an actual causal understanding. Here's the Rozenblit paper:

> Most people feel they understand the world with far greater detail, coherence, and depth than they really do. … [They] wrongly attribute far too much fidelity and detail to their mental representations because the sparse renderings do have some efficacy and do provide a rush of insight.

("A rush of insight"… Remind you of something? A spectre haunting Europe, perhaps?)

We think we understand a can opener because we can play a mental movie of using one. That *feels* as though it is almost as good as actually watching. But:

> The mental movie is much more like Hollywood than it is like real life—it fails to respect reality constraints. When we try to lean on the seductively glossy surface we find the façades of our mental films are hollow card-board. That discovery, the revelation of the shallowness of our mental representations for perceptually salient processes, may be what causes the surprise in our participants.

Unless you are a kitchen tool engineer, there's no reason to actually understand how a can opener works. What everyone else needs is to know (1) what it is for and (2) how to use it. So most of the time "understanding" is really "comfort with." It means you know how to interact with it well enough to get by, and you are reassured that it is not going to explode without warning. This comfort is provided mainly by familiarity, not understanding. Having used a can opener many times convinces you that you understand it, because you can almost always make one work, and you almost never cut yourself. Tellingly, Rozenblit and Keil found that their subjects did *not* overestimate their "how-to" knowledge, only their "how-it-works" knowledge.[4]

Learning how things work is usually a waste of time, from an evolutionary perspective. And total understanding is never even possible. The "illusion of explanatory depth" may have evolved to tell us when to stop:

> We have to learn to use much sparser representations of causal relations that are good enough to give us the necessary insights: insights that go beyond associative

similarity but which at the same time are not overwhelming in terms of cognitive load. It may therefore be quite adaptive to have the illusion that we know more than we do so that we settle for what is enough. The illusion might be an essential governor on our drive to search for explanatory underpinnings; it terminates potentially inexhaustible searches for ever-deeper understanding by satiating the drive for more knowledge once some skeletal level of causal comprehension is reached.

This doesn't always work right; our brains' guesses about when to stop can go wrong. Education theorists find that students often stop trying to understand too soon, when they merely feel "familiar" with the material, because the modern classroom demands a depth of understanding beyond what would have been useful to our ancestors. Conversely, my interest in Precambrian evolution is probably a pathological result of mild autism—a brain abnormality.

If you look closely at a can opener in operation, you can see immediately how it works. Then you forget as soon as you look away. Knowing that you *could* figure out how something works, whenever you need to, is a good reason not to bother until then—and not to remember afterward. Rozenblit and Keil hypothesized that our brains confuse vague visual memory with understanding, and that this was the source of the illusion they found.

This was confirmed in Rebecca Lawson's study of people's understanding of bicycles. She found that most people have no clue what a bicycle looks like, much less how one works, even if they own one. (I know that sounds implausible; the results in the paper are dramatic.) We all have a *memory of seeing* a bicycle, and on that basis think we know what one looks like—but few people can draw something that's even approximately similar. The bicycle-like things they do draw could not possibly work.

You might like to try this before reading on. Don't bother being artistic; the picture can just show how the main parts (handlebars, frame, seat, pedals, chain, wheels) attach to each other.

Lawson found that people *can* easily understand how a bicycle works, and draw one accurately, if there's one in front of them. She writes:

> We may be using the world as an "outside memory" to save us from having to store huge amounts of information. Since much of the information that we need in everyday life can be found simply by moving our eyes, we do not need to store it and then retrieve it from memory.

(This point will be important, by the way, in my explanations for how meaning works, much later in this book.)

Here's a bicycle drawn by someone who rides one most days:

> Bicycle drawing

This "bicycle" couldn't turn, because the front wheel is connected to frame struts that form two sides of a rigid quadrilateral. Mistakenly, it has the chain going around the front wheel as well as the back one, which also would make turning impossible (among other problems, with gearing for instance).

Perceptual understanding isn't possible for all devices—for example if they have hidden parts, or are very complicated, or run on invisible forces such as electricity.[5]

So what about meaning, which is also invisible?

Illusions of understanding: ethics

Most people think they understand ethics reasonably well. However, their ethical explanations often don't make sense; they depend on weird assumptions, use dream logic, or skip over major issues. My story "The puzzle of meaningness" includes some humorous examples. Our feeling of understanding ethics is largely illusory; we don't notice that our own ethical explanations are incoherent.

The following question is a classic of moral psychology research:

> A woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to produce. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about $1,000 which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it."[6] So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's laboratory to steal the drug for his wife. Should Heinz have broken into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?

You might like to write out your own brief explanation before reading on.

This exercise may seem risky or embarrassing. A feeling of moral competence is often close to the heart of one's sense of self. However, most experts say there is no right or wrong answer, although there are interestingly different *kinds* of answers.

It might also help to know that even professional theologians and moral philosophers are often unable to give coherent ethical explanations. Despite fancy footwork, theological answers boil down to "because that's what God wants," with no clear reason He wants that. Secular academic theories of ethics are all known to be wrong. Moral philosophers must support some theory, arguing "this is less bad than the others," but most admit that their professional expertise is rarely useful when dealing with everyday ethical problems. Evidently, professional ethicists are afflicted with a powerful illusion of explanatory depth.

Why do people think they mostly understand ethics, if they can't explain it coherently? As with can openers, we know what it is *for*, and we know *how to use it* well enough to get by. The feeling of understanding is an illusion based on familiarity and comfort. We know through experience that we can navigate ethical issues reasonably reliably, and they are not going to suddenly explode. As with devices, this is adequate for most people most of the time.

Ethics sometimes *does* explode on you—for example, if you are caught having an affair. It's not just that there will be bad consequences; there will be many difficult choices and judgements in sorting out the mess, and the inadequacy of your ethical understanding may become obvious. Sometimes such crises lead to psychological growth, including developing a more sophisticated ethical understanding.

Research in moral psychology has found that people's ethical understanding passes through a predictable series of stages. The stages are defined not in terms of what people consider right or wrong, but what sorts of explanations they use to justify those judgements. The Heinz story was invented by Lawrence Kohlberg as a way of eliciting such explanations. He assigned them to six stages of moral development. There are some problems with Kohlberg's theory—mainly, it is too

rationalistic—but the conclusion that people advance from lesser to greater ethical understanding seems correct, and important.

Disquietingly, research has found that most adults get stuck somewhere in the middle of the developmental sequence. The *illusion of ethical understanding* is one reason they may not progress. As with bicycles, if you think you know how ethics works, and can use it well enough most of the time, there seems no reason to try to understand better.

Robert Kegan has extended and improved Kohlberg's framework. He describes an ethical equivalent to Rozenblit and Keil's discovery that attempting to explain things can reveal one's own lack of understanding. The illusion of understanding sometimes dissolves when you have to give an ethical explanation.

Realizing your explanations are inadequate opens the possibility of a forward ethical stage transition. This happens only rarely, however. One reason is that it is easy to recognize that your understanding of a bicycle is wrong, by visually comparing your drawing with a real one. It is much harder to reality-test moral understanding, because ethics are far more nebulous than bicycles.

Eternalism, by promoting a reassuring illusion of ethical understanding, hinders moral development. This is most obvious in religious fundamentalism, which denies the nebulosity of ethics, stranding you in a childish moral understanding. Rationalist eternalism typically fixates some moral theory that is also obviously wrong, but does have some coherent systematic justification. These are adolescent rather than childish; utilitarianism is a common example.

Fortunately, eternalist ethical systems have become less credible, so it's easier to advance to more sophisticated understandings. Unfortunately, "easier" is not "easy," and ethical anxiety—a sense of being lost at sea when it comes to ethics—is increasingly prevalent. That is a major topic of the upcoming chapter on ethics.

Illusions of understanding: politics

Contemporary "politics" is mostly about polarized moral opinions.[7] It is now considered normal, or even obligatory, for people to express vehement political opinions about issues they know nothing about, and which do not affect their life in any way. This is harmful and stupid.

"Political Extremism Is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding" (Fernbach *et al.*, 2013) applies the Rozenblit method to political explanations. After subjects tried to explain how proposed political programs they supported would actually work, their confidence in them dropped. Subjects realized that their explanations were inadequate, and that they didn't really understand the programs. This decreased their certainty that they would work. The subjects expressed more moderate opinions, and became less willing to make political donations in support of the programs, after discovering that they didn't understand them as well as they had thought.

Fernbach *et al.* found that subjects' opinions did *not* moderate when they were asked to explain *why* they supported their favored political programs. Other experiments have found this usually increases the extremeness of opinions, instead. Generating an explanation for why you support a program, rather than of how it would work, leads to retrieving or inventing justifications, which makes you more certain, not less. These political justifications usually rely on abstract values, appeals to authority, and general principles that require little specific knowledge of the issue. They are impossible to reality-test, and therefore easy to fool yourself with.

Extreme, ignorant political opinions are largely driven by eternalism. I find the Fernbach paper heartening, in showing that people can be shaken out of them. *Arguing* about politics almost never changes anyone's mind; *explaining*, apparently, does.

This suggests a practice: when someone is ranting about a political proposal you disagree with, keep asking them "how would that part work?" Rather than raising objections, see if you can draw them into developing an ever-more-detailed causal explanation. If they succeed, they might change your mind! If not—they might change their own.

How does eternalism create illusions of understanding?

Eternalism promises to make *everything* make sense. It sometimes does deliver an illusion of universal understanding (as in the account of conversion to communism, above). Usually it can't quite manage that, because almost all eternalism is wavering. The curtain that is supposed to conceal the illusionist is translucent. Most people realize they don't understand everything. Still, eternalism does trick most people into believing they understand many things they don't.

Somehow, we don't notice that our explanations don't make sense. How does eternalism manage that? I don't have a complete answer, but I do have pieces of an answer. In fact, there is no one answer; eternalism has a big bag of tricks. The main part of this chapter describes a series of *eternalist ploys*: ways of thinking, feeling, talking, and acting that stabilize the stance. All of these are tricks for deliberately *not understanding* meaningness.

The rest of this page discusses some other mechanisms that don't fit into this "eternalist ploy" category.

Visualizing meaningness

Research like Lawson's bicycle experiment shows that genuine understanding usually depends on perceptual support. It comes from exploring concrete examples by looking and poking. To some extent we can transfer that understanding by mental visualization; but as Rozenblit found, this is sketchy.

Direct perceptual support is generally impossible for meaningness (ethics, purpose, and so on). However, we do use mental images to help understand these issues too. Thinking about the Heinz story, I generated an image of his children watching their mother dying, for example. Likewise, when thinking about life purpose, we fantasize scenes of accomplishment, or imagine dying without having gotten anything much done.

These images are emotive, but probably mostly unrealistic and unhelpful. (The Heinz story didn't even *mention* children, for example; maybe he didn't have any!) I suspect eternalism leads us to take these mental movies much more seriously than they deserve. (How? I'm not sure.)

Mystical experiences of total understanding

People in non-ordinary states, produced by psychedelic drugs or meditation, often proclaim sudden, unshakable, universal understanding. They rarely or never can explain their supposed understanding. I think these are probably mostly illusory. Such experiences *may* give genuine but ineffable insight into *some* things. I'm reasonably sure they involve no actual understanding of most things.

Eternalist systems are often led by people who have such visions; but most of their adherents don't. Ordinary eternalists have to rely on the cosmic understanding of special people.

Socially distributed (mis)understanding of meaning

Understanding of the physical world is socially distributed. You don't need to understand how to build a bicycle frame, because there are people whose job that is, and you can rely on their understanding.

The same division of labor applies to understanding meaning.[8] For instance, if you are Catholic, you know (or should know) that masturbation is a grave sin.[9] Why?

You may remember the story of Onan, who spilled his seed on the ground. You may also remember that the story is not about masturbation, but *coitus interruptus*. (That's confusing.) You may recall that masturbation is a sin against chastity, and that the only proper use of the genitals is procreation. Or maybe also conjugal love. Why?

This is a pesky, impertinent question. You are (or should be) quite certain that you are correct, even if you can't give a coherent explanation.

You don't *need* to be able to give an explanation, because you know that if you go to a Jesuit, he will (or should)[10] be able to explain in detail, with extensive logic, and answers to all objections. Your certainty can rest on your knowledge that an explanation is available, without having to know the details.

Although… for nearly everyone, it's obvious that whatever explanation a priest gives for the evil of masturbation, it will be nonsense. It will be verbiage that *sounds like* explanation, but isn't. Only loyalty to the eternalist system—the will to believe—could fool anyone into thinking it's meaningful.

The same is true for most political opinions. Individuals are usually incapable of producing coherent explanations; but why should they?

You have heard experts on TV explaining Benghazi and Keystone, and they seemed to make sense; and you know they are good and trustworthy and smart people, because they share your fundamental values. You might not be able to explain those issues in detail, but you are confident that *they* can. But perhaps those explanations are about as accurate as the priest's?

Agreeing to agree about meanings

Because eternalist delusion is so desirable, people collude to maintain it. We all agree to agree—vociferously—to whatever meanings our social group comes up with. That is a genuinely compassionate activity. We all want to save each other from nihilism.

Agreeing violently about political opinions is a major social activity. Groups of friends get together and regurgitate political explanations they've heard on TV or read on the web. This reinforces certainty and the illusion of understanding.

Talent for regurgitation gives you social prestige; people think it's an important life skill. Imagine —if you got good enough at it, you could go on TV and vomit opinions in front of millions of people! Mostly, though, this is a collaborative, improvisatory, small-group activity.

Similarly, ethical explanation is mainly a social activity. Moral philosophers want ethics to be about rational individual decision-making, but it mostly isn't. (This is one reason academic ethics is so useless.)

Research by Jonathan Haidt and others shows that ethical explanations are mostly used to justify actions we have taken or want to take. This "social intuitionism" is a descriptive theory, about how ethics works in practice. It's not a good account (even according to Haidt) of how ethics *ought* to work.

In the ethics chapter, I'll ask "what is ethics for?" if not social justification, and not rational individual decision-making. I'll argue that genuine understanding is genuinely valuable.

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1. 1.Nevertheless, certainty, understanding, and control all seem to be separate innate psychological drives. We seek certainty, even when understanding is entirely unavailable. We seek understanding, even when control is obviously impossible. Personally, I *love* understanding things like supernovas and Precambrian evolution, even though there's nothing I can do with them.
2. 2.*The God That Failed* is a famous collection of accounts by Western intellectuals explaining why they converted to communism and later became disenchanted. I'm relying here on the summary in Baumeister's *Meanings of Life*, p. 299. The quote is from Arthur Koestler, p. 23 in *The God That Failed* according to Baumeister; italics in original.
3. 3.This is called "bus bunching"; the Wikipedia has a fascinating explanation. The dynamical chaos theory used there is also important in my explanation of how meaning works.
4. 4.This result is actually a bit surprising, because the psychological literature generally finds that most people are overconfident about most things. Rozenblit and Keil did find overconfidence effects for some other types of knowledge, such as geography, but overconfidence about causality was much larger.
5. 5.Rozenblit and Keil found preliminary evidence that subjects were less likely to overestimate their understanding in these cases. I don't know whether this has been confirmed by subsequent studies.
6. 6.If you know the least bit about drug development, this story will seem absurdly unrealistic. That annoys me. Maybe this absurdity is not relevant to the essential ethical dilemma, which you are supposed to somehow abstract from the details. However, I worry that unrealistic scenarios—the famous "trolley problems" are another example—give misleading results. In fact, I suspect artificial "thought experiments," even if they weren't obviously silly, may be worse than useless for understanding ethics. I'll suggest later that observation of real-life ethical deliberation and action in "ecologically valid conditions" is needed instead.
7. 7.I'll analyze this important, unfortunate development repeatedly, at various points later in the book.
8. 8.This will be central in my eventual explanation for how meaningness works. Interestingly (to me), my PhD thesis—titled *Vision, Instruction, and Action*—is also about perceptual understanding during improvised activity, and socially distributed understanding (communicated through over-the-shoulder instructions) of that activity.
9. 9.See Catechism 2396 if you are in doubt.
10. 10.Disastrously, some priests have gotten wobbly on masturbation, and are leading millions into damnation.

14 Comments

Next Page: The fantasy of control →

> I want a remote control for my life
> Image courtesy Bruno Souza Leão

If only you could get control over your life. If only things went according to plan. If only people did what they're supposed to.

None of that is going to happen. Reality is often chaotic. Things fall apart, break down, slip away, blow up in your face—metaphorically, or for real.

The physical world, the social world, our selves, and meanings: all are nebulous—intangible, amorphous, non-separable, transient, ambiguous. This makes complete control impossible.

Eternalism denies nebulosity. It hints that you *can* get control over your life—if you just make it conform to the proper patterns. This fantasy is one of eternalism's strongest selling points—and most harmful lies.

Pursuing that fantasy has predictable bad results. Attempts to exert partial influence are often sensible and successful; attempts to gain complete control are dopey and disastrous.

Control is a major topic that shows up in many parts of this book. Besides eternalism, it is central for two dimensions of meaning, capability and contingency. It's also significant in dualism, and plays a major role in confusions about the self, ethics, authority, and sacredness. This page is an introductory overview.

Control is closely connected with certainty and understanding, covered in the previous two pages. You may find it helpful to read those, if you haven't already.

Nebulosity makes complete control impossible

Plane with cloud-seeding gun
Plane with cloud-zapping gun. (CC) Christian Jansky

"Nebulosity"—cloud-like-ness—is the impossibility of completely grasping anything. If we could just get a handle on things, we could force them to behave. But, to varying degrees, we never can.

This applies to the physical world, just as it does to the psychological, social, and meaning worlds. It is never possible to get perfect control even over a simple mechanical device. I'll give technical explanations for this later, in discussions of dynamical chaos and the objective inseparability of objects. A simple way to see it, though: your device could always get hit by meteor, at any time, and then it will stop doing what you want. This is very unlikely, but shows that the world is never perfectly predictable.

Most activities involve other people, who are notoriously difficult to control. Even the most powerful tyrant cannot entirely manage it. Worse, perhaps, you cannot always control even yourself. Sometimes you find yourself doing things you hadn't intended, and will probably regret later, because it's what you want at the time. And, even when events go according to plan, their meanings may squirm out from under you. The outcome you so desired may be, objectively, just as you wanted it—and yet it no longer seems significant, as it did when you began. (I'll say more about each of these types of failure of control later on this page.)

Overall, nebulosity often seems the main obstacle to control,[1] and pattern the main resource. Nebulosity, therefore, often becomes the hated enemy. Eternalism promises to make nebulosity go away by fixating patterns, making complete control possible. Of course, it cannot.

Fortunately, nebulosity is not actually a hostile force. It delivers unexpected opportunities, and surprising good outcomes as well as bad ones. Learning to appreciate nebulosity is an important way out of eternalism and into the complete stance.

Pattern makes interaction possible

In the ideal situation of perfect control, you could make anything you want happen simply by choosing it. You would be unconstrained—causally unaffected—by the outside world. Control would flow only outward from you toward the world. The *locus of control* would be purely *internal* to you.

In the opposite extreme, you would be entirely controlled by the world, and any choices you might make would be meaningless. The locus of control would be entirely *external*, and causality would flow only inward, from the world acting on you.

Neither of these extremes occurs in reality. Ultimately, this is a fact of physics; causality is always distributed, and one thing cannot affect another without also being affected by it to some extent.[2] However, it's also obvious in everyday life, so long as you look without forcing an extreme internalist or externalist view.

Locus of control, in other words, is always nebulous: partial, shifting, uncertain, ambiguous. This is partly because the self/other boundary is itself nebulous; it's often unclear what is "me" and what is "that." Partly self and other are nebulous because locus of control is nebulous; these are, in part, two ways of saying the same thing. (This is a key aspect of my analysis of what "self" means.)

Because "control" is often understood as "complete control," an alternate vocabulary may be useful. One might speak of "influence," meaning partial control, for example. This is somewhat misleading, though, by suggesting that you are active and the world is passive (although passive-aggressive: it doesn't always do what you tell it).

I prefer the word *interaction*: it suggests that both you and the world are actively participating in determining what happens.[3] "Interaction" covers causality shared with both the non-human world and with other people.

Improvisation is characteristic of interaction. Because the world is nebulous, you can't plan in advance everything you are going to do. You always have to figure some actions out as you go along. Usually, when the time comes, it's obvious what you need to do, although you could not have foreseen it.

Collaboration is the most important form of interaction.[4] Most human activities involve other people. Human interactions may be hostile; not all are collaborations. But collaborations are the most valuable, and most interesting (to me at least).

Practical activity is a spontaneous partner dance. You are continually responsive to the details of your unfolding situation, as revealed by perception. It is futile to try to force interactions to conform to a preconceived idea of how things should go.

> Fukushima nuclear reactor on fire
> Fukushima nuclear reactor on fire. (CC) Digital Globe

"Control" sometimes has negative connotations, and "collaboration" positive ones. However, my point is not moral or political. The issue here is not that control is *not nice*, it's that complete control is physically impossible.

So long as you recognize that nebulosity is inevitable, there is nothing necessarily wrong with seeking partial control. Sometimes it's even ethically imperative to get as much control as possible; for example in designing and operating a nuclear power plant.[5]

The psychology of control confusions

The rest of this page covers specific confused attitudes to control:

- Illusory control
- Control breakdowns, and explaining-away lack of control
- The illusion of zero control
- The impossibility of self-control
- The impossibility of control of other people
- Illusions of control by proxy
- Monist and dualist approaches to control
- The fantasy of getting what you want by renouncing control
- Stupid things people do when control gets boring
- The impossibility of controlling meaningness itself

Illusions of control

In many situations, it is difficult or impossible to know how much control you have. You have to guess, based on understanding and experience. Extensive psychological research[6] has shown that most people *overestimate* how much control they have—or could get—most of the time. This has several objectively harmful effects.

If you believe you have more control than you do, you are likely to take larger risks than you should. Experiments (and everyday experience) show that overconfidence leads to gambling-like behavior. It accounts for a lot of stupid accidents and bad life-decisions.

Overconfidence that you can eventually get control (through practice, or by applying bigger hammers) can make you waste time and resources trying to control the uncontrollable. Combined with the sunk cost fallacy, this can lead to applying ever increasing resources to an unworkable strategy. Believing that control must always be possible makes it difficult to learn from failure. Each disaster looks like a mere temporary setback, and you may take it as evidence that even more violent effort is called for.

Eternalism can make anything less than complete control emotionally unacceptable. Letting go, and accepting partial control, may seem too threatening. Then you may pursue control *for its own sake*, even when it has no objective benefit, or when the costs of maintaining control are obviously too high.

Control is only ever partial; but eternalistic hope for complete control can lead to over-controlling. That is the counter-productive application of extra force, complexity, or rigidity, when those actually result in *less* control, not more; or when the cost of increasing control outweighs its benefits.

Since it is pattern that makes partial control possible, over-control often attempts to impose a pattern by brute force. The pattern may be a real one that just doesn't fit the situation (you are not actually that person's best friend, so they aren't going to do that task for you); or it may be an entirely imaginary one (you can't actually find a cure for your retinopathy using tarot cards). Eternalism often leads to inventing spurious patterns that would grant control, and clinging to them even when there's strong evidence against them, if that would mean loss of the illusion of control.[7]

A strong emotional need for control may lead you to refuse to deal with parts of reality that you can't control to your satisfaction. Some people organize their lives to avoid most social

interactions, or responsibility for anything mechanical, or dealing with money—as much as possible. Abandoning the possibility of incomplete control can have a high cost, drastically narrowing the scope of your life.[8]

One common response to nebulosity is excessive, obsessive planning: trying to figure out everything that could go wrong, and what you'd do if it did. Sometimes this is wise, but when you don't fully understand the pattern, planning may be impossible. Over-control and planning also blind you to serendipity and unexpected opportunities.

Often it is better to observe the actual pattern, and to intervene minimally in its flow as events unfold. This skillful improvisation—often coupled with collaboration—can redirect existing forces in the direction you want.[9] Such interaction doesn't provide complete control, but may give better results. It also allows you to change course when new positive possibilities open.

Breakdown

Eternalism promises complete control, but cannot deliver. How to sustain the illusion, when non-control becomes obvious?

The first response is to invent an excuse. Eternalism explains away each failure as a one-off special situation that does not predict future lack of control.

The excuses given by American government agencies and multinational CEOs are essentially the same as those of African witchdoctors and of drug addicts everywhere. This is highly amusing once you notice the pattern.

No one ever says "We mostly don't understand what is going on; the effects of our actions are inherently unpredictable; and our motivations are mixed, so we often undermine our own effectiveness." (Even though that's always the truth for everyone and every organization.) Instead:

- Adverse global economic conditions
- Sudden ripening of negative karma from a previous life
- It's society's fault
- Profits were impacted by supply chain issues
- The gods are grumpy; someone in the village must be having an affair
- It was due to a few corrupt individuals, and does not reflect the high ethical standards, dedicated work, and consistent competence of the Department as a whole
- Negative energy from skeptics in the room interfered with the experiment
- Train delays due to the wrong type of snow on the tracks
- Demonic opposition, stirred up by enemy witchdoctors
- Operational irregularities occurred
- My assistant pronounced one of the words of the spell wrong
- I *never* get that drunk

Everybody knows: I'm not that kind of guy; I wouldn'a did what I did, if I had'n of been high

Such excuses explain that the failure occurred only because you *didn't* have control at the time. Therefore past failure doesn't predict future failure, because of course in the future you *will* have control. Having control is "normal," and should always be expected.

At some point, excuses run out, and the illusion of control collapses. Fear is the natural reaction to being out of control; and it can help deal with some bad situations. However, an eternalistic need to always maintain control can cause constant anxiety or even paranoia.

The eternalistic all-or-nothing tendency makes the sense of control brittle. Any temporary setback may flip you from an illusion of control into the illusion of no-control.

Illusion of helplessness: nihilistic anxiety and depression

Nihilism is the stance that denies all meaningful patterns. That makes meaningful control—or even influence—impossible.

Anxiety and depression are strongly associated with nihilism. Feeling of loss of control in a specific situation is frightening; feeling that you may lose all control produces *pervasive* anxiety. Concluding that you *have* lost all possibility of control—that you are entirely helpless—causes depression: the sense that all action is pointless.

Psychological research has demonstrated that depression collapses the illusion of control.[10] Normally,[11] people overestimate their control; when depressed, people may underestimate.[12]

Perceived lack of control results in learned helplessness—inhibition of practical action—which is believed to be closely related to depression.[13] Similarly, people who experience an external locus of control have been shown to be prone to clinical depression.

Total responsibility is the confused stance, promoted by popular "spiritual" systems, that "you create your own reality." Implicitly, it requires complete control of every aspect of the universe. The opposite stance, victim-think, promoted by popular "political," "ethical," and "psychological" systems, requires denying that you have any influence or power. Both stances try to save you from confronting the fearful question "how much control do I actually have?". However, both absolutist answers lead to dysfunction and misery.

Research finds that people who perceive control as partly internal and partly external, and that it shifts back and forth, handle difficulties more effectively than those with either external or internal locus. This resonates with my claims for the psychological value of the complete stance. For this dimension of meaningness—capability—I call the complete stance light-heartedness. I've summarized it thus:

> Playfully co-create reality in collaboration with each other and the world. No need for self-criticism or for anxiety. Effortless creativity. Obstacle: Hard to let go of need to be reassured about outcomes.

Self-control is impossible

> Ice cream

This is obvious to anyone who has struggled to lose weight.

Eternalism wants to see the self as unitary, separate, durable, consistent, and well-defined—because then it could be in control. We are none of those things. Our selves are inherently, inescapably nebulous; and therefore uncontrollable.

It is often more accurate to see one's self as a community of divergent, competing desires, with constantly-shifting political coalitions among them. Depending on which have the upper hand at

any moment, the actions one chooses change. This frequently undermines plans and intentions. When desire for romance gains power, it forms a firm intention to avoid ice cream to lose weight and become more attractive; but when dessert time comes, desire for noms foments rebellion.[14]

Many excuses—particularly the excuses you make to yourself—boil down to "it wasn't really me who did that." ("Everybody knows I'm not that kind of guy!") At some level, this is outrageously hypocritical; but it is also honest and accurate. The political coalition of desires that drove drunk was not the same coalition that regrets it the next morning—and those coalitions are more-or-less what we call a "self."[15]

Consistent choices would also depend on a clear boundary between "me in here" and "the world out there." The self/other boundary is always somewhat nebulous, however; so you cannot make perfectly independent choices. The more open you are to others, the less control you have. You probably wouldn't have driven home drunk if your friends at the bar hadn't done the same.

Disgust with your own inconsistency motivates the stance of True Self. That would be "who I really am"[16]—a unitary, separate, durable, consistent, and well-defined ideal. The "false self" is the divided, easily-influenced, impetuous, devious, incoherent one. If only you could become your True Self, you would be perfectly virtuous and always in control.

The True Self stance motivates over-control of your desires, and totalitarianism in your internal politics. The supposed True Self—itself actually just a coalition of impulses, fantasies, and fears —becomes a tyrant. It enforces a rigid personal morality and exiles the rest of the self to a dank prison cell. Fearing internal anarchy, it suppresses most enjoyment, creativity, and spontaneity, lest they undermine its control. Festering in the dark, these suppressed self-fragments grow monstrous, twisted, powerful. When eventually they break out in revolt, the carnage can be gruesome.[17]

A healthy self is a series of negotiated compromises among hopes, fears, projects, desires, and relationships, based on recognition that complete control is impossible, so all aspects of the self get enough of what they need that conflict is minimized.

The upcoming chapter on selfness discusses these issues in detail.

Control of others is impossible (and attempts are harmful)

To gain complete control over your own life, you would need to control other people. Not only their actions, but also their thoughts and feelings—because those interact with your own.

Complete control of people is even more impossible than complete control of the inanimate world. Partial control or influence, by various means, is possible, and may often be benign. Sanity requires accepting that everything you do is a collaboration. It also requires accepting partial control (or influence) of others over you.

The eternalistic compulsion toward over-control leads to coercion and abuse of power. Ethical eternalism—moral certainty—provides spurious justifications for forcing other people to do what you want. This ranges in scale from family relationships to world wars.

Totalitarianism, a manifestation of political eternalism, is an extreme example. Ideologues rationalize oppression as necessary for preventing the nihilist apocalypse, a dystopian fantasy of ethical anarchy caused by loss of institutional control.

The stance of reasonable respectability, which fixates the social order, makes despotic control easier. Its opposite, romantic rebellion, denies the value of institutions, and views all power as illegitimate, coercive control.

Control by proxy

Identifying your self with a more powerful proxy can give a vicarious sense of control. This is a back-up strategy when personal control is too obviously impossible.

Proxies include individuals, such as political and religious leaders; social groups, such as tribes, nations, and sects; imaginary people, such as God, gods, or culture-heroes; and abstractions, such as political and religious ideologies.

This illusion of control depends on psychological identification, allegiance, and surrender. You have to give up your own control—in a particular area of life, at least—to transfer the locus to the proxy. Psychological surrender gives a feeling of connection or union with something much greater and more meaningful than your personal concerns.

Feeling that you are part of a group allows you to participate emotionally in its strength and success. This is true even when the tribe—or its leaders—do not provide you with any actual control over your life. Sports fandoms are a benign example. Oppressive political regimes that maintain popular support are perhaps the worst. Vicarious power through identification with the state seems an acceptable trade-off to many subjects.

In fact, this dynamic seems to underly most malign power relationships, ranging from domestic abuse through Stockholm syndrome and anti-life religions to totalitarian dystopias. Despotic "leaders" can never rule by force and fear alone; they depend on worshipful surrender and identification.[18]

Monism and dualism: control by connection and by separation

Eternalism comes in two main flavors, monist and dualist. Monism denies boundaries and fixates connections. Dualism denies connections and fixates boundaries.

Control usually depends on boundaries, connections, or both. Since both are ubiquitous, it's usually best to consider and manipulate both. However, the monism and dualism's denials lead them to ignore one, and to try to exert control only through the other.

Monism attempts control exclusively through connections. When genuine connections do not permit control, it invents imaginary ones. This is typical of magical thinking. "Psychic powers," New Age quack therapies, and the Law of Attraction are typical examples.

Dualism attempts control exclusively through boundaries: categorizing, discriminating, separating, sorting, ranking, and purifying. This becomes dysfunctional when nebulous reality fails to fit into tidy boxes. Bureaucracy, caste systems, and "enterprise software" are typical examples.

Control by renouncing action

The Secret

Popular "spiritual" books like *The Secret* recommend abandoning all attempts at control, or even action, in favor of spiritual virtue ("positive thinking"). This is an extreme version of control-by-proxy, in which the proxy is the Cosmic Plan, or The Entire Universe, and it does all the work.

This approach is typical in monist systems, which deny all boundaries. Since, monism says, you *are* The Entire Universe, its actions and yours are identical. Any attempt to act on your own simply limits you, by creating an artificial and illusory separation.

Renunciation often acts as a moralistic reward fantasy. For monism, control is *not OK*, because control depends on differences, which monism denies. Since everything is the same, everything is equal, and nothing can be allowed to control anything else. Giving up control is a supremely virtuous act, which The Entire Universe rewards by showering you with everything you could possibly want.

Obviously, adopting this strategy leads to severe emotional dysfunction, passive-aggressive relationships, and total inability or unwillingness to deal with everyday responsibilities.

Control is intolerably dull

Total control (which requires total predictability) is totally boring. Life needs some challenges, surprises, setbacks, and serendipity to make it interesting. Enjoyment and personal growth come only with partial control.[19]

Highly-successful people, whose lives are too much under control, often semi-deliberately mess them up, for example with an extramarital affair whose revelation destroys their career as well as their marriage. The thrill of risk, and the difficulty of avoiding detection, breaks the monotony of excessive control. It is better, of course, to leave what is going well on autopilot, and to take on greater challenges in new domains.

Meanings are out of control

Meaningness itself is nebulous, and therefore uncontrollable. This undermines practical activity that attempts to control meaningful conditions. Nebulosity of meaning implies constant uncertainty about the merits of purposes; about what counts as progress and setbacks; about what methods would be ethical or unethical; about how your choices shape and are shaped by your self; and about implications that may go beyond the personal, immediate, and obvious, into the greater, mysterious patterns of meaning claimed by religion and social philosophy.

"The puzzle of meaningness" illustrates many aspects of these problems in the context of an adultery.

> The attraction was overwhelming. The sex was scalding. You loved with a passion you had never felt before.

> In time, it waned; and you ended the affair.

> Now, you wonder: *what did that mean*? In the beginning, it seemed enormously significant. By the end, it had slid into a casual friendship plus sex.

> Were you mistaken in thinking it was meaningful at the start? Or did it have a meaning that it lost?

> And was the affair right, or wrong, or perhaps somehow somewhere in-between?

What does it mean about you that you cheated—which you were sure you never would do? Should you be less certain about yourself in other ways?

Marriage is a sacrament; but this affair also seemed at first to have a sacred dimension. Was that just a self-justifying illusion?

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1. 1.Not always, of course; sometimes you simply lack the prerequisites needed for a course of action which would be highly likely to succeed if you had then.
2. 2.At the level of fundamental physics, all forces are symmetrical; they act mutually on pairs of particles. This is not much relevant to everyday life, however. I'll explain a more relevant, macroscopic understanding of distributed causality on the discussion of dynamical chaos.
3. 3."Interaction" is still somewhat misleading, unfortunately. It suggests that there are two or more objectively separate parties involved, which is not true.
4. 4.My prehistoric PhD thesis was also about improvisation and collaboration, and the impossibility of control. Some people just don't know when to move on in life.
5. 5.Even there, tsunamis (for instance) make complete control impossible. Recognizing this, the trend in nuclear reactor design has been from active to passive safety. Active control makes human activity the locus, along with complex electrical systems to which humans delegate. It's external to the reactor. Passive safety shifts the locus into the reactor itself. For example, in some designs, when things go wrong, it shuts down by literally falling apart. Gravity does the work.
6. 6.Control is a major topic in academic psychological research. I have not studied the results seriously. This page is based largely on my informal observation of control confusions in everyday life. The research I have read accords with my observations. I have linked some topics to relevant Wikipedia pages, which could be starting points if you would like to investigate further. (As of mid–2015, most of the Wikipedia articles are not very good, but their references may be useful.) I have not found good overall review articles. This may be because control has been studied by many different branches of psychology, using different frameworks and terminology that are difficult to align. "Born to Choose: The Origins and Value of the Need for Control" includes a not-terrible survey.
7. 7.The gambler's fallacy is a well-studied, if somewhat simplistic, example. "Interpretive control" is a broader psychology research term for inventing explanations in order to feel you have control when you don't. See for instance Baumeister's *Meanings of Life*, p. 42.
8. 8.Experimental psychology and psychotherapeutic theory corroborate most of the harmful control dynamics I describe here. Psychology has not found convincing reasons for them. They seem clearly maladaptive; so why do brains do these things? I suspect the answer is: eternalism, as such. The desire to believe that everything has a fixed meaning appears to be enormously powerful. It is significant that (as we'll see in the next section) depression, which is the negation of eternalism, reverses most of these control dynamics. Although eternalism is partly innate, it is strongly reinforced by modern Western culture. It would be interesting to see whether harmful control dynamics are less prevalent among hunter-gatherer peoples, for instance. Based on the little I know of the relevant cognitive anthropology, I suspect the answer is yes.
9. 9.I wrote about this in more detail, but in a rather different conceptual framework, in "Unclogging."
10. 10.Actually, the studies I have read only show a correlation between depression and absence of the illusion. I do not know of experiments that show conclusively which causes which. (If you do, I would love to hear about it!) Based on personal experience, I believe that the causality is bidirectional. That is, depression brought on for other reasons results in loss of the feeling of control, and feeling that important factors are out of control can provoke depression.
11. 11."Normally" here meaning what is most common: "under the influence of eternalism." However, I don't think eternalism is altogether natural. I would like to believe that the

complete stance is "normal" (although uncommon) in being "natural"; and that adopting it would eliminate control illusions.

12. 12.Originally this was called "depressive realism" because in the first experiments that demonstrated it, depressed people estimated their degree of control roughly correctly. However, subsequent experiments have shown that depression correlates just with decreased sense of control, and in some situations depressed people underestimate it.
13. 13.The resulting psychological stress can be literally lethal in experimental animals.
14. 14.George Ainsle's *Breakdown of Will* is an outstanding analysis of this pattern, technically termed *akrasia*.
15. 15.*Breakdown of Will* and *The Guru Papers* both provide much insight here.
16. 16.This is an interesting example of the weaselly function of the word "really."
17. 17.I wrote about aspects of this in "We are all monsters," "Eating the shadow," and "Black magic, transformation, and power." See also *Breakdown of Will*, *The Guru Papers*, and *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, which discuss the pattern extensively.
18. 18.*The Guru Papers* is an extensive, insightful analysis for the religious domain. For politics, "The Good Tsar Bias" analyzes several cases, including Hitler and Stalin. Both men created personality cults according to which they were powerful, benevolent leaders whose naive goodness enabled underlings to get away with incompetence, corruption, and mass murder. "If only Stalin knew what evils are done in his name!" was a common Russian attitude. "The closer a leader is tied to the symbols of the nation or group with whom they identify, and the closer people's identification with the nation or group is, the more difficult it should be for them to accept that the leader is responsible for bad outcomes, since such acceptance threatens one's identity, and the more likely it will be for them to displace that responsibility onto subordinates as a protective measure."
19. 19.This point was made famous by Csikszentmihalyi's book *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. See also my post "Tantra and flow."

2 Comments

The Wheel of Fortune, from the Hortus Deliciarum
Lady Luck turns the Wheel of Fortune

The meanings we care about first and foremost are *good* and *bad*. Not good and evil—not ethics, not yet—but good and bad *for us*. We want to know how the wheel of fortune will turn. Will particular people, things, and events be blessings—or disasters? Where do goodness and badness come from, and how can we influence them? What do good and bad events imply for other dimensions of meaningness—social relations, our selves, and our purposes?

Eternalism promises answers: certainty about what is good and what is bad, and understanding and control over what produces them. However, "good" and "bad" are not intrinsic qualities.[1] Reality is not about us, and doesn't know or care whether it benefits or harms us. "Good" and "bad" are not merely unpredictable; they are inherently nebulous: mixed, shifting, ambiguous. Thus, broad answers to "will good things or bad things happen?" are impossible.

And so, again, eternalism cannot deliver. Relying on its claims about good and bad is a recipe for disappointment, if not disaster.

Elaborating meanings of good and bad

Eternalism is about seeing meaning where there is none, and adding extra meaning even to what is already genuinely meaningful. Chance events—turns of the wheel of fortune—are taken not just as good or bad, but *meaningfully* good or bad.

Eternalism gives good and bad events implications for all the dimensions—purpose, ethics, our selves, social relations, and so on. Good outcomes are mistaken as rewards or confirmations. Bad ones appear as omens of still worse to come, or deserved punishments, or as tests from God.

The "just world hypothesis" is the pervasive assumption—explicit or tacit—that good and bad outcomes are not random, but deserved. The eternal ordering principle guarantees that. This is the beginning of the elaboration of good and bad into good and evil. Good and Evil often become independent actors: as vague "forces," or personified as spooks,[2] human individuals, or social groups.

Eternalistic systems typically promise good outcomes—for those who obey the demands of the eternal ordering principle. Bad outcomes are due to violations of the cosmic order. Violations can be reversed by purification, which restores the order.

If the eternal order can be violated, then how is it eternal? And, how can bad things happen to good people? Many outcomes are obviously random; eternalism is obviously wrong, as everyone knows at some level. Various strategies of self-delusion cover this up, in order to preserve an optimistic outlook. Elaborate theories of cosmic justice in the afterlife are attempts to preserve eternalism against everyday experience. When these eternalistic ploys fail, nihilism looms.

Good, bad, naturalism, and supernaturalism

Old illustration of the wheel of fortune

A major theme of this chapter on eternalism is that errors usually attributed to supernaturalist religions are also common among atheists, and in naturalistic ideologies. This includes mistaken ideas about good and bad—but those *are* particularly prone to supernatural explanations.

In the short run, good and bad manifest as *luck*. A feeling of being lucky, or unlucky, is nearly impossible for even the most committed secular scientific rationalist to avoid at times. "I get duped by eternalism in a casino" is a personal account of such an incident. In "No cosmic justice" I observed that:

> A vague, incoherent expectation of cosmic justice is one of the hardest aspects of our Christian heritage to shake off. I am a life-long atheist, and have never actually believed in cosmic justice. Yet I still sometimes catch myself hoping that I will somehow be magically rewarded for good deeds.

Magical thinking is a powerful eternalist ploy. It promises certainty about the spinning wheel of fortune, through esoteric techniques such as divination, psychobabble, and career counseling. Imaginary connections "explain" random coincidences. Underlying all this is the assumption that the universe is *about us*—and since our lives are meaningful, everything else must be, too.

Explicitly non-supernatural eternalisms make the same promises. Communism guarantees a good outcome for history: eventually capitalism must collapse, and be replaced by a worker's paradise. UFO cults expect imminent salvation by benevolent aliens. Techno-futurists are sure a Singularity will soon deliver us from all material afflictions (or perhaps doom us to sudden extinction). These are all silly, but they postulate no supernatural forces.

Fate, destiny, and finality

Pat Sajak and Vanna White, from the TV show Wheel of Fortune
Vanna White and Pat Sajak

In the long run, eternalism sees good and bad as the concern of *fate*. Proper distribution of good and bad is the main point of the Cosmic Plan. Both individuals and social groups (tribes, nations, even our species) supposedly have fates.

We are particularly concerned about what happens *in the end*. This is the matter of *destiny*. It is commonly considered that the only real meaning—of an object, event, life, or group—is the meaning it has as it ends. Whatever may happen before that doesn't properly count.[3] As an extreme case, in some versions of both Christianity and Buddhism, the only thing that matters for determining your fate in the afterlife is your mind state at the moment of death.

The final meaning is the *eternal* meaning, and therefore the "real" one. This discounts most actual meanings, in favor of eternalistically-ascribed ones—which is wrong. We'll see later that this error leads to nihilism, when you realize that nothing is meaningful *to you* after you die.

Eternalism promises good outcomes to those who obey. *Miserabilism*, a stance closely connected with nihilism, guarantees *everyone* bad outcomes.

Beyond good and bad

Humans (and other animals) evolved to force-fit everything into the categories "good," "bad," and "irrelevant."[4] We make snap judgements about these three—and are often proven wrong. Some events are unambiguously one way or another; but even the most important ones usually have both good and bad aspects. We acknowledge this in phrases like "a silver lining" and "a mixed blessing."

Recognizing the nebulosity of meanings is the way out of the maze of eternalism and nihilism, and into the complete stance. Suspending judgements of "good" and "bad" and "uninteresting" is a particularly effective escape route. *Playful curiosity* is characteristic of the complete stance. "What is this like?" and "How does it work?" and "What happens if…" are usually better questions than "Is this good, or bad?"

Qualifying judgements of good and bad is essential in adequate approaches to ethics and politics, particularly. (These will develop into major points later in the book.)

> DESTINY: A tyrant's authority for crime and a fool's excuse for failure.[5]

Interpreting good and bad as good and evil turns them into absolutes, over which no compromise is possible. Ever-escalating embroilment ensues. Dropping good and evil is a first step toward a non-eternalist ethics. (Although only a first step—replacing them with "harm and benefit" can lead to eternalist utilitarianism, for instance. Those, too, are nebulous—so utilitarianism can't succeed as an eternalist system.)

For politics to be anything more than a quantitative showdown, both sides in a conflict must recognize the nebulosity of their interests. Not only are *those people* not simply evil, and *us folks* not simply holy: what they *want* is not purely wrong, and what we want is not an unalloyed good. When all can drop the moral posturing, all may be able to work together to find an outcome all can live with—which will not be good, bad, or uninteresting, but a nebulous combination of all three.

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1. 1.They are not merely our opinions, either, though. As with all meanings, they are neither objective nor subjective.
2. 2.Benevolent and malevolent spooks, as causal explanations for good and bad outcomes, are a cultural universal. Sometimes there are also moody spooks who alternate

capriciously: a sensible explanation for the randomness of good and bad events. I find it sad and telling that few care what spooks think or do when it doesn't affect humans.

3. 3.I don't know where this idea comes from. It's obviously nonsense, but pervasive. I've tried to construct an explanation in terms of evolutionary psychology, according to which what mostly matters is whether you get progeny to adulthood before dying. An estimate of whether you are likely to succeed critically affects your optimal life strategy. The less likely evolutionary success is, the more evolutionarily rational high-stakes gambles (such as murder, rape, and robbery) become. I haven't been able to make this explanation work, quite. Perhaps the source of the idea is mere cultural accident.

4. 4.Presumably this is an efficient strategy for animals with simple brains and simple lifestyles. It doesn't work well for humans, but brain evolution hasn't caught up with cultural evolution. Also: the Buddhist influence on this book should be unusually obvious here. Buddhism holds that "attraction, aversion, and indifference" are the cause of all suffering. I think that's an oversimplification, but insightful nonetheless.

5. 5.Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*.

7 Comments

Corpus hypercubus

If all meanings are fixed, then ambiguous meanings are not meaningful at all. To eternalism, any potential nebulosity of meaning looks like non-existence of meaning. Any morality that is not black-and-white is just immorality; any life-purpose that is not ordained in the Cosmic Plan is aimless wandering; any uncertainty about who you are is intolerable.

In other words, to eternalism, every other stance appears to be nihilism, more-or-less. Nihilism actually *is* harmful and wrong—eternalism is right about that. If nihilism were truly the only alternative, perhaps eternalism would be the least bad choice. That is a main part of its appeal.

When eternalism's promises of certainty, understanding, and control are revealed as lies, nihilism looms. The promise to keep nihilism at bay is then eternalism's final ploy.

Increasingly many Westerners have abandoned organized religion, but surprisingly few say they are atheists. They may say "I don't believe in God, exactly, not as a person, but I believe in *something*—maybe you could say a higher power, or the universe as a whole, or maybe it's love —it doesn't really matter what you call it."[1]

I think what they are trying to say is that they believe meaning is real; and I think they are right. Theirs is a relatively sophisticated stance: nihilism is wrong, and so are God-based religious systems. But it's not true that, for meaning to be real, it has to be fixed in place by some other eternal ordering principle.

I will deliver good news: there is a third alternative that includes what's right about both eternalistic religion and nihilism; avoids the errors of both; is conceptually coherent; and is workable as a way of life.

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1. 1.For instance, in a controversial interview, Oprah Winfrey told atheist Diana Nyad "I think if you believe in the awe and the wonder [of nature], and the mystery, then that is what God is. It's not the bearded guy in the sky."

6 Comments

Surreal image illustrating eternalism
Art courtesy Dita

Eternalism makes promises it can't keep. It lies about the things that are most important to us. It makes us do stupid, crazy, evil things. And we still love it and keep going back for more.

Eternalism seems so *nice*. It is hard to believe ill of it. Yet always it drops its victims in seething cauldrons of misery. The message of this entire book is: eternalism is bad;[1] there is a better alternative. So, much of the book consists of warnings about eternalism's harms. This page is an overview.

The harms are myriad. Some I have already discussed: troubles that flow from the promise of certainty, the illusion of understanding, and the fantasy of control. Some I will detail shortly, in the sections on eternalist ploys and non-theistic eternalisms. Many must be postponed to chapters on stances allied with eternalism, such as mission, true self, and ethical eternalism, each with harms specific to its dimension of meaningness.

Broadly, we might categorize harms as:

- Deliberate stupidity
- Emotional regression with an abusive, addictive dynamic
- Bad practical outcomes from unrealistic actions based on imaginary meanings
- Emotional pain from trying to conform to eternalism when it's obviously not working
- Morally wrong decisions based on absolutist ethics

We are not stupid enough for eternalism

Eternalism comes naturally; human brains evolved to hallucinate meaning where there is none. Any other stance takes at least a little thought. Nihilism, especially, is difficult. It's only possible to maintain nihilism using sophisticated rationalizations that explain away obvious meaningfulness. Other, more complex stances depend on dubious metaphysical distinctions that take work to apply in concrete circumstances.

Nevertheless, eternalism is obviously wrong. Everyone can see that many events are completely meaningless, and the meanings even of important ones are often nebulous.

To maintain eternalism, you have to deliberately stupefy yourself. You need to damage your own natural intelligence to not-see nebulosity and to preserve illusions of meaningfulness and cosmic order. Starting on the next page, I'll explain various mind-killing ploys you can use to hide eternalism's failures and lies.

Eternalism can provide bogus *feelings* of intelligence, from perceiving patterns that aren't there. This is the rush of excitement as the new convert to an eternalist system "discovers" that Mindfulness or Marx or Mormonism explains everything. Desire for meaning makes you willing to sabotage your critical ability, in order to accept preposterous stories in which the Cosmic Plan makes everything make sense. That inhibits curiosity and the natural drive to find a better understanding.

In the end, no one can make themselves stupid enough to accomplish eternalism—to maintain the stance at all times. Everyone, at times, does recognize nebulosity—and so moves into some other stance.

Eternalism is regressive and addictive

Eternalism is comforting, when life is going well enough. Then you can choose to ignore the ways reality fails to fit fixed meanings. Eternalism's promises of hope and solace seem credible. You can live in a pastel fantasy world. So eternalism "works" as long you can maintain a childish, self-indulgent obliviousness—which is its characteristic emotional texture.

Maintaining eternalism requires emotional regression, into a toddler's bedroom, watched over by a wise protecting parent: the Cosmic Plan, or some authority who poses as its representative. When you are unable to keep deluding yourself, you look for someone more powerful to do the job: someone or something that can affirm eternalism in the face of your perception of the contradictory evidence. The parent-figure promises to protect you from nebulosity. You choose this relationship specifically to obstruct emotional and intellectual growth when that seems too frightening.

Preserving comforting illusions may be psychologically valuable in the short run, in times of crisis: as antidotes to depression, anxiety, and despair. (Those are symptoms of nihilism, which may be the only accessible alternative to eternalism for some people.) In the longer run, this pain-killing function leads to helplessness and addiction.

As the opening paragraph of this page suggested, a relationship with eternalism may resemble addictive dynamics of domestic abuse, which keep a victim returning to the abuser. The victim believes—rightly or wrongly—that they are powerless, and that the abuser is powerful. The victim hopes that the abuser would act as a protector against the world, if properly propitiated. This requires the victim to delude themselves that the abuser has loving intentions, and that the abuse episodes are somehow be triggered by the victim's inadequacy.

Eternalism has bad practical results

Eternalism promises eternally good feelings. And it *is* a comforting ride—until it crashes into reality and you get hurled from your seat onto the open highway.

Meanings have consequences. Meaning is not an autonomous domain, disconnected from practical reality; everyone frequently acts on the basis of perceived meanings. But those are often wrong. Eternalism says the world is good, and I am good, so if I choose to do something good, then the result must be good! But often it isn't.

As we saw earlier, eternalism's illusions of understanding and control fantasies often lead over-confidence, excess risk-taking, over-control, and other unrealistic patterns of action. Alternatively, the delusion that you *must* base action on the Cosmic Plan leads to paralysis when you are unable to discern what it demands. (This is particularly common in the stance of mission, which is closely related to eternalism.)

Acting based on imagined meanings frequently fails. Harm and pain ensue. Eternalism's synthetic certainty ensures that this comes as a shock, each time. Each time, one experiences it as a betrayal. I am a good person; this wasn't supposed to happen to me!

Then, disillusioned, you may exit eternalism into another stance. Alternatively, you may apply ploys to maintain eternalism—probably in an increasingly shaky, wavering form.

Wavering eternalism is emotionally painful

Eternalism persuades you that you *should* maintain the stance at all times. This has moral force; if you waver in your commitment, you are a bad person. However, it is impossible to accomplish consistent eternalism. This implies perpetual struggle, with shame and guilt at imperfection, and much wasted effort.

The wavering eternalist feels intense confusion during periods of doubt.

When eternalism fails, it tries to convince you that it's your fault, for wavering, for not trying hard enough, for being unworthy of the Cosmic Plan. Then you may punish yourself—as harshly as you can, to demonstrate your renewed commitment. (The Cosmic Plan can't punish you adequately; it doesn't exist!)

As you repeatedly experience eternalism failing when it encounters nebulosity, you develop fear and loathing of ambiguity and change. You come to avoid areas of life that seem particularly nebulous. This progressively narrows your scope for action, leading to rigidity or even paralysis. You may isolate yourself socially: from everyone, or into a closed group that agrees to pretend eternalism works. You may adopt an aggressive hostility toward anyone who reminds you of nebulosity.

You may come to feel cramped and imprisoned in the small safe space where eternalism seems to function. Creativity and daring become impossible.

You somehow cannot find your true mission in life, for which eternalism would guarantee success. You neglect mundane goals as mere materialism, meaningless in the eyes of the eternal ordering principle. Most of the time, you cannot locate your true self; your miserable ego's attempts to live up to its ideals are pathetic. Sometimes, you believe you *have* found your true self and mission, and go off on a fantastical ego-trip crusade, which needs constant confirmation from followers and eventually ends in catastrophe.

Eternalism is immoral

The eternal ordering principle is a cruel tyrant. The Cosmic Plan makes insane demands—and calls that morality. It sometimes commands harmful actions; it often fails to promote beneficial ones. Following its dictates causes damage to yourself and others.

Ethical issues are inescapably nebulous. Ethical eternalism blinds you to the complexity, ambiguity, and situatedness of moral decision-making. Taken seriously, it leads to moral absolutism and political extremism.

Religiosity promotes paranoia about contamination; blaming of victims; waste of resources and opportunities; and tribalist conflict.

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1. 1.Also, nihilism. Nihilism is bad too. But most people know that.

3 Comments

Everyday experiences of nebulosity and meaninglessness make eternalism difficult to maintain, despite its powerful allure. *Eternalist systems*, such as religions and political ideologies, provide

reinforcing structures. They include patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that help dispel doubt and explain away experience.

Many specific claims of eternalist systems are plainly false. The natural conclusion is that each system is wrong. If they were just neutral, descriptive, factual explanations, we'd abandon them. We commit to them only because they promise to make eternalism work.

Eternalism as a stance and as a system powerfully reinforce each other, then:

- Eternalism gives ideologies their dazzling sheen of hope. Non-eternalist systems that claim to explain meaningness exist, but they are much less appealing. Systems based in nihilism, existentialism, and the complete stance are examples.

- Eternalism is possible without a supporting system—my casino experience was an example —but that is unstable when it encounters nebulosity. A system's explanation of how a particular eternal ordering principle gives everything meaning helps maintain faith despite evidence.

This page points out eternalistic aspects of some common belief systems:

- Theistic religions
- Rationalism, scientism, and ideological atheism
- Psychological theories
- Political ideologies
- "Spiritual but not religious" systems
- Pseudoscience, "alternative healing," and fringe beliefs such as UFO abduction narratives
- Theories of history as determining meanings

The two most influential Western ideologies are Christianity and rationalism. Both are eternalist. Other Western eternalisms mostly derive from attempts to reconcile or integrate the two. Typically they combine an attractive promise of some sort of salvation with an exaggerated faith in the power of reasoning to determine meanings. These are the Christian and rationalist heritages, respectively.

I won't attempt a comprehensive catalog, nor a detailed exploration of how and why any eternalist system works and fails to work. Countless books explain dysfunctional as well as valuable aspects of each of these ideologies, so there's no need to refute any of them here.

Our aim instead is to see how these systems are essentially similar in emotional appeal. The diversity of their apparent subject matter obscures recognition that it is eternalism that makes them seem compelling.

Because these systems have the same emotional basis, they are functionally interchangeable. Systems claim that their specific meanings are frightfully important, but on investigation, it seems specifics are not what we care about. What matters is that meanings remain certain, make sense, and give us some control over life.

It's common to grow up Christian and then switch to militant atheism, or passionate communism, or mindless Buddhism, or dogmatic rationalism, and then often to switch again, perhaps several times. You can do that all without changing your fundamental stance that everything must have *some* definite meaning, which provides life purpose, guides your choices, and lets you distinguish right from wrong.

Theistic eternalism

Christianity is the most obvious example of eternalism. God is the eternal ordering principle that sets the Cosmic Plan and gives everything a specific meaning. The other Biblical religions, plus others such as Hinduism, are also eternalist.[1]

If you are not religious, you may have been thinking "this eternalism thing is not my problem." However, theism and eternalism are not the same:

- Some theistic religions—animisms and polytheisms—may not be eternalistic, if they do not insist that gods (or anything else) fix meaning in place.
- More relevant for Westerners, most eternalisms are non-theistic. For example, most current versions of rationalist eternalism (coming up next!) do not involve God or gods.

Non-theistic eternalist systems are often described by opponents as "religious," or even as "cults." Their adherents angrily deny religiousness, on the basis that they don't involve God, or anything supernatural. Nevertheless, to outsiders they seem to function strikingly similarly.

The word "eternalism" bypasses that argument. It names the quality shared by systems that promise definite answers to questions of meaningness, and so inspire fervent commitment, but aren't literally religious.

Rationalist eternalism

Non-theistic eternalism may actually be more influential and more harmful. Secular eternalisms have much the same defects as religious varieties, but this is less well-known, and therefore harder to defend against.

Rationality was the first substitute proposed for God, back in the European Enlightenment. Rationality, after all, led us out of the nightmare of religion. What better to crown as the new ruler?

Rationalism comprises various ideologies that exaggerate the power of reasoning. Regarding meaningness, rationalism is the stance that everything must make sense—that there is a meaningful pattern to everything—so it must be possible for us to determine the meaning of everything using rationality.

This metaphysical faith has no basis in experience. Many things make no sense, and we cannot understand them, individually or collectively. What *did* the extra-marital affair you had mean? Rationalism insists that it must be possible to figure that out, rationally. Why would you believe that? Only because it's too scary to contemplate the possibility that the meaning was inherently nebulous. Eternalist rationalism has to obscure that, and so distorts accurate perception.

Scientism is the species of rationalism which expects that questions of meaningness can all be answered using specifically science, rather than reasoning in general. (Maybe the *true* meaning of your affair could be determined by dissecting your brain?)

Attacks on rationalism usually come from other eternalisms. They insist that rationality could never explain their favorite meaning-laden, unscientific things like God, consciousness, or love. Rationalists usually reply that it *must* be possible to explain these things rationally. Mostly neither side offers substantive arguments; blind faith in their own eternalistic system motivates both.

In the previous section, I made no attempt to critique theism; here I will make no attempt to talk you out of rationalism. *Meaningness* takes for granted that both are on equal footing with UFO

cults: collections of implausible claims held together by hope for ultimate certainty about meaning.

However, you may find interesting my book *In the Cells of the Eggplant*, which explains how rationalism fails, for technical reasons, in its own terms. Never mind art, love, or meaning: rationalism is a bad explanation even of how science works. *The Eggplant* provides a better one.

Atheism as an eternalism

If you have grown up in theism, atheism is an important step in freeing yourself from eternalism. It's only the first step, though. It's easy to switch to a non-theistic eternalism that is just as bad, or worse; or to fall into nihilism, materialism, or some other confused stance that will make you miserable.

Atheism itself is just non-belief in gods, and has no inherent implications for questions of meaning. However, atheism implies nihilism if you believe (correctly) that nothing short of God could support absolute meanings, and (incorrectly) that meaning can't exist without getting firmly nailed in place. Religious opponents insist that nihilism is the only alternative to theism, and that nihilism leads to suicide, murder, drugs, and despair (not necessarily in that order). They're wrong that it's the only alternative, but it *is* common for loss of religious belief to lead to nihilism, and opponents are right that nihilism can be awful.

Once you have killed God, and decided that, all things considered, nihilism doesn't sound like much fun, it's tempting to put up some other idol in His place. If God is not the source of value, ethics, and purpose, then what is? If you ask that question—taking it for granted that meaning must have *some* source—you become a seeker after a workable eternalism. You may adopt rationalism, or some psychological theory, or radical politics, or some combination of them. Unfortunately, none of these can provide an ultimate source of meaning, and each causes many of the same troubles as religion.

Early in this century, prominent atheists organized an eternalist movement, New Atheism, that was much in the news for a few years. Critics described it as "fundamentalist" and "evangelical" and "just another religion." It inspired passionate commitment, based on promises of certainty, understanding, and a plan to improve the world by destroying religion and putting morally correct principles in its place. These are hallmarks of eternalism.

New Atheism's specifics were incoherent, but often just inverted theism: whatever religion said about meaning, the opposite must be correct. Although non-belief in God has no direct political implications, Christianity has been associated with the political right since the 1970s, so New Atheism attracted mainly leftists. According to Scott Alexander's plausible analysis in "The Godlessness That Failed," most adherents eventually abandoned "atheist" as identity, and switched to "social justice activist."

Psychological eternalism

Meaning is interactive, not subjective, but our psychologies are intimately involved in our relationships with it.

- Meanings are often unmistakable, but also often we do not understand them fully, or even at all. Our partial understanding, and the work we do to better it, are not clearly separable from the meaning itself.

- We usually have emotional reactions to meaningful events, and although the emotions are not the meanings themselves—remember that it is possible to be mistaken about meaning!—they are also not clearly separate from them.
- Understanding better one's own psychology, and human psychology in general, helps understand how one relates to meaning—which helps understand better meaning itself.

Therapeutic psychology began as an attempt to cure "nervous illness," but almost immediately developed into methods of inquiry into meaningness. In fact, many mental illnesses resemble everyday confused stances, taken to extremes:

- Manic psychosis "reveals" hidden meaningfulness in everything, accompanied by powerful feelings of certainty, understanding, and control. This also constitutes, by definition, eternalism.
- Feelings of meaninglessness are a typical symptom of clinical depression, and by definition of nihilism.
- Narcissism is an exaggeration of the stance of specialness.
- Borderline personality is a disorder of selfness.

Most problems for which patients seek psychotherapy have no known biological cause, and pharmaceutical treatments may work scarcely better than placebos. Talk therapy addresses questions of meaning for which earlier generations would have sought the advice of a rabbi, priest, or pastor. Some therapists obligingly provide answers that have no basis in empirical psychology. Some have developed those into theoretical frameworks for understanding meaningness.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, many educated people adopted these psychological ideologies because their factual and ethical claims seemed less obviously false than those of both religion and rationalism.

The therapeutic framework provided a useful new ontology of meaning. People discovered that they had *relationships*, where previously they had had friends, family, lovers, and fellow workers. They now had *issues*, where previously they had just gotten upset about stuff. They even had *relationship issues*, usually involving mysterious *unconscious motivations*. Where previously they just wanted things, they acquired objective *psychological needs*, and therefore had quasi-divine justifications to pursue them.

Such concepts became the main focus of meaning for many. They trickled down into popular culture, into pervasive psychobabble, quasi-religious cults, and New Age nonsense. That tended to discredit the approach, and psychological eternalism is less popular now than a quarter century ago.

Adopting aspects of the therapeutic worldview remains inescapable, even if you are committed to some other system that explicitly rejects it. It is too valuable as a way of understanding how we think and feel and act *in response to* meanings.

It's fundamentally wrong as an understanding of meaning itself, though. Mainly it assumes that meaningness is subjective, which is factually incorrect; and unsatisfactory; and which leads to nihilism (as we'll see in the chapter on existentialism). "The puzzle of meaningness" satirized the problem:

> Talking with the therapist doesn't go as smoothly. "How does that make you feel?" is her mantra.
>
> After answering that dozens of times, over several sessions, you finally rebel. "I *know* how it makes me feel. What I want to know is what it *means*."

"Well, what does it mean to *you*?" she asks.

"But that's just it," you say. "I want to know what it *actually* means. Not just to me. I mean, meaning isn't just a feeling. Ethics can't be like that. Some things are just right or wrong, no matter what you feel about them."

Because meaning is inherently interactive, answers to problems of meaning cannot be found through psychological exploration. Attempting that leads to self-involved paralysis. Psychotherapy-ism obsesses with the self: self-esteem, self-loathing, self-image, self-fulfillment, self-actualization, self-worth, true and false selves, *et cetera ad nauseam*. The complete stance cuts through this by pointing out the nebulosity of selfness and of the distinction between self and other.

Meaning, as interaction, requires action. Decades ago, there was a beach resort ad whose tag line was:

> HAVING YOUR DREAMS FULFILLED CAN BE MORE THERAPEUTIC THAN HAVING THEM ANALYZED.

It stuck with me. Fixing circumstances often beats grubbing about in your unconscious.

Political eternalism

Many people—especially recently—take political ideologies as their main framework for understanding meaningness. They serve much the same function as religions or psychological systems.

The political attitudes of most people—even now—are incoherent, lukewarm, and pragmatically self-interested. National government policies seem distant and mainly irrelevant to anything you actually care about. They are significant only if they may make people like you a bit better off.

This is realistic. Most nation-level policies address nebulous problems, for which crisp, definitely correct solutions are inherently impossible. Such problems are not amenable to first-principles reasoning or moral absolutism. They are best approached with a mixture of general good intentions, common sense, reference to successful precedents, and explicit experimentation. Usually neither you nor the government can reliably predict policy effects.

Detailed, systematic political ideologies, with absolute opinions about specifics, are created by and for people who care passionately about politics. Most care because they hold it as their primary source of meaning: of ethical correctness, missionary purpose, and personal identity. This doesn't work well:

- For individuals, it produces the typical harms of eternalism: deliberate stupidity, emotional regression with an abusive, addictive dynamic, bad practical outcomes from unrealistic actions based on imaginary meanings, emotional pain from trying to conform to the system when it's obviously not working, and morally wrong judgments based on absolutist ethics.

- For society, it replaces the proper, pragmatic purposes of policy-making with unrelated quasi-religious goals. Eternalism's tools for manipulating political processes with quasi-religious sermonizing are also often wielded with obfuscated, bad intentions. Political theories cannot deliver the utopias they promise. Often, instead, they deliver oppressive dystopias. Sometimes, when taken sufficiently seriously, they produce intentional multi-megadeath catastrophes.

Everyone recognizes the similarity of political fanaticism to religious fervor. Both come in waves through history. In 2021, as I write this, it is most obvious on the left, and often analogized to the 1700s' "Great Awakening"—probably because the pun "Great Awokening" is irresistible. A more accurate analogy is the Evangelical Christian New Right of the 1980s. That analogy is strong enough and detailed enough that it may be predictive. Understanding how and why the New Right failed may be helpful both to the current left and to their opponents.

UFOs: non-supernatural quasi-religion

Rationalist and atheist arguments against theistic religions usually focus on the falsity of their supernatural claims. Dispelling those beliefs has some value, but I think it misses the main culprit: eternalism. Supernatural beliefs are harmful mainly because they serve eternalism, not because they are false.

Supernaturalism is not an innocent mistake. It's motivated by eternalism.[2] Eternalism is continually contradicted by ordinary experience. You need to invoke imaginary entities to confirm it; the mystical invisibility of the supernatural provides an all-purpose excuse.

Most mistaken beliefs are harmless, because they have no significant consequences. If they did, people would realize they were wrong, and would change their beliefs. Many people believe that the powdered orange-flavored drink Tang was invented by NASA, which is false, but it doesn't matter, because it's pretty much meaningless. If most people believed superglue (and nothing else) had a supernatural origin, it wouldn't matter, because superglue has no great significance.

Many modern eternalisms involve no supernatural claims, yet function as religions do. Many people believe the US military routinely encounters alien spacecraft, which is almost certainly false; but the factually wrong belief wouldn't matter if it weren't for its implications about meaningness. As many religious studies researchers have pointed out, UFO beliefs closely resemble religious beliefs. Space aliens function just like gods, angels, and demons, except they are supposedly natural, not supernatural.[3]

Susan A. Clancy's *Abducted: How People Come to Believe They Were Kidnapped by Aliens* explains not just "how" people adopt UFO beliefs, but "why": eternalism.

> Being abducted by aliens is a transformative event. Not only does it furnish an explanation for psychological distress and unsettling experiences; it provides **meaning for one's entire life**. As abductees have said, it "enlarged my world view," "gave me wisdom to share," "caused me to care about the spiritual path of mankind," "expanded my reality." The beauty of the abduction belief is that it doesn't just explain specific problems, like headaches and sexual dysfunction. It offers a comprehensive view of the world, an explanation for human existence, and the promise of a better life.

> The abductees taught me that people go through life **trying on belief systems** for size. Some of these belief systems speak to powerful emotional needs that have little to do with science—the need to feel less alone in the world, the desire to have special powers or abilities, the longing to know that there is something out there, something more important than you that's watching over you. Belief in alien abduction is not just bad science. It's not just an explanation for misfortune and a way to avoid taking responsibility for personal problems. For many people, belief in alien abduction **gratifies spiritual hungers**. It reassures them about their place in the universe and their own significance.

Every single abductee at some point during an interview said, "**Things make sense now**."[4]

"It makes sense"

All eternalisms provide an illusion of understanding. Whatever specific claims a system makes, the "sense" it makes is ultimately eternalism itself. Belief in homeopathy is based not on any evidence of its working, but on its resonance with faith in the meaningful interpretability of the world in general and health in particular. People turn to New Age quackery for problems allopathic medicine can't make sense of: mysterious configurations of chronic pain, nebulous malaise, and weird symptoms that doctors dismiss as "probably psychological." Wearing magnets on your wrists probably won't make those go away, but at least it provides an understandable explanation, in terms of the workings of meaning in general.

> Q: How is that supposed to work?
>
> A: Magnets direct the field of energy, right? You remember from science class: if you spread iron filings on a sheet of plastic and put a magnet under it, you can *see* the invisible lines of force! This energy that flows in your body is the very same that pervades the entire universe, that lights the stars and galaxies. Cosmic Consciousness orchestrates the beautiful harmony of all things. Even seemingly-inanimate objects like the iron filings respond to this implicate order of Being.

Rationalists enjoy sneering at pseudoscience and "alternative health." However, the seeming understanding provided by their more sophisticated eternalism is also largely illusory. It's much more similar than they realize: emotionally attractive explanations, based on excessive faith in reason, that fall apart immediately on testing against evidence. (See Part One of *In the Cells of the Eggplant*.) In both pseudoscience and scientism, the specific claims are plainly false, but seem plausible because they vaguely confirm a worldview according to which everything makes sense.

Unfortunately, many true things don't make sense, and many false things do; and neither spirituality nor rationality can fix that. When apparent evidence and experience conflict with a conceptual framework, the framework may need revision or replacement; or the evidence or its interpretation may be faulty. No universal recipe exists for sorting out such conflicts to gain better understanding, and often we have to acknowledge and accept the imperfection of our concepts. Eternalism balks: because this nebulosity undermines its promises of certainty, understanding, and control. The path out of eternalism into the complete stance begins with open-ended curiosity, which finds incomprehension interesting rather than threatening.

The meaning of history

Many eternalisms say that our little lives are given meaning by world-historical events, in the past and especially in the future.

The prototype is Christian eschatology. The most meaningful past event was Christ's Resurrection. In the End Times, lots of highly meaningful supernatural stuff will happen, like the Tribulation, Christ's triumph over the Anti-Christ, and the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Then the specific meaning of your individual life, namely the good and evil you did, will be pronounced at the Last Judgment. The details of this past and future history are guaranteed certain by the prophetic book.

Marxist history follows the pattern. The meaning of the past is its succession of economic systems. The present Tribulation of Late[5] Capitalism will end imminently with a crisis of collapse, followed by the triumph of Communism and permanent utopia. Your life is given meaning by the side you take, and the work you do to hasten the End Times. The details of this past and future history are guaranteed certain by the prophetic book.

Life has, on the whole, gotten better over the past couple centuries. The Myth of Progress is that this is due to some intrinsic force of History, an unfolding of the Cosmic Plan, rather than a combination of nebulous fortunate accidents and people gradually finding mundane practical methods for improving mundane practicalities.

Should we expect Progress to continue? Prophets' opinions vary. Whiggish political theorists and techno-optimists both guarantee that it will. Gloomy conservatives, eco-collapse theorists, and apocalyptic Singularitarians—who believe we will all get eaten by a super-intelligent artificial intelligence soon—guarantee that it won't. Either way, our mundane and obviously largely meaningless present lives are given significance by our relationship with the extraordinary, intrinsically meaningful future.

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1. 1.Mainstream Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and rationalism are all eternalist. There may be unusual versions that aren't. I have not definitely identified any, but sometimes someone objects when I make the blanket generalization. Buddhism explicitly claims not to be eternalist, but in practice most versions adopt eternalism and nihilism simultaneously, which is not an improvement in my opinion.
2. 2.Belief in spirits and non-physical causes is natural, and universal in pre-modern cultures. In the modern era, we know better, and belief can only be maintained by force of eternalism.
3. 3.Carl Jung discussed the similarity of UFO beliefs with religion in his 1959 *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. D. W. Pasulka's 2019 *American Cosmic: UFOs, Religion, Technology* is a scholarly, seemingly non-fictional work, with a startling plot twist toward the end. I won't spoil it for you, but it dramatically illustrates the interchangeability of secular UFO beliefs with traditional religion. My thanks to Jake Orthwein for pointing me at it.
4. 4.Paragraphs quote pages 162, 163, and 145, respectively. Emphasis added in each case.
5. 5.Jesus promised to return during his disciples' lifetimes, but was unavoidably delayed by a logistical issue, and is a couple thousand years late for his appointment. Marx expected an imminent collapse of capitalism—surely it couldn't get much worse!—but by 1927 the Marxist economist Werner Sombart had coined the phrase "late capitalism" to describe the post-WWI phase that wasn't following the script. Faithful Marxists commit to expecting late capitalism to collapse at any moment now. Surely it can't get much worse!

1 Comment

Do you have a system of meaning, or does the system have you? When you discover you are owned by an ideology, you can escape. But better, you can own it—and others.

Religions, political theories, scientific rationalism, and psychotherapeutic models provide powerful resources for making sense of problems of meaningness. They also make false claims that may lead to confused thinking, painful emotions, and harmful activities. On the previous page, we saw how they stabilize, and in turn are stabilized by, eternalism—the mistaken and harmful stance that everything has a definite, knowable meaning.

When forced by experience to admit your system of meaning is unfixably flawed, it's natural to look for a better one. After adopting several in succession, you may realize that the same flaw afflicts all of them: eternalism. Then you might try to reject all ideologies. That seems to be impossible, and also loses what is good and right in each.

It is better to retain systems' insights, as ways of working with meaning, while letting go of their underlying eternalism. This requires adopting the complete stance: accepting the inseparability of pattern and nebulosity in meaning, in conceptual systems, in the world, in yourself, and in the relationships among all these.

Possession

When you commit to an eternalist system, what you commit is yourself. Your *self*.

Ideally, the system *becomes* your self. You "identify as" a rationalist, an anti-racist ally, or a QAnon digital soldier: you try to view yourself as identical to the system, or to make yourself as nearly as possible into the system's ideal.[1]

When you commit to a system, it owns you. It's normal, and passed over without notice, to say that you "belong to" a church or political party. Slavery is illegal, though?

Spirit possession might be a better analogy. In many cultures, a supernatural, immaterial person can enter you and displace your ordinary mind with their overwhelmingly powerful one. Then they speak through your mouth, and act with your body. Such spirits may be demonic and unwanted, or divine and sought out. Or it might be hard to tell.

Possessed by an ideology, you may feel that your speech is divinely inspired, or that the wisdom of the ancients is speaking through you. Or at minimum you can be absolutely certain of its truth without checking, because it unambiguously aligns with—it authentically expresses—the Higher Truth of the system itself.

As a whatever-ist, you speak *for* the whatever system. You look for opportunities to preach, and to argue with unbelievers. That may leave you bruised. It may not be to your advantage; you sacrifice yourself for the honor of the system. You take any insult to it as an attack on your self and your community, and might fight even unto death.

Yet the feeling of channeling the spirit may be exhilarating and welcome, because it confirms eternalist certainty. It feels best when possession is so complete that you are unaware of it. Righteously denouncing Whiteness or Wokeness, as the case may be, you do not notice any distinction between yourself and the hate-filled absurdities you are regurgitating from a hard-hitting video you watched a few hours earlier. You mistake the words of the spirit for your own thoughts.

You may not even recognize that an ideology is involved. Bad people have ideologies, which are deceitful and wicked; *you* just stand for what is good and right. That is not an ideology; it's simple truth.

Or, you may be aware that you are possessed, but love it (when it is going well, at least). You are actually *being* an ally, or a digital soldier, not just "believing." You punch Nazis, or invade the Capitol building—high as a kite on eternalist certainty.

Disidentification and deconversion

Whatever system of meaning you may have committed to, everyday experience will contradict it at times. This creates cognitive dissonance between the abstract framework and concrete reality. Typically, then, you apply eternalist ploys to obscure the conflict and to reinforce your commitment. These tricks don't always work.

At times when the ghost loses its grip, you may have the surreal experience of hearing your mouth saying things—often absolute statements—and you aren't even sure what they mean, much less whether or why you would believe them. That can be frightening, when you realize you are not in control of your voice. To avoid it you might either submerge yourself in possession again, or try to snap out of it altogether.

It may be better just to watch for a while, with friendly curiosity? There's lots you can learn about selfness here, and a fascinating altered state of consciousness, so long as you can tolerate the vertigo.

Because any eternalist system often contradicts experience, your commitment can only ever be wavering, to various degrees. Gradually, enough friction accumulates that you can't help admitting you have been owned. As you disidentify, you come to *have* the ideology, rather than being had by it. You realize it is a somewhat arbitrary construction, which you chose somewhat arbitrarily. It no longer seems absolutely compelling. Then, perhaps suddenly, your commitment may fail. You reject the system and break free.

That's usually horrible.

Commitment to an eternalist system is similar to a marriage. In return for an enormous, sometimes difficult investment, you gain feelings of certainty and stability. Leaving a religion or other ideology can be much like a painful break-up or divorce.

Overwhelming feelings of betrayal, loss, regret, anger, shame, anxiety, and depression are common. Not coincidentally, these are symptoms of nihilism. When you have rejected the system you thought was the source of all meaning, everything may seem meaningless.

Rebound relationships

The system gave you feelings of understanding and belonging. Naturally, you want to get that back, but without the bad parts. The risk here is jumping straight into bed with some other eternalist system.

In a rebound romantic relationship, you'll often pick someone who seems as different as possible from your ex. (Leaving a system based on God and sexual restrictions? Choose one that emphatically rejects the supernatural and says all sex among consenting adults is fine!) Then you may find that the superficial differences conceal deep similarities to your ex. ("My old religion promised me God's true moral code, but it had nothing to say about some key ethical dilemmas I faced, and some of its rules were obviously wrong in retrospect. Then I adopted rationalist utilitarianism, which, well, had nothing to say about some key ethical dilemmas, and sometimes was obviously wrong in retrospect.") A few years on, you may have another traumatic break-up.

Alternatively, if your romantic experience was good on the whole, you may spend years dating a series of similar people—because that *is* the sort of person you want. None of the relationships quite work out, but you keep expecting to find one who is fully satisfactory. It's similarly common to spend years or decades drifting through New Age systems, getting excited about one after another, although none does much to solve your problems. It's rare and courageous to

recognize that these monist-eternalist systems all have the same attractions and the same defects, and then to extract yourself from that whole culture into some more realistic way of being.

"I keep making bad choices for commitment—why? Maybe the problem is with me?" In personal relationships, it may be a mistaken understanding of what a partner can do for you. For example, an unconscious hope to be re-parented is unrealistic, and can only lead to trouble. You'll fall for people who (perhaps unconsciously) promise to do that for you, but cannot deliver. Likewise, you may be maintaining an unconscious hope that some new system of meaning could deliver on the false promises of the one you grew up with—the promises of eternalism. But that can only lead to destructive fanaticism, or to less dramatic disappointment and disenchantment.

Being without ideology

Much harm comes from specific demands of individual eternalist systems. However, much is due to eternalism itself. When you realize you have been a puppet to an ideology, or have been bought and sold by a series of them, you may recognize that the problem is not just particular systems, but ideology as such.

An ideology—a system of concepts—makes sense of meaning. But it seems concepts are deceptive; they obscure the truth of meaning. Maybe you could make better sense without them? Maybe you can perceive reality directly, instead? Maybe you can bypass concepts and gain ultimate insight by trusting your feelings?

This isn't entirely wrong. Much of perception *is* non-conceptual. In uncommon states of awareness, in meditation for example, one may abide for hours without concepts, and find perception heightened. Significant but ineffable insights *do* sometimes spring from the unconscious, manifesting initially as peculiar feelings and mythic images, and may evolve into partially-verbal understandings.

Living in a non-conceptual or visionary realm full time is probably impossible, and certainly undesirable. We need concepts to deal with mundane reality, but also to engage with meaning. People who spend most of their time in exalted spiritual states are often ethically challenged, politically naive, surprisingly selfish, practically helpless, and all-round useless.

And taking conceptlessness as an ideal is itself a monist-eternalist ideology: anti-rational Romanticism mashed up with modernist Zen. Once again, rejecting your system of meaning has just led you into the embrace of another; one that denounces all others—just as all the others do.

Unpicking a system

> Unpicking a thread with a seam ripper
> Image courtesy J Williams

You are not stupid. You committed to a system because much of it is true and good and useful.

You don't need to abandon your system immediately, or even at all.[2] You can own it, instead of its owning you. You can continue to use it as a way of thinking, feeling, and acting—instead of its using you.

The complete stance recognizes both nebulosity and pattern. It recognizes nebulosity and pattern in the subject matter of an ideology, and in the system itself. Eternalist systems try to be perfectly definite, to have answers for everything. That is impossible, because meaningness is always somewhat indefinite. Ideologies blur and fudge when they run into nebulosity, or they insist on absurdities. Nevertheless, they provide often-valuable ways of looking at patterns of meaning.

Rather than suddenly and totally rejecting an ideology when its failings become too glaring to ignore, it's better to unpick it like a seam. You unravel a seam with close examination, one stitch at a time. Ideologies are complex, with many details. Leaving the overall structure in place for a while lets you observe the operation of each piece.[3] You will see how it functions and when it fails, and how you and others relate to it in different circumstances.

The aim cannot be just figuring out which bits are right and which are wrong. Because meaningness is inherently nebulous, it doesn't support absolute statements. A system's particular claims about meaningness are never either absolutely true or absolutely false. This invalidates any project of figuring out what claims about meaning are right and which are wrong in order to rescue the correct ones and assemble them into a new True System.

Because meaningness is patterned as well as nebulous, claims may be accurate enough often enough, or mistaken enough often enough, to accept or reject them as generalizations with exceptions. But in what sense are its claims more-or-less true? It is meaningful to speak of moral truths, or psychological truths, or mythical truths, which are distinct from factual truths, and from each other.

Typically, meanings are context and purpose dependent. When you observe a bit of a system working well or not, you could investigate specifically how and why. What factors make it valuable in some situations and misleading in others? How can it be applied usefully and when should it be ignored?

It's also helpful to watch how you relate to the system when it works, and when it goes wrong:

- When it is going smoothly, are you reassured by feelings of certainty, safety, and unambiguous understanding? If so, you could wonder whether that is realistic. As those feelings stop seeming convincing, it's a sign that you are starting to use the system, rather than being used by it.

- When the system lets you down, when it grates against reality, do you make excuses for it? Do you say to yourself "yes, but the alternative is much worse, so I will stick with it as it is?" Do you try to maintain your commitment using the eternalist ploys?

While unpicking, you may alternate between revulsion and recommitment. It can be emotionally difficult.

When you feel mainly revulsion, when you come to think all ideologies are mostly manipulative lies, it's easy to fall into post-ideological nihilism.[4] You may congratulate yourself for having figured out that all claims about meaning are false, and conclude that everything is meaningless. Then you may try to make an ideology of nihilism—but you can't. You can make yourself miserable trying, though.

Open-ended curiosity —a texture of the complete stance—is the antidote to both eternalist and nihilist ideologies. The complete stance is both the best result of letting go of addiction to systems, and the best method for doing so.

Moving to metasystematicity

Committing yourself to a system makes you a tool for accomplishing its goals. The move to *metasystematicity* begins by inverting the relationship. For metasystematicity, systems can be tools for understanding.

Tools don't do the work; you use tools to do the work. You can't rely on a system to make sense of meaning for you. You make sense of meaning using systems.

You use different tools for different tasks. If you *have* one system, rather than being had by one, you can have several. You can use different ones in different contexts—or even several in a single situation.

Metasystematic use of systems requires some disassembly, to tease apart genuine insights from eternalistic overreaching. Most obviously, eternalist systems have different central topics. Theism mostly talks about God and salvation after death; scientism mostly talks about inanimate objects; psychotherapeutic ideology mostly talks about feelings. These systems are "functionally interchangeable" only for stabilizing eternalism. You may have switched allegiance from scientism to Jungianism, even though they are about entirely different things, just because they both make eternalist promises.

In principle, you could use scientism as a way of understanding inanimate things, and Jungianism as a way of understanding mythical things. This is not so easy, because eternalisms can't resist trying to explain *everything*. Theistic religions just can't help themselves from making false claims about scientific facts, no matter how badly that has gone. Scientism can't help itself from making false claims about ethics, no matter how badly that has gone. So metasystematicity asks about the limits of reliability of a system. That is likely to be restricted to its central subject matter, at most.

Eternalist systems' attempts to become Theories Of Everything mean they don't get along well. Attempting to hold both scientism and Jungianism, restricting each to its main topic, would be difficult. Scientism couldn't help yelling "all myths are false!", and Jungianism couldn't help insisting that the Soul and Sacred somehow escape physicality.

That is due to the *–ism* of both. Science has nothing to say about myths; only scient-*ism* does. Jung and his lineage developed valuable way of working with mythical material that you can (with some hard work) separate from the implicit metaphysics of Jungian-*ism*.

If you *have* systems, you can reflect on how to coordinate them; which takes precedence in what circumstances, and why, and how to combine aspects of two or more in a single situation. Nebulosity does not allow absolute truth, only more-or-less truth. This does not mean that everything is as true as anything else, or that anything goes. Metasystematicity involves figuring out *in what sense* a principle is true, and how and when and why to apply it.

When that is done, you can use two systems concerning the same subject matter, at the same time—even if they are contradictory. Contradiction is not necessarily a problem in the domain of meaning, because meaning is nebulous.

It is, for example, often helpful to apply contradictory moral frameworks when considering difficult ethical problems. Immanuel Kant famously defended an absolute moral duty to tell the truth, even when honesty would result in the murder of an innocent. Some utilitarians hold that lying is morally required whenever it increases the sum of pleasure in the world, no matter by how little. Nearly everyone else considers that lying is sometimes justified by its consequences, but usually you should tell the truth even if that causes minor harm. (Notably, but not only, when truth concerns your own wrong-doing, and the harmful consequence is to yourself.) Considerations of duties and of consequences are irreconcilable *in general*, but both may cast light on a single specific situation. Using the two at once is a form of moral metasystematicity.

Metasystematicity says "yes, and also, on the other hand…" This does not imply indecisiveness. It implies taking responsibility for your thinking, feeling, and acting. *You* understand situations; you cannot outsource your decision-making to an ideology, nor the blame it may entail. You are

not subject to a system. Rather, you take the recommendations of systems into account, among other considerations.

Vastness

Most eternalist systems promise *vastness*: becoming part of something far greater than yourself.[5] Theism connects you with God, who is incomparably superior to the entirety of His Creation, and gives you a role to play in His Plan. Scientism's sales pitches invoke the unimaginable scale of the astronomical universe, and promise complete understanding of it with physical laws that—like theism's Biblical laws—are absolute truths. Political theories explain the millennial sweep of human history, and the global struggle for justice, in terms of immutable laws of society, and they offer you a starring role in determining whether future generations will live in an oppressive dystopia or glorious utopia.

None of these glittering promises can be kept. There is much less to ideology than meets the eye. There is no supernatural, most natural phenomena are too messy to be understood with scientific laws,[6] and human beings are too diverse and ornery for any political ideology to explain or control society.

Nevertheless, eternalist systems *are* much bigger than your self. They span vast social and cultural groups, across space and time, and are ways of feeling and interacting, not just intellectual collections. Much of their operation is non-conceptual, and effectively incomprehensible. Weekly church-going may be good for you and for society, even if the eternalist sermons are nonsense. Subordinating yourself to a religion may restrain destructive egotism, and provide you with a small but meaningful role in a global social and cultural community.

Above, I suggested freeing yourself from ideology by shifting from being had by a system to having one, and then to having several. That is a useful way of understanding the process as you begin it, but it is a simplification, and not fully accurate. You cannot fit even one system inside yourself. Complete independence from systems, and complete inversion of the domination relationship, are impossible and undesirable.

Vaster than ideology

> Hot air balloons in a blue sky
> Image courtesy Allison Louise

Relating accurately with the world's vastness, including all its systems, requires changing your conception of self, and your relationship with your self. You *can* be bigger than any ideology—but it will no longer be a you, a self, that is bigger.

It always has been bigger, because it is not an it. You just didn't notice. You are not a container. You do not have fixed boundaries. The distinction between you and everything else is nebulous.

Your understanding is mainly not personal; it is cultural. Your emotions are mainly not personal, they are relational. Your activity is mainly not personal, it is social.

You extend indefinitely across systems of meaning, from which you are not separate. This does not mean you are One With The Entire Universe. It means your self blurs together with everything you interact with, and selfness fades out with distance.

You cannot be a coherent, fixed, well-defined system. You never were one; but when you identified with an ideology, you tried to make yourself one. When you tried to *have* systems, you tried to make yourself a bigger, stronger one than them.

Skill in metasystematicity involves accepting your own non-systematic nebulosity with good humor, and without trying to bully your self into a fixed, fully-structured form. You are an indefinite, constantly changing jumble of involvements with people, projects, ideologies, material objects, social and cultural institutions, a vulnerable human body, the cycle of the seasons, and the vicissitudes of history.

This can be frightening, because it implies the impossibility of complete self-control. There is no clearly-defined self to do the controlling, and no way to control a "you" who extends vaguely throughout cultural history and across the globe. There is some danger of pathological ego dissociation here, if you mistake nebulosity of self for absence of any structure or boundary.

Better, you can play with interactions among all the phenomena of the world. Nebulosity does not imply chaotic discord. When conflict does occur, recognizing the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern may lead to creative syntheses or resolutions.

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1. 1.This page uses the grammatically indefinite "you" throughout to refer to the protagonist. If it seems accusatory at times, please do not take it personally. Nearly every failing I ascribe to "you" is part of my personal experience. The others are observations of patterns commonly seen in others—from close friends to anonymous online essayists.
2. 2.Some systems are better (or worse) than others, of course. If you realize you are in an abusive cult, speedy exit may be wise. Even then, reflection on what it got right will prove valuable. It's tempting to replace unrealistic idealization with unrealistic vilification. It was all-good; now it is all-bad. The violence of rejection is a defense against being pulled in again by its attractions. It's also an excuse to avoid admitting your own gullibility and culpability. You try to convince yourself that the only possible explanation for your previous adherence was that the cult was overwhelmingly duplicitous and coercive. A realistic assessment of what was genuinely good as well as evil in it will be painful and difficult, but worth the effort.
3. 3.This analogy doesn't really work. If you unpick seams, the garment falls apart, but the pieces are left intact. When unpicking a system, you change your relationship with its whole fabric, while leaving the structure intact. I haven't got a better analogy, and am keeping this one for its sorry pun: you also "unpick" in the sense of undoing your choice to commit to an ideology, without necessarily vilifying it.
4. 4.For a detailed discussion of post-ideological nihilism, see Thomas Swan and Suzie Benack's "Narcissism in the Epistemological Pit," *Journal of Adult Development*, Vol. 9, No. 3, July 2002.
5. 5.Vastness is not a promise of eternalism itself, which is why I did not cover it in "The appeal of eternalism." Eternalism is just "everything means something," and the something might be quite narrow.
6. 6.See *In the Cells of the Eggplant*, particularly the chapters on reductionism and definition.

4 Comments

Ascended yogi

Accomplishing eternalism would mean always knowing the fixed meaning of everything, and acting accordingly. That is impossible, because there are no fixed meanings. It's also not possible

to completely blind yourself to nebulosity, and not possible to always give in to the insane demands of supposed fixed meanings.

Mainstream Christianity recognizes this, actually, with the doctrine of original sin. It is not possible for humans to avoid sin. Everyone is sometimes in conflict with eternal meaning.

Some eternalist religious sects (typically termed the "mystical" branches) claim that accomplishment is possible. You can perfectly unify your self with the Cosmic Plan while in this life. This usually implies monism, and I'll discuss such mysticism in detail in the monist chapter of *Meaningness*.

Some eternalistic political ideologies claim that collective accomplishment is *inevitable*; history guarantees utopia, eventually. Some non-political eternalist progress ideologies (versions of transhumanism, for instance) also say that accomplishment is at least possible in principle.

Comment on this page

> Surreal image of exiting
> Image courtesy Ubé

When the promises of eternalism are revealed as lies, when the harm it does becomes impossible to overlook—you exit.

Exit is rarely dramatic. Eternalism is so wrong that you drop it frequently, in the moment—but adopt it again a minute later. Stances are extremely unstable, and hard to maintain for long. Even if you are committed to an eternalistic system (a religion, for example), you ignore its claims about meaning many times a day, when they contradict practical reality.

If you are committed to a particular confused stance, growing understanding of its defects may lead eventually to a dramatic "deconversion experience"—of leaving a religious or non-religious eternalist system, for example. This book is not about that (although see "Vaster than ideology" for suggestions about how best to let go). It's about the unnoticed moment-to-moment movements of meaningness.

Exiting eternalism implies adopting an alternative stance toward meaningness.[1] The specific way eternalism breaks down in a particular situation guides you into another stance, which seems to offer a solution.

This book advocates moving from confused stances (such as eternalism) to the complete stance. The complete stance is relatively inaccessible, so this is difficult at first. Generally one is tossed from one confused stance to another, without even noticing, much less understanding. A first step toward accomplishing the complete stance is noticing the transitions between other stances. Becoming aware of movements among stances, and what triggers them, helps you understand the emotional dynamics of each. Learning to recognize the promises a stance makes, and reflecting on its repeated failure to deliver, kills the allure for you—and then you can escape its grip.

Where you may go next

> No exit
> Also courtesy Ubé

Because eternalism is the simplest, most basic confused stance, you may transition from it to almost any other. Exiting one of the more specific stances, discussed later in the book, typically can lead to only a few others. I'll discuss likely exit moves for each stance in the chapter about it. (The schematic overview of stances also lists the most likely next stances adopted when exiting each.)

From eternalism, there are three groups of stances you might move to: quasi-eternalistic stances, nihilism and quasi-nihilistic stances, and the complete stance.

The most closely allied stances are "circumscribed eternalisms." These admit that some things are not meaningful, but insist on fixed meanings for others. For example, mission says that "mundane" purposes are meaningless, really, but insists that "eternal" purposes are ultimately meaningful. Such stances preserve much of the feeling-tone of eternalism. They are attractive when eternalism's promises still seem generally plausible, but when its absolutism is obviously unworkable in a particular situation.

When a betrayal by eternalism leaves you feeling sick, nihilism or one of its allied stances may look more attractive. Outright nihilism is nearly impossible to maintain, but you can adopt it transiently. In the longer term, you might commit to some kind of Nihilism Lite, like materialism. Materialism (as I use the word in this book) is the stance that higher purposes are meaningless, but mundane, material ones are real.

With practice, you can learn to avoid both these possibilities. Instead, when you notice you are in the eternalist stance—when you find yourself insisting on a fixed meaning—you can use that as a reminder to move to the complete stance.

Learning skillful exits

> Altnabreac Station exit
> Altnabreac Station exit image courtesy Rob Faulkner

This book aims to provide methods for deliberately moving out of wrong, dysfunctional stances into accurate, functional ones. Mostly, people seem unaware of the dynamics I describe, and so get pushed around helplessly, from one confused stance to the next, when difficulties arise. Instead, you can use moments of breakdown as openings to move on deliberately—ideally, to the complete stance. Troubles with meaning are valuable if you are prepared to transition and know where best to head. That requires understanding how all the stances work: what makes the confused ones attractive, how they inevitably fail, and why the complete stance is better. This takes intellectual understanding, thorough emotional familiarity, and then skill developed through repetitive practice.

Overall, the method could be described as *destabilizing* confused stances and *stabilizing* the complete stance.

- Eternalism consists of denying nebulosity, so learning to recognize nebulosity is the general method for destabilizing the stance.
- Since eternalism's appeal is the promise of certainty, understanding, and control, realizing that it cannot deliver those destabilizes it.[2]
- In the eternalist ploys section, I have also suggested antidotes for many more specific patterns of eternalist thinking, feeling, and action.
- Just exiting eternalism is insufficient, though, if that simply drops you into another confused stance. Each needs its own antidotes—discussed later in the book.
- The complete stance consists of acknowledging both nebulosity and pattern, so stabilizing it involves learning to appreciate mixtures of the two. That too must wait for later.

1. 1.Could one take no stance at all? In some sense, the complete stance is that no-stance, because it does not limit meaningness in any way. That is what makes it "complete." It allows meanings to be however they are, without metaphysical pre-commitment to their being one way or another.
2. 2.Conversely, an antidote to nihilism is realizing that *partial* knowledge, understanding, and control are possible.

2 Comments

Chess move

Eternalist ploys are ways of thinking, feeling, talking, and acting that stabilize the eternalist stance.

Eternalism is inherently unstable because it is obviously wrong and harmful. Yet it feels so good that one wants to find ways to maintain the stance. Ploys are ways to blind oneself to nebulosity and to trick oneself into finding meaning where there is none.

For example:

- *Imposing fixed meanings* is a way of thinking using artificial, prescribed categories
- *Hope* is a way of feeling that shifts imaginary meaning to the future, when the present is obviously meaningless
- *Wistful certainty* is a way of talking that asserts the presence of meaning where none can be found
- *Purification* is a way of acting that forces reality to conform to meaningful concepts

Each page in this section describes one eternalist ploy: how it works, and an example of the ploy in action. I explain how each causes harm, and an antidote to apply when you find yourself using the ploy and would rather not.

It is not so easy to see the casual, random occurrences of everyday life as meaningful; so individual eternalist ploys are usually not highly effective, or not for long. Typically we switch rapidly from one to the next, as the inadequacy of each becomes obvious. Or, we deploy several at once, hoping to overwhelm our intelligence with multiple spurious arguments.

Some ploys you are unlikely to use if you are not committed to eternalism. Others, everyone falls into sometimes, even when committed to nihilism or the complete stance (both of which reject eternalism).

You will find all of them familiar, either from personal use or from overhearing them used. Still, it may be useful to read the explicit analyses, because the concept of "eternalist ploys" may provide new insight into their operation.

The ploys are particularly easy to observe in religious fundamentalism and political extremism. Such systems use them in heavy-handed, clumsy ways, making them obvious. In this section, I mainly describe the ploys as methods for fooling yourself; but priests and politicians use them rhetorically to fool others too. Later in the book, I discuss eternalism as a route to social power.

Four groups of eternalist ploys

I have categorized the ploys into four groups.

- By definition, eternalism means seeing everything as meaningful—although most things aren't. The first group of ploys *hallucinate meanings* where there are none.
- Many things are obviously meaningless, or have obviously nebulous meanings. The second groups of ploys *blind you to meaninglessness* and nebulosity.
- Sometimes it's impossible not to perceive meaninglessness, and so all those ploys fail. The third group *explains away meaninglessness*.
- Finally, if meaninglessness cannot be explained away, you have to react in some way. The fourth group tries to cope with meaninglessness when it's unavoidable.

Alternatively, the ploys could be grouped based on whether they are typically used in monist eternalism or dualist eternalism—or both. Most *are* used in both. However, smearing meaning around, magical thinking, and bafflement are particularly useful for monist eternalism. Similarly, fixed meanings, hiding from nebulosity, arming, and purification are particularly useful in dualist eternalism.

[I am unsure about my current list of ploys. They seem to overlap and run into each other somewhat, and I also expect I may find more of them. I may need to "refactor" the categories. Feedback about this would be welcome!

For now, I have provided unfinished versions of the pages describing the ploys. They are preliminary, incomplete drafts; I'll come back and finish them when I'm more confident that overall scheme is correct. However, there should be enough explanation for each that you will understand how they work, and so can recognize them in operation.]

5 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

The eternalist ploy *imposing fixed meanings* is the first of several that hallucinate meanings that don't exist, in order to avoid perceiving nebulosity.

This ploy tries to force a pre-determined set of categories on experience. These often have fixed positive and negative values, and demand that you take particular actions in response to them. The "abominations" of the Old Testament are examples. "Stereotypes" are one contemporary secular manifestation.

Often these categories don't fit, and the imposed meanings are wrong. When you act on them, reality eventually slaps you upside the head. You get unpleasant outcomes you didn't expect—based on your wrong categorization. Then you are shocked and confused; the conceptual system breaks down and you have no idea what to do.

The antidote is curiosity. *Wonder* what things mean; investigate without presuppositions. Allow things to mean whatever they do, or to remain mysterious or meaningless if that's what they want. Avoid premature judgements of meaning.

Ultimately, the antidote to all eternalism is to understand, recognize, accept, and stabilize the complete stance: that meanings are always fluid, partial, changing, and vague.

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The eternalist ploy *smearing meaning all over everything* hallucinates imaginary meanings, to avoid perceiving meaninglessness. That makes it similar to the ploy *imposing fixed meanings*, but whereas that deploys rigid categories, "smearing" is non-specific.

Smeared-around meanings are usually vague. If something is labelled "inappropriate": how, and why, and what does that actually imply?

Smearing is also usually quite undiscriminating about which things get what meanings. The important thing is that everything means *something*. Smearing accepts nebulous meanings, but not meaninglessness.

For instance:

> Traditional ways of knowing draw on the wisdom of nature, which the West has forgotten.

This is almost perfectly vague, but expresses a strong value judgement nonetheless. Not only does it devalue "the West," it also attempts to rescue "traditional ways of knowing" from the sensible judgement that they are sometimes idiotic and virtually meaningless. "Nature" and "wisdom" are sufficiently hand-wavy that they can justify almost anything—especially if they are supposed to be "mysterious" (to unenlightened Westerners, at least).

Smearing is common in monist eternalism, whereas fixed meanings are more common in dualist eternalism. (See "The big three stance combinations" for an introduction to monist vs. dualist eternalism.) Monism denies specifics, whereas dualism fixates them. Smearing is typically justified by "intuition" (characteristic of monism), where fixed meanings are justified by categorical knowledge (characteristic of dualism).

Smeared meanings cause trouble in almost the same way as fixed ones. They fail to fit reality, so acting on them has bad outcomes. Relying on "traditional ways of knowing" to handle an Ebola outbreak is a *really* bad idea.

The antidote to smearing, as with imposing, is to find out what things actually mean. If you find yourself smearing a lot, learning to be clear and specific is helpful, and some rigorous intellectual work is called for. For imposing, the antidote is more to be receptive to your perceptions of meaning, moment-by-moment, and to allow them to be as they are.

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Magical thinking is hallucinating a causal connection where there is none.[1] It includes ideas such as destiny, "messages from God" (or "from the universe"), belief in physical effects of "magical" acts, psychic powers, and so forth.

Magical thinking is a common form of patternicity. It is a common ploy for making eternalism seem workable when it is not.

Eternalism is the stance that *everything has a fixed meaning*. Magical thinking gives specific, wrong meanings to many meaningless events; and eternalism can be used as a theoretical framework for justifying the meanings given by magical thinking. ("It's not just a naturally-occurring omen, it's a message *from God*!") So there is a powerful synergy between eternalism and magical thinking. In fact, most major religions probably began as systematic appropriations of everyday magical thinking by elite eternalist priesthoods.

However, magical thinking is not necessarily eternalist. For example, believing homeopathy works, without giving it any spiritual significance, is magical thinking—but not eternalism. On the other hand, if you think homeopathy has something to do with cosmic Oneness, that is eternalistic.

Magical thinking causes harm when you act on mistaken causal beliefs and get bad results.

Part of the antidote to magical thinking is understanding that brains just naturally do it. You have to watch out for it. Once you see its patterns, catching it becomes automatic, and you can laugh at it.

Another part of the antidote is to learn how the world actually works.

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1. 1.More precisely, magical thinking is belief in a causal connection without having an adequate epistemological basis. There are interesting borderline cases, such as nutritional "science"—which I write about later—for which the epistemological basis is contested. I am more skeptical of nutritional "science" than most people; and I also believe that it is heavily laden with covert moral claims, thereby attributing ethical meanings to food that it does not have. All this makes nutrition a fascinating contemporary example of eternalism, magical thinking, and the metastasis of ethics into domains where it has no legitimate business.

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Hope springs eternal… istically.

Hope shifts imagined meaning to the future, when the present is obviously meaningless.

Hope is harmful in devaluing the present and shifting attention to imaginary futures that may never exist. Hope causes emotional stunting and childishness. It is inimical to emotional growth.

This page will discuss the putative value of hopeful illusions as defenses against anxiety, depression, and despair. (The logic of that is really that hope is an antidote to nihilism, which is seen as the only alternative. That's a different ploy.) It may function as a useful defense in emergencies, but illusion is counter-productive as a long-term or general strategy.

Even in crises, hope can be harmful. Since eternalism consists of blindness to nebulosity, it is destabilized by anything that brings nebulosity to our attention. Fortunately, nebulosity is indirectly visible in everyday life: as uncertainty, surprise, endings, confusion, breakdowns, and disagreement.

Unfortunately, when in the eternalist stance, it is usually only negative manifestations of nebulosity that can shock us out of blindness. Generally that leads to nihilism rather than the complete stance. This happens for all of us, frequently. "Damn, I seem to have inadvertently offended that person I met recently who I hoped might be a friend. Oh, well, I guess it was pointless to try anyway." More dramatically, personal crises (such as the death of a family member) are probably the most common triggers for crises of religious faith.

Crisis, by destabilizing eternalism, can be an opening into either nihilism or the complete stance. We should prepare for this. In a crisis, we generally get caught up in strategic suffering, i.e. frantically trying to get the world to go back to behaving the way we think it ought to. It is difficult then to think about what may seem like abstract philosophical concerns. Knowing that unwanted events are likely to tip us into nihilism, knowing how to recognize nihilism as we shift into it, and knowing the antidotes to nihilism, is a first step.

I will discuss, in passing, hope as a Christian "theological virtue." This is hope specifically for salvation. It derives from will, not from the passions.

The antidote to hope is active acceptance of the present as it is, and prospective acceptance of the future, however it will be.

I have written about this from a Buddhist perspective at "Charnel ground" and "Pure Land"—a pair of essays that are best read together.

6 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Eternalism is so obviously wrong that it can't fool anyone completely or consistently. We always know better, at some level.

That means eternalism always contains an element of make-believe. Every eternalist thought, speech, and act feels like children putting on eye patches and pretending to be pirates, launching daring raids on the cookie jar from a corvette that looks suspiciously like the dining room table.

Eternalist systems often explicitly demand suspension of disbelief ("you gotta believe!"). This is as true of eternalist political systems as of monotheist religions.

Pretending, like hope, is harmfully anti-growth. It causes emotional and intellectual stunting; childishness.

The antidote, as for kitsch, is realism. Just stop pretending.

Comment on this page

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Because eternalist delusion is so desirable, we collude to maintain it. We implicitly agree to agree to whatever meanings our social group comes up with. We support each other in not-seeing the nebulosity that contradicts those meanings. We choose not to mention it; to distract each other from it; to pretend the elephant of meaninglessness is not taking up most of the room.

This is genuinely compassionate activity. We all want to save each other from nihilism.

People are often passionately attached to some eternalist system or other, but the details are insignificant. All that matters is that they hold nebulosity at bay. It's common for people to switch from intense commitment to one political ideology, or religion, to another. What they seek is a supportive social group that confirms that everything makes sense.

Since the details *don't* matter, those are typically delegated to the leaders of an eternalism-based institution, such as a church or political party. Such institutions are tools for organizing eternalist collusion.[1]

The antidote to collusion is pointing out nebulosity. As an individual, one can smile and remain silent when someone tries to get you to agree that everything is meaningful; and that is usually best. However, changing the social dynamic does require active contradiction.

This is quite tricky, and must be done skillfully. There are always ethical complexities in trying to change other people. Switching away from eternalism is one of the most profound changes anyone can make; and it can easily lead into nihilism, which may be worse. So the stakes are quite high.

The Angry New Atheists and the Speculative Realists seem examples of *un*-skillful contradiction. The tirades of the Angry Atheists are tinged with nihilistic rage and intellectualization; Speculative Realism is tinged with nihilistic anxiety, depression, and intellectualization. This is unhelpful (although the New Atheists overall have probably done much good.) As with all attempts to change people's political or religious opinions, the tendency is to score points to enhance your status in your in-group, rather than to sincerely engage with the people you are trying to convert in order to help them.

Humor is the best method for demonstrating nebulosity and meaninglessness. Not "jokes" as such, but pointing out how cute it is when meaning and meaninglessness, pattern and nebulosity, play together like puppies, nipping and tickling each other, tumbling over and over.

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1. 1.*The Guru Papers* provides much insight into the workings of eternalist social groups.

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Hiding from nebulosity is the first of several eternalist ploys that blind you to evidence of meaninglessness. (Previous pages in this section discussed ploys that allow you to hallucinate meaning where there is none—a related but different strategy.)

This ploy attempts to physically avoid nebulous situations and information.

It's difficult to apply this ploy as an individual. It's more effective when applied by social groups (such as religious sects or fringe political movements).

Extreme examples are closed cults, which try to isolate their members from anything that contradicts their eternalist beliefs.

Hiding doesn't work well. Even in a cult compound, you can't separate yourself from the obvious meaninglessness of everyday randomness.

Attempts to hide leave you narrow and fearful.

The antidote is to allow, or even actively seek, nebulosity. Experiment with odd media, anomalous situations, and unfamiliar social groups or cultures. Learn to *enjoy* not understanding quite what is going on.[1]

(This is related to the method "eating the shadow" I've written about elsewhere.)

Nebulosity provokes anxiety, so one should not rush this process. Sensible care is called for.

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1. 1.You could try dwile flonking.

5 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Kitsch is one of the main ploys of eternalism. In Milan Kundera's memorable phrase, "kitsch is the denial of shit". For "shit" we can substitute nebulosity, which eternalism finds unacceptable. Kitschy eternalism simply refuses to see meaninglessness, even where it is obvious.

This leads to a willfully idiotic sentimentality. We try to live in a pastel-colored Disneyfied world in which everything works out for the best in the end, everyone is well-intentioned (although sometimes confused), there is a silver lining in every cloud, everyone is beautiful inside, when life gives you lemons you make lemonade, and all the world needs is love. [1]

Kitsch is a refusal to seriously engage with spiritual problems. Any anomalies are dismissed as being due to finite human understanding of God's benevolent intent. Reasonable faith is replaced with credulousness.

False and exaggerated emotion is characteristic of eternalist kitsch.

The antidote to kitsch

The antidote to kitsch is realism: the acknowledgement of shit. Realism requires no particular method or insight; merely willingness. Kitsch is idiotic because we always know better; we just don't want to admit it.

The danger in applying this antidote—and a reason we fear to do so—is that we may conclude that *everything* is shit. That, however, is nihilism. We must acknowledge *both* nebulosity and pattern. The term "kitsch" comes from art criticism; it describes "art" that is self-consciously "beautiful" or sweet. Art that is self-consciously ugly and repellent is equally false, and in recent decades has become equally trite. Authentic art acknowledges the inseparability of light and darkness, and can be a path to non-duality.

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1. 1.According to the Talmud, every blade of grass has its own angel that watches over it and encourages it to grow. Isn't that *darling?*

4 Comments

Archangel Michael defeating Satan (Guido Reni, 1635)

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Arming and armoring oneself is a ploy for maintaining eternalism. When nebulosity is obvious, eternalism fails to fit reality. The response is to armor oneself against evidence, and to arm oneself to destroy it.

Kitschy sentimentality can serve as armor against recognizing nebulosity. We blind ourselves to mystery; we try to make the world small and comfortable; and suffer when we encounter vastness.

The cost of armoring is blindness to opportunity. Much good is left undone because an eternalist code did not recommend it, and much harm is done because the code required it. Less obviously, but perhaps even more importantly, we lose the freedom of courage: the freedom to risk, to take actions whose results we cannot predict. Armored eternalism condemns such creativity.

When sentimentality feels threatened, it turns ugly—because the function of sentimentality is self-protection. Confronted with evidence that our code is imperfect, we retreat to a harsher, more restrictive code, and seek to impose it on the uncooperative world as well as ourselves. We become censorious and self-righteous.

When the armor wears thin, we crank it up into melodrama. We make ourselves up as heroes in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Alas: those who are too sure they are on the side of God are capable of the greatest evil. Armed eternalism results in hostility, punishment of self and others, narrowness, bitterness, and brittleness.

When the supposed Cosmic Plan collides with what is decent and sensible, one either does the apparently right thing, which erodes one's commitment to eternalism, or one follows the prescription. If that has a bad outcome, one must blind oneself to the failure. We do that by hardening ourselves, and often also by hardening our interpretation of the code—against the temptation to weaken it to fit reality.

Eternalism makes you think "nice" people will behave the way you want them to. When they don't, you demonize them, and try to control or punish them. In fact, Kundera's theory of kitsch was motivated by his analysis of totalitarian communism in his native Czechoslovakia; totalitarianism, he concluded, is kitsch in government.

In the pathological extreme, armed eternalism sees any deviation as a threat that must be destroyed, and becomes sociopathic. We may launch witch-hunts, or conduct internal witch-hunts, scouring our own minds for evidence of sinful thoughts. Vast crimes have been justified in the name of eternalism: Inquisition, religious wars, and genocides.

Armed eternalism sees totalitarianism as the only defense against the *nihilist apocalypse*. (Of which, more in future chapters.) But the dichotomy between totalitarianism and apocalypse is false; due, as usual, to nihilism appearing to be the only alternative to eternalism.

The antidotes are relaxation and de-escalation. As you learn that nebulosity need not be negative, you can allow ambiguity increasingly. As you allow ambiguity, there is less and less need to war against evidence of it.

Comment on this page

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Faith is an eternalist ploy for blinding yourself to nebulosity. It means explicitly choosing to ignore experience or reason when they contradict eternalism. This need not be faith in any particular belief or system, but simply in certainty that there is *some* meaningful order to everything.

Faith implies dumbing yourself down, and looking for external authority to affirm eternalism over reality as you can perceive it.

The antidote is regaining self-trust and intelligence by learning, through experience, that personal observation and reasoning can yield accurate understanding.

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Thought suppression is the eternalist ploy that hides nebulosity and meaninglessness simply by rejecting thoughts that would make them obvious.

The thought "maybe everything is meaningless" might be intolerable. In your experience, it may lead immediately to full-blown nihilism. So you choose not to think it.

It's hard to choose never to think of something. ("Don't think of a pink elephant.") To suppress a thought effectively, you have to recognize warning signs that it's coming. For instance, there are thoughts that tend to lead you to the one you want to avoid. "Maybe there's nothing in particular I'm meant do with my life" can lead to "so maybe everything is meaningless" (although it need not). So it's better not to think that either. And "I don't really know what I'm meant to do with my life" leads to "maybe nothing," so better not think that.

Since meaninglessness is so common, a multitude of observations and thoughts could eventually lead you to the wrong conclusion that everything is meaningless. The more often you apply thought suppression, the wider the domains of experience you have to blank.

Thought-terminating clichés

One tactic for stopping an unwanted train of thought is to apply a counter-thought.[1] Among these are *thought-terminating clichés*.

A cliché is a fixed thought that ends an authentic line of inference. For example: "everyone is put on earth for a reason." That ends patterns of thinking that might lead to "nothing really has any purpose." This thought is not something you are likely to come up with yourself; it's part of the thought soup of our culture. You hear someone "wise" saying it when you are teenager, and take it over as your own. There's no good reason to believe it, but you accept it originally on authority and then because it makes you feel better.

Here are some more examples:

- There is someone for everyone.

- His time had come, I guess.
- Everything happens for the best.
- Everything is part of the unfolding plan for the universe.
- God works in mysterious ways.

The term "thought-terminating cliché" comes from Robert J. Lifton's *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. This book has useful insights into several of the eternalist ploys. He writes:

> "The language of the totalist environment is characterized by the thought-terminating cliché. The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. These become the start and finish of any ideological analysis. In [Chinese Communist] thought reform, for instance, the phrase 'bourgeois mentality' is used to encompass and critically dismiss ordinarily troublesome concerns like the quest for individual expression, the exploration of alternative ideas, and the search for perspective and balance in political judgments. And in addition to their function as interpretive shortcuts, these cliches become what Richard Weaver has called "ultimate terms": either "god terms," representative of ultimate good; or "devil terms," representative of ultimate evil. In thought reform, "progress," "progressive," "liberation," "proletarian standpoints" and "the dialectic of history" fall into the former category; "capitalist," "imperialist," "exploiting classes," and "bourgeois" (mentality, liberalism, morality, superstition, greed) of course fall into the latter. Totalist language then, is repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull: in Lionel Trilling's phrase, 'the language of nonthought.'"

Punishing bad thoughts

Another tactic is punishing yourself for thinking unwanted thoughts.

Eternalist authorities recommend actively rooting about in your psyche to find bad ("sinful") thoughts and punish them. These might be labelled as morally bad (so they deserve punishment); but they can be anything that contradicts the stance you are trying to maintain. For eternalism, lack of faith is a sin.

Harm

Thought suppression leads to deliberate stupidity.

Thought suppression can be involved in *any* confused stance. Every confused stance involves not-seeing something about meaning; suppressing thoughts that would lead to that could always help maintain the confusion. However, thought suppression is particularly characteristic of eternalism, because eternalism is *particularly* simple and stupid.

Thought suppression also leads to a sensation of claustrophobic imprisonment within a limited set of safe thoughts; of timidity in the face of the unfamiliar; and a strangled inability to express oneself.

A fascinating personal account of the harm of thought suppression was posted as a comment on this site.

Antidote

The antidote is to allow thoughts.

For this, mindfulness meditation may be particularly useful. That mainly consists of non-judgmental awareness of thoughts. Since thoughts are mostly just junk we've taken over from our culture, you can regard them as not-particularly-mine. Therefore, they don't say anything about "me," which makes them less frightening.

In practicing mindfulness meditation, you discover what you think. This comes as a surprise to everyone!

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1. 1.Counter-thoughts can also be applied positively, to direct oneself into a complete stance.

3 Comments

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When eternalism collides with reality—as it eventually must—and causes needless suffering, you are tempted to abandon it. But eternalism is so attractive, and the apparent alternative—nihilism—so appalling that this is unacceptable. So a common ploy is to cut a deal.

You make a bargain with eternalism that it will behave better, and in return you will recommit to your faith in it. This bargain may be the product of negotiation over a period ranging from seconds to years.

Of course, the argument is entirely in your head. And, of course, eternalism has no intention of keeping its side of the deal.

Eternalism will let you down over and over—because the world isn't actually as it promises. This can produce an addictive cycle. When vagueness and meaningless are less obvious, eternalism delivers its emotional rewards. When they are more obvious, chaos, confusion, pain and doubt arise. Then you wonder what you did wrong. You may punish yourself on eternalism's behalf. You try to figure out how to make the good feelings come back. If only, you think, I could *really believe*. If only my life weren't such a mess. I know! I'll promise to believe again, if life promises to go back to normal.

The antidote is to use periods of doubt as productive openings in which you can switch to the complete stance. This requires understanding that nihilism is not the only alternative to eternalism, and some skill in avoiding the slide into nihilism.

It's only possible to combat eternalism's ploys effectively if you can also combat nihilism's ploys. Otherwise, it's out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Comment on this page

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Wistful certainty, a ploy for maintaining the eternalist stance, follows this pattern of thinking:

> There *must* be a…

For example,

- There *must* be a God, or at least a *Something*
- There *must* be a meaning to life
- There *must* be a special purpose I was put here to fulfill
- There *must* be a right ethical system
- There *must* be a correct form of government
- There *must* be a reason this happened
- There *must* be a rational explanation for everything

"Wistful" certainty occurs when one can't think of a reason there "must" be whatever it is. One is sure, however, because eternalism wouldn't work if whatever it is weren't true.

- There *must* a God, or at least a *Something*, because otherwise: there would be nothing to hold meaning reliably in place.
- There *must* be a meaning to life, because otherwise: it's meaningless and I might as well kill myself.
- There *must* be some special purpose I was put here to fulfill, because otherwise: I would be worthless.
- There *must* be a right ethical system, because otherwise: I'd have no idea what to do.
- There *must* be a correct form of government, because otherwise: there would be no way to guarantee justice.
- There *must* be a reason this happened, because otherwise: the Cosmic Plan would be incomplete.
- There *must* be a rational explanation for everything, because otherwise: the universe wouldn't make sense.

This is *wistful* because one wishes one could think of a better justification than "or else eternalism would fail." It is *certain* because the possibility of letting go of eternalism seems unthinkably awful.

Wistful certainty is the first of several ploys for explaining away non-perception of meaning. This is a little different from earlier ploys that hallucinate particular meanings, or that blind you to meaninglessness. In this third category of ploys, you are aware that you are not perceiving meaning.

Wistful certainty tends to lead to paralysis, because you believe you don't have enough understanding to act accurately.

Wistful certainty can also lead to imposing fixed meanings or smearing random meanings around, as ways of resolving the anxiety of not-knowing.

The antidote is to remind yourself that many things are meaningless, or have inherently vague meanings, and that action is possible anyway.

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Faithful bafflement is a ploy for maintaining the eternalist stance, closely related to wistful certainty. It admits a further quantum of doubt. It may feel anguished, rather than wistful:

- I don't know what I'm supposed to do!
- I don't know what it all means!
- How can this have happened!

It is faithful, because you have not yet let go of eternalism. But where wistful certainty is sure there is some answer (though it is not visible), faithful bafflement starts to suspect there is no answer (though eternalism must somehow be correct anyway).

Like wistful certainty, faithful bafflement can lead to paralysis.

As with wistful certainty, the antidote is to use doubt as an opening. Existential crises force spiritual questions; they can lead you into into pathological confusion, but they can also clarify meaningness and lead into the complete stance.

One tactic is to turn around the expression of bafflement, and to personalize it.

If you are upset about a moral choice and exclaim "I don't know what I am supposed to do!", ask yourself: "supposed by whom?"

This tactic works even for staunch atheists. We all have at the back of our minds a shadowy authority figure by whom we will be judged. It takes more than a current membership card in the Council for Secular Humanism to dispel that bogeyman. In calm and rational times he hides from the light of rationality, but in dark and troubled moments we feel his boney hand on our shoulder.

Instead of "I don't know what it all means!" ask: "what does this mean to me? What does it mean to my family or community?"

Rather than trying to answer "How can this have happened!" in terms of the Cosmic Plan, you can look for a practical answer. And you can also remind yourself that many things happen for no reason at all.

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Mystification is a ploy for maintaining the eternalist stance. Like wistful certainty, it is a tactic for explaining away non-perception of meaning. It is the next step when faithful bafflement fails.

Mystification uses thoughts as a weapon against authentic thinking. It creates glib, bogus metaphysical explanations that sweep meaninglessness under the rug. It can be vague, poetic, emotive (typical of monist mystification), or elaborately conceptual and intellectual (typical of dualist mystification).

Eternalist ideologies claim to have all the answers. However, when push comes to shove, they admit that some things are mysterious. In fact, the mysteries turn out to include all the major questions about each of the dimensions of meaningness.

Still, eternalist ideologies insist that it is not mysterious *which* things are mysterious; nor *how* they are mysterious; nor what the mystery *means*. One is not to inquire into that which is

mysterious, to come to have a tentative opinion about it. Mystery is not allowed to be mysterious: We know everything about it, says eternalism.

In fact, according to this ploy, mystery always means the same thing: *apparent meaninglessness is the very best proof that everything is meaningful*. Everything mysterious is bundled together and labeled "sacred" or "miraculous" or "cosmic." Or, more specifically, "God's plan, not for man to know"; or "the historically-inevitable working-out of class struggle"; or "the uncomputable but optimal decision strategy."

Mystification produces half-assed mumbo-jumbo explanations. Acting based on these fails— naturally!—with more-or-less disastrous results.

The antidote to mystification is actual thinking. "Actual thinking" means not simply repeating thoughts you have taken over from an ideology, but active curiosity and investigation and questioning and reasoning. It involves skepticism; not the pseudo-skepticism of rejecting claims your tribe rejects, but actively wondering about how things are, and refusing to accept attractive stories that make no sense.

Thinking is a skill. There are many specific methods, taught for example in the "critical thinking" curriculum, and it is worth learning them. It is also important to realize that thinking must go beyond method.

Recognizing meaninglessness can be an opening into vastness. That is what mystification promises—but then it delivers the opposite. It gestures at vastness, but immediately closes it off by labeling it, and by pretending to explain some ultimate insight into its nature.

The best antidote to mystification is to appreciate, and open to, the experience of vastness. That is *wonderment*.

Comment on this page

Next Page: Rehearsing the horrors of nihilism →

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When most ploys for maintaining eternalism have failed, sometimes the best that can be said for it is that it is less bad than nihilism. And, if nihilism were indeed the only alternative, that might be true.

Reminding yourself of how bad nihilism is can help you maintain the eternalist stance. Reminding others of how bad it is can help stabilize them in the stance.

This is the hellfire and brimstone of eternalist preaching. It's likely to produce fear and loathing.

Also, it can backfire. It's hard to explain the harm of nihilism without explaining how nihilism works. Explaining nihilism is likely to make it seem plausible. So rehearsing nihilist horror can actually pop you into nihilism, rather than keeping you out!

The antidote to this ploy is to compare eternalism with the complete stance rather than with nihilism.

Comment on this page

Next Page: Purification →

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Purity is an obsessive focus for dualist eternalism. It mobilizes emotions of disgust, guilt, shame, and self-righteous anger.

The classic discussion is Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. There is also much useful analysis in *The Guru Papers*, which draws on *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*.

The purity obsession's harms are a narrowed scope of action, and various neuroses (avoidant-compulsive; superiority complex).

An effective antidote is deliberately playing with "impurity."

1 Comment

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Eternalism is the confused stance that everything has a fixed meaning. Various ploys try to maintain that stance in the face of frequent evidence that most things do not have definite meanings. When these fail, a fallback is to try to maintain eternalism where it seems most critical or plausible, and wall that off from everything else, which you abandon to nebulosity.

It is difficult, for instance, to see how earthquakes, tsunamis, and famines could be willed by a benevolent God; or meaningful; or anything other than disasters that *just happened*. It is difficult not to fall into the stance that *most* things are God's will, but not some bits that cause you trouble.

For the liberally-minded, it is common to abandon the view that life has a definite purpose, while continuing to insist that some particular scheme of ethics (utilitarianism, for instance) is definitely correct. Then one has abandoned eternalism in the dimension of purpose, while preserving it in the dimension of ethics.

Fortress eternalism has all the same defects and harms as full-on eternalism—within the territory you hold eternalistically. Also, if you misinterpret nebulosity as meaninglessness, then you are effectively a nihilist as far as anything outside your domain of safety is concerned; and you are subject to the harms of nihilism when you venture there.

Terrifyingly, as you try to tend your eternalist garden, you find the outer darkness encroaching. Areas of visible chaos inexorably expand. Having initially admitted a tiny bit of nebulosity, it spreads like a puddle of black ink—because in fact everything is nebulous. You can try to build dams, bulwarks against the encroaching tide, by redoubling commitment to eternalism; but you find that more and more of everyday life becomes the domain of nebulosity. Eternalist belief is increasingly relegated to Sunday morning. Increasingly, you become a nihilist in practice, even while maintaining commitment to eternalism in theory.

Since eternalism is the stance that *everything* has a fixed meaning, fortress eternalism is not really eternalism at all. This last-ditch ploy transitions you from eternalism to some next stance.

This is, actually, an opportunity to move to the complete stance. When the last defense finally collapses, you can see that all is nebulous. If you remember then that nebulosity is *not* meaninglessness, and recognize patterns of meaning remaining after eternalism has collapsed— you have found the complete stance.

The Pillars of Creation (dust clouds in the Eagle Nebula) seen in infrared

Nihilism holds that there is no meaning or value anywhere. Questions about purpose, ethics, and sacredness are unanswerable because they are meaningless. You might as well ask about the sleep habits of colorless green ideas as about the meaning of life.

Nihilism is a mirror image of eternalism—the stance that everything is meaningful. (For an introduction, see "Preview: eternalism and nihilism.") However, the two stances are not simply opposites; they share fundamental metaphysical assumptions.

Eternalism and nihilism both fail to recognize that nebulosity and pattern are inseparable. Therefore they suppose that "real" meaning would be absolutely patterned: perfectly definite and certain, unchanging and objective. This is their shared metaphysical error.

Eternalism insists that meaning really is like that. That is its second metaphysical error. Nihilism observes, accurately, that no such meaning is possible. This corrects the second error. However, because nihilism shares the first error, it concludes that meaning is impossible, period. This is also wrong; nebulous meanings are "real," for any reasonable definition of "real."

Nihilism is attractive to those who have explicitly recognized, understood, and rejected eternalism's second error: belief in some sort of special, fixed meaning. That is not easy. Nihilism is, therefore, the more intelligent stance. Or, at least, it's a stance that tends to be adopted more often by more intelligent people. (It's even more dysfunctional than eternalism, so we could also call it less intelligent.)

While most people are committed, however waveringly, to eternalism, only a few commit to nihilism. In denying all meaning, nihilism is wildly implausible. Only a few sociopaths, intellectuals, and depressives try to maintain it.

We'll see, though, that almost everyone adopts the nihilistic stance at times, without noticing. When the complete stance is unknown, nihilism seems like the only possible defense against the harmful lies of eternalism. (Just as eternalism seems like the only possible salvation from the harmful lies of nihilism.)

Even if you are relatively immune to nihilism, it's important to understand as a prototype. Many other confused stances are modified or limited forms of nihilism. They reject particular types of meanings, rather than rejecting all meaningfulness. That makes their distortions, harms, and emotional dynamics similar to nihilism's.

Obstacles to nihilism

In a way, it's a pity that it's so hard to be a nihilist. Nihilism is mistaken and harmful, but its insights into what's wrong with eternalism point toward the complete stance.

The obstacles to nihilism are that:

1. It's hard to give up hope that eternalism will someday deliver on its alluring promises
2. There is a strong social and cultural taboo against adopting nihilism
3. Meaningfulness is obvious, so nihilism is obviously wrong
4. Nihilism is harmful, and its dire psychological side-effects make you miserable and useless

The first two are "bad" obstacles, in the sense that they are obstacles to the complete stance too. The second two are "good" obstacles, in that they can shift you out of nihilism into the complete stance. I'll explain each of them further below.

These powerful obstacles might seem unsurmountable, except that eternalism is also obviously wrong and harmful. When you have been beaten up by eternalism often enough, nihilism may seem less bad.

In practice, because meaning *is* obvious, committed nihilists usually adopt some sort of Nihilism Lite. That is, wavering nihilism secretly admits certain kinds of meaning, while denying others.

What is it like?

Nihilism is attractive because it promises you don't have to care. Nothing means anything, so why would you? Success and failure, suffering and pleasure, they're all equally meaningless. You are always at zero; can't get worse. You are freed from all demands.

That's the promise. The reality is that loss of meaning results in rage, futile intellectual argument, depression, and anxiety. The endpoint of nihilism is catatonia. Most of this chapter concerns these emotional dynamics.

In addition, I address the *content* of nihilistic intellectualization. This is a collection of reasons for rejecting meanings as "not really meaningful":

- Some say all we can get are wrong kinds of meaning; not ultimate, not objective, not eternal, not inherent, not transcendent, and so on. I suggest that these are not defects we should care about.

- Others attempt to prove that meanings can't exist at all. These all have major logical flaws that you'd notice immediately if they weren't emotionally attractive. They seem compelling only when nihilism seems comfortable and we want to maintain it.

Antidotes to nihilism

As long as nihilism seems comfortable, you have no reason to find a way out. When you realize its costs exceed its benefits, you may want to escape. That may not be so easy.

Since nihilism is an emotional strategy, not a coherent philosophy, recognizing that its supporting reasoning doesn't work has limited effect—but can be helpful for some people. You may be able to think your way out.

If eternalism seems like the only alternative to nihilism, nihilism may seem less bad. Understanding—experientially as well as intellectually—the complete stance as a better, third alternative helps.

The underlying emotional problem is usually not that you genuinely believe meaning doesn't exist, nor that the *right* kind of meaning doesn't exist, but that life doesn't seem meaningful *enough*. This is a psychological and practical problem, not a philosophical one, so psychological and practical methods may help. There are many ways to intensify one's experience of meaning, making it more powerful, more obvious, more compelling, and more enjoyable.

4 Comments

NASA nebula image

If you think you are not nihilistic—I think you are mistaken.

If you think you are a nihilist—I think you are mistaken.

I hope this chapter on nihilism will be useful both to people who think they aren't nihilists, and to people who think they are.

Nihilism is a thing you and I, personally, *do* sometimes. Everyone does, sometimes.

If nihilism were just a conceptual philosophy—something to think and talk about—you could safely ignore it. But *doing* nihilism is bad for us: bad enough that it's worth the effort to stop. This chapter explains how.

For non-nihilists: what you can learn from nihilism

I will suggest to non-nihilists that understanding nihilism in detail is important. You are right to reject it: nihilism is harmful and mistaken. However, it is not an abstruse philosophical irrelevance, because *everyone* falls into nihilism at least occasionally. I'll suggest that you may be more nihilistic than you realize, and it may be causing you more trouble than you think.

What is at stake here is our understanding and control over our own lives. Nihilism matters because meaning matters, and the best-known alternative ways of relating to meaning are also wrong.

Fear of nihilism is a main reason people commit to other stances, such as eternalism and existentialism, that are also harmful and mistaken. A clearer understanding of what's wrong with nihilism can help you avoid those too.

For nihilists: this is not the usual denunciation

The usual arguments against nihilism are nonsense. I will confirm that you are right to reject them. I will agree with much of what you believe about meaning, and agree that it is important. Meanings are, for example, not cosmic, eternal, or personal, and this matters.

Realizing that eternalism and existentialism are wrong is the main reason people try to be nihilists, which makes it a more intelligent stance.

However, nihilism itself—"nothing is meaningful"—is harmful and mistaken. This chapter explains why, with detailed analyses that are unlike those you have seen before.

I hope to persuade you that you cannot actually be a nihilist, because you are too intelligent to fully convince yourself that nothing is meaningful. However, committing to nihilism, and attempting to live by it, may be causing you more trouble than you realize.

For both nihilists and non-nihilists: a better alternative

Fortunately, there is another possibility, not well-known, the complete stance. It is not harmful or mistaken.

However, you can only get there once you understand exactly why nihilism and eternalism are both mistakes. That is why you may find it worth your while to read this chapter—whatever you currently think about nihilism.

Sticker: NIHILIST LIVES DON'T MATTER

Nihilism's promise is "you don't have to care." Nothing means anything, so why would you.

Nihilism promises evasion of all responsibility. You don't have to do anything, because nothing matters.

Nihilism promises simplicity: an escape from the wearying complexity of intertwining nebulosity and pattern.

Nihilism promises cold comfort: you may be miserable, but nothing better than misery is possible. It takes you back to zero. Positive and negative meanings are equally impossible. You are not missing out on anything.

Nihilism promises certainty: there is definitely no meaning anywhere, so you can abandon the fruitless search for its ultimate source.

These promises are lies.

There is a better way.

The ease of oblivion

The onslaught of meanings is exhausting. A million times a day you get told you have to do this or that, because meanings. If you stop for a minute and take a step back… most of that junk is pretty meaningless. Somehow it seems you have to do it anyway.

On the other hand, you got a bad review at work, your back is acting up and sitting at a computer all day is making it hurt more every day, and your spouse has been sulking for weeks for no explainable reason. You can't think of anything you can do about any of that. Heavy stuff is going badly and looks like it's getting worse.

What you *really* don't want is to have to *deal with* what that all means and how you feel about it.

If nothing matters, then you don't.

On top of everything else, there is the hard, uncertain, endless worrying work of sorting out what is and isn't meaningful and what to do about it.

You could just ignore it.

You could just stop.

Nihilism promises oblivion. Oblivion is rest. Oblivion is freedom.

Simplicity

Life is too complicated. The intertwining of nebulosity and pattern generates endless, kaleidoscopic hassles, opportunities, bafflements, projects, scenarios, commitments, conflicts, strategies, relationships, possessions, obsessions, appointments, disappointments, —

They all seem meaningful at times and meaningless at others. Which matter? How could you possibly keep track of all that? Can you care about everything all at once all the time? What do you drop on the floor when the crunch comes? What does it all mean, taken together? Does it mean anything at all?

No, promises nihilism. It's simple: nothing means anything. You don't have to bother with any of that stuff. That's all the understanding you need.

Eternalism is also simple: it tells you the meaning of everything. When you realize eternalism is a pack of lies, simply inverting it is the obvious and simple move.

Nihilism shuns complex specifics, because they are too obviously meaningful. In their place, it substitutes conceptual abstractions and vague generalities. When your boss threatens to fire you because you can't work because you are in too much pain and your spouse has left on a "business trip with a friend"—

—none of that matters, because you are just an automaton assembled by the random process of evolution, and in a million years no one will know it happened, much less care.

Getting back to zero

Life is a sickening blindfold rollercoaster ride of slow climbs and terrifying drops. It's hope and fear, pleasure and pain, anticipation and disappointment. Some people seem to like that sort of thing? Maybe you'd rather get off—immediately.

You're strapped in, but there's anaesthesia. To suffer is to want things to be other than they are; but if nothing means anything, there is no reason to prefer anything over anything else.

You may feel pain, but pain is not suffering. Suffering is the rejection of pain. Who cares? Soon you will be dead, the sun will explode, the universe will run out of energy and it will freeze to death. Pain will be over.

Depression and senseless rage beat agony and terror.

Pleasure is meaningless. Joy is meaningless. There's nothing better than misery. "Better" is a meaning. You are not missing out on anything.

Nihilism is attractive when life seems worse than zero. It promises you can get back to neutral. Like eternalism, it promises control: you can keep the thermostat set to zero.

It lies. You can dull your suffering with depression, but you can't completely hide it from yourself. You're trying to convince yourself you are at zero when you know you're in the minus zone.

The story of the fox and the grapes, illustrated by John Tenniel

When you can't get what you need for life to seem adequate, when everything seems out of control and out of reach, what's left becomes meaningless. You might as well give up wanting, nihilism says. At least you won't be disappointed.

Is there *nothing* left? There's still bubble tea. If you got a bubble tea and enjoyed it, you would be reminded of everything you'd enjoy more and can't have. You'd better give up bubble tea. It doesn't mean anything, anyway.

You could go skateboarding in the park, but would that be fun? It seems like way too much effort. If it wasn't fun, everything would be worse. If it was fun, you'd have to deal with your feelings about getting a *little* bit of fun, not enough. That would be super exhausting.

Nihilism promotes ascetic self-denial. If life goes even a bit into the positive, you aren't at zero anymore. It'll just swing back to negative and it'll be even worse. So you ruthlessly amputate the small enjoyments that are the signposts on the way out of nihilism.

Certainty

Nihilism promises certainty about the absence of meaning. You don't have to wonder and guess about what really matters. It doesn't.

Eternalism also promises certainty. These are the two most absolute stances. They are mirror images of each other.

What guarantees does it give that there is no meaning? Science has proven that meaning can't exist! Or, so nihilism confidently asserts—without going into specifics. You'd think that if Science had proven that meaning doesn't exist, you would remember which great scientist did that, and something about how their experiment worked.

Well, says nihilism, if you are even slightly rational, and not deluded by eternalism, the reasons are obvious! Spoiler: there isn't any rational argument that everything is meaningless. What did happen was that scientific rationality disproved many religious claims that had supported eternalism. Eternalism is indeed false, but that does not imply nihilism.

Defense against eternalism

You got fooled by eternalism's alluring lies about meaning. Repeatedly.

Maybe several different eternalist systems. You kept trying another, after you realized each one was a con. "You have to keep up hope," right? That was fatal. It sucked you into manipulative cults, dangerous political movements, and wacko therapies.

You won't get fooled again. You'll never get swindled by faith again. You won't get taken in by claims that some idiot thing is "meaningful." It's all lies.

If you refuse to believe in any meanings, you will be safe from trickery.

Eternalism claims to be the only salvation from nihilism, but now you realize nihilism is the only defense against eternalism.

Nihilism can't deliver nothing

Nihilism promises you nothing, but it can't deliver even that.

You are going to get meaning no matter what.

Sometimes, you get too much meaning.

When overwhelmed, you may have to retreat. Then nihilism may seem a way of avoiding self-blame for a breakdown. It's better to recognize that sometimes life just *is* too much. It's OK to admit that; it doesn't make you a permanent failure.

When overwhelmed, it may be better to recognize that many of the things you were treating as meaningful… aren't. Not so much. You could let go of some of them.

Sometimes, you can't get enough meaning—or not of the right type.

Then in nihilism you pretend to believe meaning doesn't exist. It's a childish tantrum of rejection: if you can't have *chocolate* ice cream, you are not going to have ice cream *at all*.

Inadequate meaning is not a metaphysical problem. It is a practical and psychological one. There are practical methods for increasing meaning in life. There are psychological methods for opening to perceiving and appreciating meanings you have overlooked.

Gaining confidence in an accurate understanding of how meaningness works is the best defense against both eternalism and nihilism. That understanding is the base for developing skill in working with meanings. That is the path into the complete stance.

10 Comments

The Who—Won't Get Fooled Again

Nihilism begins with the intelligent recognition that you have been conned by eternalism. Nihilism is the defiant determination not to get fooled again. Having been swindled over and over by false promises of meaning, the nihilist stance refuses to acknowledge even the most obvious manifestations of meaningfulness—lest they, too, turn out to be illusory.

Betrayal and loss

Eternalism makes seductive promises: that you are always loved, that the universe is in good order, that right and wrong can be known for certain, that your suffering has meaning, that you have a special role in creation, that there will be cosmic justice after death.

When you have been disappointed often enough, you start to realize these sweet lies are poison. Such grand promises cannot be kept. Discovering that you have been betrayed by eternalism, and have lost out on the promises it made, is a horrendous emotional blow.

Then we may react with the same emotions we have in the face of any other catastrophic betrayal and loss, such as a divorce following infidelity: *denial, anger, arguing, depression, anxiety,* and *acceptance*.[1]

On this page, I'll explain briefly the dynamics of these reactions to loss of faith in eternalism. Then I'll devote a full page to each strategy separately.

Denial: wavering eternalism

One's first reaction to recognizing the nebulosity of meaningness is to deny it. On some level, you realize that not everything has a definite meaning; that eternalism is false. But since that seems too awful to contemplate, you refuse to admit it. You redouble your insistence that everything is *peachy keen*—and prepare to do violence to anyone and anything that contradicts you.

This is *wavering* eternalism. You try to maintain the eternalist stance using ploys such as kitsch, arming, and mystification. These are not nihilistic strategies; but they can easily flip into nihilism, when nebulosity becomes so obvious that pretending becomes impossible.

Anger

Nihilism is a simple inversion of eternalism. It denies that there anything is meaningful at all. At times when meaning is particularly evanescent, when you are particularly bitterly disappointed in it, you may commit to nihilism. "I'll *never* get fooled again!"

But this commitment is difficult—probably impossible. Meaningfulness is, at other times, obvious. As a result, in practice all nihilism is *wavering* nihilism.

Whereas wavering eternalism consists of eternalism plus secret doubt, wavering nihilism consists of nihilism plus secret passion. Passion is the recognition of meaningfulness. To maintain wavering nihilism, you must blind yourselves to meaningfulness, which is even more difficult than blinding yourselves to the nebulosity of meaning.

Rage is one way wavering nihilism reacts to evidence of meaningfulness. This is a defiant negativity: "I *don't care!* No matter what you say, I will *not* admit life is meaningful!" Nihilistic rage wants to destroy whatever has meaning, and whoever points to meaning. (This is the mirror-image strategy to armed eternalism.)

I mentioned that the people most prone to nihilism are sociopaths, intellectuals, and depressives. These are the people best able to deploy the corresponding approaches of rage, argument, and depression. Almost everyone adopts all these strategies at times, however.

Arguing with reality

Eternalism uses willful stupidity to not-see nebulosity. Realizing that you have been duped, and seeing through eternalism's lies, is intelligent. Mostly, only unusually smart people explicitly commit to nihilism.[2]

Smart people are used to using clever arguments to get what they want. So it is natural to apply intellectual brilliance to the difficult task of maintaining wavering nihilism, to fight its greatest obstacle: the obviousness of meaningfulness. Nihilistic intellectualization is the counterpart to eternalist kitsch: calm insistence on plainly false claims.

Somehow meaningfulness must be explained away by conceptual sleight-of-hand. A theory that proves "nothing is really meaningful"—in which "really" is the gate to a hell writhing with logical demons—can distract you from the obvious.

This theory has to get complicated quickly in order to be sufficiently confusing, or seem so insightful as to dazzle you into submission. Typically, nihilistic intellectualization involves extreme abstraction, voluminous intricacy, sesquipedalian diction, non-standard logic, and often

reflexivity (meta-level analysis). These insulate the argument from checking against everyday experience.[3]

Because nihilistic intellectualization is often colored by its sister-strategies of anger or depression, it is often aggressive, hostile, cynical, or pessimistic; whereas eternalistic justifications are typically cloying, simpering, naïve, and Pollyanna-ish.

Depression

Realizing that eternalism will always fail often results in anguish, pessimism, depression, stoicism, alienation, apathy, exhaustion, and paralysis.

The loss of guaranteed meaningfulness is a real one, and it is natural to feel sad about it. Depression goes beyond spontaneous sadness, however. It is active and deliberate—although it feels passive and externally imposed.

Nihilistic depression suppresses the feelings (positive and negative) that go with recognition of meaning. Depression can be thought of as rage turned inward. It tries to kill your passionate response to reality.

Depression copes with loss by lowering the stakes. It wants to disengage from problems of meaning by refusing to admit that they are important. If nothing is really meaningful, then the loss of meaning does not matter. Of course, you *do* care about life. But that is unacceptable when you have committed to nihilism. That caring is the main obstacle to accomplishing nihilism, and depression tries to annihilate it.

Acceptance

Acceptance of *both* meaninglessness and meaningfulness is the way out of nihilism, and into the complete stance.

One has to fully allow the emotional loss that comes with the collapse of eternalism. The pain of loss is real and cannot be destroyed, talked away, or minimized (as the nihilistic coping strategies attempt to do). You have to admit that you *do* care, that the world *is* meaningful, so the stakes are high. But you also have to learn to turn away from eternalism's alluring promise to remove the pain by restoring fixed meanings.

Conceptual understanding of nebulosity is probably required. Until you understand how meaningfulness and meaninglessness coexist, confused stances alternate, jostling for position as meaning and lack of meaning become more and less obvious. The complete stance remains invisible until you learn the sideways move to nebulosity. Nebulosity allows the coexistence of pain and joy, and reveals the benefits of meaninglessness.

Appropriation

Nihilism's analysis of the defects of eternalism is largely right. That analysis can be appropriated in the complete stance.

Nihilistic rage can be transformed into clear-minded rejection of fixation; nihilistic intellectualization into non-conceptual appreciation of nebulosity; nihilistic depression into enjoyment of meaninglessness with equanimity.

1. 1.This list is close to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's observation of the stages of emotional reactions to one's own impending death, in her *On Death and Dying*. Not everyone necessarily has all the same reactions; but it's a useful framework for the discussion here. She did not consider anxiety a stage, but it is a pervasive feature of grieving, and other experts have suggested that it should be included in the list.
2. 2.This is a generalization, of course. It is possible to make brilliant conceptual arguments in favor of eternalism (usually in defense of a system, such as an eternalist religion or political ideology). There are probably also stupid people who commit to nihilism (although I have not come across one).
3. 3.Nihilistic intellectualization is characteristic of postmodernist thought. I will have much more to say about postmodernism later in the book.

59 Comments

Sleeping bat
Snoozy bat courtesy Sally Dixon

We all slip into *nihilizing* at times: refusing to see meanings that are right in front of us. Generally we pop right back out of it. Some people commit to nihilism, and describe themselves as nihilists. To accomplish nihilism would be to see absolutely everything as entirely meaningless all the time. What would *that* be like?

It's hard to imagine—just as it's hard to imagine what it would be like to be a bat. We can reason it out, though—and the answer does fit the experience of nihilizing.

This page discusses three plausible-seeming accounts of what accomplishing nihilism would be like: suicide, automaticity, and catatonia; and what these imply for momentary nihilizing. First, though, let's distinguish some stances closely allied to nihilism, but distinct from it, which are more easily accomplished.

Accomplishing Lite nihilism and allied stances

"What is it like?" is often asked of self-described nihilists in web forums about nihilism. Questioners say they can't imagine, and find it hard to believe that it's even possible.

I think their skepticism is usually right. The answers internet nihilists give are usually consistent with stances other than full nihilism, in the sense of "nothing means anything." The word does have other definitions, but it's not uncommon for "nihilists" to assert that nothing means anything, and then go on to acknowledge that some things do mean things, without noticing the contradiction.

Most often, "nihilists" advocate existentialism, the stance that nothing *intrinsically* means anything, but that we *create* meanings, which work just fine, so there's nothing to worry about. Or, they may advocate materialism: it's true, they say, that fancy meanings like God and ethical absolutes are imaginary, but obviously we care about mundane things like having fun, which—they say—is a better way to live anyway. Others, less enthusiastically, adopt a Nihilism Lite, which admits that some things are slightly meaningful, sort of, but have a wrong, inadequate sort of meaning, or are not meaningful *enough*, and are only meaningful in some trivial sense.

These stances are all much easier to accomplish—to maintain consistently—than full-on nihilism. Not actually *easy*: they are unstable, and tend to slide into other allied stances when contradicted by reality.

But, for example, accomplishing Lite nihilism just requires stubbornly insisting "nope, not meaningful enough, hardly means anything at all" in every situation; and that is common enough in moderate depression.

Suicide

> There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.

That's the first line of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a famous essay on nihilism, existentialism, and "the absurd."

But this is confused. If there is no meaning, no purpose or standard of value, then there is no more reason to commit suicide than any other action. Of course, there would also be no reason *not* to commit suicide. But if we act out of mere habit and are not used to killing ourselves, or if we cease acting altogether, suicide is impossible. And if we acted at random, there are so many other things we might do that suicide would be extremely unlikely.

So, logically, suicide is the accomplishment of miserabilism—the stance that everything is awful—not nihilism. "Awful" is a meaning, so miserabilism is diametrically opposite to nihilism. However, the two stances *taste* the same: they cause rage and depression.

If you convince yourself that everything is meaningless, you may feel that there is some meaning to that, namely that it is awful! Much nihilistic writing implicitly makes this mistake. Logically, it makes no sense. If everything is meaningless, then it is meaningless that everything is meaningless, not awful, and there is no problem.

In practice, however, the nihilistic stance is usually accompanied by intense negative emotions, including depression, sometimes with suicidal feelings.

Depression *is* awful. This chapter of *Meaningness* hopes to help you avoid or escape it. Nihilistic depression *can* lead to suicide, even though the two are contradictory.

Automaticity

To accomplish nihilism would be to continuously regard all phenomena as meaningless and without value (positive or negative). Since we act only for meaningful reasons—or, at least, that's what we usually claim—it would seem that if we ceased to perceive meaningfulness, we'd entirely cease to act.

However, some of what we do is automatic, or merely habitual. It may be meaningful in a bigger picture, or may once have been meaningful and lost its purpose; but it doesn't require specific awareness of meaning as we act. How much of life is like this is hard to estimate. It seems to be a matter of degree, too. When doing some boring, familiar, necessary task, you may say "I was on autopilot" after noticing you'd made a baffling mistake a while back. If you go to work on four hours sleep, you may say "I'm a zombie today." When doing some socially required but largely meaningless ritual (some work meetings), "just going through the motions" is a common description. Still, you have some intermittent awareness of purpose.

In clinical depression and anxiety, a more intense version of this is called "depersonalization-derealization disorder." (Anxiety, like depression, is a common consequence of nihilism

—"existential angst.") The world seems unreal and meaningless, and you feel like there's no one home in your skull. You may still function more-or-less normally: your body goes through the motions of living, although it seems you have been turned into a humanoid robot. If it's more severe, you may become partially or even entirely incapacitated.

The usual lay understanding of "catatonia" implies immobility. However, psychiatry also describes "excited catatonia," in which you perform meaningless, purposeless actions, repetitively or randomly.[1] Excited catatonia is usually a symptom of severe anxiety or depression.

Catatonia

In catatonia's more usual form, you gradually interact less and less, sometimes eventually becoming entirely motionless and unresponsive. In severe cases, it is fatal: you stop eating and drinking, and die of starvation or dehydration.

You might guess that catatonia would involve loss of awareness. It doesn't. Some patients coming out of it say that they were fully conscious, remember everything that happened, and were thinking as normally as one can in a state of extreme anxiety or depression. Often eye movements are also normal; you track what is going on around you. This suggests that catatonia is in a sense deliberate. It is *unwillingness* to act, as much as inability. (That will connect with the account of nihilistic depression later in this chapter.)

Catatonia is much more common than I realized before researching this page. Dramatic cases of long-term hospitalization with total rigidity seem so extreme and alien! But, reading the list of symptoms, I recognized that several friends, and I myself, have had mild or moderate cases when depressed.

It's an under-studied, ill-defined, and poorly-understood condition.[2] Consequently it is under-diagnosed and under-treated. That's unfortunate, because apparently intravenous lorazepam (an anti-anxiety drug) is usually highly effective.

So what?

Nihilism, as a stance, ranges from momentary and mild to committed and extreme.

Most people, probably everyone, nihilizes at least occasionally. We dismiss as "meaningless" a thought, feeling, or event whose meaning we don't want to deal with. The harm done may be slight, if the refused meaning was slight, and if one doesn't nihilize too often.

However, understanding the endpoint of nihilism, and its symptoms along the way, can help avoid even minor harms, as well as forestalling a slide into adopting it habitually. Casual nihilizing produces irritation, anxiety, and listlessness. It cuts off open-ended curiosity about nebulous meanings. Investigating those deepens meaning, and enables play, joy, and creativity.

It may seem that I am unfairly pathologizing a widely-held, benign philosophical system by associating it with severe mental disease. I don't think so:

- Nihilism is not benign. "'Nihilism is OK' is not OK" explains why advocates of "happy nihilism" are not actually nihilists—and are also flirting with disaster.
- "The uncanny absence of nihil –ism" explains that it is not a philosophical system. It's not that nihilism a bad or wrong system, but that no such system exists at all.[3]
- The upcoming sections on depression and anxiety explain how these are closely related to nihilism (and its allied stances such as existentialism). They make you both miserable and

useless. Yet nihilism can make them seem attractive. I do want to warn you against its siren call.

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1. 1.A good review article is Subhashie Wijemanne and Joseph Jankovic's "Movement disorders in catatonia," *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry* **86** (2015), pp. 825–832.
2. 2.I have no relevant training and am not at all expert on this or any other mental health condition. I found the Wikipedia article helpful, if you'd like to learn more. As of August 2021, it seems to be based largely on a review article which goes into more detail: Sean A. Rasmussen, Michael F. Mazurek, and Patricia I. Rosebush, "Catatonia: Our current understanding of its diagnosis, treatment and pathophysiology," *World Journal of Psychiatry*, December 22, 2016, **6(4)**: pp. 391–398. My impression from limited lay reading is that "catatonia" is probably several causally-unrelated conditions with overlapping symptoms, and that several other conditions treated as distinct are themselves partly the same condition, including for example pathological apathy, avolition, and abulia.
3. 3.I know this might sound implausible before reading it! It's got –ism in it, so it must be an ideology, right? Nope. Check your botulism.

6 Comments

> Woman with a buffalo skull
> Image courtesy Mallory Johndrow

Nihilism inspires holy dread, and thundering (but ineffectual) condemnation. That is understandable, but unrealistic and unhelpful. *Meaningness* treats nihilism as an ordinary, practical problem we all face, as individuals and societies.

Everyone is a nihilist except us

"Nihilism" is often used as a weapon, or as an insult, for assaulting the Bad Tribes. We hold these Truths sacred because they prove the Cosmic Plan. The Bad Tribes deny them and insist on some meaningless nonsense instead. They don't really believe in anything!

Christian apologetics often equates atheism with nihilism. Nihilism is mistaken and harmful, so this is a strong emotional argument for Christianity, even if it has no logical validity.[1] Loss of Christian faith *is* a common route into nihilism, giving the argument greater plausibility. However, although most nihilists are atheists, most atheists are not nihilists. On average, they see just as much meaning as religious people, but perceive it as self-produced, as opposed to divinely produced.[2]

> Tree in a field
> Image courtesy niko.photos

If you hold trees as sacred, you might call anyone who doesn't a nihilist. I kind of believe trees are sacred, so I'm sympathetic; but it's more accurate to say just that unbelievers overlook a significant meaning. I might say they are "nihilizing" that particular meaning. Few non-tree-worshippers deny *all* meanings, so most can't properly be called nihilists.

Holy dread

Fuseli's painting "The Nightmare" showing a dreaming woman afflicted with demons
Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*

For committed eternalists, nihilism is not just mistaken, it is *uncanny*. It's not just ethically wrong, it's *taboo*.

That's because eternalism is always wavering. However committed you are, you know it's wrong. It's wrong as a stance: meaninglessness is obvious everywhere, and most meaningful things aren't explained by the Cosmic Plan. Every eternalist system often contradicts what you plainly see.

If everything else is nihilism, however, you'd better reinforce eternalism by reminding yourself of its horror . The threat of the collapse of all meaning justifies any drastic action.

The uncanny is a glimpse of the Shadow—the *not-me* that you have rejected and hidden from yourself. If you identify with eternalism, you banish from your sight any hint of meaninglessness.

And then, at three a.m., you wake in a cold sweat with the thought "is this all there is?" And nihilism looms in the dark at the foot of the bed, leering at you.

To maintain eternalism, you must treat nihilism not just as a silly mistake (which it is), nor just an amoral threat to society (which it is); not as a possibility that could be considered rationally and rejected: but as a taboo that must *not* be considered—lest you be seduced by its creepy, forbidden, sexual allure.

Black magic

Man wearing black cloak wielding a skull staff
Image courtesy Dmitry Vechorko

Most groups and individuals accused of "nihilism" recognize that the word is mainly a weapon used against them, and therefore strongly reject it, and explain how they *do* believe in something special.

Others seize it as a defiant identity. Embracing the Shadow by violating taboos liberates personal power: energy that was tied up in not-seeing. Nihilism is particularly attractive when "dark triad" aspects of personality manifest: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Some nihilists use their elite ideology as black magic: as an unholy weapon against eternalists. In their rage, they take sadistic glee in destroying eternalist illusions and throwing former believers into black despair.

Your own eternalism is best dismantled gently and gradually. If you are deeply stuck in it, however, violence may be the only answer. Then nihilistic black magic can also have a positive power of personal transformation. I wrote about this at length in two essay series on *Buddhism for Vampires*: "We are all monsters" and "Dark culture and tantric transformation." Particularly relevant are the essays "Black magic, transformation, and power" and "Black magic and meaningness."

Appropriating nihilism as dark culture

Nihilism may be a valuable, if unpleasant, diversion on the way to the complete stance. The complete stance recognizes what is right in nihilism—the nebulosity of meaningness, and the outright meaninglessness of many phenomena. If a temporary romance with nihilism is the only way to come to appreciate that, violating some taboos may be worth the price.

As the psychological transformation approaches completion, you can appropriate nihilism's dark power as compassionate communication. It is unkind to destroy the illusions of the vulnerable before they are ready, but encouraging others to escape eternalism can be beneficial.

The alchemical reaction between grisly horror and good humor produces art—dark culture—and play. That is an invitation to join and enjoy the dance of nebulosity and pattern.

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1. 1.In Buddhism, "eternalist" is often used as a corresponding weapon directed at anyone who believes in something you think obviously isn't real. Partisans of the Tibetan Geluk sect accuse the Nyingma sect of eternalism for believing in the "luminosity of emptiness," and nihilism for denying the objective existence of karma. Partisans of the Nyingma sect accuse the Geluk sect of nihilism for insisting on the "non-affirming negation" which denies the luminosity of emptiness, and eternalism for teaching that karma is fixed. Religious wars have been fought over this.
2. 2.David Speed, Thomas J. Coleman, III, and Joseph Langston, "What Do You Mean, 'What Does It All Mean?' Atheism, Nonreligion, and Life Meaning," *SAGE Open*, January 2018.

Comment on this page

Next Page: Sexy cynicism and nihilist elitism →

Couple dressed in goth-ish black clothes; guy with defiant posture

You are a special, superior individual. Your intelligence overmatches the meek-minded herd: you have *discovered the truth* of meaninglessness. You are harder and bolder than the lazy weaklings who take refuge in comforting lies: you *face up* to the pitiless cold glare of the bleak, empty universe.

Or, more likely: you don't consider yourself a nihilist at all. But sometimes you nihilize anyway. There are domains of meaning you don't want to look at—so you don't. Understanding nihilist motivations may clarify reasons you choose that, and its costs and benefits.

Nihilist elitism is half right. It takes uncommon intelligence to recognize that eternalism is categorically wrong: that *no* belief system can provide a foundation for meaning, and that there are no ultimate, transcendent, or objective meanings. It takes uncommon courage to defy social conventions of meaning, and to accept the outcaste label "nihilist." It takes uncommon grit to accept the agonizing amputation of meaning.

And, nihilist elitism is half wrong. Meaning is obvious everywhere, and it takes deliberate stupidity to pretend not to see it. If you are smart enough to figure out that eternalism is wrong, you should be smart enough to figure out why nihilism is also wrong. Eternalism is cowardly in clinging to illusory meanings, but nihilism is also cowardly in clinging to illusory meaninglessness. If you are tough enough to let go of the comforting simplistic certainty of religion or scientism, you should be tough enough to let go of the comforting simplistic certainty of nihilism.

Adopting the nihilist stance renders you dazed and confused. Intellectual arguments can't fully suppress the jarring dissonance between "nothing means anything" and the obvious meanings of everyday life. When you are genuinely nihilistic, not merely materialistic or existentialistic, usually you are hurting, scared, and lost. Your brave front of sophisticated contempt may go about two millimeters deep.

Bolstering your ego with feelings of elitist superiority is a poor substitute for figuring out how to work with meaningness effectively.

Defying eternalism is sexy

Children take the social world as it comes. Your parents' community's ideas about meaningness are brute facts of life.[1] Sometime in your teens or twenties, you may figure out that it's largely hypocrisy, posturing, and mindless pious verbiage. Most of it has no basis, and overall it does not make sense.

You learn—from experience, or observing others' rebellion—that calling out polite lies results in punishment, more or less severe, by your parents and community. Then you can try to make yourself stupid enough not to notice them; or you can silently pretend and obey; or you can rebel.

It takes some intelligence to recognize self-serving nonsense. It takes some courage to oppose a corrupt eternalistic system. It takes some grit to deal with society's disapproval when you do. That is a mark of maturity and independence.

Rebellion shows that you have emerged from unthinking embeddedness in your family and their social group and their limited understanding of meaningness. You are now a sophisticated man of the world, with a broader, harder, more realistic view. You are strong enough to navigate the demands of harsh environments with concrete constraints, in which pious abstract eternalist fantasies are irrelevant and misleading.

These are stereotypically male traits, ones that stereotypically women find attractive for sex and marriage, and that men seek in team members. If you are a man, or a teenage boy, you might do well to develop them, and advertise them. And if you aren't there yet, you could fake it.

Rebellion can be genuinely heroic, when it involves significant risks and aims to free others as well as yourself. In a relatively tolerant environment, adopting a cynical posture—going around saying "everything is fake" in a knowing, world-weary way—is a cheap way of simulating heroic qualities. The pose may not impress anyone over the age of fourteen; but, I don't know, I was doing it well into my twenties, and sometimes it works? Besides, much of culture *is* fake, and not everyone notices, and pointing it out is often useful. (See, I'm *still* doing it!)

Once you are past fourteen, sometimes someone is going to call you on it. *Why* is patriotism/God/love/ethics fake? You can bluff: "Yeah, everyone knows that, unless they are a total dupe." Often you'll get away with that; sometimes not. As you grow up, you gradually learn what it's profitable to be cynical about, and what not. You may even figure out what actually *is and isn't* fake, and be able to explain why. That's hard work, though.

It's easier to adopt some alternative belief system that has ready-made answers; and nearly all rebellious young people do. You can find them on the internet. You might find "nihilism," which apparently says that *everything* is fake. That's much easier than keeping track of a long list of what is and isn't and why. Plus you get to wear all black clothes, and everyone looks sexy in black. It's fun being a rebel without a clue for a couple years, and then you grow up and get on with real life.

Nihilism is not cynical enough

Nihilism is the shadow of eternalism: it would never occur to you that meaning doesn't exist if authorities didn't keep making such a big deal about how it definitely does. It is usually those who take eternalism most seriously, who are most devoted to some Holy Truth, who become serious nihilists, when they realize it's bogus. And the more rigidly eternalistic your community is, the more outrageous its bogosity is. It is only when you pursue Truth to its utmost that you come to see that all eternalisms are false.

So it's failure to be cynical *enough* that results in authentic nihilism: genuine commitment, beyond an adolescent pose. It comes from failure to recognize that eternalism is highly unstable. Most people aren't particularly eternalistic; their commitment to their religion or political ideology is quite superficial. A serious nihilist is over-earnest, and assumes others' seemingly passionate declarations of belief are also earnest, whereas often they are mere social conformity. However eternalist they may claim to be, most people adopt materialism most of the time. That is the pragmatic stance for getting on with an ordinary life. The nihilist gets upset that eternalist beliefs are *false*, whereas mostly they are just *fake*. They're false too, but that's irrelevant for most people.

The nihilist mistakenly accepts the eternalist melodrama of cosmic meaning and inverts it,[2] instead of recognizing that it's dumb and hardly anyone else takes it seriously.

This earnestness is admirable, even heroic, although a bit dopey and naive.

Grandiosity is self-loathing

The nihilist takes his seriousness and heroism too seriously, and decides it makes him special. He explains to anyone who will listen how smart and rational and scientific he is, because he has figured out the Truth of meaninglessness.

He also dramatizes and exaggerates the pain and horror of nihilism, to look manly and tough.[3] He may work to make it worse in reality as well, diving into depressive agony with relish, to prove to himself (and to his increasingly imaginary audience) how hard and committed he is. He must be superhuman to continue functioning, however shakily, in the face of his knowledge of the horrifying truth, and the consequent loss of all possible motivations to live. It would drive lesser mortals insane with fear and trembling, if they could even understand it.

Simultaneously, he realizes his obsession with meaninglessness is sick, that he's torturing and progressively crippling himself, that he can't be all that smart if he was so committed to eternalism and it is so stupid, that he's missing out on life and turning himself into a repellent monster. And for what?

Nihilist elitism depends on the implicit belief that recognizing the meaninglessness of everything is meaningful. But at some level, the nihilist recognizes that's self-contradictory. The angry intensity with which he insists that nihilism is The Truth is self-refuting: meaninglessness is meaningless, so there's no purpose in shouting about it. All value is illusory, which implies his pride must be delusional. Meaninglessness renders him—along with all other human animals—helpless and pathetic, impotent ever to make a mark on the universe.

The teenage rebel without a clue may think "becoming a nihilist" means joining the Cool Kidz Club, but you don't get much confirmation from other nihilists. It's not a functional subculture. It's isolating, because friendship would be meaningful, and we can't be having that.

So the nihilist is full of lonely self-hatred, which he tries to hide, but can't help expressing occasionally in unguarded moments. Mostly he projects the hate outward, as contempt for ordinary people, who are too stupid and cowardly to accept the truth. He rages at them for not recognizing his superiority, for continuing to mouth pious socially-required idiocies, and for enforcing their meaningless morality on him.

Dating advice for nihilists

Goth couple kissing passionately

Hip cynicism is attractively edgy, but serious nihilism is well *over* the edge and down into the abyss. It might seem kind of cool when you are fifteen; it's immature and uncool if you are twenty five. It's a miscalibration. It goes way too far to work as a dating strategy. It looks like a dangerous mental health problem, not sexy sophistication. You're going to need to grow out of it.

You've got an unfair advantage. Taking problems of meaning seriously, as nihilists try to, can lead to actually figuring them out—if you let go of the juvenile dramatics and the self-destructive refusal to watch meaning at work. With experience, you can discern accurately what is meaningful and what is not.

Then you can be the right amount cynical, about the right things, and you can make it snarky and entertaining—because the paradoxes of intertwingling nebulosity and pattern are hilarious. And eternalism *does* deserve condemnation, scorn, and ridicule. But eternalists deserve help with their confusion, not derision, so you can also be the right amount sincere and supportive at the right times.

Nihilism can be a lot of fun, if you don't take it too seriously. Secretly, you knew this even when you were indulging in nihilistic agony. It was part of your motivation, although you wouldn't officially admit it to yourself.

The whole thing is amusingly absurd: eternalism is absurd, nihilism is absurd, life is absurd, death is absurd. You can point out the surreal humor of it all, and many people will laugh. The ones who aren't too scared—and making it funny takes the edge off the terror.

You can play with the magic shadow-dance of meaning and meaninglessness as they turn into each other. You can turn that into artistic creation that is smart and tough and fearless like nihilism at its best, and joyful, confident, and insightful, like eternalism at its best. You can gather and spearhead a creative community of like-minded smart, confident people.

What do women want in a man?[4] Yeah, all that.

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1. 1.If your circumstances as a child are unusually bad—if your parents are abusive or neglectful, or if their own circumstances are chaotic and they cannot protect you—you may not internalize their attitudes toward meaning at all. This can be another path to *de facto* nihilism.
2. 2.Relatedly, we'll see later that many of the standard justifications nihilists give for nihilism are taken from Christian apologetics, rather than rationality or science as claimed.
3. 3.Many of the writers most closely associated with nihilism, such as Nietzsche and Cioran and Mishima, go on at tedious length about how masculine it is, since it proves pain tolerance. Nietzsche idolized strength and power, but he was mostly too sick and weak to function, and had nearly zero influence during his working lifetime.
4. 4.I don't always give dating advice, but when I do, it's for heterosexual nihilist men. Apparently! The "dating advice" framing is partly a joke: this is a sketch of how to

transition from nihilism to the complete stance, which is the same regardless of gender and sexual orientation. Since depressed, angry, anxious, delusional people are unattractive to everyone, and humorous, playful, creative people are attractive to everyone, it probably also can work as a dating strategy for women and for guys into guys. It's not a secret that generally improving yourself and your own life makes you more attractive. That said, the specifics here are in line with academic research on heterosexual dating dynamics.

6 Comments

Demonic combat
Warhammer 40,000 image courtesy Stefan02

In the grim darkness of the near future there is no meaning. Nothing is true; everything is permitted.[1]

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as **toward a catastrophe**, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 1888-ish[2]

Was Nietzsche right?

According to some authors, we have already had the apocalypse—we called it "the twentieth century"—and its time has passed. Others say it is now under way and will soon get worse; or that it is an imminent danger, but we are not quite there yet. Some think nihilism was never a big deal, and Nietzsche was making a fuss about nothing.

It's hard to say, because it's not *exactly* clear what a nihilist apocalypse would look like.[3] The first section of this web page summarizes some common conceptions. Ideas about the details have changed; so the rest of the page is historical. (I discuss the history in much greater detail in *How Meaning Fell Apart*.) I suggest that although nihilism is, in fact, a civilization-ending threat, the danger can be averted.

Apocalyptic visions

In a world of total license, the masses follow their baser instincts to engage in the worst sorts of depravity. The pernicious denial of absolute truth and absolute moral rules spreads from the decadent elites to the coarse lower classes, who lose all respect for authority, indulge their natural promiscuity, breed like rabbits, play vile noise music, worship blood-drinking demons, casually commit rape and murder, tear down all institutions, destroy Western civilization, and let loose a wave of anarchy and violence that precipitates a thousand-year Dark Age.

Eternalist systems—religions, political ideologies, rationalisms—use the apocalyptic vision to justify themselves by demonizing alternatives. Armed eternalism sees amoral anarchic irrationality as the only alternative to total obedience.

Dogmatic religion portrays atheism, immorality, and sexual license as the only alternative. In the words of the eloquent pseudonymous blogger "Gratiaetnatura":

> Imagine a world with no objective values. In this world, people who get away with horrific crimes such as child abuse, rape, and murder never find justice. It is a world in which there is no meaning over and above individual or societal whims. In this world, people seek their own pleasure without boundaries. If sex between men and men, between women and women, or between people and animals satisfies someone, there is no law in this world that could condemn it other than someone's individual moral whims. And if something inconvenient gets in the way of one's pleasure, such as a pregnancy, in this world a woman can find a "doctor" to murder her baby under the full protection of the law.

I can't get myself as worked up about excessive sexual pleasure as some religious conservatives, but I do frown on murder, and am quite fond of the benefits of civilization.

Political ideologies denounce alternative systems as certain to lead to oppression, civil war, social collapse, and millions of deaths—because they deny sacred political values. This apocalyptic vision is realistic; it has manifested repeatedly. On the other hand, all political ideologies are also eternalistic: unwilling to compromise on their particular sacred values, and therefore capable of murdering millions of innocent people to defend them.

Full political nihilism denies the meaningfulness of all social institutions,[4] and results in personal political apathy. This is common; but can an entire society lose its focus on political questions?

Tidal waves of irrationality periodically sweep across nations, or even the globe. The results are predictably bad; sometimes they produce mass starvation. For **rationalism**, the apocalyptic vision is a universal rejection of reason and evidence, of science and technology, of principles and functions, of systems and methods. The grim dark future replaces these with pseudoscience, tribalism, conspiracy theories, and New Age and Christian Evangelical cults. Inflamed irrationalists condemn the intricate technical, economic, and social systems that enable billions to live in reasonable safety. Having smashed unnatural water treatment methods, environmentally unacceptable food transport systems, and oppressive police departments, most of us would die of cholera, famine, or insane sectarian violence. Is that a realistic fear?

The apocalyptic twentieth century

Prophets usually proclaim the apocalypse as a theoretical but looming and imminent disaster, now partially under way. But maybe it already happened. Maybe it was the fault of rationalism. And Christianity. Eternalism begets nihilism…

For a thousand years, rationalism and Christianity walked as brothers, hand-in-hand, due to the miraculous synthesis performed by saints such as Augustine and Aquinas. Rationality proved that everything the Church said was correct, and God was the Supreme Rationalist, so all His Creation was perfectly rational, as he decreed.

Then everything went to hell, which we call the Age of Enlightenment. The brothers grew apart and they quarreled, even unto vengefulness. Their spiteful words discredited them both: for both critiques were truth, at least in part.

The quarrel exposed and heightened the internal nihilisms of both major eternalist systems. Christianity tends to deny the meaningfulness of the actual world in favor of the transcendent Hereafter. Under attack from empirical science, it abandoned reality for a spiritual fantasy world. Rationalism tends to deny the meaningfulness of anything it can't immediately find an

explanation for. Under attack from religion, it abandoned the domain of meaning to philosophical cranks.

This is the pattern of Fortress Eternalism: defending some territory as absolutely meaningful, while regarding the surrounding wilderness with *de facto* nihilism. Having divided phenomena between them, and with each ideology having severely wounded the other, all existence became potentially meaningless.

Attempts to reconcile religion and rationality, incorporating aspects of each, proliferated ideologies in the aftermath. Unfortunately, all these were muddled middles: unworkable combinations of detached bits, without addressing the underlying metaphysical error. That error is the denial of the nebulosity, and its misapprehension as non-existence of meaning, which gives rise to both eternalism and nihilism.

Nihilistic rage combined with nihilistic amorality is dangerous. Pervasive resentment of reality plus the belief that, in the absence of an eternal moral code, any action is justified, becomes sociopathic. But when armed eternalism sees any deviation as a threat that must be destroyed, it also becomes sociopathic.

Political ideologies are prime suspects as perpetrators of apocalypse. The more fervently eternalistic they get, the more dangerously nihilistic they become. Vast crimes have been justified in the name of eternalism by fear of the nihilistic apocalypse.

Eternalism sets up abstract nouns as bloodthirsty idols. The French Revolution was a premonition of apocalypse that haunted Europe for the next century. Initiated in the name of Rationality, Democracy, Liberty, Equality, and Solidarity, almost immediately it evolved into the Reign of Terror. The Terror sacrificed tens of thousands of innocent lives to sacred abstractions: real humans executed by the state as obstacles to an imaginary utopia.

> Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice; it is thus an emanation of virtue; it is less a principle in itself, than a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of the nation.
> —Maximilien Robespierre, architect of the Terror, 1794

> Pile of skulls
> Skulls of some of the estimated 1.5 million Cambodians tortured and murdered by the communist regime, 1975–79. Photograph courtesy Sigmankatie

The two great disasters of the twentieth century, communism and fascism, executed tens of millions each: with wars, murder factories, and deliberately engineered famines.

Was that enough to count as an apocalypse? Many historians and political theorists blamed World War II, the Holocaust, the Holodomor, the Cambodian killing fields, and the rest, on nihilism. How much more apocalypse do you want?

Communism and fascism both interwove eternalism and nihilism.[5] Communism is eternalist in justifying everything in terms of salvation in the earthly paradise that will result when the revolution is complete, and in asserting the historical inevitability of that revolution; and nihilist in denying any meaning or ethics outside "class struggle," with everything reduced to expediency in promulgating the revolution. Nazism sacralized blood and soil, the invincible German Spirit, but otherwise was an incoherent farrago of denials and hatreds: *against* everything except itself. Both tended in practice to reduce to omnidirectional nihilist rage: cruelty and destruction for their own sake, not even for selfish or tribal gain.

In the end, sociopathic eternalism and sociopathic nihilism are difficult to distinguish. There is not so much difference between "God told us to kill you all" and "God can't tell us not to—because we already killed Him."

Somehow, toward the end of the century, it seemed that we had collectively snapped out of it. Worst-case scenarios, such as a nuclear WWIII, didn't happen, and the Soviet Union and assorted lesser evil empires disintegrated.

So the threat of nihilism receded, we came to the end of history, and everyone heaved a great sigh of relief.[6]

Then we got nihilistic postmodernity instead. Oops.

Apocalypse now

> Today, a new post-Christian barbarism reigns…. Hostile secular nihilism has won the day in our nation's government, and the culture has turned powerfully against traditional Christians. We tell ourselves that these developments have been imposed by a liberal elite, because we find the truth intolerable: The American people, either actively or passively, approve.
> —*The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, Rod Dreher, 2017

Religious conservatives tell us that the nihilistic apocalypse has occurred, or is occurring. However, if the worst consequence of nihilism is gay marriage (as some suggest),[7] this century has gotten off practically scot-free in comparison to the last.

"Postmodernity" means that it is now difficult to take any ideology—Christianity, communism, scientism—seriously.[8] Eternalism is less a threat, because its systems have shattered into incoherent jagged shards of meaning.

In 2016, in *How Meaning Fell Apart*, I described cultural and social conditions of the past twenty years as the "atomized mode":

> Religions decohere into vague "spirituality," and political isms give way to bizarre, transient, reality-impaired online movements. Atomized politics abandons the outdated convention that political arguments should make sense.

> Legacy systematic institutions find themselves increasingly unable to adapt to an environment of pervasive incoherence. States are starting to fail, as parts of the world become ungovernable. Others are abandoning democracy for authoritarianism, in desperate attempts to hold social structures together.

With systematic eternalism collapsing, the character of nihilism has also changed radically. The danger of overlooking meanings may be eclipsed by the danger of being overwhelmed with too many meanings, lacking structures to fit them together:

> There is no standard of value, so everything seems equally trivial—or equally earth-shaking, or equally threatening. Our lives are so full of so many crises and outrages that it may all fail to add up to much.

> The loss of coherence gives a misimpression of meaninglessness. In the atomized mode, though, there's overwhelming quantities of meaning. Projects, creativity, and

fundamental values suffer when they are challenged by cacophonous internet alerts a million times a day.

Civilization still needs large systematic institutions—states, corporations, markets, universities—to survive. The atomized mode corrodes the social systems we depend on. Some are nearing collapse. I do not know whether people who grew up in that mode, and disdain systematicity, can keep the machinery of civilization running.

Martin Gurri's excellent 2014 *The Revolt of The Public* describes current American popular nihilism similarly.

A radical ingratitude makes the nihilist tick. His political and economic expectations are commensurate with his personal fantasies and desires, and the latter are boundless. He expects perfection. He insists on utopia.

Every social imperfection and government failure triggers the urge to demolish. Fortified by the conviction that he deserves more, he feels unconquerably righteous.

The riddle he poses is whether, in any sense, under any combination of events, he could gain enough momentum to damage or wreck the democratic process.[9]

As of 2021, "damage" at least seems certain.

However, I (and Gurri) worry less about sudden coups transforming democracies into 1930s totalitarian dystopias of active destruction, than about social media gradually transforming them into failed states of passive incompetence, neglect, and decay.

The internet-enabled public is extremely sure what it is *against*: everything. It has no clue what to be *for*: no coherent conception of a better future. It will not take "yes" for an answer.

The individual course of nihilism often progresses from rage to depression. Society and culture may be following the same trajectory. The destructive rage of nihilism and the paralyzing depression of nihilism are both potentially catastrophic.

After apocalypse

That an apocalypse has not yet destroyed civilization gives our culture some implicit confidence that nihilism will not bring the End Times, even though God is good and dead.

We are at a point in history in which eternalism and nihilism have both been thoroughly discredited. There is broad (if shallow) recognition that nebulosity is not necessarily a problem.

So perhaps we are ready for the complete stance.

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1. 1."In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war" is the tag line of the game *Warhammer 40,000*. The picture at the top of this page illustrates the Warhammer mythos. "Nothing is true; everything is permitted" was a slogan adopted by Hassan-i-Sabah, the founder of the Hashshashin (Assassins), according to the historical novel *Alamut*. William S. Boroughs and Robert Anton Wilson popularized the maxim. More recently, it is the tagline for the video game series *Assassin's Creed*, based on *Alamut*.
2. 2.Bold emphasis added; italics in original. *The Will to Power* was produced after Nietzsche's death by others, drawing mainly on his notes from around 1888. Historians have found that it somewhat distorts his intentions.

3. 3.I invented the term because, although the nihilist apocalypse has haunted the imagination since Nietzsche's prophesy, there is no standard name for it.
4. 4.Here I'm using "political nihilism" as a specialization of "existential nihilism," i.e. the stance that nothing means anything. Historically, "political nihilism" usually refers to a particular, remarkably incoherent Russian revolutionary movement of the late 1800s.
5. 5.Albert Camus' 1951 *The Rebel* explains the intertwining of nihilism and eternalism in political ideology brilliantly. It is a main inspiration for this web page, and contributed significantly to my general understanding of eternalism, nihilism, and the complete stance.
6. 6.This might be a dangerous complacency. It may only be continuing good luck that nihilism has not yet been used as an excuse for all-out nuclear heck.
7. 7.Immediately after the quote above, right as the substance of the book begins, Dreher continues: "The advance of gay civil rights, along with a reversal of religious liberties for believers who do not accept the LGBT agenda, had been slowly but steadily happening for years. The U.S. Supreme Court's Obergefell decision declaring a constitutional right to same-sex marriage was the Waterloo of religious conservatism. It was the moment that the Sexual Revolution triumphed decisively, and the culture war, as we have known it since the 1960s, came to an end. In the wake of Obergefell, Christian beliefs about the sexual complementarity of marriage are considered to be abominable prejudice—and in a growing number of cases, punishable. The public square has been lost."
8. 8.The standard defintion of postmodernity, from Jean-Francois Lyotard's 1979 *The Postmodern Condition*, is "the condition of incredulity toward grand metanarratives," meaning the major eternalist systems.
9. 9.Quotes from both *The Revolt of the Public* and my "The kaleidoscope of meaning" edited for concision.

4 Comments

Next Page: "Nihilism is OK" is not OK →

> Meme image of nihilism stereotype (depressed person) vs reality (happy person) both with the statement "nothing in life matters"
> Meme source

Some people claim that you can live a joyful, productive, maybe even a meaningful life as a nihilist. Nihilism, they say, is OK. Better than OK! It's fun and freeing and fulfilling!

Mostly, they seem unclear on the concept. They do not, in fact, advocate nihilism, as the denial of all meanings.[1] Rather, they reject eternalism—the fixation of all meanings—and rightly so. Although this misunderstanding causes needless confusion, it can be a helpful step.

You can indeed lead a joyful, productive life after rejecting eternalism; but not as a nihilist. Nihilism makes you miserable and ineffective. That is not OK. It also erodes our cultures' and societies' ability to improve conditions and tackle urgent problems. That is also not OK.

What is happy nihilism?

"Happy nihilists" generally advocate some stance that is neither eternalism nor nihilism in the usual sense. Often, they suggest the subjective choice of one's own meanings, which is existentialism, not nihilism. Unfortunately, existentialism is difficult to maintain, because mostly we *can't* choose meanings. Some meanings are nearly impossible to either alter or overlook, and so are some meaninglessnesses. Therefore, when happy nihilism means existentialism, it usually eventually collapses back into either eternalism or *unhappy* nihilism. Clearly distinguishing existentialism (which is moderately bad) from nihilism (which is worse) can help you avoid that collapse.

In some cases, self-described nihilists may have found a stance that is not eternalist, nor existentialist, and also does not deny meanings. That is the complete stance, which *Meaningness* also advocates.

Like existentialism, the complete stance is difficult to maintain consistently. Happy nihilists may find helpful strategies and tactics for that later in the book. I would also suggest that "nihilism," because of its negative connotations, may not describe your stance well for others. A positive alternative would be more effective for communicating and advocating your discovery.[2]

Does nihilism matter?

Some, rather gloomier, nihilists insist that nothing means anything, and although that's kind of a drag, it doesn't really matter.

Maybe nothing much would be different if everyone believed nothing matters. We can't be sure whether that's true from abstract reasoning; it's a factual question.[3] I don't know of careful studies, but I observe that people get unhappy, unpleasant, and unproductive when feeling nihilistic.

Nihilism includes moral nihilism, the claim that there are no morally good or bad actions. If people believed and acted on that, we'd have the nihilist apocalypse. Many people do say they believe this, but they act about as morally as others, so maybe the belief doesn't matter? More likely, they don't believe it in the way they say they do. Maybe they mean "ethics has no ultimate grounding, so nothing is *really* right or wrong, but of course we feel compassion and care about justice, and usually act accordingly." I've heard many self-described "nihilists" say things like this. That's not nihilism, it's a rejection of ethical absolutism. It's on the way to the complete stance for ethics.

Banal cultural nihilism

For most of the twentieth century, nihilism was considered a major threat. Over the last few decades, that worry has faded. There's now a mistaken impression that nihilism is an old-fashioned, dead issue. That's based on the accurate assessment that no one now takes it seriously as a philosophical problem, and the nihilist apocalypse has not happened.

But rather than coming as a sudden, sharp shock, nihilism has metastasized as a dull, debilitating disease. Lite nihilism is everywhere, as a *de facto* aspect of mass culture and politics.

"Pop pomo" is partly to blame.[4] Postmodernism and poststructuralism rose from the ashes of existentialism, historically. Where existentialism said meaning must be an arbitrary individual choice, pomo makes it an arbitrary *social* choice. When social groups make different choices, there is no basis for negotiation, because both are equally arbitrary. Then all conflicts reduce to raw power struggles.

This "banal nihilism" is the ideological basis for much current populist authoritarianism.[5] These movements are simultaneously dogmatically eternalistic and chaotically nihilistic. The tribal "values" are absolute, and must not be questioned or disrespected; but truth, morality, and justice have no meaning beyond what we want this week.

After postmodern nihilism

Meaningness and Time analyzes current social, cultural, and political developments, and advocates a better future that draws on an understanding of the simultaneous nebulosity and pattern of meaning. That is: the complete stance.

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1. 1.No one owns definitions, and there are other, technical uses of "nihilism." However, "nothing means anything" is what is typically meant in common usage. (Philosophers call this "existential nihilism," when it's necessary to distinguish it from other sorts.) In any case, "happy nihilists" often explicitly say "nothing means anything, and that is just great!"
2. 2.A nice example of happy nihilism is Charlie Huenemann's "Everything is meaningless – but that's okay" (*Three Quarks Daily*, October 26th, 2015). He insists that everything is meaningless because there is no eternal meaning, but then defines "value" to mean the sorts of meaning that aren't eternal, and says they are all we need. Substantively, this is more-or-less the complete stance, but it seems an unhelpful way of explaining it.
3. 3.Guy Kahane's "If nothing matters" is quite good if you want an abstract philosophical treatment. *Noûs* 51 (2):327–353 (2017).
4. 4.John Nerst's "Postmodernism vs. The Pomoid Cluster" (*Aero Magazine*, 30 June 2018) analyzes the relationship between postmodernism as an academic theory and "pomo" as a popular way of relating to meaningness.
5. 5.Karen Carr's *The Banalization of Nihilism* (1992) coined the term and analyzed the problem.

3 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This will expand on a section in "Wavering nihilism: emotional dynamics."

Comment on this page

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This page will be a brief introduction the ways we use spurious pseudo-rational arguments to justify nihilism by explaining away meaningfulness. It will expand on a section in "Wavering nihilism: emotional dynamics"; you can read the summary there.

1 Comment

> Vivid Impressionist portrait of Nietzsche by Edvard Munch, 1906
> Portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche by Edvard Munch

It's natural to assume nihilism is an –*ism*: a philosophy, an ideology, a conceptual framework, like commun*ism*, Buddh*ism*, or rational*ism*. Then, like those eternalist systems, it would have famous proponents, books full of explanations, and maybe even schismatic subsects. But it doesn't. This is surprising, and revealing.

"*Nihilizing*" is a thing we all do at times: refusing to recognize meanings that are right in front of us. That is the active aspect of nihilism, considered as a stance, not a system. *Stances* are simpler, more fundamental patterns of thinking and feeling and acting than systems. They powerfully affect our ways of being, whereas ideologies are mostly just intellectual verbiage. When people *talk about* nihilism, often it is as if it were a system. Most people reject the imagined system; a few advocate it. Neither group notices that there isn't one.

As a stance, both nihilism and eternalism—its opposite—are highly unstable. We slip back and forth, usually without even noticing. We fall into nihilism briefly—sometimes for as little as a few seconds—and then slip out again. It's just that, in the moment, "nothing means anything, really" felt like a perfectly sensible way of looking at things. And so you did. And then you moved on. But something *went wrong* for a bit there—something you'd do better to avoid.

Committing to nihilism, deciding that you "*are* a nihilist," is unusual, and typically a big deal. It's a conversion experience, and the adopted identity may persist for years. It's uncanny that you can go that long without noticing that there isn't an –ism. That's a feature of the peculiar cognitive distortions nihilism produces *as a stance*.

There are a great many books "about nihilism" written by academics: philosophers, cultural historians, and literary critics. Surely that's where you'd go to find the –ism? But no. It turns out that few of them are about nihilism, even as a stance; they are about other topics. I'll discuss them in the first section of this page.

You would think that, if nihilism were an –ism, there would be famous nihilists, but the only one most people have heard of is Friedrich Nietzsche. He is—not coincidentally—my favorite philosopher. The second section here explains why he wasn't in fact a nihilist at all, but did write the most important books about nihilism as a stance.

The true theoreticians of nihilism are not academics, but talented amateurs writing on blogs and web forums. The last section is about them and their work.

Books with "nihilism" in the title

I read several dozen academic books "about nihilism" in preparation for writing about it myself.[1] This confirmed that, like botulism, nihilism is not an –ism. There was much less to them than met the eye at first.

Nearly all the ones written in the past hundred years are actually books *about books about* nihilism. They mainly review the previous books. And since several like that have been published every year for decades, they are mostly books about books about books about … about books about nihilism.

When they are not about books, they are mostly about nihilists, rather than nihilism. There isn't a nihil –ism for them to be about, and academics don't know how to write about stances.

And the nihilists they discuss are all fictional! They review novels that feature supposedly nihilistic characters. These are storytellers' attempts to imagine what it would be like to accomplish nihilism. A realistic portrayal would be boring and depressing: catatonia. So the characters commit colorful murders instead. That dramatizes the rage aspect of nihilism, but isn't particularly realistic or interesting either.

When "nihilism" books discuss real people, it's Nietzsche plus a few existentialist philosophers, and the books admit that none of them were actually nihilists. They were worried about how to *avoid* nihilism, instead.

Some authors come out either for or against "nihilism." Most of them actually advocate or excoriate other related ideologies, not nihilism: existentialism, miserabilism, atheism, fascism, materialism, hedonism, or specifically-moral nihilism. The rare few that discuss nihilism itself treat it as a mere tendency, one that raises only a vague and hypothetical problem. I have found none that bother to engage seriously with nihilism in its own terms.

This is uncanny, don't you think? Many philosophers and cultural historians say nihilism is the most important issue of the past century, but they never come to grips with the substance of it. Their "problem of nihilism" is how to respond to a threat they cannot locate—because it is not a coherent ideology. It is a psychological phenomenon, not a philosophical one.

No academic book explains why the many conceptual arguments for nihilism, as advanced by talented amateurs, are mistaken.[2] I've had to do that mostly from scratch. Apparently this has no academic value,[3] but these arguments matter because they stabilize the stance. When in the grip of nihilism as a psychological process, faulty "proofs" of meaninglessness suddenly seem compelling. My hope is that explaining both what's wrong with each, along with its valid underlying intuition, will help afflicted readers extricate themselves.

What about Nietzsche?

By the late 1800s, educated elites understood that Christianity and rationalism, the West's two main eternalist systems, were deeply flawed and probably unfixable. It was polite to go through the motions of pretending to believe, but increasingly many didn't. That may be fine for *us*, they thought, but what if the masses catch on? There was no plausible third ideology. "Nihilism" was the possibility that pious morality and sober rationality would no longer keep the rabble's base instincts in check, and the nihilist apocalypse would ensue.

Nietzsche was not polite—one reason I love him. He proclaimed the death of God (meaning that no one takes Christianity seriously anymore) and the rise of Dionysus (the anti-rational god of drunken revelry). At times he described himself as "a nihilist," by which he meant *not* that everything is meaningless, but that he actively rejected the available eternalisms. He also condemned "nihilism," understood as apathetic unwillingness to take problems of meaningness seriously. He particularly included Christianity and "Apollonian" rationalism in that.

Nietzsche's intention was to develop a new, positive alternative. "Active nihilism," which he praised as the project of destroying religion and rationalism, was merely a step toward that goal. Unfortunately, he had a complete and permanent mental breakdown before he worked out what the better alternative might be. He was not a systematic thinker, and probably would not have advocated a new eternalist system. On the whole, he may best be classified as an existentialist— as many historians do. He exhorted the courageous individual to create their own original values, in defiance of society.

Nietzsche is easy and fun to read: straightforward, vivid, and outrageous. He was brilliant; the best philosopher of all time, in my opinion. He also frequently contradicted himself, couldn't assemble a coherent theory, and much of his writing is quite wrong. He was crazy. His best work was done in the year before his catastrophic psychotic break, and you can tell he was on the edge of losing it. His thinking shows all the emotional dynamics of nihilism, and all its characteristic cognitive distortions.

Nevertheless, all the books about books about books about nihilism are a lineage of working out implications of his thinking.[4] The impression that there's some worked-out theory of nihilism probably derives from the misunderstanding that Nietzsche must have produced one, because he was such a towering genius.

And, when amateurs try to develop a personal theory of nihilism, it's generally obvious that Nietzsche is their main source—although they may have read only summaries, or skimmed his clickbait titles (*Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Antichrist*, *The Will to Power*) rather than seriously working through his writing. You could not do so and mistake him as saying that everything is meaningless.

Amateurs are the true theoreticians of nihilism

My explanation of nihilism in this chapter draws primarily on amateur, non-academic sources: blogs, internet forums, and self-published books, plus in-person conversations, pop culture, and my personal struggles with it. These sources reflect ways laypeople understand nihilism, which is significantly different from philosophers' views. They better reflect the trouble with it we all get into at times.

I am highly sympathetic to this amateur work! These are genuine attempts to take nihilism seriously, which academics have never bothered to do. Since nihilism—as a stance—is a common and dire problem, this is important. Laypeople feel they have to work it out for themselves, because the pros refuse to do their job. On the other hand, it's naive: meaning is pervasive, so nihilism is false, and it's impossible to make sound arguments for it. I respect the attempt, even if the results are at best silly, and often creepy.

The arguments of amateur nihilists articulate ways intelligent people in the grip of the nihilistic stance try to maintain it, in the face of the obviousness of meaning. I do that nihilizing sometimes, and you probably do sometimes too.

Examining the details can help us stop.

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1. 1.Here, as throughout the book, I'm using "nihilism" to mean specifically what philosophers call "existential nihilism," i.e. "everything is meaningless," which is also what non-philosophers almost always think "nihilism" means.
2. 2.There are a few good philosophical journal articles that address individual arguments. I cite some later.
3. 3.To be fair to individual academics, the fallacies are in each case obvious, if you are not emotionally motivated to believe them. Academia gives no credit for pointing out the obvious, even when no one has gotten around to doing it previously. Unfortunately, this leaves many important matters unspoken.
4. 4.They usually also cover Søren Kierkegaard, an earlier existentialist Christian who worried about nihilism and had some minor influence on Nietzsche, plus various earlier Russians who didn't. Kierkegaard is super tedious. I haven't read the Russians, who sound even more so.

13 Comments

Yes yes yes how deliciously meaningless
Yes yes yes how effervescently meaningless
Yes yes yes how beautifully meaningless
Yes yes yes how profoundly meaningless
Yes yes yes how definitively meaningless
Yes yes yes how comprehensively meaningless
Yes yes yes how magnificently meaningless

> Yes yes yes how incredibly meaningless
> Yes yes yes how unprecedentedly meaningless
> Yes yes yes how mind-blowingly meaningless
> Yes yes yes how unbelievably meaningless
> Yes yes yes how infinitely meaningless

Let's distinguish six attitudes to "nothing means anything":

1. *Full-strength nihilism*: Nothing is meaningful *at all*. Period.
2. *Nihilism Lite™*: OK, maybe some things are "meaningful" in some trivial sense, but not *really* meaningful. Those meanings don't count! Therefore, everything is awful.
3. *Miserabilism*: Everything is awful, so nothing means anything.
4. *Existentialism*: Nothing is objectively meaningful, but subjective meanings are real.
5. *Materialism*: There are no higher meanings, but mundane goals like food, safety, sex, power, money, and fame seem meaningful to us, due to evolution.
6. *The complete stance*: Meaning is neither subjective nor objective; meanings are real but nebulous; this is fine!

All these might be called "nihilism," but they are entirely different in their implications, and in their rational and emotional workings. I will devote a page, or several, to discussing each, separately. Here, I'll summarize my treatment of each, with an eye particularly to seeing the distinctions between them.

Hardcore, full strength, 190-proof nihilism

Let's say you stopped by the store on the way home from work to get cat food, because your spouse texted you to say that you'd run out. Getting cat food was your purpose for going to the supermarket. Purpose is one of the main dimensions of meaningness. Going to the supermarket was meaningful: if you forgot, your cat would go hungry and would suffer and complain. This meaning is not merely subjective, at least not in the sense that it's just in your head. Your cat finds food meaningful, too. If you failed to feed your cat for long enough, it might seriously reevaluate your relationship, and there would be consequences. Your spouse might have something to say, too.

Hardcore nihilism insists that, no, actually, you had no purpose in going to the store. The supposed purpose was an illusion. There are no purposes *at all*.

This is basically just silly, and motivated only by stubbornness. I don't believe anyone actually holds hardcore nihilism, although some people do try to argue for it publicly. It is a fallback position when you get backed into a corner by someone pointing out that, obviously, many things *are* meaningful; yet you want to continue to claim to be a nihilist. It's logically consistent in a way that (as we'll see) lite nihilism is not; but it requires defiance of all sense and evidence.

Attempts to justify it involve elaborate intellectual obfuscation: sophistical, scientistical, pseudo-rational fallacies. I'll cover these in later, in "190-proof nihilism: intoxicating intellectual idiocy."

Nihilism Lite™

Lite nihilism grants the obvious, that some things are meaningful "in some trivial sense," but insists that they are not "really" meaningful. The kinds of meaning that would actually matter don't exist, so you might as well just kill yourself.

So you may agree that going to the supermarket was slightly meaningful, in some uninteresting sense; but you hasten to add that this does *not* imply that Life has an Ultimate Cosmic Meaning,

or anything like that! Which is entirely correct. However, it is a *different* claim from "nothing means anything."

Lite nihilism starts from the intelligent recognition that the kinds of meaning claimed by eternalism indeed do not exist. For example, meanings are not inherent, or eternal, or perfectly definite or certain. That means that the seductive promises of eternalism are harmful lies. It cannot deliver the benefits of total understanding and control that it advertises.

Lite nihilism's error is the implication that the kinds of meaning that do exist are all trivial and inadequate. This conclusion is rarely (if ever) spelled out in detail. The typical pattern is to jump from "meanings don't last forever" to "so everything is worthless," without explanation. There is a powerful *emotional* logic to this, but is it correct? What exactly is wrong with non-eternal meanings?

What kinds of meaning do exist, once eternalistic delusions are stripped away? For what purposes, and in what ways, are they inadequate—if they are? These questions deserve careful investigation.

The distinction between 190-proof nihilism and the lite version is rarely made explicit, so we tend to switch between them as needed to make nihilism seem plausible. We can slide from "nothing is inherently meaningful" to "nothing is meaningful" without noticing we're doing that. In fact, we do that deliberately, to pull the wool over our own eyes.

The promise of nihilism is "you don't have to care." This works only if there is no meaning at all. You obviously *do* care about feeding the cat, so only if that is negated could nihilism deliver any benefit. If you admitted mundane matters like cat food are meaningful, you'd effectively transition from nihilism to materialism. Materialism's promises and emotional dynamics are quite different. The circumstances in which materialism seems attractive are not the ones in which nihilism is attractive, so you may want to avoid the switch.

So the idea here is to trick yourself into thinking that arguments for lite nihilism (or even materialism) are really arguments for full-strength nihilism.[1]

In pages below, I go through various properties that eternalism claims meaning has, and which lite nihilism rejects. (For example, meanings are not eternal, ultimate, or God-given.) For each, I explain why we should not be upset about meaning not working that way.

Miserabilism

By "miserabilism" I mean the view that everything is awful.[2] Thinking that everything is awful is depressing, and depression frequently leads to nihilism. Nihilism also leads to depression, and depression leads to thinking that everything is awful, so all three of these support each other. In experience, "everything is awful" and "everything is meaningless" *feel* similar, and they usually come at the same time.

However, "everything is awful" is actually an entirely different statement from "everything is meaningless." In fact they are incompatible, because "awful" is a value judgment—a meaning—and nihilism denies all values. "Everything is awful" can inspire us to work to make things better; it is a potentially powerful source of purpose. By declaring that *everything* is awful, which is a fixed meaning, miserabilism is technically a species of eternalism! Nevertheless, I'll discuss miserabilism further in the section on nihilistic depression.

Materialism

The materialistic stance, which rejects "higher" meanings but affirms mundane purposes, is often described as "nihilistic." Materialism does not meet the book's definition of "nihilism"—denial of all meanings—but it does have some of the same emotional dynamics. Seeing through eternalist claims about higher meanings hits you with the same feelings of loss as nihilism's denial of all meanings.

Still, materialism is different enough from nihilism that I devote a separate chapter to it.

Existentialism

I use "existentialism" to mean the idea that meanings must be subjective because they are not objective.[3] Then you could either say that subjective meanings are just fine, so there's no problem; or you could say that subjective meanings are no damn good, so everything is awful.

The "no damn good" conclusion makes existentialism slide into miserabilism and then lite nihilism. This is what historically happened to existentialism as a cultural movement in the mid-20th century. As existentialists worked out the implications of a subjective theory of meaning, it looked increasingly inadequate and unworkable and led to individual and group rage, intellectual pretentiousness, depression, and angst—the four emotional characteristics of nihilism. As a movement, existentialism collapsed half a century ago.

Many intelligent non-philosophers accept the premise that meaning must be subjective, but don't see why this should be a problem, and advocate an optimistic existentialism. This stance is now rare among academic existentialists.

I think a subjective theory of meaning cannot, in fact, be made to work. Existentialism collapsed for good reasons. The subjective theory of meaning is factually wrong, and trying seriously to make it work leads to nihilism inevitably.

Meaningness develops an understanding of meaning as neither objective nor subjective. Detailed explanation has to be postponed to much later in the book, but there's a preliminary analysis of existentialism right after I finish with nihilism.

The complete stance ("Joyful nihilism")

Above, I asked:

> What kinds of meaning do exist, once eternalistic delusions are stripped away? For what purposes, and in what ways, are they inadequate—if they are?

This book, *Meaningness*, could be summarized as an investigation into these questions. It suggests that meaningness is nebulous, which accounts for what's right in nihilism's rejection of eternalist meaning. It suggests also that meaningness is patterned: real, concrete, and functional. These patterns are adequate; the nebulosity of meaningness does not imply there is anything wrong with the universe. We can't get the kinds of meaning some may want, but we can get the kinds we need. Certainty is not possible, but knowledge is; total control is not possible, but strong influence is; complete understanding is not possible, but incrementally better ones are.

Since the complete stance agrees with lite nihilism's analysis and rejection of eternalism, it might be considered a species of nihilism by some. In fact, I sometimes think of it as "joyful

nihilism"—although it strongly disagrees with nihilism's central claim that "nothing means anything."

Going through that analysis in detail takes one a fair way toward explaining the complete stance. Upcoming pages will explain why lite nihilism is right to reject eternalism's characterization of meanings as objective, eternal, inherent, ultimate, and so forth; but wrong to insist that meanings that lack these properties are no good. Accepting both parts of that is tantamount to adopting the complete stance.

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1. 1.This is an instance of the "motte and bailey" pattern of fallacious rhetoric. Usually rhetoric is designed to convince other people, but nihilism is mostly something you try to convince yourself of.
2. 2.I have given "miserabilism" this meaning by fiat for the purpose of this book. The word is not widely used and doesn't seem to have a clear definition. "Pessimism" is often used for everything-is-awful-ism in philosophy, but the everyday meaning of "pessimism" is restricted to the future. Miserabilism is about the present (or near future, as opposed to the long term).
3. 3."Existentialism" is not a precisely-defined term. The way I'm using it here is not entirely standard, but it's roughly in line with some traditional uses.

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

The logic of nightmares

Standing in the kitchen, you *know* your basement has grown another creepy dark room that was not there before. In the center is a coffin, and in the coffin there is an undead corpse. You *know* that, in a minute, you will dream-walk down there and open the lid…

and you know that your confrontation with the monster *has already happened*, over and over again, even though it hasn't happened in the dream *yet*, and you don't know what the monster looks like or how it will kill you

you just have TOTAL CERTAINTY and TOTAL DREAD

"how could I know about the vampire when I'm upstairs in the kitchen"

that is inconsequential and irrelevant to your INESCAPABLE HORRIBLE DEATH

if anyone in your dream said "basements don't grow extra rooms" or "why don't you *not* go down there? if you do, why not take garlic and a stake and hammer?"

you'd dismiss that with angry impatience—

they are too stupid to get that THERE IS A MONSTER IN THE BASEMENT AND YOU ARE ABOUT TO DIE

Sometimes we justify our nihilizing with logical-sounding reasoning. Sometimes we try to extend that into a full-blown nihilistic ideology. Sometimes we convince ourselves that we've succeeded.

This page explains broad categories of reasoning flaws found in many mistaken justifications for nihilism. They are useful as a framework for understanding the dozens of specific justifications discussed in the following pages.

You can also apply this understanding directly. When you find yourself justifying your nihilizing, you can notice that your reasoning is, for example, "proving too much," and drop it. That shortcut saves remembering the details of why each of the justifications is wrong. It also may apply to other justifications I've missed covering.

Bare assertion

"We know that, rationally, everything is meaningless." That is: of course every rational person knows this, and it doesn't need any explanation, because the matter was long since settled.

Often this bare assertion recurs frequently, without expansion, both in nihilist texts and in one's own stream of thought. This is the epitome of the generality, abstractness, and repetitiveness of nihilistic thinking. It is common in amateur nihilist manifestos. It also shows up surprisingly often in professional philosophy, probably because philosophers semiconsciously realize no specific argument for nihilism would pass muster in a Philosophy 101 term paper, so they avoid them.

"Every rational person agrees" is, of course, also not a logically valid argument. They might all be wrong; so one should ask what justification they have for their belief, and evaluate that instead.

"Everyone believes it" would still count as circumstantial evidence. However, it's empirically false: most people trained in technical rationality are not nihilists. (Although we *are* more prone to nihilism than others, because we are better at recognizing that eternalism is wrong.)

Bare assertion works only when you have a powerful desire to believe; just as you nod along with flimsy arguments for the existence of God, when you want to believe that. It helps if your willingness and ability to ask specific questions has been degraded by nihilism.

Unexplained inferential gap

Here there is a premise and a conclusion, with a "therefore," but a vast intermediate gap doesn't get filled.

An example is "everything is just made of atoms, so it's all meaningless." How does "made of atoms" imply "meaningless"?

You vaguely suppose some famous philosopher or scientist proved this long ago, "as everyone knows," even if the details don't exactly come to mind.

Conflating special meaning with all meaning

This is a particular type of unexplained inferential gap. It is the main error in lite nihilist reasoning. It starts with some special kind of meaning claimed by eternalism, such as absolute, transcendent, eternal, or ultimate meaning. It observes that *this* sort of meaning does not exist— which is true, it doesn't. It then leaps to "meaning doesn't exist" without justification.

That would follow only if you had reason to believe that the special kind is the only kind. But lite nihilism never asserts, much less justifies, that. In fact, it tacitly or explicitly acknowledges that "mundane" meanings do exist.

The underlying felt sense, rarely explicitly thought or said, is that mundane meanings are no good, and therefore don't count. "Doesn't count" is not the same as "doesn't exist," though. And doesn't count *for what*? What *would* count; what is the criterion? Why apply *that* criterion?

Jumping from "no special meaning" to "no meaning" lets you avoid examining specifically why the available meanings seem inadequate. That effort seems too emotionally difficult. It is too likely to reveal the actual situation: that that your life is seriously unsatisfactory, in some specific way; that attempts to improve it seem too likely to fail; and that dealing with it realistically is too painful to consider. Nihilistic reasoning distracts you with a metaphysical generalization that implies you don't have to care.

Proving too much

An argument "proves too much" if it is a special case of one that would prove many other things that are obviously false. For example, if someone says "You can't be an atheist, because it's impossible to disprove the existence of God", you can answer "That argument proves too much. If we accept it, we must also accept that you can't disbelieve in Bigfoot, since it's impossible to disprove his existence as well."[1]

Many of the arguments for the non-existence of meaning would also prove the non-existence of wings, colors, thoughts, potato mashers, or frogs. Recognizing this in a particular case may be sufficient to dispel that justification for nihilizing. Recognizing that a whole slew of the arguments fail for this reason might help you avoid nihilizing altogether.

Proving too much is not itself a logical error; it just shows that there must be a mistake somewhere in the reasoning. It's fair then to conclude that the argument doesn't work, and move on. However, it's often worth figuring out exactly where the flaw is, and why the argument might seem convincing anyway. Just because a line of reasoning fails, it doesn't imply its conclusion is false. (Perhaps it's impossible to be an atheist for some other reason.) Also, there may be some valid insight motivating an imperfect proof.

Or, maybe the conclusion *is* false, but the argument seems attractive because there's some *other* implicit intuition justifying the claim. Then it's good to uncover that, and figure out why it is both wrong and persuasive.

That's true of many justifications for nihilism which prove too much. They resonate because implicitly they extrapolate from some mistaken, mechanistic theory of how meaning would have to work if it did exist.

Reasoning from a mistaken theory of mechanism

"If meaning existed, it would have to work like so-and-so, but that wouldn't work, so it doesn't exist."

Here the assumption may be that meaning would have to be inherent in objects, or made of a spiritual fluid, or consist of mental representations, or depend on free will; or some other dubious metaphysical theory.

There's two logical flaws here. First, it's correct that meaning doesn't work in any of those ways, but that doesn't imply that it doesn't exist. It could work some other way (and in fact it does).

Second, usually this proves too much. Usually the supposed metaphysical mechanism was supposed to underlie many other phenomena (for instance perception, knowledge, or choice). If disproving the mechanism disproved meaning, it would disprove the others equally, but their existence is mainly uncontroversial.

Reasoning from ignorance of mechanism

This jumps from "we don't know how it works" to "it doesn't exist." That proves too much, because there are lots of definitely existing things whose mechanism we don't know.

A stronger version reasons from "we can't even imagine any way it could work" to "it doesn't exist." This would also prove that—for instance—gravity doesn't exist. There is no currently plausible way of reconciling general relativity with quantum theory, even in theory. All the conceivable approaches have been tried, and they haven't worked, and there's good reasons to think that each won't work. Nevertheless, gravity seems to be pretty much a thing.

Although the "we can't even imagine" argument is logically fallacious, it may still seem convincing, given that most available theories of meaningness are clearly wrong. I hope the interactionist sketch of an understanding given in *Meaningness* can help with that. It's not a worked-out theory of mechanism, but it may make it plausible that one could exist.

Reasoning from supposed knowledge of mechanism

"We *do* know how meaning works, therefore it doesn't exist."

Logically this seems bizarre, but it's a common line of reasoning. "Meaning is just an evolved brain function, so it isn't real, it's just an illusion" is an example. "Meaning is just a made-up social agreement, not real" is another.

The underlying, implicit intuition is that mysteriousness or non-physicality is an essential property of meaning, so anything that lacks it isn't meaningful. Eternalist claims about meaning do often rely on religious mystification or metaphysical woo, which we are right to reject. Those meanings usually *are* illusory. That doesn't imply all meanings are.

The Gish creep

The "Gish gallop" was a technique used by the "young earth" creationist Duane Gish against evolutionary biology. It was wildly successful. In formal debates, Gish spewed as many arguments against evolution as quickly as he could. They were all fallacious, but in the time it would take to refute any one of them, he could produce ten more.

Similarly, all the justifications for nihilism are fallacious, but there sure are a lot of them. If you think (or say) "everything is meaningless because atoms," and it becomes apparent that this doesn't quite follow, you can think (or say) "everything is meaningless because galaxies," without acknowledging that the first claim failed. Then you can move to "everything is meaningless because evolution," and so on.

I call this a "Gish creep," rather than a gallop, because nihilistic thinking is characteristically slow. It's not that nihilism spews dozens of bogus arguments per minute, it's that it sneaks from one to another without your noticing. You get a sense of certainty from the sheer number of

supporting reasons, all pointing in the same direction. You may cycle through a few familiar ones, over and over, again without noticing that each fails.

My hope is that explaining in one place why *all* of them are wrong will weaken this strategy. When you see it laid out how each element in the pattern of nihilist discourse is mistaken, maybe it will catalyze a reevaluation of the stance as a whole.

As with the Gish gallop, refuting all of the spurious arguments is a large, tedious job. No one has previously attempted it.[2] Any sane person just says "look, obviously meaning exists, you need to see a therapist and get over this and get on with life." I am not a sane person. I am a vengeful deranged person, and I intend to put psychotherapists out of business. Or anyway, I am an unreasonably motivated person who wants to help everyone stop nihilizing.

Recycling rationalism v. religion

Christianity and rationalism are the two mainstream Western ideologies of meaning, and it's natural to recycle pieces of them when trying to justify nihilism. They've been litigating meaningness for the past few centuries: from *The Inquisition v. Copernicus* down to *New Atheism v. Evangelical Fundamentalism*. Since both of their theories of meaning are wrong, each has been able to develop arguments that discredit the other effectively.

> *Christianity*: Since God is the source of all meaning, you have to believe in Him, because otherwise you have to believe that meaning doesn't exist. Then you'll kill yourself or everyone else.

> *Rationalism*: Hey, we don't go around killing anyone! But obviously God doesn't exist, and obviously meaning does exist.

> *Christianity*: Yeah? So where does it come from, then?

> *Rationalism*: It's, um, it's an intrinsic, universal property of reason itself.

> *Christianity*: Really? How is that supposed to be an explanation of where it comes from?

> *Rationalism*: Uh, something about evolution?

> *Christianity*: Yeah, no, that doesn't work. If ethics, for example, were merely evolved, there would be no way to condemn human sacrifice, which you claim evolved. Nor would there be any way to resolve moral disagreements, since you claim the views of both sides evolved through mere accident.

> *Rationalism*: If God existed and was good, he wouldn't allow bad things to happen. You can't explain divine evil, which seems like a much bigger problem than human evil.

> *Christianity*: That's a boring old argument. No one takes it seriously any more. Some version of the free will defense is surely true.

> *Rationalism*: You are reduced to insulting the question, because you don't have an actual answer. At best, a free will defense can't account for natural evil and pervasive suffering. That's a fatal flaw.

> *Christianity*: You still haven't explained how merely human meaning is supposed to work.

> *Rationalism*: It's an individual choice! We humans make our own meanings. We don't need God for that.

> *Christianity*: Nope, if you could "individually choose" goldfish crackers as the meaning of life, you'd just be crazy and wrong.

And so on. These objections, and dozens more like them from each side, are all valid. Since there's no widely-accepted alternative to the religious and rationalist theories, it is easy to mistake refutations of them as justifications for nihilism.

We fall into nihilism when we realize that eternalism is wrong; and the more committed we were to eternalism, the harder the fall. After a devout Christian loses faith, "If you don't believe in God, then everything is meaningless" may remain convincing. Christianity's rebuttals of rationalism are also valid reasons not to take up the alternative.[3] After a devout rationalist loses faith, it's natural to reason from "There's no God to give things meaning, so our theory must be right" and "oops, our theory is wrong" to "meaning doesn't exist."

In fact, it seems that most, if not all, justifications for nihilism were taken over from rationalism's critique of religion, and vice versa.

Eternalizing nihilism

Some try to make nihilism a conceptual system that explains the True, ultimate nature of reality. It's extremely meaningful that everything is meaningless, they say. Maybe it's The Answer To Life, The Universe, And Everything. Even short of that, arguments for nihilism are often passionate, full of sound and fury, thereby implicitly suggesting that meaninglessness is highly meaningful.

Taken literally, this is self-contradictory. The meaninglessness of everything would include the meaninglessness of the meaninglessness of everything. Being bad or interesting is a meaning, and if everything is meaningless, then that isn't bad or interesting. It's meaningless. No problem! But also not worth making into a grand theory of everything.

A slight variation makes the meaningfulness of meaninglessness not quite *logically* contradictory. In principle it's possible that everything is meaningless *except* for the fact of everything being meaningless. I've heard people try to make that work. But that doesn't seem to be the usual underlying intuition.

It's more common to derive additional, specific, meaningful conclusions from "everything is meaningless." Once you get started on that, you find that *each* thing is made meaningful by its own meaninglessness, which doesn't make a lot of sense. Indeed, it's a muddled middle, a failing attempt to reconcile an opposite pair of stances.

There's several different directions this can go. One idea is that meaninglessness is meaningful in giving us freedom of choice, and is therefore good. This is common in "happy nihilism." It confuses fixed meaning with meaning in general. It's true that there is no fixed meaning, which is in fact good because it does give us freedom. It is not true that there is no meaning at all. Meanings are nebulous, not non-existent.

Less happily, existentialism also insists that meaninglessness is extremely meaningful. It says that everything is objectively meaningless, and we have *complete* freedom of choice, which has to be entirely arbitrary, because meaning has no intrinsic pattern at all. Historically, existentialists found this anguishing, because we can't actually do that. They thought that this was The Human

Predicament, and the Meaning of Existence, and behaved badly and used too many capital letters and were miserable. Don't do this.

Still worse, miserabilism decides that it is awful that everything is meaningless, and each and every little thing is made cosmically awful by its meaninglessness, and overall life is utterly unbearably awful because it is meaningless. Please don't do this either. It really isn't much fun.

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1. 1.This example is verbatim from Scott Alexander's excellent post "Proving too much".
2. 2.A partial exception is Iddo Landau's *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World*, the only book on nihilism I can recommend. His approach is rather different from mine, but the motivation is the same, to give practical resources for escaping from nihilism, instead of gathering academic publication points. Surprisingly, the book never uses the word "nihilism," but it does address many specific reasons people give to justify "everything is meaningless."
3. 3.For his catalog of justifications of nihilism, Landau drew heavily on Christian theologian William Lane Craig's "The Absurdity of Life without God," which conveniently collects arguments that Godlessness implies meaninglessness.

7 Comments

When you realize that eternalism's promises are false and harmful, nihilism may seem compelling. Eternalism insisted that everything is meaningful; nihilism inverts that, and says nothing is. Many things obviously are meaningful, though, so nihilism is difficult to maintain. On the other hand, it may seem like the only defense against getting sucked back into eternalist delusion. What to do?

Lite nihilism is an attractive solution. It successfully refutes eternalism while avoiding the absurdity of the full-strength version.

Lite nihilism recognizes that eternalism's promises rely on false claims about the nature of meaning itself: that it is, for instance, absolute, eternal, or objective. Lite nihilism accurately points out that these "special" sorts of meaning, which would make eternalism work by fixating pattern, don't exist.

Eternalist systems maintain their plausibility by insisting that the meanings that matter *are* special, and so can guarantee its promises; and by sweeping under the rug all other meanings, which are not absolute, eternal, or objective. Those don't count; they are trivial, mundane, and worthless.

Lite nihilism, unfortunately, accepts this ploy. Then nothing is really meaningful; the available kinds of meaning are all defective and inadequate. Everything *might as well* be meaningless. So this is a big problem, and you should probably be extremely upset about it. If you aren't upset, it's only because you can't face the truth, so you are choosing to live in a fantasy world.

Lite nihilism, unlike the full-strength version, may seem perfectly sensible. It is somewhat wavering; it includes some grudging recognition of lite meaningfulness. It tries to get the benefit of nihilism ("you don't have to care") without going into full absurdity. This more-or-less works, so long as you avoid thinking about it clearly enough. It takes some work to see how it's mistaken. Unfortunately, unlike full-strength nihilism, it's possible to accomplish lite nihilism: to maintain it consistently for long periods. That can be awful.

When you keep the first part of lite nihilism—its rejection of eternalism's false claims about special meanings—and drop the second—its acceptance of eternalism's denigration of other meanings—you've adopted the complete stance. So passing through lite nihilism is probably necessary on the way to accomplishing the complete stance and maintaining a consistently accurate relationship with meaningness. We'll come back to that at the end of this chapter, discussing nihilism as a valuable stage on that path.

This section of the book goes through a dozen common reasons people say meaning is inadequate: for example, that there is no cosmic meaning, no universal meaning, or no meaning of life as a whole.

Each of these negates an eternalist claim—correctly! But you may not have thought about exactly why the eternalist claim is false. We'll do uncommonly detailed analysis, which may deepen your understanding of what's wrong with eternalism, and strengthen your commitment and ability to reject it.

Lite nihilism admits that "some" meanings are "sort of" meaningful, but doesn't want to say which. It wants to direct your attention away from the specifics of actual meanings, in order to maintain the illusion that you don't have to care about them. When we analyze each of the claims of inadequacy, we'll direct attention to the *non-special* types of meaning—for example, non-transcendent, non-objective, and non-unique ones. What exactly is wrong with these? Only that they can't deliver on eternalism's promises. "So what?" is the answer to most justifications for lite nihilism. "Meanings aren't absolute!" Well, so what?

If you are genuinely willing to let go of hoping that somehow eternalism can deliver, then you can take a good hard look at whether specific meanings may be adequate, or more than adequate, anyway. I'll suggest reasons each sort of non-special meaning is valuable.

Just noticing that you are doing lite nihilism, and dropping it, is the way out and into the complete stance. When you find yourself rejecting meaning in general because it lacks some special property: remind yourself that, yes, that specialness is an eternalist lie, but that does not negate the meaningfulness of your actual, specific situation. Then you can explore the details and flavor and texture of the meanings of that situation—and on that basis, take action.

This is a practice, that you can make a habit. There'll be more about this at the end of this chapter, on exiting nihilism, and in the complete stance chapter.

1 Comment

> Cute weasel
> Weasel courtesy Zdeněk Macháček

"Nothing *really* means anything." That is the essence of Nihilism Lite. You've heard it a million times. You've probably had the thought yourself sometimes, even if you've never considered yourself a nihilist.

Lite nihilism divides meanings into "real" ones, which could do the job if they existed, and other ones, which are inadequate.

Nihilism just follows the lead of common eternalist systems here. They want to trick you into putting *all* your energy into their system. To do that, they make a two-pronged assault on your

ability to perceive meaning accurately. They claim that their special meanings are *supremely* valuable; and that other meanings aren't "really" meaningful at all.

1. They say their special meanings are absolute, ultimate, objective, or transcendent. These are abstract metaphysical properties which supposedly somehow confer infinite value.
2. The meanings you would otherwise naturally perceive are defective: they are made-up, illusory, trivial, or mundane, and therefore have little or no value.[1]

Nihilism agrees with this categorization, but denies that there are any of the first, "real" type of meaning. The Lite version grudgingly admits that the second, defective type does seem to exist. Full-strength nihilism says that those also aren't meaningful *at all*.

Commonly, one falls into nihilism by seeing through only the first prong of eternalism's propaganda. You realize an ideology's supposed absolute meanings aren't so special after all— and some of them are just wrong. What you don't notice is that its denigration of other meanings is also a lie. Instead, unfortunately, you accept its framing of the actual world as an insignificant vale of tears. Then you are left with nearly nothing, which might not be a lot of fun.

Eternalism, in both its theistic and rationalistic versions, pounces at that point. Your rejection of its absolutes has made you miserable! And, look, if there were no God (or: if Science™ could not deliver Absolute Truth), then nothing would "really" mean anything. That would be extremely bad because then there could be no ethics or purpose in life. Therefore, God exists (or: Science™ is The Truth). That may be sufficient to rope you back in.

If, instead, you are confident in your rejection of the first prong—eternalism's claim to absolute meaning—and if you want to avoid the harms of nihilism, it's time to work on the second one.

"Really" is a *weasel-word*, "aimed at creating an impression that something specific and meaningful has been said, when in fact only a vague or ambiguous claim has been communicated." "Against 'really'" explains that it is used to intimidate you into accepting dubious metaphysical claims:

> The power of "really" is to stop you from asking. If you can't see that everything is meaningless, it means that you are just not smart enough to understand. "Really" means "shut up, kid—I've got all the answers. I have access to the *real* world and you don't."
>
> These are huge, implausible metaphysical claims. Defending them would be difficult at best. "Really" is a way of intimidating you into accepting them without explanation.
>
> When someone hands you a "really" claim, try making it into an "in some sense" claim, and then ask the obvious questions.

So:

- Specifically what is un-real about the "wrong" kind of meanings? (The vagueness of "really" is part of what makes "nothing really means anything" sound convincing without any justification.)
- Is it accurate to describe these meanings as "not real"? (Or do they seem defective in some other, more concrete way?)
- Are the specific supposed defects of the "unreal" meanings problems we should be upset about? (Or are they just the ways actual meanings actually work, quite well?)
- What job is it that meanings are supposed to do, that the unreal ones are not capable of? (Are they in fact inadequate?)

Answering these questions may be quite a lot of work. When in the grip of nihilism, that is unwelcome. "Nothing really means anything" can seem correct when disappointed: when you realize something didn't mean what you hoped. Nihilism's promise is that you don't have to care. Since nothing really means anything, you can forget about the complicated, difficult, on-going task of figuring out how meanings work.

I will suggest that what is true is that meanings are nebulous—but that does not make them non-existent, inadequate, or unreal, any more than clouds are non-existent, inadequate, or unreal.

In the following pages, we'll investigate many specific alleged defects of meanings—for example, that they are not ultimate, objective, or authorized by space aliens. Each of these allegations has a valid underlying intuition. They also each involve a metaphysical confusion, usually with an emotional motivation.

Sorting out *specifically* how meanings work, and what they can and can't do, is an antidote to nihilism. Let's do it.

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1. 1.The second "prong" here is nihilistic. Ideologies whose overall thrust is eternalistic do sometimes resort to nihilism when convenient.

1 Comment

Man standing on a rock at night looking at the Milky Way
Image courtesy Greg Rakozy

Objective meaning. Ultimate meaning. Transcendent meaning. Cosmic meaning. Eternal meaning. Absolute meaning.

We don't have any of these *extra-special fancy* meanings, and we can't get them. Should we be very, very sad?[1]

Especially when one first loses faith in eternalism and enters the nihilist stance, it may seem one should, and must. One still has a wistful longing to belive eternalism's false promises of certainty, perfect understanding, control, and security. The function of *special meanings* is to guarantee those promises. The feeling of their loss can be intensely painful.

I will suggest figuring out, with atypical specificity, what we want from meaningness, and also what we can realistically get. No meaning can guarantee certainty, but there are many for which we can be quite confident. We cannot fully understand meaningness, but we can we can gain a much more accurate and detailed understanding than eternalism provides. And so on.

This is the work of the complete stance. It is a way out of nihilism; and probably also out of its pain. The sorts of meaning we *can* get may prove adequately satisfactory, with their powers and limits both understood.

A cynical take on special meanings

Terms such as "objective meaning" and "ultimate meaning" are rarely defined clearly, and all those *special* words get used almost interchangeably. They refer to the hypothetical variety of meaning that could somehow deliver on eternalism's promises—whatever that sort of meaning

would be. Eliezer Yudkowsky describes terms like these as "applause lights": they don't have any specific content, but tell the studio audience when to clap and smile and nod and yell "hooray!"

Since no sort of meaning can deliver on eternalism's promises, it prefers to leave the category as vague as possible. An eternalist rhetorical trick is to deflect your attention from concrete meanings to metaphysical abstractions. The less that is said about "transcendent meaning," the harder it is to argue—or even notice—that it doesn't exist.

Cynicism is justified here. Claims of *special* meaning often serve as power grabs: assertions of authority. "Transcendent" can mean "you better do whatever the priests tell you to, *or else*." These are the *real* meanings you must pay attention to—and obey!—neglecting the other, supposedly defective meanings, which you would care about otherwise.

The function is to compel agreement. The vacuity of the terms, and the lack of any support from evidence or reason, makes that easier to enforce. You can always argue with ordinary meanings. Special meanings, you can't. They are declared "holy ineffable mysteries" if you ask difficult questions, meaning "shut and stop causing us trouble."

Nihilism starts here… and ends

Committed nihilism often starts here, when you stop trying to argue with nonsense and conclude flatly that "none of this makes any sense; none of it exists; meaning isn't real."

You *could* notice that some songs are real and meaningful, and your love for your family, and work you do. Then you would avoid or escape nihilism. But, somehow, those may not seem enough. As eternalism insisted, they aren't *really* meaningful.

What is missing? What do you actually want here? Which parts of the promise of "transcendent meaning" can you actually get (if any?), and which are pure fantasy?

Work to answer such questions may repay the complicated and difficult effort. That work is not just conceptual. It may require feeling, remembrance, and experimentation. I cannot tell you what you will discover, nor promise it will be satisfactory.

You may find you may lack practical assurance of security; a resolution to estrangement from yourself; a consistent feeling of being loved; a way of prioritizing personal versus altruistic purposes, or sensible short-term goals versus imaginative long-term ones; connection with sacred vastness; confidence in your moral adequacy; or other possibilities, which perhaps neither you nor I can imagine as you begin. There are ways of gaining such benefits of meaning that are non-special, and achievable in practice. They do come without eternalism's alluring guarantees, however.

Varieties of specialness

In pages that follow, I discuss each of the supposed special types of meaning. I will treat them with perhaps more serious consideration than they deserve. Through somewhat lengthy analyses, I hope to explain why it's not necessary to mourn their absence, and also to uncover valid intuitions about meaningness some conceal.

- Absolute meaning is the most general special sort.
- Transcendent meaning is typically asserted by theistic eternalism.
- Eternal meaning is pervasive in, um, eternalism.
- Objective meaning is the special applause light for rationalism.

- Ultimate meaning would be the meaning found at the end of … *something*. There are diverse species, depending on what you look at the end of.
- Cosmic meaning is a bit old-fashioned. Wow, groovy, way out, man!

Non-ordinary meaning

I'll also describe a little-understood category: meaningness that is neither special nor ordinary. By "not special," I mean that it does not support eternalism's claims. By "not ordinary," I mean not often encountered in everyday life, and unusually difficult to locate, understand, and articulate. Types of meaning found through—for instance—intuitive leaps, meditation, and psychedelic drugs may be "non-ordinary."

Non-ordinary meaning is wrongly dismissed by nihilism as non-existent or defective: illusory or merely subjective. If you are feeling both nihilistic and that something critically important is missing from your life, it may be non-ordinary meaning.

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1. 1.This alludes to a recent nihilist manifesto, Rivka Weinberg's "Ultimate Meaning: We Don't Have It, We Can't Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad," *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, 2021. She uses "ultimate meaning" to mean "the purpose of a particular individual's life when considered as a whole." I discuss this paper later.

5 Comments

Next Page: No absolute meaning →

> Crystal
> Atoms in a crystal are ordered in an almost absolutely perfect pattern. Image courtesy Jason D

"Absolute" crystalizes the essence of eternalism: the attempt to fixate pattern to dispel nebulosity, in order to gain certainty, understanding, and control. "Absolute" means all-or-nothing: the only alternative to *my* eternalistic faith is nihilism.

Nihilism concurs: nothing in our everyday world is absolute, therefore there is no meaning. You should be very, very sad.

"Absolute" is the first of several rhetorical tricks we'll examine that deflect attention from pragmatic concrete meanings to highfalutin' metaphysical abstractions. That's a powerful eternalist move, because you can make abstractions say whatever you want, whereas concrete meanings are inconveniently stubborn in meaning what they want to mean. Nihilism, which mostly just inverts eternalist trickery, points out that the metaphysical absolutes don't exist, so the dinner plate is empty—while hiding inconvenient actual meaningfulness under its table napkin.

Unlike "transcendent meaning," "ultimate meaning," and "eternal meaning," the phrase "absolute meaning" is rare; but "absolute truth" and "moral absolutes" feature in both eternalist and nihilist manifestos. Absolute truth, if it existed, might offer absolute certainty, and moral absolutes absolute control (of the afterlife, at least). These are eternalist promises, and nihilism gets upset that they won't be kept.

Absolute truth

> Raven
> Image courtesy Mary Lewandowski

Meanings rely on facts. Whether you are guilty of a moral infraction depends in part on what in fact you did; your identity depends in part on your factual history; and so on. Absolute meanings require absolute factual truths.

Absolute truths are *just plain true*: no ifs, ands, or buts. Unfortunately for eternalism, nebulosity makes absolute truth impossible, and nebulosity is pervasive in the kind of world we live in. It's *pretty much* true that the raven is black, but it is not *absolutely* true; it's somewhat gray and green and blue and purple. Its color is somewhat nebulous. It's impossible to be certain about matters in which there is no absolute truth, only more-or-less truth. Recognizing the pervasiveness of nebulosity, and mistaking it for meaninglessness, is a route into nihilism.

The meanings of the Biblical religions depend on the factual claims of the Bible. In the 1700s, it became clear that many are false. That led to the development of nihilism as a recognized problem in the 1800s. In response, religions split themselves between two strategies, modernism and fundamentalism.

Religious modernism jettisoned most factual claims in order to preserve the absolute truth of an essential core. Those are the minimal claims needed to glue meaning firmly in place, such as the omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence of God. Conveniently, these claims are nearly all abstract and metaphysical, and therefore resist refutation on the basis of factual evidence.[1] Abstract metaphysical claims also escape nebulosity: it's as plausible that God is *absolutely* omniscient as that He's just widely knowledgeable.

Inconveniently, abstract metaphysical claims also cannot be supported with factual evidence. Faith in them depends solely on the inherent emotional attraction of eternalism itself. In practice, religious modernism collapses from the specificity of genuine Christianity into a vague feel-good secular eternalism. When stressed, with nothing concrete anchoring it, this "moralistic therapeutic deism" slides gently into lite nihilism—or more often materialism or some other other closely allied stance.

Recognizing this slippery slope, the fundamentalist alternative insists on the absolute, literal truth of every word of the Bible. This renders fundamentalism brittle. As long as you can pretend to believe absurd falsehoods, you are lashed securely to the mast. When you break free, you are thrown into the storm-tossed open ocean of fluctuating nebulosity and pattern. Losing faith in fundamentalism is a common route to hardcore nihilism.

Rationalism, as an eternalist ideology, also depends critically on the absoluteness of truths. Its whole framework collapses unless everything is either absolutely true or absolutely false. Part One of *In the Cells of the Eggplant* explains this at length; see particularly its chapter "The truth of the matter."

> We want to know things about cottage cheese and dance moves and puppy training— but nothing is absolutely true about them. Obviously, all sorts of things are true about them, in a common sense way. But we can't even say definitely whether or not something is cottage cheese. There are always marginal cases, like cottage cheese that has been in the refrigerator too long and is gradually turning into something else. Nor is it absolutely true that cottage cheese is white. That is only "more-or-less true"; examined closely, it's slightly yellowish.
>
> Most true statements are not absolutely true. They may be true enough for all practical purposes; true in some sense; officially true, but effectively meaningless; true, other things being equal; true, as far as it goes; or true in theory, but not in practice.

Recognizing that rationalism requires a type of truth that mostly doesn't exist leads to post-rationalist nihilism.

Moral absolutes

Some things are *just plain wrong*.[2] When it comes to moral absolutes, there is no wiggle room. As with absolute factual truths, there can be no ifs, ands, or buts.

A morality of absolute rules is reassuringly straightforward: easy to understand fully. It offers the possibility of blamelessness: full control of one's own moral adequacy. It also provides tools to control others by condemning and punishing their unambiguously wrong acts.

Absolute morality is appropriate for people who don't yet have the cognitive sophistication to deal with moral complexity. This includes children and some—not many—adults. They may find a more accurate ethics baffling, and be unable to make use of it, despite good intentions. Or they may perceive a more complex system as just "everything is gray, nothing is really wrong, so I can do whatever I like, as long as I can get away with it." A simplistic, absolute morality is sometimes inaccurate, but far better than unconstrained self-interest.

When you recognize the inadequacy of the ethics you previously subscribed to, you may adopt or even commit to moral nihilism. This is a common route into nihilism overall. Whereas supposedly absolute factual truths are usually supported by *some* specific evidence and reasoning, the support for supposed moral absolutes is usually quite vague. Many factual questions are only slightly nebulous, where ethical ones may be thoroughly cloudy.

Logically, moral nihilism is a special case of general nihilism: nihilism denies all meaning, whereas moral nihilism denies only ethical meaning. However, its dynamics are quite different, so I'll discuss it separately later, in the chapter on ethics. For example, moral nihilism is often gleeful, where general nihilism is depressed. It's possible to maintain a lite general nihilism fairly consistently for many years, whereas most people—psychopaths excepted—snap out of moral nihilism pretty quickly. When someone behaves badly at work, it's quite difficult not to notice your moral judgement of them, however committed you may claim to be to "there is no right or wrong."

Relativism isn't a thing

Eternalists sometimes contrast absolute truth or morality with "relativism." This term has no clear definition, and is used to refer to several quite different views. It is mainly a pejorative: few serious thinkers currently defend broad concepts of either "relative truth" or "moral relativism."[3]

Most views condemned as "relativism" are types of subjectivism. They hold that truth, meaning, or morality are exclusively a matter of either arbitrary social agreement or arbitrary individual opinion. Proponents of such views usually describe them with some other, more specific term.

Eternalism equates relativism, and subjectivism in general, with nihilism. This is not formally correct, but it is pretty much true in practice. "Meanings" chosen arbitrarily, or held subjectively without external support, are hard to maintain. Truth and ethics are neither subjective nor absolute. A more sophisticated ethics recognizes that there are no moral absolutes, and right and wrong depend on many factors, including intentions and circumstances as well as the act itself; but that does not make ethics a matter of individual choice, nor of cultural consensus.

How badly do you want absolute assurance?

Mostly we do fine without absolute truth or absolute morality.

- There are no absolute truths about eggplants, but that causes no trouble when you make ratatouille. There are few absolute truths even in science and engineering. We've found ways to work effectively with the gloppiness of the physical world.[4]

- We almost always agree on whether everyday actions are morally wrong, without having to comment or even think about it. We pass over this moral unproblematicness without noticing it. The rare disagreements, mainly invented to help Facebook sell ads, are noteworthy because they are rare and upsetting (although usually distant).

Desire for absolutes is a regression to the illusory safety of childhood, when your parents had all the answers. Are you adult enough to accept that the world offers no guarantee of safety? If you can't, your choices are to try to believe eternalism's comforting lies, or to hide in the dark pit of nihilistic depression.

If you can, there are pragmatic methods for increasing your knowledge, insight, power, and security—although they are not 100% reliable. That is what the complete stance recommends. It offers tools that help you understand, and come to trust, meanings that are somewhat nebulous, but patterned enough to be adequate most of the time.

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1. 1.Metaphysical claims remain vulnerable to *a priori* reasoning, though. In this case, that's the "Problem of Evil": why does God permit it? Admitting there is no good answer is a common route to atheism, and sometimes nihilism.
2. 2.Masturbation, for example: *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2352.
3. 3.See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* articles "Relativism" and "Moral relativism" for an overview.
4. 4.Unfortunately, although philosophers have long recognized that "absolute truth" mostly isn't a thing, they've never bothered to work out a coherent story about how we work effectively with "more-or-less truths." Parts Two and Three of *In the Cells of the Eggplant* do that.

2 Comments

> Pseudo-Medieval-looking engraving of a guy looking from the grayscale world into the brilliantly colored Realm of Forms
> The Flammarion Engraving; CC BY-SA 4.0 for coloring

We want to deny nebulosity and fixate pattern. Denial fails when the nebulosity of some meaning in the actual world becomes too obvious. Then we may retreat to an imagined Fairy Neverland of pure pattern, uncontaminated by messy nebulosity.

Eternalism exchanges realities, declaring that Neverland is the *really* real world, and the apparent word is illusory. Nihilism rejects Neverland but fails to undo the other half of the swap, so it too denies everyday meaningfulness.

Sometimes, "transcendent" gets used loosely just to mean "extra special," as in "a transcendent athletic performance." In this sense, "transcendent meaning" is just "special fancy meaning." Some authorities explicitly equate it with absolute, infinite, and eternal meaning.

Typically, though, the sense is that real meaning is *elsewhere*—in Neverland. "Transcendent" often contrasts with "mundane," literally meaning "in the world." Here in the world, the only meaning is mucky mundane meaning, which is no damn good.[1] Transcendent meaning is external, independent, set apart, and therefore uncontaminated by nebulosity.

Our limited perspective, trapped in the murk of the material world, cannot discern meaning accurately. On that, eternalism and nihilism agree. To see what is "really" meaningful, you'd have to stand outside the universe, like God. Nihilism says that that is impossible and meaningless. There is nothing outside materiality: no meaning anywhere.

Eternalism promises meaning in Neverland. But, wait, if *real* meaning is entirely elsewhere, what good is it? One theory is that *some* mundane meanings are OK after all, but only because they are shadows of the transcendent meanings that exist in another dimension. Alternatively, we can't access transcendent meanings here, but we can sometimes get a glimpse into the Higher Reality. Or transcendent meanings shine into our fallen world, like shafts of sunlight through chinks around the closed door of a dark hut.

For traditional rationalism, Neverland is the Platonic Realm of Pure Forms. For modern rationalism, it is the Platonic Neverland's descendent, the abstract realm of *formal* models.[2] For the Biblical religions, Neverland is Heaven, where God lives. Heaven has seemed decreasingly plausible for centuries, and it's an easy step to drop it.

Then you may fall into nihilism, without noticing eternalism is wrong about mundane meanings. Maybe, on reflection, those can meet your requirements? Even if not all your hopes.

"Natural Law" provides a more believable sense of "transcendent meaning." There are factual Laws of Physics; maybe there are Laws of Meaning, such as moral laws, inherent in physical reality. They may transcend social conventions and subjective personal beliefs. Maybe they can be derived from an understanding of evolution by natural selection. Some intelligent non-human animal species seem to have a basic sense of ethics, purpose, value, and self. Evolved meaning is probably a significant part—but only a part—of a full and accurate understanding of meaning overall. We'll explore non-human morality in the chapter on ethics for that reason.

Like Christian Creationists, nihilists reject evolved meaning, on the basis that evolution is a random, meaningless process, and nothing meaningful can come from something meaningless. We'll return to that mistaken idea in "No evolved meaning."

"No objective meaning" is core to post-rational nihilism. Objective meaning would transcend the individual. Nihilism is right that objective meaning, in the sense of residing inherently in objects, doesn't exist—because meaning is interactive. However, there is another sense of "objective": meanings that reasonable observers generally agree on. Those certainly do exist. And as interaction, all meaning "transcends" the individual, because interactive is not subjective!

"Transcendent" can simply mean "incomprehensible"; some dictionaries give this as a major sense. "Incomprehensible" doesn't necessarily imply non-existent, but it should make you suspicious and want to ask hard questions. "Transcendent meaning" is often said to be invisible, ineffable, and accessible only through special, "mystical" means, maybe only by special people. These are convenient properties when constructing propaganda for an eternalist system. It's reasonable to suppose such "meaning" is usually imaginary.

The complete stance doesn't categorize meanings as transcendent or not. Some meanings are much more important than others, but they are not set apart as special, or entirely different in type. Most meanings are obvious, generally agreed on, and easy to understand.

That said, some meanings are "non-ordinary": they may indeed be ineffable, difficult to understand, resistant to public inspection, and accessible only through atypical means. These are worth exploring, carefully. One must steer between the eternalist Scylla of making them mean more than they do and the nihilist Charybdis of denying that they are more than delusions. The complete stance advises *allowing* meanings, more than searching for or creating them.

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1. 1."Transcendent" also sometimes contrasts with "immanent," which also means "in the world," but differently. "Immanent" is in the world but good, whereas "mundane" is in the world and bad. Some religions recognize the logical and emotional problems that result from declaring that all apparent meanings are bad, and only transcendent meaning counts. They try to resolve the difficulty by declaring the sacred both transcendent *and* immanent. This move is "controversial" and generates extensive obscure but heated theoretical debates, which suggests it doesn't work very well.
2. 2.Most rationalists are deeply committed to both physicalism—the doctrine that only physical things exist—and the existence of a non-physical realm of formal objects. They try not to notice the contradiction. Part One of *In the Cells of the Eggplant* discusses this at length. See particularly the chapters "Reference: rationalism's reality problem" and "What can you believe?".

Comment on this page

The Butterfly Nebula photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope

Some things are more meaningful than others. Some purposes are more important than others. Some ethical considerations outweigh others. Some aspects of your identity are core to who you are, whereas others are incidental.

But often it is hard to compare. What is the *most* important thing to do? Which choice should you make in an ethical dilemma of conflicting principles? Which parts of your identity are you least willing to let go of in difficult, changing circumstances?

Eternalism hijacks two accurate observations, that some things are clearly more meaningful than others, and that much suffering can come when a comparison is *not* clear. It promises an "ultimate" standard that would resolve all such questions.

"Ultimate" literally means "last." What would the *last* meaning be? Last how?

"Ultimate" is also used to mean "greatest and most important." Greatest how? Most important why? The word is extremely vague, but sounds impressive, like whoever says it must know what they are talking about. That makes it ideal as a weasel word, like "really." Eternalism typically uses "ultimate meaning" non-specifically, as synonymous with "real meaning" or extra-special fancy meaning. That means "do whatever we say and don't ask questions."

Nihilism, on the other hand, often takes the word more seriously, asks what "ultimate meaning" would actually mean, and comes up with some specific answers. It observes that there isn't any meaning like that, decides this is somehow awful, and descends into depression.

Is there a scale?

American Ermine
This fellow stole the bacon fat from the bird feeder. Courtesy Kurt Bauschardt

When someone invokes the potentially weasly word "ultimate," questions you should ask include:

- Specifically what scale?
- Does it work to put these things on a single scale?
- Is there in fact a linear ordering here? Is "scale" the best way to think about this?
- Why is this scale relevant or correct? Should I care about it?
- What other scales might be relevant?
- Does it have an end point?
- Is the end point the only one that matters?
- What's happening in the middle?
- Maybe some point other than the end is better, more interesting, or more relevant?

That some things can be weighed as greater or lesser does not imply that *every* two things can. Some people unambiguously sing better than some others, but there is no absolute scale of singing prowess, and comparison is often meaningless. There is no "ultimate singer" (despite music industry hype and teenage infatuations).

Maximal or infinite meaning

As types of special meaning, absolute meaning and transcendent meaning are binary, qualitative categories: they contrast absolutely with relative and mundane meaning. "Ultimate" implies the existence of a quantitative scale of greater and lesser meanings.

If there's a scale of meaningfulness, then everywhere on the scale is *somewhat* meaningful (except maybe zero at the bottom). This would contradict nihilism (unless everything is at zero, in which case it's not a scale after all).

If meaningfulness was on a scale of zero to ten, and if you were at seven, you could think "well, I'm doing pretty well, actually!" Often, though, lite nihilism implicitly imagines a threshold, maybe around three point two. If life is only one point nine meaningful, that doesn't count, and it might as well be zero. (We'll look into that possibility in "Not enough meaning" later.)

By invoking the metaphor of a scale, "ultimate meaning" makes itself seem intuitive and reasonable. However, by focusing only on the top endpoint, it becomes qualitative and absolute in effect. Like lite nihilism, eternalism wants to count intermediate points as effectively zero. Either meaning is ultimate, or it's not worthy of notice. "Ultimate" highjacks the intuition of differences in importance to give credence to a bogus absolutism.

If the scale ran from zero to ten, it might not seem reasonable to treat nine point nine as effectively meaningless. The phrase "infinitely meaningful" counters that accurate intuition. If there's something that is *infinitely* meaningful, then all finite meanings are equivalently inconsequential in comparison. Three divided by infinity and 9,748,023 divided by infinity are both zero. This is an eternalistic rhetorical trick to get you to drop everything other than some special (but imaginary) meaning.

Varieties of ultimacy

The next several pages consider various scales invoked by "ultimate meaning." Each distorts some partly-accurate intuition about meaning to make it seem that nihilism is the only alternative

to eternalism. They declare "ultimate" endpoints that are either spectacularly meaningless (directing attention away from midpoints where meaning is obvious), or simply nonexistent.

- "Cosmic meaning" hijacks the intuition that bigger things are often more meaningful. That is true only up to a point, though. Intergalactic space is enormous and almost completely meaningless, and "the meaning of the entire universe" doesn't even exist. Nihilism encourages you to imagine looking back at your life from a distant galaxy, and hopes that from this imaginary distance it will seem meaningless. You are not in a distant galaxy, however. You are on earth, a meaning-saturated locality.

- Meanings can be more or less durable. Longer-lasting ones are often more significant. Maybe "eternal meaning" would be most significant, if there were any. Eternalism promises there is some; nihilism accurately observes that there isn't, but wrongly concludes that anything that can finish is meaningless. Directing attention to the end point of time, human extinction, or the heat death of the universe directs it away from the present, where meaningfulness is common.

- Many things you care about will stop being meaningful after you die. If endpoints were all that counted, meanings during your life wouldn't be meaningful. (Eternalism and nihilism are both big on meanings that aren't meaningful… The complete stance finds this unnoticed self-contradiction pretty funny.)

- Something that is meaningful only to a few people might not seem very meaningful, especially if you are not one of them. Mo' people, mo' meaning! Ultimately, to really count, a meaning should be universal: meaningful for everyone. Maybe even space aliens.

- There's a contrary intuition that the most intense meanings are personal; maybe even unique and private and ineffable. A spurious ultimatism suggests that unless your life has a single, definite, unique meaning it's not meaningful at all. Existentialism promotes a doomed struggle to find or create this sort of meaning, which can't exist.

- Cats understand simple meanings, such as their own social signals, and many recognize the purpose of tools such as can openers. They are oblivious to, or misunderstand, most meanings humans care about. Perhaps superior space aliens see more meanings, more accurately, than we do. An ultimate being (such as God) would see all meanings perfectly accurately. Presumably there aren't any, though.

- Making an omelet is meaningful: you get something nice to eat. It's not *very* meaningful, though. Writing a book is more meaningful, partly because it takes much of your time for years. It's a big project, and bigger projects are more meaningful. Maybe your ultimately big project is your life as a whole? It's hard to see what the meaning of *that* is, though— because it doesn't exist. That doesn't make living meaningless.

- Some meanings are "higher" than others, on a scale different from mere intensity. It's an accurate intuition that altruism and creativity are often more meaningful than materialistic self-gratification. This does not negate the meaningfulness of enjoyment, and does not imply the existence of some ultimate, "highest" form of meaning, as eternalism might wish. Recognizing this may lead to a nihilistic inversion: denying that higher meanings are meaningful at all.

- "No ultimate meaning" sometimes means "in the final analysis" or "after full analysis." Which analysis? Usually that's not spelled out. It's just gesturing toward the whole mass of nihilistic intellectualization and saying "there must be a convincing argument against meaningfulness in there somewhere!"

Meaning without a scale

Ultimate meaning would be convenient, if it existed and we had access to it. It doesn't. That is inconvenient, but it doesn't make everything meaningless. It doesn't mean we can never make comparisons of importance.

Sometimes we have to make hard choices, without any ultimate standard.

We know for sure that we *can* do that, because we *do* do that.

3 Comments

> Throne of Cthulhu
> In his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.
> "That is not dead which can eternal lie /
> And with strange aeons even death may die"Image (CC) IceNeuro
>
> The universe is expanding, and everything in it is growing farther and farther apart. As it does so, it grows colder and colder, and its energy is used up. Eventually all the stars will burn out and all matter will collapse into dead stars and black holes. There will be no light at all; there will be no heat; there will be no life; only the corpses of dead stars and galaxies, ever expanding into the endless darkness and the cold recesses of space—a universe in ruins. So not only is the life of each individual person doomed; the entire human race is doomed. There is no escape. There is no hope.
>
> The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good men everywhere to better the lot of the human race—all these come to nothing. In the end they don't make one bit of difference, not one bit.

Great nihilist sales pitch! I'll pull it apart at the end of this page.

But first…

What is "eternal meaning"?

"Eternal meaning" often gets used as a vague, generic term for the supposed special type of meaning that could deliver on eternalism's promises: perfect certainty, understanding, and control. Used that way, it means the same as "absolute," "transcendent," or "ultimate meaning." Some writers—both nihilists and eternalists—explicitly equate these.

However, sometimes it's meant literally: meanings that last forever. About those, we might ask:

- Is it true that there are none, as nihilists claim? (Probably. Anyway, the particular ones people want to believe in are eternalist fantasies.)
- Are non-eternal meanings not really meaningful? (No, there's no reason to believe that.)
- Should we care that there are no eternal meanings? (I give reasons to think not.)
- Why do many non-religious people care anyway? (Due to several confused intuitions: some are secular; most are lingering holdovers from religious eternalism.)

Are there eternal meanings?

Probably not. Eventual human extinction seems likely. We do share some meanings with other terrestrial species (hunger, for instance), and if there are sentient aliens elsewhere in the universe, we might share meanings with them as well. There may be hungry extraterrestrials long after there are no humans. However, in time, the universe may effectively end, and presumably that would end meaning as well.[1]

Are non-eternal meanings non-existent?

> Potato masher
> Potato masher courtesy Grannie's Kitchen

No. They are obvious everywhere, so we know that's false.

The claim also proves too much. A potato masher is not eternal, but it is a potato masher anyway, because it was made to mash potatoes and you can still use it for that.[2] Insisting that potato mashers don't exist today because they won't survive the explosion of the sun billions of years from now would be silly.[3]

Should we care that there are no eternal meanings?

Probably not.

People care about all sorts of things that seem pretty meaningless to me, like football scores. So I can't say "no, you shouldn't care." What I can say is that most of the specific reasons people use to explain their caring about eternal meaning are mistaken.

What's special about eternal meanings?

Just being eternal wouldn't make something particularly meaningful. No one cares whether hangnails will retain their slight meaning past the end of the universe. In fact, it seems that "eternal" is something of a red herring.

Special meanings—ones that could deliver on eternalism's promises—are the underlying issue. From everyday experience, we know meaning comes and goes, sometimes without any apparent cause. When meanings change, our hopes for certainty, understanding, and control are dashed. Therefore, it seems that it is not that eternal meanings are special; it's that special meanings have to be eternal.

This isn't a knock-down argument. For instance, it's imaginable that one set of special meanings could deliver temporarily, and be replaced with a different set as soon as the first lot expired. (Christian Dispensationalism does claim this.) Also, eternal meanings whose truth you were uncertain of, or didn't understand, would not deliver as promised.

Nevertheless, eternalism *wants* to claim meaning doesn't change; but obviously it does. So instead it says that *real* meanings never change; and ones that do, don't count.

Unfortunately, the specific meanings eternalist systems declare eternal and special are imaginary. God, who is supposed to guarantee eternally fixed meanings from outside of time, doesn't exist. It's more plausible that methods of formal rationality do exist outside of time, but all attempts to

use them to establish truths about ethics, purpose, or value fail due to nebulosity. Communism has no coherent vision of its fantasy of an eternal post-revolution utopia. And so on.

Lite nihilism recognizes that all such attempts to establish eternal meanings must fail, and rejects them. Unfortunately, it fails to accept the obvious fact that changeable meanings are not merely all we've got, but do count.

Are non-eternal meanings adequate?

Although both eternalism and lite nihilism sometimes deny the existence of non-eternal meanings, their underlying demand is that you must reject and ignore them. Many eternalist systems say explicitly that you must not care about non-eternal meanings *at all*. You must sacrifice everything meaningful in your transitory life to get into heaven, or to bring about the eternal utopia that follows the glorious communist revolution. Nihilism often retains this harmful, impossible to satisfy moral principle.

Wishing eternal meanings existed, so they could guarantee eternalism's false promises, doesn't make non-eternal meanings valueless. You might consider them less valuable, but not zero. You can reasonably insist that you are dissatisfied with non-eternal meanings, but not that they don't exist, and not that you don't care about them at all.

Pretending they don't exist is a deliberate, motivated confusion: to avoid inquiry into the nature of meanings. If you admitted they exist, it would be natural to ask specifically what makes them inadequate; and you suspect you won't like the answer. In fact, you already know it: accepting the interplay of nebulosity and pattern of meaningness reveals that it is real and important, so you have to deal with it; but you can't get the comforting guarantees you hoped for. In other words, both nihilism and eternalism are wrong.

So, should you be upset that eternal meanings don't exist? Are non-special meanings unacceptably inadequate? There is no cosmically correct standard of evaluation by which one could answer this question. It's not even a well-formed question: adequate for what?

However, it seems better to accept moderate uncertainty, incomplete understanding, and imperfect control than to refuse to deal with our actual situation. That requires accepting that meanings may suddenly disintegrate; the rug may be pulled out from under you at any moment. In exchange, you may find that life is, after all, deeply meaningful, here and now.

That is the complete stance. It may seem unattractive and difficult—until you get used to it—but it's better than the alternatives. And seeing how meanings come and go, and joining in their evolving dance, is at minimum fascinating; sometimes highly enjoyable.

The scene-change sales trick

I know what it's like, Mr. and Mrs. Mark. It's the bitter end of January. It's cold and dark and it's been raining for weeks. You're cooped up with the kids and they're so bored and maybe acting out a bit. They're too unhappy to do their schoolwork, and you've started even snapping at each other. There's no escape from your apartment. There's never any time off from the endless drag. The days go slower and slower, and you feel winter will never end, just stretching on forever…

You need a vacation! But what a hassle *that* can be. Arguing about where to go and when, looking for a decent hotel that has a room at a reasonable price, packing and

unpacking, trying to find your way around an unfamiliar, maybe scary place. You're so exhausted you think "I need a vacation from my vacation!"

Now imagine you own your own familiar, safe home away from home you can go each year. Your ultra-clean and comfortable luxury condo already has everything you need; no worry about forgetting to pack anything. Picture yourselves on the private beach: the kids are frolicking in the swimming area under the watchful eye of the lifeguard, and the two of you are discovering the restorative power of time off in the sun with a delicious tropical drink—reconnecting with each other! Your precious time away is special, and the familiar faces of our accommodating staff are dedicated to making the most of the magic.

On island time, it seems like your stay lasts forever. Looking back years from now, you remember your timeshare as the backdrop for some of life's most celebrated, unforgettable milestones, and you think "this was one of the best decisions of our life —an investment in family well-being that keeps paying dividends in cherished experiences!"

And, Mr. and Mrs. Mark, I have more good news for you! My manager has prequalified you for purchase, so I can give you your key right now, after you're done with the paperwork!

You can use this pitch to sell vacation condo timeshares, or God, or meaninglessness.

The trick is to get the mark to do your work for you by messing with their perception of time and space. You hypnotize them into creating their own mental imagery to accompany the feelings you conjure in them by supplying just enough button-push elements that they'll fill in the details with what's most meaningful for them.

Then you transport them in imagination to a bad place and time, and make them make themselves as miserable as they can. They feel the awful scene as if it were here and now.

And then you whisk them away to paradise, and get them to feel vast relief at the contrast. And then the closing: that good feeling can be prolonged eternally when they commit!

Remember all that stuff about the universe dying that I quoted at the top of this page? (You might like to go back and read it again, to see the similarity.) I wrote the timeshare sales pitch myself, but that gloomy guff about the end of time is verbatim from perhaps the greatest nihilist manifesto ever written, by William Lane Craig.

To sell nihilism, you transport the mark to a time and place devoid of meaning, and you ditch them there. There's no second half to the pitch.

We'll see this pattern repeatedly in upcoming pages—starting with the next one, "No cosmic meaning." There, nihilism takes you a distant, lifeless galaxy, and strands you in the cold dark meaningless emptiness of interstellar space. More generally, nihilistic intellectualization tricks you into looking away from your obviously meaningful—if unsatisfactory—concrete situation, and gets you to ruminate on meaningless metaphysical abstractions, which it claims are all that really count, from which you are supposed to deduce the meaninglessness of everything. "Interstellar space is meaningless, therefore so is everything else."

The "No eternal meaning" schtick—every nihilist manifesto includes this—teleports you to the end of time, where (your guide explains, reasonably enough) there is no meaning. Fear and sadness about the death of the universe is displaced fear and sadness about significant endings in

your own life. The sense is that the universe is bigger than anything else, so we should be sadder and more afraid about its imminent demise than about anything else.

You feel the horror—and then nihilism tells you there is no way out. Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, one of the best-regarded recent books advocating nihilism, makes this explicit: the sun has *already* exploded; the human race is *already* extinct; you, the reader, are *already* dead.[4]

I quoted William Lane Craig's "The Absurdity of Life without God," which conveniently collects and concisely summarizes much nihilist rhetoric. He's arguing for Christianity, despite that: if you don't believe in God, then the only alternative is nihilism, which is utterly horrific. Therefore, God must exist.

Say no to nihilism

Timeshare operators are famous for abusive hard-sell sales "presentations," in which a whole series of salespeople keep going over and over the pitch, trying out different deceptive tricks on you, for hours and hours. There's many pages of advice on the web about how to survive these ordeals, without buying. They boil down to the magic word "no."

When nihilism tries to get you to imagine that you are already dead, or the human race is extinct, or you are in the Andromeda Galaxy, just say—

"No. That is not happening now. I can see I am here, in *this* place."

---

1. 1.The "heat death of the universe" seems much less certain now than a few decades ago, when cosmology was considered a pretty much solved problem. There are now both empirical and theoretical anomalies that suggest current understanding is incomplete and uncertain.
2. 2.Despite Plato's claim that they aren't real potato mashers, because they are just shadowy imitations of the One True Potato Masher, which we cannot perceive because it lives in the Transcendent Realm of Ideal Forms. I don't understand why anyone takes anything he says seriously.
3. 3.Is there some way this analogy fails, due to a relevant, essential difference between meanings and potato mashers? They are more alike than you might suppose: meanings are tools for living.
4. 4.It doesn't seem he meant this as a metaphor, although it's hard to tell, because his writing shows the characteristic cognitive distortions of nihilism, and mostly doesn't make sense. However, it reads more like he was having a delusional, depressive mental health crisis while writing it than that "we are all already dead" was supposed to be some sort of poetic simile.

10 Comments

The Andromeda Galaxy
The Andromeda Galaxy, (CC) David Dayag

I mean, OK, but what even is it?

Lots of people wonder whether cosmic meaning exists, or are bitterly certain there is none, or try to figure out how to find it—like, should I try meditation or something? Or they regret that we've collectively lost it, and say we need to return to it—but what are they even talking about?

Sometimes "cosmic meaning" refers vaguely to the unspecified, special kind of meaning that, if it existed, could deliver on the promises of eternalism. Usually, though, "cosmic meaning" seems to mean something a bit more specific.

But what? What makes a meaning cosmic or not? No one complaining about the lack explains, and they give no examples, so I don't think they have a clear idea of it. Theologians supply explanations of "eternal meaning," but rarely discuss "cosmic meaning," and treat them as equivalent when they do. All the philosophical treatments I've found are worse than useless, due to a mistaken idea of what "cosmic" means.

This page details several common, half-thought ideas about "cosmicness." A better understanding explains why you might reasonably feel distraught that it's missing in your life, and practical approaches to addressing the problem.

But first: although nobody tells you what cosmic meaning would be, you've probably heard many times how they know there isn't any. It goes like this:

The sales pitch

Caught up in the trivial concerns of your everyday life, you never stop to ask if any of it is truly meaningful. If you step back from your subjective illusions of meaning for a moment, you can see that everything you do is just schemes generated by your animal instincts for survival, with no point beyond that.

Zoom out from your self a notch. Some people think their friends and family give their lives meaning, but—if you even have any—none of them know or care about some of the things you are most stressed and obsessed with. Most of your thoughts and memories and pains and disappointments will remain forever private. You are fundamentally alone.

Zoom out again. The community you live in is full of people who don't know you at all. If you get run over by a mattress truck while crossing the street and die horribly, they won't hear about it, and if they do, they won't care. You might as well not exist.

Zoom out. You live in a country of millions of people, run by idiot politicians and greedy billionaires who care for nothing but power and money. If everyone in your neighborhood died because some corporation spilled toxic waste in the water supply, it would be in the news for a week, and then everyone outside would forget about it and nothing would change.

Zoom out. You are stuck on a rock with eight billion people for whom your life is completely pointless. Perhaps you hope to gain some fame, to achieve something great, hoping that might give your life some actual purpose. Well, suppose you succeed and everyone on earth knows your name and reveres your accomplishments. So what? In the vastness of the cosmos, the whole earth is a miniscule grain of dust, coated in a thin layer of organic chemical scum. Some bacteria glommed together in colonies a few billion years ago and eventually turned into monkeys. Now some overgrown bacterial colonies in the middle of nowhere are deluded into thinking they are significant.

Not much to see here

The Pale Blue Dot is a little right of center, coincidentally within a streak that is a camera lens artifact.

Zoom out. The 1990 "Pale Blue Dot" photograph shows Earth through a telescope on the Voyager 1 spacecraft, from just under four billion miles away, a distance of forty times that of the Earth from the Sun. The Earth takes up 0.12 pixels of the image. Carl Sagan wrote:

> Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there–on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

> The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

> Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

Zoom out. In the big picture, nothing that happens on Earth makes any difference at all. The next nearest star to the Earth after the Sun is Proxima Centauri. It is almost three hundred thousand times as far from Earth as the Sun: thirty trillion miles away. If Voyager 1 was headed there, it would take seventy six thousand years to arrive. Proxima Centauri has an Earth-like planet that is barely detectable with the most powerful telescopes. Nothing we can do will have any impact there. If it is inhabited, do you think the aliens there care anything about your vain ambitions, constant worries, and rapidly approaching death?

Zoom out. Both stars are located nowhere in particular in the Milky Way galaxy, which is fifty thousand times farther across than the distance between them. The galaxy contains hundreds of billions of stars. The Milky Way is one galaxy among many in the Local Group, whose largest is the Andromeda Galaxy, roughly a million times further from us than Proxima Centauri. The Local Group is part of the Laniakea Supercluster of a hundred thousand galaxies, which is a part of a galaxy filament, which is a tiny thread within the cosmic web of the universe.

Between stars, there is only empty space: silent and cold and dark and unimaginably lonely.

Cosmic monster
Unnameable cosmic abomination (CC) Sandeep Karunakaran

If there is life in the Andromeda Galaxy, it may be incomprehensibly more powerful than humanity. Alien civilizations have had billions of years to develop. Standing before them, they seem god-like to you; but to them, you are as utterly insignificant as bacteria. If they noticed you, it would be with momentary, implacable hostility before recycling your body's atoms to make paperclips. Their reign and achievements stretch across billions of stars, and their eldritch

technologies and worlds-destroying wars are utterly alien and incomprehensible in terms of human values. Yet viewed from the perspective of the universe as a whole, they too are revealed to be impotent, pointless, useless, meaningless: sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Stand on a frozen rock that drifts endlessly alone in the Andromeda Galaxy, a shard of a planet whose star system was blown up in some cosmic battle that was already forgotten a billion years ago, and realize exactly how "meaningful" your momentary microscopic life on Earth is.

An illusory perspective

I hope you are feeling a little lonely, frightened, and depressed now—or at least can imagine how other readers might. That will help understand our several different upcoming analyses of what's going on in that sales pitch. It combines a number of sleazy rhetorical tricks.

A first analysis: this sales pitch is similar to the one in "No eternal meaning," which transported you, in your imagination, to the miserable meaningless end of time. This one transports you to a miserable meaningless rock squintillions of miles from nowhere, and dumps you there.

It's the same trick, getting you to visualize something that is misleading and not in your interest. "In the big picture," it says: but, it's a *picture*, a fiction, not a concrete reality. If you imagine looking at things from a standpoint where, you are told, they look like X, then they will look like X in your imagination. If you stand behind a translucent red screen, everything will look red. Why would you choose to do that? You can also imagine "looking" at your life from another galaxy… but you are just making things up, guided by a voice that wants to throw you into despair.

As you pull away, an object *appears* to dwindle in size, but this is an illusion. Things don't actually get smaller when you move away from them, and they don't get less meaningful either.

Meaning depends on contexts and purposes. If you go to a place with no context and no purpose, there will be no meaning there, at least not until you've hung out for a while. But if you could teleport to a nice Italian restaurant in the Andromeda Galaxy for lunch, and return to Earth in time for your regular afternoon tryst with a coworker in the office broom closet, your life here would not look less meaningful when considered from your table at *Osteria Andromeda*.

The sales pitch tries to suggest that the perspective from extremely far away is somehow more accurate than looking at your life close up. It's true that stepping back can sometimes give you a more objective view, which may be more accurate in some ways. It's not true that accuracy of perception increases without limit as you get further and further away.

Maybe that's given plausibility by the idea that God is infinitely far away—outside the universe entirely—but sees everything in it perfectly clearly. You, however, cannot do that, and cannot realistically imagine it. And anyway, God apparently regards at least some of what we do as highly meaningful, despite His great distance.

Thought soup

Most philosophy papers about cosmic meaning argue about whether you should buy the sales pitch: do galaxies make everything meaningless, or not?[1] None of that is relevant, because no one except a few astro-geeks cares about galaxies. Obviously it's true that galaxies themselves are meaningless, but it's super unclear how that's supposed to make *your* life meaningless.

The philosophers missed the point, because they assumed that "the cosmos" and "the universe" are the same thing. It turns out those are critically dissimilar, and the cosmos hasn't got any galaxies in it. More about that later.

Fortunately, we aren't doing philosophy here. We're figuring out how to get out of a pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting that makes us miserable and useless. So our job is to figure out what makes that pattern seem sensible and attractive anyway.

Nihilism doesn't make any sense rationally, but it's important to sort out the underlying irrational thoughts and emotions, for two reasons. First, to counter them on their own terms. Merely ridiculing irrationality may not have the power to exorcise it. Second, investigating specific irrational ideas reveals broader patterns of more and less accurate and functional relationships with meaningness.

Persistent irrational ideas are often vestigial remnants of ancient understandings. Some were once mainstream theories, but discredited centuries ago; some pre-date civilization, and even humankind. They survive as "thought soup": fragments of evolutionary history and long-dead ideologies that persist in popular culture as ways of talking and thinking and feeling and acting: clichés, metaphors, plot points and story arcs.

"Cosmic meaning" and "not cosmically meaningful" are such. Where did *they* come from?

Same old story

Cave painting of a hyena
Cave hyena painted on the wall of Chauvet Cave, circa 31,000 B.C.

Dateline: Southern France, 31,000 BC.

When you were fourteen, your parents were killed and eaten by a pack of giant hyenas. The clan chief heard screaming and arrived with some other men in time to drive them away and rescue you. A hyena had bitten a chunk off your right calf, leaving you permanently lame.

When your leg had healed enough that you could hobble, the clan's shaman took you aside one night and spent hours pointing at the sky and telling you tales of the buffalo woman whose spurting milk formed a bright band across the night, and the hunting of the Great Bear that leapt into the stars, and the adventures of the wandering planets, and the secret trails shamans walk among the constellations. You nodded and tried to follow along, but none of it made sense and the stars looked pretty much like stars, same as they'd always looked. He said he would take you on as an apprentice, since you'd never make it as a warrior or hunter, but first you'd have to pass the Ordeal in the Cave Of The Beasts. The monsters in the cave were terrifying, the absolute blackness was terrifying, and it was freezing and you were starving, and you failed.

The chief had little use for you, but he slowed the clan's hunting ground migrations so you could keep up, and made sure you got enough of the hunters' kills not to starve. He found a place for you scraping hides and sharpening spears for other men to use.

The clan was ambushed by warriors from some strange tribe. They yelled "bar bar bar" at each other and had no human speech. They had magic sticks that hurled sharpened willow wands into men's bodies. Your chief ordered a charge, and the men ran in with their spears. The strangers turned as if to flee—but then turned again and waved their magic sticks and everyone fell screaming in pain. The chief had a willow shaft in his eye. He died the next day, along with most of the rest of the warriors.

His nephew, not much older than you, became the new chief. He had always had contempt for you. He told the clan that they were to sharpen their own spears, and scraping hides was women's work. Now the clan members mostly would not look at you when you tried to talk to them, and no one would tell you why. You could tell that they were preparing for next migration, although the moon was still far from full.

You woke one morning and the camp site was empty. The clan had packed silently and left before dawn, without you. You yelled but there was no answer, and you expected none. Which way had they gone? The camp site was on the plain, at the foot of a high rock formation, a pile of boulders the clan used as a lookout point. Climbing it was slow with your bad leg.

At the top, you looked out across the vast empty plain in every direction, but you could not see the clan. They must have set off long before dawn.

You remembered men coming down from the lookout saying that they had spotted smoke from the cooking fires of other clans. That seemed the only hope: to wait until your clan made camp and built a fire, and then to try to cross the empty plain alone to reach them and beg to be taken back in. You waited all day, looking out in every direction, but there was no smoke.

Night fell. You had no fire—that was the shaman's job—and no food. It was freezing cold and dark and you were utterly alone. There was no moon, and the stars shone in meaningless pitiless indifference.

In the dark, there were giant merciless monsters.

Insignificance

I hope you noticed that this story is significantly similar to the nihilist sales pitch. We'll explore the parallels which make nihilism emotionally effective. Its rhetoric tries to make you feel lonely, worthless, and vulnerable.

Here's a clue to the meaning of "cosmic meaning." Whereas discussions of "eternal meaning" display anxiety about the nebulosity of ethics and the meaning of death, discussions of "cosmic meaning" display anxiety about the nebulosity of purpose and about personal significance—or, actually, *in*significance. The nihilist sales pitch drives toward the "realization" that you are utterly insignificant "when viewed from the perspective of the universe as a whole."

Well, yes. Significance is not an intrinsic property; it is a relationship. Something is significant only *to somebody*. It is true that the Andromeda Galaxy does not care about you. So what? You don't care about it, either, unless you are an astro-geek.

Humans are obligatorily social animals. Before we killed off all the cave lions, an isolated human in Southern France was a snack. A band of humans with spears could usually intimidate predators into leaving them alone.

Being part of something bigger than yourself—a protective clan, at minimum—is essential to human survival, and the human way of being, and of relating to meaningness. Partly this pre-dates humanity; chimpanzees have similar social structures, as presumably did our common ancestors millions of years ago. It's likely that our overgrown brains developed mainly to understand and exploit social relationships.

Especially critical is maintaining your social role within the clan. That is the basis of social significance: you are valued enough that the clan chief will risk his life, and his warriors', to save you from cave hyenas. You are valued enough that the chief gives a meaningful purpose to your life, even if it is only sharpening spears and scraping hides.

When you lose that purpose, when you lose your social significance, then the clan abandons you —and then you are alone in the night, and will die of cold, hunger, or predation within hours or days. That pitiless evolutionary selection pressure underlies our contemporary craving for purpose and significance. (Or that's my story, anyway. I don't have specific evidence for it.)

The "No cosmic meaning" hypnotic induction tries to regress you into this archaic part of your brain which is terrified of being abandoned in the dark. In part, it puts the universe in the place of your clan, as the greater whole of which you are a part, and tells you that this cosmos is utterly indifferent to you, or even actively hostile. Cowering before the clan council/galaxies, you have no value, no significance, no purpose, and so no protection, support, or comfort.

The universe

In current usage, "the cosmos" means the same thing as "the universe," but it used to mean something entirely different. "Cosmic meaning" concerns the cosmos, not the universe. Philosophers' confusions largely stem from failure to recognize this.

Taking "cosmos" to mean "universe", one might guess that cosmic meaning is to eternal meaning as space is to time. That is, cosmic meanings are those that apply uniformly throughout the universe. However, "cosmic meaning" is rarely if ever used that way. That would be "universal meaning," which we'll deal with elsewhere.

Some philosophers think cosmic meaning is about "the universe as a whole." This makes no sense. First, "the universe" isn't a thing, and there is no whole. There's an extremely large amount of empty space with—comparatively speaking—an extremely small number of atoms scattered around randomly. Occasionally a few of them glom together to make a galaxy or something. This is obviously meaningless, in whole and in parts, and no one cares about it. (Except a few astro-geeks.) There isn't anything to argue about here, although that doesn't stop philosophers trying.

What people care about is the meaning of the *cosmos* as a whole—or the lack of it.

The Ancient Greek verb *kosmein* means "to put in good order," and especially "to arrange troops in formation for battle" or "to establish a government." *Kosmos*, then, is "that which has been ordered by command."

Yahweh

After you were eaten by a cave bear at the end of the previous story, thirty thousand years passed. The magnificent arc of human progress ascended so far that chiefs could put into order arrays of tens of thousands of warriors, and command them into battle. They could slaughter whole cities to the last man, woman, and child, and streets ran with rivers of blood.

Sometimes this seemed quite unpleasant, and some people wondered if it was entirely necessary. Even some warriors secretly wondered whether following chiefs into battle was in their own best interest.

And so: Yahweh.

Originally, Yahweh was the war chief—but not the High King—of the vast Israeli pantheon.[2] In perhaps the oldest tale in the Bible,[3] Yahweh, speaking through his prophet Deborah, commanded the human Israeli war chief Barak to gather ten thousand spearsmen to fight against Sisera, an enemy war chief, who commanded a numerically and technologically superior force with nine hundred chariots of iron. Yahweh himself ordered ten thousand stars to descend with their spears

of cold fire, and led them also into the battle. At Meggido—site also of Armageddon, the future battle at the end of the world—the combined human and divine armies defeated Sisera.

Six hundred years later,[4] speaking through his priests, Yahweh abolished all the other gods, and commanded the primordial chaos into a cosmos, to His liking. He arrayed each and every thing in the world to order with His Word.[5] It is true that His cosmos was only a few hundred miles across, an unimpressive effort by later standards, but that wasn't the point. The point was that everything was rendered significant by the fixed purpose He gave it. Especially people, who he spent the rest of the Bible ordering around and smiting for disobedience. His priests and duly anointed kings saw that this was good.

Other warlike tribes got their own cosmoi, of course. I'm just doing Yahweh because half the fragments of cosmos the West retains are vestiges of His.

The cosmos

Colored engraving of the cosmos
Robert Fludd's classical conception of the cosmos, 1617, just before it got destroyed

Around the same time, the arch-rationalist Greek philosopher Pythagoras used "kosmos" to refer to the heavens: the stars whose eternally regular motions were ordained in the cosmic plan of the eternal ordering principle. Pythagoras was an astro-geek, so he cared about things like that. Normal people don't. Nevertheless, over-optimistically, others extended his term to the sublunar world of horse-armor, lamb-roasts and cosmetics—and, most importantly, themselves. That's where we got the other half of our now-shattered cosmos.

The cosmos is the fixed order of the world humans live in, devised by God or something functionally equivalent,[6] for a purpose in which humans play key roles. The cosmos gives everything in the material world a functional meaning, and also gives every human being a social meaning.

"The meaning of the cosmos as a whole" is the purpose served by the cosmic order. It has nothing to do with galaxies. Your personal purpose is a piece of the grand overall purpose, that fits together neatly into the rest. You are placed into your proper role in the cosmic battle array by divine command.

These are our *cosmic meanings*, the true meanings that really matter. They contrast with the trivial, illusory meanings we just make up, from our egocentric perspective, to satisfy base animal desires.

Or, so proponents of "cosmic meaning" would have you believe. As we'll see later, misunderstanding "cosmos" as "universe" does make believing difficult, because galaxies are obviously meaningless. Then it is plausible that cosmic meaning doesn't exist.

Nihilism takes the next step: nothing is meaningful at all, because it's not cosmically meaningful.[7] This is an instance of a common nihilistic reasoning error. It assumes meaning would have to work a particular way (cosmically, in this case); observes that it doesn't; and concludes that it doesn't exist.[8]

This nihilistic complaint gains credibility from the postmodern fragmentation of the social order. Social roles are no longer fixed by the cosmic plan. They are increasingly complex, uncertain, and nebulous. No one, neither chieftain nor god, can guarantee your significance nor purpose.

You want to be part of something much greater than yourself, but there is no universally recognized social institution that can grant that.

You get choice; and with that, groundlessness. It's a mixed blessing. To varying extents, everyone feels nostalgia for the traditional, natural human way of being: in a stable, significant role among a close-knit clan. That nostalgia can be exploited by malign ideologies bearing false promises; but it's also genuine, and motivates much of the best of human activity.

How significant is enough?

The social meanings we can get now may seem not only nebulous, but not *big enough*. Nothing is significant enough to count: there is no *cosmic* meaning. The things you might be able to do are so tiny, compared with the cosmos. Getting galaxies mixed up with your thinking about social significance doesn't make rational sense, but there are powerful underlying emotional intuitions connecting social and cosmic meanings.

If you will have to rely on the clan when cave hyenas attack, you must always wonder whether they will take that risk. Emotionally, the cosmos is an expanded, supernatural analog of the clan. Is it willing to protect you? Can you *compel* it to, if it's acting sullen? In the prehistoric clan, these were questions about your social status and power.[9]

Repute

Remember "I get duped by eternalism in a casino"? I won thirty-seven cents in a slot machine, and:

> I realized that *the universe loved me*, and that everything was going to come out well after all. My ever-present nagging sense of vague *wrongness* disappeared, and I recognized that it had always been a misunderstanding. Everything is as it should be; everything is connected; everything *makes sense*; everything is benevolently watched over by the eternal ordering principle.
>
> This was eternalism *straight-up*, with no conceptual framework. God was not in the picture. Instead, I had just a vague feeling about my relationship with the Non-Me. When I say I felt that "the universe loves me," this did not involve any concept of "the universe" as a thing; rather, a vague omnidirectional feeling of being loved.

I said "the universe," but I meant the cosmos. Which, I suspect, was my brain somehow mistaking thirty seven cents for the unconditional enthusiastic support of my clan. "They keep giving me stuff, for nothing!" Except I come from a typical modern Western nuclear family, not a clan; its few members loved me, but were not going to be much help in a hyena crisis.

It's important to stay on the right side of your clan, especially the more powerful members. In a clan, you are constantly doing each other favors, partly to gauge reactions, to test who will go how far to support you. Your status in the clan, your repute, how much you are liked, respected, or feared—your significance to the clan—is evolutionarily critical.

When Yahweh abstracted the clan into the cosmos, He promised absolute reliability. If something that big loved you, it wouldn't stop capriciously when the chief's nephew came to power, or due to some accidental loss of your social value, like a laming hyena bite.

In the modern West, we have to rely on vast anonymous societies. They too are capricious. How can we gauge their support?

Many people feel that they would have to do something spectacular in order to count as having a meaningful life. Finding a cure for cancer, or writing The Great American Novel, would make you special, and then life would be meaningful. Why? The unthought emotional logic: it would prove that you are valuable enough to society that everyone would feel compelled to help in case of hyenas. How can you check the level of compulsion? Fame. Famous people's lives are meaningful; yours isn't.[10]

But how famous do you need to be, for your life to count? Once you get on the fame treadmill, nothing seems ever to be enough. You could be "more famous than Jesus," as the Beatles were half a century ago, and get mostly forgotten even before you're dead.

Anyway, nobody in the Andromeda Galaxy was impressed with Beatles, not even in the 1960s. They weren't *cosmically* significant. What would you have to do to get known there?

Power

> Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way…
> —Bertrand Russell, 1903[11]

Meaning is causal. Nobody cares about you in Bangladesh, because you have no impact there.[12] When the sales pitch transports you to the Andromeda Galaxy and tries to convince you that your earthly life is meaningless, it's because you have no effect on the eldritch abominations living there.

What you need is *power*. You can't rely on the clan unless you are are a powerful member. You can't rely on it absolutely unless you have absolute power.

Some, hungry for meaning, say they want to "make a dent in the universe." What's up with that lust for cosmic vandalism? You need unlimited power to compel the entire universe. Some nihilist manifestos make it explicit: even that would be inadequate. Nothing short of personal Godhood could make your life meaningful. You need transcendent meaning, standing outside the universe altogether.

But the puny Biblical God could create only one, finite universe. Lame. Our universe is a tiny atom in the infinite sea of universes created by some Indian gods. Would having the power to create and destroy countless universes on a whim, for a joke, or in hope of impressing some goddess enough to get her pants off be enough power to count as meaningful? You can always take this nonsense a step further. What's the threshold for significance?

Meaning is a tool. Do you throw your potato masher away because you can't also mash galaxies with it?

There are already eight billion humans. As far as approximately eight billion of them are concerned, your life is insignificant. Galaxies' opinions are irrelevant: either you are significant on the basis of your limited, local causal effects, or not at all. If you want to make a rational case for "not at all," you'll have to leave "cosmic meaninglessness" out. Unimpressed space monsters don't add anything extra to the eight billion humans who don't know you and don't care.

Seek social significance in society

… not in the Andromeda Galaxy.

Feeling lonely and worthless is a common cause of nihilism. When stabilizing it seems attractive, exaggerating that feeling into *cosmic* loneliness and worthlessness, by ruminating on the vast cold dark emptiness of intergalactic space, can be effective.

When you're fed up with nihilism, and become willing to work your way out of it, reluctantly reentering society may have to be part of the package. Finding an adequately significant social role is surprisingly satisfying, daunting as that task may seem at first.

You become significant by doing significant things, with other people. They don't need to be *cosmically* significant. It's actually OK to be less famous than Jesus and less impressive than God. You can start small.

It helps if you aren't hostile, depressed, or superciliously intellectualoid. It helps if you are interesting. You become interesting by becoming interested in the world, and then doing stuff. The upcoming chapter on the complete stance explains how.

Astrology is rational

Not just rational: it was critical for the survival and evolutionary success of humans for hundreds of thousands of years.

Many plant and animal species have evolved a reproductive strategy called "predator satiation." All the members of the species reproduce at the same time, producing so many offspring that predators cannot eat all of them. In plant species, all the fruits or seeds may come ripe within a couple days of each other, overwhelming the ability of animals to eat them all before some can find their way into the soil. Some animal species hatch or bear young all at the same time, for the same reason.

These species synchronize their reproduction to the annual solar cycle. Others migrate at specific times of year, either on account of annual weather patterns, or in pursuit of seasonal food sources.

In many regions, human hunter-gatherers migrated frequently too. They went to specific locations at specific times of year when they knew food would be abundant. In early autumn, they might go to the river where there's a salmon run for a particular week every year, with more fish than anyone could possibly eat. A week later, they'd walk several days to the trail the bison take on their annual migration. They'd take a few calves from the vast herd, and spend the next week butchering and drying the meat to make jerky. Then they'd migrate to the bramble hill where blackberries were coming ripe. They'd have to keep an eye out for bears, but when the blackberries were gone the fattened-up bears would head to the same cave every year to hibernate. A brave hunting party might spear one in its sleep, and then the rendered bear fat, plus jerky and dried berries, would make the pemmican the clan needed to survive the snowy months.

It was essential to know when to migrate, within an error margin of only a few days. Nothing observable during daytime can tell you that. Fortunately, close observation of which stars appear on the horizon at sunrise and sunset provides an accurate calendar. Different constellations appear and disappear in the night sky according to the season.

Animals also behave differently according to the phase of the moon. Depending on how bright it is at night, predator and prey species—including humans, in both roles—are more or less vulnerable or active, according to which has better night vision. Some species time their reproduction according to the lunar cycle for this reason too. Nearly all cultures have believed that this is true of humans: surely it cannot be a coincidence that the human menstrual cycle has the same period?[13]

We live in an engineered world of manufactured objects that have objective properties. Our ancestors did not. Everything in their environment was irregular, nebulous—with the exception of a clear sky. The pattern of celestial motions recurred with absolute regularity, year after year, decade after decade, grandparents to grandchildren, the same since the Dream Time, eternally. That was the *only objective truth* available for nearly all human existence. Astrology—observing the effects of the night sky on the terrestrial world—was the most powerful, reliable, and rational method of prediction known for a million years. It's probably in our genes[14]—and that is another part of what goes into "cosmic meaningfulness" today.

By the time of Yahweh, urban empires had kept written records for a thousand years and commanded order over regions a thousand miles across. That confirmed the universality and objectivity of astrology: the heavenly cycles are not a matter of opinion; they are invariant across vast expanses of time and space.

Probably this is where eternalism began. In the face of pervasive, chaotic discord, plague, famine, and war: "Why can't our lives be predictable like the stars?" That made the heavenly bodies essential to the *kosmos*, the ordering of the world.

There was a niggling mystery: all the stars are fixed, except five, which the Greeks called *planetoi*, "wanderers." Their motions seem mostly regular, but then sometimes they stop and go backwards for no apparent reason. Perhaps that could explain the remaining apparent randomness of terrestrial life?

Babylonian astro-geeks cracked the code. By mathematical analysis of centuries of precise observational data, they derived methods able to predict exactly when and how the five planets would misbehave, triggering epidemics, crop failures, and invasions. This was not only the source of the Biblical cosmos, but the model for all subsequent science.

Rationality destroyed the cosmos

You know the next part of this story. In Yahweh's cosmos, the sun and stars went around the earth, by His command. Then: Copernicus. Galileo, *eppur si muove*. Darwin, Einstein, yadda yadda, all that stuff.

Science drained all the magic from the world. God got restricted to Sunday mornings, then died of neglect. His cosmos passed with Him. All that was left was the universe: mere atoms and the void. We were turned out of the Garden of Eden again: the fruit of the tree of knowledge alienated us from our natural abode. We were no longer at home in the world—because there no longer *was* any "world," only a bleak, uncaring scattering of meaningless dead matter.

The death of the cosmos prompted the wrong idea that if there is not total pattern there must be total chaos. If the universe is uncreated, then it is random, meaningless, incomprehensible, and so must its parts be. This is where nihilism begins, in the failure of eternalism, at the end of world. And so then also existentialism: since the universe is meaningless and entirely random, any seeming meaning must be an arbitrary human imposition ("but maybe that's sort of OK-ish, somehow").

Influential political philosophers concluded that, with no cosmos to boss us around, social roles were indeed arbitrary impositions. Rationally, you must pursue your personal vision of meaning, unencumbered by archaic religious superstitions and oppressive hierarchies. You are a free individual, and can pursue your own chosen morality, with no particular responsibility to anyone. Clans were abolished by enlightened decree. Except in a few cases explicitly specified by rationally-conceived laws, no adult has any reason to support any other.

There's much to like in our world of atomized individuals, but much of value that was intrinsic to our evolutionary heritage was rejected and forgotten. Our vague feeling that *something important is missing*, which we may sometimes articulate as "cosmic meaning," refers in part to that.

The universe is too big

People have been complaining about this since Galileo blew the cosmos to bits in the early 1600s.

> When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in an eternity before and after, the little space I fill engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.
> —Blaise Pascal, writing around then[15]

They're still going on about it:

> We are ephemeral beings on a tiny planet in one of hundreds of billions of galaxies in the universe (or perhaps the multiverse)—a cosmos that is coldly indifferent to the insignificant specks that we are. It is indifferent to our fortunes and misfortunes, to injustice, to our hopes, fears, values, and concerns.
> —David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*, 2017

But why is the size of the universe a problem? We've already had one explanation: it provokes the evolved agoraphobia of early humans lost on an open plain, separated from the clan, and therefore vulnerable to cold, starvation, and predators.

"Too big" usually gets followed immediately by "knows nothing of me" or "is coldly indifferent." This is the complaint that, unlike the cosmos, the universe cannot stand in place of the clan to provide social support and social significance. The stars of the cosmos were close enough to take a friendly interest in human affairs; the stars of the universe are not.

Distant galaxies are meaningless. So what? Specks of dust are meaningless, too. Is that a problem? No, so what makes galaxies different? Often, big things are more meaningful than little ones. If you take down a wooly mammoth, it will feed the clan for a month and everyone can stop worrying about hunger; but there's not a lot of meat on a shrew. If the biggest things in the universe are meaningless, maybe that suggests everything smaller is too.

On the other hand, distant things are generally less meaningful than near ones. As you zoom out, more and more come into view, and you cannot care about them all. You have some maximum capacity for perceiving significance, and when you divide that by eight billion people, you get pretty nearly zero. Even more so if you divide by hundreds of billions of galaxies, each containing hundreds of billions of stars. On average, everything in the universe must be utterly insignificant, and what makes you so special?

This is silly, although philosophers have wasted careers arguing about it. Meaning is not evenly distributed through space.

Maybe the main upset is that the universe is too big to be a cosmos. Essentially all of it is meaningless, which makes it implausible that Yahweh created it as a home for human beings. And then, since His whole job was to run the cosmos, it becomes implausible that He even exists, or anyway that He's going to grant us any significant meaning. If there's no life elsewhere, it would have been extremely inefficient for Yahweh to have created so much universe for no reason, and

He doesn't seem that dumb. Alternatively, if we have to share His love with trillions of tentacle aliens in the Andromeda galaxy, He's probably too busy to care much about us anymore.

A broader perspective

View over Berkeley, California
Panorama of the Bay Area from the Berkeley Hills, (CC) Joe Parks

Caught up in the intricate concerns of your everyday life, you may not stop often enough to consider broader questions of meaning. If you step back from your immediate projects and problems, you may find an outside perspective a valuable way to shake yourself out of egocentric materialism. This view lets you see that some of your concerns may be less important than they seemed from up close. Also, it reveals that some life choices, which made sense at the time, were somewhat arbitrary in retrospect. It could be good to reconsider them.

Zoom out from your self a notch. At times your friends and family may seem not to care, but that is only because they are distracted with the web of meanings in *their* lives. As you see your own myopic self-concern more clearly from a step back, you realize that theirs is the same. You develop compassion for them, and for yourself, and can relax enough to give both space, and to act from empathic care more often.

If you find yourself socially isolated, you still nevertheless interact with other people occasionally. You have choices: even your tone of voice when checking out at the supermarket can make the world slightly better or worse. Sometimes something you say casually can make a disproportionate difference in someone else's life. We all have meanings for others that we can never know.

Zoom out again. Let's say you live in Berkeley, California. Hike up to Wildcat Peak, just outside town. You get a glorious perspective on all the neighborhoods and major roads and the university and the harbor. You've seen them all close up, but now you realize you hadn't understood how they all fit together in the big picture. You can see south to Oakland, with the cranes in its port that inspired the giant war robot walkers in *Star Wars*,[16] and the Bay Bridge, and San Francisco across the Bay, and the Golden Gate connecting to Marin and Mount Tamalpais.

Looking out from Wildcat Peak, you feel a million people living their lives, even if you cannot see them individually. Those lives include enjoyable and useful and meaningful activities—along with much suffering and pointless tedium. This distant overview of their lives can give you greater objectivity on your own, by analogy. That allows a judgement more like that of a neutral tribunal. It can increase the scope of your motivations. You may decide to become part of a purposeful group project that is more significant than your personal concerns.

The view from afar is not inherently more accurate. It is less so, in fact, because it loses detail, which you can fill in only with imagination. From Wildcat Peak, you can see all the way to the South Bay, but it's too far to see clearly; just a lumpy gray blur. The value of perspective is that it is a different and complementary view on your life, not that it is a better one. It's not useful to take *only* this view.

Zoom out. If you are reading this, you probably live in a country that, despite infuriating exceptions and appalling mistakes, provides far greater security and support to most people than your Paleolithic clan, or an Iron Age empire in the era of Yahweh, ever could. Life has gotten spectacularly better on average, socially and culturally as well as materially. On the whole, on average, we have good intentions, and can reasonably expect to create a better future together. Each of us, including you, can contribute to that in some small way.

Zoom out. Astronauts who have seen the whole earth from space describe it as astonishingly beautiful, far more so than they had expected. Many find this perspective a profoundly meaningful experience, of connection and grace.

❚

Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell said:

> You develop an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world, and a compulsion to do something about it. From out there on the moon, international politics looks so petty. You want to grab a politician by the scruff of the neck and drag him a quarter of a million miles out and say, "Look at that, you son of a bitch."

> There was a startling recognition that the nature of the universe was not as I had been taught… I not only saw the connectedness, I felt it.… I was overwhelmed with the sensation of physically and mentally extending out into the cosmos. I realized that this was a biological response of my brain attempting to reorganize and give meaning to information about the wonderful and awesome processes that I was privileged to view.

One with the cosmos

Centuries after Galileo killed it, the scientist Alexander von Humboldt resurrected the cosmos in the mid-1800s. He revived both the word "cosmos," barely used in the interim, and the concept.

Humboldt promoted Romanticism, the mainstream intellectual movement of his era. Romanticism rejected objectivity in favor of the subjectivity of strong emotions and aesthetic appreciation, especially of nature. It repudiated the Enlightenment's reductive, mechanistic rationalism. It championed instead a holistic understanding of the cosmos as a single, intricately interconnected, organic and spiritual entity, pervaded with a subtle life force. For Humboldt and Romanticism, the scientist does not stand apart from and above the material world, regarding it with detached contempt; but is an integral part of Nature, not separate from it, and should regard it with love, worship, and awe.

Humboldt's book *Kosmos* influenced generations of thinkers. Richard Maurice Bucke popularized the term "cosmic consciousness" after a mystical experience in 1872:

> All at once, without warning of any kind, I found myself wrapped around as it were by a flame-coloured cloud. For an instant I thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next, I knew that the light was within me.

> Directly afterward came upon me a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into my brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Divine Splendor which has ever since lightened my life; upon my heart fell one drop of Divine Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven.

> I saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love, and that the happiness of everyone in the long run is absolutely certain.[17]

If this sounds more like 1972 than 1872, that is no coincidence. The anti-rational New Age counterculture wasn't new at all. Nearly all its ideas were lifted directly from the Romantic era. The oftimes mindless hippie exclamation "wow, *cosmic*, man!" is straight out of Humboldt.

This monist-eternalist vision is mainly factually mistaken and spiritually harmful. However, even now it may be a useful corrective to nihilist-dualist, reductive rationalist misunderstandings.

If you scorn "cosmic meaningfulness" but secretly feel some wistful regret that it does not exist —I will suggest that you may be able to find it after all.

Yoshimi Battles The Pink Robots

> "Whenever I analyze the scientific realities of what it means to be living here on Earth – in this galaxy – spinning around the sun – flying through space – a terror shock seizes me!!! I'm reminded once again of how precarious our whole existence is…"
> —Wayne Coyne, the songwriter and singer of this album, explaining it

I was driving due south late at night on SR1, the main New Zealand highway, with the Flaming Lips' *Yoshimi Battles The Pink Robots* on the CD. It was 2002, long sections of SR1 across empty parts of the country were still unpaved, CDs were still a thing, and the album had just come out. I'd bought it in Auckland for the drive, on the recommendation of a review that said it sounded like no previous music, and featured Wayne Coyne "wittering on about the meaning of life."

It was a moonless night and I couldn't drive fast on the gravel road and I couldn't see anything much so I was looking mostly at the starry sky. The Milky Way was dead ahead, and exceptionally bright. I was in the middle of nowhere, so there were no city lights and the sky was clear. Clear except two small clouds, far off, many miles away to the south, off a bit to the side of the Milky Way.

Half an hour later I noticed they were still far off, many miles away to the south. They were glowing, as clouds sometimes do when they reflect moonlight. But there was no moonlight. I watched as miles of empty darkness rolled by and they got no bigger.

Yoshimi Battles The Pink Robots is a sad, spooky science fiction album about the end of the world, and it was late at night, and I was starting to get spooked.

The only theory I could come up was that the clouds were glowing remnants of nuclear explosions, much further in the distance than I had supposed.

Had I missed the beginning of Armageddon? Would anyone even bother to nuke Wellington, my destination, the capital of New Zealand? It seemed extremely unlikely, but I pulled over and got out of the car, wondering tensely whether it was sensible to take the risk of continuing to drive toward what even *might possibly* be a radioactive conflagration in the city.

Slowly, as I shivered and peered south, a better explanation assembled itself.

Antonio Pigafetta was the proto-scientist on Magellan's disastrous 1519–1522 expedition, the first circumnavigation of the planet. In his account of the voyage, Pigafetta reported that near the Antarctic pole of the sky "there are many small stars congregated together, which are like to two clouds a little separated from one another, and a little dimmed." Later they were named the Magellanic Clouds.

Could it be? I had read about the Clouds as a teenager, but had not seen a picture, and it never occurred to me that I might also someday see them. They are the two galaxies closest to the Milky Way, although further than the tens of miles down the road I had imagined. Just about one quadrillion miles further. They are the largest, most distant things you are likely ever to see without a telescope.[18]

My fear turned to wonder, and awe, and elation in the face of *vastness*. Miraculously, individual photons had spent hundreds of thousands of years traveling across nothingness just to fall into my eyes, thousands every second, so I could see that the Clouds were part of my world, and I was part of their world, and we were both held by the universe.

Turns out… galaxies can be meaningful after all.

> Magellanic Clouds
> The Magellanic Clouds (top center) over the Atacama desert radio telescope array.
> The Milky Way to the left.
> Image (CC) ESO/C. Malin

Vastness

Whether contemptuous or wistful, the claim that nothing is cosmically meaningful expresses a feeling of loss at being cut off from vastness.

The emotional root of nihilism is the sense, usually accurate, that some important aspect of meaning is missing from your life. Sometimes that's a normal, explainable, ordinary sort of meaning: nothing seems to have any purpose, for example. Sometimes the lack is obscure, or even unnameable. Vastness is one form of such non-ordinary meaning.

We have three emotional responses to vastness. It can provoke terror, as it did in the great philosopher Blaise Pascal four hundred years ago. It can engender curiosity, wonder, and awe at its beauty, as many astronauts report. We may not get a choice between these two, because the experience can be overwhelmingly intense. When that is too emotionally difficult, we may nihilize it, more or less successfully. That is, we may try to un-see vastness, or to deny its meaningfulness.

Alternatively, if it seems worth the risk, you can deliberately pursue vastness, for the perspective it gives on meaning, and for the possibility of personal transformation. (There's more about this in the complete stance chapter, starting in the page on wonder.)

There are several routes to vastness. One of the most reliable is to seek it alone in nature. It may be found in the sky, night or day; in the ocean; or in mountains. Although I'm a bit of an astro-geek, I find the last of those most effective myself. I wrote about this in "At the Mountains of Meaningness."

But you might locate vastness anywhere on a clear night far from civilization.

> I found myself in a tiny one-man tent, sheltering from a violent thunderstorm in the remote mountains of Mexico. When the rain finally stopped, I squeezed out into the night. I felt anxious and alone until I looked up, and was hit by a rush of adrenaline. Above me was a radiant, shimmering sea; an ocean of light that stretched not just from horizon to horizon but deep into forever. For a brief moment, I was lifted up, connected, home.

Thinking back, it isn't the individual constellations I remember, or the planets, or even the glittering ribbon of the Milky Way. It is simply the sheer awesome power of the sky. In London, where I live, the night sky is dull and dark with a neon orange glow, its emptiness broken by only a few struggling pinpricks of light. But here the veil was lifted, as if returning to me something that I hadn't even known was lost. On this moonless night, it seemed there was no blackness at all. There was only silver. Only stars.

—Jo Marchant[19]

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1. 1.I read several dozen academic papers on cosmic meaninglessness. I found them generally tedious and silly. I have two reluctant recommendations if you want to read some anyway. First, Iddo Landau's "The Meaning of Life *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89:4, (2011). His treatment is generally sensible and concludes that life is not meaningless even when viewed in an intergalactic context. Second, Guy Kahane's "Our Cosmic Insignificance," *Noûs*, 48:4 (2014) pp. 745–772. If you accept the mistaken premises that "cosmic" means "in terms of the physical universe" and that significance is sufficiently quantitative to enable arithmetical division, his paper is well thought through—whereas most others contain glaring logical errors as well. Both papers are fairly recent and summarize the prior literature, which you can definitely skip.

2. 2.This is discussed in the standard work on the gradual development of Israeli religion from Canaanite polytheism, Mark S. Smith's *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. Naturally, this analysis is not accepted by all people of the Book.

3. 3.*Judges* 4–5.

4. 4.Historians date *Judges* 4–5 to the twelfth century B.C.; monotheism and *Genesis* to the sixth.

5. 5.The Genesis creation myths are revised versions of earlier Mesopotamian ones. In those, the material world already existed before the gods commanded it into order as a cosmos. *Genesis 1* can be read that way also. The verb typically translated there as "created" also means "commanded its functional role," and the Genesis scholar John H. Walton suggests that that this is the correct reading in context. See his *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary*, or a summary at "Material or Function in Genesis 1? John Walton Responds," *BioLogos*, April 3, 2015.

6. 6."Anaxagoras, born about 500 BC, is the first person who is definitely known to have explained the concept of a *nous* (mind), which arranged all other things in the cosmos in their proper order, started them in a rotating motion, and continuing to control them to some extent, having an especially strong connection with living things."—*Wikipedia*, s.v. *Nous*.

7. 7.Or not meaningful enough to count, in the case of lite nihilism.

8. 8.Donald Crosby's *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, p. 128, has a nice analysis of this false, forced binary choice. "Everything in the universe must focus mainly on us and the problems and prospects of our personal existence, or else the universe is meaningless and our lives are drained of purpose…. When we find that there is much about the experienced world which does not fit neatly within any particular human scheme of interpretation, or that the world is perhaps not as wholly subordinated to our purposes and needs as we had formerly thought, then we despair."

9. 9.Guy Kahane makes the same suggestion in passing: "It would be amusing if the desire for grand cosmic significance is ultimately just the projection of the evolved concern with status that we share with other primates." See also Robin Hanson's blog post "Meaning of Meaning of Life," *Overcoming Bias*, September 7, 2010.

10. 10.Social media provide a simulacrum. If you had a million followers on Instagram, that would make your life meaningful, right? You'd really *be* someone then.
11. 11.Bertrand Russell, "The Free Man's Worship," *The Independent Review* 1 (Dec 1903), 415-24
12. 12.If you *are* famous in Bangladesh, substitute Belgium or Botswana or Betelgeuse.
13. 13.Although nearly all cultures consider it highly significant that the menstrual cycle accords with the lunar one, it appears that they are mistaken; current science finds no synchronization with the moon, nor even between women.
14. 14.I have no specific evidence for this hypothesis. Attributing great meaningfulness to the stars is a cultural universal, but maybe that's just because our ancestors spent hours looking at the sky every night. Before there were roofs and candles, there wasn't much else to do.
15. 15.From Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, a collection of notes published posthumously, so it's not known exactly when he wrote this. Many other people were rendered similarly upset by the early-1600s astronomical discoveries that demolished the Medieval cosmology.
16. 16.George Lucas denies that he based the AT-AT walkers in *The Empire Strikes Back* on the Oakland cranes, but if you see them it's obviously true, as everyone who lives around there knows; so who cares what *he* thinks.
17. 17.Paraphrased from Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*.
18. 18.The Andromeda Galaxy is bigger and further; under ideal conditions, it is barely visible to the naked eye as a vague faint smear. The Milky Way is bigger than the Clouds, but it's closer, and you can't see it as a single thing. We're inside it, so it appears as a broad nebulous band of random weird stuff that always continues below the horizons.
19. 19.Jo Marchant, *The Human Cosmos: Civilization and the Stars*, 2020. I came across this book half way through writing "No cosmic meaning," and found it fascinating and inspiring. I've taken some details of my discussion from it. I can't recommend it completely unreservedly, because it gets cozier with monist pseudoscience than I'm comfortable with. If you discount those bits, it's wonderful.

12 Comments

Two almond biscotti
Biscotti (CC) Joey Doll

"Rumcake and Rainbows" suggested that meaning is neither objective nor subjective, but interactive. So, we could dismiss nihilist complaints that nothing has any *objective* meaning, simply by saying "yes, and that isn't a problem, because it doesn't imply anything is meaningless."

But "Rumcake" swept several significant issues under the rug, to simplify the explanation near the beginning of the book.

- A degree of objectivity is possible and important in judging some claims about meanings. Some claims are quite solid, and others are nonsensical. We evaluate them using reasoning and evidence in ways similar to evaluating claims of fact.

- "Objectivity" is not a single, clear concept. It's a collection of diverse, nebulous intuitions, based in metaphors of experienced activity. Something may be objective under one definition but not under another.

- "Subjective" and "interactive" are not clearly-defined, absolute categories either. All three shade into each other.

It is often better to think about objectivity as a matter of degree. Some meanings are more
• objective than others. Figuring out what things mean in a more objective way is often
possible and worthwhile. In many cases, that can increase confidence, understanding, and
influence.

• Whether something counts as "objective," and how objective it is, can depend on what you
are trying to do and why. Often it means "more objective for our current purposes than the
available alternatives here."

We'll have three goals for investigating objectivity of meaning, here and in more detailed
discussions later:

• To free ourselves from the misunderstanding that meaning is not objective and therefore
doesn't exist, or that it is so defective that it might as well not.

• To help understand the appeal of mistaken, subjective theories of meaning, such as
existentialism.

• To enable a more accurate and effective relationship with meaningness through developing
a more sophisticated understanding of what it means for something to be objective,
subjective, or interactive.

Objectivity does not grant certainty

"Objective meaning" is often understood as as special type of meaning that should deliver on
eternalism's promises: perfect certainty, understanding, and control. It is the special sort
postulated by rationalist eternalism, whereas "eternal meaning" is beloved of dualist religious
eternalism, and "cosmic meaning is found mainly in monist eternalism.

There is no sort of meaning about which we can be completely certain, so in this sense it is true
that there is no objective meaning.

This proves too much, though. "Perfect objectivity" is unattainable for pretty much everything,
even in the hard sciences.[1] So it can't be right that anything about which we can't be perfectly
objective should be rejected. There are no facts about which we can be perfectly certain, and
there is no perfectly objective method that could produce such certainty. Demanding those for
meaning, but not for other sorts of knowledge, is unreasonable.[2]

In chemistry, exercising objectivity can produce confident knowledge, short of absolute certainty.
This is also true for meaning, although meanings are more nebulous than molecules, and we have
to accept lesser degrees of confidence.

Objectivity is a virtue

Objectivity is a vague concept. It's surprisingly hard to pin down when you think about it.[3]

Often objectivity is defined mainly by contrast with subjectivity: how things appear from your
personal viewpoint. Unfortunately, you are unreliable. What seems true to you may not be, due to
your perceptual limitations and distortions, the influence of your idiosyncratic and unstable
emotional responses, your fantasies, preconceptions, opinions, ignorance, irrationality and faulty
reasoning, self-interest, social group bias, ideology, *et cetera ad nauseam*. So objectivity can be
understood just as any attempt to do better than that.

Even though we can't quite say what it is, we rightly ascribe virtues to objectivity, opposites to the vices of subjectivity: trustworthy, far-seeing, transparent, impersonal, stable, level-headed, realistic, dispassionate, fact-respecting, rational, unselfish, even-handed, open-minded, and so on. Like other virtues, none of these can be absolute, and there is no general method to guarantee any of them. There are often ways to exercise these virtues in specific situations, however.

Degrees of objectivity

A meaning is objective to the extent that it's independent of observer, broadly recognized, and publicly verifiable. A meaning is subjective to the extent that it depends on the peculiarities of a particular observer in a particular situation.

It may be helpful to think of all observers organized in concentric circles around yourself, at distances representing their dissimilarity to you. The further out a meaning extends, the less subjective it is. It is unclear whether there are any perfectly subjective, or perfectly objective, meanings.

A perfectly subjective meaning would be one that was entirely arbitrary, and couldn't be communicated at all, let alone shared. An example might be my taking a particular tree as sacred, in "At the Mountains of Meaningness." I'm not sure I could have said anything, on that occasion, to explain why or what that meant. On the other hand, many cultures take some trees as sacred, and there are particular objective properties—such as being unusually large, ancient, solitary, and oddly shaped—that correlate with sacredness. It may be that if I took you to that tree, you might get a sense of what I was trying to communicate, even if you didn't share the perception.

A perfectly objective meaning would compel all possible observers to agree. At minimum, you'd have to get buy-in from the eldrich abominations in the Andromeda Galaxy. But hey, they're not so different, basically people like us, probably pretty reasonable once you get to know them. It's *imaginable* that much more radically different entities are possible, and even if they don't actually exist anywhere, to be properly objective you'd need to get them on board too. Elementary mathematical truths are candidates for perfect objectivity; not much else. (And can you be *sure* the eldritch abominations don't have different and better ideas about mathematics than we do?)

Most meanings occupy different points in the middle ground. The circle of your benevolent political ideology is further out (more objective) than the circle of your egocentric concerns, but nearer in (more subjective) than the circle of cross-cultural moral universals.

"Interactivity" spans this entire space, except for the endpoints. Apart from perfectly objective and perfectly subjective meanings (if those exist), every meaning involves an observer and the phenomena observed, and its details depend to some degree on the peculiarities of both.

How objective is enough?

"No objective meaning" comes in 190-proof and lite versions. 190-proof versions insist that anything that isn't objective doesn't exist. Typically, they also assume things are objective or not, usually without clarity about which or why. This could be rash. If eldritch abominations don't agree with you about how gravity works, does that make gravity non-existent? How about potato mashers, which they refuse to accept as an objective category, due to living in a galaxy sadly devoid of potatoes? If you grant that meaning is not *always entirely* subjective, you can't use "not objective" to claim it doesn't exist. That is the common nihilistic error of equating nebulosity with non-existence.

Lite versions concede that some non-objective meanings exist in some weak sense, but treat them as defective. They might say that claims about ethics, purpose, and value may have some sort of necessary social function, but are inherently arbitrary, unreliable, biased, evanescent, and based in emotion rather than evidence. Therefore meaning is not real. It is utterly inadequate, and you should be depressed about it.

It's true that some meanings *are* defective and inadequate. This is sufficient reason to find or create better ones. That often requires taking a broader view of some dimension of meaning, thereby treating it more objectively.

There's no all-purpose threshold for "objective enough." Meanings have functions (or we wouldn't bother with them). By way of analogy, it may always be possible to make a better potato masher, but if the one you've got is doing the job, it's good enough. If you learned about a much better type, you might decide yours wasn't good enough after all, and you'd replace it. Likewise, more-objective meanings are often better, but if one isn't available for whatever you are doing at the moment, or switching seems like too much trouble, you'll probably do OK with the one you've got.

You could still complain that, overall, meaningness is more subjective, or more nebulous, or less certain than you'd *like*. But there doesn't seem to be any rational basis for claiming no meaning is ever "objective enough" to count as existent, or to be willing to engage with it. So this lite nihilism is untenable other than as griping, in the same way you might gripe about the imperfection of your potato masher.

Is more objectivity always better?

It is possible to be outright mistaken about meanings, which is bad. And, unresolved disagreements about meanings can lead to harmful conflicts when they have practical implications for group interests.

But individual and group differences in perception and understanding of meaning are often good. The difference between your view that making perfect biscotti is a major purpose in life (I don't agree) and mine that writing about meaningness is a major purpose (eccentric, at best) could benefit both of us, if I enjoy eating your biscotti and you enjoy reading *Meaningness*.

I probably think your religion is wacky, and you almost certainly would think mine is. In a country that guarantees freedom of religion, this doesn't need to be a problem for either of us. Plus, if I find your temple rather off-putting and you find it deeply moving, our interactions there may expand my range of appreciation and perception of sacredness.

Objectivity can be a vice if taken too far. The sales pitch in "No cosmic meaning" tried to get you to consider your life from point of view of a distant galaxy, from which it would appear meaningless. That is taking objectivity too far by several quadrillion miles. Objectivity becomes dysfunctional when it results in refusing to admit the existence of useful meanings that aren't universal. That is nihilism.

Skilled use of objectivity

Some meanings may be built into human brains. However, as small children we begin to learn meanings that go beyond the innate, both through direct experience and by observing family interactions. This process continues, with increasing sophistication, throughout life.

Most meanings are publicly observable, to varying extents, and are communicable to varying extents through language, art, physical demonstrations, and other means. You may be told, as a

child, that lying is wrong. You may observe harms that come from lies, and the ways people react when they are revealed. You may gain insight into the ethics of lying from fictional narratives.

Learning new meanings in these ways increases your objectivity, developing skill with a wider range of meanings. That rescues you from a narrow egocentricity, and later the parochial concerns of your community. You can imaginatively stand outside your own viewpoint, and then outside that of your group. Remember the "zoom outs" of the "Broader perspective" section of "No cosmic meaning"? Taking successively wider views reduces how important differences seem, while increasing your accuracy of perception of their details. Realistic humility grows; conceit diminishes. You come to relate accurately and effectively to a broader variety of situations that are meaningful in more different ways.

Further development usually requires more deliberate, explicit, and reflective effort. You become curious about the nature of meaningness itself, and what it means to understand it.[4] You come to appreciate the specific virtues of objectivity enumerated above. The "view from nowhere" is impossible, but attempting to approximate it can be valuable for some purposes in some contexts.

Considering meaningness objectively is not so different from considering the material world objectively. There is no overall method that guarantees objectivity, but many specific tactics are useful in some situations. The main thing is the attitude of wanting to understand what's actually going on, and what works or doesn't. That makes you reluctant to accept claims without justification, or to invent meanings as self-indulgent fantasies. You strive to explore and acknowledge your personal, group, and ideological biases, and to compensate for them or set them aside. You try to gather and take account of relevant details, to think clearly, to avoid getting unduly swayed by your feelings, and to maintain an open mind when considering alternatives.

Looking at things from multiple *conceptual* viewpoints is entirely possible even when looking at them from multiple literal ones isn't. Recall the discussions of unpicking systems and of metasystematicity in "Vaster than ideology." Greater objectivity comes with recognizing what system or systems of interpretation you use, how they function, and what they do well and badly. Where do they agree/disagree? Why? Are syntheses possible? Are they desirable? Is it useful to regard particular meanings from one standpoint, and others from another? Are there meanings that are best viewed from several at once?[5]

Skilled use of subjectivity

Your personal understanding of meaningness is unique and valuable. You cannot eliminate it or fully avoid it, nor is there any good reason to.

Realizing this, you can regard your distinctive, eccentric takes on meanings with affectionate amusement. They are limited, peculiar, vaguely absurd when viewed from a distance; but (if you have done the work of objectivity) mostly not wrong, and they are your own.

Subjectivity enables you to discover or create personal meanings; ones which you, at least, enjoy. Skillfully expressed, others may come to enjoy them as well. This is the function of art (in the broadest sense). Others, if open-minded, may also find them inspiring or practically useful.

If I had to opine about "the purpose of life"—a dubious proposition!—it is this.

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1. 1.See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article "Scientific objectivity" for an overview of why strong versions of objectivity are impossible. In realistic practice, all scientific experiments involve some human judgement and interpretation. There are also

theoretical reasons to think this is unavoidable. We'll return to this point later in *Meaningness*; see also my book *In the Cells of the Eggplant*.

2. 2.Some nihilists do convince themselves that all knowledge, even of what color socks they are wearing, is impossible. This "epistemic nihilism" is silly as a philosophical theory. However, a common route for rationalists into nihilism is realizing that there is no universally reliable method for reasoning from evidence (so no knowledge can be certain), and misunderstanding this as knowledge being impossible or mostly unavailable. This can be a horrible loss-of-faith experience.

3. 3.The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article "Scientific objectivity is a good starting point for understanding the diversity and nebulosity of the meanings of "objective." Two classic works are Thomas Nagel's *The View From Nowhere* (about objectivity of meaning) and Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's *Objectivity* (about objectivity in science). The next *Meaningness* page discusses "Some other varieties of objectivity."

4. 4.This curiosity should motivate practical inquiry, not detached theorizing. Nihilism often tries to avoid difficult details by escaping into abstractions. It is dangerously easy to get lost in space by philosophizing without frequent reference to specifics of obviously visible everyday concerns.

5. 5.I've discussed these questions in many other places, from different angles. See for instance the discussion of the fluid mode in "Developing ethical, social, and cognitive competence," and of political ideology in "Understanding," in "Tribal, systematic, and fluid political understanding," and in "Completing the countercultures."

Comment on this page

"No objective meaning" claimed that objectivity is nebulous, undefinable, and a matter of degree. This may have seemed surprising or implausible.

Scientists and philosophers confronted this problem during the twentieth century. They were unable to find any workable definition for "objectivity." More important, by the middle of the century, they were forced to conclude that there is no *method* for objectivity. It's a vague quality, an aspiration, a virtue. You know it when you see it, but you can't nail it down.

I find the history of this discovery—drawn-out, unexpected, and unwelcome as it was—fascinating. It's not the sort of thing that belongs in *Meaningness*, which is not about philosophy, history, or science, though.

Nevertheless, this page discusses briefly several conceptions of objectivity that might cause both eternalists and nihilists to think meanings are non-existent or worthless unless they are objective:

  • Objectivity meaning the non-involvement of minds
  • Objectivity meaning inherent in objects
  • Objectivity meaning a universal law
  • Objectivity meaning demonstrable by science

You can skip this page if the previous one's claim seemed reasonable: that some objectivity in meaning is often possible, desirable, and nebulous. If you didn't, this page might change your mind, but it doesn't attempt a comprehensive philosophical argument. Either way, you might find the details theoretically interesting for their own sake.

Objectivity is not one thing

The plausibility of "no objective meaning" depends on sliding between different senses of "objective" without admitting it. It's true that there isn't any objective meaning if "objective" means "minds aren't involved in any way." It's false if "objective" means "agreed upon by a broad community who have considered the matter carefully, paid attention to evidence, and set aside personal and group bias as much as possible."

That "objectivity" is dangerously ambiguous is a mainstream view:

> So many debates in philosophy revolve around the issue of *objectivity* versus *subjectivity* that one may be forgiven for assuming that **someone somewhere understands this** distinction. There certainly exists a widespread intuitive imagery associated with the duality that is sufficiently vivid to motivate heartfelt philosophical commitments, but, once approached directly, the distinction nevertheless proves extremely difficult to nail down. It is likely that part of what is causing confusion is that there are **a number of non-equivalent ways of drawing the distinction**, some of which are better suited to certain subject areas than others. Expecting a monolithic theory that applies to all cases is probably an unreasonable aspiration.[1]

> If what is so great about science is its objectivity, then objectivity should be worth defending. The close examinations of scientific practice that philosophers of science have undertaken in the past fifty years have shown, however, that **several conceptions** of the ideal of objectivity are either **questionable or unattainable**. The prospects for a science providing a non-perspectival "view from nowhere" or for proceeding in a way uninformed by human goals and values are fairly slim, for example.[2]

No mindless meaning

A simple understanding is that objectivity is about the physical world, whereas subjectivity is merely mental. Objective truths are things that would remain true if all minds were removed from the universe. If meaning is a mental thing, it isn't objective and doesn't exist, or at least isn't any good.

This proves too much. Most nihilists would not want to deny the existence of *all* mental things, nor their value.[3] Memory, for example, is routinely studied scientifically, and shown objectively to exist (if you somehow doubted that). "Meaning is just a mental thing" might suggest it is fallible (like memory), but not that it's always worthless or arbitrary or delusional.

Anyway, since meaning is mainly interactive, not subjective, it's not solely mental (although minds are generally involved). It is often observable, and sometimes objectively so. More about that below, and later in the book.

No inherent meaning

> Cat food advertisement

On the theory that "objective" means "mindless," objective meanings would have to live in mindless objects (and mindless processes, events, and so on). Those would be "inherent" or

"intrinsic" meanings, probably installed as part of the Cosmic Plan. Such meanings were taken for granted by the Western mainstream until the scientific worldview discredited them.

It's common for nihilistic thinking to skip from "everything lacks inherent meaning" to "everything is inherently meaningless." That's a much stronger statement: that nothing could have any meaning whatsoever. It doesn't follow at all; it implicitly assumes that intrinsicness is the only way meaning could work—a common form of nihilistic logical error. In fact, many things do have meanings that aren't inherent.

Are there any meanings that *are* inherent? It's reasonable to say "no," because the pre-scientific view that objects are imbued with non-physical, meaningful essences is wrong. But it's a more subtle question than it seems.

What *is* an intrinsic property? Gravitational mass is perhaps the strongest candidate.[4] What is it? It is the propensity to exert an attractive force on other objects, in proportion their own mass, decreasing with the square of distance.[5] That force is an interaction, whose effects which can be observed and measured. But mass itself can't be! Mass is a purely theoretical, hypothetical abstraction, based on observing a mathematical pattern in the observed interactions.

It's a convenient simplification to posit mass as an intrinsic property, but only because gravity is indiscriminate. Any object is willing to interact with any other object. If some objects were finicky, and exerted a whimsically unpredictable attractive force mostly only on objects that belonged to the Emperor, were embalmed, or trembled as if they were mad, assigning a mass to them would not make sense. We might also be inclined to ascribe subjectivity to them.

To the extent an object interacts consistently, that interaction may be described as (relatively) objective, and due to some (relatively) intrinsic property of it. Take cat food. Some cats are finicky, but if they are hungry enough, almost any cat will eat almost any commercial cat food. It's pretty clear cats regard "edibility" as an intrinsic and meaningful property.

Cats are not altogether mistaken in this philosophical view, even if it is characteristically egocentric. Edibility is a moderately objective, moderately intrinsic, moderately meaningful property of cat food, because cat food interacts in an edible way with many (but not all) carbon-based life forms. Most humans would also eat cat food if hungry enough, but koalas would not.[6] Humans would find the discovery of a pallet of cartons of cans of cat food highly meaningful if we were starving after the robot apocalypse, but koalas would not.

> Hedgehog eating cat food
> "my hedgehog loves cat food" courtesy Alice Popkorn

This may have seemed like a whimsical and irrelevant philosophical entertainment. It is not.

Why is it temping to say "everything is *inherently* meaningless" when we're feeling nihilistic?

It is because, at those times, we lack confidence in our ability to enter into meaningful interactions. We don't feel up to doing our part—because nihilism makes that seem a gigantic and hopeless effort. We don't think the meanings we co-produce can be good enough. We want the Cosmic Plan to take full responsibility, and provide solid, definite, separate, permanent, inherently existing meanings for us. Then we are hurt and angry and frightened when it doesn't.

Completely inherent meaning would require no work on our part (which is what eternalism promises). Inherent meaning would be reassuring and dependably just *there*. However, meaning is always nebulous, fluctuating, uncertain—like a dance, not like a statue. That might seem unsatisfactory. However, it provides freedom and creativity and lightness and exploration, where

cosmically fixed meanings would be inescapable, boring, heavy, and restrictive. If the universe had inherent meaning we would all be living in a totalitarian prison.

No universal meaning

Cat looking dubiously at an apple
Image (CC) Lisa Zins

If eternal meanings are the same across all time, it's natural to wonder about meanings that are the same across all of space. That would be a natural interpretation of "universal meaning." This doesn't seem to be interesting, if we're considering space beyond the earth. Meaning is portable. If you take your cat and a pallet of cat food with you to the Andromeda Galaxy, cat food will have the same meaning there it does here. The vast ionized gas clouds there do not create a meaning-distortion field.

More significant is universality across observers, regardless of where they happen to be situated in space. Uniformity of meaning across all *possible* observers would be inherent meaning, but it is hard to know who is possible.

Our discussion so far has concerned the objectivity of objects; the rest of this page shifts to discussing the objectivity of subjects. Uniformity across all *actual* observers is strong evidence of "objectivity," and sometimes taken as a definition of it. Or, since some people are deluded or subject to perceptual errors: uniformity across all rational, competent observers.

Unfortunately, complete but mistaken agreement is possible, even for basic facts. Nearly everyone throughout human existence has agreed that the sun is much smaller than the earth,[7] and has been wrong. Consensus is evidence for truth, but no guarantee.

It's also not clear meanings *should* be the same for everyone. People are different, and individual differences contribute to meanings. "*The* meaning of life" is a common demand, and nihilists often deny there is one. But different people have differently shaped ears, which doesn't mean ears don't exist. Why would we want everyone to get the same meanings, or insist they don't exist if they aren't universally shared?

Underlying "no objective meaning" is anxiety about disagreements. Unfortunately, ideologically contested issues are the ones most likely to come to mind when "meaning" is brought up. That gives the impression that agreement is usually impossible without totalitarian coercion, and therefore meanings are arbitrary fantasies.

This is most obvious in the dimension of ethics. If one person says that homosexuality is an immoral and unnatural deviation and an abomination in the sight of the Lord, and another says it's morally neutral, widespread in nature, and deserving of special protections, and they get extremely upset with each other, then what?

It would be nice if there were some unquestionably correct—"objective"—way to settle ideological disputes without having to kill millions of the enemy. What we want are meanings that *compel* agreement, all by themselves. It's temping to try reading moral philosophy, which purports to address this problem. Unfortunately, that not only fails, but adds a hopeless mass of complex confusions.[8] It's common for rationalists to recognize this conceptual mess, and to conclude there is no way of achieving agreement, so morality is "subjective" and therefore entirely arbitrary. Then they might generalize the rejection to all meaning, falling into nihilism.

Focusing on ideological disagreements obscures the fact that most meanings are non-controversial, so we hardly notice them. Some are trivial and situation-specific. What was your

purpose in stopping by the corner store on the way home? To get cat food. Some meanings are major and universal across human cultures: it is wrong to injure members of your family.

Nihilists sometimes dismiss "meaning" as a delusory human invention, but the basic morality of cooperation, trust, loyalty, betrayal, and punishment evolved separately in many unrelated non-human social species. It probably results from a deep mathematical pattern that is independent of biological specifics.[9]

Sometimes nihilists say that space aliens would have incomprehensibly different ideas about meaning, or none at all, which proves that it's illusory. The sales pitch in "No cosmic meaning" claimed the civilizations of the eldritch abominations in the Andromeda galaxy would be "utterly alien and incomprehensible in terms of human values." I think that's probably not true, for evolutionary reasons.

In any case, do you really need tentacle monsters' consent before admitting meanings exist? Why would you outsource your opinions about ethics to eldritch abominations?

No scientific meaning

A bit later in the book, we'll take up the 190-proof argument that science proves everything is meaningless, and a series of claims that specific scientific theories show this. Here we'll consider the lite nihilist suggestion that science finds that nothing is *objectively* meaningful. (That would leave open the possibility that it is meaningful in some other way—probably "subjective" is assumed.)

A great value of science is that it can sometimes definitively end disagreements with an unambiguous experiment. Inability to do the same for ideological disagreements about religion, politics, and so forth is a major source of nihilistic disappointment with meaningness. It would save enormous trouble if a few objective measurements could conclusively resolve ethical questions about abortion, income redistribution, and cannabis use. It is frustrating that they can't. Social groups have different "subjective" opinions, and there seems to be no way of determining who is right. Recognizing this can lead to rejecting the whole dimension of ethics as meaningless, or "objectively meaningless," or at least "not objectively meaningful."

This both overestimates and underestimates the value of scientific objectivity. *Sometimes* science yields effective certainty: about the melting point of bismuth, for example. Often it doesn't. Many billions of dollars worth of research over many decades have failed to resolve disagreements among theories of quantum gravity, or about the nature and cause of Alzheimer's disease. On the other hand, ethical disputes often centrally involve uncertain matters of fact, which objective scientific methods may clarify. Many culture war participants consider relevant what brain functions fetuses exhibit at different gestational ages, how economic growth and income inequality affect each other, and the severity of harm done by different methods of cannabis ingestion. Although these particular issues remain in dispute, sometimes ethical disputes *are* settled by taking into account objective facts.

"Nevertheless," nihilism insists, "ethical principles *themselves* are just opinions. Science shows they have no objective basis, so they're pretty much meaningless."

Is that true? Treating the question abstractly and in general leads you into philosophy, which is never a good idea. It gets very complicated very quickly, with a lot of arguments that depend on concepts (like "science" and "objectivity") that are ill-defined, and turn out not to be single coherent things, but many nebulously similar strands.[10] Sorting this out isn't on our agenda, but I want to point out some reasons to doubt that "nothing is meaningful" follows from science or objectivity.

It is common to confuse "nothing has an objective meaning" with "objectively considered, nothing is meaningful." Relatedly, science may be understood as "discovering things about objective reality," or as "objective methods for discovering things about reality."

- Some theories of science say its *subject matter* is objective things, with a definition of "objective" that explicitly excludes meanings. In that case, science can't *show* anything is meaningless. Meaning and meaninglessness are just equally outside its domain. Everything is "objectively meaningless," but only by linguistic fiat.

- Some theories say that objectivity is a property of scientific *methods*, rather than the topics it investigates. Then perhaps science could investigate supposed meanings in an objective way, and determine that they don't exist: in the same way it exorcized ghosts, demons, and pookas. A common rationalist misimpression is that this has happened. (How?) We'll exorcise that erroneous belief thoroughly later. Here we'll investigate some questions of objectivity specifically.

You know how many thumbs you have, what a potato masher is, and which letter comes after W. This is not scientific knowledge, but it is objective under some reasonable definitions: those that emphasize public testing, rational evaluation of evidence, and effective certainty. This suggests knowledge of meanings could be similarly objective although not scientific.

You might object that in theory you could build an instrument that would objectively determine how many thumbs someone had; whereas you cannot build one that would determine whether abortion is murder, even in theory. However, it seems questionable whether, even in theory, you could build an instrument that would objectively determine that X comes after W, nor what makes something a potato masher. Maybe a fully general artificial intelligence could; but it isn't clear those would be any more objective or scientific than we are, and it seems reasonably likely they would develop opinions about abortion.

Meaningfulness is not measurable as a single-dimensional property of objects (nor of brains). However, meanings manifest in interactions, which are often publicly observable and verifiable. The meaningfulness of cat food can be determined by showing it to hungry cats and watching what happens. "But," you might object, "that's hardly a meaning at all. You can't measure ethics!"

Let's take fairness, for example. A new hire has just joined your workgroup. At the next morning meeting, the boss passes a box of donuts around the table, as she always does. The box gets halfway around, and the new guy takes all the donuts that are left and stuffs them in his mouth simultaneously. It seems reasonably certain that there will be publicly visible consequences. Exactly which is hard to predict, but you can project several likely next events. You can find objective evidence that a fairness violation has occurred: "Hey!! What the—!" for instance. I'm confident that it is possible to use an AI vision and speech recognition system to detect some of these (although this is at the edge of what is feasible in practice currently).

"But," you might object, "you aren't observing *meaning*, just behavior!" This is analogous to the situation with gravitational mass. Mass just *is* an abstraction of a pattern of specific, detectable interactions. Analogously, there are patterns of observable interactions that we abstract as "fairness" and "unfairness."[11] The objection that these interactions are not meaning itself comes from the mistaken assumption that ethics must live in some undetectable metaphysical plane, rather than in the physical world.

Anyway, there's been quite a lot of unambiguously scientific investigation of ethics recently. I find some of the results helpful in thinking about ethical questions objectively. I'll review some of this work in "No meaning from evolution."

Surfing meaningness

"No objective meaning" is motivated by shock and revulsion at disagreement about meanings. We don't want to have to deal with that. Especially, we don't want to deal with having meanings we had thought reliable slip out from under us.

This is, however, just how meaningness is: nebulous, uncertain, ungraspable, fluid, sometimes chaotic. When you realize that, you can hide in the black hole of nihilism, hoping meaning will go away and leave you alone. Or, you can get on your board, adopt the complete stance, and learn to surf the surge—accepting you're going to get tossed around sometimes, and enjoying the exhilarating ride when you can stay up.

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1. 1.Richard Joyce, "Moral Anti-Realism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition). Bold emphasis added. The current version of the article says much the same, but less directly. I suspect his wording cut a bit too close and produced protests to the editor. In any case, the surrounding discussion is worth reading.
2. 2.This is from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article "Scientific objectivity."
3. 3.Some rationalist nihilists *do* back themselves into denying the existence of all mental phenomena, seemingly motivated by a desire to deny meaning in particular. As far as I can tell, this is just silly stubbornness, and not their genuine belief.
4. 4.I took this example from Paul Graham's excellent online essay "Is there such a thing as good taste?", November 2021.
5. 5.This is Newton's Law of Gravitation. I'll ignore later complications to the physics.
6. 6.Koalas are among the very few mammal species believed to be "obligate herbivores," meaning they won't eat meat under any circumstances. Nearly all herbivores, although not adapted to hunt, eat meat when they can get it—dead, immobilized, or unusually unwary prey.
7. 7.The truth of this is obvious. We know the sky is the same size as the earth, because it reaches from horizon to horizon, from one end of the world to the other; and the sun takes up only a tiny fraction of the sky.
8. 8.The ethics chapter of *Meaningness* begins by dismissing moral philosophy, and starts over with different, non-philosophical methods.
9. 9.We'll explore this in "No meaning from evolution."
10. 10.If you can't resist, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article "Scientific objectivity" explains different senses in which science might be considered objective. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's *Objectivity* is the most influential work on this topic from the past couple decades.
11. 11.This analysis owes a great deal to *accountability*, as that is understood in ethnomethodology. "Accountability" is an explanation of the moral force of social norms in terms of publicly observable interactions.

3 Comments

Adult man cleaning flossing his white teeth with dental floss
Image (CC) Marco Verch

What is The Meaning Of Life? It is to play your role in the The Cosmic Plan.

When you realize there is no Cosmic Plan, it could seem reasonable to conclude that everything is meaningless.

Why did you buy dental floss? So you could clean your teeth. Why clean your teeth? So you don't get bad breath. Why avoid bad breath? Because you want to be appealing on dates. Why? To get married. Why? To have children. Why? To propagate and ensure the flourishing of humanity. Why? Because that's The Meaning Of Life As A Whole. Why? Because that's in the Cosmic Plan.

Oops.

Maybe buying dental floss was completely pointless, since there's no Cosmic Plan? Maybe *everything* is pointless, and there's no justification for doing anything. That way lies catatonia…

This is a common pattern of nihilist reasoning. Fortunately, it depends on a mistaken understanding of how purposes work.

This is a version of a more general misunderstanding: that something can be meaningful only through depending on something else being meaningful. The second thing supposedly *justifies* the meaning of the first, which would have to be meaningless without that justification. But what makes the second thing meaningful? Maybe a third thing. But where does this chain of justifications end?[1] It would have to be in something ultimately and inherently meaningful. Eternalist systems point to some eternal ordering principle, such as God or Utility, for that; but all such are delusional.

Dimensions of meaning other than purpose follow the same pattern. Ethics, for example. One thing is good because it is justified by another good thing, and that is good because etc., and the last thing is good because the God said so. The practical problem here is not so much that God is fictional; it's that our limited human reasoning is often incapable of discerning His Will. Likewise, it is rarely feasible to resolve difficult concrete ethical quandaries with arithmetical utility computations.

The motivation for this demand for ultimate justification is the eternalistic desire for certainty. The model is Euclid's geometry, in which everything could be proven by stepwise deduction, starting from a handful of unquestionably true axioms. If we had an axiomatically meaningful ultimate, a chain of justifications would ensure we were always doing the right thing. Realizing that this is impossible can throw us into nihilism. The complaint "you can't justify anything as meaningful" is a wistful, covert demand for an apology (or at least an explanation, or at *least* greater guidance) from God.

Usually "meaning can't be justified" is a 190-proof argument for the total non-existence of meaning. Like most 190-proof arguments, it's immediately defeated by the obviousness of mundane meanings. We do have purposes for many things we do (although not "ultimate" purposes), so meaning does exist. As with other 190-proof arguments, what remains is to understand why it seems to make any sense at all. I would postpone analysis until the 190-proof section, except that we will need it in the next page. That is about the lite nihilist complaint that life has no purpose "when considered as a whole."

These confusions stem from a rationalist misunderstanding: that all activities result from plans that aim to accomplish definite purposes. Let's steelman this idea first. Saner rationalist theories let go of Cosmic Ultimate Purpose, and admit that there are some intrinsic goals that you *just have*, with no justification. Maybe you *just do* want to have children. In order to accomplish that, you plan to get married, which will require going on dates, and with a few more steps of rational deduction you can *prove* that you need to buy dental floss.[2]

When feeling nihilistic, you might think "well, why *should* I have children," and there's no answer to that. (Maybe that goal was put in you by evolution, but that's just its cause, not a

justification. There's no *should* involved.[3]) If you've been drinking 190-proof nihilism, then you say "so everything is meaningless," and maybe lapse into a catatonic stupor. When that wears off and you're only doing the lite stuff, you admit that some things have some sort of inadequate mundane meaning, including maybe even buying floss, but feel very sad that there's nothing more to life than that.

Fortunately, this theory of purposes and actions, with the implicit assumption that we are all mechanical, rational planners or utility-maximizers, is simplistic, and I think factually wrong. It is not metaphysics, it is an empirical claim, which could be supported or refuted with factual evidence and coherent reasoning. In fact, there is extensive evidence from cognitive science against it, plus in-principle reasons it can't be true.[4]

I will sketch aspects of an alternative conception of activity.[5] Scientific investigation is in progress but inconclusive, so I will suggest that you attend to your experience, to see whether it seems plausible.

What was your purpose for singing in the shower?[6] There isn't a meaningful answer to this. Singing in the shower is not pointless, but it has no point. It is neither rational nor irrational. "Purpose" is not a relevant consideration.

If someone *asked* why you were singing in the shower, you would come up with some meaningless generic "justification" like "I enjoy it" or "it's a habit, I guess" or "for fun." Or you might be slightly peeved, because it's a dumb question that the asker should know can't have a meaningful answer.

Nevertheless, it's a social norm that you are required to come up with a justification for anything you do if asked. This is called "accountability" in ethnomethodology, where it's taken as the fundamental mechanism of both rationality and morality. Because of this requirement, we all become highly skillful at coming up with "purposes." Generally, though, these are after-the-fact rationalizations for the social acceptability of what we've done, not accurate reports of why we did it.

When you were looking around the kitchen for a snack, why the handful of cherry tomatoes rather than a chunk of cheddar? You could come up with a meaningless generic reason, like "I felt like it." Maybe you did have a real one (you remembered you are on a diet), but more likely it's just what you did. "I determined that it was the action that would result in greatest long-term utility" is absurd; no one grabs snacks on any such basis.

It seems that lots of things you *just do*. But this isn't quite right: you were looking around the kitchen. Mostly, the situations we find ourselves in *show us* what to do. The tomatoes made you do it.[7]

Why *did* you buy floss? The chain of justifications at the beginning of this page was ridiculous; no one thinks like that. You bought floss because it was on your shopping list, that's all. (Your list told you to do it!)

But why floss your teeth at all? An honest, thoughtful answer might be "many reasons, and none in particular." It's true you want to avoid bad breath, but that danger seems fairly theoretical, and not a main motivation for flossing. Your dental hygienist always nags you about it, and for some reason you feel a vague responsibility not to let her down. You also know in theory that failure to floss results in "gum erosion," which sounds bad, although you'd really rather not know the details, and have been careful not to find out. Your mother taught you to floss when you were a kid, but there's lots of things she told you to do that you don't. Really, I mean, flossing is just what one does; everyone knows it's a good thing to do; do I *have* to justify it to you?

Rather than "chains of justification," it would be more accurate to say "webs of activities." Everything we do fits together with many other things, in a semi-coherent fabric. Sometimes there *is* a single, well-defined purpose for an action; but even then if you ask why *that*, usually there are many answers. Purposefulness divaricates and disperses into the spreading web. Further, "each" purpose is itself nebulous; rarely a completely clear, distinct, and specific goal. That means the fabric is not a web after all: it is a continuous, vividly-patterned sheet of mutually-supportive, meaningful activities; a variegated landscape.

The rationalist idea that everything you do has (or should have) a single well-defined purpose, which lies outside the activity itself, alienates you from your own experience. It renders meaningless what you are doing while you are doing it. Your continuous, interlinked flow of activity gets reduced to a sequence of discrete decisions and actions, each of whose meaning is only abstract and theoretical, in pointing to a hypothetical, often distant, future "state of affairs." This is a recipe for nihilistic depression!

There are times when careful, rational consideration of possibilities and purposes is valuable; particularly when stakes are high, interactions are complex, and it's not obvious what to do. Learning about game theory, decision theory, and means-ends planning methods may save you from serious mistakes.

Explicit decision-making is not usually warranted in the case of grabbing a snack. On the other hand, reflecting on your Hostess® Twinkies® habit, and resolving to make healthier choices in future, might be sensible.

Stakes are highest in "major life choices," like whether and when and with whom to have children. These often don't seem like choices, though. As with choosing a snack, the situation shows you what to do. You don't need to deliberate; you *know*. Still, particularly in the case of children (on whom you may impose your bad choice for a lifetime), I wish more people did think carefully. Explicit reflection on purposes and alternatives could prevent much suffering. Too many parents blunder into child-rearing by just going with the flow, and secretly regret it later.

In high-stakes emergencies, there is no time for planning or deciding. You have to rely on the situation to show you what to do. A classic study on "decision-making" interviewed a fireground commander who had been working under severe time pressure while in charge of a crew at a multiple-alarm fire at a four-story apartment building.

> We asked him to tell us about some difficult decisions he had made.
>
> "I don't make decisions," he announced to his startled listeners. "I don't remember when I've ever made a decision."
>
> He insisted that fireground commanders *never* make decisions. We pressed him further. Surely there are decisions during a fire—decisions about whether to call a second alarm, where to send his crews, how to contain the fire.
>
> He agreed that there were *options*, yet it was usually obvious what to do in any given situation. He insisted that he never compared them. There just was no time. The structure would burn down by the time he finished listing all the options, let alone evaluating them.[8]

This is highly meaningful activity in a highly meaningful situation. Yet inventing any "justification" would have to wait until the tiresome bureaucratic Incident Report he'd be required to fill out the next morning.

As a practice, I suggest remembering occasionally to observe your own activity, to check whether it results from *chains of justifications*, or is part of a *vividly-patterned landscape*.

To avoid nihilism, I suggest refraining from reasoning about justifications except when there is a specific reason it could be helpful in a particular situation. I suggest avoiding excessive planning and obsessive decision-making. I suggest dropping the compulsion to justify your past actions to yourself, or to anyone else, unless required.

Instead, I suggest cooperating with the textures of your situation and activity, and particularly those of the complete stance: wonder, curiosity, humor, play, enjoyment, and creation.

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1. 1.The standard citation for this problem is Thomas Nagel's "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68:20, pp. 716–727, 1971.
2. 2.I took the dental floss example from Rivka Weinberg's "Ultimate Meaning: We Don't Have It, We Can't Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad," *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 1:1, 2021. I'll discuss that paper in "No meaning of life as a whole."
3. 3.Rationalist nihilism frequently confuses causes of action with reasons for action. This is due to the mistaken assumption that you are a causal mechanism programmed to derive all its actions from reasoning about goals and effects. We'll explode that delusion in "No meaning for automata."
4. 4.Reviewing the science is out of scope for *Meaningness*. The first part of *In the Cells of the Eggplant* covers some of it. My PhD work aimed to dispel this misunderstanding within the field of artificial intelligence. For a programmatic early version, see "Abstract Reasoning as Emergent from Concrete Activity" (1986). My 1991 thesis book, *Vision, Instruction, and Action*, is more detailed but quite technical, and therefore less relevant to *Meaningness*.
5. 5.Part Two of *The Eggplant* discusses it in greater detail. Some of the research on this is now described as "4E cognitive science," meaning "embodied, embedded, enacted, or extended." This work draws together strands from many different fields, but is particularly rooted in phenomenology (particularly Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty), cybernetics, developmental psychology, neurophysiology, and the theory of computation.
6. 6.I took this example from Richard Gipps' excellent blog post "what's the point?". His analysis, like mine, is influenced by Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and by the psychology of depression.
7. 7.This was the point of Pengi, an artificial intelligence program I wrote with Phil Agre in 1986, whose seemingly purposeful activity came from looking at its situation to see what to do. Philip E. Agre and David Chapman, "Pengi: An Implementation of a Theory of Activity," *AAAI-87 Proceedings*, pp. 268–272.
8. 8.Gary Klein, *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions*, 20th Anniversary Edition, 1998. Extract lightly edited for concision.

5 Comments

Senior Couple Enjoying Beach Holiday Running Down Dune
Project #47,391 is 86.2% complete; 2347 of 3000 available utilons collected.
Image (CC) SalFalko

So what *is* The Meaning Of Life? Some events in it seem meaningful; but looking at your life as a whole, you realize they don't add up, and it's meaningless. And if it's meaningless as a whole, how meaningful can the parts be, really?

So says lite nihilism. It opposes eternalist systems, which often tell you your overall purpose:

Question #1: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.[1]

With loss of faith in eternalism comes disbelief in any ultimate cosmic source of meaning. Nevertheless, if you are only a lite nihilist, you recognize that buying dental floss is meaningful (barely). Is that all there is to it? A few decades of chores, jobs, vaguely unsatisfying relationships, and then you die?

Shouldn't there be some actual *point* to having a life? Some "chief end," a higher meaning, a significant mission, something to hope for and strive toward? Mundane meanings might *exist*, but they are plainly inadequate. Trying to make a meaningful life out of that stuff is materialism. "He who dies with the most dental floss wins"? Everyone knows *that* doesn't work.

Why can't life have a richly meaningful story arc? Lots of ups and downs, and a happy ending not guaranteed of course, let's be realistic, but still?

A common intuition is that everyone's life must have the *same* meaning. It used to be glorifying God, for example. But without God, where would a uniform Meaning Of Life come from? Maybe meaning comes from biology? But biology sets how things are, not how they should be; and if people have any life purposes at all, they seem in fact to be quite diverse. Anyway, it doesn't seem credible that you get a genetically specific life-meaning. If people's ideas about their life-meanings are different, it's probably because they are just making them up, and made-up meaning isn't a thing?

The exact opposite intuition is also common: that a meaningful life must have a unique individual purpose—and if most people's don't, that's because theirs aren't meaningful after all. Since mundane purposes are shared, unique ones must be "higher" meanings: great acts of altruism, invention, or artistry. This is the stance of mission.

Who is to say what counts as a "higher" meaning, though? How "high" is enough? Existentialism says that you must choose your unique, "authentic" life purpose, as an act of absolute self-authorship using perfectly free will, uninfluenced by society. This is impossible (as we'll see in the chapter on that). Lite nihilism recognizes (correctly) that arbitrary subjective meaning is no meaning at all, and concludes (mistakenly) that "higher" meanings are delusional.

Getting a bit bored with the glorifying

What would it be like to have a single, overall meaning for your life? If you had a single purpose, would that imply that you tried, as nearly as possible, to do nothing other than that? It is hard to imagine what that would be like, but it sounds unpleasant and probably pathological. Variety and balance of activities seem important—mundane enjoyments among them.

Somewhat saner attitudes might treat the meaning of life as a whole as a project or as a story. Both involve organizing diverse activities to make sense overall.

Rivka Weinberg's "Ultimate Meaning: We Don't Have It, We Can't Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad"[2] makes a lite nihilist case against life being meaningful when considered as a whole:

> Leading a human life is an effort or enterprise we all engage in, just as we engage in many other projects within our human lives. It can then come as a disappointing surprise to note that, unlike many other of our purposeful enterprises, leading life itself cannot have a point.

Her argument is that the value of a project must be external to the project itself, and also must be somewhere else within your life. But your life as a whole couldn't have a point, because there is nowhere that is both within and external to your life, for the point to live.[3]

I like this paper a lot; the writing style is delightful, and it's as well-reasoned as philosophy gets. However, its implicit theory of projects, activities, and purposes is wrong, and is harmful if it does make you very, very sad. It's tempting to respond in kind, but committing philosophy is very, very bad, so instead I'll point out two reasons to reject this view.

First, "a project" is an optional technique for viewing patterns in your activity in order to rationalize it. There is no objective truth about whether or not something "is" a project. Sometimes it's useful to view some things you are doing *as* a project, to better organize them; sometimes it's not. Walking on the beach is better not viewed as a project. Usually you don't make a project of breakfast, but if you are going to try cooking something new for guests, treating it as a project and planning it out might help.

Is it a good idea to view your entire life as a single overall project? Weinberg says that if you do, it should result in your being very, very sad. I think she's probably right.

So I recommend that you **don't do that**.

She says that everyone does treat their life as an overall project, and seems to think this commonality is obvious and requires no evidence. I think it's obviously not true. I don't treat my life as a project. I doubt anyone usually does, unless they've had long-term exposure to hazardous levels of toxic rationalism.

Second, "a whole" is also an optional way of viewing the nebulous flux of phenomena. Matter, space, and time are not objectively divided into clearly separate chunks.[4] Wholes and parts are not fixed by physical reality, but emerge from the process of locating meanings in our interaction with the world. Cultural concepts play a major role in what we count as a unified thing. We take "a corporation" for granted as a kind of whole, and relate to it as such; people from cultures that don't have that idea don't and can't.

The ancient Greeks came up with the idea that "a life" is a kind of thing, that you have one, and that you should relate to it correctly.[5] This was a disastrous mistake that has caused vast unnecessary suffering for thousands of years. Like "colorless green ideas," "your life as a whole" doesn't have a meaning because it isn't a thing.

Stuff happens. You do things. More stuff happens. It goes on like that. Many events you get involved with have nothing to do with your intentions: big stuff like plagues and major government errors, and little stuff like friends unexpectedly showing up for brunch or an outbreak of inscrutable office politics. All those are individually meaningful, but trying to make sense of them as parts of a coherent whole is indeed pointless and doomed to failure.

Another approach is to try to view "your life" as a story: a coherent narrative in which you are the central character. But if that is a story, you are definitely not the author. Much of what happens, you don't get to choose, and makes no sense in terms of the story arc you are trying to force. As a narrative, it would have to be a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.[6] Stories are not good models for life, because their function is entertainment and sometimes ineffable insight, not fidelity to reality.

Both the project view and the story view try to to impose a fixed pattern of meaning on the unpredictability of events. They try to make eternalism true by force, in order to gain impossible degrees of certainty, understanding, and control. This has costs.

One cost is overlooking the meaning of events that don't fit your concept of the project or story. They don't count as really meaningful, so you are likely to neglect both risks and serendipitous opportunities.

BIRTH SCHOOL WORK DEATH

Another is that you are likely to adopt standard-issue social scripts. Most people don't find those predictively accurate, nor easy to conform to, nor very satisfying even if you manage to more or less act out your part. They are boring and don't have anything to do with you personally. They're mostly meaningless, actually!

Recognizing this, existentialism fantasizes that you can come up with your own unique, original script, which would be much more exciting. But almost certainly you can't, and even if you do write a better story, you aren't likely to be able to live it.

Rejecting a fixed overall schema for the meaning of all your activities does not imply passively drifting through events, much less that they are all meaningless. Organizing some activities as projects can increase confidence, analytical insight, and effectiveness. Stories are tools for holistic insight, for recognizing nebulous patterning. Both can be more or less helpful according to circumstances. Choosing when and how to use them is a skill. Do not try to order events into battle, nor allow yourself to get blown about like a leaf in a storm.

The way out of both eternalism and nihilism is to gain skill in more comprehensive and accurate perception of meaning.

Open to nebulous meaningness; notice it, allow it, nurture it, dance with it, ride it.

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1. 1.This is the opening of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647).
2. 2.*Journal of Controversial Ideas* 1:1, 2021.
3. 3.What about living altruistically, for the sake of others? What you do for them can't be the point of *your* life, she says, because it's part of *their* life. And anyway, it just postpones the problem: what's the point of their life? Living for others just creates an infinite regress.
4. 4.See "Boundaries, objects, and connections" in *Meaningness* and "Objects, objectively" in *In the Cells of the Eggplant*.
5. 5.Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* usually gets the blame for this, but the Greeks said they got philosophy from Egypt, so maybe the catastrophe goes further back. Egyptian beliefs about the judgement of souls upon entering the afterlife do seem to depend on "your life as a whole" being a thing.
6. 6.I recommend two papers by Galen Strawson explaining why trying to understand your life as a story is optional and probably a bad idea: "We live beyond any tale that we happen to enact," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 18 pp. 73–90, 2012; and "Against Narrativity," *Ratio (new series)* XVII, 2004.

10 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Usually, a feeling that life is not meaningful *enough* motivates lite nihilist complaints that it is not really meaningful at all.

Logically, this begs questions like "How meaningful would be meaningful enough? What's the threshold? Where did that level come from?" Sometimes, choosing a more realistic standard can dissolve nihilistic misery.

However, the perception that your life is "not meaningful enough" may root in an accurate perception that it *could* be much more meaningful. Fortunately, there are practical ways to increase meaningfulness.

Comment on this page

> Everclear 190-proof bottle
> 190-proof Everclear image courtesy Bighead

190-proof alcohol is the strongest you can get by conventional distillation. 190-proof nihilism is the strongest you can get by conceptual disputation.

190-proof nihilism is the stance that nothing means anything at all, period.

Nihilism is inherently unstable because it is obviously wrong; meanings are everywhere. However, it is emotionally attractive when it seems the only alternative to eternalism. Then you may commit to nihilism and attempt to stabilize it, typically with intellectual argumentation.

These arguments claim to prove that meaning cannot exist. They are abstract, reasoning from first principles.[1] Most commit fallacies that render them silly as logic—never mind that they contradict obvious concrete examples.

190-proof nihilism is so obviously wrong that it's difficult to maintain for long. Instead, one slides into Lite Nihilism, a weaker stance: that some things have some sort of trivial meaning which doesn't count.

Usually, one defends the 190-proof version only when backed into a corner by someone who is trying to rescue you from your commitment to nihilism. When they point out that some things are indeed meaningful, holding the line of absolute denial seems necessary to avoid stepping onto what seems like a slippery slope toward *everything* being meaningful—the eternalism you've rightly rejected.

Uncommonly, 190-proof nihilism can seem plausible and attractive when in extreme nihilistic depression. Then the emotional drive is toward oblivion. The hope is that intellectually convincing yourself that awfulness is meaningless will cut you off from your feelings of anguish and despair. This can work to a limited extent, for a limited period, but usually there are better options.

How to use this section

The web pages in this section go through many arguments for 190-proof nihilism. They point out why each is mistaken. This can function as an antidote, in two ways. However, there is a warning label on the medicine bottle. Taken the wrong way, it could reinforce your stuckness in nihilism instead.

1. If you have reasoned yourself into nihilism, you can reason your way out. Recognizing that your thinking was logically faulty is a step forward. It's usually not sufficient, though…

2. You had powerful emotional motivations for the fallacious reasoning. Uncovering them enables you to work toward a better way of *feeling* about meaning, which includes the realistic aspects of nihilism without its harms. That is: the complete stance.
3. You may experience powerful emotional resistance to accepting the counter-arguments in this section. You may feel driven to construct counter-counter-arguments to salvage your commitment. Then you will dig yourself in deeper, adding further intellectualization to the maze of twisty little arguments you are lost in. This is nearly guaranteed if you read the section as if it were abstract theorizing: philosophy. It is not philosophy. It's an intervention in a dysfunctional way of being.

For the antidote to take effect, you have to *want* to exit nihilism, and entertain the possibility that you can. If you are committed to nihilism, and intend to pick holes in philosophical arguments, I suggest you stop now; reading on will be harmful for you.

I recommend paying attention to your emotional experience as you read this. Whenever you find yourself wanting to argue, ask yourself:

- Why am I trying to *prove* that nothing is meaningful?
- What am I hoping to accomplish by refuting this argument against nihilism?
- Can I locate the emotional payoff of nihilism for me, in this very moment as I read this?
- If meaning were real, then… what?
- Am I afraid of the possibility that some things are even slightly meaningful?
- What else might I have to accept if I admitted that meaning is sometimes real?
- How might I feel differently, if I admitted that? (Probably bad!)
- Specifically what would be awful in my life if I took meaning as real?
- Would I have to change what I do? How would my life, my activities, be different?
- (Try to imagine how that other life would feel.) What's awful about it?
- What would I have to do that I can avoid now?
- What can I do now that I would have to drop if I accepted meaningfulness?

To help you avoid misunderstanding the section as philosophical analysis, I've made the counter-arguments humorous, playful, and brief. (Such humor is characteristic of the complete stance.) They simply point out that each argument for nihilism is silly. They deliberately refuse to take potential counter-counter-arguments seriously. No doubt there are counter-counter-arguments in each case—but those would also be silly. Creating an endless hall of mirrors of fallacious arguments in every direction is what nihilistic intellectualization does.

"Well, what about…?" If you *want* to exit nihilism, you need to drop that, not indulge it—and figure out why you want to go on arguing that way.

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1. 1.First-principles reasoning almost never works in the real world. Each step of deduction must be reality-tested. *In the Cells of the Eggplant* discusses the reasons for this in detail.

7 Comments

Golden-eyed tree frog
Image (CC) Charles J. Sharp

"You can't *prove* meaning exists! Therefore, nihilism.

"No, *that* is not meaningful. Nope, neither is *that*. Nothing is!"

This is the hardest core of hardcore 190-proof nihilism. Some evangelical nihilists go out of their way to pick a fight, and then simply reply "not a proof" when given any reason to think there are meanings, and "nope, not meaningful" to any example you point to. Usually this stubborn refusal to accept the obvious comes with with a smug, elitist air of certainty of impending intellectual victory. It is, in fact, a *guaranteed win* in some sense…

text separator

[Scene: A university herpetology lab. RANA, a herpetology postdoc, is weighing a frog. An ANANURIST bursts in.]

ANANURIST: You are all frauds! Frogs do not exist!

RANA: Here is a frog.

ANANURIST: That isn't really a frog!

RANA: Uh… yes, it is?

ANANURIST: You can't prove it!

RANA: Looks like a frog to me.

ANANURIST: You are deluded by your faulty perception. Also you are blinded by your false anurist ideology. Nothing is a frog, really.

RANA: I think you'll find that every sane person would agree that it is a frog.

ANANURIST: Everyone used to agree that the earth is flat! That proves nothing. Nowadays, more and more people are discovering the truth of ananurism! There is no scientific proof of the existence of frogs!

RANA: I just weighed it. 37 grams of frog.

ANANURIST: That might prove gravity exists, but not frogs.

RANA: So what is this, if it isn't a frog?

ANANURIST: It's just a bunch of atoms.

RANA: It is an amphibian with no tail, nine or fewer presacral vertebrae, a urostyle, a hyoid plate and unsupported tongue, and a protractor lentis muscle; which makes it a frog.

ANANURIST: You can't prove any of that either. None of those things exist.

RANA: So what would persuade you that this is a frog?

ANANURIST: Logic. You can't prove the existence of frogs by rational deduction, and you know it!

RANA: Can you prove you exist?

ANANURIST: I am not a frog!

[An ORDERLY arrives from the adjacent Philosophy Department.]

ORDERLY: Professor Nihil, it's time for your medicine.

ANANURIST, *wide-eyed*: I do not exist![1] You do not exist![2]

[ORDERLY injects him with 2mg lorazepam. He calms down almost immediately.]

ORDERLY: I'm so sorry, Dr. Pipiens, sometimes our charges escape the Department. I hope he didn't give you too much trouble!

RANA: No… it was… quite interesting, actually.

text separator

Let's take "no proof!" much more seriously than it deserves. We'll consider it first from point of view of logic, and then motivation.

At the level of logic, there are two issues: burden of proof, and standard of proof.

The burden of proof argument is that the non-nihilist is somehow obligated to convince the nihilist that meaning exists. Who would accept that? For most people, since meaning is obvious practically everywhere, the natural response is "Yeah, okay, believe whatever insane thing you like, dude" and then to ignore them. There's no point arguing with flat earthers, or ananurists (people who claim not to believe in frogs), or nihilists (people who claim not to believe in meanings).

Some evangelical eternalists will take the nihilist's bait. They usually make metaphysical, first-principles arguments, often religious ones, which are easily defeated. This is rather sad. The eternalists are trying desperately to shore up their own wavering belief in eternalism with some argument that fails because eternalism is also false. "Cat food is meaningful even to cats" is the correct reply to "no proof!", but that doesn't reinforce eternalism. Eternalists—who enter such debates mostly to try to convince themselves—won't use it.

Often, if you don't take the "no proof!" bait, an argumentative nihilist will make one of the many "science proves meaning doesn't exist" moves, implicitly accepting the burden of proof themselves. We'll discuss those in upcoming pages.

The standard of proof question is: what would count? What evidence or reasoning would be acceptable? You can point to a concrete example like "cat food is meaningful even to cats," and the argumentative nihilist can just say "you can't prove that either."

That nihilist move proves too much, as we've seen. Someone can always simply refuse to accept any evidence or argument for anything. Outside of mathematics, there is no such thing as absolute proof. On the other hand, no sane person will agree that the existence of frogs is put in doubt, much less disproven, by such stubbornness.

Nihilists often demand rational or scientific proofs, specifically. Some eternalists do promote first-principles, supposedly-rational "proofs" of eternalist claims. All are fallacious, so the nihilist rightly anticipates a quick win here. You can't prove the existence of anything that way (outside of mathematics). Scientific "proof" has also not been considered possible since the mid-twentieth century, when philosophers reluctantly recognized that science can often provide persuasive evidence, but never absolute certainty.

Many meanings that eternalists promote are imaginary, so demanding evidence in those cases is reasonable. It was partly scientific investigation that led many people to stop believing in angels and immaterial souls. By analogy, it might seem reasonable to expect that scientific investigation would discredit meaningfulness too. (That analogy underlies most of the "science proves meaning doesn't exist" arguments, as we'll see later.)

Some meanings are like angels: purely an article of faith. Dismissing them for lack of evidence is sensible. Some meanings are like frogs: they are right there. Demanding proof of frogs is not reasonable, and it's unclear what evidence could force an ananurist to change their tune.

There is no scientific instrument that measures meaningfulness, but there is no scientific instrument that measures frogness, either. A DNA hybridization assay can tell you that one living thing is closely related to another, but the ananurist can say "that just shows these two globs of atoms are similar; it doesn't prove that either of them *is a frog*."

Of course, you *can* investigate frogs scientifically; that's what a herpetological laboratory does. Scientifically, a frog just *is* a bunch of atoms, organized and interacting in particular, observable patterns. You can also investigate meanings scientifically, and there are laboratories that do that. Scientifically, a meaning *also* is a bunch of atoms, organized and interacting in particular, observable patterns.[3] Scientific, empirical investigation of ethics is a substantial field, for example. We'll look into that in upcoming pages. (Most eternalists and nihilists both assume that meanings would have to be non-physical, so this may come as a surprise to some?)

Let's turn now to motivations for taking the "no proof," "not a meaning" line. I can see three. Two are in bad faith, as 190-proof nihilism almost always is. The third can be genuine, in good faith.

First, some people just like winning arguments, and "that's not a proof" is in *some* sense always guaranteed to "win." It makes you look like an obnoxious idiot, but you can have the satisfaction of holding your ground against an opponent. It also can lure unwary eternalists into making silly arguments of their own,[4] which you can then dismember and crow about.

Second, it's the defense of last resort when someone is making a good case for something being meaningful. You can simply refuse to concede when you are clearly losing. It is transparent and leaves you looking weak and defeated, but you don't have to admit that explicitly.

Eventually you'll realize arguing for something you don't believe is dumb, and feel a bit ashamed, and like maybe you should stop. You might find the nihilist rage section helpful in working out how to drop the combative attitude.

The third motivation is fear of getting fooled again, of getting pulled back into eternalism if you admit that anything is meaningful at all. It's a slippery slope: from cat food to the Rapture, Plague of Frogs, Second Coming, and all that. This motivation is genuine, but the fear is perhaps exaggerated.

If this is where you are at, there's a good way forward: from 190-proof to lite nihilism. It's safe. You can continue to reject all the delusional special meanings eternalists insist on. Acknowledging super obvious mundane meanings like "a purpose in making an omelet is to have something to eat" does not lead to glassy-eyed religious devotion.

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1. 1.Peter Unger, "I Do Not Exist," in G.F. Macdonald (eds) *Perception and Identity*, 1979.
2. 2.Peter Unger, "Why There Are No People," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4 (1979), pp. 177-222.
3. 3.I'm using "scientifically" as a qualifier here to avoid taking any position on the mind/body problem. Meanings aren't entirely mental, but they usually involve mental things. Like other mental things, investigating those scientifically means treating them as physical, and thereby implicitly taking a provisionally physicalist mind/body problem stance. I myself am not committed to that approach to the mind/body problem, nor to any other.
4. 4.Maybe they will try to prove the existence of frogs by quoting the Bible. *Exodus* 8:3: "And the river shall bring forth frogs abundantly, which shall go up and come into thine

house, and into thy bedchamber, and upon thy bed, and into the house of thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thine ovens, and into thy kneading troughs."

6 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Everyone knows scientific rationality murdered meaning. But specifically whodunnit? With what weapon weapon? The corpse is long-since cold; when was the crime committed?

Which science was that? Which famous scientist made this epochal breakthrough discovery? How did the experiment work? What apparatus did they use? Did they get the Nobel Prize for this? Why not?

This is an event that everyone remembers vaguely, but which never happened.

It's dim distorted memories of the debates between religion and scientific rationalism. There's a sense that this all got settled long ago and doesn't need to be relitigated. The details don't matter; only deluded religious fanatics are trying to keep the debate going.

Scientific rationality did conclusively disprove some religious claims, and seriously undermined religion's account of meaning overall. However, it never tried to disprove the existence of meaning in general.

Comment on this page

"There was no meaning in the universe at the moment of the Big Bang, and there's no physical process that can add meaning, so there's no meaning now."

This argument for nihilism proves too much. There were no wings or potato mashers for quite a while after the Big Bang. Evolution added wings; people added potato mashers. Evolution and people are also both involved in adding meaning to the universe.

The next page addresses the complaint that, since meaning evolved, it doesn't exist. (Put that way, it sounds silly, doesn't it?)

Later pages address the complaints that, if people are involved in making meaning, it's an illusion or just made up. Those are more reasonable: if people chose meanings arbitrarily, it might be wise to discount them. (This is the reason existentialism tends to collapse into nihilism.) However, we don't choose arbitrarily, if at all. Meaningness is subject to many non-human constraints. For instance, the physical principle of conservation of energy is intimately involved in the meaning of food.

> God creating the universe
> William Blake, *Ancient of Days*

The sense that there is no physical process that adds meaning to the universe gains credibility from the implicit assumption that meaning is non-physical. This gives rise to a series of nihilistic arguments according to which some eternalist supernatural theory of meaning is mistaken, and therefore meaning does not exist. These are fallacious: although meaning doesn't work in those ways, it does exist and works in other, natural, physical ways. Several upcoming pages cover

errors of this sort. They are not nihilistic *enough*: they fail to reject eternalist—usually religious—explanations for meaningfulness.

The Big Daddy of those explanations is that God put most of the world's meaning in when he created it, at 6 p.m. on October 22nd, 4004 B.C. He is also the sole source of any additional meaning (such as His Incarnation) that has been added since. The Big Bang didn't put any meaning in at the beginning, and by analogy that suggests there isn't any meaning now.

Other explanations rely on a misleading intuitive physical analogy: that meaning is a sort of supernatural fluid, subject to a conservation principle. You can't create meaning out of non-meaningful things, any more than you can create water out of sticks or stones or something. Of course, you *can* create water out hydrogen and oxygen gas, but that wasn't known at the time intuitions like this entered our thought soup.

Biological evolution is useful again as a counter-analogy. Wings evolved out of non-wings, by a mechanism that is now quite well understood. Meaning comes partly from biological evolution, partly from cultural evolution, partly from individual innovation, and partly from entirely other sources. The details aren't always clear, but meaning developing out of non-meaning is not fundamentally mysterious. Much less is it impossible for any in-principle reason.

6 Comments

Next Page: No meaning for mortals →

In the end, everything is meaningless. Your death is certain, and final. No heaven awaits; you just cease to exist. Life is but a spark in the infinite blackness, a spark that appears, flickers, and dies forever. What meaning could that have? You will soon be forgotten, nothing you do can make any difference in the long run, none of it matters.

This sales pitch[1] somehow seems plausible when you are in the grip of nihilism, which inhibits asking questions that might lead you to reject it:

• Is it true that your upcoming death means that everything is meaningless now? (No.)
• What reasoning leads from "death is certain and final" to "everything is meaningless"? (No explicit argument supports this claim; it's just asserted.)
• What makes it emotionally compelling, even though it makes no sense? (Several half-thought underlying intuitions, plus the usual sleazy sales tricks.)

Mistaken intuitions about mortality are often key to nihilism's power overall. "Death means everything is meaningless" may be compelling when your own upcoming death is salient and fearsome. It is a central nexus for nihilistic ideas, tying in with many other mistaken reasons that seem to support the stance. This page digs in to expose and untangle them.

Some of these underlying ideas are secular, but many derive from Christian theories about an afterlife. I'll treat them in that order.

Rationally speaking…

Empty toothpaste tube
Image (CC) Kristopher Avila

We know "death means everything is meaningless" is wrong because everything isn't meaningless. So, at the level of rationality, the remaining question is where the error in reasoning lies.

A usual version is "after you are dead, everything will be meaningless for you, so everything is meaningless, really." This proves too much. An analogous argument is: "after you use up your current tube of toothpaste, you won't be able to get any toothpaste out of it, so really it doesn't contain any toothpaste at all, and never did."[2]

How do we get from "in future, this will be true" to "it is true now"? "No meaning for corpses" does not logically imply "no meaning for mortals." As with so much nihilistic justification, there seems to be no explicit reasoning, so there's no specific error to locate. I went through many texts that simply jumped the gap, without any supporting argument.

Often, however, they do include many pages of repetitive verbiage that, at the level of logic, amount to simply asserting the implication over and over. This sales patter generally embeds particular rhetorical tricks and implicit intuitions, though. The rest of this page is about those.

Death and eternity

> For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool.
>
> Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.
>
> —*Ecclesiastes* 2:16–17

"No meaning for mortals" is closely connected with "no eternal meaning," discussed earlier. Often they are intertwined in nihilist soliloquies, and reinforce each other. Their underlying intuitions and implications are somewhat distinct, though.

"Eternal meaning" is a special kind of meaning; you can deny it while conceding that transient mundane meaning exists (although it doesn't count). By contrast, when nihilism invokes death, it is often to claim that nothing in life is meaningful at all. So the first is lite nihilism, and the second is 190-proof.

On the other hand, "no eternal meaning" makes a much stronger temporal demand. A meaning that lasted a mere trillion years would count as inadequate by its standard. A mere eye-blink; not even all the stars will have died yet! "No meaning because death" looks ahead only as far as the end of your own life. Or, sometimes it reminds you that you cannot live on in memory or through your deeds, since they will be forgotten in a few centuries at most.

Duration matters

> Dancing skeletons
> Citapati/Kinkara

Other things being equal, longer-lasting meanings are more meaningful. This suggests eternal meanings—if there were any—would be most meaningful. It does not imply that less-than-eternal meanings are non-existent, or have zero meaning.

It also does not imply that all meaning ends with your personal death. Many of the most meaningful things began long before you were born and will go on long after you are dead. They are meaningful to you, and they will be meaningful to others, probably for centuries.

Duration only weakly correlates with meaningfulness. Hangnails have probably been meaningful to hominids for millions of years, but only very slightly.

Conversely, some things are highly meaningful, but only briefly. An intense love affair, a major spiritual experience, or a triumphant project success may be the most meaningful thing you ever experience. Perhaps that lasts only days or weeks. Then its meaning may rapidly fade. Does that imply it was not meaningful at the time? Why?

What is most meaningful can change, but that does not make it meaningless. Iddo Landau writes:

> A person who was engaged in philanthropic work in a third-world country from the ages of twenty to thirty, focused on good parenting from thirty to fifty, wrote good literature from fifty to sixty-five, and ultimately spent years in meditation in a monastery would not therefore seem to have led a meaningless life.[3]

The transience even of slight meanings does not render them meaningless. Suppose right after you finish sweeping the floor someone tracks dirt across it, and you have to sweep it all over again. That does give the feeling that it was pointless—you may as well not have bothered. However, if the floor stays reasonably clean for a week, you don't feel the same way. Perhaps it would be better if it remained clean longer, or even forever. But you accept having to sweep the floor periodically, and do not regard it as pointless because its effect is not eternal. If the house burns down and that floor will never be clean again, the times you swept it do not become retroactively meaningless. If you have a stroke and can't remember having ever swept a floor, that does not make it retroactively meaningless, either. The meaning of sweeping isn't in your head; the meaning of sweeping is that the floor gets clean at the time.[4]

This suggests that more significant and longer-lasting meanings are not contradicted by death, even if they are only personal. It doesn't *prove* it; maybe death is relevantly different from other meaning-ending events—but that would need explanation.

Headcount matters

> Severed-head goddesses
> Chinnamasta/Ucheyma

Other things being equal, something that is meaningful to more people is more meaningful. If a meaning survives my death, it must be meaningful to people other than me, so maybe it's a more meaningful meaning. In fact, meanings should be universal, according to this line of thinking.

However, this does not show that merely individual meaning—which ends when I do—doesn't count at all. Meaning is always meaning for someone in particular, because meanings live in interactions. Eternalism's hope for inherent meanings, which wouldn't require anyone to find them meaningful, doesn't make any sense.

Endings matter

> Yes, nothing really matters in the end. But people forget that things often matter quite a lot in the beginning and the middle.

The full meaning of a time-limited project with a definite goal becomes apparent only at its end. Then you can evaluate its success or failure, and the causal roles of events along the way becomes much clearer.

If the project is canceled part-way through, or everything it aimed for is undone immediately afterwards, then the effort was all in vain, and it might be counted as meaningless in retrospect.

Maybe death is like that? The project of your life finally reaches completion, it is finally about to become meaningful, and then it is suddenly canceled.

Often we don't feel that way even about failed projects, though. Success was not guaranteed, and attempting the goal was worth the effort. Probably also there was growth and companionship and enjoyment along the way.

In any case, life isn't a single project with a definite goal. Considering it that way is a common intuitive misunderstanding, although usually not held explicitly. It's wrong and harmful, as we saw in "No meaning of life as a whole," and will explore further in the chapter on purpose.

It's attractive, though. The nebulosity of meaning is uncomfortable. We want meaning to be definite, certain, final, simple and understandable. Reducing all meaning to a single overall life-project with a clear goal and endpoint might make that possible. It might be nice if, in the end, God would give an unambiguous yes-or-no judgement, tie up all the loose-end plot points, and tell you what everything really meant.

To pun a bit, if that were even possible, it would be a huge reduction, though. A great reduction in the scope and diversity and richness of meaning. Meaningness is many splendid things; trying to make all life into a single project would exclude most of them.

The usual sleazy sales tricks

Nihilist and Christian sermons on death are nearly indistinguishable. They use the same sales tricks we've seen earlier. The intent is to produce the nightmare state of stunned, paralyzed certainty and dread.

They use a hypnotic, repetitive, cyclic drone of abstract statements, chained by vague topical association rather than specific implication, lulling your reasoning ability into somnolence.

To further weaken resistance, they keep reminding you of the awfulness of death, hoping to throw you into depression, which makes meaninglessness seem more plausible and further degrades your cognitive capacity.

Then, they pull the scene change trick we first saw in "No eternal meaning," switching your view in imagination to the after-death state, painting your experience as cold, dark, lonely, and therefore meaningless. If you allow yourself to be transported by the words, you find yourself *already dead*, six feet under, with life unreachable and therefore meaningless.[5]

Finally, Christianity and nihilism offer supposed relief. The Christian afterlife, on the one hand; or the zero-point peace of death-in-life on the other.

Death is bad

Death sucks. Mostly, it seems like a bad idea. On the whole, we'd really rather not. We can imagine circumstances in which we'd choose death, but we'd prefer to *choose* it, only when it seems like a good idea, not have it forced on us at some inconvenient time when we've really only just gotten started with things.

The suckiness of death may taint the rest of life, to varying degrees, perhaps even making it seem pervasively bad. That would not make it meaningless; "bad" is a meaning. However, it can motivate miserabilism, the stance that everything is awful. Miserabilist sermons do usually obsess about death, and shade into horror fiction. It's common to confuse miserabilism and nihilism, so thinking about death can make "life is pervasively meaningless" seem plausible, if you aren't thinking clearly. And miserabilism, like nihilism, degrades your reasoning ability.

Desire for immortality, or at least greatly increased lifespan, is natural. It's also taboo, because immortality is reserved for God. Nobody else is allowed to get it. Except when you are dead.

The Christian afterlife

"The fact of death makes everything meaningless" doesn't make any sense. It's not a natural argument; not one you'd be likely to come up with on your own.

It is, of course, Christian apologetics (propaganda).[6] The fact of death makes *this* life meaningless, apologists say; or it is meaningful only in relation to the afterlife, which is what is really meaningful. No afterlife, no meaning.

This is the standard "transcendent meaning" move: denying actual meaning, snatching away your sense of meaningfulness, relocating it to a Neverland which you can reach only by doing whatever authorities demand. If you don't believe that, then your life is totally empty, which is awful, so you must be wrong. Can you check whether they are telling the truth? No, you can only get to Neverland after you are dead, and it's not like ghosts are going to come back and say "yeah, Christianity is a total lie, there's no afterlife, you just stop existing, I'm dead so I know all about it."

When nihilism denies the Hereafter, it may fail to extend that dismissal to the rest of the story: that real meaning could only be found there. That's a danger especially for ex-Christian nihilists; but also for the rest of us, since Christian ideas are so deeply woven into secular Western culture.

When nihilism seems attractive, we grasp at any reason to believe it, even when it comes from a religion we reject.

More generally, in sorting out questions of meaningness on the way to the complete stance, it's helpful to explore ways Christian themes shape your thinking without your awareness, even if you are fully committed to rationalism, atheism, or some other religion.

Death, life, and meaningness

If you don't believe in an afterlife, the question is what to do in the one you have got. That is the matter of purpose, one of the main themes of *Meaningness*. In short, the book advocates doing things that are both enjoyable and useful. That seems obvious, but it is somehow elusive. A better understanding of how meaning works in general, and purpose in particular, may help.

1. 1.The "spark" sentence is verbatim from William Lane Craig's "The Absurdity of Life without God," and the rest of the introductory paragraph paraphrases him, although similar sales patter is standard across Christian apologetics.
2. 2."A human being is not like a toothpaste tube! That's a terrible analogy—totally invalid." Well, in what specific, relevant way are they dissimilar? No one seems to explain *why* death implies meaninglessness during life, and without explaining how that is different from future emptiness implying current emptiness, the parallelism holds.
3. 3.Iddo Landau, *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World*. Lightly edited for clarity.
4. 4.This example also comes from Iddo Landau, with my elaboration.
5. 5.Thomas W. Clark's "Death, Nothingness, and Subjectivity" points out the fallacy here: that, if there is no afterlife, we must continue to have some sort of "blank experience of nothingness" after death, which is permanent and unpleasant. "Rejecting visions of reunions with loved ones or of crossing over into the light, we anticipate the opposite: darkness, silence, an engulfing emptiness, a peaceful oblivion. But we would be wrong."
6. 6.Craig's "The Absurdity of Life without God" includes a typical version.

5 Comments

Next Page: Nihilistic depression illuminates the shadow →

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This will expand on a section in "Wavering nihilism: emotional dynamics."

Comment on this page

Next Page: Miserabilism tastes like nihilism →

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Miserabilism is the stance that everything is awful. It's often confused with nihilism because both provoke rage and depression.

"Everything is awful" is an entirely different statement from "everything is meaningless." In fact they are incompatible, because "awful" is a value judgment—a meaning—and nihilism denies all values. By declaring that *everything* is awful, which is a fixed meaning, it is technically a species of eternalism!

It doesn't taste like that, though.

Comment on this page

Next Page: Nihilistic anxiety opens into play →

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Nihilistic anxiety is also called *existential angst*.

Nihilistic anxiety is pervasive; it is not about anything in particular.

Not being able to make sense of specific things naturally causes anxiety about them, because of uncertainty. Not being able to make sense of *anything*—a consequence of nihilism—causes non-specific, pervasive anxiety.

The underlying worry is that our perception of meaningness is unreliable. Therefore, there is no sensible way to choose activities. Paralysis results. Anxiety alienates one from all projects, and from social involvement. This is depressing.

Whereas nihilistic rage, intellectualization, and depression include active strategies for stabilizing nihilism against the threat of meaningfulness, anxiety is purely a consequence.

"Cosmic horror" fiction—such as Lovecraft's Cthulhu stories—express nihilistic anxiety. They convey the feeling that everything is horrible and doomed, without making any actual sense. As I've written elsewhere, this is silly (although fun if you don't take them seriously).

Actually, in nihilistic anxiety and depression, everything shows up as existent but meaningless, and therefore silly. This includes oneself. In existentialism, this is called "The Absurd."

Perceiving this absurdity is valuable, because it's funny—or can be. Laughter is enjoyable, which points to a route out of nihilism.

Finding meaninglessness enjoyable is necessary to stabilize the complete stance, so this is a particularly *good* way out.

5 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

In this book, *existentialism* means the stance that meaningness is subjective. In contrast, eternalism and nihilism both assume that meaningness must be objective.

Existentialists also say that for meaning to be "authentic," it must be a purely individual creation. Meaning should be a perfectly free choice, made after you have thrown off all cultural assumptions and social pressures. That is not actually possible, and existentialism collapses into nihilism if you seriously attempt it.

The complete stance is that eternalism, nihilism, and existentialism are all equally wrong. Existentialism is a mere muddled middle: an attempt at compromise between eternalism and nihilism that fails because it shares with them an underlying metaphysical assumption. The assumption is that meanings can be localized inside things. Eternalism supposes the meaning of an object is inherent in it (and external to us), so it is objective. Nihilism (correctly) points out that meanings cannot be inherent, and (wrongly) concludes that they cannot exist.

Existentialism supposes the meaning lives inside your head (so it is subjective, internal, and individual). This is also wrong. I will explain later why meanings logically *can't* be subjective. They also can't be individual: they are inherently social. Also, we don't have perfectly free will to choose meanings. We are constrained by, and unavoidably depend upon, biology and society and culture.

If you try to maintain the illusion that existentialism is possible, you will probably end up adopting the stance of True Self—an idealized ego that would have the capacity to make an

individual judgement. You are also likely to make the quest to find your personal meanings into a mission. These hopeful fantasies tend toward eternalism—which can make existentialism attractive. However, both these confused stances are harmful and mistaken.

Many intelligent people nowadays recognize that meanings cannot be objective, and commit to the existentialist stance. Some know the history, and call themselves existentialists. But existentialism conclusively failed half a century ago, so the word sounds quaint and dated, and most people who adopt it now don't realize that's what they are doing. Many think they've invented a clever personal philosophy—with no clue why it won't work.

If you seriously attempt existentialism, you will fail. You cannot create your own meanings. If you take that failure seriously, and analyze what went wrong, you may recognize that subjective meanings are impossible. Then—since objective meanings are also clearly impossible—you will end up in nihilism.

The way out is to recognize that meaningness is neither subjective nor objective. It is a collaborative accomplishment of dynamic interaction. One might say that it lives in the space-between subject and object; or that it pervades the situation in which it manifests, including both subject and object. But these metaphors are misleading; meanings simply don't have locations.

12 Comments

Dramatic cloudscape over Sydney opera house
Image courtesy Trey Ratcliff

This page introduces the central chapter of *Meaningness*, explaining the *complete stance*. The complete stance recognizes that meaningness is both nebulous and patterned. Put another way, it neither fixates nor denies meanings. Or, equivalently: it enables the realistic and creative possibilities that emerge when you let go of eternalism and nihilism simultaneously.

If you arrived here unfamiliar with the term "complete stance": postpone this page! It will seem boring and technical. Instead, read "Preview: eternalism and nihilism" for an introduction to the topic.

You are already in the complete stance

Maintaining confused stances—such as eternalism and nihilism—is actually impossible, because they frequently contradict experience. We are aware, subliminally at least, that they require extensive make-believe.

Because we know eternalism and nihilism are wrong, we are all always already almost in the complete stance. It's obvious that meaningness is both nebulous and patterned. This *should* make the complete stance obvious. Unfortunately, it's often not obvious at all, because it is not a well-known concept.

It also looks unattractive from a distance. Unlike eternalism and nihilism, it does not claim to be The Ultimate Answer. Unlike eternalism and nihilism, it makes no comforting promises of certainty, understanding, control, or non-responsibility.

Further, the complete stance looks dauntingly complicated from a distance, because it works with both pattern and nebulosity, plus their intricate interrelationships. From its own point of view, it is simpler than either eternalism or nihilism. It sees only one thing (meaningness) not two (meaning

and meaninglessness). It does not attempt to divide pattern from nebulosity—an artificial and impossible separation that causes endless complications.

Pretending not to be in the complete stance, we are usually somewhat effective at pulling the wool over our own eyes, using the eternalist ploys and nihilist justifications. So we often act *as if* we were genuinely eternalists or nihilists, and this has awful consequences.

The complete stance looks boring from a distance

The road to the complete stance appears dull, at first, because it is obvious. The way is deflationary: it strips away the enticing dramas of confused stances:

Eternalism
> "You are on a Mission from God to fulfill the Ultimate Meaning of the Universe!"

Nihilism
> "You have seen through the illusion of meaning and joined the intellectual elite who recognize the hard and cold reality of Ultimate Meaninglessness!"

Existentialism
> "You have thrown off the fetters of mindless social conformity, and have the courage to create your own meanings out of raw nothingness!"

We manufacture these dramas because we fear that actually-existing meanings are inadequate. But—exciting, colorful, and appealing as fantasy-meanings may be—they are imposed, delusional, and noxious. We are better off without them.

Freedom from metaphysical delusions

The negative definition of the complete stance, as not fixating or denying meaning, is unappealing. However, it points to the main promise: freedom. Freedom from metaphysical delusions, and their propensity to limit action.

The shared metaphysical mistake underlying eternalism and nihilism is that the only meaningful kind of meaning would be non-nebulous: objective, eternal, distinct, changeless, and unambiguous. Recognizing that meanings are never that way, yet real all the same, is a more positive definition of the complete stance.

We might begin by asking:

> What is creative, but not eternalistic?
> What is realistic, but not nihilistic?

Dropping attractive delusions is the antidote to eternalism. Allowing meanings to *be as they are* is the antidote to nihilism. Then you discover that meaningness is adequate after all—*more* than adequate—wondrous, delicious, and vivid!

If we are always already in the complete stance, are we already done? No. The aim is to stabilize the complete stance, so we fall back into confused stances less often; and to gain skill in working with fluid meaningness.

Curiosity, playfulness, and creativity are three aspects of that skill.[1] These are not separate; just three different ways of talking about the same art. I will say something about each in this chapter; and more throughout *Meaningness*.

Because *this whole book* is about finding, stabilizing, and accomplishing the complete stance; and because the stance is—from its own point of view—so simple and obvious, the chapter is relatively short.

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1. 1.Vajrayanists will recognize these—along with "wondrous, delicious, and vivid"—as structural equivalents of "coemergent emptiness, bliss, and clarity," respectively. Equivalently, these are parallel to the trikaya.

7 Comments

> Child sitting on the trig point on the Schiehallion peak
> Sitting on top of the world. Specifically, the surveyors' marker at the peak of Schiehallion.
> Image courtesy Russel Wills

Complete stances resolve problems of meaningness: nihilistic depression, harms of blind faith, the anguish of ethical dilemmas, bafflement about what you should do with your life…

Misunderstanding meaningness makes many miserable. Overall, the book *Meaningness* aims to give you tools to shift from confused stances that cause unnecessary suffering into complete stances. Those are accurate understandings that engender enjoyment of the ways meaningness works in everyday life.

This chapter is the heart of the book: it explains how to find your way to complete stances, what you may find there, and why they might be attractive enough to commit to them. The chapter is somewhat abstract, so the following ones explain how to apply this understanding in specific sorts of situations.

The appeal of complete stances is dual:

- They eliminate the particular patterns of dysfunctional thinking, feeling, and acting caused by confused stances, and the suffering that results. Below I'll say a little about how complete stances *resolve* problems of meaningness in general. We've mostly already covered that for eternalism and nihilism, though; the chapters on those stances explain the antidotes.
- Complete stances promote ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are not just accurate, but enjoyable and effective. The rest of this chapter is about this intrinsic appeal. Explaining that is a bit awkward, though…

Complete stances

Confused stances result from rejecting the nebulosity of meaningness. Either they try to force meaningness into fixed patterns (like eternalism), or they deny its existence or significance (like nihilism). That sets up a confused metaphysical binary, and we mistakenly assume we must choose one side of or the other.

This chapter is about "the" complete stance, which simply consists of allowing nebulosity together with pattern. Then you have no need for fixation or denial. It is the most general and abstract of all stances. It is complete just by declining to use any general rule for discarding possibilities of meaning or meaninglessness. Accordingly, it's a bit difficult to say much about it—although the chapter does its best.

The rest of the book is about "complete stance*s*" plural. Those consist of accepting the nebulosity of particular dimensions of meaningness, such as ethics, purpose, sacredness, and so on. They resolve confused stances that fixate or deny these dimensions, or issues within them. These complete stances are more specific, so I can describe them in greater detail.

Resolution

If we were imaginary ideal philosophers, our confusions about meaningness would have begun by considering the possibility that all meanings must either be eternally unchanging and perfectly definite, or else non-existent. And then we would have decided that yes, this is correct. In an academic, abstract sense, that conclusion is the root of eternalism and nihilism. But no one actually begins that way, and hardly anyone has such a thought. Instead, we absorb confused stances from our culture as myriad patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. Starting in childhood, we imitate other people who have adopted them, and they become habitual. The metaphysical errors are implicit. No philosophical reflection is required, and usually little is involved.

Coming to a correct conceptual understanding of meaningness is helpful for dissolving fixations, and for accepting what confused stances deny. Unfortunately, that is not sufficient, or even most of the work. The confusions are deeply ingrained in our cultures and societies, and in each of our own ways of being. Agreeing that a metaphysical error is mistaken doesn't (by itself) eliminate its harms. There is some intellectual satisfaction in understanding the complete stance, but that is minor compared to its benefits for your life. (Which is why this book is not philosophy.)

Escaping confusion into a complete stance consists mainly of un-doing specific, habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting, and replacing them with better ones. You *resolve confusions* by noticing, over and over, different ways you pretend not to see icky nebulosity; act as if it weren't there; and are shocked when it screws up your plans. Having noticed, you find ways to allow yourself to see and accept it, and to think, feel, and act accordingly. This takes years.

Gradually you get more comfortable in the complete stance, and less willing to suffer in confused ones. You develop skill in applying the antidotes, and skill in feeling out how pattern and nebulosity intertwine in specific situations. On that basis, you understand better, experience positive emotions more often, and act increasingly effectively. Most of this chapter is methods for that.

Practical problems

Most confusions, and most problems, do not result from rejecting nebulosity. The methods of *Meaningness* apply only to ones that do. It is "not a general dialectic," nor an all-purpose fix for everything wrong with your life.

However, wrong ideas about meaningness often cause unrealistic, failing attempts to solve even purely practical problems. We'll see many specific examples later in the book. A brief, funny but sad one is the story of Fifi's business plan, which seemed to make sense only because she was in the grip of the confused stance of mission.

With confused stances resolved, you are more likely to take accurate, effective, realistic action in situations where considerations of meaning play some role in the difficulties. This leads to level-headedness, confidence, spontaneity, and good humor—all characteristics of the complete stance.

Talking about completeness

I said that explaining the intrinsic appeal of the complete stance is "a bit awkward." In this chapter, I cannot avoid words like *wonder*, *awe*, *play*, *elation*, and *joy*. You may have conflicted feelings about such terms. (I do!)

However, strong reactions, positive *or* negative, could obscure the message:

- These words may be inspiring—in an unhelpful way. They may make the complete stance sound like "Enlightenment," something very fancy. Then it will remain remote, abstract, theoretical, rather than useful in everyday kitchen-sink life.
- They may sound kitschy and fake. They remind me of sentimental idealizations of childhood; dumbed-down New Age and Christian evangelizing; and "nice" versions of psychotherapy-ism. Yuck.
- The words may seem to invoke something special you lost, or never had. That could trigger a sense of hopeless longing.
- Or they may induce unrealistic urges to recover the specialness through extreme effort or esoteric endeavors.
- When the unrealism is obvious, the words may provoke cynicism: these are mere fantasies, probably employed to part fools from cash.
- Or derision: anyone who believes in "wonder" must be pretending to have some sort of superior "humanistic values," but is actually a naive fool.
- Or dismissal: "wonder" is a thing, but it's trivial kid stuff; responsible adults don't have time to waste on it.[1]
- Or anger: it's important, but unavailable because our society and culture are oppressive and dysfunctional.
- Or resentment, if you hear this as "you *should* feel wonder, instead of watching TV." *Who are you to tell me what I ought to feel?*
- Or ridicule: attempts to inspire can easily veer into cringeyness.

All these emotional responses are natural and justified, I think. However, they obstruct my using the words in ways I hope you will come to find reasonable.

The reactions are manifestations of eternalism (the positive ones) or nihilism (the negative ones). *For that very reason* we can appropriate them to gain a clear understanding! That is: each of these is a *correct* reaction to some unhelpful way of interpreting the terms. Coming to understandings of "wonder" and the rest which do not provoke any of these responses—because they are neither eternalistic nor nihilistic—is an aim of this chapter.

Appeal

The main part of this chapter describes *textures* of the complete stance. These are "what it is like"s; ways it can show up in different circumstances. They are intrinsically appealing, and this is where I have to use *awkward words*. All the ones above, plus for example:

- freshness
- intimacy
- freedom
- passionate involvement
- playfulness without trivialization
- an absurdist sense of humor; laughing in the face of adversity
- enjoyment of ambiguous circumstances that might otherwise cause anxiety
- confidence

- creativity
- wizardry

Looking ahead to more specific complete stances, they offer, for example:

- meaningful purpose without compulsion
- ethical ease
- humorous affection for one's foibles
- light-hearted, effortless accomplishment
- benefits of religion without dysfunctional dogma
- heroism and nobility
- experience of flow, dancing with reality

I suggest open-minded skepticism toward such promises. Cynically dismissing them as advertising hype risks missing out on good things. Accepting them uncritically risks committing to yet another superficially attractive ideological system that can't deliver. If they seem somewhat too good to be true, but not obviously nonsense, you can investigate by trying out the methods of this chapter. Curiosity implies suspending both faith and cynicism.

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1. 1.Wonder, play, joy, and the rest *are* typically more accessible for children than adults. Why, and what to do about it, are fascinating and important topics, but out of scope for this book.

4 Comments

Hillwalkers at the peak of Schiehallion
Schiehallion peak image courtesy William Starkey

One way to understand the complete stance is through similarities and differences from *peak experiences*. Religious experiences such as "enlightenment" or being "born again" are the prototypes. Secular peak experiences may also be induced by mountains or oceans, music or art, sex or drugs.

Words used to describe peak experiences overlap with ones I use to describe textures of the complete stance. Some are *wonder*, *richness*, *reverence*, *wholeness*, *aliveness*, *simplicity*, *playfulness*, *effortlessness*, *spontaneity*, *ecstasy*, *creativity*—and *completion* itself![1] The feelings of peak experiences overlap extensively with the complete stance—but the two are not at all the same.

Peak experiences are rare, extremely intense, and non-conceptual ("ineffable"). Typically they occur spontaneously, with no clear cause. Some circumstances are conducive: mountains, rituals, and concerts, for instance. None of these reliably produce peak experiences, though.

Peak experiences can be transformational, radically reworking one's routine relationship with meaningness. They can trigger rapid personal development. However, most fade to vague treasured memories instead. That may motivate unsuccessful, increasingly desperate or even destructive attempts to recapture the effects of the experience by repeating what you mistake for the original cause.

The complete stance shares much of the texture of peak experiences, but is quite different too:

- It is a stance, not an experience: a way of being in the world, not mainly a subjective feeling
- As a way of thinking and acting, it has extensive conceptual content
- When stabilized at least somewhat, it is an everyday occurrence, not rare
- It is not typically intense—although it does not exclude intensity, and may involve strong feelings, especially at first
- It can be entered into deliberately, through rational, explainable methods, not dependent on lightning strikes or divine grace
- It must be cultivated through reflection over many years, and typically doesn't manifest until you are at least twenty-eight,[2] whereas peak experiences often occur in one's teens or childhood, without specific preparation.

The complete stance can have transformational benefits similar to peak experiences, though it is more gradual. The two also seem to be mutually enabling and mutually illuminating. Peak experiences give brief but memorable exposure to the feelings of the complete stance, which makes it easier to identify in everyday life. The complete stance makes textures familiar and easily accessible, so when intensity occurs, it is more likely to produce a peak experience instead of turbulent emotional confusion.

Abraham Maslow introduced the term "peak experience" in his 1964 *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*; it remains the indispensable work on the topic. He drew heavily on William James' 1917 *Varieties of Religious Experience*, also still a must-read. Both books are dated in language and ideology, but packed with insights we might do well to recover.

In the last year of his life, knowing he was near death, Maslow began developing a new concept of "plateau experience."[3] The way he explained the contrast between plateau and peak experiences is quite similar to the comparison I made here between the complete stance and peak experiences. Relative to peak experiences, the plateau is more cognitive; calmer, less intense and emotional; everyday, not rare; and achieved by years of deliberate work rather than unexpected grace.

The previous page described unhelpful emotional reactions to words I use in describing the complete stance: *wonder*, *richness*, *playfulness*, *effortlessness*, and *elation*, for example. These may evoke wistful memories of peak experiences, or dubious stories you've heard about them. They might give the misimpression that the complete stance, if it existed, would have to be *very special*, extraordinary, nothing like real life. Negative emotional reactions to that might be justified. This comparison with peak experiences may help dispel the misunderstanding that leads to those.

The complete stance is usually no big deal. It's not an overwhelming emotional orgasm with choirs of angels and blinding white light.[4] It's quite natural, straightforward, and sensible.

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1. 1.All these descriptive terms are from Abraham Maslow's *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, the classic text on the topic.
2. 2.Just anecdotally, 28 is the magic number; many people have told me that's when it started to make sense for them. I've no idea why, or whether this would hold up in a more rigorous empirical investigation.
3. 3.There's a summary in the Preface he added to *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* in 1970. His other statement is in "The plateau experience: A. H. Maslow and others," Stanley Krippner, editor, *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 4, pp. 107–120. A useful review of subsequent work is Nicole Gruel's "The Plateau Experience: An exploration of its origins,

characteristics, and potential," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2015, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp. 44–63.

4. 4.Not that there's anything wrong with overwhelming emotional orgasms, choirs of angels, or blinding white light. Nice place to visit, although I wouldn't want to live there.

3 Comments

Invisible man

Confused stances, such as eternalism and nihilism, are obviously wrong—and yet we frequently adopt them. That should make the complete stance obviously right—and yet it is difficult even to notice. It seems invisible when needed.

How come? This page covers several common obstacles to recognizing and adopting the complete stance.

Confusion seems simpler than completion

From a distance, the complete stance appears complex, muddled, and uncertain.

Eternalism and nihilism have a spurious simplicity, clarity, and stability about them.

• Eternalism: each thing has a meaning; here it is.
• Nihilism: nothing has a meaning; done.
• Completion: well, you see, there's this thing you haven't heard of called nebulosity, which takes a whole book to explain, and it means that meanings don't work like everyone thinks: they are not clearly identifiable so you never know quite what they are; but actually nebulosity is the same thing as pattern, which is its opposite, so—

The confused stances are simple opposites; mirror-images of each other. When it becomes obvious that one of them is wrong, the easiest thing is just to invert it, which takes you to the other.

Eternalism and nihilism both take for granted the split between pattern and nebulosity. From both standpoints, fixed meaning seems the only possible meaning. Once that split is made, the complete stance seems paradoxical. It appears to attempt to combine contradictory claims. Whereas eternalism looks *wrong* from the standpoint of nihilism—and vice versa—the complete stance looks *nonsensical* when viewed from any confused stance. Not false: just gibberish.

Completion is invisible—inconceivable—until it is apprehended on its own terms.

Mistaking the complete stance for a confused one

In our attempts to stabilize eternalism, we learned to violently reject evidence that meanings are nebulous—because that seems the slippery slope down to nihilism. In our attempts to stabilize nihilism, we learned to violently reject evidence that meanings are real and important—because that seems the slippery slope down to eternalism.

The complete stance accepts both sorts of evidence. So it incorporates the valid parts of eternalism's critique of nihilism, and of nihilism's critique of eternalism.

From point of view of eternalism, anything that contradicts eternalism looks like nihilism: the rejection of meaning. From point of view of nihilism, anything that contradicts nihilism looks like eternalism: an insistence on universal meaningfulness. Thus, from eternalism, the complete stance is indistinguishable from nihilism; and from nihilism, the complete stance is indistinguishable from eternalism. Either way, it becomes effectively invisible.

Too close to see

Whatever you do, however boringly mundane, takes into account the meanings active in your situation. That includes concrete, immediate aspects, such as the usefulness of a potato-masher for mashing potatoes; and also longer-term, more abstract ones, such as the symbolism of vegetables versus meat in your culture. Usually you are not particularly aware of such meanings, you just mash potatoes; but your activity makes sense, and it makes sense only because of them.[1]

Whatever you do, however exalted your mission, you ignore innumerable meaningless details; irrelevant events that occur for no particular reason and don't affect your project. You cannot avoid momentarily noticing such features, but you usually dismiss and forget them as quickly as possible.

You are, therefore, always already implicitly in the complete stance. You recognize, at some level, that both meaningfulness and meaninglessness are pervasive.

This is inescapably obvious. It is like the blurred image of your nose, always present in your visual field but almost never noticed. It is so obvious, so much a taken-for-granted aspect of everything you do, that you constantly pass over it without reflective consideration; without thinking through what its implications might be.[2]

Too simple

The complete stance can be defined in several ways, all ridiculously simple:

- Recognizing that meaning and meaninglessness both exist
- Recognizing that meanings are both real and indefinite
- Abstaining from both eternalism and nihilism

    That's *all*? That's it?? That's your *Answer to Life, The Universe, And Everything*?!

Well, yes.

I'm sorry you were hoping for something complicated and difficult. That might make you feel like you'd *got something* when you finally understood it, so you'd have made progress and could feel better about yourself.

There *are* implications… and applications… and practices… and… enormous conceptual complexities? You are now only a small way through the book *Meaningness*. Maybe the rest will be more satisfying?

It's just looking at particular patterns of meaning to see how they are nebulous and what that means, though.

Lack of understandable explanation

Because the complete stance is too simple to accept, it needs a complicated explanation. The Fundamental Texts section of the *Meaningness* Further Reading Appendix describes several. Unfortunately, each of these is in some way inaccessible for most readers.

The complete stance is invisible simply because no one has explained it in a way many people could follow. What's missing, and needed, is a complicated conceptual explanation that is nonetheless as plain-spoken and straightforward as possible.

Meaningness aims to be that.

Lack of cultural and social support

Popular culture is all about the confused stances. TV sitcom plots and dialog perform confused stances. Song lyrics express confused stances. "Politics" is the collision of confused stances.

Songs expressing the complete stance are… uncommon.

Many social institutions support confused stances. Most religions enforce eternalism. Most NGOs are infested with mission. The consumer economy promotes materialism.

Institutions promoting the complete stance are… uncommon.

The complete stance is not part of our current everyday world. It is invisible simply because it is unknown.

Sailing the Seas of Meaningness, a much later part of *Meaningness*, suggests ways the complete stance might become a taken-for-granted aspect of our culture, society, and psychology, in the way the confused stances are now.

Missing emotional pay-offs

Eternalism offers the comfort of certainty of meanings, of a benevolent Cosmic Plan; nihilism offers the comfort that suffering is meaningless and you don't have to care. The complete stance makes no such comforting promises.

The *resolution* offered by the complete stance does not take the form of *answers*. We want answers, because they seem solid, although resolution is what we need. The primordial separation of pattern and nebulosity itself arises from the urge to categorize; to find definite answers. In terms of problems of meaning, we want concrete answers to "should I have sex with my wife's sister" and "which political cause should I devote my life to." We do not want an abstract explanation of the ultimate unanswerability of questions of ethics and purpose. That does not seem useful.

The complete stance does offer emotional goods, but they are less obviously appealing. More like healthy vegetables than eternalist candy or nihilist Everclear.

Overwhelmingness

Eternalism and nihilism both produce constricted views on the world. To maintain either, you must blind yourself to much of what would otherwise be visible. You must un-see the constantly

evolving rearrangements of meaning and meaninglessness, of pattern and nebulosity, of understanding and baffled wonderment.

Beginning to see interweaving pattern and nebulosity opens a bigger, richer, stranger world. This can induce agoraphobia—a sense of lost bearings, of exposure in untracked vastness.

The complete stance, when first encountered, can seem emotionally overwhelming. The dynamic tension between meaning and meaninglessness manifests as boiling energy which may be simultaneously frightening and attractive. One's familiar ways of understanding, of thinking and feeling about meanings—the confused stances—no longer work. Lacking a map of the new world, one may naturally recoil in shock. Retreating to the seeming safety of a renewed commitment to a confused stance is a common first reaction to a glimpse of the complete stance.

It is best then to proceed gently. Rushing development into the complete stance can backfire. Apply the antidotes to the confused stances, and the practices for stabilizing the complete stance, only when you feel relatively emotionally secure.

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1. 1.This alludes to an atypically humorous passage in Thomas Ligotti's miserabilist manifesto *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*. In contrast with 190-proof nihilism, miserabilism admits that some things are marginally meaningful. "A potato masher is not useless if you want to mash potatoes… Buddhists have no problem with a potato-masher system of being because for them there are no absolutes. What they need to realize is that everything is related to everything else in a great network of potato mashers that are always interacting with each other." Ligotti rightly points out that this does not, as claimed, solve the problem of suffering. (pp. 76-78 in the 2010 edition.)
2. 2.Buddhists may find it interesting to compare some of the obstacles I describe here with the doctrine of "The Four (Seeming) Faults of Natural Awareness." In this context, "natural awareness" means the non-dual view that perceives form and emptiness simultaneously. It is "natural" not in being common, but in being the default state if you are not actively avoiding seeing emptiness or seeing form—because otherwise both are obvious. In *An Arrow to the Heart*, Ken McLeod translates the Faults as: "So close you can't see it; So deep you can't fathom it; So simple you can't believe it; So good you can't accept it." They are discussed in Ngakpa Chögyam's *Wearing the Body of Visions*, pp. 64-65.

12 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Meaningness is inherent in interaction, so you can observe it, especially while participating in it.

(This is particularly helpful as a corrective to the mistaken Romantic idea of Looking Deeply Within to find True Meaning.)

Maintaining dual attention on your participation for its own sake and as revealing something about the nature of meaningness.

Bearing in mind the texture of open-ended curiosity, i.e. being open to pattern but not forcing it.

Keeping an eye out for:

• Nebulosity
• Pattern and nebulosity intertwining

- Strategies of the confused stances (ploys and evasions)
- Stance transitions

Insights from ethnomethodology.

Comment on this page

Treasure Map

A preliminary move toward adopting the complete stance, which resolves confusions about meaningness, is identifying or locating it. What even is it? How do I access it?

As the "Obstacles" page observed, the method is too simple: *just stop trying to separate pattern and nebulosity*. If you complain "but how am I supposed to do that," most explanations are too complicated: obscure, difficult, and over-long.

The complete stance can be approached both experientially and conceptually. You may find one approach easier, or the other. For some, increasing comfort and familiarity with nebulosity in experience, and then finding patterns within nebulosity, gradually leads to conceptual understanding. *Meaningness* mainly aims for conceptual understanding first. The two approaches are synergistic, and it's most effective to combine them. Stabilizing the complete stance eventually requires both: it is "a way of thinking, feeling, and acting."

This page provides a medium-length explanation of a four-step method for finding the complete stance. It's ambiguously both conceptual and experiential. I hope it is neither too simple nor too complicated. A more detailed version appears later in the book.

The fundamental method of meaningness

Specifically in this instance, through open receptivity and passionate involvement: first finding nebulosity; then finding patterning within nebulosity; finding how they relate; and participating from engaged apprehension.

This should sound fairly familiar. It is the method used throughout *Meaningness*.[1] We've seen many implicit applications already.

I sketched an informal version in the introduction to the book: "Accepting nebulosity resolves confusions about meaning." Now we can be somewhat more precise and detailed. Let's take it a few words at a time…

Specifically in this instance

This is a practical method for resolving problems of meaningness as they arise. It is not about theoretical or philosophical analysis. Applying it to abstractions tends to veer into vapid metaphysical speculation.

Use it concretely, at least at first. Ground the practice in specifics.

When you've succeeded with sufficiently many everyday-life cases, you will start to see more general patterns. Then drawing more abstract conclusions may be justified.

Finding, through receptivity and involvement

"Finding" is an imperfect term, in suggesting a finality: you've *found* nebulosity, so you can put it in a box and take it home with you. That is an unworkable fantasy of fixation.

"Finding," here, implies instead an ongoing interaction.

An alternate phrasing, "looking for" nebulosity, could put too much emphasis on your part in the interaction. It is a little too prescriptive, active, and subjective. Making a project of it—applying a technique, or searching along a mapped path—does not allow for nebulosity's own active role of manifesting itself in the situation. Nebulosity often shows up unexpectedly, perhaps as breakdown or as serendipity.

"Observing" or "experiencing" nebulosity risks the opposite misunderstanding. These terms are too passive; they put too much of the burden on nebulosity to show itself. They wrongly suggest nebulosity is an objective feature of the situation that can be dispassionately recorded.

"Open receptivity" is the nebulous aspect of your own role in finding nebulosity. "Passionate involvement" is the patterning aspect of your role.

Step 1: Nebulosity first

Viewed from the complete stance, nebulosity and pattern are inseparable, and both are always completely and equally present. However, our usual way of being overlooks or denies nebulosity, which often seems unwelcome. When approaching completion from confusion, one must overcome the ingrained habit of prioritizing patterns, by attending to nebulosity instead. That's easier to the extent that you can experience nebulosity positively, and come to actively enjoy it.

The introduction to this book included a preliminary, vague explanation of nebulosity. It said that meaningness is insubstantial, amorphous, non-separable, transient, and ambiguous.[2]

Recoiling from nebulosity stops you from noticing its qualities. It's just "Ugh! Look away, run away, nuke it from orbit!" Taken as an absolute—as total absence of pattern and of meaning—nebulosity *is* devoid of characteristics. The five terms "insubstantial, amorphous, non-separable, transient, ambiguous" could be taken just as stating lacks: of solidity, shape, discreteness, continuity, and definiteness. However, since nebulosity is inseparable from pattern, it never occurs absolutely, or in the absence of pattern. When found, it does have these qualities—negative and nebulous as they sound.

We can re-express the five qualities in positive terms. "Positive," both as characteristics nebulosity does suggest; and as ways nebulosity may be welcome, rather than uniformly noxious. We could say these positive characterizations point toward pattern from nebulosity. That implies also pointing toward their inseparability, as it dances in the middle, between these poles at the extremes. Recognizing and working with this inseparability is the complete stance.

Overall, we could summarize the positive aspects of nebulosity as freedom from fixation. Absolute patterns, lacking nebulosity, would be perfectly rigid. They would create a totalitarianism of existence, in which everything not demanded by the Cosmic Plan was impossible.

Insubstantiality permits movement without restriction. It points toward the fluidity and flexibility of pattern and nebulosity when taken together.

Amorphousness allows for creativity, improvisation, and change, like a sculptor's modeling clay, when fixed forms might not.

Non-separability can be understood as intimacy, connection, and as the pervasiveness of meaning.

Transience, the fact that meanings and circumstances are not eternal, engenders freshness, opportunity, serendipity, and spontaneity.

Ambiguity provides freedom from fixed meanings. It gives birth to humorousness, openness, and wonder.

These are qualities of the *texture of interaction*: of perception, action, and awareness. To find nebulosity, lightly bear in mind the possibility of noticing these qualities as they arise in everyday life. When you do, gently investigate further, feeling for their occurrence in specific situations.

Step 2: Finding patterning within nebulosity

The specific words matter here again. One aims at finding *patterning*, rather than specific patterns. That is, for this method, one avoids solidifying patterning into discrete forms. (Making patterns as discrete and rigid as possible can *sometimes* be extremely valuable, in engineering, for example. It's counterproductive for this practice, though.)

"Within" expresses the method of approaching the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern *starting from* the side of nebulosity. After finding nebulosity, one finds patterning *as an emerging aspect of* that nebulosity.

The opposite practice is also feasible: finding nebulosity as an aspect of patterns.[3] However, the more radical motion from nebulosity toward pattern may make it easier to find the complete stance, by restraining the natural tendency to overemphasize pattern.

So one finds patterning within a particular context that one has already found to be nebulous. That makes it harder to absolutize than a pattern-in-the-abstract. One finds patterning as softened by the nebulosity that surrounds it. Then it points toward their inseparability. (This again is just a method of approach, not the complete understanding. The complete stance takes nebulosity and pattern as mutually pervasive, and recognizes both equally, not favoring either.)

The book introduction described five qualities of pattern: reliability, clarity, distinctness, endurance, and definiteness. Having found nebulosity in a situation, one may attend to the possibility of locating these qualities as well.

The habitual impulse then will be to grasp at them, and to try to separate them from the corresponding qualities of nebulosity: insubstantiality, amorphousness, non-separability, transience, and ambiguity. Restrain this impulse. That is the second step in the method.

Step 3: Finding how nebulosity and pattern relate

"Finding" is a careful word choice here again. It could contrast with "analyzing," for example. Analysis is sometimes extremely useful, but in this method it would tend to harden patterns prematurely.

Finding requires both gentleness and precision. Gentleness includes intuitive awareness, non-conceptual sensitivity, and receptive exploration. Precision includes clear thinking, close attention, and deliberate investigation. Combining them is restraint from fixation and denial of

both pattern and nebulosity. That avoids jumping to conclusions before developing accurate understanding.

The relationship between nebulosity and pattern is simple in the abstract: they are inseparable aspects of each other. Nebulosity is always patterned; patterning is always nebulous. But we aren't doing philosophy here. We want practical resolutions to particular problems of meaningness. How best to sort out a work or family conflict, for example? Specific details matter, so "nebulosity and pattern are inseparable!" is not obviously helpful.

Ways nebulosity and pattern intertwine in a particular situation or domain can be unique, surprising, or unboundedly complex, so ultimately no fixed method for this third step is possible.

However, it often helps to find the simultaneous presence of both of a seemingly-opposed quality pair from among the five. Feel for their mutual pervasion: how is this *both* insubstantial yet reliable? Amorphous yet clear? Non-separable yet distinct? Transient yet enduring? Ambiguous yet definite? Can these coexist? Can all be true at once? Partially or relatively, at least? This sounds quite abstract, but it may reveal specifics in specific situations.

The rest of "Doing meaning better"—the main division of *Meaningness*, of which this page is a part—applies the fundamental method to many dimensions of meaningness. How do nebulosity and pattern relate in problems of ethics, purpose, identity, and so on?

In a sense, having read this far, you know everything in the rest of the book. But working through particulars in these different dimensions should make it much easier to apply the fundamental method in your life.

Step 4: Participating from engaged apprehension

This fourth step is the activity of the complete stance itself.

"Engaged apprehension" expresses the pattern and nebulosity of one's self in interaction.[4] It echoes "open receptivity and passionate involvement," but in the opposite order, because now we are emphasizing active participation. Also, whereas "open receptivity and passionate involvement" are about *you*, "engaged apprehension" is about interaction, in which you are inseparable from "the situation." (This inseparability of self and situation is the topic of the upcoming chapter on selfness.)

The complete stance is a better way of thinking, feeling, *and acting*. These are also inseparable.[5] Nebulosity and pattern are sensed as aspects of participatory activity, and participation flows from their inseparability.

The rest of this chapter on the complete stance is mostly about that!

Later, *Meaningness and Time* applies the method to society, culture, and psychology, across time: past, present, and especially the future. Can a shift to the complete stance resolve our urgent, global crisis of meaning? I believe this is possible.

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1. 1.This method is structurally parallel to the Four Naljors of Dzogchen Sem-dé. (The Four Naljors, rather than the Four Ting-nge-dzin, because this page corresponds to the *path level* in the threefold logic of base, path, and result.) I believe the Four Naljors, and other Buddhist non-conceptual meditation systems that work directly with form and emptiness, are powerfully synergistic with the more conceptual approach I sketch here. For an introduction, see Ngakpa Chögyam's *Roaring Silence*, which covers only the first two

naljors. *shock amazement* is a difficult, advanced text that includes all four naljors and the four resulting ting-nge-dzin. The explanation of the complete stance in *Meaningness* is *not* meant as a presentation of Dzogchen. They are structurally parallel, but the subject matter is not the same.

2. 2.This fivefold characterization comes from Vajrayana Buddhism, which takes it as foundational ontology. I don't think it has any special ontological status, but I do find it useful as a reminder of some ways you may find nebulosity. I've modified it somewhat for use in this different context. I recommend Ngakpa Chögyam's *Spectrum of Ecstasy: Embracing the Five Wisdom Emotions of Vajrayana Buddhism* for an extensive explanation of five ways emptiness and form (analogous to nebulosity and pattern) manifest and interrelate.

3. 3.*The Eggplant* explores this alternative approach. In the domain of technical rationality, which absolutizes patterns, finding nebulosity within them opens out one's understanding into meta-rationality.

4. 4."Apprehension" means direct, immediate comprehension of a situation, not necessarily on the basis of full conceptual understanding. The word also can imply worried anticipation, but that's not the sense here.

5. 5.Buddhists may notice that the phrase "thinking, feeling, and acting" is an expression of the trikaya; their inseparability is the svabhavikakaya.

16 Comments

The complete stance, the way of being that recognizes the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern, shows up in characteristic *textures*. For example: *wonder*, *play*, and *creation*.

These textures may appear spontaneously as qualities of thought, feeling, and interaction, at times you adopt the complete stance. They spring naturally from the dynamic interweaving of nebulosity and pattern.

The previous book page, "Finding the complete stance," may have seemed unhelpfully abstract. This section on the textures describes what the stance is *like*, so you can recognize it as it arises.

You can also deliberately enter into the textures, as methods. You can nudge yourself into a texture, as a way of adopting the complete stance in the moment. And you can practice the textures as methods for stabilizing it longer-term. As such, they are parallel to the eternalist ploys and the nihilist justifications. These are all tricks for stabilizing the corresponding stances.

This is the introduction to a series of six pages, each describing one texture. The six-way taxonomy is somewhat arbitrary. You'll find that the textures blur into each other; and more could be added to the list. Each is simply "how things go when nebulosity and pattern are not divided," so they are not distinct.

A spectrum of textures

The six textures can be thought of as each leading to the next: wonder → curiosity → humor → play → enjoyment → creation. It is useful to understand this as a causal sequence. It is also useful to understand that it is not actually one.

As a sequence, the textures are ordered from *more nebulosity* to *more pattern*. The order is also from least active to most. Denying nebulosity is habitual, so you enter the complete stance initially by recognizing it. At first that is simply *wonderment*: here's this amazing feature of reality that somehow you'd been overlooking! Wonder is willingness to allow that perception to

persist. Then you notice that pattern appears along with nebulosity; and that provokes *curiosity*. What's going on with that? As you start to understand how that works, it seems *humorous*. It's paradoxical, surprising, and fun. With growing understanding, you can *play* with meaningness. You can experiment, improvise, dance with it. Play is *enjoyable*; you want to take it further. As you discover nebulous patterns, you begin to *create*, to make new meanings.

As I said, this causal sequence is not *true*. It's not false, either. It's a sometimes-useful way of conceptualizing the relationships among textures that ultimately are not ordered, or even separate.

- Each of the textures depends on all the others, and feeds all the others.
- We're always already in the middle of things, so we may find ourselves in any texture unpredictably, as circumstances arise.
- Each of the textures springs from the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern, and those aren't quantifiable. Everything is always entirely nebulous and entirely patterned. "More nebulous" or "more patterned" is nonsense, looked at that way.

Three-way parallelisms

We can conceptualize the textures another way, based on taking three as primary: wonder, play and creation. Then we treat the others as aspects of the primaries: curiosity and humor as aspects of wonder, and enjoyment as an aspect of play.

This rather artificial scheme enables parallels between the three primary textures; the three false promises of eternalism; and the three main emotional dynamics of nihilism. These parallels are also somewhat artificial, due to the nebulosity of all these categories, but may make conceptual connections that aid understanding.

Looked at this way:

- Wonder is nebulous patterns of understanding, where eternalism promises complete understanding
- Play is nebulous patterns of control, where eternalism promises complete control
- Creation goes beyond the already-defined into the nebulously knowable, where eternalism promises complete certainty.

In each of these you can see how the texture corrects eternalism by restoring recognition of the nebulosity it denied—while still retaining pattern. So these textures can serve as antidotes to the appeal of eternalism's false promises.

Likewise, we find parallels for the nihilistic dynamics that deny pattern:

- Wonder is an antidote to nihilistic intellectualization, which tries to stop you from perceiving and understanding patterns of meaningfulness
- Play is an antidote to nihilistic depression, which tries to cut you off from acting on patterns of control
- Creation is an antidote to nihilistic rage, which tries to destroy patterns of meaning.

A further series of parallels relates wonder, play, and creation with thinking, feeling, and acting:

- Curiosity and humor, which are aspects of wonder, are ways of thinking that allow patterns to be nebulous, rather than fixating them
- Enjoyment of the dance of nebulosity and pattern, which is an aspect of play, is the characteristic feeling of the complete stance

- Creation, which conjures patterns from nebulosity, is the characteristic activity of the complete stance.[1]

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1. 1.Buddhists will recognize a further parallel with the trikaya. This is particularly clear in the Dzogchen presentation of the trikaya as *dang*, *rolpa*, and *tsal*. Each of these words has many meanings in Tibetan, and so is untranslatable except in context. However, dang can mean "openness" or "clarity"; rolpa most often means "play"; and tsal can mean "creativity." (I've spelled these words phonetically. If you want to look them up in a dictionary, they are *gdangs*, *rol pa*, and *rtsal*. Many letters in Tibetan spelling are silent.)

2 Comments

Next Page: Wonder →

> Peak view
> Wondrous perceptual field at Schiehallion peak, courtesy greenzowie

Our aim here is to understand wonder as a *texture* of the complete stance.

In wonder, you perceive nebulosity and pattern simultaneously, and impose neither meaningfulness or meaninglessness. (That's what "the complete stance" means.) We'll look at what wonder is, what it implies, and what its value may be. And we'll discuss how to cultivate wonder as a method for adopting, maintaining, and stabilizing the complete stance; and as a prerequisite for other textures such as curiosity, play, and creation.

Awe, wonder, nebulosity, and pattern

> Misty mountain hop
> Schiehallion's flanks "girdled in modesty: clouds below, rocks above." Image courtesy Don MacCauley

Recall that a good way to understand the complete stance is by comparison with peak experiences. That works here:

Wonder is to the complete stance as *awe* is to peak experiences.

So what is awe? An influential psychological study found that it consists of perceiving overwhelmingness plus incomprehensibility.[1] It can be experienced as either ecstatic or terrifying, depending on whether the vastness, the overwhelmingness, seems threatening. The emotional intensity of awe motivates you to make sense of the experience; to expand your horizons to admit its meaning. That is what gives peak experiences their transformational power.[2]

I suggest that wonder occurs in *heightened agendaless attention* combined with *suspension of habitual interpretation*. Heightened agendaless attention allows and perceives unexpected patterning; suspension of habitual interpretation allows and perceives unexpected nebulosity. This is what makes it a texture of the complete stance: recall that the stance consists in recognizing pattern and nebulosity inseparably.

"Agendaless attention" means that you are not looking or listening for anything in particular. Wonder is not wonder*ing*. Instead, you appreciate the *vividness* of pattern, the fascinating richness. That is what draws and heightens your attention. Wonder appreciates phenomena just as they are, for their own sake, not for some external value. It is a non-instrumental attitude. (We'll

come back to this as a major theme in the play page, and then again in the complete stance for purpose.)

"Habitual interpretation" is the usually-automatic, unthinking, barely noticed, nearly-instantaneous perceptual process that assigns meanings to phenomena, or dismisses them as meaningless. Eternalism is hard to overcome because we normally *see meanings*, as if they were objectively given.[3] We see vomit on the sidewalk *as* revolting, a smile *as* flirtatious, a bit of fluff on the carpet *as* meaningless. *Suspending* interpretation means *allowing* meaningness: neither imposing nor opposing meaning; leaving it alone as it is, not messing with it. Wonder grants instant freedom from metaphysical confusions: not because you resolve them conceptually, but because you have set aside their implications.

Now we can understand awe more precisely: as *forced wonder*. Overwhelmingness compels attention, and makes it agendaless by eliminating any possibility of effective action. Incomprehensibility makes habitual interpretations impossible. Thus, in awe it is impossible *not* to perceive pattern and nebulosity simultaneously.

As this page progresses, we'll see ways wonder differs from awe in terms of the points of contrast between the complete stance and peak experiences:[4]

- Awe is rare—because overwhelming, incomprehensible situations are usually dangerous, or else soon become overly familiar. Wonder can occur frequently.
- Awe's overwhelming emotions and its incomprehension prevent conceptual thought. It can be stupefying as it occurs, though it may motivate subsequent work at understanding. Wonder may involve intricate conceptual thinking (or not).
- Wonder can be quite quiet, so it may even go unnoticed.
- Wonder, unlike awe, can be practiced as a deliberate method.
- Wonder enables gradual transformation, rather than sudden radical rebirth.

Everyday wonder

Spider web against scallop shell

Wonder is a natural way of being. It's not esoteric or special. You may often adopt it briefly, without even noticing—if you don't recognize its significance, and don't know what to look for.

Let's do an example. There's a black scallop shell in the corner of my window. I noticed, from across the room, the sun glinting on the web a spider had built across it. There was a moment of revulsion at the mess—but, without thinking, I suspended that habitual interpretation.

Unexpected beauty had captured my attention. Walking across to the window, spots of dust stuck to strands of the web were glittering. (I'm afraid the photo does not accurately show the effect, due to camera limitations. Maybe you can supply the gleam from memories of similar scenes.)

Like stars in the night sky. I stopped and just looked, enjoying their brilliance, for perhaps a second or less.

It occurred to me then that the bejeweled spider-strands looked like galaxy filaments, the largest known structures in the universe.

Rotating image of the cosmic web
Web of galaxy filaments: simulation and visualization by Andrey Kravtsov and Anatoly Klypin, NCSA

Wonder is intrinsic, non-referential; it involves no external purpose. In the moment, none of this was either meaningful or meaningless. Not the visual activity of my eyes moving from point to point, not the feeling of unexpected enjoyment, not the conceptual analogy between dust motes and galaxies. These were just present, as-they-were—because my heightened attention was agendaless.

If I had not been writing about wonder, I would have left them there. The entire event took only seconds, and I would immediately have forgotten it. Meaningfulness and meaninglessness were equally irrelevant.

As wonder is a texture of the complete stance, eternalism and nihilism are both naturally opposed to it.

- The eternalist impulse is to turn this into something special: a Meaningful Experience. A dualist eternalist might say this was a moment of grace, granted by God, revealing the majesty of His Creation. A monist eternalist might say I had a profound revelation of the unity of the Macrocosm and the Microcosm; "as above, so below." A physics crank might invent some theory about how the cosmic web is causally similar to a spider's.

- The nihilist impulse is to dismiss it as obviously meaningless. Spider webs are utterly mundane and ordinary. They have nothing in common with the large-scale structure of the universe, apart from a purely coincidental and superficial visual similarity. There is, as a matter of objective fact, no meaningful connection between dust specks and galaxies. This whole thing was a straightforward cognitive error, embroidered into an emotional fantasy, in order to preserve the delusion that life has some sort of "meaning" beyond animals being wired up to maximize their evolutionary fitness.

Both these impulses terminate wonder as soon as it you notice it, inhibiting the natural process.

On the other hand, if you *don't* notice wonder when it arises spontaneously, then you don't cut it off by reflex—but maybe you don't get much benefit from it, either.

In this case, wonder lasted perhaps three seconds. I had seen what there was to be seen. I walked away.

But it turned out that there was meaning in it after all. In wonder, there is no external purpose; but a minute later, it occurred to me to use the example here. Perhaps it will help you notice your own moments of everyday wonder.

The overview of textures explained that wonder leads to curiosity, and then to humor, and play, and enjoyment, and creation. I hope you can see how each of those contributed to the writing of this little story.

Feelings of wonder

All stances have thinking, feeling, and activity aspects, which pervade their textures. The previous section explained wonder's activity aspect, consisting just of heightened attention and the suspension (non-activity![5]) of interpretation. Here I'll cover feelings typical of wonder; then we'll do thinking in the next section.

Spaciousness is the feeling of release from the bounds of fixed meaning.

Fixed meanings are claustrophobic. "Ugh, dirty, and I'm stuck in a house[6] full of spiders, they're creepy, maybe poisonous, I don't want to have to clean this up, it's a hassle, I don't have time for

it, I have *other* stupid stuff I have to do." All that in a fraction of a second: not as thoughts articulated in words, but as the overall, oppressive gestalt of the encounter.

The routine meanings of a situation block your view of it. Habitual categorization suppresses details; it dulls the senses. I felt shut in a small box, confined in space and time and possibilities for action. But bright sunlight drew my attention sharply, my perception became agendaless, I saw vivid details I would otherwise have overlooked, and so other meanings were revealed.

Re-seeing the web as beautiful, the usual interpretations fell away. It's not that I realized they were untrue—all my complaints *were* true, pretty much. It's that they were suspended; ceased to have any relevance.

Aesthetic appreciation, fascination with beauty in its intricate specificity, typically accompanies wonder. Heightened agendaless attention can perceive the unexpected, which reveals *freshness*: whatever you see, hear, smell, taste or touch is unique, not merely another instance of a familiar category. Wonder is almost synonymous with amazement, astonishment, and perplexity. Reality is a delicious surprise. Not a surprise as in "maybe this will happen, or maybe that, but I expect *this*"—and then you get *that*. Surprise as in "I couldn't have imagined this beforehand."

Wonder is the feeling of accepting contact with nebulosity. Wonder requires *willingness* to allow chaos, uncertainty, ambiguity, discontinuity, meaninglessness.

Wonder is ambivalent. In wonder, there are no set boundaries, and the world opens up into vastness. That can come as a release and a relief; or you may feel agoraphobia. You realize nothing is altogether solid, and that groundlessness provokes *vertigo*. If eternalism or nihilism is habitual, wonder's open-endedness—its non-confirmation of your stance toward meaning— seems threatening.[7] That's why there's an immediate urge to shut it down by insisting that whatever is happening is either meaningful or meaningless, rather than letting it be.

The confused stances are defenses against the anxiety of nebulosity. Stabilizing the complete stance involves learning from practice how and when you can tolerate it—or enjoy it.

That is the cost of *freedom*. It is the exit toll you pay for stepping out of a musty, dingy box into a bigger, brighter, stranger world. It is the price for freshness, appreciation, and insight. Wonder is the prerequisite too for curiosity, humor, play, enjoyment, and creation; they rest on clouds. They are often joyful, but inevitably also sometimes queasy.

Wonder and insight

Studies of awe have found that it can be provoked by conceptual vastness, just as by perceptual vastness. Encountering an overwhelmingly powerful, initially incomprehensible intellectual system can blow you away.[8] You recognize that its vast sweep implies you will be forced to reevaluate much of what you thought you understood—which might radically change how you think, feel, and act—but specifically *what* requires revision is obscure until you have assimilated it.

Let's call the analog of conceptual awe "intellectual wonder." As a response to incomprehensibility, we can contrast it with wondering and with bafflement. *Wondering* has a specific question in mind, and expects a specific form of answer. (I'll call this "closed-ended curiosity" on the next page.) It may involve heightened attention, but does not suspend habitual interpretations. *Bafflement* is the inability to even get started on making sense. Familiar meanings are suspended because they're obviously irrelevant, but you cannot bring conceptual attention to bear, so you are incurious. *Intellectual wonder* recognizes that your existing systems of meaning cannot encompass the new one, so you must suspend your usual ways of thinking.

Simultaneously, the new one is fascinating, so it draws your attention to its intricate details; but you don't yet know what to attend to, so it is agendaless. (This leads naturally to "open-ended curiosity," which is similar, but more active, directed.)

Suspending interpretation gives space for unexpected alternative meanings to emerge. That is *insight*.

Understanding gained from wonder is nebulous, especially initially. The complete stance recognizes that *all* understanding is nebulous—whereas complete understanding is a false promise of eternalism. However, the new meanings emerging in wonder should later be tested and reconciled with one's other, more solid understandings. Apparent insights may be productive, or not. The spider web/cosmic web analogy was spurious and unproductive (other than for its use here). A famously valuable example was August Kekulé's breakthrough understanding of the chemical structure of benzene in a dream of the ouroboros—a snake biting its own tail.[9]

Insight opens new possibilities for action: alternative responses to situations and feelings. This points the way into the more active textures of the complete stance. You are freed for curiosity, play, and creation.

Wonder as a method

To the extent that you have stabilized the complete stance, its six textures often occur naturally and effortlessly. Short of that, the textures can also be used as methods for adopting and stabilizing it.

Wonder is the most receptive, least active texture, so it's harder to apply deliberately than the others. You can't just say "right, I'll do an hour's worth of wonder now, and then have lunch." (Or anyway I can't!)

That there is no specific method for producing wonder may contribute to the misleading and counterproductive sense of specialness around it. It helps to consider it *no big deal*; something to enjoy when it occurs, but not something to try to hold onto, crank up artificially, or make a fuss about after the fact.

On the other hand, wonder is not a subjective experience;[10] it's not something that just happens to you, like awe. It does have subtle *doing* components: attention and suspension.

The circumstances conducive for awe may also produce wonder. Going to a concert *just in order to* find wonder might be slightly silly (or not!). But if you are going to one *anyway*, you could maintain background awareness that wonder (or awe) *might* occur, and intend to *notice* and *allow* it if it does.

So in fact the method for wonder is: wonder at wonder! Recall that wonder is heightened agendaless attention plus suspension of interpretation. When wonder occurs, maintain heightened agendaless attention *to attention itself*, and suspend interpretation *of suspended interpretation*. Attention to attention intensifies wonder. Suspension of interpretation of interpretation allows it to persist. (If you think "oh, yes, I seem to have suspended interpretation, so this must be wonder, which means I'm adopting the complete stance, so the next thing is, I have to figure out what 'the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern' is supposed to mean"—then the moment is lost, and wonder collapses into a fixed system of conceptual interpretation you read about on some website.)

Noticing wonder requires knowing what it is like: the associated thoughts, feelings, and (in)actions. I hope this page gives a preliminary, conceptual sense of that. Practice develops a non-conceptual familiarity, which is more reliable.

Many meditation methods that aim at "emptiness"—nebulosity, roughly—train you to suspend interpretation. These do seem to facilitate wonder. It *is* possible to decide to suspend interpretation for an hour before lunch.

There are meditation methods that train you in heightened attention—including, in some cases, attention to attention. However, nearly all aim at single-pointed focus for a particular purpose. I do not know of one that specifically trains you in the agendaless attention that wanders about according to its evolving fascinations.[11] The poet Robert Bly recommends training in art appreciation for this purpose; he describes it as "sharpening the senses by labor."

An experiment in wonder

Altazimuth theodolite (same as a zenith sector, but two-axis)

Want to do an experiment?

I'll tell you a story that gave me a moment of intellectual wonder. It may or may not for you!

What I suggest is that, as you read it, you maintain awareness of the possibility of noticing heightened, agendaless, conceptual attention, and the possibility of suspending of your usual understanding. At a certain point in the story, you may notice a slightly uncanny frisson of disorientation. Then, metaphorically, your ears may suddenly prick up—you may find yourself fascinated. Your mind may dart in all directions looking for answers, or you may want to read on as quickly as possible. I suggest instead that you stop for a moment then, and pay attention to the feelings, and what you are thinking, and what you are wanting to do. Then proceed slowly, dividing your attention between the story and watching your own attention and interpretation. And allow the story to not make sense for a moment, but do not attempt to make your allowing incomprehension to mean anything itself.

In 1765, surveyor Jeremiah Dixon and astronomer Charles Mason of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, England, set out to survey the Pennsylvania-Maryland border—later known as the Mason-Dixon Line. It took two years to mark the boundary across 233 miles. Through uninhabited wilderness, dense forests, hostile Indian territory, up and down mountains, they made painstaking observations using delicate, state-of-the-art scientific instruments. Mason's astronomical career was devoted to the most pressing technological challenge of the time: accurately determining one's geographical position, especially when at sea. The best method involved using a highly accurate clock and fancy telescopes, which they brought.

The boundary was legally defined as running due west from a specific point, so for the survey it was mainly important to get the latitude—the north/south coordinate—right. For this, Mason and Dixon used a *zenith sector*. That was a six-foot telescope mounted on a wheel, like in the picture above. Tick marks on the wheel told them the telescope's angle from straight up. The wheel was mounted on a tripod that they adjusted to verticality using a plumb bob—a weight on a string that points straight down. By locating stars in the telescope, checking their angles from the vertical, and consulting tables that said where they should appear at what time of night, they could determine their position. As a simplified example, as you go north, the pole star appears to move higher above the horizon, and closer to the zenith—the point in the sky directly above you.

From first principles, they calculated that their position error should not be more than fifty feet. Yet over the course of the survey, they repeatedly found anomalies of several hundred feet. They

attributed this to imprecision in the instruments, which they corrected by taking multiple measurements and averaging. Or so they thought! But they were wrong. In fact, the line they laid out does repeatedly veer hundreds of feet off from straight east-west.[12] And not at random…

When Mason got back to Greenwich, his boss, the Astronomer Royal Nevil Maskelyne, suspected a different explanation. Newton's theory of gravitation had been thoroughly confirmed as applying to planets. In principle, it was supposed to apply to any sufficiently large object, but there was no evidence for this. However, physicists had calculated that it should be just barely possible to measure the gravitational force exerted by a mountain using instruments as precise as were then available. Maskelyne guessed that the anomalies Mason and Dixon noted were due partly to the Allegheny Ranges, which they repeatedly crossed. Mountains to the immediate north or south of their path had sucked the plumb bob sideways, toward themselves. That threw off the verticality of the azimuth sector, which did not point straight up as it should.

In 1772, Maskelyne submitted a funding proposal to test the hypothesis.[13] Money came through in 1773, and Maskelyne put Mason on the job of finding a suitable mass. Mason chose Schiehallion, an isolated Scottish peak whose nearly-symmetrical conical shape would simplify calculations. Using a ten-foot azimuth sector, Maskelyne confirmed that the mountain did deflect the plumb-bob. This was a spectacular confirmation of Newtonian gravitation. The amount of the deflection, together with the measured geometry of the peak, made it possible to calculate the ratio of the density of mountain rock (which was known) with that of the earth as a whole. This was approximately 5/9. Maskelyne's colleague Charles Hutton correctly conjectured from this that implied our planet has a metallic core—metals such as iron being much denser than rock.

> View of Schiehallion from Loch Rannoch
> Schiehallion appearing as a cone; photograph courtesy Anne Burgess

How did that go for you?

It was a shock for me, learning that the gravitational pull of mountains is so powerful that it got Mason and Dixon hundreds of feet off course. I felt both delight and vertigo, which stopped my mind for a moment. And then learning that Maskelyne could measure this accurately enough with 1770s instruments to get the density of the earth correct to within 20% was another shock. And that earth's iron core was discovered then…

In elation and vertigo, my curiosity piqued me. These were surprises of the "never would have imagined" sort.[14] What *else* might I be wrong about, if my understanding of gravity and of technological history were so wrong? I spent an entire day reading to find out.

Further reading and further research

My main sources for this page were spider webs and mountain ranges. In other words, it's based largely on experience.

However, my understanding is rooted in Vajrayana Buddhist theory and practice. "Spacious freedom" is my somewhat idiosyncratic presentation of relevant theory. *Roaring Silence*, by Ngakpa Chögyam and Khandro Déchen, is a guide to the most relevant introductory meditation practices.

This is *at least the third* time I've tried to write about agendaless perception and suspension of interpretation—although I haven't used exactly those terms before. Reading the previous two attempts may deepen your understanding by coming at the topic from different angles. "At the Mountains of Meaningness" (2015) is about peak experiences and experiences on literal peaks;

about vastness; about the wonder, inspiration, and insight found there; and about the nebulosity of perception, concepts, and action. The "Reopening the senses" section of "Hunting the Shadow" (2017) is about "liberated perception," which is "discovered through precision," "in nature, and through art, and especially art that is about perception in nature."

After mostly finishing this page, I thought I ought to check the academic literature, and found work that was surprisingly interesting. I'll pass along a bit of what I learned, with citations in case they inspire you to follow up. Also, at the end of this appendix, I'll suggest a possible line for further research.

"Spaciousness" seems closely related to "openness to experience," considered one of the five fundamental factors of personality in current empirical research. Studies have found openness correlating with the terms I've used for each of the six textures of the complete stance.[15]

Earlier I footnoted Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt's "Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion," *Cognition and Emotion*, 2003, 17(2), pp. 297-314. This is now the classic work on the topic; I took the definition of awe as overwhelmingness plus incomprehensibility from it.[16] I also learned from Brent Dean Robbins' "Joy, Awe, Gratitude and Compassion: Common Ground in a Will-to-Openness," presented at the conference *Works of Love: Religious and Scientific Perspectives on Altruism*, 2003.

This lecture by Brian Cantwell Smith is titled "Deference, Humility, and Awe." It's mostly not relevant to this page, but he packs about twenty serious, far-reaching, out-of-consensus points into an hour's talk, any one of which a lesser academic could have made a career out of, so I recommend it highly. He does make the point that you can experience awe entirely within the conceptual domain; he uses the examples of first encountering Gödel's and Turing's work on impossible knowledge.

The methods used in classic studies on awe and peak experience would probably no longer pass muster. Researchers basically asked people to tell stories about their memories of long-ago experiences, and looked for commonalities. In the wake of the psychology replication crisis, I suspect this would no longer count as "science."

Nebula
Awesome image used by real scientists in an actual experiment

However, more recent research purports to induce awe in the laboratory. The first such study showed people a series of outer space images, played them Sigur Rós' *Hoppípolla*, "a song with qualities known to evoke awe," and asked them how they felt about them. (Paul J. Silvia, et al., "Openness to Experience and Awe in Response to Nature and Music," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 9(4) (2015), pp. 376–384.) The main finding was that openness to experience correlated strongly with self-reports of "awe-like" emotions.

More convincingly, Alice Chirico and her collaborators have used virtual reality (VR) headsets to induce awe, measured physiologically (pulse, skin conductance) as well as by self-report. (Alice Chirico et al., "Effectiveness of Immersive Videos in Inducing Awe," *Scientific Reports* **7**, 1218 (2017).) They subsequently used computer graphics and virtual reality to create immersive experiences that can manipulate differing aspects of awe—such as "overwhelmingness" and "incomprehensibility"—separately. (Alice Chirico et al., "Designing Awe in Virtual Reality," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2018) 2351.) Another study found that VR-induced awe increases a

standard measure of creativity (Alice Chirico, et al., "Awe Enhances Creative Thinking," *Creativity Research Journal*, 30:2, 123-131 (2018)).[17]

I've been wondering whether the distinction between wonder and awe could be validated experimentally. I expect inducing wonder in VR is also feasible. (Even my favorite 2D video games seem to do that for me.) How could we verify which is which? One way might be through visual psychophysics: objective measures of what people are looking at and what they see, using for example gaze-tracking cameras and reaction time tests.

My understanding of agendaless perception draws on my understanding of perception *with* an agenda, which was a main topic of my work in artificial intelligence. In a well-practiced task, you know what to look for where, because you know what the things you see mean. This can be verified with gaze tracking: experimental subjects focus their attention tightly in predictable, task-relevant places.

In awe and wonder, your routine methods for visual interpretation break down, and you don't know what to look at. In awe, you are "blown away," and my guess (based on introspective memory) was that your attention widens to take in the vastness of the entire scene, without looking at anything in particular. I discovered as I was finishing this page that this has just been verified experimentally by Muge Erol and Arien Mack ("Immersive experience of awe increases the scope of visuospatial attention: A VR study," *Journal of Vision* September 2019, Vol.19, 285a).

My prediction is that wonder engenders significantly greater visual exploration (as could be measured by gaze tracking), and tighter focus (as could be measured using the methods of Erol and Mack), than awe. However, I would expect the gaze to fixate on inherently salient visual features, rather than task-relevant ones. (Inherent salience is well-understood in visual psychophysics.)

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1. 1.This is Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, "Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion," *Cognition and Emotion*, 2003, 17(2), pp. 297-314. The paper gives both a plausible theory and a useful literature review. Keltner and Haidt use the term "vastness" rather than "overwhelmingness," but say that a perception of enormous power is typically involved. Rather than "incomprehension," they use the technical term "accommodation," meaning "the process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience." They write: "awe involves a difficulty in comprehension, along with associated feelings of confusion, surprise, and wonder." I have found little prior literature on wonder itself.
2. 2.Keltner and Haidt: "We propose that prototypical awe involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience of something vast. Such experiences can be disorienting and even frightening… They also often involve feelings of enlightenment and even rebirth, when mental structures expand to accommodate truths never before known. We stress that awe involves a *need* for accommodation, which may or may not be satisfied… Awe can transform people and reorient their lives, goals, and values…. Awe-inducing events may be one of the fastest and most powerful methods of personal change and growth."
3. 3.The "Meaningful perception" chapter of *In the Cells of the Eggplant* explains this.
4. 4.My distinction between "awe" and "wonder" was a terminological choice, not necessarily an analysis of the way the words are commonly used. That is, I wanted to make a distinction, and by *fiat* I've used these two related words to do so. "Awe" and "wonder" are not clearly distinct in common usage, nor in most of the academic literature I've read. However, the one relevant study I've found (after nearly finishing writing this page) confirms the distinction I'd drawn. Relative to "awe," "wonder" is described with fewer words implying intense positive emotion, less certainty, more cognition, more perceptual

work, and more curiosity. Kathleen E. Darbor et al., "Experiencing versus contemplating: Language use during descriptions of awe and wonder," *Cognition and Emotion*, ePub 2015.

5. 5.Remember that I'm presenting the textures in order from wonder, which is the least active, to creation, the most.
6. 6.I'm writing this during quarantine for COVID in April 2020.
7. 7.Religious awe can be terrifying—the *mysterium tremendum* of the numinous. The *uncanny* is more-or-less wonder plus anxiety. As I wrote in "We are all monsters," "Uncanniness is the experience of conceptual interpretation breaking down. Spookiness is frightening unpredictability and alienness—mixed with familiarity. Nothing can be more familiar than ourselves; and yet there are times when we find ourselves alien, chaotic, and confusing."
8. 8.Keltner and Haidt use as examples psychoanalysis, feminism, and evolutionary theory. Each of those did blow me away when I first learned about them. YMMV.
9. 9.I was disappointed to read, while researching this page, that Kekulé's story about this insight may have been fictional or a joke.
10. 10.Of course you do experience wonder, as you do any other activity, and it does have specific associated feelings, as we've seen. Wonder is not an experience in the same sense that washing dishes is not "an experience."
11. 11.It seems that Dzogchen ought to have a method of this sort. It is in the spirit of the Four Chog-Zhag. Maybe there is such a method, and I don't know about it.
12. 12.For gloriously more geeky details, see Robert Mentzer's "How Mason and Dixon ran their line."
13. 13.His proposal was to the Royal Society, which formed the Committee of Attraction to decide whether it was worth spending *an awful lot of money* on. Benjamin Franklin was among the members of the Committee.
14. 14.It's plausible that a contributing factor is the orders of magnitude difference in size between the earth, the mountain, and the plumb bob. This conveys spatial vastness conceptually, which—just as when it is perceived visually—can often induce awe.
15. 15.So you might wonder whether "the complete stance" isn't just another term for openness to experience. It's not. Openness can make it easier to tolerate nebulosity, but doesn't ensure you understand accurately the many ways it interacts with pattern. Monists are typically extremely open to experience, yet monism is inimical to the complete stance. The confused stances mission and Romantic rebellion also seem, anecdotally, to correlate with openness.
16. 16.Keltner and Haidt's model is similar to several earlier ones they review. One they don't mention is Rudolph Otto's 1917 explanation of "the numinous" as a mystery (*mysterium*) that is at once terrifying (*tremendum*) and fascinating (*fascinans*).
17. 17.The effect size in the creativity study data is enormous. Potentially extremely exciting, so I'd like to see it replicated.

7 Comments

Open-ended curiosity is a texture of the complete stance. It flows naturally from understanding the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern. Open-ended curiosity avoids fixating meaningness into pre-determined categories.

Confused attitudes to mystery

Open-ended curiosity is a stance toward not-knowing. It is easiest to understand by contrast with some other stances.

Generally each dimension of meaningness gets its own chapter in *Doing meaning better*, the main part of this book. For knowledge, we can just do a quick version here, enough to make sense of "open-ended curiosity" as a texture of the complete stance. (*In The Cells of the Eggplant* is a whole book expanding on this. Or, "Upgrade your cargo cult for the win" is a long essay version.)

So, let's apply the familiar *Meaningness* scheme!

That begins by identifying a metaphysical error that generates pairs of confused stances. In the case of knowledge, it is the assumption that it must be perfectly definite. As usual, this is a denial of nebulosity.

Ignorance denied

> There are no mysteries; this Holy Book / sacred institution / omniscient guru has all the answers.

Outright denial of unknowing is the simplest confused stance. This is typical of eternalistic dualism. The most obvious examples are simplistic versions of the Biblical religions. This is also the stance of simple versions of scientistic rationalism, which is also a dualist eternalism. Outright denial of ignorance is hard to maintain because, for many questions, no authority does have a plausible answer.

A more sophisticated version admits that answers are not always immediately available, but claims that there is a guaranteed method for finding them. That might be some type of prayer, in the religious case; or *The Scientific Method*, for scientism. If it doesn't seem to get an answer, it's because you are doing it wrong; but there are experts who can do it right. Learning to be an expert might take special talents and many years of apprenticeship.

Eventually you may realize that experts also can't reliably find answers. You may discover that there is no "The" scientific method; and for many fields, no set method is available at all.

Research on how college students' attitudes toward knowledge develop finds that they often arrive with "there are no mysteries," realize that is wrong, and switch to "but there is a method." Later, some students also figure out that there are no consistently reliable methods—typically only in graduate school.[1]

Wonder is the antidote to the denial of the nebulosity of knowing. It involves receptivity and gentleness. Clear thinking is good, but your mind should not be so sharp that it cuts your own throat. Aggressive precision is a common failure of dualism. It traps you in a cage of certainty. It is better to be roughly right than precisely wrong.

Ignorance fixated

> We are the keepers of the Eternal Sacred Mystery about which knowledge is impossible, so it is taboo to enquire.

This stance reacts to the nebulosity of meaning by denying patterns of knowledge. It is typical of monist eternalism, such as the New Age and some versions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism.

Consistent with monism, this stance usually gloms together all questions without answers, and treats them as a unified Cosmic Mystery. Then it gives some vague and incoherent, but holy and comforting, interpretation to the aggregate. For example, "we all partake of the nature of Cosmic Consciousness, which is the Whole Universe becoming aware of Itself, so the Cosmic Mystery is really Knowing."[2]

The antidote to monist eternalism is demanding specific answers to specific questions. Derisive scorn may be helpful if they are not forthcoming. This is an appropriation of dualist nihilist rage!

However, denying pattern and fixating non-existence is typical of nihilism, and there is a nihilistic version of this stance. It's more sophisticated than the monist-eternalist version. It says that knowledge is impossible, and that this is a cause and/or result of meaninglessness. When challenged, the 190-proof version usually falls back on the Lite version: "real knowledge" is impossible. Cognitive development research finds that students commonly adopt this stance after realizing that no entirely reliable methods can exist. There's a humanities version, which is postmodern hyper-relativism, and a STEM version, which is post-rational depression.

The antidote to this stance is diligent investigation. Openness is good, but you should not be so open-minded that your brain falls out. Refusal of judgement, on grounds of principle, is a common failure of both monists and nihilists. It leaves you open to dangerous memetic parasites.

A muddled middle

When it's impossible to avoid the conclusion that an authority has answers for some questions and not others, a muddled middle emerges. Some matters are certain, so the authority is not to be questioned; others are holy mysteries, so the authority is not to be questioned.

Some Christian sects give detailed, *Absolute Truth From God* answers for innumerable minor issues; but the big questions—the critical contradictions such as theodicy, the trinity, and the nature of the eucharist—get glommed together into Divine Mystery.

Some supposed sciences do the same. Representationalist cognitive "science" develops elaborate theories of particular sorts of thinking; but you are not allowed to ask about critical contradictions, such as how a physical thing can "represent" something it is causally disconnected from, how you can find out whether or not something is a representation, or what scientific tests can determine what one represents. (Representationalism is particularly harmful when meanings themselves are wrongly claimed to be mental representations.)

Typical of muddled middles, this stance fails to eliminate the underlying metaphysical error: that proper knowledge must be perfectly definite. It just tries to apply each of a mirror-image pair of confused stances in different cases. Accordingly, it has the defects of both. It proliferates spuriously definite "knowledge" that is quite wrong, *and* it makes you vulnerable to vague mystical memes.

It's common to fall into this trap when first emerging from post-rationalist nihilism. You take Science too seriously as a reliable theory of some things, while simultaneously adopting mystical woo as an approach to others.

Closed-ended curiosity

Closed-ended curiosity recognizes that some things are known, and some things are not. It may recognize degrees for confidence or certainty in knowledge. It may recognize that there are no fixed ways of answering some questions.

Curiosity is closed-ended when it wrongly assumes that answers, when and if found, must be definite. This is the same metaphysical error again.

"Definite" does not mean "certain." Certainty is your opinion about a statement. Definiteness is about the nature of the statement itself, and about its relationship with the world. A properly

definite statement would be perfectly clear, and so either true or false in reality—even if we cannot know which.[3]

Closed-end curiosity assumes that conceptual structures, such as taxonomies, either fit the world or don't. It tries to find answers to well-defined questions, in terms of a fixed system; to locate missing pieces of a puzzle whose shape and meaning you already know.

Closed-end curiosity is valuable; it is a proper mode of routine science, routine engineering, and routine organizational management. It is not a mode of the complete stance, though.

Open-ended curiosity

Open-ended curiosity resolves the metaphysical error by dancing with the inseparable nebulosity and pattern of knowing. That is what makes it a texture of the complete stance.

Open-ended curiosity asks: "I wonder what this is like?" "I wonder whether some meaning will emerge here?" "I wonder how this works—what possibilities for action it may offer?" It is open, particularly, to possibilities that are shut off by any fixed system of interpretation.

Open-ended curiosity actively seeks examples of pattern and nebulosity intertwined. Those are the source of understanding.

An *understanding* is a way of being; nebulous but effective patterns of thinking, feeling, and interacting. An understanding is not a collection of statements that might be definitely true or false.

Open-ended curiosity is not centrally concerned with answers, or with questions. Those can be important, but they come *after* understanding.[4]

Open-ended curiosity does not assume the form of an answer. It does not assume there *is* any answer, nor that questions are necessarily meaningful. It is comfortable with formlessness and meaninglessness. It is willing to be confused, and willing to allow confusion to persist. When a phenomenon stubbornly refuses to make sense, open-ended curiosity neither jumps to judgement, nor rejects it as boring or frightening. It allows both meanings and meaninglessness to be however they are.

Open-ended curiosity recognizes that you don't have to have an opinion about everything—or even most things. It also does not shun judgement when a clear pattern emerges. And then, it does not regard any conclusions as final.

Open-ended curiosity gives you the freedom to interact with the world without metaphysical presuppositions. That interaction gives your self the freedom to be unconstrained metaphysically as well: to be solid or insubstantial, sharp or fuzzy, distinct from the world or absorbed in it, enduring or transient, defined or vague.

Because it does not presume any system, open-ended curiosity means not having to do things by the book. That does not imply that it is passive, or that it rejects all structure or methods, or that it is some sort of mystical intuition. *In the Cells of the Eggplant* spends a hundred pages explaining how to apply open-ended curiosity in professional, technical work.

As a *method* of stabilizing the complete stance, open-ended curiosity takes intelligence, hard work, and generosity—as well as just openness.

As a *texture* of the complete stance, it is natural, effortless, and joyful.

1. 1.This is the line of research initiated by William G. Perry. A useful review is Barbara K. Hofer and Paul R. Pintrich, "The Development of Epistemological Theories: Beliefs About Knowledge and Knowing and Their Relation to Learning," *Review of Educational Research*, Spring 1997, Vol. 67, No. 1, pp. 88-140.
2. 2.Quantum woo is a common, egregious version of this monist misunderstanding of mystery.
3. 3.There aren't any fully definite statements, outside of mathematics. This is a big problem for rationalist epistemology. *The Eggplant* devotes a chapter to this—but it's not yet published as of the time I'm publishing this page. In the mean time, if you are feeling masochistic, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on "Propositions" demonstrates how difficult the problems are, and how convoluted the responses.
4. 4.Another way of putting this is that open-ended curiosity is ontological, where closed-ended curiosity is epistemological. I'm avoiding these philosophical polysyllables at this point in *Meaningness*; they become central in *The Eggplant*. As a historical note, "understanding precedes representation" was a central slogan of Phil Agre's and my work in artificial intelligence.

4 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Humor—both in the sense of laughing at a joke, and of "good humor"—is a characteristic texture of the complete stance.

Humor closely connects with:

• Ambiguity
• Paradox
• Absurdity
• Surprise
• A sudden recognition that a situation can be seen differently
• Noticing cognitive errors
• Not taking adversity personally

All these come with the recognition of the inseparability of pattern and nebulosity, which is the definition of the complete stance.

3 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Playfulness is a characteristic texture of activity in the complete stance.

Comment on this page

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Nebulosity often seems unwelcome. To maintain the complete stance, one must actively enjoy it —in its intertwining dance with pattern.

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Creation is the characteristic activity of the complete stance; its densest texture.

> Workers on a bamboo scaffolding
> Photo courtesy CEphoto, Uwe Aranas

Difficult to attain, easy to maintain

We slide into confused stances effortlessly, often without even noticing. They are unstable, though: as soon as it becomes obvious that one is wrong, we switch to another. Even if we commit to one, perhaps as part of an ideological system, we find they are difficult to maintain. They collide with reality often enough that stabilizing them requires great effort.

The complete stance tends the opposite way: it is difficult to attain, but with practice becomes relatively easy to maintain.[1] "Obstacles to the complete stance" explained several reasons it is difficult to attain, access, or adopt.

However, once you become familiar with the complete stance, it is relatively easy to maintain, because it is accurate. Unlike the confused stances, experience does not contradict it.

Put another way, we adopt the confused stances mainly because they seem the only ones available. In each particular situation, we choose the least bad one, despite our being more-or-less aware of its defects. Once the complete stance becomes accessible, confusions seem decreasingly attractive.

What does it mean to stabilize the complete stance?

The complete stance is a *stance*, meaning that it's an attitude and mode of activity one adopts in response to a specific problem of meaningness as it arises. Like other stances, it's typically transient and may go unnoticed. It is not a permanent accomplishment, once and done.

To *stabilize* a stance means putting in place structures and strategies that support your commitment to it by making it easier to maintain.

This page largely reviews the book's introductory explanation of how confused and complete stances work. Now you can understand the same material more deeply, having worked through detailed explanations of the dynamics of some specific confused stances: eternalism and nihilism.

For example, you've read how we stabilize eternalism and nihilism using eternalist ploys or nihilist evasions. You've also read about ways specific antidotes and counter-thoughts can destabilize those strategies.

Stabilizing completion through understanding, rejecting, and destabilizing confusions

Confused stances rest on metaphysical errors; complete stances resolve them. In the case of eternalism and nihilism, the error is the shared mistaken belief that only fixed meanings could be real. Clear conceptual understanding of how and why this is wrong, and of its harmful consequences, stabilizes the complete stance. Once you accept *that* it is wrong, you can explicitly commit to the complete stance, and reject its alternatives.

This conceptual understanding and commitment could be mere philosophical theory, however, lacking practical effect. Translating understanding into changes in your way of being requires experiential familiarity with stance dynamics: their characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. It also requires enough practice in applying the concepts that it becomes habitual.

Eternalism, nihilism, and the complete stance are all mutually exclusive. Any reason to adopt one is reason to reject the other two. Therefore, all the antidotes that destabilize eternalism and nihilism are methods for stabilizing the complete stance.[2] This is true particularly inasmuch as the complete stance can be defined simply as "refraining from both eternalism and nihilism."

Practical understanding of confused stances means involves familiarity with their characteristic thoughts—the ploys and evasions—and skill in deploying the counter-thoughts. It means recognizing the sale pitches, noticing how you get sucked in by their emotional promises, and knowing how to decline them: reminding yourself they cannot deliver. It means learning their textures of activity: the self-blinded destructive rampages of armed eternalism and nihilistic rage, for example.

Stabilizing completion through familiarity with stance transitions

Familiarity with the patterns of transition between stages builds on familiarity with individual ones. In "Stances are unstable" and "Exiting eternalism" I gave examples.

One observes the recurring patterns of shifts from one unstable stance to the next. What triggers these changes? Generically, one slides out of a stance when it stops making sense of a situation, and another becomes available as an alternative. *Doing meaning better*—the main part of *Meaningness*—explains this, for many different stance pairs, in as much detail as seems feasible. However, noticing these patterns in a specific situation takes practice. Also, everyone's patterns are somewhat different, according to habit and personality.

As you gain familiarity with how this goes, you can intervene at each point, and nudge yourself toward the complete stance, rather than sliding around among confused ones. Eventually, you may gain understanding of the full web of possible transitions. You quickly recognize moments at which a confused stance becomes unstable because it stops making sense of a situation, and what antidote to apply. You also recognize moments at which the complete stance becomes unstable—usually because it points to unwelcome nebulosity—and you know what to do to stabilize it.[3]

Simply noticing that you feel confused, and remembering that the complete stance is a better alternative, is often all that is needed.

Noticing and maintaining the complete stance

The complete stance is quite natural, and everyone occasionally adopts it, briefly, usually without noticing.

It is not a special state of consciousness.[4] There are feelings that typically accompany it, but they are not dramatically distinctive. They may accompany other stances as well. This makes it hard to recognize.

"Have I already adopted the complete stance in this situation?" is a good question to ask.

- Am I fixating some dimension of meaningness?
- Am I denying some dimension?

If, on consideration, the answers are both "no," then you have indeed already adopted the complete stance.

Finding the complete stance repeatedly, and then paying attention to the thoughts, feelings, and activity that accompany it, stabilizes it. That is, familiarity makes it easier to maintain in the face of temptations to drop into confusion.

"Textures of complete activity" describes what the complete stance is like. You can use these descriptions as methods: are things going like that now? How can I nudge them more in that direction?

Stabilizing the complete stance through commitment and practice

If you understand conceptually how the complete stance is accurate, and find its benefits attractive, you may choose to commit to it. Then you will find yourself wavering: you cannot always maintain the stance, despite good intentions. Sometimes you will catch yourself having wandered off into eternalism or nihilism, or some Lite version of them, for a while. Perhaps moments; perhaps months.

The antidote to wavering commitment to the complete stance is: wavering commitment to the complete stance. That is, increasing stability comes with practice. Commitment to any stance—an enduring determination to adopt it whenever it may be relevant—is a powerful method for stabilization. You put effort into maintaining it, and develop skill at strategies for doing so.

The usual way to commit to a stance is indirectly, by committing to a system. Systems are easier to commit to because there's more structure and narrative detail to latch onto. A competent system also comes with powerful stabilization tricks. For example, committing to Christianity provides you with numerous methods for maintaining eternalism. They include thoughts such as recollecting points of a catechism; feelings such as fear, love, or trust in God; and activities such as participation in the sacramental rites.

Systems are not available for stabilizing the complete stance.[5] So, for now at least, we can only commit directly to the stance itself.

Meaningness provides a somewhat systematic presentation, but is far short of a full-blown system such as a religion or political ideology. Perhaps one would be impossible, because systems generally fixate distinctions, and the complete stance rejects that. Any presentation must be somewhat nebulous, because the subject matter is, in part, nebulosity itself.[6] A detailed

presentation of *the* complete stance is also difficult because it is so abstract and general. Complete stance*s*, plural, for particular dimensions of meaningness, are more specific, so there is more to say. (Coming up!)

Accomplishing the complete stance

I wrote above that the complete stance is typically transient, and not a permanent accomplishment. Nevertheless, it might be possible to accomplish it, meaning you *always* adopt it. (Or nearly always!)

Accomplishment might make you remarkably effective at resolving problems of meaningness— for yourself, and for others. You might seem capable of meaningness-wizardry, conjuring practical solutions with possibilities few would have noticed.

It may be worth aspiring to this!

On the other hand, it might make the stance seem out of reach, which could be discouraging. That could make commitment more difficult. Stabilizing the complete stance is a gradual process; wavering is inevitable. Expect progress over months and years, not days and weeks. (Sometimes sudden breakthroughs are possible, though!)

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1. 1.I've borrowed this rhyme from informal teaching by Ngak'chang Rinpoche on the relationship between two meditative states. Those are not parallel to confusion vs. completion, though, so the details aren't relevant.
2. 2.We previewed this in "Stances are unstable" and "Exiting eternalism."
3. 3.Here we are reviewing the "main method" described in "Meaningness as a liberating practice." There's a more detailed version coming up!
4. 4.The complete stance is structurally parallel to to some interpretations of "enlightenment" in Buddhism that might be described as extraordinary states of awareness. It is not such a state, or any sort of state at all; and it is experientially unremarkable.
5. 5.The Further Reading Appendix mentions some systems that "rhyme" with the complete stance. However, they don't squarely address or deliberately support it. Also, they're all weird and difficult, and won't be attractive or accessible for most people.
6. 6.And, in fact, the "rhyming systems" I mentioned in the footnote above—Dzogchen, existential phenomenology, ethnomethodology— are each notoriously nebulous, apparently due to their engagement with nebulosity.

Comment on this page

Monism is the idea that "All is One." *Dualism* is the idea that the world consists of clearly separate objects. These ideas may seem abstract, and irrelevant to your life. However, they are central to many religious, political, and philosophical systems. Therefore, it's important to understand why both are wrong, how they are harmful, why they are attractive, and a better alternative.

Monism and dualism are, at root, ideas about boundaries, objects, and connections. Are all things One, without boundaries? Or many separated objects? Is everything totally connected? Or is every object a clearly distinct individual?

I will begin by answering "no!" to all those questions. Realizing that the everyday world doesn't work in *either* a monist or a dualist way undercuts the intuitions that make these ideas seem reasonable.

Then I will look at first monism, and then dualism, in detail. Finally, I'll describe *participation*, the complete stance I recommend as a third alternative. The rest of this page summarizes these three stances.

Monism

The boundary that people care about most is the boundary between the self and the world. Denying and fixating that are the most significant applications of monism and dualism.

If All is One, then there is no boundary, and you are really the entire universe. Typically, monists say that the universe is equivalent to God, so you are actually also God. As you realize everything is totally connected, you develop the ability to affect anything you want.

This is the ultimate fantasy of power and invulnerability. However, convincing yourself that you are All-powerful, when you aren't, does not make your life go well.

When the fantasy collides with reality, monists retreat into a make-believe magical world. Monism produces dreamy spaciness, refusal to make any clear distinctions, refusal to judge. This leads to drifting through life, expecting other people to clean up your messes, contributing nothing except spiritual clichés mouthed at unwanted times.

As a social ideology, monism tends toward totalitarian denial of individuality.

Dualism

The nebulosity of the self/other boundary means that we cannot even control our selves. What we call "self" constantly gets bits of "other" blended into it. That's what perception does, what communication does, what interacting with the material world does.

The fantasy of dualism is that a clear separation between you and others frees you from their contaminating influence, and from responsibility to the world.

Dualism, by blinding you to connections, makes it easy to evade ethical responsibility for consequences. Psychologically, it produces alienation from the natural world, from other people, and from the sacred. As a social ideology, dualism tends toward denial of collective responsibility.

Participation

Participation is the stance that revels in the extraordinary variability of the world, that loves and engages with specifics and individuals; and also appreciates the porous self/other boundary, works skillfully with diverse connections, and accepts responsibility for whatever you encounter.

13 Comments

Stance	Monism	Dualism	Participation
Summary	All is One		

	Monism	Dualism	Completion
		Everything is clearly distinct from everything else. Especially me	Reality is indivisible but diverse
What it denies	Differences, boundaries, specifics, individuality	Connection, dynamic interplay, unbounded responsibility	
What it fixates	Unity; also over-emphasizes connection	Boundaries, separateness, limitations, definitions	
The sales pitch	You are God	Clarity gives you control	
Emotional appeal	I am all-powerful, all-knowing, immortal, invulnerable	I am not contaminated by other beings, and have only specific, limited responsibility for them	
Pattern of thinking	Willful stupidity	Distrust	Engagement
Likely next stances	Eternalism, mission, true self, specialness	Can combine with either eternalism or nihilism	
Accomplishment	Directly perceive all things as One	Perfect independence	Phenomena (including oneself) understood as neither distinct nor identical
How it causes suffering	Have to blind self to diversity of physical reality	Alienation due to being cut off from world and others	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Obviousness of diversity	Obviousness of connection	Difficulty of understanding the complete stance
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Appreciation of diversity	Appreciation of connectedness	
Intelligent aspect	Non-obvious connections are common and often important; all categories are somewhat nebulous	The world is endlessly diverse	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Provisional understanding of indivisibility	Points toward appreciation of diversity	

Comment on this page

Yin/Yang symbol
Pathological counter-dependency

Monism and dualism are opposites. But because each is obviously wrong, each turns into the other when cornered. A devious trick!

Monism is the stance that fixates sameness and connections, and denies differences and boundaries. Dualism is just the other way around: it denies sameness and connections, and fixates differences and boundaries.

Both these confused stances sometimes show themselves to be obviously wrong. The complete stance of participation recognizes that samenesses and differences, boundaries and connections, are all real, but also always somewhat nebulous: ambiguous and fluid. This is obviously accurate, but usually less convenient. Monism and dualism are simpler, and deliver particular emotional payoffs—some of the time.

The monism within dualism

All boundaries are somewhat vague. This is true of physical boundaries, and of abstract category boundaries. Sometimes you cannot say on which side of the boundary something falls—not for lack of knowledge, but because there is no right or wrong answer. This is intolerable for dualism.

Confronted with this nebulosity, dualism tries to harden the boundary by putting everything clearly on one side or the other. How? What defines a boundary? Everything *inside* the boundary is one way, and everything *outside* is the other way. Dualism exaggerates the commonality of everything inside, and the commonality of everything outside. It forces a choice onto items near the boundary, which must conform to one criterion or the other.

Dualism thereby imposes an impression of homogeneity. Everything inside is, ideally, exactly the same, and perfectly connected to everything else within. Everything outside is also exactly the same. So, on either side of the boundary, dualism turns into monism!

This dynamic is closely related to *essentialism*, which is a typical strategy for justifying the equivalence of the apparently dissimilar. "These two might *look* different," essentialism says, "but they are *essentially* the same." The "essence" is an invisible, magic, indwelling property that dualism claims explains the commonality, but that cannot be detected by any ordinary means.

Particularly harmful examples of monism-within-dualism are found in ideologies governing social groups. (Religions, political orientations, and ethnicities are typical examples.) The group presses its members all to be the same; to be *our kind* of person. Everyone outside is treated as interchangeably the *wrong kind*. The ideology has no room for anyone near the border. It does not accept that people on either side vary among themselves. The amount of pressure for conformity, and for rejection of outsiders, is a measure of how pathologically dualistic the group's functioning is.

The dualism within monism

Confronted with patterns of distinction, monism attempts to force universal homogeneity. Sameness is good; difference is bad. Pointing to unity is holy; pointing to distinctions is materialistic selfishness.

Everything and everyone is included within the One. The One is All. Anything that appears not to be included must be assimilated. Anything that cannot get fitted into the One is wrong and must be destroyed.

To see that everything is totally connected is enlightenment. To misunderstand things as separate is the root of all evil.

There must be no differences in value; everything and everyone is equal. Nothing is better than anything else. You must accept this. Claims of inequalities are discrimination; prejudice;

intolerance. We must not allow intolerance; that is absolutely unacceptable. Intolerant people are ignorant and inferior.

In sum: when monism encounters a difference it cannot ignore, it turns into dualism—often a particularly absolutist and pathological dualism.

Some "spiritual" ideologies are the clearest examples of monism. They can be highly intolerant of anyone recognizing distinctions they deny, or rejecting imaginary connections they fixate. They may denounce non-believers as "scientistic materialists," for example. As everyone knows, scientistic materialism is responsible for war, capitalist exploitation, the ecological rape of the planet, chemtrails, and vaccine-induced autism. None of those awful things would be allowed if everyone realized everything was connected.

Monist religions are exceptionally evangelical, pursuing an embrace, extend, extinguish strategy. *Perennialism* is the claim that all religions are essentially the same. Specifically, they are essentially the same as monism. We should accept and include all religions, as different paths to the same Truth. Christianity, for example. Essentially, the message of Christianity is that you should emulate Jesus. Jesus is essentially God, who is essentially The One that is All. You emulate by realizing your essential sameness. So, really, the aim of Christianity is to discover that you are God, who is The Entire Universe.

This is a dire distortion of Christianity, which is a dualistic religion. None of Christianity—sin, salvation, the afterlife—makes any sense if you are "really" God. Nevertheless, many supposed Christians have converted to monism without noticing, and are unable to see any difference between the two. Monism, extolling tolerance, begins by saying that Christianity is totally true, but it eventually explains that old fashioned Christians *are doing it wrong*, because the "real" Christianity is actually monism. Christianity is only true insofar as it is monism.

Monism uses the same embrace-extend-extinguish strategy against Buddhism. Centuries ago, monist proponents of Hinduism "benevolently included" Buddhism as a "totally valid branch" of the greatly diverse tree of Hinduism. Then they insisted that everything about it was not quite right and must, step by step, be replaced with Hinduism. This was part of the reason Buddhism went extinct in India. In the past few decades, "spiritual but not religious" monism has infected modern Buddhism and mostly eaten it from within. It will be interesting to see how long Islam— perhaps the most dualistic of all religions—can withstand this virulent pathogen.

Egalitarian political ideologies also can fall into the intolerant monism that is dualistic in its approach to opponents. This is the pattern of "political correctness," which says that everyone must be included, all beliefs must be accepted, and everyone is perfectly equal. Except for people who are not politically correct. They must be cast out. Their beliefs are unacceptable and must be silenced. They are ethically inferior; that's their essential and permanent nature, and no amount of repentance and purification can redeem them.

The boundary between sameness and difference is nebulous yet patterned

Monism and dualism are mirror-image attempts to separate sameness and difference.

This is typical of confused stances, which come in pairs of apparent opposites. Each pair shares an underlying, unrecognized mistaken metaphysical assumption. The confused opposition can be resolved by making the assumption explicit, understanding why it is wrong, and replacing it.

The metaphysical assumption shared by monism and dualism is that boundaries must be perfectly solid, objective, eternal, clear, and definite. Monism recognizes, accurately, that there are no

completely hard boundaries—but then wrongly denies that there are any differences at all. Dualism recognizes, accurately, that distinctions are important—but then wrongly fixates them.

All boundaries are somewhat nebulous; yet the patterning of the world implies that boundaries are everywhere.

There is never a perfectly definite fact-of-the-matter as to whether two things are the same or distinct. Any two things are somewhat different and somewhat similar; somewhat separated and somewhat connected. Understanding and acting on this is the complete stance, participation. It is "complete" in recognizing both sameness and difference, separation and connection.

I have used the yin/yang symbol, at the top of this page, to illustrate the pathological hard distinction between monism and dualism—the two colors in the figure. Each teardrop shape contains within it a distinct circle of the other color, which I am using to symbolize the inclusion of the opposite stance within each.

I know little about the Taoist philosophy in which the yin-yang symbol originated. I gather, though, that its metaphysics may approximate "participation." In that case, the hard edges between black and white in the figure are misleading. As a symbol of participation, it would be more accurate if they shaded into each other. And not just gray between black and white. It would be more accurate, too, if the two halves of the diagram each showed contrasting but harmonious patterns of diverse colors.

Perhaps the ancient Chinese sages would like to commission me to redesign their sacred symbol? I haz mad graphic design skillz, and my rates can be quite reasonable on major jobs.

Further reading

The Guru Papers presents an outstanding analysis of the pathologies of monism, its denial of differences, and its trick of turning into dualism when that fails. I have posted my notes on it here. The most relevant part starts with the note for page 303.

Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity explores the pervasive nebulosity of all categories, and analyzes the pathologies of dualism and its fixation of boundaries. The book develops methods for working effectively with ambiguities of sameness and difference, avoiding both monism and dualism.

Both these books are particularly concerned with pathologies of monism and dualism in political and religious groups.

In "Inclusion, exclusion, unity and diversity" I wrote about a monist aspect of "Consensus Buddhism" (the white American Buddhist mainstream). The Consensus claims to include everyone, while deliberately excluding most Buddhists. This is a case of "dualism within monism" particularly close to home for me.

10 Comments

Blueberry jam in jar: how many objects?

Monism is the idea that "All is One"; dualism, that the world consists of clearly separate objects. To start, we need an understanding of what it means to be *one* thing, or a *separate* thing, in general. Then we can look at what it would mean for the entire universe to be one thing, or many separate things, and what might follow from that.

There is a jar of blueberry jam on my breakfast table. I could pick it up and toss it in the air and catch it. The lid is screwed on tight, so it will hold together. The jar won't stick to the table or to my hand.

So, intuitively, an *object* is a bunch of bits that are *connected* together, and aren't connected to other things. The *boundary* of the object is where the connections stop.

These definitions are often useful in practice. However, they also often don't work.

Are a glass jam jar, its metal lid, and the jam itself one object, or three? It depends on what I'm doing with them. If I'm moving bottles around in the fridge, looking for the mustard, I'll treat the jar with lid and contents as one object. That's true even if I carelessly left the lid unscrewed and it could fall off. If you have a naked waffle and ask me to "pass the jam, please," the jar and jam are the one object I'll pass you—but I wouldn't include the lid. If I'm polite, I might actually remove the lid before passing the jam.

And then there is the jam itself, as I stir it into my yogurt. It's not object-like at all. It *will* stick to my hand, or to the table, if I spill a bit. It's sticky blobby goo, with semi-squashed bits of blueberry. Are the blueberry bits separate objects or not? It's impossible, if I poke at them, to say where their boundaries lie; they fade off indeterminately into the more liquid parts of the jam. Mixing it into the yogurt, the boundary between the two substances becomes gradually, increasingly obscure, indefinite, non-existent.

A cloud is a particularly dramatic example of ideas about objects not working. (That is one reason I use the word "nebulosity" so often; it means "cloud-like-ness.") Seen from afar, you can say that *this* cloud and *that* one are definitely distinct. Yet as you get close, you find that a cloud has no boundary at all. And, there are no connections holding it together.

So, what is going on here? The world is not *objectively* divisible into separate objects. Boundaries are, roughly, perceptual illusions, created by our brains. Moreover, which boundaries we see depends on what we are doing—on our purposes.

However, boundaries are not just arbitrary human creations. The world is immensely diverse. Some bits of it stick together much more than other bits. Some bits connect with each other in many ways besides just stickiness. The world is, in other words, patterned as well as nebulous.

Therefore, objects, boundaries, and connections are *co-created* by ourselves and the world in dynamic interaction.

Monism—"All is One"—is the denial of boundaries. It recognizes, accurately, that there are no *objective* boundaries, but then insists that this means there are really no boundaries at all. (Or, that boundaries are merely subjective, purely creations of the mind, which is almost as wrong.)

In the same way, monism tends to over-emphasize connections. "Everything is totally connected" is a typical false monist claim. Everything *is* connected—by gravity—but most things are not connected in any meaningful way. Monism sees connections that don't exist, producing a magical world view. (Misunderstood "quantum physics" is a common justification.)

Dualism is the fixation of boundaries. It insists they are perfectly well-defined and objective. It also tends to deny connections that actually do operate.

The next several sections of the book explain how boundaries, objects, and connections work in detail. Along the way, I'll have more to say about nebulosity and pattern. Also, I'll lay the groundwork for understanding participation, the stance that resolves the mirror-image confusions of monism and dualism. Part of that is explaining "neither subjective nor objective, but interactive"—a theme that will be important throughout the book.

If what I said on this page was convincing, you could skip ahead, to the detailed discussions of monism, dualism, and participation.

However, the idea that the world is *not* made up of clearly separable objects, but is also not just one big blur, may be unfamiliar. Some readers may resist these claims; so I will explain in depth.

You may also find my explanation of *how things are* interesting just for its own sake.

22 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

The question of existence and non-existence is a *colossal red herring*.

John Nerst's excellent essay "The Big List of Existing Things" covers much of what I mean to say here. If you are interested in the topic, you can read it in place of this unwritten *Meaningness* page.

Many metaphysicists have used sorites arguments to convince themselves that ordinary objects, such as pots and people, do not exist. This is a dire confusion.

Framing the problem as "whether and how objects exist" leaves the objects unchallenged and problematizes a property they may possess (viz. existence). But it is objectness that is problematic, not existence!

Part of the problem is a common pattern in metaphysics, of mistaking physical intuitions as metaphysical intuitions. Another problem is a consistent failure to ask what "exists" even means —if anything. I will give a sketch of an answer to that.

Then I'll explain that the sorites arguments have nothing to do with existence; correctly understood, they problematize boundaries, and therefore the concept "object" instead.

5 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

While this page is unwritten, see the chapter introduction for a better explanation. What follows is a very abstract summary of some key points.

Monism is the stance that All is One. It denies separateness and diversity.

Monism is motivated by the unacceptability of specifics. Facts about one's self, life, experience, and the world seem unattractive, and inessential. Monism holds that the essential is the abstract and general, instead—and those are seen as pure and all-good. The physical world, as it appears, is an impure illusion, which should be transcended.

Monism holds that all religions and philosophies are essentially the same, and that they point at the same ultimate truth. Namely, the truth of monism! This is a clever strategy for assimilating and extinguishing competing systems. To insist that "No, actually, our system contradicts yours" sounds aggressive and "not-nice"; but actually it is monism that has imperialistic aspirations.

Monism holds that the true self is mystically identified with the One or Absolute or God or Cosmic Plan.

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Monism can be criticized from the points of view of dualism, nihilism, or the complete stance.

The dualist and nihilist critiques of monism appear to have lost some of their effectiveness recently. The new monist pop spirituality has flown in the face of these critiques. It appears to have developed a new rhetorical technique for bypassing them.

I hope that a new critique, based in the complete stance, will be more effective.

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According to dualist eternalism, monism is wrong because it is not possible to achieve union with God.

If it were possible, the core logic of dualist eternalism—sin and salvation—would fail.

This critique is decreasingly effective, because more and more people reject the authority of the established (dualist) religions, and see no argument that unity with God is impossible, beyond "priests say so."

For further reading, before I write this section: the Vatican has published, online, a very nicely done criticism of the New Age, much of which applies to monism more generally. (The New Age is pervasively monist.)

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The nihilist critique of monist eternalism is that it is factually false.

Although this critique is correct, it has recently become decreasingly effective. Widespread skepticism about the authority of science, and increasing acceptance of the view that "all beliefs are equally valid," allow people to dismiss factual accuracy as irrelevant to spiritual truth.

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From the point of view of the complete stance, monist eternalism fails on its own terms. It cannot deliver what it promises.

2 Comments

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While this page is unwritten, see the chapter introduction for a better explanation. What follows is a very abstract summary of some key points.

Dualism is the stance that individuals can be unambiguously identified and separated. It fixates boundaries and denies connections.

In the dualistic stance, the self exists separately from other people, from the world, and from any sort of eternal ordering principle such as God. Fear of contamination by the nebulosity of reality —always changing and ambiguous—motivates dualism.

Dualism comes in both eternalist and nihilist forms. Eternalist dualism is typical of traditional Western religions. It holds that the true self, or soul, is separate from God, or other eternal ordering principle. God is transcendent and separate from the world. (Eternalist monism, by contrast, asserts the ultimate identity of God, the world, and the soul.)

The scientific-materialist world view tends toward nihilist dualism (although it is possible to hold a scientific-materialist view without either nihilism or dualism). On this view, individuals exist separately, but have no real meaning or purpose.

Comment on this page

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This page is unwritten. See the chapter introduction for some explanation. What follows is a very abstract summary of some key points.

Reality is indivisible but diverse. Boundaries and connections are both nebulous, but both real. They are neither objective nor subjective; neither inherent in the world, nor personal choices. They shift to serve practical functions, but cannot be merely imposed or arbitrary. They are accomplished through meaningful social activity of interpretation

3 Comments

"Selfie"

(CC) Clauds Claudio

We are awash in ideological crazy-talk about "the self":

- Moralists say we have to overcome our selves because they are selfish

- Psychotherapists say most people's aren't working well, and need tune-ups using their expert understanding of how selves should work

- Spiritual teachers say we have somehow misplaced and forgotten our *true* selves, and must go on quests to find them

- Most implausibly, Buddhists say the self does not exist—and, worse, many pop science writers agree!

Unfortunately, we cannot ignore these discordant voices, because questions of self are inseparable from questions of meaning: purpose, ethics, authority, and personal value.

Uneasily, we apply bits of all these stories about "self" in different circumstances. We might study one theory or many in detail, trying to make sense of our selves. Mostly, though, we try not to think to much about questions of self; it is anxiety-provoking, and experience shows it usually doesn't lead anywhere useful.

Confused stances rest on an unnoticed, mistaken metaphysical assumption: that "the self," if any, must be a durable, separate, continuous, well-defined thing. Then these stances claim that there is such a thing (but maybe you have the wrong sort); or that there isn't one (and you are stupid and doomed if you disagree); or that there ought to be one (so you need to create or find it); or that there ought not to be one (so you need to get rid of yours).

"Self" contrasts with "other"; between them, there must be a boundary. The last chapter explained how boundaries are always nebulous: vague, changeable, and purpose-dependent. This is especially true of the self/other boundary. Where we draw it varies according to what we are doing—and rightly so. The same applies to boundaries between different parts of the self (insofar as it is meaningful to speak of "parts of the self" at all).

We saw that there are two confused stances concerning boundaries: monism, which denies boundaries, and dualism, which fixates them. We've also discussed two other fundamental confused stances: eternalism insists that everything is meaningful; nihilism denies all meaning. These can combine, producing for example monist eternalism or dualist nihilism.

- Dualist eternalism regarding the self/other boundary insists that you do have a self that is durable, separate, continuous, well-defined. Different versions assert conflicting claims about "what the self really is." Or, they say, you *should* have a particular kind of self, so if you don't, you need to fix that.

- Monist eternalism says that really there is no boundary between self and other; so if it seems like there is, you need to fix that.

- Nihilism says there is no self at all; the concept is meaningless, so if you think you have a self, you need to fix that.

These combine in extra-confused ways. Some people claim that your self really doesn't exist, *and* it is bad, so you need to get rid of it. Some claim that you have a hidden True Self, *and* it is the same thing as having no self. Some claim this True Self is The Entire Universe.

All such confusions come from the assumption that "the self" must live in something like a house, with solid walls that stay put and keep hailstorms outside and your pet aardvarks inside.

Crazy ideologies begin when insightful people notice the self/other relationship not working like that, but lack a framework for understanding nebulous boundaries.

Nebulous selfness

Recognizing that the "boundary" between self and other is both patterned (non-arbitrary, partly predictable, somewhat reliable) and nebulous (ill-defined, unstable, purpose-dependent) dissolves all the confused stances. I call this complete stance "intermittently continuing." Here, "self" is not a thing; it's nebulous patterns of interaction. It is sometimes useful to say "selfness" or "selfing" to underline the non-object-ness.

Having abandoned the confused stances, there's much to say about selfness in the complete stance. And this is all fascinating and often useful. But it's important not to overvalue the details (so I will reluctantly limit my discussion). There's more value simply in dissolving self *as a problem*. Once you firmly set aside the confusions, what remains doesn't require a lot of fussing over.

For the complete stance, meaningness lies in *dynamics*: patterns of interaction. To understand any particular dynamic, you have to look at aspects of both "self" and "other," and also the "boundary" between them. (I've put scare quotes around all these to underline their nebulosity and non-object-ness.) Typically, most of "the self" and "the world" are irrelevant to a dynamic, so they are the wrong conceptual categories.

Aardvarks

Aadorable aardvarks (CC) Scotto Bear

Let me make a ridiculous analogy. You notice that your house is increasingly inhabited by tarantulas, which you fail to fully appreciate due to arachnophobia. You could declare them illusions and ignore them (*no-self nihilism*); that would work until you wake up with a pair engaged in amorous activities on your face. You could tear down all the walls (*monism*) because you and tarantulas and aardvarks are All One. However, you'd still have tarantulas, *plus* hailstorms, and the aardvarks might bolt. You could caulk all the tiny holes around the windows to keep tarantulas out (*dualism*)—but we'll see that won't help unless you nail the front door shut too. (Then you'd starve.) You might decide that your house is the wrong kind (the kind that tarantulas infest) and move into a different one—but it turns out that won't work either. There's nothing wrong with your house (*self*).

On investigation, you discover that your daughter has been bringing home a tarantula every day to feed to the aardvarks; but they don't like tarantulas, and ignore them, so the would-be meals wander off to inhabit your dress shoes and silverware drawer.

The problem is not with the house, nor with the world outside the house. The problem is an activity that actively transports creatures across the boundary. Discussion with your daughter reveals that her biology teacher has told her that aardvarks eat bugs, and the biggest bugs she could find were tarantulas, so she thought your pets would especially enjoy them. A misconception easily corrected; problem solved.[1]

Meaningness is like this, I will suggest. It is neither objective nor subjective: neither outside the self, nor inside. Rather, meanings are patterns of activity that cross the nebulous self/other boundary.

Nebulosity of self makes complete control impossible

"Intermittently continuing" is unsettling because it undercuts fantasies of control. It contradicts the ideal of a unitary subject with free will, because activity is always a dynamic, improvised collaboration with nebulous-but-patterned otherness.

(What I say here about control is condensed and may not make sense yet. I'll explain more later in this chapter; the upcoming chapters on capability and contingency discuss nebulosity of control in depth.)

Any causal analysis of activity has to trace high-frequency loops of mutual influence that cross the self/other boundary. We cannot make independent choices because the permeability of that boundary—via perception and action—means we are never independent. It is futile to try to force interactions to conform to a preconceived idea of how they should go.

We cannot even control ourselves, because phenomena switch frequently from "self" to "other" and back; because "parts of self" have nebulous boundaries themselves; and because they are often more closely coupled to "other" than to other parts of self. As a dramatic example, when two people fall in love against their better judgement, each person's emotions communicate more with the other's than with their own more dispassionate thoughts.

Allowing nebulosity of selfness enables accurate relationships

Intermittently continuing means learning to be comfortable with the ambiguity and unpredictable changeability of selfness. That requires attention, courage, hard work, and good humor. However, it frees you from neurotic self-obsession, and increases the effectiveness and enjoyability of your relationships.

Supple, skillful selfing makes for satisfying, successful interactions. Firm and fluid othering enables us to *play with* the self/other boundary—whose interpenetrating nebulosity and pattern become a source of amusement. We can co-construct our lives as art projects in the shared space of meaningness, not inside or outside, but between and surrounding and pervading us.

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1. 1.Did you know that the only thing aardvarks eat besides ants and termites are aardvark cucumbers, which fruit underground? For desert-living aardvarks, these cucumbers are a vital water source. Conversely, aardvark cucumbers are entirely dependent on aardvarks for reproduction. Nothing else eats them to disperse the seeds.

5 Comments

Stance	The authentic, true, deep self	Selflessness	Intermittently continuing
Summary	The hidden, true self is directly connected to the Cosmic Plan, bypassing social constrictions	There is, or should be, no self	Selfness comes and goes; it varies over time and has no essential nature
What it denies	Nebulosity of self	Patterns of self; the self/other boundary; natural self-interest	

What it fixates	The patterns of selfness; the self/other boundary	Discontinuity; absence of self/other boundary	
The sales pitch	Your true self is much more exciting than your yucky regular one	You can get rid of your yucky regular self	The patterned self is unproblematic once its nebulosity is accepted
Emotional appeal	I'm much better than I thought I was	I have nothing to lose	
Pattern of thinking	Romantic idolization of fantasy self	Willful blindness to continuity and self-interest	Humorous affection for one's foibles; absence of anxiety
Likely next stances	Eternalism, monism, specialness	Nihilism, ordinariness	Nobility, enjoyable usefulness
Accomplishment	Authenticity in sense of living from true self instead of regular self	Egolessness	Conjuring supple, playful magic in the shared self/other space
How it causes suffering	Attempts to retrieve supposed true self fail; attempts to live up to it fail	Neglecting practical personal affairs	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Non-existence of true self	Manifestations of regular self	Fear of discontinuity; cannot repair or remove self
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	No essential nature, no coherent true self	I have much in common with who I was and will be	
Intelligent aspect	Recognizes negative social conditioning & possibility of spontaneity	Recognizes lack of essential nature or durable continuity	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Points toward power of nobility: we can be much more than we generally pretend	Points toward generosity of nobility	

Comment on this page

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This page will discuss the *representational theory of mind*. This disastrously mistaken theory is accepted by most cognitive scientists. Consequently, it has become highly influential in general Western culture, and is taken for granted by most educated Westerners. It has significantly distorted our understanding of our selves, and so of how to live.

The theory originates in the analytic philosophy of of mind. ("Originates" both historically and logically.) Post–1950 philosophy of mind has two aims:

1. To develop a convincing argument for *physicalism*—the doctrine that mental things are actually physical things, or are "reducible" to physical things.
2. To acknowledge and include *cognitivism*—the doctrine that people have beliefs, desires, and intentions (not merely dispositions and behaviors).

Physicalism is opposed mainly to mind-body dualism: belief in a non-physical soul. The natural human view (of pre-modern people) is that the mind is not a physical thing. It is the "ghost in the machine": a "spook." The dualist view is that spooks are the sort of thing that can think; can have beliefs, desires, and intentions. A person is a spook plus a meat robot. Meat can't think.

So the "cognitive project" has been to explain how meat *can* think. That requires exorcising the spook—the ghost in the machine. The representational theory of mind is the dominant approach.

Simplifying somewhat, it says that beliefs, desires, and intentions are "represented" as sentences in a special language ("mentalese"). Mentalese, in turn, is "implemented" as physical things (structures, states, or processes) in the brain.

Beliefs, desires, and intentions are *about* things outside the brain. For example, the belief that "snow is white" is about snow.

The question is: what does "about" mean? And how can things in the brain be about things outside the brain? What sort of relationship is this "aboutness"?

No good answers to these questions have been found. Worse, there are good in-principle reasons to think that no answers *can* be found:

> *If* beliefs, desires, and intentions were mental representations, *then* they would have to be non-physical. That is: spooky.

These are the "billion tiny spooks" of my title. The representational theory of mind beheads one big spook (the soul); but—like the Hydra—it simply returns as innumerable smaller ones.

(Bizarrely, mentalist philosophers often slip, and admit this in passing, describing representations as "non-physical"—despite their stated commitment to physicalism.)

The upshot is that either physicalism is wrong, or else the representational theory is wrong. Or both! I don't have a strong opinion about physicalism; my guess is that something *like* it is probably right, although it seems wrong as stated. Anyway, mind-body dualism is almost certainly wrong, so a non-spooky understanding of what it is to be human should be helpful.

The representational theory is also clearly wrong, for several reasons in addition to its logical contradictions. Overall, the problem is not that meat is the wrong thing to make beliefs, desires, and intentions from. It is that things inside the head cannot magically connect to things outside the head to be about them. (This discussion in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is relevant, but may be opaque if you're not familiar with the literature.)

The representational theory is not only *wrong*; it is also *harmful* for ordinary people's understanding of what we are and how to live. I'll also explain these malign consequences.

Fortunately, there are alternative approaches to understanding what sort of things people are, which are more consistent with facts, and which lead to better ways to live. These approaches do not take the skull as a fixed boundary; their understandings span "inside" and "outside." Their

explanations involve *interactional dynamics* of physical causality that—through perception and action—constantly cross between "self" and "other."

27 Comments

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Notions of "true" self are closely related to eternalism, because they fixate pattern and deny the nebulosity of the self.

There are both dualist and monist concepts of true self. The dualist true self is a "soul" or isolated subject. The monist true self is magically connected to, or identified with, the eternal ordering principle.

2 Comments

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This will discuss several stances that deny the self, in different ways. Some interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* are nihilist in denying that the self exists at all. Some materialist views are also nihilistic denials. And then there are religious or ethical views of "selflessness" that hold that the self is existent but ought not to be, or ought to be ignored or undermined or subjugated or denied or generally kicked around.

3 Comments

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An optimistic view of the self as incoherent, but not non-existent, and not necessarily problematic.

1 Comment

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How can meaningness be neither objective nor subjective? Doesn't everything have to be one or the other? Either meanings are out there in the world, and properly objective, or inside you, and merely subjective or mental. Right?

As we've seen earlier in this chapter, the inside/outside, self/other distinction is nebulous, and often irrelevant, because meaning keeps crossing it. Meaningness *couldn't* be either subjective or objective, because it extends freely between, across, and around self and other.

Not objective

It's been obvious for more than a century that the universe is not inherently meaningful (eternalism). However, it's also not inherently meaningless (nihilism). It's neither inherently meaningful nor inherently meaningless because meaning is *not the sort of thing that can be inherent*.

Meaningness is an interactional dynamic that arises between oneself and one's situation. The problem comes when we deny our part in that, and try to put all the responsibility for meaningfulness out in the situation. We want to do that because we don't trust ourselves. We don't think the meanings we co-create will be good enough. We want a solid, definite, separate, permanent, inherently existing meaning to be made available. (This is what people invent God for —to feed us that kind of meaning.) That kind of meaning would be reassuring and dependable.

However, there isn't any meaning like that. The only kind that exists is nebulous: ambiguous, fluctuating, uncertain; like a dance, not like a statue. That might seem unsatisfactory at first. However, once you accept that meaning is like that, you can see that it's actually much better than the hypothetical solid kind of meaning. It provides freedom and creativity and exploration and lightness, where the given-by-God kind of meaning would be restrictive, dull, heavy, boring, and inescapable. If the universe had inherent meaning we would all be living in a totalitarian prison.

Not subjective

If meaningness were merely subjective, or if it were a matter of individual or social choice, it would not be possible to be mistaken about it. Yet we make mistakes about meaningness all the time.

This was the point of my casino story. I was mistaken not about what happened, factually, but about what it *meant*. You can't say that "the universe loves me" was "true for me". It was just plain false.

Meaningness in the complete stance

Meaning is a *collaborative, improvised accomplishment*. We re-make meaning in every moment, through concrete, situated *meaning-making work*.

Even the most simple, mundane meanings (like the meaning of breakfast) are interactional—they involve you, your yogurt and jam, the spoon and table, the people you are eating breakfast with, and (to decreasing extents) everyone involved in creating that situation, and all the non-human actors who were also involved. The more of that stuff you remove, the less meaning is there.

4 Comments

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This chapter discusses stances toward purpose.

For an introduction to this topic, see "An appetizer: purpose."

The question of purpose is easy for both eternalism and nihilism. For a committed eternalist, your purpose is whatever the Cosmic Plan says it is; no problem. For a committed nihilist, there can be no purpose; no problem. Both stances are difficult to live up to. In practice, we usually fall into two other, confused stances: mission and materialism.

These confused stances share an underlying mistaken metaphysical assumption: that purposes can be classified as "mundane" or "higher," and only one of those sorts is meaningful.

- *Mundane* purposes are those we share with other social mammals: food, security, reproduction, and position in social dominance hierarchies. They also include material altruism on behalf of one's family or tribe.
- *Higher* purposes are those that transcend animal existence, such as creative production, disinterested altruism, and religious salvation. These are sometimes called "transcendent," "eternal," or "ultimate." Their value should survive your physical death, or have significance in realms beyond the material.

Materialism is the stance that only mundane purposes count; it fixates their value, and denies higher purposes. We have no choice but to pursue sex, power, status, safety, pleasure and possessions; anything else is a delusion. *Mission* is its mirror image: it fixates higher purposes and denies mundane ones. We have a specific higher purpose, and pursuing others is wrong.

Death is a common problem of meaningness. One reason is that "you can't take it with you." Whatever mundane purposes we have satisfied in life are immediately and totally obviated by death. All our possessions, everything we have accumulated, the structures we have built to keep us safe and comfortable, the people who love us, our honors and accomplishments, our position in society—all are instantly torn away and we return to zero. Soon we are forgotten. Perhaps children remember us; but in a hundred years, no one will know or care in the least how much we had or whether we got what we wanted or not. How can something matter when no one still living even knows about it? In the big picture, it seems all the concerns that take up almost all the energy of almost everyone's lives are completely meaningless.

There are two common responses to this. One is to observe that, since everything is a zero after we are dead, it is all the more urgent to get on with life now. Purportedly transcendent accomplishments are of zero value to me after I am gone. Better to get what I can while I can. That is materialism. The second possible response is to observe that, since all mundane purposes are nullified by death, there is no point whatsoever in pursuing them. Rather, all effort should be devoted to an eternal, higher purpose, whose accomplishment can survive my death. This is the stance of mission.

Mission often additionally claims that each person has a *unique* higher purpose; so it is mutually supportive with the stance of specialness. Materialism is concerned with purposes everyone shares; so it mutually supportive with ordinariness.

Both mission and materialism can be seen as muddled middles that try, and fail, to reconcile eternalism and nihilism. Both hold that certain purposes are definitely meaningful (like eternalism) and others are definitely not (as in nihilism).

Animal desires are the most emotionally obvious, and so materialism is more closely allied to nihilism, admitting the meaningfulness only of the material domain. It is easier to deny the meaning of higher purposes, because their objects are not immediately apparent. On the other hand, the meaninglessness of many mundane events is obvious. You missed the your usual bus to work because it left two minutes early; the Coke machine mistakenly gave you an extra coin in change; you spilled some of it on your shirt. So what? It's hard to believe the eternal ordering principle cares about such things.

Mission is more closely allied with eternalism, admitting the nebulosity of only the material domain. It is easier to deny the nebulosity of the transcendent, because many higher purposes are too abstract to definitively refute.

As attempts at reconciliation of eternalism and nihilism, based on recognition of the errors of both, materialism and mission both also partake of the nature of the complete stance. However, they both are ultimately failures, and so in practice we oscillate between the two.

Alternatively, since both are unworkable, a muddled middle tries to find a further halfway point between them. It *mingles materialism with mission*, attempting to satisfy the demands of both in a single course of action. You might, for instance, pursue fame and glory leading a celebrity media campaign to save starving Africans from poverty. Motivations are usually mixed. When pursuing higher purposes, one almost always also hopes for some mundane reward.

The complete stance for purpose, *enjoyable usefulness*, rejects the mundane/eternal dichotomy. The value of both sorts of purposes is nebulous but patterned. This complete stance replaces the misleading question "what am I supposed to do" with "what can I do now to be useful and enjoy myself?"

4 Comments

Stance	Mission	Materialism	Enjoyable usefulness
Summary	Only higher purposes are meaningful	Only mundane purposes are meaningful	All purposes are meaningful, when they are. Do things that are useful and enjoyable.
What it denies	Value of mundane purposes	Value of higher purposes	
What it fixates	Value of higher purposes	Value of mundane purposes	
The sales pitch	Find and follow your true mission, and the universe resonates with you	He who dies with the most toys, wins	There is no scoreboard
Emotional appeal	Exciting, personal, transcendent purpose lifts you out of mundanity	Get what you want	
Pattern of thinking	Fantasy; non-ordinary methods for seeking the supposed true mission	Grim self-interest	Flow
Likely next stances	Eternalism; specialness, true self	Nihilism; ordinariness	Nobility, intermittently continuing
Accomplishment	Sacrifice all mundane purposes to eternal mission (saintliness)	Exclusive self-interest	Rennaisance person
How it causes suffering	Can never find your supposed true mission; neglect mundane aspects of life	Can never get enough; alienation from others and from authentic creativity	

Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Reasonable self-interest	Compassion, creativity	Is that it? No hope of completing purpose, so no hope for salvation or basis for self-congratulation
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Mundane purposes matter to me	I do care about others, and about creative work	
Intelligent aspect	Higher purposes are valid; materialism is unsatisfying	Mundane purposes are valid; mission is a fantasy	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Creativity and generosity are aspects of enjoyable usefulness	Material satisfaction and accomplishment are aspects of enjoyable usefulness	

3 Comments

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Mission is the confused stance that only "higher" purposes are meaningful.

As an attempt to reconcile eternalism and nihilism—with an emphasis on eternalism—mission tries to overcome the obstacles to eternalism and the defects of nihilism. The obstacles to eternalism are the obviousness of nebulosity and meaningness, and the necessity of submitting one's self to the eternal ordering principle. Mission admits nebulosity in the mundane domain, thereby partially evading eternalist demands. And, we'll see soon, it also tries to preserve one's personal self-definition in the eternal domain, by obfuscating and owning higher purposes. Meanwhile, mission attempts to evade nihilism's accurate perception of the nebulosity of the self by reinforcing it with a fixed higher purpose.

Eternalism holds that all things are meaningful, which includes the mundane. However, while this is not logically necessary, eternalist religions typically give negative value to "the world" and the domain of animal meaning.[1] Consequently, mundane behavior is tightly regulated. The stance of mission allows you to withdraw this part of your life from the purview of the Cosmic Plan. In the stance of mission, mundane concerns are seen not to matter, so that one has the freedom to behave any old way. As a consequence, the material lives of those committed to mission tend to be nasty messes, marked by financial irresponsibility, distorted and neurotic relationships, and neglect of their personal physical environment. One can justify this on the grounds that mundane concerns are trivial, and that it is actually noble to neglect them, sacrificing them to the mission.

For eternalism, higher purposes are fixed and universal. The eternal ordering principle gives everyone has the same purpose, or at most there are a small number of prescribed roles (such as priest, layman, housewife). If you subscribe to an eternalist religion, any priest can tell you exactly what you ought to do, and he will have the same answer for everyone in your role. As a consequence, the eternalist has certainty. If you act in accordance with the eternal principle, you have divine justification for your action, and a guarantee of your righteousness. For many people this is profoundly comforting. It frees one from freedom, and the uncomfortable responsibility of choice that comes with freedom.

But doing the same thing everyone else is supposed to do is dreary. Mission is attractive when we want the comfort of eternalism but find that it is too restrictive. We want more freedom to do our own thing. Even when we aren't sure what our higher purpose is, we are pretty darn sure it isn't what the priest says. It is most often those who are not committed members of an organized religion who commit instead to mission as a stance. They are "spiritual but not religious" or "seekers" or New Agers or "have their own path," or try to combine the uncombinable ("I'm a Neo-Pagan Christian"; "I'm a Buddhist and an observant Jew"; "I'm really into Taoism and Native American shamanism"). Generally one comes to this kind of vague and conflicted spirituality because the demands of authentic religions are too strenuous, but one is unwilling to abandon religion for materialism.

I have defined mission as fixing higher purposes while denying mundane meaningfulness. In practice, proponents of mission usually go a step beyond this definition. They hold that you have a *single, unique, personal* higher purpose: *your* mission. Moreover, only you can discover what your personal mission is, although it is a gift to you from God.[2] This puts your mission beyond the control of priests and dogma, which gives you a measure of private living space in the realm of higher purpose, but at the same time preserves your divine warrant.

Whereas purposes according to eternalism are typically common knowledge, mission is initially mysterious. Not only does my unique personal mission have to be discovered by me personally, this can be done only using non-ordinary methods. The ordinary, or "rational," approach to choosing purposes beyond the mundane might be based on assessing my talents, skills, and circumstances, and comparing how well these might serve available higher ends, such as various arts, forms of socially beneficial work, or religious activities. Mission dismisses this approach as nasty materialism. (As a variant of nihilism, materialism does tend to be nasty—and intelligent. As a variant of eternalism, mission tends to be "nice"—and credulous.)

To find my mission, I must, rather, use quasi-magical methods, such as prayer, divination, vision questing, talk therapy, dream work, or meditation. There are whole industries who can help you with this: career counselors, hallucinogenic shamans, fundamentalist ministers, management coaches, aromatherapists, past-life regression rebirthers, and Jungians—among many others. From a nasty materialist point of view, all these approaches boil down to grubbing about in my psychology to create some vague but attractive fantasy of what I might do. Collectively, I will call these *psycho-magic*.

Mission's theory of suffering can be stated as a distorted form of the Buddhist Four Noble Truths:

1. The materialist way of life is full of suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by failure to align one's actions with one's true mission.
3. Suffering can be ended by aligning one's actions with one's mission.
4. The way to align one's actions with one's mission is to apply psycho-magic.

> Deep down in our hearts, we all know that we have a mission. We know that there must be more to life than the mundane rat race; so we must have a true calling, a reason we were put here on earth. When we find it and embrace it, everything falls into place and we discover profound inner peace. Acting on our mission gives life an extraordinary appeal, the wonderful feeling that we are in synch with reality and fulfilling the promise of something transcendent. Mission is more than a job description or social role; it is a matter of the soul. Only the life-force-denying insistence of society that we pay allegiance to a spurious realism, and the siren song of petty materialism, keeps us from following our hearts and joyfully doing that which we were truly meant to. Resisting our deep purpose causes only pain, struggle, and heartache.

Materialism's *quantitative* theory of suffering gives rise to competition, success and failure. If you think you will eventually get enough, it's hard to break out of materialism. Mission's *qualitative* theory is particularly attractive to people who believe they can't successfully compete. It can be a kind of consolation prize. No one else has *my* unique mission, so there's no possibility of comparing accomplishments. The expectation that one's mission be unique explains why it is hard to find.

Uniqueness can also make me feel special. Mission and specialness are allied; we'll discuss this in depth in the chapter on that stance.

Since my single inherent mission is supposed to guide me throughout my life, it is necessarily abstract and open-ended. It cannot actually either be accomplished, nor can I definitely fail to accomplish it. I can only act in accordance with it, or not. This avoids the problem real higher purposes can share with mundane ones: that both success and failure are disappointing.

Because my mission is inherent in me from birth, no one can take it away. Talent fades, or can become obsolete, or is surpassed by the next generation. It is nebulous. My unique mission, however, cannot be challenged by reality: it is eternal and absolute.

The confused "true self" stance is therefore also closely allied with mission: my unique, true purpose is the essence of my authentic being—or close to it.

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1. 1.Some predominantly eternalist religions may deny the meaningfulness of the mundane altogether—in which case they have adopted the stance of mission rather than being fully eternalistic. Nietzsche wrote *[need cite]* that Christianity is nihilistic in removing meaning from this earthly life, to instead focus on a supposed afterlife. To the extent that this is true (which seems to vary among Christian sects), Christianity is not altogether eternalistic.
2. 2.Some advocates for mission say that your mission was something that you and God collaborated in constructing before you were born. You mostly forgot it during the birth process; some children remember it better than many adults.

2 Comments

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The two aspects of mission—the fixation of higher purposes and denial of mundane purposes—both cause unnecessary suffering.

Fixating a higher purpose causes suffering in the search for it, suffering if the one you "discover" is bogus, suffering as you overlook other opportunities, and suffering as its suitability wanes. Denying mundane purposes leads to unrealistic actions, neglect, ineffectuality, failure, and consequent pain for oneself and others.

When events make these defects obvious, they become obstacles to maintaining the stance—however committed to it you may be. Like all confused stances, mission is inherently unstable. It typically alternates with mission in our lives.

Finding your mission is, apparently, difficult. Some people devote enormous amounts of time and energy in searching for it. This can last years, or for a lifetime. At times, you believe that you have gotten "signs," or have had flashes of profound insight, and perhaps have even finally discovered your true mission. Then you are excited, and you pursue that mission. But in a few

months, you don't seem to have made much progress, and "God wouldn't have given me a purpose if he didn't mean me to make progress, would he?" Maybe you misidentified the purpose.

Or maybe you're just not up to the task. Or maybe you're being weak and dithering when you should be pursuing your mission. Perhaps you should whip yourselve into pursuing it harder. So you do that for a while, but then suddenly find you can't remember what your mission was after all. Maybe you weren't meant to follow this path after all? You look back in your diary to see what you wrote down when you had the revelation, and it seems to fall flat. Why did you think that was your mission? Why doesn't the Cosmos give you another sign? Oh, misery. It must be time to do some intensive psycho-magical work again.

Mission is a scam. It is inherently selfish: it is about "the perfect rôle for me," not about "things that need doing."

Authentic eternalism frees you from the responsibility of choice. Mission wants freedom from eternalism's imposition of higher purposes, but simultaneously to preserve certainty by avoiding choice. The myth that you can *discover* your mission rather than *choosing* it (existentialism) or *accepting* it (eternalism) is a sleazy attempt to have it both ways. It allows you to pretend to be in accord with the eternal ordering principle, but it's really all about self-righteousness and self-justification while doing as you please.

Fortunately, it doesn't work.

The reason you can't finally find your mission is that there is no such thing. That is not to say that higher purposes are not meaningful, but that they are nebulous. Accordingly, there is no higher purpose that is *inherently* and *permanently* the *single one* you should pursue. If you search for that, confusion and disappointment are certain. Then you are liable to fall into nihilism, concluding that there is no purpose to life after all, and perhaps become suicidally depressed. Or you may fritter away years doing things you know to be meaningless, paralyzed and anxious, waiting and hoping that your mission will finally reveal itself. At best, you may jump back to materialism when mission shows no progress. At least, with materialism, there clear cause-and-effect involved, no unreliable psycho-magic is required, and you can tell if you are getting somewhere. Besides, you've got to eat.

Imagining that you *have* found a mission can quite as bad.

If a supposed "mission" is sufficiently concrete, it becomes a practical project at which we can succeed or fail. Then if you complete your mission successfully, what else is there to live for? If you fail at it conclusively, what else is there to live for? You supposedly had only one mission; you're all used up.

If the supposed mission is not sufficiently concrete, it is no guide to action. People often come up with "personal mission statements" like "I will always live in complete integrity for the benefit of others." An attractive sentiment, that, but useless.

The "non-ordinary methods" used to find "authentic missions" examine your psychology: both what you "truly" want to do ("in your heart"), and on what your resources are (talents, personality traits, and so forth). But the problem with psychology is that the self is nebulous: insubstantial, ambiguous, changing.

If you follow your psychology, your idea of what your mission is may change every few months —or even moment to moment. But a mission is supposed to be the guiding principle of your entire life. Frequently changing your ideas about your mission avoids both failure and success. Avoiding failure preserves the comforting illusion that you will eventually find your mission *for*

real, and then everything will come out right. But avoiding success means that you drift or bounce from one project to the next without ever accomplishing anything of significance. You are led like a pig with a ring in the nose by the rope of your ever-changing psychology.

The idea that you have one definite mission that you can definitely discover can lead you to seize on something quite wrong and pursue it with far greater determination than it deserves. I once acted as a business consultant to Fifi, who had decided that her mission in life was to create the world's first mobile beauty spa. She was going to outfit a large motor home as a combined live/work space. She would park it in downtown financial district parking lots, sleep in the back, and offer services out of the front. Fifi's own expertise was in color consulting (advising people on what color clothes to wear). She recognized that this business didn't require the use of the motor home; she could, and did, color-consult in her clients' own homes or offices. So she would hire make-up artists and masseuses to create the actual business. She presented this as a glorious vision of selfless service to unmet needs of busy female executives.

During the development of a detailed business plan, it became at each step more obvious that this project was stupid. The world does not need a mobile beauty salon—and neither did Fifi. Mobility produced no significant convenience benefit to potential customers; it was not a cost-effective way of providing the services; there were government regulatory problems with using parking lots as a place of business; a motor home large enough to both live and work in was unreasonably expensive. But she was convinced that this was her *true life's purpose*. Fifi herself was not stupid, but she was using the myth of mission to avoid having to genuinely look at her situation. In fact, her "vision" was an incoherent fantasy based on a mishmash of unrealistic solutions to problems in her personal life: conflicts and disappointments in her housing and work situations.

Even if the mission you fixate on is initially sensible, over time it can diverge increasingly from the reality of what you can do, what you want to do, and what is useful, due to the nebulosity (ambiguity and mutability) of both yourself and your circumstances. If your life's mission is "to elevate the world's consciousness through song," and you develop nodules on your vocal cords that make singing impossible, then what would be a serious practical set-back for a materialist becomes an existential catastrophe. If your life-mission is "to bring the benefits of natural herbal remedies to everyone who is ailing," then you have a more serious problem than a career change if herbal supplements go out of fashion or are banned by the government.

Paul Graham's insightful essay "How to Do What You Love" has this advice:

> Don't decide too soon. Kids who know early what they want to do seem impressive, as if they got the answer to some math question before the other kids. They have an answer, certainly, but odds are it's wrong.

> A friend of mine who is a quite successful doctor complains constantly about her job. When people applying to medical school ask her for advice, she wants to shake them and yell "Don't do it!"… How did she get into this fix? In high school she already wanted to be a doctor. And she is so ambitious and determined that she overcame every obstacle along the way—including, unfortunately, not liking it.

> Now she has a life chosen for her by a high-school kid. *[That is, her former self.]*

Identifying a single mission can be helpful in bringing focus to a difficult long-term project. But it also means you may overlook other opportunities that could be pursued in parallel. The careers of highly-productive and highly-creative people are usually marked by opportunism, in a positive sense: they change directions repeatedly when their interests and circumstances change. That keeps them from getting stale, and makes the best use of their abilities and alternatives. That is the way to dance with nebulosity and pattern.

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A good question… Or is it?

If you look for answers—in books, on the web, from supposed experts—everyone will agree:

> Discover your unique talent, follow your passion, and success is guaranteed.

Richard Bolles' enormously successful self-help book *What Color Is Your Parachute* was a main reason this idea came to dominate our culture's thinking about personal purpose in the realm of work.

It was originally published in 1970, just around the time that the formerly-industrial American economy started creating large numbers of jobs manipulating abstract meanings rather than bits of metal. This caused a crisis of meaning. The fraction of the population for whom a career was supposed to be a source of meaningfulness jumped. But which were truly meaningful? Most of those meaning-manipulating jobs are obviously bullshit.

Bolles' idea was hugely appealing: I am special, I have a unique mission, and if I pursue that mission as a career, the Cosmic Plan will certainly reward me for being true to myself.

It's terrible advice, though. It's done great harm, to individuals and to society.

Pragmatically, it's bad career advice. If there's something unusual about you, it's generally pretty unlikely anyone wants to pay you for it. (Of course, there are exceptions, and advocates of this idea tell inspiring stories about nice people who became extraordinarily successful because they had an obsession with garden snails or something.) If you love doing something, probably a lot of other people do, too, so there's likely to be an oversupply of people who want that sort of work, and it won't pay well. Or at all!

Discovering this often sets you off on a Quest for your True Mission In Life; if only you could find that, a satisfying career would follow! This reliably causes misery, as in the story of Fifi's bad career vision.

At the level of meaningness, it's also terrible advice. The stance of mission reliably messes up your life and makes you miserable.

You don't have a single, special purpose or passion in life. You have many, and they're all shared with others. Which ones are best to pursue depends on pragmatic considerations, including "how much can I get paid for this?" Such circumstances shift over time. In 1970, everyone assumed they'd only have one career. It's common now to change every decade or so.

Which purposes are best to pursue also depends on shifting interests, increasing capabilities, and the arc of personal development through adulthood.

There is no "supposed to" about purposes. Implicit in "supposed to" is that Someone else is doing the supposing. Bolles was an Episcopal clergyman. His book was notionally secular, but God is a constant ghostly presence. If you don't think God is going to give you career advice, you should be suspicious and careful when reading this book, or the enormous number of similar texts it inspired.

If you *do* think God should be involved in your career, I'd suggest adopting the eternalist stance rather than mission. In other words, take your religion much more seriously. It probably does not recommend the sorts of self-centered attitudes and psycho-magical exercises Bolles did.[1]

Encouraging young people to "follow their passion" and "discover their mission" has created an enormous oversupply of graduates with expensive degrees in fields that are almost entirely useless. This is bad for progress, for making the world better by doing pragmatically useful things. It has also created a class of meaning-manipulating malcontents who agitate for social changes that provide bullshit jobs for them. They have become a substantial, and often harmful, political force.

"What should I do with my life?" is a bad question. "Pursuing which purposes will be most enjoyable and useful now and over the next several years?" is a better one.

2020 note

I wrote that "everyone will agree" (about what you should do with your life) in 2007. It was true then. I began working out a rebuttal. The above is a rough draft, partly from then, partly from 2020.

Recently, Cal Newport has written about this extensively. I haven't yet read his book, *So Good They Can't Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love*. However, from summaries, his critique seems to be broadly similar to what I intended:

> The passion hypothesis, which says that the key to loving your work is to match a job to a pre-existing passion, is bad advice. There's little evidence that most people have pre-existing passions waiting to be discovered, and believing that there's a magical right job lurking out there can often lead to chronic unhappiness and confusion when the reality of the working world fails to match this dream.

> We don't have much evidence that matching your job to a pre-existing interest makes you more likely to find that work satisfying. The properties we know lead people to enjoy their work—such as autonomy, mastery, and relationships—have little to do with whether or not the work matches an established inclination.

His alternative advice seems at least partly right:

> It's important to adopt the craftsman mindset, where you focus relentlessly on what value you're offering the world. This stands in stark contrast to the much more common passion mindset, which has you focus only on what value the world is offering you.

I'm not totally on board with "relentlessly," or with the implication here that you *only* focus on what value you are offering the world, rather than what value the world offers you. The complete stance for purpose acknowledges the role of both.

The last part of his book also explicitly advocates "career mission." Having not read it, I'm not sure how his use of "mission" relates to mine here.

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1. 1."At the heart of this book is the Flower Exercise: a self-inventory in which you examine seven ways of thinking about yourself" says the 2020 edition.

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"Politics" has largely replaced religion as a source of meaning in Western countries.

In the dimension of purpose, this manifests as making some political agenda into a personal mission.

That causes all the usual personal problems taking on a mission does in general. Additionally, it messes up politics itself, and contributes to our current crisis of institutions.

Political activism can be valuable if it is realistic, meaning if you are competent at it and if you are promoting policies that are likely to work. Taking it as a personal mission usually results in overlooking those "ifs" in favor of narcissistic emotional needs.

There is no cosmic scoreboard. Do you have something specific to contribute, or are you just showing off how on-the-right-side you are?

Comment on this page

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This page will cover a variety of antidotes to one of mission's two metaphysical errors: fixating higher purposes.

Recognizing that mission is essentially selfish and aggressive (while pretending to be altruistic). It's me trying to force the world to do what I am pretending God told me I'm supposed to make it do.

"*Your* purpose? You think some eternal ordering principle of the universe cares enough to give you your very own purpose? Exactly one of them? And you are different enough from everyone else that you get your own private one?" Well, no, when you put it that bluntly…

Refuting the fear that if I *don't* have a mission, then the universe is meaningless, and that is horrible, and I would be miserable.

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This page will cover a variety of antidotes to one of missions's two metaphysical errors: denying mundane purposes.

Recognizing the unattractive self-righteousness of denial of mundane desires.

Impracticality of mission orientation. Need realism.

Common pattern in people addicted to mission of neglecting their mundane circumstances, thereby creating messes for themselves that they expect other people to clean up because they are too elevated to deal with them.

Courage needed to tackle mundane domains after neglect, because so deeply dug into hole.

Obstacle: viewing as crass. This is kitsch. Too good to get your hands dirty.

Pattern of initially applying eternalistic approaches when confronting neglected mundane mess. E.g. practicing affirmations ("I am growing more and more fruitful each day") rather than taking mundane practical action (figuring out which credit card has the highest interest rate and paying it off first, or rolling the balance over to a card with a lower rate). "Money will come to me when the time is right." "God will bless me materially as he sees fit."

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Materialism is the confused stance that only "mundane," self-interested purposes are meaningful.

As an attempt to reconcile eternalism and nihilism—with an emphasis on nihilism—materialism tries to overcome the obstacles to nihilism and the defects of eternalism.

- The central obstacle to nihilism is the obviousness of meaning; especially the meanings of one's desires and the objects of one's desires. Consequently, materialism is all about self-gratification and self-preservation.
- The central defect of eternalism is its demand that you serve the "eternal," "higher," or "transcendent" purposes of the Cosmic Plan. Those are often unreasonable, inconvenient, painful, or outright harmful. Materialism rejects eternalism's demand by denying the meaningfulness of all purposes other than the mundane ones. Those, which we share with other social mammals, are too obvious to deny.

Materialism is most obviously about the accumulation and consumption of physical objects, and the term is sometimes used to refer exclusively to that. But in a broader sense it covers dedication to the pursuit of any self-interested purpose. These include, for instance popularity, fame, sex, status, and power.

Materialism doesn't work, but we often adopt it because it seems like common sense. The sense is that getting what you want is what makes you happy; not getting what you want, or getting what you don't want, makes you unhappy. If you could get enough of what you want, then you'd be much happier.

And, this is mostly not wrong! Mundane purposes are real purposes, and are often entirely worth pursuing. The complete stance toward purpose—"enjoyable usefulness" recognizes this.

There are two problems. First, getting what you want often *doesn't* make you happy. Second, ignoring unselfish, eternal purposes can make your life pretty meaningless, which is a bad thing in itself, and also usually makes you unhappy when you notice and admit it.

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Materialism wrongly fixates mundane purposes, and denies higher ones. Both aspects cause unnecessary trouble.

This page explains how three other confused stances, eternalism, mission, and nihilism reject materialism. These rejections are each partly right, and obviously so. Unless you are stubbornly committed to materialism, you will admit this, if perhaps sometimes reluctantly. That makes these considerations obstacles to maintaining the stance, destabilizing it.

Each critique is flawed; partly wrong, although not entirely mistaken. These flaws are also obvious, which is a reason it's possible to adopt materialism at times.

Meaningness rejects materialism from point of view of the complete stance. It regards all purposes, mundane and higher, as both nebulously meaningful and nebulously meaningless. The next page explains that critique.

Eternalism's rejection of materialism

Most people are committed to eternalism in word, but often adopt materialism in deed. The ubiquity of the discord between these two has not escaped the notice of the guardians of eternalistic religions, who devote much of their effort to condemning it.

There are two lines of attack: materialism leads you to selfishly violate God's laws, and it distracts you from higher purposes (which, in eternalist theisms, are God's purposes). God's laws generally require self-sacrifice, which is inimical to materialism. God says Thou Shalt Not, and materialism says "I'll go for what I want." God says Thou Shalt, and materialism asks "what's in it for me?" And the tug of animal desires is so strong that, unless we constantly fight them, we will—according to most eternalist religions—lose sight of our true purpose, which is to please God.

Non-theistic eternalisms make similar critiques. For example, some political ideologies say materialism is the root of the destructive capitalist consumer culture. It creates unjust power and wealth inequalities, destroys the environment, and eliminates the possibility of cultural transcendence by filling our heads with mediocre mass entertainment.

The eternalist critique is correct, insofar as *exclusive* pursuit of *fixed* mundane purposes is harmful—even to oneself.

Mission's rejection of materialism

The critique of materialism from point of view of mission is similar to the eternalist critique. (So it is correct for the same reason, and to the same extent.) Materialism is selfish; it views other people as mere means or tools to the materialist's shallow purposes. It is amoral. It values things over people, power over virtue, lust over love, consumption over generosity. A materialist may create works of enduring value, but only as a means of self-advancement or self-glorification.

The difference between eternalism's and mission's critiques is that mission sees mundane purposes as meaningless, and has no interest in their details. Eternalism fixates mundane purposes as well as higher ones; an eternalist religion may give detailed guidance on how you should live everyday life.

Nihilism's rejection of materialism

The nihilist views the materialist as deluded. For the nihilist, there can be no real purpose. Only an idiot could believe that "he who dies with the most toys wins." Mundane purposes are transient and empty—just as higher purposes are vain and imaginary.

> … all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more; it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
>
> Signifying nothing.[1]

Nihilism is right that purely personal, mundane purposes expire at death. That doesn't make them entirely meaningless, but it's a factor important to consider. Meaning cannot be purely personal, and neither can purposes.

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1. 1.William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V.

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Materialism fails on its own terms.

Comment on this page

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This page will cover a variety of antidotes to one of materialism's two metaphysical errors: fixating mundane purposes.

They provide freedom from the compulsive need-driven quality of mundane desires, and allow you enjoyment free from grasping.

Comment on this page

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This page will cover a variety of antidotes to one of materialism's two metaphysical errors: denying higher purposes.

They allow you to recover compassion and creativity.

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The defects of mission and materialism are well-known and experienced by us all. Because each is unworkable, they are unstable, and we adopt both at different times, or in different parts of our lives. This also does not work. Trying to mix them is another approach.

Torn between mission and materialism

Alternately adopting mission and materialism can feel like a war between two parts of oneself.

- The part committed to mission claims to be morally pure, and casts the part committed to materialism as selfish and subhuman. Secretly it also knows that its self-denial is self-destructive, and wishes it could let go and enjoy life a bit more.
- The part committed to materialism claims to be realistic and intelligent, and casts the part committed to mission as a hypocritical holier-than-thou simpleton. Secretly it also feels guilt and disappointment, and wishes it felt secure enough to be more generous.

This is a recipe for misery and dysfunction.[1]

The prominent Anglo-American philosopher M. Ciccone was famous for passionate commitment to materialism in her early work. Subsequently, however, influenced by the mystical philosophy Kabbalah, she explored the existential angst that comes of being torn between materialism and mission:

> How high are the stakes?
> How much fortune can you make?
> Does this get any better?
> Should I carry on?
> Will it matter when I'm gone?
> Will any of this matter?
> Does it make a difference?
>
> Nothing lasts forever.[2]

Muddled middles

A more sophisticated strategy seeks to *mingle materialism and mission*. This creates muddled middles: attempts to avoid the tension by finding a compromise. These can be categorized as giving higher purposes mundane uses or as giving mundane purposes higher meanings.

[There should be a diagram here, showing mission and materialism in between eternalism and nihilism, and then the two doubly-muddled middles between mission and materialism.]

Giving higher purposes mundane uses

In this mingling, one overtly pursues a higher purpose, with a covert mundane agenda. One might, for instance, aim for fame and glory while leading a celebrity media campaign to save starving Africans from poverty; or make zillions of dollars (and acquire a harem of groupies) as an "alternative" "rebellious" musician; or wield the power of life and death over millions, in the name of Protecting The People, as a demagogic politician.

On a more ordinary level, our motivations are rarely unmixed. When pursuing higher purposes, we almost always hope for some mundane reward, even if it is only a casual compliment from a friend. This is often sleazy and covert. That is not to say that we cannot be authentically compassionate or creative; just that there is a self-aggrandizing tendency operating at the same time.

Virtually every domain of human activity gets appropriated and distorted by materialism. We use every situation as a domain in which to conduct social actions of seduction, competition, and domination. Almost nothing is too trivial, nor too important, for a group to specialize in it; observe differences in ability, recognize champions, winners, and losers; hope for success in it and fear failure; and seek mates who are successful at it.

Any time we set out nominally to do something (even a noble, higher purpose—curing cancer perhaps), we are also to some extent using that project as a way to look virtuous, make money, gather power, or make ourselves more sexually attractive. We may be more or less aware of these additional motivations. Even if we were perfectly disinterested ourselves, the other people engaged in the activity would have these motivations. So it becomes impossible simply to do the thing; we can only do it plus materialism. Often the demands of materialism run counter to accomplishing the original project. Materialistic agendas are the main obstacle to many goals.

Giving mundane purposes higher meanings

This mingling strategy is the mirror image of the first. Here we pretend a plainly mundane purpose—such as material consumption—has some spurious higher one. This pretense aims to alleviate guilt about mundane purposes generated by the critiques of materialism. And, as a happy twofer, we can look good to other people at the same time!

As traditional bases for meaning have evaporated, hunger for alternative sources have made this an increasingly effective marketing approach. It presents products that you buy for mundane purposes as having higher ones, such as fair trade, saving the environment, educating starving children, purifying your chakras, sending a message to evil capitalists / perverted socialists, and so on. In principle, it is possible that such combinations could work, but when you investigate details it nearly always turns out that they have little if any effect. You may feel better about yourself—if you can maintain the delusion—but otherwise you are paying extra (a mundane loss) without the claimed higher benefit.

If feel you have adequately fulfilled your unwanted duty to higher purposes this way, you will be less likely to pursue them realistically.[3]

Here is a short, clear explanation from Slavoj Žižek:

Starbucks is in the business of selling indulgences—of the sort Martin Luther railed against—absolving you of secular sins.

I'll discuss this muddled middle further in the ethics chapter of *Meaningness*. I've also written about it in " 'Ethics' is advertising."

Almost right and completely wrong

The muddled middles are accurate in their implicit recognition that both mundane and higher purposes are meaningful, and that—realistically—we have no choice other than to pursue both.

They are inaccurate, and may not work well in practice, because they tacitly accept an absolute distinction between the two types of purpose. They try to achieve two purposes in a single activity. This fails to resolve the underlying tension.

So long as the types of purpose still seem opposed, the strategy pulls activity in two directions at once. That usually makes it both less effective and less enjoyable. "Fair trade" coffee does little if any good. And do you genuinely feel better for overpaying for it, or do you just feel that you've dutifully checked off an ethical chore?

The muddled middles preserve the self-indulgent, self-protective grasping of materialism, *and* the self-righteous justification of mission. That tends to lose the uncomplicated enjoyment-value of animal satisfaction (because we pretend that is not what we seek), and also the selfless compassionate joy of accomplishing higher purposes (because we have subordinated those to a materialist agenda).

---

1. 1.*The Guru Papers* explores this pattern in depth; I have summarized it here.
2. 2.Madonna, "How High," on *Confessions on a Dance Floor* (2005). Cf. "Material Girl," written by Peter Brown and Robert Rans, sung by Madonna on *Like a Virgin* (1984).
3. 3.Or so some social-psychology research claims, and it seems plausible! As of 2020, it's hard to know what results in that field to take seriously, due to the replication crisis.

Comment on this page

Next Page: Enjoyable usefulness →

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Enjoyable usefulness is the stance that both eternal and mundane purposes are meaningful—when they are. Therefore, we can and should pursue both.

On the other hand, no purpose is ultimately meaningful. That gives us freedom to choose; and means that we need not particularly fear failure.

This stance tends to lead to experiences of "flow" and enjoyable accomplishment.

On the other hand, it is unattractive because accomplishment gives no metaphysical validation. There is no basis for hope of salvation if only we try hard enough.

4 Comments

Next Page: Want what you like →

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One defect of materialism is fixating mundane purposes, locking one into the idea that only a few things can bring you satisfaction in the material realm, and getting as much as possible of them is the meaning of life. That's what you should want.

Meanwhile, mission tells us that material enjoyment is a meaningless distraction from higher purposes. You shouldn't want that.

Both these voices are wrong. Consequently, to varying extents, we do not know what we actually like and will enjoy, and therefore do not know what we should want. Finding out can be quite difficult, but highly worthwhile. (As well as surprisingly interesting!)

That is a prerequisite to the "enjoyable" part of enjoyable usefulness. See also the discussion of enjoyment in the chapter on the complete stance.

I have written about how to find out what you like, and nurture your desire for it and enjoyment of it, on another site, here and here. This page will cover roughly the same material, in a very different style.

        Confusing image

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Much suffering and confusion comes from the idea that people could be either ordinary or special. This is a mistake. No one can be either one—no matter how hard we try. The belief that we must be one or the other obscures the reality of what we are, and the reality of what we can become.

So if we are neither, what are we? Mostly, what we are is confused. We are confused about our proper role in the world.

We know that we aren't really special, because we recognize that we are essentially the same as everyone else. Although we secretly hope and suspect we might be special, we cannot figure out what our special role should be. We seek obscure omens and chase tentative possibilities, but they shift about and peter out. We recognize that people who present themselves as special are actually on harmful ego trips.

Yet we also know we aren't really ordinary, because there are moments when we recognize our vast individual potential. No matter how hard we try to fit in, we secretly know that our innermost possibilities do not lie in going along with society. People who present themselves as ordinary are pretending to be herd animals—but no one is really fooled.

The problem is that we see no third possibility. So we jump back and forth between trying to be special or ordinary. We try to find some sort of compromise, or some way to be special in one part of our lives and otherwise ordinary. Mostly we try to bury the issue altogether, because it is so uncomfortable. But spiritual practice, life crises, and moments of grace keep bringing it to the surface.

Once we understand that, another, better possibility appears. That third alternative might be called nobility, or heroism.

2 Comments

Stance	Specialness	Ordinariness	Nobility
Summary	I have a distinct and superior value given by the eternal ordering principle	My value comes from being like everyone else	Developing all my abilities in order to serve others
What it denies	Shared humanity	Unusualness	
What it fixates	Personal value	Personal value	
The sales pitch	You are better than they are	Don't put on airs	Be all you can be
Emotional appeal	Reinforces ego	No need to live up to potential	
Pattern of thinking	Disdain; self-aggrandisement	Fearfulness, laziness	Impeccability
Likely next stances	Mission, true self	Materialism	Enjoyable usefulness
Accomplishment	Autoapotheosis	Baaaaaa	Heroism
How it causes suffering	Ego-trips; role anxiety; need for constant confirmation	Suppression of individuality	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Familiarity of experience; maintaining image is exhausting	Unusual impulses; cannot conform to herd	Selfishness; fear; laziness
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Recognition of shared humanity	Recognition of potential and uniqueness	
Intelligent aspect	Recognition of potential and uniqueness	Recognition of shared humanity	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Nobility does rise above the ordinary	Humility is an aspect of nobility	

5 Comments

Special

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Although we all have an intuitive feeling for specialness and ordinariness, they are not easy to define. Specialness—as I am using the word—is not merely "extraordinary" or "better than most." Nor is ordinariness just "what is common."

Specialness is often confused with extraordinariness. Some people *are* extraordinary. They are talented, famous, beautiful, or accomplished, in ways others are not. Often they are mistakenly thought of as special. Maybe they can even convince themselves they are special—some of the time.

No amount of talent, fame, beauty, or accomplishment can make you feel consistently special, though. Extraordinary people feel ordinary much of the time. That can be highly disappointing. It is not possible to become special through our own actions, by doing something extraordinary.

The problem is that extraordinariness never manages to escape into the transcendent. People vary as to how strong or clever they are—but that is just something that happens, as a matter of

ordinary variation. And talent, fame, beauty, and accomplishment fade—whereas it seems specialness should be eternal.

So what is specialness, then? A special person is singled out, from birth, for a particular role in the cosmic plan. Their life-course is laid out in the plan in a special way, giving it a special meaning and value. That does not depend on any objective, personal characteristics—although we might mistake those as evidence of specialness.

Since there *is no cosmic plan* to choose special people, there are no special people. It is actually impossible for anyone to be special.

That might be depressing, if the only alternative to being special was to be ordinary. Luckily, there are other possibilities.

1 Comment

Ordinary sheep

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True humility requires the courage to risk greatness.
—Bert Hellinger

Ordinariness might seem the opposite of specialness. Actually, it is almost the same thing. What they have in common is the idea that our life has a definite proper course. The idea of ordinariness is that in the cosmic plan our role is the same as most everyone else's. It is right for us to do "what one does" and to live for no distinctive reason, without sticking out. It is wrong to pretend to be something fancy and special.

Because there *is no cosmic plan*, it is as impossible to be ordinary as it is to be special. No one is predestined to be a sheep. Yet we often waste a huge amount of emotional energy in trying to be ordinary, or trying to appear ordinary. That is because we are lazy and fearful. (Isn't it interesting how often laziness drives us to take on impossible, exhausting tasks?)

We try to be ordinary when we think that living up to some idea of specialness would be too difficult. If we could be ordinary, we would not have the responsibility of living up to our potential. We feel justified in behaving badly, so long as we are stupid and unkind in common ways.

We try to be ordinary when we cannot imagine what our special role could be. We try to be ordinary when the uncertainty of the future is terrifying. "Being like everyone else" seems at least to offer the safety of a known outcome.

Comment on this page

Lion

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When we abandon our hope of a pre-packaged life-meaning, another possibility appears. We might call this "nobility" or "heroism." Neither is a perfect word, but they point in the right direction.

Nobility is the aspiration to manifest glory for the benefit of others. Nobility is using whatever abilities we have in service of others. Nobility is seeking to fulfill our in-born human potential, and to develop all our in-born human qualities.

Because nobility is an intention, it is possible for everyone. Specialness tries to be better than ordinariness. It would only be possible to be special if most people were ordinary. Claims of specialness are based on uncommon qualities. It would not be possible for everyone to be special.

Everyone *could* be noble—and at times all of us *are* noble. It is not an accomplishment; it is a stance. But nobility is not easy. It is not easy to hold the intention continuously. It is not easy to abandon our laziness. It is not easy to let go of hope that one day we will discover our "true life-mission," given by the cosmic plan. To be noble is not special—but it *is* extraordinary.

Specialness demands constant confirmation. That is because no one really *can* be special, and no one *is* special. The illusion of specialness is in constant danger of collapse. Nobility takes itself for granted, and needs no confirmation. When we have that intention, we have no doubt of it. Specialness aims at a brilliant destiny; nobility is always already complete.

Mere goodness is not nobility. Often we use goodness as a way of trying to be ordinary or special. Being "morally correct" in an ordinary, unimaginative, conformist way may be an excuse for avoiding the scary possibility of extraordinary goodness, or greatness. Doing good in a showy way can be a strategy for convincing ourselves, or others, that we are special. Celebrity charity work often seems to be that. Of course this is better than many other ways of trying to be special, but it somewhat misses the point. Specialness serves in order to rise, whereas nobility rises in order to serve.

The idea of being "noble" may sound remote or ridiculous. However, it is actually possible— whereas it is not possible to be either ordinary or special. Nobility is actually available to all of us in every moment, simply by choosing it. It is frightening; but to me it seems infinitely worthwhile.

3 Comments

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Comment on this page

Stance	Total responsibility	Victim-think	Light-heartedness
Summary	We each create our own reality and are responsible for everything that happens in it	It's not my fault and I am too weak to deal with it	Playfully co-create reality in collaboration with each other and the world
What it denies	Contingency, limits	Responsibility, capability, freedom	
What it fixates	Responsibility		

		Overwhelming power of circumstances	
The sales pitch	Perfect circumstances can be achieved with sufficient effort	You are oppressed and therefore blameless	
Emotional appeal	Fantasy of control over future	No need to make any effort	No need for self-criticism or for anxiety
Pattern of thinking	Aggressive, paranoid	Fearful, depressed, emotionally manipulative	Effortless accomplishment
Likely next stances	Specialness, true self, mission	Ordinariness, materialism	Nobility, ethical responsiveness
Accomplishment	King of the Universe	Have all needs met by exploiting others' pity	Effortless creativity
How it causes suffering	Hypervigilance; can't meet infinite requirements with finite capacity	Resentment, depression, neglect of opportunities	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Obviousness of limits	Obviousness of opportunities	Hard to let go of need to be reassured about outcomes
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Letting go of fantasies of accomplishment; willingness to fail	Gratitude; letting go of payoffs; walking away; practical action	
Intelligent aspect	Recognition of possibility	Recognition of limits	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Experience depends more on our own perception & action than is usually thought	Because we have finite capabilities, we can cut ourselves some slack	

2 Comments

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The delusion that you are, or can be, totally responsible for "your" reality is prevalent in some religious and psychotherapeutic circles.

4 Comments

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Victim-think is a strategy for denying all responsibility. "Since I have no power, it's not my fault, and you can't expect me to deal with it."

Victim-think is versatile; you can deploy it in many ways, varying across several axes. It applies to individuals and to social groups. It can be *first person* (I or we are victims), or *third person* (he/

she/they are victims). You can use it as an excuse for bad behavior, or as a plea for aid. Those can be directed at powerful people or institutions, or at God or some other eternal ordering principle.

Some common patterns of use:

- Maybe I did steal that, but I am having a hard time. It's society's fault.
- My social group is victimized, so we are justified in attacking members of another one.
- I know this relationship is bad for both of us, but I'm too weak to end it.
- That social group is oppressed, so the authorities should give them special privileges.
- That guy is a member of an oppressed group, so you can't hold him responsible for his criminal act.

Each of these may be accurate in rare cases. More often, they are harmful distortions, and covert power-plays.

Generally, it's rare for anyone to bear *no* responsibility for their actions—just as total responsibility is rare or impossible. These extreme, confused stances are attractive because they simplify moral reasoning, and can be used as weapons in social conflicts.

Mostly, everyone involved has partial control over events, which makes questions of moral responsibility complex and inherently nebulous. We may not like that, but any serious ethics or politics has to acknowledge and work with reality as it is, not as we would like it to be.

2 Comments

Next Page: Light-heartedness →

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Playfully co-create reality in collaboration with each other and the world.

2 Comments

Next Page: Ethics →

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[This chapter is mainly unwritten. In the mean time, I've written about ethics in a Buddhist framework on another site. The approach I take there is mainly consistent with what I will eventually write here. This page there sketches the path to a complete stance for ethics. This one fills in some more details, although in retrospect I find it unnecessarily obscure.]

Available systems of ethics are dysfunctional. They ignore nearly all the ethical questions people actually have. Academic and theological answers are useless, not because they are wrong, but because they address questions no one cares about.

Our most pressing ethical questions—such as "how ethical should I be?"—cannot even be *asked* within existing systems, much less answered correctly. And so, in practice, everyone has abandoned the systems.

Unconstrained by systems, ethical claims have proliferated as metastatic cancers of meaning, infiltrating tumors into every organ of culture.

Useful analysis has to start over—but not from scratch. We all *do* ask the questions that matter, and not all our answers are wrong. Everyday ethical experience goes most of the way toward an accurate ethical analysis.

The structure of this chapter should be familiar by now: it looks at an opposing pair of confused stances that share a mistaken metaphysical assumption; diagnoses the mistake as a failure to appreciate the nebulosity of the topic (ethics); and develops the complete stance that recognizes the inseparability of the nebulosity and pattern of the topic.

The underlying mistaken metaphysical assumption is that, to be meaningful, ethics must have a definite, objective foundation.

Ethical eternalism assumes there must be a correct ethical system that accurately reflects the objective reality. (This is a classic example of wistful certainty: there *must* be one, otherwise the universe would be *bad and wrong*, and that's unthinkable.)

One main reason for clinging to eternalism *in general* is the fear that without an eternal ordering principle, ethics is impossible. It is thought that ethics must be based in a transcendent source such as God or Rationality or Progress. Fortunately, that is not the case. Ethics arises, reliably, from the patterned interaction of innumerable factors. It does not require a definite foundation.

All existing eternalistic ethical theories are not merely *wrong*, they're entirely irrelevant to the issues we actually care about. The ones they obsess over (deontology vs. consequentialism, trolley problems, what Jesus would have said) no one cares about. Those are quite unlike the ethical questions we typically encounter.

Ethical nihilism recognizes (accurately) that ethics has no ultimate foundation, but then concludes that ethics is merely subjective and/or meaningless. This is wrong; it seems plausible only if one fails to challenge the underlying metaphysical assumption about the nature of ethics.

Ethical responsiveness rejects the assumption and so can develop an accurate ethical practice.

Since this three-fold pattern of analysis is now familiar, I can dispose of ethical eternalism and ethical nihilism reasonably quickly.

Most of the chapter is devoted to an exploration of *everyday ethical practice*. Ethics is not a system of reasons (as in consequentialism and deontology), nor of personal traits (as in virtue ethics). It is patterns of *situated social practice*. "Situated" means that it is unboundedly dependent on context. "Social practice" means that it is inherently *collaborative*, *improvisational*, and *interpretive*.

I discuss numerous ethical phenomena that everyone encounters regularly, that we actually care about, and that are mostly or entirely ignored by existing ethical theories. I'll address these both from an informal, participant-observer point of view, and based on recent research in evolutionary psychology and sociology. Along the way, I gradually introduce my normative judgements, pointing toward "responsiveness."

How ethical should I be?

This question comes up several times a day for most people, I believe. There is no existing ethical framework in which it can even be *asked*, much less answered. I think that's a serious problem. People are disappointed by ethics and religion because they don't get an answer, and that has negative consequences.

I use the question to introduce the *flavor* of my approach. It's also a "forcing question": trying to answer it uncovers a series of related issues in everyday ethical practice, which might otherwise be overlooked.

My first answer is that we should all be *much less ethical*. This answer is somewhat flip, and I'll take it through a series of qualifications, modifications, and reverses. However, it's also quite serious. The absence of a workable ethical framework leads us to devote great effort to applying ethics in domains where it's the wrong tool. We should all stop doing that.

Ethical nebulosity, ethical anxiety, and ethical ease

[We cannot be certain about ethics because the topic is inherently nebulous. This leads to ethical anxiety. Ethical anxiety motivates much dysfunction, at both personal and whole-society levels. It is mainly unnecessary, however. Accepting the interplay of nebulosity and pattern dissolves most of it.]

Ethical value and ethical metastasis

[There are many forms of value: pragmatic value, aesthetic value, religious value, and ethical value among them. Over the past century, pluralism and relativism have eroded all types of value other than pragmatic and ethical. This leads to mis-using ethics as a stand-in for other non-pragmatic forms of value, notably sacredness. This *ethical metastasis* is hugely harmful. (I will analyze many specific cases.) I advocate de-ethicizing various domains and restoring them to their proper value-types.]

Ethical display, ethical fungibility, and values marketing

[*Ethical display* is communicating your ethical position. I'm using the word "display" in the ethnomethodological sense; it's closely related to "signaling" in evolutionary psychology and economics. (I've written at length about ethical signaling elsewhere.)]

[*Ethical fungibility* is the idea that you can be less ethical in one situation if you've been more ethical than required in another. (Or, if you want to be less ethical now, you can promise to yourself that you'll make it up later.) There's an implicit sense of "karmic bank account" involved. We all do this, although it leads us to do wrong things. It makes intuitive sense due to the absence of a coherent approach to the question "how ethical should I be?".]

[*Values marketing* exploits ethical fungibility by adding small amounts of "ethics" to products in order to justify a much higher price tag. "Fair trade" coffee is the canonical example. People buy it to alleviate ethical anxiety and to build up their ethical bank balance. Starbucks is in the business of selling indulgences, in the Pre-Reformation sense!]

Ethical agreement

[Most supposed ethical disagreements are not genuinely about ethics, but about other value-types, or are display strategies. In fact, nearly everyone in modern societies agrees about nearly everything. Recognizing this alleviates ethical anxiety and promotes ethical freedom.]

Ethical freedom

[Here I discuss freedom *from* ethics. Often choice of action is *not* an ethical issue: you can do what you want. Ethical considerations are often not overriding (even where they apply at all). This is tremendously important, because creativity and enjoyment live in the zone between "must" and "must not."]

Ethical responsiveness: the complete stance

[Treating ethics as a situated social practice, we can ask: what tools and skills are available? How can we do this better?]

13 Comments

Stance	Ethical eternalism	Ethical nihilism	Ethical responsiveness
Summary	The Cosmic Plan dictates a fixed ethical code according to which we ought to live	Ethics is a meaningless human invention and has no real claim on us	Ethics is centrally important to humans, and is not a matter of choice, but is fluid and has no definite source
What it denies	Ambiguity of ethics; freedom; courage; creativity	Ethical imperativeness	
What it fixates	Ethical code (rules/ laws)	Absence of ethical absolutes	
The sales pitch	Cosmic justice guarantees reward/ punishment if you obey/defy the ethical code	Do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law	Ethical anxiety is unnecessary
Emotional appeal	Avoiding blame; preventing others from harming/offending you	Take what you want; don't let morality get in the way	
Pattern of thinking	Self-righteousness	Arrogance	Light-hearted concern
Likely next stances	Religiosity, mission	Secularism, materialism	Light-heartedness, nobility
Accomplishment	Remorseless soldier of God	Sociopathy	Ethical maturity
How it causes suffering	Harmful actions are sometimes required by the supposed rules; beneficial ones may not be promoted	Without ethics, harmful actions are just rational self-interest	
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Situations in which ethical rules are unclear or promote obvious harm	Natural concern for others	Requires close attention to particulars; no guarantee of blamelessness

Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Allowing ethical ambiguity	Respecting ethical imperatives
Intelligent aspect	Recognizes the importance of ethics	Recognizes the ambiguity of ethics
Positive appropriation after resolution	Points toward nobility	Points toward ethical maturity

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> There *must* be a correct ethical system that reliably determines right and wrong. Adopting it will guarantee we will always do and be good, not evil.

This is the founding assumption of ethical eternalism. It's pure wishful thinking—wistful certainty. There's no reason to believe such a system exists; in any case, we certainly haven't found it, after millennia of trying. So don't hold your breath waiting for it before making ethical decisions.

Religious ethical systems can be maintained only through faith, in the face of contradictions—increasingly unattractive.

The ethical systems promoted by academic philosophers are equally implausible, even if they are supported by reams of complicated arguments. Bizarrely, advocates of each agree it has profound flaws they have no idea how to fix, and yet… since there *must* be a right system, their arguments boil down to "our fundamental flaws look less bad than yours."

- "Consequentialism is at least coherent, even if it gives obviously wrong answers most of the time"
- "Deontology at least gives right answers in typical situations"
- "Virtue ethics at least doesn't insist that you do obviously wrong things, like the other two do"

Since there are well-known, excellent refutations for each eternalist ethical system, this page doesn't need to go into much detail.

Rather, it will simply point out that eternalist ethics is *bound* to fail, because ethical issues are inherently nebulous. Worse than just being wrong, eternalism provides unbounded certainty for ethical opinions, which leads to extremism, and catastrophic atrocities committed on the basis of moral absolutism.

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Utilitarianism is an ethical theory based on the intuition that one should act to produce the most good for everyone overall. That intuition is often right. Trying to make it the sole source of ethics always fails, though. This is an example of a non-theistic, rationalist eternalist error.

Utilitarianism is an accountant's theory of morality. (It appeals especially to atheists of a technical bent.) Suppose you have to choose between two actions. If you could predict all the results of each action, and if you could figure out how good (or bad) the results would be for everyone, and if you could combine all the goods and bads into a single total number, then you could compare the totals for each action, and choose the better one. (This is an example of the continuum gambit.)

Notice the "ifs" in this story. To make utilitarianism work, you'd have to be able to:

  • predict all the effects of actions
  • assign a numerical goodness/badness of each effect on each person
  • combine these numbers into a meaningful total

Each of these tasks is quite impossible.

Utilitarianism is, therefore, a wrong-way reduction: it replaces the difficult but tractable problem of ethical decision-making with an absolutely hopeless one. This is just like the sportsball problem I discussed earlier. It is far easier to predict the winning team in a sportsball game than to predict how many goals will be made by each side.

The Other Leading Brands of ethical theory—deontology and virtue ethics—don't require you to solve such problems. Deontology merely requires that you follow rules, and virtue ethics that you be a moral sort of person. These approaches have *other* dire defects, and are quite wrong. But they don't require impossible feats of computation.

Utilitarians are undeterred. When pressed, they usually admit the impossibilities. Further, they admit that no known version of utilitarianism gives correct ethical answers *even in principle*, even if you could solve all the impossible problems.

The seemingly-simple ethical accounting turns turns fiendishly complicated once you dive into the details. Every accounting scheme produces clearly wrong results in some cases. Utilitarians propose ever-more-complex approaches, each of which turns out to have its own pathologies. This obviates utilitarianism's most attractive feature: its intuitive simplicity, at first glance, compared with the endless rules of deontology and the elaborately literary conceptions of virtue.

When challenged, utilitarians usually argue that, on balance, their theory is *less bad* than deontology or virtue ethics—which they regard as the only two possible alternatives. (The fact that all three are *clearly wrong* does not seem to motivate a search for other possibilities.)

Utilitiarians suggest that, even if it is impossible to calculate the overall goodness of actions, doing so even approximately is correct approach to ethics. They feel that there *must* be a version of their theory that actually works, and that all-purpose methods of approximating *must* exist— even though they are presently unknown. This is a nice example of eternalistic wistful certainty.

Eternalism is the denial of nebulosity: the fact that meaningness is inherently indefinite, uncertain, and untidy. Utilitarianism proposes a fixed, objective, sharp-edged theory of ethics— which I believe is entirely impossible.

The nebulosity of ethics is uncomfortable. It means we can have no guarantee of acting ethically, no matter how hard we try. It means ethics is *really hard*.

Utilitarianism promised, at first glance, that ethics is easy, just a matter of adding some numbers. Looked at in detail, it makes ethics impossible, not merely *really hard*.

Eternalism is always a con; it always makes huge, infinitely desirable promises it can't fulfill.

Later in the book, we'll look at the ways ethical eternalism's failure produces ghastly, unethical outcomes.

1 Comment

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Ethical nihilism is the stance that ethical claims are all entirely meaningless.

This is wildly implausible, and probably no one can really adopt it, even if some gloomy philosophers claim to be committed to it. So this page can be blessedly brief.

2 Comments

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Comment on this page

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Comment on this page

Stance	**Reasonable respectability**	**Romantic rebellion**	**Freedom**
Summary	Contribute to social order by conforming to traditions	Make an artistic statement by defying authority	Value social order as a resource; satirize it as an impediment
What it denies	Nebulosity of social order	Value of social order	
What it fixates	Social order	Heroic status of the counter-culture	
The sales pitch	Law'n'order	Death to the oppressors!	
Emotional appeal	It's safe	It's sexy	
Pattern of thinking	Emotional constriction	Confused romantic passion, testosterone poisoning	Political maturity
Likely next stances	Ordinariness; dualism	Specialness; mission; nihilistic rage; true self	Nobility, light-heartedness, kadag
Accomplishment	Pillar of society	Romantic martyrdom	
How it causes suffering	Complicity in oppression; abandoning of	Opposes realistic action to ameliorate conditions; justifies violence	

	responsibility and moral maturity		
Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Social conventions stifle expression and opportunity	Silly; doomed by definition	Urgency of social imperatives
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Who cares what they think?	I'm being silly and just striking a pose to look cool	
Intelligent aspect	Recognizes value of social order	Recognizes arbitrary and restrictive character of social order	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Points toward kingly qualities of nobility; society as a beneficial structure	Points toward warrior qualities of nobility; charismatically involving; makes splendid art	

2 Comments

Next Page: Reasonable respectability →

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Reasonable respectability: the sheep's stance to social authority.

Comment on this page

Next Page: Romantic rebellion →

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

I have a fair amount of text completed, but not a clean version yet. The following is from the 2007 draft of *Meaningness*. It draws heavily on Camus' *The Rebel*.

Romantic rebellion starts from denying the "omnibenevolent" clause in Problem of Evil. Since there is undeserved suffering, the Cosmic Plan is not good after all. Therefore the eternal ordering principle must be defied. (This can apply to any source of order seen as corrupt, including God, Fate, The Establishment, "the artistic mainstream," "oppressors," or whatever.)

The first problem with romantic rebellion is that it is necessarily doomed, because it doesn't actually deny the eternal principle, it merely defies it. The Authority remains omnipotent, or at any rate vastly more powerful than the rebel. So the enterprise is obviously hopeless from the start.

As a result, there is a certain lack of seriousness about the whole business. The rebel wants to convince himself that he's *extremely committed* and that defying God is *massively courageous*, but it's all quite silly. "Dream the impossible dream" & tilt after windmills. It's about glory, not practical consequences. Romantic rebellion is romantic because it is based in passion, not reason.

Recognizing this impracticality, the rebel must denigrate the possibility that things can actually be changed for the better. The rebel sees ordinary, pragmatic benevolence or reform as the enemy, because it draws attention away from the necessity of rejecting the existing order *in toto*. The rebel "can only exist by defiance".[1] Any sort of moderation is also the enemy, because again it implies a degree of acceptance of what is. Total destruction is (in theory) the aim. Typically, the logic of romantic rebellion makes any actual destruction unnecessary, but there is always a danger

that moral confusion plus romantic logic will lead to acts of terrorism. Mass murder on the scale of saturation bombing and concentration camps is not romantic, but suicide bombing—and destroying people's careers using social media—can be.

On the other hand, actual retaliation from The Authority seems unlikely. (If genuine defense against The Authority becomes necessary, rebellion ceases to be romantic and becomes unpleasantly practical.)

The second problem is that romantic rebellion does not identify an alternative coherent source of value. (If you set up such a source, you'd have a new, different eternalism; a different move.) Lacking such a source, romantic rebellion somewhat arbitrarily extols some of what was previously seen as good as evil, and vice versa. The two are blended. Extolling "the outlaw, the criminal with a heart of gold, and the kind brigand."[2] "The romantic hero, therefore, considers himself compelled to do evil by his nostalgia for an impracticable good."[3]

In the Rudra move, one takes oneself to be the source of value. But the romantic rebel does not have the guts to do that, or has enough sense not to.

The romantic rebel actually recognizes his or her own confusion about values, and this is a source of suffering. This is a specifically *romantic* suffering that the rebel celebrates. It is a badge of honor.

Since there is no realistic hope or method for overthrowing The Authority, there is nothing practical for the rebel to do. What is left is to *maintain an attitude of opposition*. Quietly maintaining an attitude by oneself is not very exciting, however; and romantic rebellion is all about faux heroism.

Romantic rebellion is, therefore, necessarily a social activity. What is important is not simply to maintain an attitude, but to *strike an attractive pose*. One must be *seen* to be maintaining an attitude.

To be seen as a rebel, one must join in a *Movement* that forms the audience for one's heroic pose. Further, one looks to The Movement for confirmation of one's uncertain value judgements.

Within The Movement, the important thing is looking cool—since actually warring against God is hopeless, and actually doing anything useful undercuts the total rejection of the existing state of affairs. The actual source of value is personal glory. This entails playing to an audience; "always compelled to astonish".[4]

Romantic rebellion doesn't work as theology (though people have tried; Satanism, for instance).

Romantic rebellion also makes for lousy politics. Striking defiant poses is not a workable basis for government—although it is the main activity of most contemporary politicians. Not to mention Islamist terrorists.

Romantic rebellion is a lot of fun, though, and can have terrific aesthetic value throughout the arts. E.g., rock'n'roll is all about romantic rebellion.

Sympathy For The Devil. *Paradise Lost*.

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1. 1.Camus, p. 47.
2. 2.Camus, p. 46.
3. 3.Camus, p. 44.
4. 4.Camus, p. 48.

4 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Value social order as a resource; satirize it as an impediment.

Comment on this page

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Comment on this page

Stance	Religiosity	Secularism	Kadag
Summary	The sacred and the profane are clearly distinct in the Cosmic Plan	Sacredness is mere superstition; nothing is sacred	Because nothing is inherently sacred, everything can be sacred
What it denies	Nebulosity of sacredness; vastness	Sacredness; vastness	
What it fixates	The sacred	Arbitrariness of perception of sacredness	
The sales pitch	Avoid contamination through ritual purity	Freed from religion, we can get on with practical projects	The good bits of religion without the dogma
Emotional appeal	Personal superiority through religious conformity; minimize uncanniness of vastness by codifying it	Don't have to think about that uncomfortable religion stuff; pretend you don't see vastness and hope it goes away	Can neither dismiss nor grab onto sacredness
Pattern of thinking	Self-righteousness	Pretending not to care about meaning; apathy	Awe
Likely next stances	Reasonable respectability, mission, specialness	Materialism, ordinariness	Freedom
Accomplishment	Perfect ritual purity	Total inability to experience awe	Ability to experience anything as sacred
How it causes suffering	Paranoia about contamination; resources and opportunities wasted; tribalist vilification	Flatness of existence in the absence of the sacred	

Obstacles to maintaining the stance	Obvious mundanity of religious forms	Spontaneous religious feelings	Innate reactions of disgust
Antidotes; counter-thoughts	Purity is a matter of perception, not truth	I do sometimes experience awe	
Intelligent aspect	Recognition of sacredness	Recognition that nothing is inherently sacred	
Positive appropriation after resolution	Sacredness matters	Narrow religion is harmful; something better is available	

3 Comments

Next Page: Religiosity →

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Religiosity is the confused, eternalistic view that the sacred and profane can be clearly separated.

Comment on this page

Next Page: Secularism →

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

As used here, secularism is the stance that sacredness is mere superstition; nothing is sacred.

Comment on this page

Next Page: Kadag →

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Because nothing is inherently sacred, everything can be sacred.

I have written a page on a closely related topic on *Vividness*.

3 Comments

Next Page: Meaningness and Time: past, present, future →

The 10,000 Year Clock of the Long Now

Western culture, society, and selves have disintegrated.

The bottom has fallen out of the bucket.

This is common knowledge. It is just a fact—for worse *and* for better. It happened. Spilt milk. No use wringing hands.

Instead, ask: now what?

The problems of meaningness we face now are dramatically different from those of a half-century ago. We also sense new opportunities, and have new resources.

To relate better with meaningness in the future, it helps to understand how meaningness works now. To understand that, it helps to understand how it worked differently in the past.

So, *Meaningness and Time* begins with a history. It describes a chronological series of *modes of relating with meaningness*. I concentrate on the history of the past few decades—the period that some theorists call "postmodern."

Modernity can be seen as a few centuries of trying to make eternalism into a systematic organizing principle for culture, society, and self. This began to seem dubious a century ago, and the twentieth century was haunted by the specter of nihilism. That was the great twentieth century problem of meaningness.

Late in the century, many people concluded that systematic eternalism had finally collapsed. Yet the nihilist apocalypse failed to arrive—at least not in the form feared. (*Too much* meaning is now a huge problem; absence of all meaning is not.) So then what, if neither eternalism nor nihilism?

The past half century has brought a succession of approaches to answering that, which I call the *countercultural*, *subcultural*, and *atomized* modes. Each has responded to a crisis of meaning created by the previous mode, and each has produced new serious problems.

That brings us to the present—the atomized mode of tiny jagged shards of meaning-stuff: globalized, commodified, decontextualized; a kaleidoscopic, hypnotizing, senseless spectacle. (Twitter, in other words.)

We cannot go back; each former mode was superseded because it did conclusively fail to provide what we needed from meaning. How can we go forward?

I sense, tentatively, a new mode emerging, which I'll call *fluidity*. Perhaps, if I am right that there even is such a thing, it will manifest dire new problems of its own.

I'm hopeful, though, that it's workable in ways that other recent modes were not. It approximates the complete stance, just as modernity approximated eternalism and postmodernity approximates nihilism. If the complete stance is accurate and functional, then the fluid mode should be too.

Comment on this page

> Girl exploring modern ruins at Gunkanjima Island
> Image courtesy Jordy Meow

My suggestions for how meaningness may evolve in the near future, and how best to relate to it, are based on an understanding of changes in recent history. I propose a series of *modes of relating to meaningness* that have developed over the past few decades. Each mode solves particular *problems of meaningness* caused by the previous mode; but introduces new problems of its own.

This page introduces the modes; chapters within this history explain the modes and their implications in detail.

A very brief history of meaningness

The *choiceless mode* is unaware that alternative meanings are possible. This is the mode of closed cultures; of societies isolated from other peoples. It has not existed in the West for several centuries, and is increasingly rare world-wide.

The problem: When cultures come into contact, they experience conflicts over meanings. Other peoples do things differently; their beliefs seem obviously wrong to us. But they think our beliefs and practices are wrong. How do we know ours are right?

The solution: The *systematic mode* tries to solve this problem by creating unarguable foundations, to restore certainty. This mode is closely allied with eternalism, although not all eternalism is systematic. The systematic mode is *universalist*; it says that meanings are the same for everyone, everywhere, eternally.

The new problem: During the twentieth century, it became apparent that attempts to build unshakable foundations had failed, and suspicion grew that it was actually impossible. That raised the threat of nihilism: perhaps everything is actually meaningless?

By the 1960s, mainstream systematic society and culture had become obviously dysfunctional. They failed to provide adequate meaningfulness, and there was general revulsion at the mainstream's nihilistic moral breakdown.

The new solution: The *countercultural mode* developed in response. It came in two flavors, the monist counterculture (the hippie movement) and the dualist counterculture (the Moral Majority). These movements proposed universalist systems of meaning that were alternatives to the mainstream. Although rhetorically opposed, the two countercultures were structurally similar, shared historical roots, and had more in common than is usually recognized.

The next problem: The universalism of the countercultures was a fatal flaw. Their new visions were both unable to appeal to a majority. They were unable to encompass the diversity of views on meaningness now found within societies (and across the world). Because they were mass movements, they could not provide community.

The next solution: The *subcultural mode* abandoned universalism, and with it the attempt to find ultimate foundations for meaning. Instead, subcultures provided numerous "neotribal" systems of meaning that were meant to appeal only to small communities of like-minded people. Some subcultures explicitly extolled nihilism.

The problem with that: Subcultures proved unable to provide either the breadth or depth of meaning people need. Also, lacking strong organizing principles, they repeatedly fissioned in response to differences in view. This is most obvious in the case of subcultures centered on musical genres. The Wikipedia article on heavy metal subgenres is worth a look. Heavy metal is a subgenre of rock, the primary countercultural genre, and spawned a subculture. Death metal is a subsubgenre. Melodic death and technical death are subsubsubgenres.

Around the end of the millennium, subcultures reached the limit of fragmentation, and the mode became unworkable. You can try to live the melodic death lifestyle, but it's not going to answer most of your questions about Life, The Universe, And Everything. The attempt to provide coherent meanings without foundations had failed. Meaning disintegrated altogether.

What came next: The *atomized mode* takes incoherence for granted. It does not seem a problem, in this mode; we don't need systems. Meanings do not hang together. They are delivered as bite-sized morsels in a jumbled stream, like sushi flowing past on a conveyer belt, or brilliant shards

of colored glass in a kaleidoscope. Or—to use the thing itself as a metaphor for itself—like Twitter.

The problems we have now: Throughout the twentieth century, from the beginning of the breakdown of the mainstream systems until the breakdown of subcultures, the underlying worry was "not enough meaning." The atomized mode delivers, for the first time, way *too much* meaning. It is overwhelming, like trying to drink from a firehose.

Because the shards of meaning do not relate with each other, it's impossible to compare them. There is no standard of value, so everything seems equally trivial. The collapse of subcultural community has atomized society, and we find it impossible to construct satisfactory selves from the jagged fragments of meaning we're bombarded with.

Now what: A new *fluid mode* may address our current problems of meaningness. My understanding of fluidity is tentative; it's based partly on observation of current trends, and partly on the intrinsic logic of meaningness.

The fluid mode approximates the complete stance, which incorporates the accurate insights of eternalism and nihilism: recognizing that meaningness is always both patterned and nebulous. Likewise, the fluid mode acknowledges structures of meaning without attempting rigid foundations. Its values are collaboration, creativity, improvisation, intimacy, transience, aesthetics, and spiritual depth through community ritual.

The fluid mode goes meta to the process that generated the previous modes. It understands how each solved serious problems of meaningness. It's therefore able to use each of those solutions when similar problems arise.

Periods, people, cultures, and categories

The various modes appeared at different times; but none of them entirely displaced previous ones. Each arose among some leading-edge group, spread as its solutions became widely understood, and diminished gradually as its own problems became obvious and the next mode mostly replaced it.

Anyone living in the West now can relate to meaningness in any of the modes, and sometimes does. However, which mode seems most natural, and which mode one uses most often, varies from person to person.

It seems that the way one relates to meaningness is learned when one is roughly 15–25 years old; and for most people it is difficult to change after that. The mode that feels *native* is likely the one prevalent in your peer group at that age. Newer modes seem unattractive and unnatural. Their problems are more obvious than the opportunities they offer. For example, many in the Baby Boom generation remain loyal to their counterculture, even though they have participated in subcultures, and experience atomization when they use the internet.

People have different preferences in relating to change. Some would rather be at the hip leading edge, and are likely to adopt the modes typical of younger generations; some prefer the safety of the trailing edge.

Nations and cultures, too, vary in the speed at which they adopt new modes of meaningness. The Islamic world, for instance, has only partly transitioned from the choiceless to the systematic mode, and is mostly unable to cope yet with the following ones. Some poor countries are being forced by the internet from the choiceless world directly into the atomized one; that's extremely difficult.

Since *none* of the modes is fully functional, none constitutes straightforward progress. I'm sympathetic to the conservative impulse to resist these changes and stick with a mode that seems to mostly work. Later in this section, I'll write about the risks and costs of too-fast change. However, I believe the only way out is through. And, I hope that the fluid mode will be able to incorporate the valuable aspects of all the others.

You may be skeptical of my "modes" as categories; you may find them simplistic, and counterexamples may come to mind. If so, you are quite right. They are meant as "ideal types": heuristic conceptual categories that illuminate some trends, while inevitably distorting others. They are not meant as ontological; they have no existence in the real world.

In fact, after finishing this history, I will demolish it. The whole thing is a lie. There are no modes; we are always "in the fluid mode" because meaningness has always been both patterned and nebulous. No culture or society was ever actually systematic, for the same reason no one can actually be an eternalist: nebulosity is always obvious. No culture or society can actually be atomized, for the same reason no one can actually be a nihilist: patterns are always obvious.

The analysis of modes is useful for the same reason as the analysis of confused stances. Though we are, in some sense, always in the complete stance, and always in the fluid mode, we try to imagine otherwise. That can have catastrophic consequences.

Sources and similar analyses

Most of this history may be familiar; I may have nothing original to say. I've drawn on at least five sources:

- The standard historical analysis of modernity, nihilism, and postmodernity
- The sociology of American generational attitudes
- My personal experience living through most of the modes
- Adult developmental psychology
- Vajrayana Buddhist theory

My explanations of the choiceless ("traditional") and systematic ("modern") modes, the threat of nihilism, the rise of the monist counterculture, and the end of modernity are all standard intellectual history. "Postmodernity"—a historical concept that is now widely accepted—corresponds to the subcultural and atomized modes.

I began thinking about the history of meaningness when trying to understand why Buddhism appeals much more to Western Baby Boomers than to younger people. The answers I wrote in 2009 and in 2011 were early versions of the history I'm presenting here.

I discovered that there is as much of a generation gap between Buddhists of Generation X and Generation Y as between the Boomers and Gen X. That lead me to read about generational differences, which helped me understand that "postmodernity" includes two quite different modes (subcultural and atomized), which are native for Generations X and Y respectively.

I seemed to have as much in common with Gen Y as with Gen X. Affinity with Gen Y made me realize that I could understand cultural, social, and psychological change through my own experience and memories. I've lived through most of the history I describe. Each successive mode has radically changed the way I've lived, and the way I experience my self. I grew up in a museum of mainstream systematic culture; tried to be a hippie in my early twenties (though it was too late); enthusiastically participated in numerous subcultures through the '80s and '90s; experienced the dissolution of subculturalism, found myself atomized by the internet; and am now groping for fluidity.

Reflecting on the changes in my experience of meaningness led to the problem/solution framework I present here. Its details may be original. However, it's structurally similar to theories of adult psychological development such as that of Robert Kegan, in *The Evolving Self*, which influenced me heavily in my twenties. Kegan's framework concerns "meaning-making," and suggests that each developmental stage solves problems created by the previous one.

Spiral Dynamics extrapolates such theories from psychological to cultural development. Roughly, its beige, purple, and red memes correspond to the choiceless mode; blue and orange to the systematic mode; green to the monist counterculture; and yellow to the fluid mode. It doesn't seem to include anything corresponding to the countercultural/subcultural/atomized distinctions (just as the theory of postmodernity does not).

In Kegan's framework, and in Spiral Dynamics, each developmental stage goes meta to the last, so that whatever was previously experienced as "subject" becomes "object," and a new subject, or self, emerges to reflect on it. Also, the stages alternate between excesses of individuation and social embeddedness. I love the elegance of this structure, but it mostly doesn't fit the changes I'm writing about. Instead, I see each mode as containing the seeds of its own destruction, because its supposed solution becomes the next problem.

The final influence on my story is the Vajrayana Buddhist theory of form, emptiness, and non-duality; or eternalism, nihilism, and Dzogchen (the Tibetan word for "completion"). The Vajrayana understanding of "nihilism" is close to the Western one, and "eternalism" is analogous to Western understandings of foundationalism, which is the philosophical basis for the systematic mode. Vajrayana's analysis of the failures of both nihilism and eternalism echoes that of current Western philosophy; but it claims also to provide a solution that avoids the problems of both by incorporating the insights of both. That was the starting point for *Meaningness*, this book. The central claim of the book is that complete stances can resolve the problems of the confused stances. Similarly, I hope that the fluid mode can resolve the problems of postmodernity.

Incorporating this Vajrayana view points toward a possible solution—fluidity—whose details might not be predictable in other frameworks.

15 Comments

Next Page: A gigantic chart that explains absolutely everything →

This chart is an overview of *Meaningness and Time:* the past, present, and future of culture, society, and our selves. It shows how the modes of meaningness manifest in many aspects of life.

Some people find this sort of systematic presentation helpful; others do not. Skip it if you are one of those who don't.

It probably won't fit in your browser window, and you'll have to scroll horizontally. Sorry about that. (The title of this page mocks its unwieldiness and ambition.)

Mode	Choiceless	Successful systems	Systems in crisis	Countercultures	Subcultures	Atomizati
Era *(all dates approximate and are for leading-edge societies)*	Over by 1700	1450-1914	1914-1980; native for those born before WWII	1964-1990; native for Baby Boom generation	1975-2001; native for Generation X	2001-?; na Millennial
	[None]					

Problems this mode addresses, created by the previous one		Challenge of alternatives. How do we know our way is right and all others are wrong?	Failure of all foundations. Nihilism: meaninglessness, materialism, disenchantment of the world	Failure of mainstream culture, society, and self to provide meaning; disgust at hypocrisy, business-as-usual, and moral breakdown	Countercultures deny diversity, are revealed as idealistically impractical, fail to find new foundations; mass movement cannot provide community	Subculture… provide ad… breadth or… meaning; exploitatio… relationshi… mass-scale… society
Attempted solution	[None needed]	Supposed foundations for certainty: scripture, rationality, science, personal or collective revelation. Rational, universal, coherent	Totalitarianism (attempt to force systems to work); existentialism (attempt to create personal meaning out of nothing)	Alternatives (monist and dualist). Universalist (supposed to be right for everyone). Explicitly anti-nihilist. Draws heavily on 1800s Romanticism; abandons rationality	Subcultures provide diverse bodies of meaning, without attempting foundations. Exclusivity limits group size to provide community. Abandons universality	Global co… culture pro… convenien… packaged… meaning t… eventualiti… Abandons…
Culture	Incoherent traditions, accepted without question	Attempts to formalize/ rationalize/ systematize culture. Classicism followed by Romanticism.	Development of avant-garde; beginning of the "culture war"	Development of new cultures as self-conscious, positive mass alternative. Collapse of high culture/pop culture distinction	Repeated fissioning of subcultures. Genre obsession. Hipsterism. Quest for "authenticity." Postmodernism.	Universal… culture-bit… Kaleidosc… hypnotic, s… reconfigur…
Society	Unquestioned, simple social structure	Complex, rationalized social structure; bureaucracy	Social structures increasingly diverse and problematic; competing political theories; world wars and clash of civilizations	Brotherhood of all counterculture participants	Subcultural tribalism: communities based on narrow but innovative shared values/ interests. Rituals replace belief systems.	Global soc… into intera… virtual con… social netw… larger, geo… dispersed… communit…

Self	Person fixed by unquestioned social role; no awareness of inside/outside distinction	Self as unitary, rational individual, with an "inner life," and an explicitly-defined relationship with society	Age of anxiety: growing awareness of internal incoherence.	Self defined by membership in one counterculture (and rejection of the other counterculture)	Identity derives from subcultural allegiance. Integration of personality a receding ideal.	Atomizati due to alw internet: m more inter entertainm relationshi
Music	Traditional forms; community production; no sense of authorship	Self-conscious art music ("classical" in the broad sense). Cult of the composer	Crisis in classical music; nihilistic atonality. Serialism. Jazz.	Everyone in Boomer generation listens to all countercultural music, regardless of genre. In dualist counterculture, attempts at Christian alternative	Punk as first mass subculture. Not intended as a universal alternative; explicitly nihilistic. Repeated fragmentation of genres into sub-sub-genres.	Ludicrous genre lead ups. Run-l Aerosmith way" vide collaborati explicit ex
Sex and gender	Unquestioned sex roles	Sex roles reinforced by systematic ideologies	First wave feminism	Second-wave feminism in the monist counterculture. Moral Majority & "family values" in dualist counterculture	Fragmentation of feminism: pro- vs. anti-sex, egalitarian vs. essentialist. LGBTQ, Quiverfull, men's movements, orthosexuality, Bears, PUA, NoFap, Rules Girls, furverts, …	Intersectio Jagged, in decontextu political ar claims abc gender tha escaped fr subculture
Buddhism	Miscellaneous practical superstitions; karma, merit, and auspiciousness; monastic economics. Entirely unknown to Consensus Buddhists.	Scriptural Buddhist theorizing	Buddhist modernism: importation of new, rationalizing foundations from West, as a response to cultural breakdown in Asia	Consensus Buddhism: hybrid of Asian Buddhist modernism with American monist counterculture	Diverse Western Buddhist subcultures, mainly developed by charismatic Asian modernizers. No serious attempt at universality. Spurious rhetoric of traditionalism	McMahan folk Buddl Dharma bu Vapid @D tweets. Fa quotes. McMindfu Eckhart Tc

					(usually actually Asian nationalism).	
Vampires	Considered a realistic physical danger	Symbolize incoherence as challenge to the system (Church, Nation, and/or rationality) [Bram Stoker's *Dracula*]	Monstrous Other as Romantic anti-hero [Ann Rice; *Dark Shadows*]	Monstrous Self as Romantic anti-hero [Laurel K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake* books]	Monstrosity (incoherence) of the self as a practical hassle that can be managed [Kim Harrison]	Trivializat... longer-thro... incoherenc... as first atte... fails until ... fully diges...
Food	Mythological food taboos; pre-systematic practices of hunting, gathering, growing, harvesting, cooking, sharing, and eating it	Mainstream state/academic/ industrial food ideologies: Domestic Science, Home Economics, Nutrition	On-going; the mainstream is still strong in this domain, oddly enough	Hippie health-food culture; macrobiotics; vegetarianism	Subcultural food ideologies: proliferation of variants of vegetarianism (vegan, fruitarian, etc); Slow Food; locavorism; raw foodism; paleo; etc.	Commerci... magic ingr... the week;... of deconte... health/nut... in food ma... soylents

25 Comments

Tantric Buddhist dancer

Tantric Buddhist religious dance image courtesy Steve Evans

The *choiceless mode* of relating to meaningness has no "becauses." In the *systematic mode*, when you ask "why," a system answers "because…". The "becauses" hang together in ways that make everything make sense. In the choiceless, or *pre-systematic* mode, that's not necessary—or even conceivable.

In the choiceless mode, you know of only one way of understanding meaningness. You are unaware of any alternatives. In fact, you are also unaware of your own understanding; of the possibility of alternatives; and of your lack of awareness.

In a choiceless culture, no one asks "why?" about meanings, and so there is no "because" needed to answer. Asking doesn't occur to you. Meaning is a given: inherent in people and things. Water rats are tasty; there's no point asking why. You marry your mother's brother's daughter; to marry your father's brother's daughter would be an abomination; you do not think to ask why.

In a choiceless society, you are defined by your social position. You are the son of so-and-so, and belong to the eagle clan—as your father, the clan chief, did. When he died, your elder brother wore the eagle clan hat at the wake. If your brother dies before you, you will wear the clan hat. Like all eagles, you are an enemy of the horse clan and allied to the bear clan. You knew from the age of five that you would marry your mother's brother's daughter. This is your self; this is who you are.

In a choiceless culture, art follows forms handed down through legitimate peripheral participation plus some oral explanation. The forms are unquestioned; they are simply as they are. Making art

(in the broad sense—music, stories, clothing) is a communal activity. There is no sense of authorship, or originality as a value.

All of this is just how it is; there is no "because" available.

Of course, pesky children and anthropologists do ask "why?". If they are persistent, they'll get some story that makes no sense. Answers in choiceless societies follow dream logic, not pragmatic logic. Typically they involve biologically-impossible sex acts, a flying buffalo-woman, or a talking snake in a magic fruit tree.

In choiceless cultures, meaningness is not a problem. *You* may have a problem, because you loathe the cousin you have to marry, but that's just practical. It's a fact you have to live with, like the permanent limp you got with an ankle broken when you were a kid. It does not occur to you to blame the system, because you have no concept of systems.

Meaning in choiceless societies seems timeless and changeless. Particular meanings can and do change, but within the culture this is noticed only as specific, local, contingent changes, rather than as a general dynamic. There is little sense of history; of change beyond that experienced during one's life, and in one's community.

Many social scientists use the word "traditional" to mean what I'm calling "choiceless." However, "traditional" is also used to mean entirely other things,[1] so I've invented the new term to avoid ambiguity.

A partial experience of choicelessness

Himalayan Tantric Buddhist temple

Image of Tantric Buddhist temple courtesy Michael Reeve

The choiceless mode is the most natural one. Nearly all humans who have ever lived have only experienced meaning in the choiceless mode. Our brains co-evolved with choicelessness, and it *feels right*. All the other modes *feel wrong*. So *Meaningness and Time* is about why the other modes—despite all their genuine benefits—make us unhappy, and what to do about that.

Unfortunately, the choiceless mode depends on ignorance of alternatives. It's usually impossible for nearly everyone in the developed world, and survives mostly only in remote areas in the most "backward" countries.

In 2003, I spent a month on pilgrimage in the Himalayan backcountry; one of the poorest and most remote places in the world. I went to practice my religion, Tantric Buddhism, with people for whom it is the normal way of life. In that, I was naive and mainly disappointed. As with notional Buddhists everywhere in Asia, few people were aware of even the most basic Buddhist doctrines or practices, and almost no one had Buddhist motivations.[2]

Yet my month there was probably the happiest of my life. What I found instead was a sane, optimistic, decent society, that *felt right* to me, and I believe also to most people in it. Presumably part of that rightness was religious commonality. A Catholic might feel something similar on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. I don't think that commonality was the main thing, though.

I would like to believe that Buddhism is a particularly good religion, and this was a good place with good people partly due to its Buddhist history—even if there is not much Buddhism now. At the time, I wrote:

Whatever their experience of religion, it seems to have a very salutary effect on their character. It has been remarked by visitors here for hundreds of years that they are exceptionally honest, hard-working, considerate, sensible, polite, reserved, hospitable and decent; it is hard to resist summing this up as "noble."

I think, though, that the quasi-Buddhist content of the culture may have been less important than that it was a rare survival of the choiceless mode. The people had an intact social order, with ritual roles that everyone understood thoroughly and accepted without question.

Yesterday I took part in a procession (splendid costumes, trumpets and cymbals, deity and sword dance, fire offering) in which lots of old people were counting Guru Rinpoche mantra. So I pulled out my rosary and practiced mantra too. This got lots of amused looks (politely hidden, except in the case of small children). Norbu said today that he had overheard conversation and in fact everyone was excited and happy to see a white Buddhist; they had never seen one before. Maybe I should practice in public more often.

My own experience was one of choicelessness, too, or as much as I've ever had. At a literal, practical level, there were almost no decisions I could make. I knew only a few dozen words of the language, so I was dependent on the translator and organizer of the pilgrimage. Experientially, I was wide-open due to the combination of culture shock and intensive meditation practice:

Sometimes I find myself in an a situation that is clearly *not me*, with no explanation for how this could have happened, producing a sense of surreal dislocation. For example, a month ago I found myself working as an unpaid waiter in the restaurant attached to a Hindu temple in Malaysia, due presumably to *some* causal chain that I could not begin to reconstruct. My ability to laugh and ecstatically *go with* such situations ("I've no clue why how or why am I here, nor do I have the foggiest idea how to be a waiter in general, much less in a Malaysian Hindu temple restaurant, but I will do the absolute best job I can and enjoy it thoroughly, because why not") seems to be the best measure of my health at the level of energy.

Here the most important religious practice in an individual's life is the Annual Ritual. This is a house-and-family-blessing ritual. A crew of monks are hired to provide the requisite clangs, blaats, and hocus-pocus[3] in the house's shrine room (every house has one). While they are in there performing the ritual, the head of household participates in a small way. Mostly, however, the Annual Ritual is an excuse to invite all your friends and extended family over for some serious drinking (in the rest of the house). Exactly how this can be the most important religious practice in an individual's life, I don't understand, since the practice seems to be done by the monks almost exclusively. This is part of the general paradox that everyday life here is thoroughly infused with religious practice, and yet in a sense they don't seem to practice at all. (They pay monks to do it for them.)

Anyway, yesterday I found myself inexplicably in the shrine room of a house undergoing Annual Ritual, helping the monks. Mostly they knew the liturgy by heart, which I didn't, and there was no spare copy of the text, and in any case I can't read Tibetan fast enough to keep up. So my participation was mostly restricted to throwing rice at appropriate moments, and joining in on the very occasional bits of liturgy I recognized (such as Guru Rinpoche mantra).

At the end of the pilgrimage, I concluded:

I've gained significant new insight into what makes me happy and miserable; and, relatedly, into the nature of my energy problem. Briefly, in managing a business, I

learned to divide my energy finely, and to send out the fragments of my being to animate all the minute details of a complex enterprise—leaving as little as I possibly could within my own body. Over the years this became a habit, and one that has been difficult to unlearn. Here, I have been entirely cut off from "the world" and its complexities, into which I would habitually discharge my energy. I have instead been surrounded by natural beauty and by the sacred. Practicing perception and nowness, together with some specific energy methods, has drawn my energy back into my body, coherent and undivided. The challenge now will be to make that habitual even when dancing in the charnel ground that is the Western world.

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1. 1.In postmodernity, conservatives often use "traditional" to mean "modern," i.e. the way things were until forty years ago. "Traditional" can also mean no more than "we did it that way last time." As we'll see, traditions are often back-dated by their inventors, to make them seem non-choices.
2. 2.Instead, they practiced "the worldly yana," a religion of practical benefits.
3. 3.Clangs from cymbals, blaats from trumpets, and hocus pocus from religious texts read out loud.

14 Comments

The Crystal Palace, 1851

The Crystal Palace, a triumphant showcase of systematicity, built 1851

The rise and fall of "because"

Western culture, society, and selves all fell apart forty years ago. Or so say many theorists; and I agree. To understand how we relate to meaning now, and how we could better relate in the future, we need to understand that recent past.

A *systematic* culture answers "why" questions with "becauses." The answers are reasonably consistent and coherent. A series of "why" questions eventually reaches an ultimate, eternal Truth. This Truth is the foundation of the system, which supposedly answers all questions for everyone, everywhere, eternally.

Religious systems, government systems, economic systems, aesthetic systems, philosophical systems, scientific systems, family systems: until a few decades ago, these provided iron frameworks for meaning. Meanings were held safely in place, certified by reliable structures.

This was an extraordinary accomplishment. Systems are not normal or natural. Almost no one has had them in the hundreds of thousands of years humans have been around. Nearly everyone has had to make do without becauses. Human progress over the past few centuries can be attributed almost entirely to systems.

Then, "because" stopped working. We are back in a becauseless world—like and unlike that of our pre-systematic ancestors.

We have not yet figured out how to live well without becauses. Suggestions about how to do that are the goal of *Meaningness and Time*. First, though, I will explain how "because" worked, how it stopped working, and where that leaves us.

Disclaimers

1. The history of the rise and fall of "because" is extremely interesting. However, it's a standard academic topic that I have nothing new to say about. (My tale begins in the aftermath.) So this page presents just a brief summary, for readers who are unfamiliar with the backstory.

2. The question of how systems arose, and how (and whether) they failed, is one of the most extensively debated by historians. A careful account, with caveats and footnotes, would be much longer. My version may be a "Just So Story," or fanciful fable. I find it illuminates recent events, but you have every right to be skeptical.

3. Historians often use the word "modern" to mean what I'm calling "systematic." The "modern era" covers roughly the late 1400s until the late 1900s. However, "modern" has other meanings.[1] To avoid confusion, I've chosen a non-standard word.

Why systematicity happens

A society builds a systematic culture when it becomes aware of alternatives. When your tribe meets another that thinks it's not OK to marry cousins, like you do, the natural thing to do is to kill and eat those barbarians. In rare cases, this is impractical, and you are stuck with talking to them. They criticize your marriage system, which you didn't even know you had, and theirs is horrifying. (Or dangerously appealing, if you don't like the cousin you have to marry.) So now you need to come up with a justification, and stories about talking snakes with magic apples no longer cut it.

The European Renaissance is a key example.[2] Global trade gradually made Western Europeans increasingly aware of alternative cultures: Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the Islamic world, and even China. A major push came with a wave of refugees from the Fall of Constantinople (1453), who brought with them the texts of Ancient Greece and Rome (which had been lost in the West), plus the culture of the Byzantine Empire, plus Persian and Arabic scholarship.

> Interior of the Crystal Palace with Neoclassical decorations, 1851

> Interior of the Crystal Palace with Neoclassical decorations, 1851

Europeans gradually recognized many of these foreign ideas as serious challenges, or even as right. Meaningness became *a problem*. How to resolve conflicts between meanings?

The Renaissance got a head start by discovering that the Ancient Greek philosophers had asked the same question, and had found plausible answers. The rest is well-known: the Protestant Reformation (which ended choiceless Christianity), the European Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of capitalism, democracy, individual rights, and the general triumphal march of modernity.

Systematic society

> Queen Victoria inaugurates the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, 1851

> Queen Victoria inaugurates the Crystal Palace, 1851

A systematic society has a multitude of social roles—unlike a choiceless society, which has only a few.[3] Each role is defined by a code of regulations, which are rationally derived from Ultimate Truth. Roles fit together into complex institutions—church, state, corporation, community—that accomplish society's proper goals. Everything makes sense—everything has a "because"—so everyone knows what they are supposed to do. These systems together provide a stable, harmonious social order. Relationships among people, and between people and God, work as they should. (Or, at any rate, this is the theory.)

Systematicity makes possible the division of labor. This crucial social technology enabled the spectacular economic, artistic, technological, and intellectual advances of the systematic era. Despite all the attractions of the choiceless mode, no one actually wants to return to it if that means giving up the benefits of the systematic one.[4]

Systematic culture

The Crystal Palace, 1854

The Crystal Palace in 1854

Systematic culture provides the web of "becauses" that hold society and selves together. It explains why the way we do things is the *right* way.

Systematic culture is *rational*, in the original sense. "Ratio" is Latin for "reason," both in the sense of "reasoning"—the thinking process—and "reasons"—meaning justifications. Systematic culture thinks out reasons for everything. Supposedly, these are based on unshakable foundations that can't be argued against. The culture builds up, from there, a cathedral of consistent and coherent meanings and values, a vaulting architecture of columns and buttresses, beams and arches, principles and proofs; light and airy, yet firm enough to last till Judgement Day.

A systematic culture is reflective. It discusses itself, describes itself, judges itself, rationalizes itself. Systematic knowledge is abstract, explicit, codified, and universal. Whatever is good and true is good and true for all people everywhere, eternally. Systematic culture is learned in schools and from books more than by apprenticeship.

At the height of systematic culture, in the mid–1800s, religion, philosophy, politics, science, and all the arts were in agreement. Philosophy was not separate from theology, and atheism disqualified you as a philosophy professor. Religion was considered rational; it gave justifications consistent with common sense. Political and economic theory mainly justified the existing social order, drawing reasons from both religion and science. Science discovered the Will of God, as manifest in His Creation. Great art was, by definition, morally improving. Art expressed the highest values of the culture; it was pure, inspiring, and uplifting.

Or so went the official story. With hindsight, this may all sound ridiculous, and even repellent. We know that it failed conclusively a hundred years later. And there were, of course, prescient dissenters. But the internal contradictions in the systematic worldview were mainly invisible at the time, and it did work astonishingly well for several centuries.

The Crystal Palace, built in 1851, was a triumphant showcase of systematicity. An engineering and economic marvel, its elegant geometrical design also reflected the classical rationality of the time. At once it reflected the elegant symmetry and simplicity of Greek temples—great expressions of a previous systematic culture—and pointed to a glorious, literally En-lightened and up-lifted future.

The Palace was an enormous building with walls and roofs entirely of glass. Nothing like it had ever been seen. It was made possible by the invention of glass plate casting, just two years earlier, which was much cheaper and produced much higher-quality glass than earlier processes. The glass plates were assembled into modules, held in place with cast-iron beams. Standardization of the modules enabled mass production, a new systematic social technology. From design on paper to opening, it took only eight months to build the Palace, and its cost was a quarter that of a conventional building of the same size.

The Crystal Palace was built to hold The Great Exhibition. That was first World's Fair: shows of culture and industry, art and commerce, that were major events for the next century. The Great Exhibition included displays of fine art from around the world and through the centuries; a concert hall; exhibits of all manner of manufactured goods such as cameras, jewelry, locks, guns, and musical instruments; cutting-edge technologies like telegraphs and microscopes; and entire working factories, such as a cotton mill that went from the raw material to finished cloth. It was a huge success.

Systematic self

John Calvin

John Calvin: a main contributor to the development of the systematic self

Living in a systematic society requires, and enables, a systematic self—quite different from a choiceless self.[5]

In the choiceless mode, you are defined by your relationships; mainly family ones. Being a daughter, mother, and cousin determines what you feel and do. The function of your self is balancing your personal impulses with the needs of others, according to those roles. Morality— being a good person—means maintaining harmony by conforming to collective clan decisions. The choiceless self *belongs*, and is embedded in a web of mutual caring.

This sort of self is incompatible with complex social institutions. Efficient, specialized work gives you obligations to strangers, on the basis of explicit rules, not felt needs. A self devoted to balancing needs based on relationships cannot make sense of systematic society. It can only experience impersonal obligations as unjust demands imposed by the powerful, for the gratification of their own desires, at the expense of everyone else. Such a self must violate these demands frequently, or (if subjugated) will feel constantly resentful.

To create a systematic self, you emerge from embeddedness, as an *individual*.[6] An individual has relationships, where a choiceless self *is* relationships. For an individual, the obligations of a relationship are determined by impersonal, rational considerations, not by intensity of feelings.

Creating a systematic self involves hardening boundaries, so other people's emotions don't flood you and compel your actions. The subject/object boundary encloses a new inner world of private, reflective experience. Relationships themselves are brought inside, as objects you can consider rationally.

Where the choiceless self *is* a self, the systematic self *has* a self: it takes itself as an object in its inner world. The systematic self is able to reason about itself, in relation to others, according to roles, and can adjudicate their requirements dispassionately. For the systematic self, ethics— being a good person—means conforming to abstract systems of laws, rules, and institutions. It means conscientiousness: doing what you have explicitly agreed to do, regardless of how you and others feel about that. It means doing what is necessary to maintain the system and uphold its values.

At first this feels unnatural, but since you now *have* a self, you can act on your self. You become the administrator of your internal world. You can choose among competing desires systematically, instead of according to which yells louder. You can manipulate yourself into better behavior; into conformity with a systematic society. When successful, you reward yourself with self-esteem, which is abstract and purely internal, rather than with impulse-gratification.

All this is far more sophisticated than the choiceless self, whose inner world is just a chaos of emotions, which aren't even particularly yours, most of the time.

A systematic self has an individual identity, which is not dependent on social roles. "Individual" literally means "not divided." As chief of your inner world, you run the show. You have freedom of choice, rather than being torn between conflicting impulses and relationships. You experience yourself a single being, the same person in every circumstance, throughout your life.

A systematic self enables *authorship*, a mode of cultural creativity impossible in the choiceless world. You create as an individual, by manipulating objects in your private internal world, rather than by cooperatively manipulating external objects in the public world. The enormous flowering of culture that started in the Renaissance, and continued through the modern era, depends on such authorship.

Some historians trace the development of the systematic self to the Protestant Reformation, particularly to Calvinism.[7] The Calvinist Reformers deliberately created a well-ordered society by disciplining the poor and demanding that even the aristocracy conform to strict religious morality. To make this possible, they developed new technologies of the self.

The Reformers extended to everyone spiritual practices that had been the preserve only of monks. They insisted that *everyone* examine the contents of their souls, and that everyone should discipline themselves based on what they found there. No longer could you be saved by passively attending church on Sunday. Every layman had to be his own confessor. Individual identity developed from this individual responsibility for salvation. The new, highly-regulated social order and the new, highly-regulated self were mutually supportive.

Eternalism simulates choicelessness

Systematicity is unnatural—and *feels* unnatural. Humans evolved in choiceless societies for hundreds of thousands of years. Systematicity began only a few thousand years ago, and it's mostly only been significant for the past few hundred. Our brains are not adapted for it.[8]

Eternalism tries to provide some of the comforts of the choiceless mode, within the systematic mode. Eternalism substitutes certainty for choicelessness. If we could be truly certain, we would not have the burden of choice. If everything about culture and social roles were *definitely right*, we could go back to taking it for granted, without having to reflect on it.

The choiceless mode feels timeless, because you have no awareness of historical change. Eternalism substitutes universality for timelessness; it insists that what is true, is true eternally. But can you believe that?

Unfortunately, certainty is a poor substitute for choicelessness. Certainty implies at least the *possibility* of doubt. It demands belief. In the choiceless mode, doubt is impossible, because belief is unnecessary. You simply do the things your role calls for.

Also, of course, nebulosity is always obvious, so belief is impossible. The eternalist ploys— pretending, hope, faith, naiveté, and so on—never work for long.

The attraction of most contemporary spiritual systems—from fundamentalist Christianity to SBNR monism—is the implicit promise to return you to the choiceless mode. They lie, though. All they can offer is eternalism, not choicelessness.

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1. 1.For instance, in ordinary usage, "modern" often just means "current." In art criticism, it covers the late 1800s to about 1980—only a small part of the period called "modern" by most historians. That narrower usage of "modern" corresponds to the period of "systems in crisis and breakdown" described next.
2. 2.Systematicity is a matter of degree, not all-or-nothing. The earliest urban societies were already *somewhat* systematic five thousand years ago. Ancient India, China, Greece, and Rome were quite systematic at their peaks. Rome, especially, was astonishingly modern; it wasn't until the 1600s, or perhaps even 1700s, that Europe caught up to where it had been a millennium and a half earlier. Rome's modernity, and its success, was due to its cosmopolitanism: its willingness to adopt and adapt the life-ways of other cultures.
3. 3.On the other hand, in a systematic society, each person has only a handful of roles; whereas in post-systematic societies, we all have so many we can't keep track of them.
4. 4.When I travelled in Asia, everywhere I went, I asked people "would you rather live here or in Singapore?" Everyone said "I love it here—I would miss the food, my family, the pace of life—but yeah, I'd rather live in Singapore where I could own a big TV."
5. 5.My explanation here draws on Robert Kegan's model of psychological development. My "choiceless self" corresponds to his "interpersonal self", and my "systematic self" to his "institutional self". These are stages 3 and 4 of his 5-stage schema. "Fluidity" is meant to correspond to his stage 5.
6. 6.According to Kegan, Americans in the 1970s typically created an "institutional self" when they left home for college, full-time work, or the military. Primary membership in an institution outside the family is a natural impetus. I've put "created" in the past tense, because—as I will explain in upcoming pages—I suspect it is no longer possible to create a systematic self in the way it was then.
7. 7.For instance Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*. Other systematic societies developed similar self-technologies, presumably for the same reasons.
8. 8.An interesting question is to what extent systematicity and brains have co-evolved recently. The cultural evolution of systematicity may exert strong, novel selective pressures, which may affect genetic evolution of brains. Conversely, as innate brain capacities have changed under this pressure, increasingly sophisticated and effective forms of systematicity may become feasible, driving social and cultural evolution.

9 Comments

Cranberry sauce. Yuck!

Most new ideas are wrong. Most new ways of doing things don't work. Rationality and science can help sort helpful innovations from harmful or useless ones. However, for nearly all the time humans evolved, those were unavailable.

For our ancestors, it was nearly always a good idea to reject any cultural change. Even now, "we have always done it that way" is often a good reason to continue.[1] For this reason, our brains tend to conservatism.

For innovators, the popular preference for tradition is an obstacle. A common, effective strategy is to give the impression that the innovation is not new, but traditional. That hides its risks, costs, or defects, and makes it seem comfortingly safe and acceptable. Historians call this ploy "the invention of tradition," a phrase introduced in an excellent book by that name.

Of course, every tradition was once an invention. That is not "invention of tradition." "Invention" here means deliberate deception. It is the presentation of something new as though it were ancient. This may involve explicit falsification of history, or just misleading association of the innovation with symbols of tradition.

Genuine, dramatic progress is also attractive, but hard to come by. Advocates of ideas or practices that have long been marginal—because they don't actually work well—can dress them up as visionary breakthroughs that will *revolutionize everything*. For a while, this may bring popular attention and acceptance. This is the mirror image of an invented tradition.

So far as I know, historians haven't discussed this ploy, and there is no standard term for it.[2] So, provisionally, I'm calling these "timeworn futures."

I'll discuss some entertaining examples of invented traditions and timeworn futures later in this page. (Including horse-drawn carriages, kilts, and cranberry sauce.) But first: how is this relevant to *Meaningness*?

Legitimizing systems

The invention of tradition (book cover)

Given the serious defects of the systematic mode of understanding meaningness, it is remarkable how successful it was, for how long.

Invented traditions and timeworn futures were key strategies for overcoming psychological resistance to systematicity. For example, the radical new Protestant doctrines were "traditional Christianity, as practiced by the Early Church" (in contrast to the supposed illegitimate innovations of Catholicism). The radical new ethical demands of modern life were "traditional morality." The radically new bureaucratic state was "the glorious tradition of our nation." All these descriptions tried to make systematic mode innovations feel choiceless.

Simultaneously, each splinter Protestant sect had a fabulous "new vision" for Godly society; outmoded ethical claims were "spreading rapidly from decent modern people to benighted foreigners and our own lower classes"; and archaic state institutions were "essential foundations for national progress."

Even after the systematic worldview has collapsed overall, falsifications of both types are still frequently used to justify particular systems.

Invented traditions and timeworn futures are harmful when they justify systems that are worse than alternatives. Arguably, they are benign if they justify systems that are better than alternatives, but which may be rejected for bad reasons. Even then, the deception is dubious.

The countercultures, fabricating pasts and futures

Rave at Stonehenge

Image courtesy Andrew Dunn

As the mainstream collapsed, the 1960s–80s countercultures proposed alternative systems. These soon failed, unsurprisingly, because they didn't have much new to offer.

Both countercultures relied heavily on invented traditions and timeworn futures. However, the dualist counterculture relied particularly heavily on invented traditions, and the monist one on timeworn futures.

The dualist counterculture advocated "restoring traditional American values," but the glorious past it extolled had never existed. If the movement had succeeded, it would have created a future unlike anything in history. The monist counterculture proclaimed the "Dawning of the Age of Aquarius," but this timeworn future was straight out of early–1800s German Romantic Idealism.

Each counterculture used the other strategy as well, though. Reagan proclaimed "morning in America." The New Age justified epic silliness with invented roots in Ancient Egypt, Atlantis, Native American wisdom, Eastern Religions, Mayan prophesies, or just about any time, place, and culture other than 1800s Europe—because Romantic Idealism was thoroughly discredited.

Buddhism: 2000 years of invented traditions

Reading the history of Buddhism, I gradually realized most of its heroes and events were make-believe. Rin'dzin Pamo recognized *The Invention of Tradition* would explain the motivations of the inventors, and gave me a copy. A couple years later, I discovered David L. McMahan's book *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, about the invention of "Buddhism" in the late 1800s and early 1900s. I've written many blog posts about that.

Meanwhile, the Buddhism invented in the 1970s as a synthesis of vintage–1900 Asian modernist Buddhism with the American monist counterculture is still presented as a cutting-edge new path. Since the weakness and defects of that system have been clear for twenty years, this is a fine example of a timeworn future.

How to defend against ideological time-distortions

The only defense against invented traditions and timeworn futures is to study the history of ideas.

This book is partly an attempt to catalog the building-blocks of meaning and help you recognize them. There are surprisingly few genuinely different ideas about meaningness. Timeworn futures just repackage a few, wrapped in shiny up-to-date branding. Invented traditions try to hide something new amidst the familiar, wrapped in reassuringly retro branding.

The final chapter of *The Invention of Tradition* is titled "Mass-producing Traditions: 1870–1914." That, plus discovering that Buddhism-as-we-know-it was invented then, made me realize how much of contemporary ideology dates from the period. The era achieved a brilliant, seemingly harmonious synthesis of Protestantism, scientific rationalism, nationalism, industrial capitalism, and Romantic expressivism. It took extraordinary ideological innovations to paper-over contradictions among these—including extensive time-distortions.

I had neglected Victorian ideology as irrelevant: stiff and dull and forgotten by all. But, the story of meaningness since then is mainly just an account of that architecture disintegrating. To make sense of the wreckage we live among, we have to look at historical images of the palace at its peak.

Forthright mythologization in the fluid mode

It is almost impossible to imagine alternatives to one's own culture from within. You need to expose yourself to a source of contradiction; of otherness. With the world tending to a global monoculture, pasts are among the few resources we have for innovating futures.

Pasts also have great romantic and aesthetic appeal, so they are effective for communicating and inspiring futures. That is one reason invented traditions work. It is the duplicity of invented traditions that is the main problem, not their creation as such.

I will suggest that non-deceptive creative mythologization, based on an archaeology of meaningness, may be a valuable method in the fluid mode. Myths are sacred fictions we tell about the past to make sense of meaningness in the present, and to point toward futures we hope for (or hope to avoid). Now that we no longer live in the systematic mode, we have no reason to pretend that the myths we make are "true." We have no compulsion to tell stories that are entirely coherent and well-founded—because we've learned that is impossible.

My romantic fantasy novel, set in India in 700, tries to create an inspiring mythology. It mixes genuine history, contemporary values, and—implicitly—ideas about a future I would like to see.

British royal ritual: an invented history, with motivations

Scene from the Coronation of King Edward and Queen Alexandra

The Invention of Tradition analyzes many examples, which are fascinating and often funny. Most in the book concern the falsification of the traditions of the British kingdoms for nationalist purposes. I'll describe one of these in some depth, and then a variety of other invented traditions briefly.

The picture above is from the Coronation of King Edward and Queen Alexandra, apparently around the year 1275. The style is Pre-Raphaelite, a genre of painting from the mid–1800s that emphasized Romantic fantasy themes. Pre-Raphaelite paintings usually feature gorgeous noblewomen in long flowing pseudo-Medieval robes, gothic architecture, and a wizard or king plus maybe a dragon.[3]

Britain is, of course, famous for its royal pomp and circumstance; no country does elaborate state occasions better. That is due to its unbroken tradition of royal ritual, going back to Medieval times, as in the picture above.

Not. The Coronation of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra was held in 1902. The "tradition" of British royal ritual had mostly been invented over the previous fifteen years, and the Coronation was mainly new. It was, however, elaborately fake-Medieval. It looked like a Pre-Raphaelite painting—a fantasy of Medieval royal life—because it was imitating a Pre-Raphaelite fantasy.

(The central figure in the background appears to be Merlin, although I suppose he was actually some sort of Anglican Church functionary. Sadly, dragons were already extinct in Britain, so they were not invited.)

Of course, Britain *had* had genuine royal ritual, presumably for as long as it had had royalty. The point of a coronation ceremony is to get together everyone important to publicly agree that the new king is legitimate and unopposed. This is important because new kings are always opposed, and frequently illegitimate (relative to whatever standard of legitimacy is current). A successful coronation demonstrates that the king has enough power to force everyone to pretend, at least. It sows distrust among the opposition (who have all seen each other giving fealty to the king—so who is to say where anyone's real loyalty lies?). It also affirms the mutual dependence of the Church and crown, and God's mandate for rule. If well-executed, coronation works psychological magic (as ritual does), inspiring awe, loyalty, and gratitude in the kingdom's subjects.

However, for several centuries, Parliament had gradually increased its powers at the expense of kings, with the balance shifting by the late 1600s. Moreover, the British kings from then up to Queen Victoria, who was crowned in 1837, were uniformly defective and unpopular, yet still able to interfere strongly in government.

When Victoria came to the throne, at the age of 18, she was already popular, and a potential threat to Parliamentary power. Parliament therefore engineered a minimal coronation that was both low-key and probably deliberately "shambolic" (as it is often described). This was perhaps the low point of British royal ritual. Nevertheless, Victoria and her husband Prince Albert were popular constitutional monarchs, and exerted considerable political power behind the scenes.

In 1887, Parliament reinvented royal ritual for Victoria's Golden Jubilee, notionally a celebration of her fiftieth year on the throne. This was royal ritual with an entirely new function. It was not, in reality, to confirm the legitimacy of the Queen. Rather, the Jubilee confirmed the legitimacy of new British establishment: Parliament itself, the Anglican Church, industrial capitalism, and the colonial Empire.

The new establishment's legitimacy was indeed in question, threatened not by the throne, but by even newer forces. At home, populist movements, including socialism, were rapidly gaining support. Abroad, the moral basis for the Empire, and its political and military feasibility, were increasingly dubious.

The Golden Jubilee, and even more the Diamond Jubilee of 1897, were enormous pageants of made-up ceremony, designed to give the impression that the new British establishment was continuous with ancient tradition. Now the aged, ailing, widowed, withdrawn, depressed and drug-addled Queen could be used as a symbol of that continuity, with no risk of any *actual* continuity of the throne as a power base. Populists were often republican, in favor of abolishing the royalty and House of Lords. So, the Jubilees were meant to create new popularity for the Queen, and by extension the Lords and the rest of the establishment that she notionally headed. They were highly successful.

The Jubilees were not just—or even mainly—British affairs. The Diamond Jubilee was a lavish "Festival of the British Empire" designed by the Colonial Secretary. Parliament had declared Victoria Empress of India, a newly-invented title, in 1876. That was the pretext for making the Jubilee into a ceremony in which all the colonies gave homage to, in effect, their actual rulers— the British establishment. Ritual festivities were held not only in Britain itself, but throughout the Empire.

Victoria died in 1902, and was succeeded by her son Edward VII—whose Coronation with his wife Queen Alexandra is depicted at the head of this section.[4] That grand event was modeled on the Jubilees. Its fake Medievalism suggested eternal stability of British institutions at a time when, in reality, they were changing rapidly.

British royal ritual is now a genuine tradition, having endured for a little more than a century. Here's a scene from the 2011 wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, featuring the carriage made for Edward VII's 1902 Coronation.

Royal Carriage at Wedding of Prince William of Wales and Kate Middleton

That carriage was an invented tradition in 1902; the aristocracy had already abandoned carriages for motorcars, so new ones had to be built for the occasion. Pseudo-Medieval carriages are an authentic tradition now. The most recent one features electric windows, heating, hydraulic stabilizers, and built-in digital copies of important British historical documents. Just in case you need to check the Magna Carta, while being dragged along by six horses, to see how your royal powers are constitutionally limited.

In fact, I suspect that the over-the-top Romantic Medievalism of the 1902 Coronation was partly to underline that the royalty were an absurd archaism, retained only for symbolic value—lest the new king get any ideas.

Tartan and kilt

> Scottish national dress

A chapter of *The Invention of Tradition* concerns the invention of Scottish history, culture, and nationality. It was expanded into a a full book, summarized here. Two striking facts concern the invention of the kilt, and of clan tartans, by English businessmen.

> Tartan and kilt, those universal badges of Scottishness, are about as authentic as Disneyland. The kilt was invented by an Englishman, Thomas Rawlinson, who came to Scotland in the 1720s to manage an ironworks in the Highlands. Rawlinson observed that while the actual native costume of the Highlanders—a long belted cloak—might have been suitable for rambling over hills and bogs, it was "a cumbrous, inconvenient habit" for men working at a furnace. So he hired the tailor of the local army regiment to make something more "handy and convenient for his workmen" by separating the skirt from the rest and converting into a distinct garment.

Clan tartans were invented in the early 1800s by an English textile manufacturer, William Wilson, as a way of expanding the market for his products. Tartans were already common in Scotland, but variations in pattern were regional. It appears to have been Wilson who had the idea that each clan should have its own pattern.

Royal decree imposed unique tartans on the clans in 1822, when George IV visited Scotland. Sir Walter Scott staged elaborate state pageantry for the king. He invented numerous ancient national traditions for the occasion, deliberately creating the first unified Scottish national identity.

Meanwhile, in America

Thanksgiving is an entirely invented tradition. Its mythology has accreted gradually, but mainly dates to the late 1800s and the first half of the 1900s. One aspect I find particularly amusing:

> It has been an unchallengeable American doctrine that cranberry sauce, a pink goo with overtones of sugared tomatoes, is a delectable necessity of the Thanksgiving board and that turkey is inedible without it.
> —Alistair Cooke

This is, of course, because it was served at the First Thanksgiving in 1621. No one actually likes the stuff. (We know this, despite claims to the contrary, because no one eats it except at Thanksgiving.[5]) However, it's traditional, so one has to pretend.

But actually, there's no evidence that it was served in 1621. And, the "tradition" was unknown until the 1940s, when it was invented by Ocean Spray, the marketing arm of the cranberry industry. An advertising campaign showed "traditional" Thanksgiving dinners, prominently featuring cranberry sauce. That dramatically increased demand for an agricultural product that is nearly inedible—intensely sour, bitter, fibrous, and otherwise almost tasteless.

And then there's Christmas.

An 'American tradition' is anything that happened to a Baby Boomer twice

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1. 1.Some readers will balk at this, because it is often also used to justify the unjustifiable. I find Chesterton's parable of the fence helpful as insight into why maintaining traditions is useful as a default.
2. 2.If you know of a discussion in the academic literature, or an accepted term, I'd love to hear about it.
3. 3.They are ridiculous but I love them.
4. 4.The king doesn't appear in the picture. It shows the anointing of the queen. "Anointing" means that a shamanic medicine-man smeared sacred gloop on her. Quite what magic that was meant to accomplish, it's hard to guess. We know, though, that seemingly-senseless rituals of supposedly "primitive" peoples—whether contemporary hunter-gatherers or ancient tribes such as the Victorians—express profound ineffable wisdom, due to their connectedness to the cycles of Nature and openness to the mysteries of Being.
5. 5.My spouse claims to like it, and to have eaten it once outside of Thanksgiving. And they are not even American. So, "hardly anyone."

12 Comments

The Crystal Palace burning down, 1936

The Crystal Palace burning down, 1936

The first half of the twentieth century was *awful*. Not just materially; Western systems of meaning—social, cultural, and psychological—were falling apart. The glorious accomplishments of the systematic era could not hold civilization together, and seemed likely to be lost entirely in a global conflagration.

Many people even came to think those systems were the cause of all the catastrophes. We who live in the aftermath—we who have never experienced an intact system—we cannot fully appreciate how awful that loss of meaning felt.

This page analyzes the first phase of meaning's disintegration, roughly 1914–1964. It should help explain the new positive alternatives offered by the countercultures and subcultures, which came next, and also why those failed.

All the events I recount will be familiar, but the way I relate them to my central themes of eternalism and nihilism, and to *problems of meaning* in the domains of society, culture, and self, may seem novel.

We still have no adequate response to these issues. Any future approach—such as fluidity—must grapple with problems that first became obvious in the early twentieth century.

Society in crisis

Lenin addressing a crowd, 1920

Lenin addressing a crowd, 1920

The period was marked by two social crises: class conflict and world wars. The systematic ideologies that were supposed to resolve these horrible problems seemed, by the end, to have made them worse, or even to have been their principal causes.

Greatly increased division of labor during the 1800s created numerous specialized occupations. This drove great advances in the standard of living and enabled increasing cultural sophistication. However, it also created psychological alienation (discussed below) and social conflicts. The existing social system, which had been stable for hundreds of years, functioned only in an agrarian economy of peasants, aristocratic landowners, and a small class of skilled craftspeople. It had no way of accommodating the newly created classes, such as urban industrial workers and entrepreneurial commoners—who sometimes became richer and more powerful than most aristocrats.

Theorists proposed new systems of social organization: nationalist, socialist, democratic, totalitarian. Advocates made supposedly-rational arguments for why each was *right*; yet supporters mostly just chose the system that might benefit their in-group against others. Conflicts between them tore societies apart, often even into civil war.

Different countries tried each of the new systems, and all produced vast disasters:

- nationalism led to World War I;
- capitalism caused the world-wide Great Depression;[1]
- fascism was to blame for World War II;
- communism killed tens of millions with engineered famines and the mass murder of supposed dissidents.

WWI marked the end of naive faith in the systematic mode. Most countries went into the war confident of quick victory, confident of its necessity and ethical rightness, confident that war was an opportunity for glory, heroism, and unity. God was on our side.

For Europe, it was the first industrial war,[2] with the new social and mechanical technologies of mass production turning out deaths instead of automobiles. Four years later, after tens of millions of casualties, extraordinary horror and suffering, the traumatized survivors asked not "was it worth it" but "what was *that* all about, anyway?"

In retrospect, WWI seemed completely pointless. Or, if it had any meaning, it was to point out that the pre-war systems of meaning must have been disastrously wrong. The 1800s had seemed an era of rapid *moral* progress as well as economic and scientific progress. That was no longer credible. This disillusionment increased support for alternatives, including socialist internationalism, fascism, explicit anti-modernism, and explicit nihilism.

One pointless, catastrophic world war might be a tragic accident. To fight another, even worse one—the worst human-created disaster ever—just twenty years later, goes beyond carelessness. When the victors of WWII immediately began preparing to fight WWIII among themselves—this time with potentially billions of deaths from nuclear weapons—it was widely regarded as *a bad idea*. Yet Cold War belligerents on both sides felt justified by their systems of meaning: benevolent socialist internationalism versus benevolent liberal democracy.

Systematicity itself was a major cause of the catastrophe. Leaders and peoples took their rational ideologies far too seriously, and acted on flawed theoretical prescriptions.

Why did they choose not to see the systems were failing? Eternalism. The only alternative to blind faith in the system seemed to be nihilism.

From the standpoint of each ideology, the others looked nihilistic:

- For democratic capitalism, communism and fascism looked nihilistic in denying civil and human rights and the ultimate value of the individual.
- For communism, capitalism and fascism denied the ultimate value of solidarity—the brotherhood of all—and the economic rights of the working class.
- For fascism, the economic focus of communism and capitalism denied all values other than material ones. They denied the ultimate value of nation-state-ethnicity. They subordinated the noble, high culture of the elite to the vulgar, degenerate culture of the rabble.

Any relaxing of the defense of the system could only lead to the nihilist apocalypse. And, indeed, many thought the World Wars *were* the nihilist apocalypse—although in reality they were caused far more by eternalism than nihilism. On the other hand, a few thinkers started to suspect that it was systems *as such* that had been the problem. Among these were forerunners of the countercultures, such as the existentialists and Beats.[3]

Culture in crisis

Marcel Duchamp, Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2

Art falling apart.
Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912
(a/k/a "Explosion in the tile factory")

While the systematic mode worked—up to WWI—the role of "high" culture was to express and reinforce the values of the system. Great art was, by definition, morally improving. The arts tried to be pure, inspiring, and uplifting. They provided an idealized vision of the smooth workings of meaning as it was meant to be.

High culture expressed the sacred eternal values of the elites—the "bourgeoise"—who were its patrons. Popular culture sometimes ignored or mocked elite values; but that was ephemeral rubbish.

Starting in the late 1800s, and accelerating after WWI, artists flipped all that on its head. High art began instead to expose the cracks in the system. It articulated the widely-felt sense of disintegration, of loss of certainty. It spoke to the anxiety, confusion, and even horror that came from the failure of all foundations; but also the freedom and joy that came with liberation from eternalism.[4]

Artists, in all media, systematically rejected past artistic systems, and the rational structures that justified them.[5] Painters rejected geometrical perspective, the great achievement of Renaissance art. Composers rejected tonality, which had been the foundation of music for several centuries, and experimented with severe dissonances. Writers abandoned grammar, punctuation, prosody, sense, and all other "restrictive" forms.

At the extreme, the arts became entirely anti-sense, incoherent, or explicitly nihilistic. (This anticipates the incoherence of the atomized mode most of a century later.) Artists hurled globs of paint at a canvas; composers arranged notes by rolling dice; writers cut individual words out of a book, shook them up, pulled ones out at random and called the result a poem. Beyond even this random art was anti-art—seeming to be outright nihilism. An empty picture frame declared to be a painting; John Cage's four minutes and 33 seconds of silence declared to be music; a blank page, a poem. Tristan Tzara, a key theorist, wrote "I am against systems; the most acceptable system is on principle to have none" and "logic is always false."

Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917

Is this art? How can you tell?
(Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917)

High art also increasingly rejected all existing social systems. Biting the hands that fed it, it adopted the attitude *épater la bourgeoisie*: scandalize polite society!

The new job of art was not to uplift, but to overthrow. Eventually, you could not be a serious artist unless you constantly proclaimed your contempt and hatred for the middle and upper classes, for capitalism, for Victorian morality, for religion, for any sort of taboo or restriction. To be an artist was *by definition* to be a revolutionary. Simply maintaining an oppositional attitude became sufficient; art and social critique became inseparable.

Popular and high art now changed places. The middle and working classes had growing spending power, and entrepreneurs discovered that popular culture could be profitable. Commercial culture came to represent the "traditional values" of the systematic mode, where high art—the avant-garde—satirized and undermined them. Theorists proclaimed that all popular art was just kitsch —the cultural expression of eternalism.

Here began the "culture war," which became particularly important in the countercultural mode.

The self in crisis

Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times*, 1936

Systematic society required, and made partially possible, systematic selves. Systematic persons were rational individuals who conformed to, and enforced, systematic social values. This advance began breaking down in the first half of the twentieth century, due to systematicity's harmful side-effects. Its requirements came to seem oppressive, meaningless, and for some, impossible. Selves fractured and broke under the stress.

Work in the industrial economy felt dehumanizing. Extreme division of labor made most people tiny, interchangeable cogs in a vast, incomprehensible, relentless machine. The functioning of the economy as a whole became opaque, so it was impossible to see the meaning of one's own work, and the system's demands seemed senseless. And, indeed, working conditions often were not only awful, but pointlessly awful.

Urban, industrial social organization increasingly alienated people from each other and from nature. The systematic self—based on a rigorous self/other boundary—made this worse, and even separated people from their own everyday experience. It became possible, for the first time, to feel lonely and isolated while in a crowd.

The mid–1800s introduced a new "Victorian" sexual morality and a new culture of the family. These addressed genuine social problems with some success. In the absence of reliable contraceptive technology, and limited food production, sexual restraint lessened the rate at which children died of starvation. The new concept of a private home life developed partly as refuge from the stresses of the work world, and was closely analogous to the new enclosed interiority of the systematic self.

However, these innovations also caused stress and misery for many people. For example, England had large, persistent surpluses of women, making it mathematically impossible for all to conform to the demand that they marry. Many people (men and women, adults and children) found the

regimented ideology of duty-filled family relationships an onerous grind at best, and in some cases intolerable. Yet they were nearly inescapable. The newly private nuclear family could also conceal pathology and abuse that earlier, more open extended families might have successfully intervened in.

Increasing social complexity requires you to act as several different people in different places. Some of those partial-selves are false fronts; others may seem natural. If your personality is quite different at work and at home, which is the real you?

Ecstasy is the natural antidote to the sense that administering the systematic self—holding everything together—is exhausting. Choiceless cultures periodically celebrate with joyful non-ordinary states of consciousness, produced by community ritual, intoxicants, and relaxation of social role norms. Systematic cultures deliberately banned these as threats.[6] Even this temporary escape route was cut off.

Many people began to ask: Why? For what? Given the rigidities of the system, even the best possible life outcomes would be quite unsatisfactory for most people. The restrictions seemed arbitrary, unnecessary, and unfair. When you ask "why?", a system is supposed to always have an answer; but as the twentieth century staggered from crisis to catastrophe to breakdown, religious and political platitudes no longer seemed adequate. Rationalist certainty had also collapsed. Justifications based on abstraction and generality are sterile; when the systems they support are visibly failing, they come to seem meaningless.

In the anxiety of relativism, as eternalism disintegrates, one doubts everything. Yet the system has to reject doubters. They are criminal, mad, degenerate, lazy, undesirable; and punished or cast out accordingly. What then? Perhaps I *am* mad? Or a criminal? Perhaps "good" and "evil" no longer have any meaning? Perhaps meaning itself is impossible…

And so there developed new words for problems of the self, reflecting the new possibility of nihilism:

- Alienation, in the mismatch between social roles and internal experience
- Anomie, the feeling that social norms have broken down and become irrelevant
- Neurosis, theorized to be caused by failure to adapt to stifling social requirements
- Identity crisis, the feeling of loss of any meaningful self
- Existential angst, the feeling accompanying nihilistic doubt

Many people adapted easily enough to systematic requirements, and constructed reasonably functional systematic selves. Others found it difficult, and were miserable; some failed altogether. [7] In breakdown, the self is experienced as fragmented, incoherent, and hostile to itself.

Freud

Freud's enormous influence during the first half of the twentieth century was due to his pioneering explanations—however incomplete and incorrect—of these problems.

A fully systematic self, he argued, is biologically impossible. The ideal of the self as the rational chief of a smoothly functioning internal bureaucracy is unrealizable. Not only is the self not an in-dividual, it is always actually divided. Most of what happens inside ourselves we cannot even know about: it is unconscious. The ego—what we most think of as self—is a hapless clown, caught between vastly more powerful forces.

The monstrous, irrational, amoral, chaotic id mainly does as it pleases; then the tyrannical, persecutory superego punishes us for desires and acts beyond our control, inducing constant anxiety and guilt. The ego's mechanisms of defense against them, such as repression, denial,

regression, and projection, are themselves mainly violent failures of rational self-management. They mirror the mechanisms of social oppression.

Civilization and Its Discontents (1930), perhaps Freud's most influential work, argued that because the conflict between social demands and individual desires was unavoidable, deep dissatisfaction was inescapable. The best we can hope for is to "replace neurotic misery with common unhappiness."

Despite this profoundly gloomy conclusion, psychoanalysis functioned as a para-religion for millions of people. As a system for making sense of meaning in all its dimensions, it often fit lived experience better than Christianity.

During the middle of the century, psychoanalysis evolved away from orthodox Freudianism, in several productive directions. Object-relations theory recognized that relationships had great human value, not just instrumentally but intrinsically. It also developed more sophisticated and accurate understandings of the internal structure of the self and its fragmentation. Psychoanalysis also hybridized with existentialism, arguably deepening each. Both hybridized with Marxism, producing trenchant new analyses of the failures of the systematic mode, and suggesting new revolutionary possibilities. These were a major impetus for the 1960s–70s counterculture.

Responses: totalitarianism and existentialism

The main alternative, while all systems were failing, appeared to be nihilism—the end of meaning. However, two other responses developed during 1914–64: totalitarianism and existentialism.

These had some of the characteristics of countercultures, as I'll define them on the next page. Both proposed alternatives to the failing mainstream, and were often anti-rational.[8] Each contributed to counterculturalism: existentialism especially influenced the monist counterculture, and totalitarianism the dualist counterculture.

Totalitarianism

By "totalitarianism" I mean attempts to make a system work by force. (This is not quite the standard definition, but it's close.) This includes fascism, actually-existing communism,[9] and theocractic fundamentalism.

Totalitarianism is now mostly discredited in the West, so it's important to understand why it made sense in the mid-twentieth century—and why it still makes sense to billions of people elsewhere.

Any serious system has a network of justifications that answer all "why" questions—not perfectly, but well enough for most people most of the time. So it *ought* to work. Moreover, systems mostly *did* work, for several centuries. Even in the 1950s, many liberal Western economists and political scientists considered that the Soviet bloc had an unfair advantage, because its leaders could simply order everyone to do what had to be done. They favored democratic institutions on ethical grounds, but believed that communism was more efficient economically—so the West might be doomed. (It wasn't until the 2000s that the reasons non-systematic economies outperform started to be commonly understood.)

Like all eternalism, totalitarianism is based on the fantasy of control; it promises salvation if you conform to the dictates of the system. That promise is enormously appealing, and explains why Hitler, Stalin, and Mao had broad popular support—and why Islamic fundamentalism has broad popular support now.

The totalitarian intuition is that society would work if everyone just did what they were supposed to. And this is largely correct. Despite nearly opposite ideologies, Norway and Singapore are now among the highest-functioning countries in the world, because there is a general agreement among their citizens to do the right thing. In low-functioning countries, there is a *de facto* agreement to ignore pro-social norms in favor of personal or clan advancement. So why not just *make* everyone behave?

Totalitarianism's flaws become apparent when it collides with nebulosity. It then uses all the eternalist ploys to maintain allegiance in the face of failure. Most obviously, totalitarianism is armed and armored to restore order by force. This requires purification, eventually by killing everyone who impedes the operation of the system (kulaks, Jews, apostates, profiteers, perverts, oppressors, idolators, elitists, degenerates, running-dog capitalist-roaders, intellectuals, counter-revolutionaries, etc.). Totalitarian leadership is typically addicted to magical thinking and pretending to believe. For the masses, they encourage thought suppression and kitsch.

Speaking of kitsch, all totalitarian movements see it as *job one* to suppress and destroy avant-garde art.[10] Avant-garde art points to nebulosity and mocks systematicity—as such, not just specific systems. The Soviets declared it "counter-revolutionary," and made "socialist realism" the only legal style. (That was state-worshipping propaganda kitsch in a style crudely imitating late–1800s Academic painting.) The Nazis declared the avant-garde "degenerate," "nonsensical," and "Jewish," and banned it in favor of their own Classically-inspired propaganda kitsch. Nowadays, fundamentalists preach against it, ban it where they can, and promote religious kitsch.

In the social realm, I mentioned two problems: class conflict and world war. Totalitarianism deals with the first by banning it. (That was easy, wasn't it? If you kill everyone responsible for class conflict, it will just go away.) Totalitarians *love* world wars—eternalism deludes them that they are fated to win and establish a global Soviet / Reich / Caliphate[11]—so that's not a problem either.

Totalitarianism requires a self that is systematic but transparent. Choiceless selves—embedded in local community relationships—cannot conform to the will of a national or global system. Individuals—who have a private mental realm—may choose to resist the system, or hide dissenting thoughts from the system. The totalitarian self must be submerged in the State, or surrendered to God, renouncing personal boundaries. That is attractive, for many people, by relieving them of the burdens of choice. (Eternalism simulates choicelessness.) However, complete surrender is impossible to accomplish, which is one reason totalitarianism has not been more successful.

Existentialism

Existentialism rejected all systems of meaning in favor of choosing personal meanings. I've analyzed that extensively earlier in the book,[12] so here I'll say only a little.

Systematic eternalism tries to make meaning objective. During the twentieth century, this became obviously unworkable. Many saw nihilism as the only possible alternative, but (rightly) considered it unacceptable. Existentialists tried to create a third possibility: that meaning could be subjective rather than objective. In fact, they said, "authentic" meaning *had* to be subjective: a purely individual choice or creation, without any justification. They claimed that perfect internal freedom of choice made this possible, whatever the external circumstances.

This can't work. Meaning is a collaborative activity. It is neither objective nor subjective. It is created by interaction, and abides in that space-between. Also, we do not have perfect internal

freedom. Selves are constituted by biology and by society and culture. People cannot become ideal independent rational agents with perfectly-crisp boundaries and unlimited free will.

Bizarrely, while advocating total rejection of social values, several of the most important existentialists also advocated totalitarian social systems. For example, Heidegger supported Nazism and Sartre supported Soviet communism. Camus, last and best of the existentialists, was left to diagnose both its failure modes. He explained how purely subjective meaning slides into nihilism, split with Sartre over communism, and consistently denounced totalitarianism.

Unfortunately, existentialism's incoherent combination of extreme individualism and extreme collectivism carried on into the countercultures a couple decades later. That was a main reason for their failure.

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1. 1.Or, at any rate, this was widely believed.
2. 2.The American Civil War was the first industrial war overall, anticipating most of the features of WWI on a smaller—but still appalling—scale.
3. 3.Around the same time—1951—Kenneth Arrow proved mathematically that there is no such thing as a "fair" system of government. This could be seen as part of the general collapse of rational certainty in the 1914–1964 period. I suspect Arrow's proof significantly influenced elite decision-makers, as the general crisis in rationality did, even though there's never been any public awareness of it.
4. 4.This movement in the arts was called "modernism". As I mentioned earlier, in other contexts "modern" refers to different periods. In particular, "modernism" in the arts corresponds to the breakdown of the "modernity" that prevailed from the 1400s through the 1800s.
5. 5.Artistic modernism grew out of Romanticism. Romantic art was sometimes explicitly anti-rational, but still mainly worked within the Classical forms. It maintained strong emotional coherence, and was more-or-less realistic. Generally it also supported existing social structures, or at most sought to reform them, rather than destroy them.
6. 6.Calvinism pioneered this move, but you see the same in communist prudery, for example. Romanticism, in both the artistic and spiritual realms, revolted against puritanism—and so was a precursor to the 1960s counterculture.
7. 7.Of course, success in adapting to systematic requirements depended both on one's personal capacity and predilections, and on one's position in the social structure.
8. 8.On the other hand, fascist ethno-nationalism was not exactly universalist, where the 1960s–80s countercultures were; and communism at least pretended to rationality.
9. 9.Some communists argue that all supposed communist regimes were not really communist, and true communism would not be totalitarian. I find this unconvincing, but have added "actually-existing" to avoid arguing about it. I wonder whether anyone argues that true fascism would not be totalitarian?
10. 10.Not coincidentally, my page on eternalist kitsch draws heavily on Kundera's analysis of totalitarian kitsch.
11. 11.As I write this, ISIS—the global caliphate—is just about to conquer Rome. According to the caliph, as quoted in his press releases today, anyway.
12. 12.Actually, as of the time I'm writing this early in 2015, those sections of the book exist only as notes, and do not yet appear on the web. Existentialism is relevant to many of the themes of *Meaningness*, and I will discuss it in—at minimum—the chapters on meaningfulness, boundaries, self, and purpose.

30 Comments

Cat messing up your spacetime continuum and quantums and stuffs

I want to take you back—in imagination—to the time when the upper echelons of society had utter confidence in their own rightness, rooted in rationality and religious rectitude. For centuries, the systematic mode had provided certainty, based on those illusory understandings of meaningness. I want to show you their shock, horror, and bewilderment as their justifications fell through beneath them.

Unfortunately, I cannot do that, because I am incapable of imagining such certainty. Probably you are too. I have lived all my life in a culture that constantly reinforces the message that meaning is a matter of perspective. People's opinions about politics, ethics, aesthetics are a matter of choice, or personality, or based on individual experiences, or culture, or other arbitrary factors. Even supposed scientific truths, like about covid or global warming, are essentially contested and inherently uncertain. Contemporary Westerners may have our own strong opinions, but we literally cannot imagine what it would be like to live in a world where everyone takes for granted that there are well-known, generally-agreed-upon ultimate truths of such matters.

Leaders' total confidence in society's correctness contributed to the extraordinary achievements of the systematic era.[1] That was shattered in the early 1900s, partly by a series of *foundational crises* in rationality and religion. This page explains the collapse of rationalism; I cover the disintegration of religion in the next chapter, on the countercultures.

The promise of rationalism was that everything can be known with certainty, and understood and controlled, by applying the eternally-correct methods of reasoning. This was true *enough* to bring about the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, reasonably well governed democracies, great advances in health, life expectancy, living standards, human rights, and saner public morality. There was every reason to suppose progress would continue and accelerate.

Unfortunately, in the early twentieth century, rationalism delved too deep, undermined its own foundations, and awakened eldritch horrors. By the middle of the century, the inescapable conclusion was that rationality, science, and mathematics cannot supply the ultimate justifications that seemed possible in the 1800s. It is not true that everything—or even anything—can be known with certainty; nor fully understood or controlled. There is no absolutely correct method of reasoning. The promises of rationalist eternalism, which underwrote the optimism of the systematic mode, cannot be fulfilled by any means.

I believe this was a major factor in the breakdown of the systematic mode, and the several phases of disintegration of meaning through the rest of the century.[2] Leaders of social and cultural systems were well enough educated to understand that rationalism had failed, although probably not the details of how or why. That induced a profound loss of confidence. When challenged by the anti-rational countercultures of the 1960s–90s, they could not justify *status quo* institutions, and relinquished power relatively peacefully.

The foundational crises proved that rationality does not always work. Unfortunately, the word "always" gets too often forgotten. Incoherent irrationality is typical of our present, atomized mode. Institutional failures during the covid crisis, combined with popular pseudoscientific resistance to even sensible public health policies, may be a foretaste of greater catastrophes.

Rationality works much of the time—not just in science and mathematics, but in many dimensions of meaning as well: in politics, ethics, and aesthetics, for example. Restoring respect for a relativized rationality will be key to our upcoming transition to the fluid mode. It may herald a new age of progress, not just material but in dimensions of meaning as well, outshining anything the systematic mode could imagine.

text separator

The end of rationalist certainty was not a single event. It came as a series of unexpected, unwanted discoveries, throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Here I cover only some key events: non-Euclidean geometry, Einstein's general relativity, quantum theory, and the foundational crisis in mathematics caused by problems with infinities and in logic.

The Elements of Absolute Truth

Frontispiece
Title page of Byrne's beautiful 1847 edition of Euclid's *Elements*, demonstrating a geometrical proof of the Pythagorean Theorem with a colored diagram

For thousands of years, every educated Westerner understood that mathematics was the direct route to the Mind of God. That may sound absurd now, when religious people often revile technical rationality, but it was true from 500 BC until about a hundred years ago.

Many Ancient Greeks had a powerful religious certainty that everything in the material world must follow mathematical laws. It's difficult to understand why, because they had only two examples, neither of which quite worked, and virtually everything else was a counterexample. The theory of musical harmony based on integer ratios of string lengths was one near-success,[3] and the Ptolemaic scheme for calculating planetary motions was the other.[4]

Fortunately, it seemed that mathematics can at least provide certainty about itself. Euclid's *Elements* was the sacred source of rationality. It was the standard geometry textbook, used unchanged for two thousand years, up until about 1900. By definition, every educated European had to have read and understood the *Elements*.

The *Elements* taught the method of mathematical proof. Euclid started from ten simple, *unquestionably true* facts no one could argue with. From these "axioms," he derived complex non-obvious insights. Each step in the proof was also simple and unarguable. Each *compelled* agreement, leading you down a path to an unexpected conclusion. Therefore, you knew everything in the *Elements* was *absolutely certainly true*.

The *Elements* became the standard of rationality in general, not just in mathematics. Starting from unarguable axioms concerning some topic, you perform a series of unarguably correct deductions that demonstrate whatever you wanted to prove: QED.

This was the ideal for all systems of meaning. If you wanted to justify political or moral or legal claims, for example, you tried to set them out in the form of Euclidean proofs. In the mid-1600s, Baruch Spinoza produced an ethical theory—still influential—that he modeled on Euclid's *Elements*, titled *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*. Two hundred years later, Abraham Lincoln, who grew up in poverty and was almost entirely self-educated, wrote:

> In the course of my law reading I constantly came upon the word "demonstrate." I thought at first that I understood its meaning, but soon became satisfied that I did not…. I consulted Webster's Dictionary. They told of "certain proof," "proof beyond the possibility of doubt"; but I could form no idea of what sort of proof that was…. At last I said, Lincoln, you never can make a lawyer if you do not understand what demonstrate means; and I left my situation in Springfield, went home to my father's house, and stayed there till I could give any proposition in the six books of Euclid at sight. I then found out what demonstrate means, and went back to my law studies.

> God using a geometrical compass to create the Cosmos
> God the Geometer. Thirteenth century Bible frontispiece

For many, mathematical certainty was also a basis for religious certainty. God was the Supreme Rationalist, who created the cosmos in accord with mathematical structures that exist eternally in His Mind, outside space and time. By examining His Creation, we can find its underlying logic. That gives us a view into the Divine Rationality, and therefore absolute certainty concerning the nature and intention of God. St. Augustine, whose synthesis of Biblical myths and Ancient Greek rationalism formed the philosophical basis for Western Christianity, wrote:

> If you see anything at all that has measure, number, and order, do not hesitate to attribute it to God as craftsman. If you take away all measure, number, and order, there is absolutely nothing left.

Newton, more certain than God

> Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:
> God said, Let Newton be! — and all was light.
> —Alexander Pope, 1727

After two thousand years of all rational people knowing that mathematics *must somehow* explain everything, Isaac Newton finally proved that it did. Thank God!

Newton's physics was based on Euclid's *Elements*, and therefore was absolutely certain.[5] He made extensive use of the Euclidean understanding of space, and the deductive methods of mathematical proof. Like Euclid, Newton's physics is simple and elegant. Any reasonably bright high school student can learn the whole thing, and it all seems like common sense once you do.[6]

Mathematical physics gave, again, an unobstructed view of God: an understanding of His Will as manifest in His Creation. And, it seemed that it could explain *everything*. It was a complete theory of material existence. Or anyway, it *should* be one, and surely *would* be one, once the details got worked out.

Science and mathematics even became *more* certain than God. By 1800, many educated people doubted God, but no one could doubt Euclid's geometry, nor Newton's Laws of Motion. Those were absolute truths, true eternally and everywhere without exception. You didn't need to *believe* anything, to take anything on faith: they were *proven* true by easy-to-follow logic that no one could possibly argue with.

Together with the *Elements*, Newton's Laws became the prototype of systematic rationality for the European Enlightenment. If it works for gravity, why not for government, ethics, art, religion? And, to an astonishing extent, it did.

> Maxwell's Equations
> Maxwell's Equations: the complete explanation for light and magnetism as of 1900

Newton didn't fully explain light or magnetism, but that got done by the end of the 1800s. Or so it seemed! Four simple, elegant equations explained all known facts with perfect precision.[7] As of 1900, physicists could confidently declare: "There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now. All that remains is more and more precise measurement."[8]

With physics completed, explaining everything else seemed imminent. This was the fantasy of reductionism, that all knowledge should be applications of physics.

When parallel lines go bad

One of Euclid's axioms was somewhat more complicated than the others, and less obviously true. It can be stated as: Given a line, and a point not on the line, you can draw only one other line that goes through the point and doesn't intersect the original line. The new line will be parallel to the original one, so this is called the *parallel postulate.*[9]

The postulate is pretty obviously true, but why? For more than two thousand years, mathematicians tried to prove it true—and failed.

In the early 1800s, several mathematicians attempted a new tactic, the method of contradiction. If you want to prove something is true, you can pretend it is false, and use its falseness to prove as true something that definitely *is* false. That implies that your pretense was wrong, so the original thing must have been true.

So, let's suppose the parallel postulate is false. Then either there is *no* line parallel to the given one, or else there's more than one. Then something should go very wrong, and you'd know the parallel postulate was right.

But nothing goes wrong. You can do geometry perfectly well in either of these ways. Everything works fine. So these several mathematicians had accidentally discovered "non-Euclidean geometry." Its horrific significance remained obscure for several decades, but by the late 1800s, a toxic unease seeped out into the culture. What if—surely *not*, it would not be possible—but what if it were not just a trivial oddity—what if it were not just a theoretical possibility with no relevance to reality—what if it were *true*?

Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1880 novel The Brothers Karamazov was a foundational text for both nihilism and existentialism. It concerns problems of faith, free will, reason, and morality, driven by then-new conflicts between religion and rationalism, represented by two brothers with sharply differing views. In the philosophically central chapter, the rationalist brother invokes non-Euclidean geometry as an example of something that, like God's creation, may be true but cannot be accepted by a rational mind:

> If God exists and if He really did create the world, then, as we all know, He created it according to the geometry of Euclid and the human mind with the conception of only three dimensions in space. Yet there have been and still are geometricians and philosophers, and even some of the most distinguished, who doubt whether the whole universe, or to speak more widely, the whole of being, was only created in Euclid's geometry; they even dare to dream that two parallel lines, which according to Euclid can never meet on earth, may meet somewhere in infinity. I have come to the conclusion that, since I can't understand even that, I can't expect to understand about God.

Space and time are bent. What??

After the "end of physics," all that was left was more precise measurement. Unfortunately, one of those measurements went terribly wrong. It blew up physics, blew up rational certainty, blew up modernity, and nearly literally blew up the whole world with nuclear weapons in the Cold War.

It was the Michelson-Morley experiment of 1887, which measured the speed of light with unprecedented precision. Light is a wave, like waves on a pond. If you throw a rock in from a moving boat, the waves travel away faster behind than in front, because the boat is moving relative to the water. The earth is traveling through space, so light should likewise appear to travel

away faster behind than in front. Michelson and Morley found it doesn't. It travels at the same speed in all directions.

That answer couldn't be right. It contradicted fundamental principles of physics, not to mention rationality and common sense. However, it *was* right, as several scientists found when they repeated the experiment.

Einstein's theory of relativity solved that problem, but only at a hideous cost.

Relativity is based on non-Euclidean geometry. Space itself is warped, so the parallel postulate is not true. In physical reality, parallel lines can meet. It was bad enough when Euclidean geometry turned out to have alternatives in the abstract. Discovering that this one thing every educated person was most certain of was *actually false* was horrifying. What else might turn out to be wrong?

Well, Newton's theory of gravity, more certain than God, was also false. Einstein published the theory of general relativity in 1915, but the catastrophe came to public consciousness only in 1919, with the Eddington experiment which showed that the sun's mass bends space, so light from distant stars appears to be deflected as it passes by.

> Newspaper story:

Massive opposition from both intellectuals and the general public followed. There were anti-relativity organizations, anti-relativity conventions, organized anti-relativity letter-writing campaigns, and books and articles and newspaper editorials denouncing it. It *couldn't* be true, because it *mustn't* be true, so it was false and wicked.

Who cares about gravity? No one. That wasn't the point.[10]

The shock was to ethics, politics, aesthetics: systems of meaning. The systematic mode had justified them on the unshakable foundation of rationalism. Minor cracks had appeared already in the late 1800s. Those were plastered over, but Euclid and Newton were the prime certainties. Their fall has undermined rationalist confidence ever since. If those were wrong, anything or everything else might also come crashing down. The moral authority of science never fully recovered.

The public understood the Eddington experiment news as:

> **SCIENTISTS PROVE: NOTHING MAKES SENSE**
> Anything You Believe May Be Wrong.
> *No Absolute Truths, Authorities Insist*
> Everything shall be merely relative henceforth.

That would have made no sense before World War I, but it *did* make sense in 1919. It was a powerful confirmation of everyday experience during the war and in the chaotic postwar world. Amidst the pervasive feeling that something essential had broken down, many seized on relativity as a *symbol* of the general disintegration of meaning at the time.

Cultural theorists of the era described an epochal shift in the way people understood meaning in general. This is difficult to empathize with now, due to subsequent wholesale re-thinkings of meaningness, and of the nature of scientific knowledge.

Relativity doesn't undercut rationality as such; it's just a more complicated physical theory. It fails as a potential replacement for Newtonian physics *as a prototype for absolutist systems of meaning*. Relativity lacks key resources for that:

- It extensively violates common sense. Time runs slower near big things; the same events can occur in different orders for different objective observers; just going faster makes you heavier and shorter—without any limit, as you approach the speed of light. Meaning shouldn't misbehave like that.

- Hardly anyone can understand relativity, so most people couldn't understand social or cultural systems modeled on it, and couldn't live within them.

- Relativity is complicated and mathematically difficult. Why would God have created an incomprehensible universe when He could have made a nice simple Newtonian one that would have worked just as well? If He did, why would we take that bizarre contraption as a model for meaning?

The popular influence of relativity mainly came from misunderstanding it as "relativism": a recognition of nebulosity, more or less.

> The theory of Einstein is a marvelous proof of the harmonious multiplicity of all possible points of view. If the idea is extended to morals and aesthetics, we shall come to experience history and life in a new way.
> —Philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, 1923

- Relativity, or –ism, seemed consonant with the new celebration of incoherence in aesthetics. Some theorists hailed relativistic spacetime distortion as inspiration for Cubist and Futurist painting, for instance.[11] Others condemned relativity for the same reason.

- Many opponents, and some advocates, misunderstood it as moral relativism.

- Much opposition came from political conservatives, who saw it as a challenge to the established order.

- Some on the left said that nothing should be true unless everyone could understand it, so relativity was elitist and anti-democratic and must be stopped.

Many misunderstood relativity as a revelation of nebulosity, and therefore a disproof of rationalism. It was not; it is an absolute, deterministic system, formally similar to Newtonian mechanics.

More sophisticated thinkers understood relativity's true challenges to rationalism:

- Certainty in the Euclidean, Newtonian worldview had been misplaced. How did that happen? How could we make sure never to make a mistake like that again? Science was believed to deliver absolute truth, but had gone wrong; what needed to change?

- Rationalism had used the eternalist certainty of Newtonian physics as its model for systems of meaning. What other conceptual system of certainty could justify ethics, politics, or aesthetics?

During the 1920s, scientists and philosophers felt they were making significant progress on these problems. Mathematical logic, they thought, *could* deliver absolute certainty, and science should be re-founded on that. The "Vienna Circle" of extraordinary scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers played a central role: in making sense of relativity, in the logical positivist program

of proving the scientific method correct, and in grounding politics and ethics in science and rationality.

Then quantum hit, making the defense of rationalism still harder.

Quantum, worser than relative

Quantum theory is worse than relativity in three ways.

- Where Einstein's mathematics was difficult but elegant, quantum theory is insanely complicated and just ugly. It's a glued-up assemblage of too many ill-fitting bits with jagged edges and spikes that extend to infinity.[12] It's impossible to imagine how the ultimate nature of reality could be such a rat's nest.

- Quantum reveals that reality is *inherently random* and *inherently unknowable*. This seemed fatal for rationalism's promises of ultimate **certainty** and **control**. Precise prediction of individual events is absolutely impossible. That is not due to human limitations, but intrinsic to the fundamental nature of the physical universe. Unlike relativity, quantum actually does reveal an aspect of nebulosity.[13]

- Whereas it takes several years of university math and physics to understand relativity, *no one* can **understand** quantum theory.[14] Quantum violates common sense even more than relativity. The wave-particle duality and wave function collapse created major metaphysical difficulties for the first quantum physicists, and remain completely baffling.

Experimental tests of quantum theory make it the most precisely accurate and certain in all of science. It's a triumph for technical rationality, meaning "the application of mathematics to the material world." It was a severe challenge to rationalism, "the belief that correct thinking can yield perfect certainty, understanding, and control."

The same Vienna Circle of physicists and philosophers who tried to revise rationalism to accommodate relativity's paradoxes also took on the quantum paradoxes when they arrived a decade later. They did not succeed.

Mathematics is built on clouds

Meanwhile, mathematics was having its own foundational crisis. It turned out that, like quantum physics, mathematics itself puts intrinsic, absolute limits on certainty, knowledge, and understanding. That wrecked the project of re-founding science on mathematical logic, and eventually all hope of finding *anything* we can be certain of.

Trouble began in the 1870s, with Georg Cantor's discovery that there are different sizes of infinities. That created major problems for meaning, because philosophers and theologians had held for thousands of years that God was the only "actual infinity." The numbers 1, 2, 3, … were only "potentially infinite": you could keep on going, but you'd never get to infinity, because God is transcendent. Cantor went there. He went beyond there, and discovered more bigger infinities. He proved that there can be no biggest infinity. Oh no! How big is God, then?

Many prominent mathematicians denounced Cantor as a "scientific charlatan", "renegade," and "corrupter of youth," and demanded that his work be banished from mathematics as anti-rational. Cantor himself believed that his discoveries disproved both materialism and determinism.[15]

Another crisis for rationalism: mathematical proof was supposed to compel agreement, establishing certainty beyond any possibility of doubt. Mathematics was meant to be absolute truth, not a mere matter of opinion. Yet the leading mathematicians of the era held sharply disagreeing opinions about actual infinities, and whether proofs of them were valid. There seemed to be no way to resolve the dispute.

Further, the mathematics generated a series of paradoxes. If you did accept actual infinities, you were led to logical contradictions. The best known is Russell's paradox: does the infinite set of all sets that do not contain themselves contain itself? (If it does not contain itself, then it must, but if it does contain itself, it mustn't.)

Since the mid-twentieth century, most mathematicians have accepted Cantor's actual infinities as existent and important.[16] In fact, his work is now the basis for all the rest of mathematics. It turned out that most ordinary, finite numbers are actually hard shells that encapsulate an actual infinity crammed inside under enormous pressure.[17] If you delete the actual infinities from mathematics, what's left is ugly wreckage, and not much of it. In particular, calculus mostly doesn't work, and if you can't do calculus, you can't do physics.

This cast the whole enterprise of mathematics into question. It can't be done without actual infinities, but allowing actual infinities apparently led to metaphysical monsters and outright logical contradictions. Might the whole edifice topple as its foundations crumbled? Might mathematics devolve into pure aesthetic opinion, like postmodern film criticism?

David Hilbert, who had made major contributions to the mathematics of both relativity and quantum, led the way forward. "No one shall expel us from the Paradise that Cantor has created." The solution, he proposed, would be a more rigorously rational approach to mathematical proof, which should eliminate all room for error and opinion. He aimed then to prove that all mathematical truths could be proven: that mathematics is complete, so that everything can be demonstrated to be either true or false using objective rationality. This would also eliminate all internal contradictions, such as Russell's paradox. Then at last rationality could deliver the absolute certainty the Ancient Greeks fantasized about, and which it had seemed Newton had discovered—but now without any possibility of further unwelcome surprises.

Then, many philosophers believed, the correct political, economic, ethical, and psychological systems could be *proven* correct, beyond all possibility of doubt. Here the intellectual world of just a century ago seems as alien to me as the religion of the Sumerians. How could the smartest people of that era imagine such a thing was possible? The Vienna Circle, among others, put great effort into it. Success would eliminate much conflict and suffering, and we wouldn't have to have wars or depressions or waves of immorality and irrationality ever again.

A drastically unwelcome surprise arrived in 1931. Kurt Gödel proved that not all mathematical truths can be proven, by any means whatsoever. It is also impossible to prove that mathematics is free of internal contradictions. This showed that rationality is incomplete and certainty is permanently out of reach—as the quantum uncertainty principle had also shown, but now at an even more fundamental level.[18]

> You read essays by Hermann Weyl or John von Neumann [prominent physicist-mathematicians of the era] saying things like this: I became a mathematician because this was my religion, I believed in absolute truth, here was beauty, the real world was awful, but I took refuge in number theory. And all of a sudden Gödel comes and ruins everything, and I want to kill myself![19]

Once again, it fell to the long-suffering Vienna Circle to try to patch up rationalism to accommodate the blow. Dispersed by the Nazis, they kept at it in exile into the 1950s, but the cause was hopeless. Rationalism had conclusively, irreparably, permanently failed.

Science and mathematics after certainty

Karl Popper was the first to admit that science cannot ever, even in principle, justify certainty.[20] Science proceeds, he said, by replacing old theories with better ones, as when relativity replaced Newtonian gravitation and quantum replaced Maxwell's electromagnetic theory. However, the new ones must be assumed to be somewhat false as well.

A vague descendent of Popper's theory replacement framework provided a new triumphant narrative for public explanations of scientific progress, which deliberately obscures the foundational crisis and rationalism's failure:

> Relativity and quantum were huge successes! They prove that science works. They are *better* than the physics of the 1800s! And even though we know they must still be slightly wrong, inevitably we'll find a super-theory that combines both, corrects their errors, and explains everything.

Scientific progress is a fact, and understanding how and why it happens would be tremendously valuable. However, having dispelled the rationalist hope that a criterion of conclusive evidence could prove a theory correct, Popper did not explain what makes a scientific theory "better," or where new ones come from.

Thomas Kuhn's 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* showed that there are no fixed criteria. "Better" theories are often less good at predicting experimental results initially. Major scientific advances are *social* processes during which a community gradually changes allegiance to a new way of thinking, typically based on multiple nebulous considerations. That process is not rational, although it is also not irrational—it is meta-rational.

The "paradigm shift" produces an "incommensurable" ontology: a new way of seeing the world, not just a different theory of the same thing. Newton's theory of gravity describes an attractive force between objects. Einstein's theory of gravity does not involve any force; it describes the shape of spacetime.

Anti-rationalism in the countercultures

The next chapter discusses the two countercultures of the 1960s–90s: the hippie/New Age movement and the Evangelical Christian movement. Both justified their explicit rejections of rationality in terms of the failure of rationalism in the wake of the foundational crises.

One thread of irrationalism insists that "my truth" is just as valid as "your" truth because there is no fixed criterion. This was typical of the hippie counterculture. "Don't you know Einstein proved it's all relative, man?" was a common response to any rational criticism.

Kuhn's work was misunderstood as a general justification for relativism and for replacement of rationality with way-out speculation. Square Establishment ideas about what is possible and proper were the outmoded old paradigm. Whatever revolutionary fantasies about politics, ethics, or cosmic metaphysics you found attractive were the new paradigm, which should and would replace it. The supposed relativism of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* also influenced nihilistic postmodernism's attack on systematicity.[21]

Both the quantum uncertainty principle and Gödel's work were misunderstood as validations of everyday uncertainty, which has entirely different sources. "Even in mathematics, that supreme bastion of reason, truth is either beyond us or a matter of more or less arbitrary consensus rather than objective fact."[22] Fortunately, since science no longer makes any sense, it has no relevance for the everyday world. No matter what your opponents say about society and culture, there's no way they could prove they are correct! Therefore, your wacky opinions are unassailable.

A supposed obscure connection between consciousness and quantum phenomena justified any sort of New Age monist mystical flummery. Gödel's proof of the limits of formal systems justified the superiority of creative human insight over sterile mechanical rationality. See, our intuitive belief in healing crystals is proven by the new-paradigm science!

The Evangelical counterculture attempted to restore Christianity as an absolute foundation for systems. The nineteenth century synthesis of Christianity and rationalism had weakened the religion so much that by the 1970s it seemed on its way out. Evangelical anti-rationalism tried to reverse that, restoring Biblical literal inerrancy as a basis for morality and social order. Leaders of the movement pointed out that rationalism had discredited itself. Some alluded to Gödel as proof that "since mathematics cannot prove its own consistency, reason is powerless to justify itself, so that either there is no justification to be had, or reason can be supported only by faith."[23]

The loss of elite confidence

The main legacy of the foundational crises was loss of social confidence, rather than practical technical problems.

The systematic mode was imposed by elites on a populace that never wanted it (although they massively benefited from it on average). The elites' power and willingness to exercise it depended on their unquestioning confidence in their rational and religious justifications, and therefore in their own social, cultural, and moral authority. By the 1960s, they understood—better than the populaces they commanded—that their justifications had failed, and their systems were built on clouds.

When the countercultures challenged the elite establishment, it caved almost immediately. It was hollow, running only on momentum. The ruling class knew they had no justification for their authority apart from preexisting power, which (to their credit) they were unwilling to fully exercise. It's not that they thought "Well, Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem says I don't really know anything, so probably the hippies and queers and addicts are right." It's that they *weren't* taught that Euclid shows rationality provides certainty. For Victorian elites, it was inconceivable that sane people could contest the Law And Order agenda. In 1970s America, everything could be doubted, at least in principle… so, however misguided, maybe the kids had a point about the war at least.

Having lost their self-confidence, when anti-rationalist barbarians battered the gates, the establishment hemmed and hawed for a few years, and then just turned over the keys.

Reclaiming rationality in the fluid mode

Rationality is better than irrationality. It can be massively valuable when it works. There is never a guarantee that it will, but it often does. Science often works, and drives much of material progress. Rationality is an important tool for evaluating claims in dimensions of meaning such as ethics, politics, and aesthetics as well.

Absolute certainty *is* impossible, but effective certainty is common. No method of reasoning can be guaranteed correct, but many technical methods are quite reliable within particular domains.

Throughout the twentieth century, investigation of how rationality and science work concentrated on the traumatic events of the foundational crises. Those are atypical, nearly unique examples, and therefore a bad basis for a broader understanding. Theories that sought to explain them fail to describe most other scientific and technical work.

The theoretical problems discovered during the foundational crisis are dissimilar to the difficulties faced in real-world technical work. When rationality and science fail in practice, as they often do, it is almost never due to quantum uncertainty or Gödel issues. And, when they succeed in practice, the reasons are quite different from the mistaken theories promoted by rationalism.

After rationalism got falsified, we collectively failed to replace that old paradigm with a better understanding of how and why rationality works. That enabled the anti-rational countercultures, nihilistic postmodernism, and contemporary atomized know-nothing populism to discredit and ignore it. All our systems, social and cultural and psychological as well as technical, are falling apart as a consequence.

A shift into the fluid mode to create new functional systems will require recovering respect for rationality on a new basis. My book *In the Cells of the Eggplant* sketches how.

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1. 1.The height of the systematic era is described as the "long nineteenth century," 1789–1914, a term coined by Eric Hobsbawm, who also edited *The Invention of Tradition*, which I discussed earlier. Most of the examples in the book are from the Britain of that era. I've come to think this culture profoundly shaped our contemporary global one in ways we have forgotten, and need to come to terms with.
2. 2.I say "I believe" because it is hard to quantify to what extent the foundational crises of the first few decades of the twentieth century were causes of the postmodern collapse a few decades later.
3. 3.This theory of harmony was attributed to Pythagoras, a major rationalist of around 500 B.C. It's extremely elegant, highly honored in theory, and doesn't work in practice. By the mid-300s B.C., Aristoxenus' standard musical textbook admitted this, and explained that instruments must be tuned by ear instead. Almost all Western music has used mathematically irrational tuning in recent centuries.
4. 4.Ptolemaic calculations are commonly off by a day or two, which makes them unreliable for their practical purpose, astrology. For a thousand years, everyone recognized that this was unsatisfactory, but no one could fix it, and also it had to somehow be true anyway, because math. You can't argue with math.
5. 5.This is obscured by modern introductory textbooks, which present Newtonian mechanics mostly as empiricism plus algebra. His own presentation was mostly rationalism plus geometry.
6. 6.If you learned Newtonian mechanics a long time ago, you may have forgotten that at first it made no sense at all. Despite Newton's claim, our experience is that objects in motion do not remain so for long. Newtonian mechanics weren't intuitive for his contemporaries either, and many influential thinkers rejected it. Worst, in their opinion, gravity produces action at a distance, across a vacuum, with no material cause intervening. Even Newton found this absurd. Opponents described it as an "occult force": irrational woo that should be rejected in favor of a rational, mechanical theory involving streams of invisible particles. Physics cranks still often try to replace field theories with more-intuitive mechanical ones.
7. 7.Peddlers of metaphysical snake oil still often feature light and magnetism in their stories, because two hundred years ago they were *FACTS SCIENCE CANNOT EXPLAIN!!!*.

Metaphysical snake oil mostly hasn't been updated since that heyday of anti-rational Romanticism. Light and magnetism are now the most thoroughly and precisely explained of all physical phenomena.

8. 8.This quote is often attributed to Kelvin, perhaps wrongly. However, it was the general belief among physicists at the time.

9. 9.Technically, this is Playfair's axiom; it's equivalent to Euclid's original, but simpler.

10. 10."Everyone knows that Einstein did something astounding, but very few people know exactly what it was that he did" were the opening words of Bertrand Russell's 1925 popular introduction to relativity.

11. 11.This was factually false; Cubism and Futurism predated general relativity.

12. 12.These are attempts at metaphors for the particle zoo and generations problem; for the dozens of apparently-arbitrary constants; and for renormalization.

13. 13.Einstein refused ever to accept this. When he said "God does not play dice with the universe," he was insisting on rationalist eternalism, not theism.

14. 14."Newspapers said that only twelve men understood the theory of relativity. I do not believe there ever was such a time… a lot of people understood the theory of relativity in some way or other, certainly more than twelve. On the other hand, I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics." That's Richard Feynman, in his *The Character of Physical Law*. It's worth reading this famous quotation in context, which is too long to duplicate here. The book is from 1967, but quantum is, if anything, less understandable now than then. There are no valid analogies between quantum and everyday reality on which to base any understanding. All one can do is *agree to* quantum, by accepting that whatever absurd thing it says will turn out to be right if you test it experimentally.

15. 15.Cantor was wrong on that count. The transfinite numbers have nothing to do with materialism or determinism.

16. 16.There are still some prominent mathematicians who reject actual infinities. "Finitism" is considered a respectable position, if somewhat eccentric.

17. 17.This is my silly metaphor for Dedekind cuts or Cauchy sequences. It's not clear quite what finitists worry about; my trope is that they fear that mishandling a transcendental number might break open the shell, releasing eldritch tentacled abominations from the Dungeon Dimensions upon the world.

18. 18.Over the next few decades, mathematicians kept finding additional proofs of fundamental, hard limits to rationality. Some particularly shocking ones were the discovery of uncomputability in 1935 by Alonzo Church and Alan Turing, showing that another part of Hilbert's program must fail; Arrow's 1950 Theorem that there is no rational way to make some social decisions; Paul Cohen's 1963 proof that the main mathematical question about infinities *is* just a matter of opinion, so there doesn't seem to be any fixed "objective mathematical reality" after all; and Bell's 1964 Theorem showing that quantum weirdness cannot be eliminated.

19. 19.Quoted from logician Gregory Chaitin's excellent "A Century of Controversy Over the Foundations of Mathematics."

20. 20.Popper was a *de facto* member of the Vienna Circle, although not officially one. He wrote *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, explaining why no amount of evidence can prove a theory correct, in 1934. Its influence was mostly not felt until the 1950s, when the rest of the Circle were about ready to give up.

21. 21.Extraordinarily, nearly all the early postmodern innovators were trained by two conventional philosophers of science, Maurice de Gandillac and George Canguilhem, who supervised the theses of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Louis Althusser, and Gilles Deleuze, among others. Those guys may have brought about the end of civilization, but they understood a great deal about how nebulosity and pattern play out, and that's not an accident.

22. 22.Quoted from Torkel Franzén's "The Popular Impact of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem", *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* 53:4, April 2006. That's a good

history and summary of various misunderstandings and misuses of Gödel's incompleteness theorems.

23. 23.Also from Franzén's paper.

18 Comments

The Battle of Gibraltar (1607): painting showing galleons in combat

The *countercultural mode* of the 1960s-80s marked the final attempts to rescue the glory of systems from the maw of nihilistic collapse. It failed, and we live in its wreckage.

It would be polite to say "enduring influence" but I'd rather call it "wreckage." As civilization burned, we built two vast, fantastical, ornate galleons as escape ships. But they were not the slightest bit sea-worthy; and they collided and broke up in the harbor. The crash left a floating mass of broken spars and tangled lines, choking access to the exit.

Millions of people are still trying to live on that flotsam, so you call across: "It's a pile of water-logged junk; the rest will sink soon; why don't you come join us in our fleet of nimble new watercraft?" They jeer that your pathetic little boats are made of plastic, and you say "it's not plastic, it's a kevlar composite kayak," and so on.

This is a metaphor for the development of modes of meaningness over the past half-century. "Kayaks" will become clear only when I get to the fluid mode. But let's talk galleons: the two countercultures.

I define the *countercultural mode of meaningness* as:

Developing a new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational system for society, culture, and self, meant to replace the mainstream.

I discuss two movements that fit this definition: the "hippie" counterculture of the 1960s-70s, and the "Moral Majority" counterculture of the 1970s-80s.[1]

Goals for this discussion

The *content* of the countercultures is still all around us: rock concerts and televangelists, for instance. Such content is familiar to everyone, and needs no review.

The *structure* and *function* of the countercultures may be less understood. What problems did they address, and how were their solutions supposed to work? In what ways did they succeed and fail, and why? That is my topic here.

One goal is to understand the continuing influence of the countercultures, and especially the way their "culture war" has polarized Western societies. I will suggest that much of this polarization is due to a pervasive misunderstanding of the structure and function of the countercultures. Better understanding might help heal the rift. The two had much more in common than they recognized —both in terms of what was right about them, and what was wrong. They were both good-faith attempts to rescue systematic eternalism, using similar methods. That was impossible, however, and they both failed for the same reasons.

The following mode, the subcultural mode, can only be analyzed as a response to countercultural failure—so the failure must be understood. The subcultural and atomized modes also failed, so

we still have most of the same problems—but in different forms, because each mode has transformed meaningness in its own way.

The countercultural mode is "native" only for the Baby Boom generation. It is very different from the subcultural and atomized modes, native to Generations X and Y. One goal of this whole history of meaningness is to help give people in each generation access to each other's way of processing meaning.

Overview of the section

I'll begin by expanding on the definition "new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational systems," showing how the two countercultures fit each part of that.

"*The* counterculture" generally refers to the youth movement of the 1960s to early 1970s. The idea that the American "Christian conservative" movement of the late 1970s and 1980s was also a counterculture may seem implausible at first. It does fit that definition, however.

I will suggest that the two countercultures are best understood as monist and dualist, respectively. You might call them "leftist" and "rightist," but those words are not well-defined. In fact, "left" and "right" changed their meanings during the countercultural era, in what I will describe as a "ninety degree clockwise rotation."

Both countercultures attempted to address the problems of meaningness caused by the failure of the systematic mode during the first half of the 20th century. Although the *content* of their proposed solutions were often opposed, the *structure* was the same. Both attempted to create a new, optimistic, revitalized systematicity, by rejecting rationality and developing new religious technologies of the self. Both sought to reform society by collapsing the distinction between the personal and the political.

Both countercultures used the time distortion tricks of "invented traditions" and "timeworn futures" to make their dubious proposals seem more attractive. The "hippie" counterculture pretended to be progressive, but mainly recycled early-1800s Romanticism; the "Moral Majority" counterculture pretended to be traditional, but had a radical modern agenda. These deliberate deceptions account for some of the acrimony of the culture war.

Although both countercultures developed impressively thick and wide approaches to problems of meaning, both failed, for the same reason. Systematicity can never succeed on its own terms; it cannot be absolute. Reality is nebulous, and systems cannot fully grasp its variability. The *universalism* of the countercultures was their undoing. They could not accommodate the growing demand for cultural, social, and psychological diversity. Subcultures could, and did.

I find understanding the countercultures as monist and dualist helpful, in the light of my earlier analysis of what is right and wrong in these two stances, and how the correct aspects of each can be combined and reconciled in the complete stance of participation. This suggests ways the "left vs. right" polarization of current politics, culture, and society might also be resolvable.

The countercultures were the two final attempts to rescue eternalism: the last gasp of modernity. The following, subcultural mode was the first in-breath of the post-systematic—or post-modern —world.

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1. 1.Some earlier movements might also fit this definition; for instance Romanticism and existentialism. Socialism would fit except it was rationalist; fascism would fit except it was non-universalist. All four of these fed into the 60s-80s movements. I concentrate on the

60s-80s because my goal is to understand the most direct influences on our current mode of meaningness, rather than developing a general theory of history. Islamic fundamentalism is also mainly countercultural; I will return to this point later in the history.

4 Comments

I defined the two countercultures as "new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational systems." This page expands that definition, explaining the characteristics shared by the two. It also begins to contrast them with subculturalism—the following mode of meaningness.

Recall that the *two* countercultures are the monist "radical" 1960s-70s youth movement and the dualist "conservative" movement of the 1970s-80s. The next page explains how these relate to monism and dualism. It also explains why I call the "Moral Majority" conservative movement a counterculture—but that should start to become clear already in this page.

The discussion here is America-centric, because that's what I know best. Much of it applies to other countries, but details differ.

New

After the nightmare of WWII, everyone was exhausted, and just wanted everything to *go back to normal* for a while. "Normal" would mean the systematic mode functioning smoothly; and the 1950s were dedicated to making that happen. But none of the problems of meaningness from the first half of the century had gone away. Beneath the veneer of normality, the cracks in the systems were still widening.

Both countercultures were motivated by disgust at the hypocrisy of the mainstream. The mainstream's relatively smooth functioning was based on eternalistic pretending. In fact, mainstream society, culture, and self now failed to provide meaning. They had been rotted from within by nihilism, leaving a brittle shell of eternalistic forms that concealed fundamental corruption. Shell-shocked, these systems were going through the motions with a business-as-usual attitude, but without authentic commitment.

Both countercultures perceived a pervasive moral breakdown in the mainstream, caused by loss of meaning, although they disagreed about specific values.

Alternative

The countercultures considered tinkering around the edges inadequate. They proposed wholesale replacement of mainstream society, culture, and self with alternative systems. They defined themselves point-by-point in contrast with the mainstream; that opposition was the *counter* in counterculture.

In the 1970s, "alternative" was a synonym for "monist counterculture," in fact. An "alternative bookstore" sold New Age books; an "alternative grocer" sold alfalfa sprouts and tofu. Both were organized as anarchist collectives. The dualist counterculture positioned itself as the alternative to a society whose institutions had been captured by degenerate liberalism. It particularly opposed decisions by the American Supreme Court such as *Roe v. Wade* (abortion), *Engel v. Vitale* (school prayer) and *Bob Jones University* (racial discrimination). Both countercultures used the rhetoric of romantic rebellion against illegitimate authority to motivate followers.

The subcultures, by contrast, were not interested in replacing the mainstream; they just wanted to be left alone to do their own thing. In fact, during most of the subcultural era, there *was* no mainstream. The many subcultures were different from each other, but they were not "alternative."

Universalist

Universalism—the claim that what is right, is right for everyone, everywhere, eternally—is a key feature of the systematic mode. The countercultures retained it: both proposed universalist alternatives. The monist counterculture said that *everyone* should recycle, get over their sexual hangups, and expand their consciousness. The dualist counterculture said that *everyone* should go to church, save it for marriage, and pledge allegiance to the flag.

Universalism proved to be the countercultures' undoing. It became apparent in the 1980s that neither counterculture could command a majority. People are unfixably *diverse*, and different people want all sorts of different social, cultural, and personal arrangements.

The subcultural mode abandoned universalism; that was its foremost difference from the countercultural mode.

Eternalist

Both countercultures tried to rescue systematic eternalism from creeping nihilism. Both had optimistic, positive visions, to make everything authentically meaningful—in contrast to the make-believe mainstream.

The subcultures, on the other hand, were often explicitly nihilist. Punk was the first subculture; the Sex Pistols' "I am an antichrist / I am an anarchist / I don't know what I want / But I know how to get it / I want to destroy the passerby" blew counterculturalism to bits.

Anti-rational

Both countercultures explicitly rejected rationality, which had been a foundation of the systematic mode. All possible rational bases for systems had been tried, and had failed. Rationality had shown that meaning was neither objective nor subjective, which was misunderstood as implying nihilism: that meaning did not exist at all. Rationality, counterculturalists thought, was probably to blame for all the Twentieth Century horrors: the World Wars, loss of Christian faith, rampant materialism, ecological devastation, abortion, and nuclear weapons.

New anti-rational religious movements organized meanings for both countercultures. The hippie counterculture ransacked history to find and revive monist spiritual systems. They adopted "Eastern religions," plus vintage-1800 German Romantic Idealism, which was repackaged as "the New Age" to disguise its unsavory origins. The dualist counterculture replaced rationalized mainline Christianity with wacky fundamentalist, charismatic, and dispensationalist innovations.

On both sides, these new religions promoted supernatural practices and transformative inner experiences ("enlightenment" and "being born again"). They deemphasized or dropped codes of conduct and doctrine.

Subcultures, having set aside the failed quest for ultimacy and universality, did not need to take any particular position on rationality. With the countercultures having passed, there is room for the fluid mode to reclaim a relativized, non-foundational, pragmatic rationality.

Systems

The monist counterculture claimed to offer revolutionary new ideas, and both it and the dualist one made some genuine innovations, but neither broke away from the fundamental paradigm of systematicity. At their best, they offered new, different systems. However, it was systematicity itself that was fatally flawed; and so the countercultures sank.

Subculturalism stepped away from systematicity—or what many historians call "modernity." The countercultural era was modernity's last gasp, and the subcultures the first breath of postmodernity.

11 Comments

> Francis Schaeffer
> Francis Schaeffer, hippie guru and architect of the modern Religious Right

"The counterculture" generally refers to the youth movement of the 1960s-70s: rock and roll, anti-war protests, psychedelics, the New Left, hippies, and the sexual revolution. While puzzling out how these elements cohered—to understand the counterculture functionally and structurally —I had a peculiar realization.

A second movement shared "the" counterculture's abstract features—its structure and function. Based in Christian Fundamentalism, it might be called "the Moral Majority," after one of its main organizations. It too offered "a new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational system." This was the same mode of relating to meaningness, even though its content was deliberately opposed to most of what the hippie counterculture stood for.

This page explains how these two countercultures adopted the stances of monism and dualism, respectively. This is key to understanding their workings, as detailed in later pages.

Both countercultures had broken up by 1990, but the current American culture war is fought from floating fragments of their wreckage. I believe that a better understanding of how the two countercultures related to each other, and how both relate to subsequent modes of meaningness, may help resolve unnecessary contemporary conflicts.

Monism, dualism, and the countercultures

"Left" and "right" would be the obvious names for the two countercultures, but that could be misleading. These terms are not well-defined, and had different meanings during the countercultural era than they did before or after.

Our current left and right *like* to be called "progressive" and "traditional"; and the countercultures might have liked that too. However, I will suggest that this characterization is a deliberately misleading fiction, promoted by both.

It would be more accurate to cast the countercultures in religious terms, as "holism" versus "holiness." Or, in ethical terms, as "permissive" versus "restrictive"; or in social terms as "egalitarian" versus "respecting hierarchical differences."

These contrasts concern boundaries and distinctions, one of the main dimensions of meaningness. So I call the two countercultures "monist" and "dualist":

- Monism seeks to deny, dissolve, or weaken boundaries and distinctions. (Holism is nearly the same thing as monism.) It seeks to discover and strengthen connections.
- Dualism seeks to fixate, establish, or strengthen boundaries and distinctions. (Holiness is all about sharpening the difference between the sacred or Godly and the profane or sinful.) It seeks to sever connections that cross apparent boundaries.

Monism and dualism are both wrong, and both harmful. Every boundary is always both patterned and nebulous. Boundaries are not, cannot be, and should not be, either non-existent nor perfectly sharp. Severe problems, including our current culture war, follow from trying to eliminate or absolutize them. An understanding of participation, the stance that the resolves the monism/ dualism confusion, may help resolve these conflicts.

This page explains what made the "hippie" counterculture monist, first; and then what made the "Moral Majority" counterculture dualist. We'll see also that the monist counterculture had some dualist elements; and that the dualist counterculture tacitly accepted some "hippie" monist boundary-blurrings.

Much of this material is controversial. Reading it, you may have strong emotional reactions, categorizing particular countercultural moves as good or bad. I would suggest trying to suspend such judgements. Each had, I think, both good and bad *effects*.

I hope you will recognize that I do not support either counterculture against the other. I find some aspects of each attractive, and some repellent. Overall, it is most important to understand why both were wrong, and both failed. But it is also valuable to understand what was right in each, and what might be worth saving from their wreckage.

On this page, I go into the history of the dualist counterculture in somewhat more detail, because it's probably less well-known to most readers, and because I've written about the monist- countercultural religious left extensively elsewhere. If I seem critical of the 1980s Religious Right here, I assure you that I was just as hostile to the monist left there.

How the monist counterculture was monist

The specific contents of the monist counterculture—from recycling to Vietnam war protests—are familiar. Less obvious is the general pattern: that the specifics reflect the monist stance. It attempted to dissolve many particular boundaries, on the theory that they were illegitimate, alienating, and needlessly limiting. I'll discuss these boundary erasures here only briefly. Some I've explained earlier in the book; many, I'll return to in greater detail later.

Psychedelic drugs were a cornerstone of the counterculture; boundary-blurring is one of their major effects. They can give a sense of ultimate, cosmic unity—the supposed accomplishment of the monist stance. Short of that, they often melt distinctions of all sorts. It's common, for instance, to have experiences of the commonality of all people, of humans with other creatures, and of the animate and inanimate.

Ecology—a new science—revealed that all life is connected in an intricate web of mutual dependencies. A cultural and political movement based on it began with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. Taking the unification of concerns a step further, countercultural theorist Theodore Roszak promoted "ecopsychology," collapsing the distinctions among the natural, political, psychological, and spiritual worlds.

When you have experienced your intimate sameness with a tree, it is hard to take seriously human categories such as religions, nations, and races. The political universalism of the counterculture—the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, feminism—was based in this monist conception of human commonality.

The feminist slogan "the personal is political" expressed the essence of monist politics. The private/public boundary, a foundational principle for Victorian systematicity, disintegrated. The distinction between ethics ("ought" in the personal realm) and politics ("ought" in the public realm) collapsed. This collapse caused the culture war we've been cursed with since, so I devote a full page to it later.

Blurring the self/other distinction also contributed to the collapse of the boundary between psychology and religion (or "spirituality"). Monist religion holds that one's True Self is the same as God, and the entire universe. Thus, exploration of one's personal psychology gives direct insight into the most profound metaphysical questions. Monism erased the boundary between sacred and profane matters; nothing was any longer outside the purview of spiritual concern.

Since the personal was now both political and spiritual, the distinction between religion and politics also collapsed. Demands for political change were considered not merely a matter of one social group promoting its material interests against others, but to reflect Ultimate Truth as given by the monist eternal ordering principle.

The "sexual revolution" dissolved the sexual boundary of marriage, and eliminated most distinctions between "morally" acceptable and unacceptable sexual acts. The sexual revolution also reflected a collapse of the division between private and public morality. Privately, sexual mores had been loosening for half a century. A considerable gap had opened between what people did in their bedrooms and what they said in public. This was one of the most obvious forms of the 1950s moral hypocrisy that motivated the counterculture. To a significant extent, the sexual revolution merely allowed everyone to acknowledge what many had already been doing.

Feminism broke down boundaries between male and female social, sexual, and family roles.

The nuclear family home—a mainly Victorian middle-class invention—had long been found restrictive and isolating by many. The monist counterculture advocated replacing it with communes, collectives, and intentional communities: social structures that emphasize connections across biological families, and that break down the private/public boundary.

How the monist counterculture was dualist

Monism and dualism contain each other, and each turns into the other near boundaries. Monism —the denial of all boundaries—nevertheless draws an absolute boundary between itself and dualism. It rejects dualism as an absolutely unacceptable evil. It seeks to destroy dualism; or, failing that, to purify itself of any dualistic tendencies.

The monist counterculture went out of its way to shock, aggravate, and alienate "squares," i.e. dualists. The point was to harden the distinction between monists and dualists. As Ken Kesey put it, "Either you are on the bus, or you are off the bus." "On the bus" came to mean "monist"— and either you rode monism all the way, or you were off the bus and left behind.

Hippies were a tiny subculture in 1964, the year of the Further bus trip. Requiring intense commitment, and some hostility to outsiders, are necessary for maintaining the integrity of a subculture—as we'll see later. Kesey's attitude was sensible then.

Subcultural hippiedom formed the core of the monist counterculture (together with Berkeley student radicalism). As a local subculture of dozens scaled up into a global counterculture of tens

of millions, "either you are on or you are off" became the recipe for the culture war that still plagues us.

How the dualist counterculture was dualist

The dualist counterculture was a mirror image of the monist one: the same shape, with many aspects flipped left-to-right, and others left intact.[1]

The creators of the dualist counterculture presented it largely as a reaction to the monist one. In their view, the monist counterculture had wrongly blurred numerous boundaries. Those therefore needed sharpening—the essence of dualism.

As a point-by-point opposition to the monist program, the dualist "counter-counterculture" necessarily took on its opponent's structure. We could go through all the boundaries I listed above as denied by the monist counterculture, and we'd find that most were fixated by the dualist one. For example, dualists promoted:

- man's dominion over nature
- submission to the Creator
- and to legitimate secular authority
- nationalism
- racial segregation
- distinct gender roles
- the sanctity of marriage versus the sinfulness of non-marital sex
- human rights starting from the instant of conception, not gradually over months

All this is familiar territory. I want only to point out that the unifying feature of these positions is that they draw hard boundaries.

The dualist counterculture also claimed to want to restore "traditional values." It was never clear which era it proposed to return to; in fact, it wanted to "restore" a romanticized, mythical past in which the systematic mode actually worked. But to the extent that the systematic mode did work —in the 1850s or 1950s—it was partly on the basis of dualism. Taking those eras as ideals naturally also led to dualism.

So, for reasons of both reaction and nostalgia, insistence on boundaries is the common feature throughout the explicit "values agenda" of the dualist counterculture.

How the dualist counterculture was monist

Although the Religious Right presented itself as a point-by-point repudiation, it adopted much of the structure, strategy, tactics, and conceptual framework of the monist counterculture.[2] Several factors forced this similarity:

- It implicitly adopted some monist principles
- It deliberately imitated the monist counterculture
- Surprisingly many leftist hippies later became Evangelical rightists
- Both were responses to the same failures of the systematic mode
- Both retained the systematic mode's commitment to universalism
- Both borrowed from 1800s Romanticism
- Monism and dualism both necessarily turn into the other when pressed

As a consequence, the dualist counterculture tacitly accepted and promoted several of the monist counterculture's erasures of boundaries:

- between the personal/private and the political/public
- between ethics, religion, politics, and psychology
- between religions and sects

The two countercultures were in violent, albeit unstated, agreement on these points. They were also, I believe, disastrously wrong: these boundaries are nebulous but necessary. This shared error explains many of the social, cultural, and psychological problems we face today. I will explain that, bit by bit, throughout "How meaning fell apart."

Particularly, "Renegotiating self and society" addresses the collapse of the private/public distinction; "The personal is political" the collapse of that boundary; and "Rejecting rationality, reinventing religion, reconfiguring the self" covers the collapse of the distinction between psychology and religion.

The two remaining sections of this page cover the collapse of the boundary between politics and religion, and between ethics and religion, in the dualist counterculture.

Unifying politics and religion

The unity of the political right with Evangelical Christianity—and with particular views on sexual morality—now seems obvious, necessary, and eternal. But it was new, sudden, shocking, and deliberately engineered in the mid-1970s. For outsiders, this was (and remains) the main manifestation of the dualist counterculture.

For decades before the 1970s, Evangelicals were socially marginal, apolitical, and divided into innumerable small hostile sects. They had come together in the 1920s in support of Prohibition and against teaching evolution. The 1925 Scopes "monkey trial" made Fundamentalism look ridiculous, and Evangelicals retreated from public life in humiliation. After the Second World War, some re-entered politics—mainly on the left. Difficult as it may be to imagine now, as late as the 1960s, the majority of Evangelicals opposed capitalism, nationalism, and militarism, and supported women's suffrage and abortion rights. The social activism of leftist Evangelicals in the 1950s-60s began to blur the boundary between ethics, politics, and religion, and was a prototype for the 1970s-80s Religious Right.[3]

Evangelicalism's merger with the political right was primarily authored by Francis and Frank Schaeffer, whose extraordinary story I recount on the next page. Francis was a socially liberal Fundamentalist theologian who led a hippie commune. His teenage son Frank somehow conceived a passionate concern for the rights of the unborn. Abortion had been an exclusively Catholic and mainly left issue; Protestants and Republicans mostly considered it acceptable even up to the time of natural birth.[4]

Frank convinced his reluctant[5] father to campaign against abortion. Their roadshow was unexpectedly, hugely popular, and started to convert Evangelicals to the cause.

Republican Party operatives took note. Although the Party had long supported abortion rights, in 1972 they tried to appeal to Catholics (mainly Democrats) by reversing their position. That failed —but the Schaeffers' popularity made them realize the same strategy might work on Evangelicals (also majority left). They reached out to the Schaeffers,[6] and soon cemented a deal of mutual cooptation. The Schaeffers would deliver Evangelical votes to the Party; the Party would make opposition to abortion an ideological centerpiece for the political Right. (Frank Schaeffer later

said that their alliance with the Right was essentially an accident, which he came to regret.[7] They could just as easily allied with the Democratic Party, and in fact the Schaeffers' socially liberal views would have been a better fit there.)

The Moral Majority, the most famous dualist-counterculture institution, was founded on Francis Schaeffer's advice. Jerry Falwell, its public face, had firmly believed that politics and religion didn't mix.[8] Schaeffer changed Falwell's mind—and convinced him to make abortion the Moral Majority's central issue. Paul Weyrich co-founded the Moral Majority; he provided the political, organizational, and financial backing. His expertise was creating think tanks and lobbying groups that connected money from big business donors with economically conservative political ideology.

The Schaeffer/Weyrich strategy worked astonishingly well. On the religious side, within a few years, fervent commitment to the anti-abortion cause became the single-issue "badge" of membership in the entire political-religious dualist counterculture.[9] It is not credible that tens of millions of Americans who had zero interest in abortion in 1975 discovered deep concern for the well-being of fetuses by 1980. Instead, public opposition to abortion became the main symbol, or shibboleth, for good standing in a counterculture whose actual appeal lay elsewhere.[10]

On the political side, the Moral Majority was widely considered responsible for the election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980.[11] Reagan ran against the incumbent Democratic President, Jimmy Carter. Carter was the first "born again" President, and had taken the Evangelical vote in 1976. However, despite his personal opposition to abortion, Carter refused to make it a political issue, which Evangelicals saw as a betrayal. Reagan was not personally particularly religious, had been pro-choice only a few years earlier, and did not stress social issues in his campaign. He was primarily an economic conservative and nationalist, and in office delivered almost nothing the Moral Majority wanted. However, by 1980, the Republican Party had become the Evangelical Party, so none of that mattered.

Unifying religion by replacing piety with "moral values"

Evangelical Christians had long been split among numerous separatist, schismatic sects. Most were intensely hostile to Catholics and Jews, and fought each other over arcane metaphysical distinctions that were largely forgotten by the end of the decade.[12]

Francis Schaeffer not only united Evangelicals across sectarian lines, he also created durable alliances between them and conservative Catholics, Mormons, and Jews.[13] Under Schaeffer's influence, Falwell—a Southern Baptist—made the Moral Majority ecumenical: Weyrich was Catholic, and its third founder was Howard Phillips, a Jewish Republican politician.[14] Falwell increasingly downplayed his extremist moral positions, including his formerly overt racism.[15]

Forging a mass movement required dropping most of the traditional religious content of Evangelicalism—because that was extreme, incomprehensible, and unacceptable to nearly everyone. And anyway, no two Evangelical theologians could agree on it!

The new dualist counterculture replaced traditional doctrine and piety with "values" and "experiences." It was easy to get broad agreement on those. I'll discuss the new Christian "experiences" in "Rejecting rationality, reinventing religion, reconfiguring the self"; and "values" here.

Substituting "values" for traditional Christianity was the culmination of a process that had been underway for most of a century. By the late 1800s, it was obvious that much of what the Bible

said was wrong. Mainline Protestants adopted a liberal, modernist theology according to which the important thing about Christianity was its humanistic ethical teachings, not its metaphysical beliefs. Fundamentalism, in reaction, insisted that everything in the Bible was literally true. In the 1920s, internal conflict between modernists and fundamentalists split most American Protestant sects.

The religious leaders of the dualist counterculture were Fundamentalists. A few decades earlier, they had taught not only Biblical inerrancy, but also an ascetic moral code that forbade smoking, drinking, dancing, watching movies or plays, listening to secular music, and all "worldly pursuits" (including politics). These sins all lead straight to damnation and eternal hellfire! This was a non-starter for a 1970s mass movement.

In the counterculture, it was adequate to *say* you believed everything in the Bible, even if you had little idea what was in there, and in practice disagreed with much of it. The main thing was "believing" in Jesus as your personal savior.

It was also adequate to "have values," rather than conforming to a moral code.[16] "Values" were opinions about things other people did. The most important values were condemning abortion and "the homosexual lifestyle." (Both were non-traditional: homosexuality was not a significant issue before the 1970s; and, as I mentioned, Evangelicals had mostly considered abortion acceptable.)

The "values" innovation effectively replicated the Christian Modernist move of replacing religious piety with ethics, but went a step further: opinions replaced both belief and morality. "Having" an opinion means stating it forcefully, or assenting to it, when ritually required. It does not necessarily involve belief, in the ordinary sense that you believe your car needs a wash. You must "believe" in Creation Science rather than evolution—but since it has no consequence for your everyday life, this is often no more than performing a public tribal loyalty oath.[17]

I'm not taking sides here; this was equally true of the monist counterculture, in which you were also required to "believe" endless absurdities—that is, to agree to them in public.

Further reading

I started this page by recounting my "peculiar realization" that the Moral Majority was structurally and functionally similar to the hippie counterculture it opposed. It took a year to convince myself that this was accurate and significant. At first it seemed probably mistaken; then likely an accidental and superficial resemblance. But eventually, I decided it was an exciting and remarkably clever discovery.

Turns out, it's old hat. In subsequent reading, I found that many historians, and even some members of the movement, have pointed out the countercultural nature of the 1980s Religious Right. They have traced many structural parallels and historical connections between the two countercultures.

Describing the two countercultures in terms of monism and dualism *does* seem to be new. These categories are important in metaphysics, but have mostly not been applied to culture, ethics, or politics before.

The two best overview articles I've found on the web analyze the similarity between the two countercultures from a libertarian, subcultural point of view:

- Brink Lindsey's "The Aquarians and the Evangelicals: How Left-wing Hippies and Right-wing Fundamentalists Created a Libertarian America."

- Jesse Walker's "The Traditionalist Counterculture," which is a review of Rod Dreher's *Crunchy Cons: The New Conservative Counterculture and Its Return to Roots*.

Libertarians, and most Gen X subculturalists, stand outside the usual framing of the culture war. They are perhaps better able to regard both sides dispassionately, and to see their commonalities, rather than identifying with one against the other.

In writing this page, I made heavy use of Axel R. Schäfer's *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right*, an academic history.[18]

Ross Douthat's *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* is an excellent history of the transformation of American Christianity during the countercultural era.

The next page, on the Schaeffer family, references various sources I also found useful while writing this one.

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1. 1.I have researched the history of only the American dualist counterculture. I am not sure whether other Western countries developed anything similar (whereas the American monist counterculture was certainly influential elsewhere). Islamic fundamentalism is also a dualist counterculture, and structurally similar to the American one.
2. 2.I find this borrowing extremely interesting, because it reveals intellectual and emotional commonalities that were deliberately obscured by both countercultures. Although I'm tempted to detail the history here, not everyone is as geeky about such things as I am. If you'd like to learn more, try *Countercultural Conservatives*, pp. 93-101, 123, 132-6, *et passim*. Also, *Hippies of the Religious Right* is apparently entirely about this, but I haven't read it.
3. 3.See *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right* for a detailed history.
4. 4.For a brief popular discussion, see "When evangelicals were pro-choice." For an academic treatment, Linda Greenhouse and Reva B. Siegel, "Before (and After) Roe v. Wade," *Yale Law Journal* 2028:2011. For context, *Countercultural Conservatives* and *Sex, Mom, and God*. From the last, pp. 128-9: "Dr. W. A. Criswell (a two-term president of the Southern Baptist Convention)… was on record saying he didn't think life began until a baby took his or her first breath."
5. 5."I don't want to be identified with some Catholic issue. I'm not putting my reputation on the line for them!" Dad shouted back. "So you won't speak out because it's a 'Catholic issue?'" "What does abortion have to do with art and culture? I'm known as an intellectual, not for this sort of *political thing*!" shouted Dad. *Crazy For God*, pp. 285-6.
6. 6.Billy Zeoli, Gerald Ford's Whitehouse chaplain, was the first main go-between. Congressman Jack Kemp was an early close ally. Eventually the Schaeffers worked with most of the most powerful Republicans, including Presidents Ford, Reagan, and Bush.
7. 7.In his fascinating *Crazy For God*.
8. 8.Quoted from "People & Ideas: Jerry Falwell"; *God in America*. Also there: "In his famous 1964 sermon, 'Ministers and Marches,' Falwell declared, 'Preachers are not called to be politicians, but soul winners….' His remarks were widely interpreted as a rebuke to the political activism of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr." Similarly Billy Graham, who became another major spokesperson for the Religious Right. "Most evangelical leaders, following Billy Graham's lead, weren't interested in 'going political.' When [Francis Schaeffer] asked Billy why he wasn't taking a stand on abortion, Billy answered that he had been burned by getting too close to Nixon and was never going to poke his head over the ramparts of the 'I-only-preach-the-gospel' trench again. He said he didn't want to be 'political.'" *Crazy For God*, p. 290.

9. 9.I explained moral badges in "Ethics is advertising." My discussion there was based on *Spent: Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior*.

10. 10.Exactly *why* the abortion strategy worked so well, and the precise appeal of dualist counterculture, remains somewhat mysterious. I have read many plausible partial explanations, but no convincing synthesis. Most authors agree that the desire to make sex more dangerous for people *of other socioeconomic classes* is central to American "social conservatism." Research by Jason Weeden and his collaborators suggests American religiosity is based on practical benefits for a many-child reproductive strategy. A key paper is "Religious attendance as reproductive support," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 29 (2008) 327–334. His *The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind: How Self-Interest Shapes Our Opinions and Why We Won't Admit It*, written for a non-academic audience, lays out implications for electoral politics. I think Weeden's work is on the right track, but there's much it still doesn't explain. For an interesting—albeit inconclusive and unconvincing—meta-discussion, see Bethany Moreton, "Why Is There So Much Sex in Christian Conservatism and Why Do So Few Historians Care Anything about It?," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (August 2009), pp. 717-738. Winning line: "Sodomites are a traditionally underrepresented market for abortion services."

11. 11.Historians have later questioned whether the Moral Majority's support actually was critical, or if Reagan would have been elected anyway. For much interesting discussion, see Doug Banwart's "Jerry Falwell, the Rise of the Moral Majority, and the 1980 Election," *Western Illinois Historical Review* Vol. V, Spring 2013. Also *Religion and the Culture Wars: Dispatches from the Front*, pp. 20ff.

12. 12.Among the most important were diverging dispensationalist millennialisms. I've spent many hours trying to figure out what, if anything, this dispute was about, and completely failed. However, it's charmingly reminiscent of the *filioque* schism. It's also entertaining and instructive to compare the Wikipedia article on sectarian millennialisms with its article on heavy metal genres, which display similar fissiparous tendencies. More about that when we get to the evolutionary dynamics of subcultures.

13. 13.This despite his earlier decades in the trenches as a member of a Presbyterian sub-sub-sub-sect fighting holy wars against other Presbyterian sub-sub-sub-sects with infinitesimally different theological views.

14. 14.Separatist Fundamentalists denounced the Moral Majority for this inclusiveness.

15. 15.For decades, his main moral cause had been support for racial segregation, but by the late '70s that was no longer respectable. The Moral Majority did make opposition to the Supreme Court's *Bob Jones University* anti-segregation decision its second-most-important cause, notionally on religious freedom grounds. Ironically, the ungrateful University declared the Moral Majority "Satanic," "holding that it was a step toward the apostate one-world church and government body as it would cross the line from a political alliance to a religious one between true Christians and the non-born-again, as forbidden by their interpretation of the Bible." (Quote from the Wikipedia article on Jerry Falwell.)

16. 16.I suspect this was because by the 1970s, everyone from secular humanists to Fundamentalists was in nearly complete agreement on what acts are moral or immoral. An earlier chapter discusses this in terms of "ethical ease" and "ethical agreement"; morality was a solved problem.

17. 17.I'm not suggesting Fundamentalists secretly *disbelieve* what they assert in public, only that belief in the ordinary sense does not enter into it.

18. 18.Schäfer is not related to Francis Schaeffer, as far as I know.

9 Comments

Christians against greed: protest rally
Image courtesy Ben Cumming

The failure of social and psychological systems propelled the 1960s-80s countercultures. Societies had required selves to conform to modern, unnatural systems of employment, government, and religion. These arrangements were invented and imposed with little regard for individuals or local communities.

They were founded on economic, political, and theological theories that were mainly abstract and rationalistic. They ignored innate human needs, desires, and proclivities. It's a wonder they worked for as long as they did.

These obsolete modern ideologies included, for example, Taylorism, the Westphalian nation-state, and the Victorian family.

- *Scientific Taylorism* was the dominant theory of industrial management. It explicitly treated workers as machines whose performance should be optimized with intensive management controls.

- A state is legitimate, according to the modern *Westphalian* international system, if it rules a nation. A "nation" is defined as a set of people who share a single culture and social system. Rulers, therefore, did their best to force uniform systems on as many people as possible. This typically involved destroying most social traditions and institutions intermediate in scope between the nuclear family and the state.

- The ideology of *the traditional family* developed in the 1800s, and in that century was mainly restricted to English-speaking middle class Protestants. (So it was not traditional for the working class, or for many American immigrants.) Its precisely-defined gender and parent/child roles, emphasis on a sharp division between the nuclear family and outside world, and strict life-long monogamy are historically unusual. They don't function well for everyone.

The crisis of the self showed that organizing one's psychology to systematic requirements, with a hard public/private boundary, was unworkable for many people. The fragmentation and isolation of communities and individuals was intolerable. After spending the 1950s whistling past the graveyard of systematicity, renegotiating the relationship between self and society became obviously urgent in the mid-1960s.

The previous half-century had developed two alternatives, totalitarianism and existentialism, which were pathological extremes of collectivism and individualism. The countercultures attempted new, less absolutist renegotiations of the self/society relationship, which blurred the hard line between the two. However, both countercultures also drew on both totalitarianism and existentialism, and affirmed the values of both individualism and collectivism in ways that were incoherent and still extreme. This tended to heighten the self/society conflict, even while attempting to defuse it.

The countercultures failed because they retained systematic constraints—especially, *universalism*. They assumed that there must be *one right* way for individuals to be, and *one right* model for society, and the two must fit together harmoniously. Rather than challenging systematicity as such, they proposed *new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational systems*. That is, *countercultures*, as I have defined them.

Reforming self and reforming society

Free speech protest rally
Image courtesy Jason

Both countercultures wrestled with the self/society conflict at both ends: at the self end through psychology and religion, and at the society end through "values-based" political action.

On the whole, the monist ("hippie") counterculture wanted to reform the public sphere to better match private proclivities; the dualist ("Moral Majority") counterculture wanted to reform private souls to better match public morality. So the monist counterculture was more influenced by existentialism, and the dualist one by totalitarianism, although both drew on both (as we shall see).

In both countercultures, some activists argued that individual spiritual transformation was a prerequisite to social change, and others argued that social reform was a necessary support to constructing better selves. Despite internal conflict between these wings, both movements adopted the Romantic idea that personal change can quasi-magically fix society by the propagation of good vibrations. Both also adopted the Romantic idea that if only society were properly organized, everyone would live together in happy harmony.

The next two pages, "Rejecting rationality, reinventing religion, reconfiguring the self" and "The personal is political," describe both countercultures' reform efforts at these two ends. Inevitably, they overlap to some extent, because both movements' program was to merge them.

The remainder of this page is an overview of these programs, in terms of particular problems in the self/society interface and their attempted solutions. Some worked reasonably well, and were adopted as stable policy by governments; others were harmful or just obviously impractical. I will sketch the vicissitudes of these innovations in later modes: subcultural, atomized, and fluid.

Overall strategy

Overall, both countercultures sought to replace the artificial, seemingly-arbitrary social and personal requirements of the systematic mode with ones they considered natural. Unfortunately, their ideas about what would be natural were, in both cases, completely crazy. (In my opinion; but also this was widely acknowledged once the countercultural era ended.) Because both countercultures were eternalist, they took their insane ideologies as absolute and universal, and so tended toward harmful totalitarianism.

Replacing artificial systematic requirements with natural ones remains a popular goal. It's a decent impulse, but unfortunately there is currently no alternative to artificial social systems capable of supporting a global population of billions. The future, fluid mode must find ways to *simulate* natural (choiceless) roles while keeping artificial systems running—at least until we develop some other alternative.

As I mentioned, both countercultures tried to blur the public/private boundary as a way of addressing alienation and isolation. This was a step in the right direction, but I will suggest that one reason the countercultures failed is that they offered no *structural* change in the self/society relationship. The development of *subsocieties*—structures intermediate in scale between family and state—was a major contribution of the subcultural mode.

Both countercultures considered rationality and objectivity the source of modern meaninglessness, materialism, and the loss of the sacred. Both rejected rationality, embraced subjectivism, and tried to evert subjective meanings to re-enchant the world; to restore its inherent sacred meaning. This was extremely harmful, I think. I hope the fluid mode can recognize meaning as real but neither objective nor subjective; and rationality as a valuable tool, but not an absolute principle to be worshipped.

Technologies of the self

Acting according to formal roles, as demanded by systematic societies, is unnatural. If you develop a systematic self, it can be comfortable and empowering, but for most people formal roles feel alienating. Why should artificial, systematic demands take precedence over your personal feelings and your relationships? Your public self feels false: mere play-acting of an arbitrary, often humiliating or incomprehensible script.

Both countercultures adopted the Romantic conception of a true self. That is an idealization of the private self, freed from arbitrary public conventions. Not the private self *as it is*, because that is neurotic and sinful and false, but the self reformed and perfected. You should find your true self, and then you should be true to it. You should speak and act from that self, regardless of social judgement, because it would comport naturally with the *correct* social organization. This is "sincerity" and "authenticity"—key values of both countercultures.

There is no true self, so this approach was mainly harmful. The atomized mode effectively abandoned "authenticity," because it is obviously impossible to be "true" to an atomized self.

Modern employment is dehumanizing. (Deliberately so, under Taylorism.) The countercultures developed personal and small-group practices for personal emotional fulfillment, self expression, and "finding yourself." These seem to me on the right track, but had limited success, mainly due to universalism—the denial of diversity. The subcultures made their greatest contribution here: expressive communal practices for "DIY" exploration of psychologies, aesthetic culture, and social models.

In complex, modern societies, most people have *multiple* formal roles, in additional to natural (biological) ones. The contrasts between roles cause internal fragmentation; you internalize external ways of being as "multiple selves." Conflicts among them are disruptive and painful in both the communal and systematic modes, which expect internal coherence.

The countercultures promised new technologies for re-unifying the self. These didn't work. The subcultural mode began to develop ways of managing a fragmented self; for reconciling and switching among selves. The fluid mode finds internal diversity comfortable and empowering.

Many counterculturalists tried to make membership in one of the countercultures the unifying theme of their identity. They considered themselves first and foremost conservative Christians or liberal New Agers; and only after that insurance claims managers, Iowans, or softball players. Their community was not their town, church, or company, but the brotherhood of all participants in their counterculture. This resonated with universalism: both countercultures treated all their members as equivalent. Countercultural identity didn't work well, because a nation-scaled group is too large a group to provide functional community; and because each counterculture merely suppressed and denied its internal diversity.

Ecstatic experience is the natural antidote to rigid social requirements. That was banned in the systematic era. Modernized, rationalized Christianity had mostly also eliminated experience of the sacred and transcendent, emphasizing this-worldly humanistic ethics. Both countercultures produced new religions and quasi-religions emphasizing ecstatic practices, "direct experience," and the supernatural. I think this was an important step forward, although the details were mostly wrong.

Social reform

Both countercultures tried to reorient society away from formal, systematic roles toward natural ones: family, unstructured friendships, and local communities. This was the obvious response to the painful gap between the private and public selves. However, it represents a partial reversion

toward the choiceless mode, which isn't capable of sustaining contemporary civilization. That could eventually become disastrous.

Both countercultures sought to revise systematic social norms to make them more natural. The monist counterculture thought humanistic, egalitarian norms would be more natural. The dualist counterculture thought godly, hierarchical norms would be more natural. This divergence led to the destructive and unwinnable culture war.

In the face of mid-century anomie—the breakdown in public morality—both countercultures tried to strengthen social norms as well as revising them. Their reforms emphasized "ethics" and "values," which fused with, or even replaced, politics. Notoriously, the two countercultures disagreed violently about military and reproductive "values," which also fed the culture war.

"Family values" were—and are—the central culture war issue, actually. Both countercultures agreed that "traditional" families weren't working as they should. The monist response was to dissolve or replace the model; the dualist counterculture tried to strengthen, support, and universalize it. During the subcultural era, American society reluctantly accepted a compromise allowing diverse sexual and family models, but upholding the "traditional" one as ideal.

Both countercultures recognized the value of local communities, which the systematic mode had eroded. Both invented new local community models: monist communes and dualist megachurches. Communes failed quickly; megachurches remain vigorous. The subcultural mode developed *subsocieties* as another new model for community, which unfortunately did not survive atomization. The atomized mode provides virtual but limited community through internet social networks. Overall, the problem of community is still mainly unsolved.

1 Comment

> Pentecostal snake handlers
> Pentecostal snake handlers (Mark 16:17-18)

Rejecting rationality was the central conceptual move of both countercultures. Rationality was a foundation of the systematic mode. When the systematic mode conclusively failed, rationality got the blame.

Both countercultures explicitly abandoned rationality and adopted anti-rational religions: "Eastern" and "New Age" on the monist side; fundamentalist and charismatic on the dualist one. All these new religious movements discarded traditional social norms in favor of inner transformations supposedly wrought by "spiritual" practices.

Summary

In the systematic mode, you create a rational, systematic self. A systematic self has a clear boundary, so it is not flooded by the emotions and expectations of others. You act as the administrator of an internal world of principles, projects, and formal roles. A systematic self is far more sophisticated than a choiceless one, and is a prerequisite to participating effectively in a systematic society.

Unfortunately, this sort of self is unnatural. Living as one sometimes exposes contradictions between systematicity and human nature. It can give the feeling of being a tiny cog in a vast, uncaring, meaningless machine—the "Iron Cage" of rationalized bureaucracy. When a society imposes systematicity rigidly, it becomes psychologically intolerable for many people.

The countercultures demanded to renegotiate the relationship between self and society. Both began by rejecting rationality, and the systematic principles, projects, and formal roles that rationality justified.

I defined countercultures as "new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational systems." The only distinctive part of this was the anti-rationalism.[1] "New, alternative, universalist, eternalist, *rational* systems" had been tried repeatedly during the systematic era. These included, for instance, capitalism, communism, socialism, nationalism, fascism, democracy, Freudianism, and existentialism.[2]

The systematic mode used rationality to maintain eternalism: belief in fixed meanings. Having abandoned rationality, both countercultures turned to religion as a foundation for eternalism. Mainstream Christianity had been rationalized in the 1800s, so the countercultures constructed alternatives: the New Age in the monist one, and a reworked Evangelical Christianity in the dualist one.

The countercultural religions developed ecstatic, quasi-magical, anti-rational technologies of self-transformation. These aimed to remake the self to strengthen it against the depredations of systematic society and—particularly in the dualist counterculture—to adapt it to better conform to systematic demands. They also promised emotional, social, and pragmatic this-world benefits, whereas traditional religion emphasized self-denial, devotion to God, and other-world salvation.

The two countercultures tried to solve many of the same problems, drawing from the same limited set of pre-existing cultural tools. Superficially opposed, they attempted many similar solutions. I find these similarities remarkable, but the point of this page is not to draw the interesting historical parallels. Rather: we mostly still have these same problems—although subsequent modes of meaningness have contributed some additional tools toward solving them. Understanding the countercultures' attempts, and how they failed, may help us now.

Overall, anti-rationalism was a disaster, I think. The self/society relationship *did* need extensive renegotiation—and still does. However, we can no longer live without rational social systems, and we are diminished as human beings if we lose the ability to create rational selves. The countercultures picked the wrong target, and the alternative, anti-rational systems they built were profoundly dysfunctional. When their failure became obvious, the modern world ended. We live in the wreckage, called "postmodernity."

All is not lost. Rationality still works—just not as an ultimate foundation. Rationality does not actually contradict meaningfulness, only eternalism. The fluid mode needs to reclaim rationality, while recognizing its nebulosity and limits.

The remaining sections of this page explain:

- Why the countercultures rejected rationality: *to rescue meaning*
- How they constructed new religions as alternate foundations: *reviving Romanticism*
- The form of those new religions: *subjective individualism*
- The religions' promises to reform the self: *to deliver unity, authenticity, and ecstasy*
- Their promises of material benefits: *health and wealth*
- An assessment of their legacy: *a disaster, but one we are recovering from*

Rationalism and its discontents

> Science: ruining everything since 1543

Rationality ruins everything. As you know. As everyone has known for hundreds of years.

Back in the choiceless mode, all things were charged with inherent meaning, mountains were inhabited by benevolent and terrifying gods, and you always knew what you were supposed to do. Then rationality came along and pointed out that meanings can't be objective, there are no spooks, and you can't derive *ought* from *is*. And the world was disenchanted, emptied of meaning, and turned into mere matter.

> Charge of the Light Brigade

But wait! The heroic Romantics, on their magnificent steeds of poetry, mounted the counter-charge, plumes flying from their noble helms, against the machine guns of materialism. Meaning, they cried, was subjective, revealed by emotion, intuition, and aesthetic appreciation. We can re-enchant the world in the mystic artistic unity of our True Selves with Absolute Reality.

Alas, in mundane modernity, superior firepower defeats valor. The existentialists, seemingly the last ragged company of Romantics, fell, ignobly, in the late 1950s. Rationality demonstrated that meaning cannot be subjective *either*; Romanticism inevitably collapses into mere nihilism.

Meanwhile, rationality had turned its guns inward. During the first half of the century, rational certainty destroyed itself—in philosophy, mathematics, and science. Not only had it obliterated all other sources of meaning, rationality finally demonstrated its own meaninglessness.

Then what? asked the founders of the countercultures, in the 1960s. Rationality had been exhausted. All possible rational bases for systems had been tried, and had failed. Also, scientific rationality was apparently to blame for all the Twentieth Century horrors: the World Wars, loss of Christian faith, rampant materialism, ecological devastation, abortion, and nuclear weapons. Anyway, meaning obviously does exist, so if rationality says it's neither objective nor subjective, it must just be wrong.

Reinventing religion: anti-rationalism as the cure

Well, this is easy! Reject rationality, and recover meaning from its most salient source: religion. (In fact, rational analysis shows that eternalism is wrong. If eternalism is misunderstood as the only defense of meaning, any serious attempt to rescue it *must* reject rationality.)

Unfortunately, Mainline Protestantism—America's dominant religion—could not do the job. It had been modernized, remade for compatibility with the dictates of rationality, and thereby drained of most of its meaning. The 1920s fundamentalist vs. modernist war was about this; the fundamentalists lost then. But they were right, in some sense. The modernists were on a slippery slope to secularism, and Mainline Protestantism became a hollow shell of hypocrisy, pretense, and going through the motions.

> In the 1950s, religious commitment, despite its high levels, was superficial and largely a matter of vogue rather than conviction. Most self-proclaimed believers had little knowledge of the teachings of the Bible. To be a member of a mainline church was more a matter of adhering to convention born of the desire for social belonging. Churches were functioning mainly as social and civic clubs.[3]

So both countercultures constructed new, anti-rational religious movements to provide the meaningfulness Christianity had lost. The monist counterculture rejected Christianity in favor of "Eastern religion" and New Age nonsense. (Both these were mostly vintage-1800 German Romantic Idealism in disguise.) The dualist counterculture replaced rationalized mainline Christianity with anti-rational fundamentalist, charismatic, and dispensationalist alternatives.[4]

All these new religions promoted wacky mythologies: reincarnated space-faring priests from Atlantis bearing monist mystical wisdom; or the dispensationalist Tribulation and Rapture that separate the sheep from the goats. Such myths are defiant statements of anti-rationalism, putting you unambiguously outside the pale of the mainstream systematic worldview. Once you have publicly asserted your belief in holistic chakra rebalancing therapy, or young earth creationism, you are fully committed to simply ignoring everything rationality says. These "beliefs" are shibboleths that demonstrate your allegiance to the countercultural tribe, and rejection of the previous, systematic mode.

In this page's analysis, what matters in the new religions is not their "beliefs," but their practices. [5] In particular, this page looks at the goals of those practices, which was to re-form the self, and to cure the body by curing the spirit. The efficacy of these quasi-magical technologies of personal transformation and faith healing was dubious. Having already committed to believing nonsense made it easier to go along with new absurdities.

Although the myths were untrue, they were at least partly *functional* in keeping new versions of systematic eternalism going. Despite anti-rationalism, the overall structure of justification was left largely intact in the countercultural mode. The countercultures were still more-or-less coherent systems, and still mostly *made sense*. As systematic reform movements, they retained legacy "becauses," left over from systematic mode at its peak, and added new ones. However, there were now also unapologetic gaps that no one felt a need to fill, other than with emotional fantasies.

(Three decades later, in the atomized mode, structure finally disintegrated, coherence was lost, and nothing made sense other than in an emotional, associative way.)

The subjective turn and the end of "organized religion"

External, systematic duties are central to traditional religion. For 1920s fundamentalists, religious practice meant sitting on a hard bench, listening to sermons on ascetic morality, sin, and damnation. By the 1970s, nobody wanted that anymore.

The countercultures' new religious movements were all about *me*. They took a "subjective turn," toward internal personal mental states, particularly non-rational ones such as emotions and "experiences."[6] This was explicit in the monist counterculture; probably that is so widely known that I need not detail it here. On the dualist side, some Christian leaders resisted the subjective turn, but many adopted it covertly, and overall the Christian Right mostly succumbed in time. This is less well-known, so I'll sketch some main aspects.[7]

The subjective turn accelerated centuries-old trends: Protestant interiority, Enlightenment individualism, and Romantic emotionalism. Especially the last: the countercultures developed a renewed Romanticism, which simply ignored rationality instead of fighting it. (I will trace the historical roots of both countercultures in Romanticism later.)

The religions of both countercultures downplayed objective, external moral criteria. They replaced rules and judgements with a view of ethics as flowing from the individual conscience, "being authentic to your true Self," subjective feelings of compassion, and "doing what feels right in your heart." And so: "Phrased in the language of psychology, sinfulness was discussed in terms of therapeutic maladjustment, rather than as the transgression of divine commands."[8]

Countercultural Christianity retained some of the rhetoric of moral absolutism from its 1920s Fundamentalist roots. This seems to have been a major aspect of its appeal. There was much talk about Biblical inerrancy, and the Bible as the source of morals; but, for the most part, the

counterculture was morally undemanding in practice.[9] It placed an extraordinary, almost exclusive emphasis on sexual morality; and particularly condemned sexual transgressions of sorts that its adherents were unlikely to be tempted to.[10] This enabled enjoyably self-righteous judgement of Those Horrible People In The Other Tribe (monist counterculturalists).

More generally, the specifics of traditional religion were unappealing, and so they were simply dropped. (This, at the same time the Christian Right was marketing itself as the guardian of tradition.) Subjective individualism was incompatible with Christian doctrine. Most supposed Christians were mainly ignorant of the basic tenets of their religion, and would reject them if they knew about them.[11] So doctrine and liturgy were downplayed, with only a few key points retained.[12]

Subjective individualism was also incompatible with hierarchical authority and institutional traditions, so those disintegrated.[13] This was consonant with the American individualism and Protestant anti-clericalism that had allowed for sectarian innovation for centuries. However, the countercultural era took it to new extremes: a "choose-your-own-Jesus mentality" or "cafeteria Christianity."[14]

The innumerable Protestant sects had mainly defined their differences in terms of arcane details of abstract theology. Once everyone stopped preaching that stuff, the boundaries collapsed.[15] Everyone hates "organized religion", so countercultural Christianity developed a new social mode, featuring non-denominational churches; decentralized, unstructured communities; and ecumenical parachurch organizations whose lines of authority mimicked secular NGOs rather than traditional religious hierarchy. These achieved unprecedented economy of scale by appealing to Evangelical Christians regardless of sectarian affiliation. Generally, too, they gave people what they wanted, rather than demanding of people what traditional religion required.

Re-enchanting the self

Both countercultures saw the misery of modern life as due partly to inadequate selves. Both used religion as a therapeutic tool for re-forming the self to better cope. Both promoted personal transformation through magical, anti-rational, and supernatural methods. Both promised ecstatic personal fulfillment through direct experience of the divine. Both promised substantial material benefits, to be delivered after the self was properly restructured.

Both promised a better self, featuring self-actualization, self-affirmation, self-awareness, self-compassion, self-confidence, self-definition, self-discovery, self-esteem, self-expression, self-fulfillment, self-help, self-purification, self-realization, self-revelation, and self-transcendence.

> Evangelicalism aligned Christian faith with the Holy Grail of the affluent society: self-realization. Unlike the classic bourgeois Protestantism of the 19th century, whose moral teachings emphasized avoidance of worldly temptation, the revitalized version promised empowerment, joy, and personal fulfillment. A godly life was once understood as grim defiance of sinful urges; now it was the key to untold blessings.[16]

In the face of the difficulty of conforming to an objective moral code, the countercultures sought to instill subjective compassion (for one's own tribe, at least): an ethics of emotionalism. A moral person was now a happy, self-aware, psychologically well-adjusted one.

The Puritan virtues, required to conform to harsh external norms, were quietly dropped: self-abnegation, self-denial, self-discipline, self-doubt, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and self-surrender.

Promises of unity, authenticity, and ecstasy

The modern contrast between the systematic/public and communal/private worlds produced fractured selves, because you had to be different people in different contexts. Both countercultures sought to dissolve the public/private boundary, and to heal the divided self. In fact, they promised that the self could be unified altogether, replacing the broken ego with the True Self. That might unify even further: with the divine.[17]

This required supernatural technologies—which the countercultures promised to supply.

Where the systematic mainstream culture required hypocrisy, the countercultures promised authenticity. Where the systematic economy imposed brutal regimentation, the countercultures promised to restore spontaneity and freedom. Finding the authentic, spontaneous True Self was a major project,[18] for which both countercultures offered magical tools.

In the face of the disenchantment of the world, and loss of religious certainty, the countercultures promoted ecstatic personal experience of the sacred.

> Epistemologically, evangelical revivalism, with its reliance on the immediacy of the divine, faith in intuitive knowledge, pursuit of self-purification and holy living, and desire for a profound personal conversion experience, resembled closely the spiritual aspirations of the sixties movements. Rooted in transcendentalist and romantic conceptions of knowledge, countercultural thinking regarded truth as the result of intense, unmediated, and pre-rational experiences that dissolved the rationally constructed dualism of subject and object and revealed the unity behind fragmented existence.[19]

Both countercultures developed technologies for provoking altered states of consciousness, or intense emotional engagement, in which adherents found—or thought they found—access to the numinous.

Psychedelic drugs, understood as providing transcendent non-rational insight as well as orgiastic ecstasy, were hugely important in the development of the monist counterculture. The Human Potential Movement turned the quasi-medical private practice of psychotherapy into quasi-religious public performances that resembled Christian revival meetings—and, increasingly, vice versa. The New Age offered consciousness transformation through endlessly diverse methods such as meditation, past-life regression, channelling, yoga, biofeedback, and self-hypnosis.

Before the Twentieth Century, Christianity was mostly about conduct and belief, not experience. This was very much true of American Fundamentalism, which is where the core leadership of the dualist counterculture came from. The idea of "religious experience" is Romantic, dating from the late 1700s, but it remained marginal in Christianity up to the 1980s. At that point, the fundamentalists reluctantly folded aspects of "charismatic" Pentecostalism into the new countercultural religion.

Charismatic Christianity features intensely emotional worship, emphasizing individual experience, spontaneous singing and dancing, and being "slain in the Spirit" (falling to the floor in religious ecstasy). It empowers supposedly-supernatural practices including "speaking in tongues," divine healing, prophesy, exorcism and "spiritual warfare," and (in some churches) miracles such as snake-handling and drinking poison without ill effects.[20]

Both countercultures fetishized concepts of a definitive, personal religious event. Supposedly this was an initial, overwhelming, dramatic, emotional religious experience, which lasts only a few minutes to a few days, but which sets in motion an unstoppable process of internal transformation. That is gradual and less intense, but spreads and deepens, and eventually results in a complete reconfiguration of the self that brings it into conformity with the Ultimate Truth or Cosmic Plan.

In the monist counterculture, this was often called "Enlightenment," and supposedly came from some sort of "Eastern religion" like "Zen."[21] In the dualist counterculture, it was the "conversion experience," "being born again," or "baptism with the Holy Spirit."[22] In the mid-'80s, nearly half of Americans claimed to have been Born Again—probably even more than had been Enlightened.

Promises of this-worldly benefits

> God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problem that arises, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves.[23]

Traditional religion mainly devalued the actual, material and social world, in favor of another, transcendent one, that might be reached in the afterlife or through mystical means. The religions of both countercultures paid lip service to transcendence, but marketed their pragmatic value in this world. Both countercultures promised that you could improve your material and social circumstances by reworking your self. *De facto*, they celebrated hedonism—within bounds—and (especially on the right) enthusiastic consumption of the fruits of the capitalist market economy. [24]

New Age quackery and Christian faith healing, both operating more on the soul than the body, could cure diseases without limit. Religions on both sides promised economic success through magical means.

> Evangelicals increasingly identified with the materialistic and individualistic trajectories of American society. They abandoned the humility and self-doubt of their Puritan forebears for a therapeutic Christianity that primarily asked "what can God do for you?"

> Christian practice became less associated with self-denial, awareness of sin, and tough moral codes than with health, business success, and self-esteem. Conversion came to mean psychological healing. Sermons explained how faith empowered people and helped them become more affluent and better integrated. Churches presented themselves as providers of spiritual and community resources for personal and family needs.

> Lifestyle churches showcased religion as useful for personal and social ends, rather than as an expression of devotion to God. By emphasizing self-help, rather than sin and damnation, faith became a means of social adjustment in this life, rather than a preparation for life after death. The countercultural construction of the converted self matched the normative requirements of consumerist market society.[25]

Assessment: shooting the wrong horse

Rationality was never the problem with the systematic mode. The fault actually laid in eternalism. The countercultures attacked the wrong one. Founded on this misunderstanding, it is not

surprising that the countercultural religions were mostly stupid and harmful. That said, they were honest efforts to solve serious problems, and their legacies are not all bad.

The countercultural project of resolving the disconnect between self and society mostly failed, at both ends. That is because it left intact the structure of their relationship, tinkering only with reforms in each separately. In fact, by exaggerating both individualism and collectivism, it made the conflict starker than before.

At the self end, religious leaders promised revolutions in consciousness that would bring about profound personal and social transformation. If many monist counterculturalists had succeeded in seeing through subject/object duality, and always acted from non-rational awareness of the connectedness of all things, then the Age of Aquarius might indeed be upon us. If many dualist counterculturalists had succeeded in accepting the infilling of the Holy Spirit, and always acted from non-rational awareness of the will of God, then the Rapture might indeed be imminent.

But this turned out to be mostly wishful thinking. Available consciousness-transformation methods were less powerful than hoped. Mostly, all the religions accomplished was a change in the contents of consciousness—"beliefs"—not in its structure or mode of being. Counterculturalists adopted some new mythology, and many enjoyed transient non-ordinary experiences brought on by drugs, conversion, or ritual. Few selves transformed significantly and durably.

Intelligent advocates of the countercultural religions—both monist and dualist—might say that they should not be judged by their least rigorous presentations, by populist distortions, or by the effects of their superficial appropriations by the clueless and uncommitted. I agree, if the criterion is the usefulness of the religion to a sincere and intelligent seeker. Thinkers from both countercultures offer valuable insights: Carlos Castaneda and Francis Schaeffer, Starhawk and Rick Warren.

However, here I am concerned with cultural history: the countercultures' effect on the population at large. Some of that was beneficial:

- In both countercultures, anti-rationalism legitimized temporary escapes from grim systemic regimentation, into ecstatic communal altered states.
- Religious methods did help many counterculturalists develop greater psychological sophistication (even as many others regressed into pre-rational idiocy).
- The "morality wars," although profoundly harmful to American public discourse, made more people aware of meta-ethical questions, and helped some develop a more sophisticated ethical stance.
- Some non-rational religious methods, pursued with sufficient tenacity, may indeed bring about significant, long-lasting change.

Overall, though, the countercultures' anti-rationality and subjectivism undermined effective systematic understandings, methods, and institutions. (I assume readers of *Meaningness* understand why this was harmful, so I need not elaborate.)

Originally, both countercultures' new religious movements attracted many intelligent, accomplished people, because they seemed to offer plausible solutions to the nihilism of the systematic mainstream. Gradually, smart people figured out that they were nonsense and left. As the countercultures faded, most other adherents shook off the silliest parts. By the mid-'90s, both the New Age and Fundamentalism were widely seen as "religions for losers." This has somewhat limited the damage done.

Rationality after counterculturalism

In the next mode of meaningness, subcultures, having abandoned the failed quest for ultimacy and universality, did not need to take any particular position on rationality. Most neither reaffirmed rationality nor harmed it further. We'll see, though, that subculturalism developed a new *structural* approach to the self/society mismatch. If fully implemented, it might make the value of rationality more obvious, and the emotional reasons for opposing rationality less compelling.

> Tent in snow with disco ball
> Now is the winter of rationality's disco tent

Unfortunately, subculturalism failed, and our present atomized mode abandons coherence altogether. Without any means for structuring relationships among ideas, rationality is impossible. This could eventually be disastrous. However, unlike the countercultural mode, the atomized one is not *against* rationality; just incapable of it.

I hope and believe there is an opportunity for the fluid mode to reclaim a relativized, non-foundational rationality. The fluid mode explains that rationality is correct that meaning can be neither objective nor subjective, but points out a third alternative that preserves meaning and thereby avoids nihilism. Its meta-rational perspective appropriates rationality as a collection of often-useful, but not ultimate, tools for co-creating meanings.

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1. 1.This wasn't actually new. Both countercultures drew heavily on Romanticism, a major cultural movement of the 1800s, as a source of anti-rational ideas, inspirations, practices, and programs. I discuss this at length in "Countercultures: modern mythologies."
2. 2.Freudianism is arguably non-rational, and existentialism is arguably non-rational plus non-eternalistic, although both could often fit my definition in practice. Both countercultures did borrow heavily from both Freudianism and existentialism—the monist one overtly, the dualist one covertly.
3. 3.*Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right*, p. 36, lightly paraphrased.
4. 4.Ross Douthat's *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* is a useful history of American Christian anti-rationalism in the past few decades. He writes from a center-right perspective, and takes the Christianity of the 1950s, rather than the 1970-80s, as his inspirational model.
5. 5.I'll return to the "beliefs" in "Countercultures: modern mythologies"—not to debunk them, but to investigate meta-myths about the origins of the myths themselves.
6. 6.The term "subjective turn" comes from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. There's an excellent brief discussion in *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* pp. 2-5; you can read it via Amazon's "Look Inside" feature.
7. 7.See *Countercultural Conservatives*, p. 28: "The personalization of the religious message in evangelicalism constituted a shift from a concern with the proclamation of an objective and universal truth to a concern with the subjective applicability of truth, and thus embodied an alignment to the normative codes of modern pluralism… The emphasis on the individual in popular evangelicalism had its origin in the existentialist focus on subjectivity and the heroic rebel."
8. 8.*Countercultural Conservatives*, p. 102. See also Smith and Denton's *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*: "A significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten stepcousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."

9. 9.It is remarkable how willing the movement was to find ethical excuses for its leaders when they were caught snorting cocaine with underage male prostitutes. Such Christian forgiveness was also generally extended to the flock—so long as they publicly swore renewed allegiance to "traditional moral values" afterward. *Bad Religion*, p. 239, "Evangelical teenagers are more likely to have sex at an early age; Evangelical mothers are more likely to bear children outside marriage; Evangelical marriages are more likely to end in divorce. Catholics have more abortions than the national average." And, p. 228: "The sense of harmony, unity, and communion that so many mystics experience can provoke a somewhat blasé attitude toward sin and wickedness, and a dismissive attitude toward ordinary moral duties." See also *Cultural Conservatives*, p. 146: "While the Christian Right's insistence on biblical absolutes reinforced its image as the defender of the true faith, it … produced less an assertion of traditional Biblicism than its reduction to generic moral exhortations."

10. 10.See Weeden, Cohen, and Kendrick's "Religious attendance as reproductive support" for much useful insight here. The central emphasis on specifically sexual sin was new as of the 1970s, not traditional. It's notable also that the Biblical basis for opposition to abortion—the #1 moral teaching of the dualist counterculture—is somewhere between extremely scant and non-existent. "Pro-life" and "pro-choice" Christians both claim that a handful of Bible passages support their positions; but all of them, on both sides, seem obscure, oblique, desultory, and dubious. We need to look elsewhere for an explanation for anti-abortion sentiment.

11. 11.E.g.: "The great majority of active Baby Boom Presbyterians subscribe to neither the traditional Presbyterian standards contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter Catechism, nor to any of the more contemporary theological formulations espoused by their church." *Bad Religion*, p. 77. "Eight in ten Americans say they are Christians, only four in ten know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and only half could name the four gospels." *Countercultural Conservatives*, p. 33, calling this a "cycle of biblical illiteracy."

12. 12.See *Countercultural Conservatives* pp. 28-33 and 124-5 for further discussion of the themes of this paragraph.

13. 13."The era witnessed an extraordinary weakening of organized Christianity in the United States and a fundamental shift in America's spiritual ecology—away from institutional religion and toward a more do-it-yourself and consumer-oriented spirituality—that endures to the present day." *Bad Religion*, p. 62.

14. 14.*Bad Religion*, pp. 178, 181.

15. 15.This was taken to Perennialist extremes by the monist counterculture, which considered all religions interchangeable. It blithely mixed bits of Aztec myths, Daoism, and Sufism—as representative "wisdom traditions"—in a single sentence.

16. 16.Brink Lindsey, "The Aquarians and the Evangelicals," *Reason*, Jun. 27, 2007.

17. 17.Kramer and Alstad's *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*, p. 167ff, analyzes fundamentalism as a response to the divided self. It's motivated by fear of internal anarchy; that without external restraint, you couldn't maintain control over evil parts of yourself, which would run amok. Fundamentalism makes this pattern worse, by reinforcing ideas of internal evil and undercutting self-trust. However, surrender to it actually does (temporarily) end internal conflicts by tipping the internal power balance in favor of one part of the self against all others. This frees up a lot of energy, and in a social context creates powerful bonds with people who have made the same move.

18. 18.Not least because it doesn't exist. The subcultural mode made a major advance in abandoning the quest for the unified True Self, and beginning to develop realistic methods for living successfully with a fragmented self.

19. 19.*Countercultural Conservatives*, p. 94. See further discussion there, p. 95 *et passim*.

20. 20.This has long sounded like big fun to me. I've avoided ever going to a Pentecostal service, for fear I'd abandon Buddhism.

21. 21.The "Zen enlightenment experience" was mostly invented by D. T. Suzuki, who got it from William James, who got it from the Eighteenth Century Christian mystic (and proto-Romantic) Emmanuel Swedenborg. See Robert Sharf's "The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion" for discussion of this history, and for a useful deconstruction of "religious experience" in general.
22. 22.The phrase "born again" appears just thrice, obscurely each time, in the Bible. It was very rarely used before the publication of Watergate conspirator Chuck Colson's remarkable 1976 book *Born Again*, and then-Presidential candidate Jimmy Carter's public statement that he was "born again" a few months later. For an interesting discussion of the former, and the "conversion" phenomenon more generally, see Charles Griffin's The Rhetoric of Form in Conversion Narratives. I suspect that the dualist countercultural understanding of the conversion experience leaned heavily on Romantic sources, but I haven't traced this in detail.
23. 23.Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.
24. 24.As a Tantric Buddhist, I think this was a very wise move.
25. 25.This block quote is a mash-up of bits of text from several places in *Countercultural Conservatives*, edited for concision and clarity.

2 Comments

Next Page: The personal is political →

Protester drops a bra in the trash at the 1968 Miss America Pageant
Protesting the 1968 Miss America Pageant

The slogan "the personal is political," originating in 1960s feminism, encapsulates both countercultures' political agenda. Society had to change to accommodate the self; and political action was the way to reform the social structure.

Between them, the two countercultures shoved aside existing power dynamics and created reorganized coalitions which have dominated American politics ever since. Though both movements expired long ago, the struggle between them left a culture war that refuses to die.

A previous page, "Renegotiating self and society," summarized the countercultures' political program. The systematic mode had imposed a hard division between self and society, which caused alienation, angst, and anomie. The countercultures addressed these problems by blurring the public/private boundary: *the personal is political*.

They sought to replace the artificial, seemingly-arbitrary social and personal requirements of the systematic mode with ones they considered natural. They tried to reorient society away from formal, systematic roles toward natural ones: family, unstructured friendships, and local communities. The monist counterculture thought humanistic, egalitarian norms would be more natural. The dualist counterculture thought godly, hierarchical norms would be more natural.

"Authenticity" meant bringing the private and public selves into alignment. This was the obvious response to the painful gap between them. However, it represents a partial reversion toward the choiceless mode. Systems can be unjust, inhumane, rigid, dysfunctional, or outright inimical to human survival. Unfortunately, we still don't know how to live without them. The choiceless mode feels right but it can't feed a world of billions of people. The countercultures mostly recognized this, and did seek only to replace existing systems, not to return to a pre-systematic state.[1]

Merging ethics, politics, religion, and identity

Both countercultures unified politics and morality: the public and private manifestations of "ought." Merging them helped collapse the self/society boundary. This led to a massive revision of American political, class, and religious systems—as we'll see in the next page.

The countercultures perceived anomie: a breakdown in morality due to broad recognition that public norms were discordant with private values. Both called for a reform of social norms to bring them closer to ethical norms, and for norms to be strengthened—that is, better enforced against wrong-doers.

Power struggles between economic interest groups were the heart of politics before the countercultures. Conflict between the working class majority and the bourgeois minority drove the main ideological movements, and threatened social collapse. Counterculturalists recognized that such conflicts have no "right" resolution. Everyone may honestly believe their group should win, but that's nothing more than self-interest.

Eternalism demands an ultimate answer to political questions: there must be an unambiguously correct, clear, simple solution once you see it. A contest of selfish brute political force won't deliver that. Ethics—a force beyond self-interest—must provide the right answer for politics.

Of course, the countercultures disagreed sharply on some ethical questions. So how do we know that *our* ethics are right, and *theirs* are wrong? Religion. Religion gives transcendent, unchallengeable justification for ethical claims. And so both countercultures merged politics with religion, as well as with ethics.[2] Not only did they reform politics along religious lines, they also turned their politics into pseudo-religions.

Spiritualizing politics, and politicizing everyday personal interactions, was not an altogether bad thing. Sometimes ethical considerations should trump power politics. Sometimes political considerations should alter personal behavior. However, combined with eternalism (absolutism) and universalism (intolerance of diversity of views), the merger has poisoned both politics and everyday life.

Countercultural politics split Americans into two warring tribes. Lack of distinctions between ethics, politics, and religion is a main cause of the bitterness of culture war. When politics is inseparable from morality, your political opponents do not just have different economic incentives, they are *evil*: immoral, sub-human, demonic. That makes negotiation and compromise impossible.

As politics came to define what it meant to be a good person, many came to define their selves by membership in one counterculture, and rejection of the other. Political success would require solidarity, and both sides promoted the "brotherhood of all counterculture participants." However, identification with the monist or dualist tribe eventually proved to be an inadequate basis for self.

The monist personal was political

Pro-choice rally
Image courtesy Dave Bledsoe

The New Left was the monist counterculture's political program. The Old Left had mainly promoted the economic interest of the working class. The New Left mainly promoted a middle-class personal morality, and mostly lost interest in working class and economic issues.[3]

Monist politics addressed the crisis of the self: the problems of alienation, angst, and anomie. It started from an improbable synthesis of Marxism, Freudianism, and existentialism—the most important secular systems of meaning in the mid-twentieth century. These systems utterly contradict each other, and also contradict central tenets of the New Left. However, countercultural intellectuals somehow combined them in an ideology of complete liberation of the individual from social norms. Given this incoherent and absolutist origin, it's not surprising that many of the New Left's social proposals were simplistic utopian fantasies.

Loosening social norms

In the beginning, the New Left sought mainly to loosen existing social norms, rather than to replace them. The 1950s had been a period of unusually rigid expectations for conformity, which counterculturalists found intolerable. Many of these norms seemed arbitrary, or obsolete, or simply served the selfish interests of elites. Just throwing them off would be a good start. The monist counterculture was, at first, remarkably anti-authoritarian.

After some experience of the consequences of moral breakdown, the counterculture shifted to advocating social reform based on new norms. These were supposed to be more human and natural, in contrast with the industrial, artificial norms of the systematic mode. Leaders intended to create a supportive and egalitarian society. Not everyone got with the program immediately. So, New Left organizations increasingly demanded "discipline," and monist culture increasingly insisted on correct "consciousness." The left gradually left behind its New anti-authoritarianism.

Sexual liberation

Sex is perhaps the most personal and private of activities. Before the countercultural merger of the public and private spheres, sex would never have been considered a "political" issue.[4]

"Victorian morality" was still the official public ideology of sex and family life in the 1960s. For decades, it had been increasingly ignored in private—the very definition of hypocrisy and anomie. Improved contraceptive technology and safe, effective treatments for all the STDs of the time removed rational justifications for restrictive sexual norms.

Herbert Marcuse was probably the most important New Left theorist. His *Eros and Civilization* rejects Freud's pessimistic conclusion in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (which I discussed previously) that the self, particularly its sexual desires, must be subordinated to the social system. Modern political repression, Marcuse argued, is based on sexual repression. For the New Left, the sexual revolution was inseparable from the struggle against oppressive corporations and an oppressive state.

This program was partly successful. By the mid-1970s, when the monist counterculture petered out, a majority of Americans had adopted a much more liberal sexual morality than was publicly acceptable in the early '60s.

Family

The counterculture considered the Victorian family oppressive for all participants, and set out to dissolve it.

For children, they said, the family was a training ground for a future role as subordinates in an oppressive society. The family's purpose was to create "authoritarian personalities." Victorian family theorists had made this entirely explicit: children must be taught unquestioning obedience to arbitrary parental authority in order that they will make "good citizens" as adults. New Left theorists believed this explained the acquiescence of the German and Russian people to Nazi and

Stalinist oppression. Families make fascists. In America, families turned out obedient employees, cogs in the machinery of capitalism, whose childhood resignation to emotional abuse also made them joyless, compulsive consumers.

The demand that all men marry and support a wife and children doomed many to an onerous and unwanted breadwinner role. The Beat movement—prologue to hippies—was largely a revolt against work, which implied a revolt against marriage. Hippie men too wanted to sleep around, get high, and listen to music—not spend all their time in a mind-destroying job in order to pay for children they hadn't asked for.

Hippie women were, likewise, mostly not looking forward to a lifetime stuck at home washing dishes and changing diapers. On the other hand, many discovered that the new social norm that they should have sex with any hippie man who wanted them was not so great either. Some did have children, and then hippie rejection of breadwinning became a problem.

Meanwhile, many more-mainstream women found they enjoyed their careers, and relished the freedom from dependency on men a paycheck gave them. Second-wave feminism began as their political program to end workplace discrimination. Feminism is now hazily remembered as part of the '60s counterculture, probably because they were lumped together as enemies by the dualist counterculture. The reality was more complicated: feminism was long resisted by most male leaders of the New Left, and of the monist religious and cultural movements.

Community

The Victorian isolated nuclear family ideal was called "traditional," but it was only a century old. Anthropologists pointed out that it is culturally unusual. Extended families are more typical. These are usually closely woven into broader clans and villages. Children are normally raised by many adults. Unmarried teenage girls also do much of the work, keeping small children out of adults' hair, and buffering them from excessively harsh parental discipline.

Marcuse, and other countercultural theorists, advocated dissolving nuclear family bonds and replacing them with extended social networks.

Hippie communes put this theory into action. They address both the problem of work and the problem of family. To avoid work, we all move to a remote farm, where we're out of reach of The System, and we grow all our own food and make everything else we need.[5] There we get back in touch with the cycles of nature, live life on a human scale, and do just enough wholesome, meaningful work to meet our own needs—instead of slaving for capitalist exploiters. We hold property in common, so everyone has everything they need. We raise children communally, so they always have many loving adults to turn to.

In almost every case, this ends disastrously, usually within a year or so. The founders have high-minded cooperative ideals, but no one actually wants to plow the field, wash the dishes, or feed other people's children—and if work is not enforced, gradually everyone does less. (This is *especially* true of communes whose promise is freedom from work!)

Worse, in the absence of strong social norms, communes attract parasites: freeloaders and sociopaths. The brotherhood of all counterculturalists implies that anyone with long hair can come live on the farm. Soon a lot of long-haired guys show up who expect to be fed and laid and supplied with drugs, in exchange for doing nothing. Often they are surly or even violent as well. We are very nice cooperative egalitarian monist people, and they invariably have some sob story for why they can't be expected to pull their weight, so none of us wants to tell them to get out. No one even feels they have any authority to do so. After a few months, the productive members of

the commune give up and leave; and then so do the parasites, when the free food, sex, and drugs run out.

Communes that succeed have strong social norms. Living there requires high commitment to specific values, beyond the countercultural ones. They are mainly interested in being left alone to do their specific thing, rather than trying to impose it on society at large. These make them subcultural, not countercultural. Unfortunately, during the countercultural era, successful communes mainly ended up being dominated by charismatic authoritarians (who had the gumption to toss out the parasites) and became exploitative cults. Others, more benign, were run by leaders with strong organizational skills, who imposed formal roles and systems and found a profitable non-agrarian economic basis for their community.

The "brotherhood" fantasy, that the counterculture as a whole could function as a community, was a clear failure. Mostly its egalitarian ideals undermined even attempts to create local communities.

The dualist personal was political

Pro-life rally
Image courtesy Wikipedia

Social conservatives, as well as liberals, found the systematic mode's private/public split intolerable. It enabled pervasive moral hypocrisy, for instance in the form of "Sunday Christians," who said the right things in public, but whose private lives were unaffected by religion. Your public and private lives must match to make you an authentic Christian. This is what "born again" meant to many: that you walk the talk.

A godless society makes that walk hard going. There were plenty of sinners in the '50s, but at least mainstream society expected basic Christian morality. By the mid-'70s, atheists and perverts had taken over America. Hollywood and universities and the government, and even many supposedly Christian churches, all promoted sin. The dualist political program was a grassroots uprising for basic decency, for religious freedom, for taking America back to the traditional values of its founders. (Or so its leaders said.)

They cited the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion, as one of the main reasons for launching their counterculture. The Court's reasoning in this case was based on the right to privacy: affirming the public/private distinction. The personal, said the Court, was not political.

The founders of the Moral Majority—the foremost dualist-counterculture political organization—were also motivated by their disappointment at "born again" President Jimmy Carter's rejection of "the personal is political." Carter refused to publicly oppose abortion despite his private conservative Evangelical religious beliefs.

With the Supreme Court and the President advocating moral hypocrisy, a *counter*-cultural politics was imperative. The dualist political program worked to collapse the public and private in order to return society to natural, godly norms. This project complemented the dualist religious movement's technologies of the self, which strengthened souls against the temptations of the new hedonism, nihilism, and atheism.

Large-family values

Dualists agreed with monists that the "traditional family" was not working. They wrote the opposite prescription, though: it should be strengthened and supported, not dissolved.

"Family values" was the central dualist counterculture slogan. For liberals, the list of issues this covers is puzzling. It seems senseless and disparate, and mostly to have nothing to do with families, although weirdly obsessed with sex. If there is any common theme, perhaps it is "don't enjoy yourself!"—and it is hard to see how that is anything other than mean-spirited.

Social conservatives seem incapable of explaining "family values" other than in Biblical terms. Such justifications are nonsense, because social conservatives ignore most Biblical prohibitions, and they only started caring about the main "family values" in the 1970s.[6] Before then, conservative Protestants mostly thought abortion was fine. Sodomy had always been a sin, but an obscure one; fundamentalists had been far more concerned to preach against drinking, dancing, and gambling. The "family values" agenda must have some other, powerful, unstated motivation. Baffled liberals may attribute it to pure malice: hatred rooted in innate evil.

I've recently come to a tentative, alternative understanding that makes me much more sympathetic.[7] If we take the dualist political agenda as promoting *large* families, its specific positions suddenly make sense. In fact, conservatives do have significantly more children than liberals, on average.

Three *reproductive strategies* have been common in America in the past half-century:[8]

1. *Opportunistic* mating without marriage, and with minimal parental investment—especially, minimal support by fathers. This is most common among the underclass and lower working class.
2. *Early* marriage (teens or early twenties); many children, starting shortly after marriage; emphasis on life-long monogamy; and high total parental investment, spread over many children. This large-family strategy became typical mainly of the upper working class and lower middle class.
3. Marriage and children *delayed* to late twenties or into the thirties in order to accumulate resources (university education and establishing a career); multiple sexual relationships before marriage; fewer children; highest per-child parental investment. This is typical of the upper middle class.

The "family values" agenda makes sense when interpreted as promoting the large-family, early-marriage strategy *as against* both of the others. As a political movement, it attempts to get the government to support its reproductive strategy, and to hinder, prohibit, or punish the others.

Take abortion, the foremost issue of the religious right.[9] Those pursuing the early strategy have little use for abortion, because they intend to have lots of children as soon as they can. On the other hand, unintended early childbirth ruins the delayed strategy by interrupting education or professional career development. Before legal abortion, it forced many women to abandon their life plans altogether. It set many men back in their careers as well, because to support an unwanted child they had to maximize current income, instead of pursuing education or prestigious but low-paid training positions. Conversely, if you are currently unable to support children at all—often true for those who adopt the opportunistic strategy—abortion may be pragmatically necessary. If we assume that sabotaging the opportunistic and delayed strategies are *the point* of the anti-abortion movement, its moral condemnation of both "welfare queens" and "selfish career women" makes sense.[10]

The large-family, early strategy requires enormous personal sacrifice. If you have six children, then realistically one parent does have to stay home, taking care of them all day every day. Many people enjoy caring for children, but doing it almost your entire adult life, with little time to enjoy or express yourself, is a long hard grind, and emotionally restricting. Financially, in addition to per-child costs, the family has to give up on the potential second income. There is less parental attention and less money per child than in smaller families; preparing and paying for college may

be infeasible, for instance. For the employed parent, the financial stress and responsibility, the risk of catastrophe if you lose your job, and the impossibility of taking time off, are equally grinding.

Social liberals should recognize that sticking to this plan, in the face of constant temptations to irresponsibility, is genuinely noble. Religious conservatives congratulate themselves on being "moral" because they are "godly." Liberal atheists should recognize that they *are* moral: not because they follow the Bible, but because they work extremely hard, for the sake of others, in difficult circumstances, when they do have alternative options.

In fact, because the big-family strategy is so grueling, it needs intensive memetic support. For many people, switching to strategy 1 (abandoning your wife and children, having an affair, getting high instead of cleaning the house, spending money on something fun the family can't afford) looks attractive all too often. It is easier, more enjoyable in the short run, and might seem rational for the longer term, too. Constant reminders of absolute, eternalistic religious justifications help keep you on the straight and narrow. A community—a church—that reinforces the message with social confirmation and peer pressure, checking every week to see that you have not gone astray, is invaluable. And, the Christian technologies of the self were designed to make the large-family strategy more emotionally bearable.

The delayed, small-family strategy is the most personally rewarding, for those capable of it. However, it only makes sense if you have something better to do with your twenties. That means college, and the kinds of jobs that require eighty-hour-a-week work at low pay during your twenties in exchange for prestige or a very high salary later: entry-level positions as an academic, doctor, lawyer, or investment banker.[11] Mostly, these are inaccessible for young people from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds. If you are going to work forty hours a week on low-skill jobs for the rest of your life, you might as well have children when you are twenty.

On the other hand, if you are not capable of earning enough money to support a wife and children, strategy 2 is out of reach, and you are stuck with reproductive opportunism.

So it is not surprising that the religious right was—and still is—rooted in the upper working class and lower middle class.[12] And this explains its sudden emergence in the 1970s. Economic changes during the 1960s made strategies 1 and 3 both work better than they had. Increased workplace opportunity for women, general prosperity, and more generous welfare support made strategy-1 single motherhood much more feasible and attractive than it had been. Increasing subsidies for college tuition, plus a widening gap between blue-collar and professional/managerial salaries, made the delayed-marriage strategy 3 both easier to access and more attractive.

This meant that people pursuing the large-family strategy saw greater competition from the others than previously. It also meant many were tempted to switch. That could be threatening in several ways. At a practical level, as an example, for a man, it was more likely that your wife would leave and support herself. (This is why wives' obedience and dependency were so heavily promoted, and why conservatives oppose workplace equality.)

Psychologically, the shifts caused great cognitive dissonance. Strategy 2 *had* been the best option for most people for decades—but maybe now it wasn't? Surely I made the right decision—but now the others look better? What can it mean, when fundamental life choices change out from under you? This provokes confusion, resentment, and uncertainty. Anti-rational religious claims were a relatively effective treatment. You could take *pride* in doing what was religiously right, at great cost, even though it might seem senseless otherwise.

In fact, over the past few decades, many have shifted away from the early-marriage, large-family strategy. Some have moved in the direction of delay. Conservatives have smaller families than

they did—although on average they still have almost one more child than liberals. Many send children to college. On the other hand, economic trends that started in the 1970s have accelerated, making it ever more difficult to raise a family on a single working-class income. Many have despaired, given up, and slid into strategy 1—which may seem like total failure.

If this strategy analysis of social conservatism is right, its eternalistic religious rhetoric is a smoke screen. The "family values" agenda is just self-interested: it tries to harm competing social classes and benefit its own. The large-family strategy it promotes is not "more moral"; it is good for some people and bad for others. Forcing it on the underclass—"you can't have children unless you have a steady job and stay married"—means they will fail, and be eliminated as competition. Forcing it on the upper middle class—"you can't have sex unless it results in children, and mothers have to stay home to care for them"—eliminates much of their advantage.

Still, this understanding of what they are up to makes me more, not less, sympathetic to social conservatives. They are not just being irrationally hateful. Pursuing self-interest, and moralizing it to conceal selfish motivations even from oneself, is universal. It can't be condemned.

Also, from this perspective, one can see sexual liberalism as mainly self-interested politicking for strategy 3. Getting to sleep around, while waiting to have children until you've gotten your professional degree and established your career, makes your twenties tolerable.

The core of the monist counterculture was college-educated, middle class people in their twenties. Some went back to the "straight world" in their thirties, pursuing the delayed strategy. Some "dropped out" permanently and defaulted to the opportunistic strategy. You can view their contempt for "traditional marriage" as merely a self-interested attempt to harm those pursuing strategy 2.

Indeed, while sexual freedom is functional for some people, the change in social attitudes since the '60s has been devastating for others. I find plausible arguments made by Charles Murray, in *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, and Theodore Dalrymple, in *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview That Makes the Underclass*. The loosening of social norms, particularly around sex, drugs, and family, which originated in the monist counterculture and which is propagated by the leftish upper middle class, has been a welcome liberation for many. It has been catastrophic for others, disproportionately in lower classes. Many who might have led decent early-marriage strategy-2 lives have slipped instead into the underclass: destructive drug addiction, permanent unemployment, crime, child neglect and abuse.[13]

Dualist community

The monist counterculture's Romantic fantasy of community was the rural commune. One reason those failed was that most hippies were from middle-class urban backgrounds, and had no clue how to start a balky tractor, snake a drain, or slaughter a hog. The core of the dualist counterculture came from the rural working class, for whom such things are everyday tasks. If only they had been able to cooperate!

In fact, "Jesus freaks"—Charismatic Christian hippies—formed some of the most successful communes. Their Jesus Movement, which predated the main dualist counterculture, was an important bridge between the two, working out ways hippie innovations could be adapted for use by Christian conservatives.[14]

The dualist counterculture appealed particularly to people from rural backgrounds who experienced culture shock when they moved to cities and office-park suburbs for work. The main dualist fantasy of community was an idealization of "traditional" small-town life—"traditional" meaning "all the good stuff with none of the bad." Despite much talk, the counterculture had no

credible program for fixing rampant rural social pathology, so this was no more realistic than the hippie commune movement.

Churches were centers of the dualist counterculture. Church community can provide substantial material support, in addition to the memetic and social support I mentioned earlier. However, existing church institutions were inadequate. The counterculture innovated extensively in sermons and service style, music, management structure, marketing, architecture, and social ministries.

The most successful new-model churches grew explosively into *megachurches*, a qualitatively new form of social organization. Like the few successful communes, these became *subsocieties*: local communities with a distinctive subculture that served a wide array of social needs. This was far more functional in practice than "traditional small-town life." Hoping to reform small towns nationally was a characteristically countercultural project; megachurches are a subcultural one. Therefore, I will discuss them in detail in the next chapter, rather than here.

Upshot and aftermath

In the end, neither counterculture had a workable program for reforming the self, or society, or for renegotiating their relationship.

Although the proposals of both countercultures were *extreme*, neither was sufficiently *radical*. Both left intact a structure of individuals and a nation-scale society confronting each other across an unbridgeable gap. Both merely fiddled with details on either side of the chasm, rather than proposing a fundamentally different approach to the problems of individualism and collectivism. This is a major reason the countercultures failed.

Their social proposals were simplistic and utopian. Social liberalism is not *right*. It is good only *for some people*. Social conservatism is also not right; just good for some people. The fact is, different sorts of people need different social arrangements, including different sexual, family, and community norms.

Later I will argue that this was the fundamental error of the countercultures: universalism. Both tried to impose their preferred way of life on everyone else. However, neither way was accepted by a majority, let alone everyone.

This failure brought out totalitarian tendencies in both countercultures—particularly the dualist one. Totalitarianism, too, makes the personal political and seeks to destroy the boundary between a social system and individuals. It would take extreme state repression to force everyone into a uniform code of sexual morality. Imposing an early-marriage large-family strategy is, indeed, a central project of Islamism, a totalitarian dualist counterculture.[15] Fortunately, in America, both countercultures grudgingly accepted their democratic failure, with only minor terrorist violence from extremists on each side.

Although neither counterculture's political program was adopted in full, both partially succeeded in transforming American government, law, and social norms. (More about that in "Rotating politics ninety degrees clockwise.") Both caused considerable harm to society and to individuals, but also had some benefits.

Making explicit that the self/society boundary needed softening and reworking was a helpful step toward the subcultural mode. The conflict between the countercultures made clearer what the problems of self and society are. It made some people aware that social systems are contingent constructions, not absolute truths, so we all have a responsibility to help them evolve. Although both countercultures were eternalist, most people found themselves somewhere in the middle,

which made eternalism, monism, and dualism less credible. That too set us up for the subcultural mode's move away from all three of those confused stances.

Subculturalism developed *structurally* new models of the self, of society, and their relationship:

- Acknowledging the fragmentation of the self as inevitable made it increasingly unproblematic.
- Acknowledging diversity (including diversity of moral views) allows like-minded people to form distinctive subsocieties. This provided a layer of organization intermediate between the family and the nation-state.
- Thus, the extreme ideals of existentialist individualism (the one-pointed self perfectly separated from social influence) and totalitarian collectivism (the boundaryless self entirely dissolved in social conformity) both lost their appeal.

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1. 1.There were exceptions, particularly in the monist counterculture. Monist movements like anti-capitalism, anti-rationalism, eco-primitivism, the Noble Savage mythos, and the back-to-the-land movement would have destroyed systematicity altogether if actually carried out. The dualist counterculture's alliance with the big-business Republican right mainly forestalled similar moves, although its fringier anti-rational elements could have been equally catastrophic if they had gained power.
2. 2.One manifestation: Christian Voice, the second-most-important Christian Right organization, issued influential "Morality Ratings" on every member of Congress, based on their support or opposition to its legislative agenda.
3. 3.Although the New Left was officially Marxist and anti-capitalist, it had no substantive economic program. Its supposed anti-capitalism was mainly actually opposition to the emotionally unfulfilling "iron cage" of employment in big-business bureaucracy; to the responsibility of private industry for environmental destruction; to the military-industrial complex's promotion of unnecessary wars for profit; and to the inadequacy of government anti-poverty programs. The counterculture was not seriously opposed to a market economy, and was mainly enthusiastic about consuming its bounty of nifty new goods.
4. 4.From the Victorian era forward, do-gooders had campaigned against masturbation and prostitution. Though these campaigns were public, their objects were private, and therefore considered matters of "morality," not "politics."
5. 5.Communal agrarian self-sufficiency is a persistent, malign Romantic fantasy. Brook Farm was a hippie commune of the 1840s which failed in just the same way as the ones of the 1960s. *The Utopia Experiment* describes another attempt ten years ago, which followed the same script again. (This one led by an academic expert on, among other things, the existential risk posed by runaway artificial intelligence.) The underlying fantasy is that the choiceless mode would be paradise. The reality is that it is awful in material terms, even when its human relationships feel more natural.
6. 6.I put "conservative" and "traditional" in quotes for this reason.
7. 7.This model was inspired by sociological research by Jason Weeden and his collaborators. See, for instance, "Religious attendance as reproductive support," "Sociosexuality vs. fast/slow life history," and "Churchgoers are restricted individuals in fast groups." My discussion here is not an accurate summary of Weeden's views, and he might disagree with it. However, if it includes any useful insights, they are mostly his.
8. 8.These are not the only possible strategies. For example, extended families sharing a single home were mainly extinct in America by the middle of the twentieth century. Polygamy had been banned a century earlier. Both are common elsewhere, and more traditional than the "traditional marriage" promoted by "conservatives." DINK—dual income, no kids—is an increasingly popular *non*-reproductive strategy.
9. 9.I could give similar analyses for the other "family values" issues—drugs, pornography, prostitution, feminism, homosexuality, divorce, and so forth. However, I'm not trying to

give a detailed account of social conservatism here, just a sketch of a possible explanation of its principle and function.

10. 10.As with any major movement, different people oppose abortion for different reasons. Some have genuine sympathy for fetuses, or genuinely believe that the Bible forbids abortion. However, these moral and religious concerns can't explain why most Protestants thought abortion was fine until the mid-'70s, before suddenly making it their central political issue. Many abortion opponents do explicitly connect it with "welfare queens," "sluts," and "selfish career women," consistent with a class-based reproductive-strategy analysis. It's worth noting also that opposition to abortion partly replaced opposition to contraception, which was only made fully legal in America in 1972, by the Supreme Court decision *Eisenstadt v. Baird*.

11. 11.Plausibly one reason such professions underpay their entry-level positions is to screen out anyone who would prefer strategy 2 to 3—the lower-middle-class riffraff we don't want in our office.

12. 12.Of course, it has never been entirely restricted to those classes. In fact, one impetus to the 1980s dualist counterculture was the upward mobility of fundamentalists, from the rural working class to the suburban technical middle-middle class, particularly in the Sunbelt defense industry.

13. 13.Of course, economic changes that have disadvantaged the working class are also major factors.

14. 14.See *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right*, pp. 101, 131-4, *et passim*.

15. 15.Islamism was founded by Sayyid Qutb, after spending two years in America, 1949-51. His horror at American sexual openness seems to have been a major inspiration for the movement. "The American girl is well acquainted with her body's seductive capacity. She knows seductiveness lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs, sleek legs and she shows all this and does not hide it."

5 Comments

> Galleon tilting on giant wave
> Galleon courtesy George Grie

I write this during the 2016 American presidential election campaign, which portends a massive political realignment. The two countercultures of the 1960s-80s created stable party coalitions that persisted for decades. This year, they are breaking up.

Understanding where these coalitions came from may help understand how they have functioned, why American politics is so polarized, and what may happen next.

The countercultures redefined the American "left" and "right" from economic to "values" ideologies. Politics shifted from arguments about pragmatic policy questions to fights over meaningness itself. The Democratic and Republican Parties repositioned themselves as champions of monist and dualist countercultural values, respectively. This polarizes American politics irresolvably.

The countercultures' political realignment created a new, two-track social class system. It's personally useful to understand social class better, because it motivates so much of what we all do; but it is also always funny, because we work so hard to hide that from ourselves.

Left and right vary in meaning

In any particular time and place, political affiliation tends to range along a single continuum, which gets labeled left to right. However, "left" and "right" mean quite different things in different places and eras. Ideologues often claim that "what left and right *really* mean is"—whatever serves their argument. However, political scientists agree that there is no defining issue or axis that consistently distinguishes the two. In American politics, left and right have been redefined several times.

During the *countercultural era*, the New Left and New Right replaced the Old Left and Old Right. My previous page analyzed the goals of these New movements in cultural terms. Here I look at their implementation in electoral politics.

American first-past-the-post voting rules force a two-party system.[1] For many issues, there are more than two possible choices; and groups who agree on one topic may disagree on another. These facts imply that the two parties must always assemble incoherent coalitions of interest groups, somehow held together to cover roughly half the voters. When the sizes of groups change, or a group changes its party affiliation, the system becomes unstable, and new coalitions must be organized.

My account of the countercultural realignment is not a general theory; it is about a specific period in American history. There were partly similar political realignments in some other places around the same time. However, the details of the American rotation were unique, and some key events were just accidental.[2] The realignment was driven partly by judicial and legislative actions that granted black Americans voting rights in practice, not just theory. It was also driven partly by economic changes, specifically the growth of the middle class.

So, a "rotation" might have occurred even without the countercultures. However, the parties seized those as powerful, coherent cultural ideologies that could hold together new electoral coalitions.

The Great Rotation

Two diagrams summarize the change. The first illustrates the meanings of "left" and "right" as of 1960:

>   The American political landscape as of 1960

The main political division was between economic classes.[3] The Old Left, and the Democratic Party, represented the working class. The Old Right, and the Republican Party, represented the middle and upper classes. The working class was the majority, and the Democrats had dominated elections for several decades.

Religions aligned with economic class, and with politics.[4] The Mainline Protestant denominations were middle class and Republican. Catholics, Fundamentalists, Charismatics, and other "sects" were working class and Democrats. Religious people identified primarily with their denomination, and were hostile to denominations that had significantly different theologies.

During the countercultural era, the main political division "rotated clockwise," as indicated by the dashed arrows in the diagram above.[5] By 1980, "left" and "right" had new meanings:

>   The American political landscape as of 1980

The new *politics of meaning* was primarily a division within the middle class, who were now an electoral majority.[6] The New Left mainly promoted social freedoms and the social rights of non-economic demographic groups (race, sex, sexual orientation, etc.). It explicitly disclaimed interest in the working-class economic concerns of the Old Left.[7] The New Right mainly promoted a "large-family values" agenda, despite its alliance with business groups.

Religion realigned along with politics:

- The New Right, invented by Fundamentalists, united highly-observant religious people of all religions, denominations, and sects. The three leaders of the Moral Majority were a Protestant, a Catholic, and a Jew. That was a deliberate statement that all religious conservatives share key moral values, so arcane theological disputes should be put aside.[8]

- The New Left united everyone else: atheists, agnostics, "spiritual but not religious" monists, and Christians who didn't go to church, or didn't let God get in the way of a normal life. That last category included a majority of Mainline Protestants.

The new two-track class system

The broad prosperity of the 1960s defused the economic class conflicts that had dominated politics from the beginning of the century. For the middle class, social status became more important than income, because everyone in the class had everything they really needed. Americans' class was increasingly determined by their cultural values, rather than by income.

Social status came to be largely a matter of mouthing counterculturally-correct opinions. I wrote about this at length in "Ethics is advertising":

> The countercultures split the American middle class into two hostile tribes. Members of both considered anyone in the other tribe *inherently immoral*. With us, or against us! To be minimally acceptable as a human being, you had to demonstrate commitment to the correct side.

The middle class developed parallel social status ladders. You climb one of the ladders by demonstrating skill in conforming to, and expressing, either monist or dualist values.

> To count as a member in good standing of the monist ("left") tribe, you needed to have the correct opinion about hundreds of issues. You had to like tofu, Bob Dylan, Cesar Chavez, and Tom Robbins, and to hate nuclear power, Dolly Parton, Ronald Reagan, and the Moral Majority.

> To be upper middle class, you need to be able to figure out, on the fly, what would be the correct opinion about things that are new to you. This requires conceptual sophistication: years of study not only of details, but also of ways to think. That is what a liberal arts education used to be for.

The great thing about the new system is that everyone in the monist middle class could consider themselves superior to everyone in the dualist one, and vice versa. Morally, at least, and that's what counts in the new class system. Suddenly, everyone was above average!

Unfortunately, to maintain above-average status, everyone on each ladder has to constantly reinforce their belief in the worthlessness and moral degeneracy of everyone on the other one. This is one reason the culture war is so bitter and intractable. We fear that if it ended, we'd have to go back to measuring our self-worth in dollars, rather than political correctness.

Also unfortunately, making "values" a major determinant of social worth created an endless negative-sum signaling competition for position on each ladder. This game is negative-sum because the main signaling techniques involve conspicuous wastes of time and cognitive effort. Also, of course, the whole culture-war "values" game is negative-sum because it's actively harmful to social cohesion and sensible government.

One of the best innovations of the subcultural mode was to create a panoply of small status hierarchies, so we could ignore the social status and signaling efforts of everyone outside our subculture. This is much healthier for individuals, but unfortunately it allowed Generation X to drop out of political involvement. That meant the Baby Boomers' destructive culture war persisted long after the death of their countercultures.

Meanwhile, the culture war was cheerfully coopted by consumer capitalism. Income does still contribute to your position on the middle class ladder, even if it does not determine it. Every conceivable category of consumer product comes in monist and dualist versions, at a full range of price points. You can precisely signal which ladder you are on, and how high up, by what you fill your house with.

I do most of my shopping in Reno, Nevada. Reno has two upscale malls, a monist mall and a dualist mall.[9] The monist mall is anchored by an Apple Store; the dualist mall is anchored by Scheels, which sells thousands of guns from a showroom floor the size of half a football field.

Mac Pro

At the Apple Store, for $9,827.00 you can get a fully-spec'd Mac Pro with a 12-core Xeon E5 processor, 64GB of DDR3 ECC RAM, and dual D700 FirePro GPUs with 12GB of GDDR5 VRAM. That's 7 teraflops of crunch, and you've got 528 GB/s of memory bandwidth. You can drive eight streams of 4K video in real time. It's plenty powerful enough to do 3D animation and post-production for major studio films.

The Dalai Lama advertising Apple computers

That's insane, nobody needs a computer like that at home. Anyway, Apple doesn't even make real computers. Just pansy-ass crap for kids and art fags, promoted by the Dalai fucking Lama.

Hey, maybe I'll make an indie video game hit and make a squillion dollars. Don't think I couldn't do it! I'd *need* a computer like that.

Barrett 82A1 rifle
Barrett 82A1 image courtesy Heavennearth

At Scheels, for $12,371.99 you can get a fully-spec'd Barrett 82A1 rifle with an ATACR 5-25x56F1 scope. The semiautomatic 82A1 fires .50 BMG heavy machine gun rounds. It's accurate at 1800 meters, and .50 BMG will go through brick and concrete walls, or destroy a truck's engine block. The US military uses it in anti-materiel applications: you can take out an aircraft, in a closed hangar, with a single shot.

Various rifle cartridges including .50 BMG
The .50 BMG, at the left, with conventional rifle cartridges for comparison.
The second-largest, the .300 Win Mag, is a standard for big-game hunting and for military and law-enforcement sniper rifles.

That's insane, there's no conceivable civilian use for a thing like that. Assault rifles are bad enough, but gun nuts can at least pretend they are going to use them for

hunting or "self-defense." Why do we let these fucking fascist-wannabe rednecks buy military heavy weapons?

Hey, maybe there's going to be a major terrorist attack, or a civil uprising. Don't think it couldn't happen here! I'd *need* a gun like that.

> Gun display
> Scheels showroom floor

Counterculturalism, rebellion, and authority

The mainstream power structure resisted replacement, so both countercultures adopted the stance of romantic rebellion. "It's the system, man!" was the hippie explanation for everything wrong with the world. Or, as the New Left called it, "The Establishment."

Romantic rebellion is not supposed to succeed—success isn't romantic, it's practical. But the mainstream was so rotten that it caved, both times, within a few years, making counterculturalists the new Establishment. That left them with no mainstream to rebel against. They had to resort to rebelling against each other, or to denouncing "The Establishment," which was now themselves. This was ridiculous, and has made a dysfunctional mess of politics ever since.

The monist counterculture was initially highly anti-authoritarian and anti-Establishment, but as it gained power in the Democratic Party, it had to become less so. Its descendent, the current American left, abandoned anti-authoritarianism long ago, and is comfortable using government power to redress perceived social injustices.

The right was traditionally the party of the established order, even though the Republicans had mostly been out of power since the Great Depression. The right's opposition to the monist counterculture was initially conceived antidisestablishmentarianistically, as preserving traditional institutions against long-haired drug-fueled barbarians. However, by the mid-1970s, a series of liberal Supreme Court decisions—*Roe v. Wade* (abortion), *Bob Jones University* (racial segregation in religious schools), and *Engel v. Vitale* (prayer in public schools)—plus the expected ratification of the ERA (women's rights)—made it obvious that the system had been seized by perverts.

The New Right organized as a response to these outrages. Allegiance to the Establishment was no longer tenable. Thenceforth, the Republican Party too positioned itself as a radical insurgency against a corrupt establishment. And as the left became increasingly authoritarian, the right could claim increasingly plausibly to be the party of individual liberties.

Decades later, powerful politicians from both parties campaign "against the government" and denounce "Washington insiders." Such absurdity has had dire consequences for the quality of governance.

The Forever War, and its end

Shifting political conflict from economic to "values" issues lowered the stakes, but pumped up the rhetorical viciousness. Politics can often find reasonable compromises, or even win-win solutions, to economic contests. The Great Rotation created an endless holy war of dueling eternalisms:

- The countercultures' "values" are, supposedly, sacred religious principles, on which compromise is unthinkable.

- The justifications for the values of each side are metaphysical, and make no sense outside the monist or dualist worldview, so arguing with the other party never goes anywhere.
- In reality, the "values" are mainly tribal shibboleths and claims to personal identity and self-worth—which also resist compromise.

There is a mainstream theory of American political change that says political party realignments occur roughly every 36 years. This is explained by generational replacement. Some political scientists date the last realignment to 1968 (about when the Rotation started); some to 1980 (when it was complete). If you believe in the magic number 36, and start from 1968, we are long overdue. This could be explained in terms of Generation X mostly sitting politics out. Alternatively, if you start from 1980, we're right on schedule for a major realignment this year (2016).

In any case, I see a current shift to politics in the atomized mode. In "The new politics of meaning," I called this "the politics of incoherence." The atomized mode is native for Millennials, and electoral power is passing now from the Baby Boom generation to the Millennials. (Generation X is too small ever to dominate the electorate.) Later, I will discuss atomized politics, as a cultural phenomenon, in detail. How it will function in a two-party system, I cannot currently guess. It includes what I call an "echo counterculture war"; but atomization's incoherence suggests this cannot persist after the passing of the Boomers.

I hope Generation X, who will be taking institutional leadership from the Baby Boomers over the next decade, will drop the culture war, and can provide adequate structure to keep atomization's worst consequences at bay.

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1. 1.This is called Duverger's law.
2. 2.According to Frank Schaeffer, who was personally responsible for making abortion a major political issue, and who was extensively involved in the creation of the Religious Right, the Evangelical-Republican alliance was an unplanned and mistaken marriage of convenience that only occurred because a couple relatively minor players happened to hook up. Also, the Southern Strategy was brilliant and necessary in retrospect, but it developed more by empirical observation than rational planning, and was opposed by much of the Republican Party.
3. 3.Left vs. right did not line up perfectly with economics, of course, and there were major political disagreements other than economic ones. Both parties were somewhat incoherent coalitions of convenience before the rotation, just as after. Also, the political alignments of individuals and of groups were generally less coherent, and less polarized, then than now.
4. 4.In fact, both before and after the rotation, religion was the best demographic predictor of American political affiliation, according to polling data.
5. 5.The details of how this happened, in terms of shifts in voter demographics and electoral calculations by the Party leadership, are fascinating in a geeky way. I am resisting writing about that here, because it is well-documented mainstream political history. If you are interested, you could start with the Wikipedia articles on the Fifth Party System, which was the pre-rotation alignment; the Southern Strategy, which returned the Republican Party to power by gaining the votes of the white rural working class, formerly the core of the Democratic Party; and the Sixth Party System, which is the post-rotation alignment. I've also written in some detail about the formation of the alliance between Evangelicals (previously majority Democrats) and the Republican Party in the mid-'70s. Theorists disagree about exactly when the Fifth System ended and the Sixth began. I think it was gradual, from about 1964, when the Republicans first gained support among white Southerners opposed to black civil rights, to the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan.
6. 6.A middle class majority meant economic class *couldn't* be the basis for a two-party system, which needs a roughly 50/50 split. Put a different way, the Democratic Party *had* to make a new ideological appeal to the middle class, because its working-class base could no

longer keep it in power. The party chose to back monist values, including women's and racial minority rights, which had previously been Republican issues. That then allowed the Republican party to draw away working-class and lower-middle-class dualists from the Democrats.
7. 7.This was the main point of C. Wright Mill's Letter to the New Left, one of the movement's key founding documents.
8. 8.Conservative Christianity, post-rotation, became largely non-denominational. Given that its leaders had, since the 1920s, wasted most of their energy on vicious sectarian battles over incomprehensible metaphysical minutiae, this was a startling and welcome development.
9. 9.Actually, the dualist mall is in Sparks, which is the real Nevada. It's just across the Truckee River from Reno. Reno is infested with tax exiles from California, so it's got weird stuff like sushi.

4 Comments

Steampunk airships battle in the sky
The Airship Battle, courtesy Tom McGrath

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

The two countercultures invented fantastical time-distortion mythologies to confuse future and past. Both created nostalgia for imaginary golden ages, which were actually hoped-for (but implausible) futures. Both promised upcoming utopias that were actually tired fantasies from long ago.

Both countercultures assembled their conceptual frameworks from pieces of several old systems of meaning—most of which were long-discredited, for good reasons, and which clearly contradicted each other. They needed to hide that behind appealing origin myths.

Both countercultures assembled their core membership from several disparate subcultures. To weave them together, they needed big-picture unifying themes, leading to a glorious vision of a shared future. The two themes they selected were monism and dualism; and so they spun stories of harmonious monist and dualist societies to come.

The monist counterculture appealed to neophilia and promised innovation; the dualist counterculture appealed to neophobia and promised a return to tradition. Neither delivered. In fact, we'll see, on the whole the monist counterculture took more from the past, and the dualist one was more inventive.

Both, however, drew primarily on the Romantic movement of the 1800s, which was the first to grapple seriously with the defects of modern systematicity, and to propose a renegotiation of the relationship between self and society.

Both countercultures promoted absurd "object level" myths—part of the *content* of their cultures. These included, for example, the founding of the New Age by Mayan and Tibetan priests and the defeat of the Great Beast at Armageddon. These fables—of the monist and dualist countercultures, respectively—were not seriously meant to be believed.

The countercultures also promoted "meta-level myths," which you *were* meant to believe. These were myths about the sources and nature of the countercultures themselves. You were *meant* to believe that the monist counterculture had a radical new vision for society, culture, and self. You

were *meant* to believe that the dualist counterculture was a seamless continuation of traditional Christianity, as it existed before the perversions of the 1960s. Both these meta-myths were mainly false.

According to Lyotard's original explanation of postmodernity, meta-myths are the essence of "modernity," or what I call "the systematic mode. (He called them "grand narratives.") As modernity's failure loomed, the authors of meta-myths became increasingly frantic, and their creations increasingly fantastical. The countercultures deluded themselves about their own nature, and that is part of why they failed.

The countercultures were the last phase of modernity, and the subcultures the first phase of postmodernity. The subcultures abandoned all grand narratives, and instead created playful mythologies that you were *not* supposed to believe. Sky battles between steampunk airships are not credible—but they are fun! I will suggest that such transparent mythologizing is a key resource for the fluid mode.

Fundamentalism claims to be traditionalist, and opposed to modernity. It is actually modernist, and opposed to tradition—and to postmodernity.

> Burqa with full niqab is not traditional in most Muslim cultures
>
> Traditional dress for Muslim women varies widely by culture, and details are not prescribed by scripture

Fundamentalism remade hundreds of millions of people's mode of relating to meaning when it exploded out of obscurity four decades ago. Any account of the future of meaningness must, at minimum, understand fundamentalism as background. The Christian version is still hugely influential in America, although waning. Islamic fundamentalism is the worst memetic threat the world faces currently—although I will suggest it too is on its way out.

Misunderstanding fundamentalisms as "traditional" and "anti-modern" makes it impossible to respond coherently. Recognizing them as modern, anti-traditional, and anti-postmodern is the necessary starting point for understanding.

This page explains how fundamentalist movements:

- are modern in the sense of "recently invented"
- are modernist in the sense of providing a systematic structure of justification
- arise because traditions can't defend against "why?"; only modernist systems can
- are anti-traditional in rejecting cultural specificity in favor of abstract universalism
- are anti-traditional in rejecting complex customary beliefs, practices, and institutions in favor of someone's new and radical explanation of a supposed clear and simple Ultimate Truth
- are countercultural: "new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational systems"
- originally opposed rational modernity but now mainly oppose postmodernity, i.e. the end of the possibility of systematic eternalism
- require extremism because modernity is over and eternalism can no longer work
- are failing, and being replaced with atomized postmodern alternatives.

I sympathize with fundamentalists: postmodernity has frightening defects and dangers. I end the page by recommending that religious people find other, more effective strategies than fundamentalism for opposing postmodern threats to meaning.

Fundamentalism is modern

Fundamentalism is just over a century old. The word "fundamentalism" itself was coined only in the 1920s. It was also only in the 1920s that fundamentalism became a significant force—and then only for a few years, before going underground for decades.

World War I (1914-18) was a profound shock for eternalist certainty in meanings. Social, cultural, and psychological systems began to disintegrate. Fundamentalism seemed to promise their restoration; and this accounts for its 1920s popularity.

However, the movement began just before WWI,[1] as a reaction against "modernist" theology. This explains why it still claims to be anti-modern, although that was (we will see) not exactly true in the 1920s, and became altogether untrue in fundamentalism's second phase, beginning in the 1970s.

> Modernist theology developed in the late Victorian era as a response to the twin challenges posed to Christianity by Darwinism and historical criticism of the Bible. The modernists' goal was to adapt Christianity to the new scientific and historical consensus, and to maintain the relevance of faith in an intellectual climate suddenly grown dismissive of the authority of Scripture. To this end, they stressed ethics rather than eschatology; social reform rather than confessional debate; symbolic and allegorical interpretations of the Bible rather than more literal readings.[2]

The 1920s fundamentalists rightly recognized that Christian modernism was a slippery slope to humanism, secularism, atheism, and nihilism. Half a century later, starting in the late 1960s, the modernist Mainline Protestant denominations imploded. They had eliminated nearly everything from religion except ethics, and then adopted mainstream secular ethics, and so had nothing distinctive to offer anyone.

Fundamentalism suffered a grievous blow in 1925 when its prosecution of the Scopes "monkey trial" (over the teaching of evolution) made it look ridiculous to most Americans. It retreated into a marginal subculture for many decades.

A second wave of fundamentalism emerged in the 1970s, as the innovative memetic core of one of the two great countercultures. This was another period of visible shakiness in the systematic mode of meaningness. The "hippie" monist counterculture challenged mainstream systems, with surprising success. It was also a time of rapid cultural globalization; the mass media suddenly exposed Americans to unfamiliar images and ideas from afar. Within the West, the postmodern era was just beginning—"postmodern" here meaning the condition in which all systems have been discredited. Fundamentalism again offered a bulwark of certainty against the disintegration of meaning.

Islamic fundamentalism has a similar history. Although it has roots in 1700s Wahhabism, the movement began only in the early 20th century, and remained mainly marginal until the 1970s, when it formed the innovative memetic core of the Islamist counterculture. The same pattern holds true for Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist fundamentalisms.

Fundamentalism is modernist

Fundamentalism describes itself as traditional and anti-modern. This is inaccurate. Early fundamentalism was anti-modernist, in the special sense of "modernist theology," but it was itself modernist in a broad sense. Systems of justifications are the defining feature of "modernity," as I (and many historians) use the term.

The defining feature of actual tradition—"the choiceless mode"—is the *absence* of a system of justifications: chains of "therefore" and "because" that explain why you have to do what you have to do. In a traditional culture, you just do it, and there is no abstract "because." How-things-are-done is immanent in concrete customs, not theorized in transcendent explanations.

Genuine traditions have no defense against modernity. Modernity asks "Why should anyone believe this? Why should anyone do that?" and tradition has no answer. (Beyond, perhaps, "we always have.") Modernity says "If you believe and act differently, you can have 200 channels of cable TV, and you can eat fajitas and pad thai and sushi instead of boiled taro every day"; and every genuinely traditional person says "hell yeah!" Because why not? Choice is great! (And sushi is *better* than boiled taro.)

Fundamentalisms try to defend traditions by building a system of justification that supplies the missing "becauses." You can't eat sushi *because* God hates shrimp. How do we know? *Because* it says so here in Leviticus 11:10-11.[3]

Secular modernism tries to answer every "why" question with a chain of "becauses" that eventually ends in "rationality," which magically reveals Ultimate Truth. Fundamentalist modernism tries to answer every "why" with a chain that eventually ends in "God said so right here in this magic book which contains the Ultimate Truth."

The attempt to defend tradition can be noble; tradition is often profoundly good in ways modernity can never be. Unfortunately, fundamentalism, by taking up modernity's weapons, transforms a traditional culture into a modern one. "Modern," that is, in having a system of justification, founded on a transcendent eternal ordering principle. And once you have that, much of what is good about tradition is lost.

This is currently easier to see in Islamic than in Christian fundamentalism. Islamism is widely viewed as "the modern Islam" by young people. That is one of its main attractions: it can explain itself, where traditional Islam cannot. Sophisticated urban Muslims reject their grandparents' traditional religion as a jumble of pointless, outmoded village customs with no basis in the Koran. Many consider fundamentalism the forward-looking, global, intellectually coherent religion that makes sense of everyday life and of world politics.

Fundamentalism is anti-traditional

Traditional culture is a colorful muddle of customary, local beliefs and practices. The diverse styles of traditional women's clothing from different Muslim societies, in the illustration at the top of this page, is a fine example. Lacking a system of justification, there is no basis for arguing that other people's customs are wrong.[4]

Fundamentalism rejects cultural specificity in favor of abstract universalism. There can only be One Ultimate Truth, which must be the same everywhere, so women everywhere must wear the same clothes. Fundamentalism dismisses actual traditions as "inauthentic" on the pretext that they are degenerations from the *authentic, original* religion, which fundamentalism claims to represent —thereby inverting the actual order of history.

Traditional cultures have a structure of authority: if you want to know what God wants, you ask a priest; and he knows because he was told by an older or superior priest. There are sometimes quarrels over who gets what position in the hierarchy, but the structure itself is unquestioned and so requires no justification.

Fundamentalism rejects customary authorities in favor of a supposed clear and simple Ultimate Truth. It says the traditional hierarchy is "corrupt" and must be swept away. The structure of

justification should replace the structure of institutional authority. Fundamentalism is hostile to ritual, because that reinforces traditional authority rather than simply expressing the Truth.

Sayyid Qutb's 1964 manifesto *Milestones* founded modern Islamic fundamentalism. The book's central claim was that Islam *had been entirely extinct* for several centuries. All existing "Islam" was actually *Jahiliyyah*, "paganism," because (he said) it was not based on Shariah. Or at least not the *true* Shariah, which only he could discern. All existing fake-Islamic institutions must be destroyed by violent jihad. Somewhat less dramatically, "the absence of strong traditions and institutional ties in [American] Evangelicalism, and its high level of organizational mobility, made it a distinctly modern phenomenon."[5]

The Ultimate Truth is to be found in the scriptures, supposedly.[6] But the scriptures are pervasively vague, self-contradictory,[7] and say lots of things fundamentalists want to ignore. So fundamentalists claim special interpretive insight that gives them the authority to determine what scripture really means. But "this is where the basic contradiction between fundamentalism and true tradition lies. There is no tradition that permits the individual or group, solely on the basis of its own assertion, to proclaim its own knowledge to be infallible and absolute."[8]

Fundamentalism is countercultural

Fundamentalism, everywhere, became a significant cultural force only during the *countercultural era* (1960s-80s). In America, 1970s fundamentalism *claimed* to be a reaction to the hippie/monist counterculture, which was partly true. However, there was no monist counterculture in the other places where fundamentalisms burst forth, at about the same time. In fact, modern fundamentalism is mainly a reaction to the disintegration of secular systematicity. Each second-wave fundamentalism arose as a desperate, last-ditch attempt to hold meaning together in the face of postmodern nihilism.

Recall that I defined a counterculture as a "new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational system." I've explained how the American "Moral Majority" counterculture of the 1970s-80s fit this definition. Here I'll briefly point out how fundamentalisms *in general* are countercultural.

Fundamentalisms are *new* (and anti-traditional) because they are recent and innovative. I've described American fundamentalist innovations in "Rejecting rationality, reinventing religion, reconfiguring the self" and "Countercultures: modern mythologies." I gather the fundamentalists of other religions are similarly inventive, but don't know details.

Fundamentalisms are all oppositional (*alternative*) by nature. The early-20th-century ones opposed modernist branches of their religions. The post-1970 ones originated as political responses to secular political authorities. Recently, fundamentalists have taken control of some states; but they continue their oppositional attitude even when they exert totalitarian power. Having vanquished the internal enemy, they organize their rule—rhetorically, at least—around jihad against religious enemies outside their state.[9]

Fundamentalisms are all *universalist*, claiming that their Truth applies equally to everyone, and so everyone must behave the same way.[10] Fundamentalisms are all *eternalist*: they claim every tiny thing has a definite meaning, given by the Cosmic Plan, of which they have unquestionable knowledge and understanding. Fundamentalisms are all *anti-rational*: they oppose secular rationality, and claim to ground all meaning in non-rational transcendent revelation, as given in scripture. They are all *systems*, in the sense of networks of justifications.

Fundamentalism is losing to postmodernity

Fundamentalism was originally devised as a weapon against liberal Christian modernism: one system of meanings to fight another system of meanings. In the mid-1970s, it was re-deployed as a weapon against two other systems of meanings: the anti-rational monist counterculture and secular rationalist modernism. But, by that point, all three enemies were already dying at the hands of a fourth, more powerful force: postmodernity.

"Postmodernity" means simply that *no* eternalist system can work any longer. Starting from about 1980, we live in a shattered world: navigating storm-tossed seas among fragments of meaning, mixed up flotsam and jetsam of numerous broken systems. All eternalisms are defenseless against postmodern skepticism.

So, we need to find ways to live without them. Some people built new, smaller, sea-worthy boats —the post-eternalist subcultures—and adapted to postmodernity reasonably well. (At least until atomization hit.) Others—those who found postmodernity most difficult—turned to fundamentalism, for its promise of certainty, of solid dry land. They hoped to preserve a world that makes sense, against the firehose torrent of jagged insanity spewed by the media, and now the internet.

If you understand the defects and dangers of postmodernity, you can sympathize, even if not actually agreeing. Unfortunately, fundamentalism doesn't work; it can't work. The deluge is global, and there is no *terra firma* anywhere.

Most fundamentalists don't understand the difference between secular modernism and postmodernity. Mostly, they are stuck fighting the last war, with the wrong weapons, against a dead horse. In America, it is *way* too late to oppose evolution, or sex violence and nasty noises in music, or liberal bias on broadcast TV, or even abortion. Postmodernity doesn't care about any of that. (Increasingly, conservative Millennial voters say that they don't consider abortion an important issue.) In fact, polls in the past few years show a sharp decline in fundamentalism, especially among younger, more-atomized, generations. Older fundamentalists recognize, resentfully, that they have lost the culture war.

Third-world fundamentalisms think they are fighting "Western influence," "neo-colonialism," or even "Christian crusaders"; but actually the enemy is the atomized global culture, which is as much Asian as Western, and far more capitalist than colonial or Christian. The West can adapt to the breakdown of systems of meaning because we had well-functioning systems for a couple centuries, and spent the twentieth century figuring out why they can't work anymore. Left behind by modernity, and then by postmodernity, much of the third world never had a working systematic mode, and so now doesn't understand why that can't work. As in the West in the 1930s, the obvious response is to try to make eternalism work by force. Fundamentalism and totalitarian nationalism—fused in every third-world version—are attempts. As these fail, they become ever more desperate, and therefore ever more extreme and violent.

> ISIS fighters including young Australian recruit

Islamic extremism—originally devised as a coherent system—is atomizing. The things young Islamists say and do make no sense in any conceptual framework, traditional or modern, Islamic or Western. Many Millennial-generation Islamists know the global internet culture better than they know Islam. They are not fundamentalists—following a religion based on scripture—just extremists.

In an upcoming page, I'll explain how ISIS, the "alt-right," and "tumblr SJW" all promote politics in the atomized mode—just as the Yippies and the Taliban both pursued politics in the

countercultural mode. Since ISIS is pretty much the worst thing in the world now, understanding how this works may be important to fighting it. I'll suggest strategies for memetic warfare.

My advice to fundamentalists (and others)

As a highly religious person, although not a fundamentalist, I share your concern. The atomization of meaning could result in complete cultural and social collapse.

I suggest that you identify your enemy clearly. If you want to preserve your meanings, you need to come to grips with atomizing postmodernity, which is the current reality, instead of wasting your effort fighting obsolete modernisms.

I suggest that it is more important to find ways of preserving *some* coherent meanings than fussing about details. I would rather see a competent fundamentalist theocracy that kept civilization running than an anti-systematic social collapse—even though you would burn me as a witch in the first week after you took power. I hope you would prefer living in a competent atheist rationalist state that kept civilization running than see an anti-systematic social collapse— even if it banned all public practice of religion.

"How do we rescue meaning from nihilistic atomization?" is a more urgent question than whether God exists. Scriptural literalism has definitively failed. You and your former secularist enemies might do well to join forces. I realize a fundamentalist-atheist alliance sounds implausible—but before Francis Shaeffer united them in the 1970s, the idea that fundamentalist Protestants, conservative Catholics, and Orthodox Jews would join to fight secularism sounded absurd.

Ross Douthat, a conservative but not fundamentalist Christian, sees a "postmodern opportunity."[11]

> The Christian gospel originally emerged as a radical alternative in a civilization as rootless and cosmopolitan and relativistic as our own. There may come a moment when the loss of Christianity's cultural preeminence enables believers to recapture some of that original radicalism. Maybe it is already here, if only Christians could find a way to shed the baggage of a vanished Christendom and speak the language of this age.
>
> "Radical orthodoxy" and the "emerging church" movement are attempting to rebuild Christianity from the ground up—bypassing failing institutions, avoiding culture-war flashpoints, and casting the faith as a lifeline for an exhausted civilization rather than just a return to the glories of the past. Both have a particular interest in reaching the urban, the academic, and even the *cool*—which points to the possibility of a kind of revolution from above, in which our cultural elite is reconverted and the country comes along.

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1. 1.One cannot say exactly when a movement began; that is generally somewhat nebulous. You can trace antecedents as far back as you like; fundamentalism does take inspiration from Luther's *sola scriptura*. It would be reasonable to say it began with the publication of *The Fundamentals*, which became the movement's manifesto, in the 19-teens.
2. 2.Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, p. 27.
3. 3."And all that have not fins and scales in the seas, and in the rivers, of all that move in the waters, and of any living thing which is in the waters, they shall be an abomination unto you: ye shall not eat of their flesh, but ye shall have their carcasses in abomination."
4. 4.This doesn't mean traditional cultures are particularly tolerant, just that they don't use systematic logic to denigrate each other.

5. 5.*Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right*, p. 28.
6. 6.Alternatively, in capital-T Traditionalism, the Ultimate Truth is manifest in monist mystical revelation. Capital-T Traditionalism is almost perfectly parallel to fundamentalism, except that its religious core is monist rather than dualist. The "hippie" counterculture of the 1960s-70s was also monist, and Traditionalism manages to combine some of the worst features of both the American countercultures. Perhaps because it's bizarre and repellent at first glance, Traditionalism has had limited success. However, Sedgewick's *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* argues that it has significantly influenced Islamic extremism. Currently, it is also influential in new Russian and Eastern European far-right movements.
7. 7.Genesis 9:3: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything." How about shrimp?
8. 8.*Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, p. 162. This book casts considerable light on fundamentalism; see my summary here.
9. 9.My guess is that, in each case, state jihadism will gradually become less effective as a way of motivating and controlling the populace. That seems to have happened in Iran, which was the first fundamentalist state.
10. 10.Or, at minimum, everyone within a large religious, national, or ethnic group. Many versions of Islamic and Christian fundamentalism claim dominion over everyone in the world; Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist fundamentalisms may only demand obedience from all Jews, Hindus, or Buddhists.
11. 11.*Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, pp. 278-80.

14 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

The extraordinary accomplishment of the two countercultures of the 1960s-80s was to create new, serious, distinctive, positive approaches to all aspects of life.

Countercultural culture was *wide*, in addressing every imaginable topic, and in appealing to a broad audience—ideally, everyone. It was *thick*, in that its treatment of any given topic was substantial, dense, a significant innovation, and woven into one of the two great countercultural themes (monism or dualism) via its structure of justifications.

This contrasts with subcultures, which were narrow: able to address only a few aspects of life, and intended only for a small specific segment of society. As the subcultures progressively fragmented, they also became increasingly thin: they lost the critical mass of creativity needed to develop innovative, deep meanings.

Countercultural culture also contrasts with imploding systematic culture that preceded it. That suffered from a profound loss of confidence, and from a split between "high" culture and "popular" culture. "High" culture had been property of the social elite, but turned against its masters, as the anti-bourgeois artistic *avant garde*. By the 1960s, that had degenerated into knee-jerk negativity and empty simulations of creation, "a series of increasingly desperate gimmicks by which artists sought to give their work an immediately recognizable individual trademark, a succession of manifestos of despair."[1] Meanwhile, "popular" culture was mainly trivial; and so neither could provide thick meanings. Nihilism seemed a plausible consequence of the loss of the meaning-defining classical high culture of the systematic mode at its zenith.

The countercultures deliberately addressed that nihilism by creating new cultures as serious, positive mass alternatives. This is perhaps the most valuable legacy of the countercultural era.

The countercultures obliterated the obsolete high/pop distinction. Their new art started from popular forms, but also borrowed from the *avant garde*. Overall, it had greater depth, heft, sophistication, *and* broad appeal than either.

Some miscellaneous points I will cover

I defined the countercultures as "new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational systems." I noted that rejecting rationality was the central conceptual move of both. Anti-rationality was the key to their contribution to the arts.

Hallucinogenic drugs, whose effects are anti-rational, inspired the monist counterculture's psychedelic art movement.

This theme goes back to the Romantics, though. They too deployed art as an antidote to the dehumanizing effects of modern employment. The monist counterculture drew heavily on Romantic precedents.

The monist counterculture, particularly, harnessed the creative energy of an entire generation into a thematically coherent culture. The Boomer gonzo attitude of throwing oneself totally into a scene, take-no-prisoners, contributed to its enormous power output. This had good and bad effects. It resulted in unprecedented cultural progress, but also a lot of harmful idiocy, and lasting bitter conflict.

I don't need to go into any detail on the *content*, because it's still omnipresent and familiar. Teenagers today still listen to '60s bands, half a century later—just as they have in every intervening decade. I won't be surprised if they still do in another half century. Teenagers have not listened to pop music from the 1940s since the 1940s, and never will again.

One legacy: you can buy almost any product—whether a physical good or a service—in monist or dualist branding. As a random example: holistic dentistry and Christian dentistry. Also, heavy metal.

Everyone in the monist counterculture listened to every genre of popular music. This was consistent with monism, and universalism: music was no longer divided by race, class, ethnicity, or religion. Most subcultures, by contrast, organized around single musical genres. The atomized mode abandoned that again; and now everyone listens to anything. Like this atomized masterpiece, probably the most sublime achievement of Western Civilization:

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1. 1.Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*.

1 Comment

Breakup of the galleon Girona

Wreck of the *Girona* courtesy Notafly

The *universalism* of the countercultures was their fatal flaw.

No single system of meaning can work for everyone—or even for most people. Both countercultural visions failed to appeal to a majority. They were unable to encompass the diversity of views on meaningness found within societies after the collapse of the systematic mode. Because the countercultures were mass movements, they could not provide community.

When these failures became obvious, the countercultures disintegrated. They were replaced by the subcultural mode, which abandoned universalism, and so was able to address all these problems successfully.

This page explains how the countercultures:

- failed to find new foundations for their universalist systems
- … and so were revealed as idealistically impractical
- failed to address the differences in people's interests, values, purposes, and needs
- failed to hold together their coalitions, and so broke up into subcultures
- failed to provide strong social bonds—only membership in a nation-sized counterculture
- failed to cope with their partial success
- failed to transcend their oppositional (*counter*-cultural) attitude

The subcultural mode developed reasonably effective solutions for each of these problems. I foreshadow each solution briefly here, and describe them in detail in the subcultures section.

Failure to find new foundations

Systematic eternalism depends on a foundation: some eternal ordering principle. On that, it builds a *structure of justification*, which gives everything meaning. By the mid-twentieth-century, this had clearly failed. Nihilism seemed the only possible alternative.

Both countercultures recognized that the 1950s American mainstream was an empty shell, based on collective pretense, with mere materialism at its core. It *might as well* be outright nihilism, they thought.

But… there is a more generous way of interpreting the "hypocrisy" of the 1950s. Everyone understood, at some level, that the structure of justification no longer worked. However, everyone also understood, at some level, that *just pretending* was enough to keep the system working. This was actually right, because there never was a genuine foundation for systematic eternalism. In reality, it had always largely run on ritual: everyone acting *as if* the system was justified. This is a good thing! The ritual "as if" is the only way functional societies *can* work.

Unfortunately, by the 1950s, centuries of belief in the myth of ultimate grounding meant no one could admit there was no foundation, even as it became obvious. That meant extreme conformity had to be enforced, lest some child point out "the emperor has no throne" and the whole thing would come tumbling down. Which is exactly what hippie kids did; and so it did tumble down, startlingly rapidly. Belief in the system completely collapsed in the decade between the mid-60s and the mid-70s.

The kids imagined they could build a new eternalism on a new foundation, but they were wrong. They doubled down on eternalism, and lost again. "Everything is totally connected—peace, love, happiness!" didn't work. Neither did "Jesus is my personal savior!" Both countercultures innovated, but these foundations were not new, and their inadequacy had already been understood a century earlier.

Monism and dualism provided easy-to-understand conceptual themes that temporarily unified the countercultures; but neither actually provided a convincing new system of meaning. Instead, it was this-worldly benefits that gave them mass appeal.

Mainly, the countercultures unintentionally underwrote a relieved regression of their followers into a comfortable pre-systematic mode, implicitly rejecting the new systems created by their leaders. On the monist side: happy greedy piglets sucking at the teats of consumer capitalism, willing to make only symbolic gestures (recycling) toward social/economic transformation. On the dualist side: happily amoral heathens committing adultery, having abortions, and taking drugs, willing to make only symbolic gestures (God talk) toward social/cultural transformation. Leaders of both movements saw these as catastrophic and incomprehensible failures of commitment and discipline.

Subcultures, having abandoned universalism, had freedom to innovate without attempting to justify meanings in terms of any foundation. Some began to abandon eternalism as well, and so to acknowledge nebulosity. Naturally, they ran on ritual and creative make-believe: for example, dressing in an elaborate, distinctive, set style to go to a club where a band played music from a genre specific to the subculture, and everyone danced in the ritually correct manner.

Idealistic, extreme, and impractical

The countercultures had to drop rationality to make their foundational claims seem plausible. This was massively unhelpful. Unmoored from reality, both proliferated idealistic fantasies that the 1950s mainstream would have laughed at. The true believers who tried hardest to put them into practice often ended up psychologically damaged.

Fortunately, the mythologies-you-were-supposed-to-believe weren't believable. Counterculturalists tried, but eventually most found the contradictions with reality too obvious. By 1975, "if enough of us get high, we can end war" sounded frighteningly stupid, and so the monist counterculture was over. By 1990, "the Tribulation has begun—we must institute Biblical law to fight the Antichrist" sounded frighteningly stupid, and so the dualist counterculture was over.

The countercultures did profoundly transform American society and culture, but most people wound up adopting a pragmatic mixture of their views. On the issues they disagreed about most —for instance sex and gender—the majority compromised between their extremes. It became clear that "men and women are exactly the same by nature and should act that way" wasn't going to work for most people; but neither would "a woman's place is in the home." Similarly, life-long monogamy and endless "free love" would both be nightmares for most people. The majority adopted sequential-mostly-monogamy as their sexual morality. That has no coherent ideological justification, but seems to work for most people.

Sociological surveys suggest that people's moral judgements are much less divergent than ideologues want—and since discussion is dominated by ideologues, morality is also much less divergent than most people believe. The culture war is mostly for show. "Values" talk functions largely to signal tribal identity and class status.

Each of the extreme positions on sex and gender *do* work well for small minorities, which formed subcultures. In San Francisco, you should not be surprised to hear "we're so excited—one of my wife's female lovers is having a baby!" In New York, you should not be surprised to hear about marriages between teenagers who have had only one chaperoned meeting, arranged by families who have been in America for generations.

Broadly, subcultures abandoned the grand attempt to reform the entire nation to fit an ideological vision. They found solutions that were good enough for a subsociety.

Failure to address diversity

Universalism is necessarily illiberal: it forces a one-size-fits-all system on everyone. People have diverse desires and capabilities, and inevitably the system is wrong for some. Both countercultures aimed for inclusivity, to sweep as many people as possible into their coalition, and attempted to sweep under the rug those who didn't fit. Both failed: their overarching themes of monism and dualism were not strong enough to hold together disparate populations.

Social inclusivity was a central theme of the monist counterculture. It championed the extension of legal and social equality to broad demographic groups, such as races and sexes. It united a coalition of identity movements (blacks, Chicanos, women, gays) with the claim that The Establishment was the single source of all oppression. Theory promised that all minorities would be liberated simultaneously when the system was overthrown. But, in fact, the interests of these groups often diverged, and leaders of the overall movement (mostly straight middle-class white men) were unable to keep them in line with the broad program.

Monist inclusivity also did not address differences within demographic groups. For example, some women wanted careers, and others wanted to stay home and care for their husband and children. "Equality" was not what homemakers wanted. Within the feminist left, some saw lesbians as the vanguard of liberation; others considered them predatory male-identified threats to women's solidarity and safety from sexual harassment. This produced the first of many feminist fissions—one of the earliest manifestations of subculturalism. In the subcultural era, the left recognized the inclusive counterculture's failure to address diversity. It advocated multiculturalism (in effect, separatism) instead.

The monist counterculture advocated "everyone doing their own thing"—a plea to allow diversity after the forced conformity of the 1950s monoculture. That did produce an explosion of cultural creativity; but cynics pointed out that everyone was "doing their own thing" in exactly the same way. The counterculture's universalism meant you *had* to wear your hair long and smoke dope and worship Che Guevara to fit in. Punk—the first subculture—sneered at countercultural conformism.

Insofar as the monist counterculture *did* allow individualism, it sowed the seeds of its own destruction. In the mid-1970s, it fragmented into diverse subcultures, which went their own ways. Some people cared more about politics, and continued that struggle—but often found themselves divided over the meaning of "equality" or how best to achieve it. Others cared more about inner transformation, and pursued their various new religious movements. Many felt burned out and disillusioned, and abandoned monist ideology for getting on with a normal life.

Meanwhile, dualist counterculture leaders also emphasized inclusivity as a consequence of universalism. *All* women should obey their husbands, regardless of their particular faith. That's something dualists could all agree on, because men and women are unambiguously different, and so must have dual roles. (Denying the nebulosity of distinctions is the definition of dualism.)

Inclusivity was also dualists' route to building a powerful political coalition. The main Religious Right organizations, such as the Moral Majority, promoted common cause among Fundamentalists, Charismatics, conservative Catholics, and Orthodox Jews. They also promoted a united front across a wide range of political issues, such as the rights of the unborn, school prayer, gaining military supremacy to defeat global communism, and opposition to pornography, homosexuality, and miscellaneous other sinful sexual deviance.

The dualist counterculture's ecumenism was a lasting legacy, but the broad agenda was not. General-purpose conservative political action groups found themselves spread too thin to effect change. Different conservatives cared about different issues. They formed single-purpose organizations that proved more effective.

The founders of the Moral Majority genuinely believed they represented that—but in time discovered that they didn't. Whether or not it was moral, the Moral Majority definitely did not command the allegiance of a majority. At most, about 40% of Americans aligned with their agenda. Likewise, at most about 40% of Americans aligned with the values of the monist counterculture. Of the rest, some were centrists who found some value and some fault in both. But many wished to be left alone, to pursue their own distinctive purposes, as individuals or as subcultures. They were unwilling to be dictated to by moralizing priests and political activists of either persuasion.

Recognizing diversity, and organizing around it, was the essence of subculturalism.

Failure to provide community

Both countercultures promised a brotherhood of all counterculture participants. That was not a workable basis for community, because there were too many participants, and they were too diverse.

Instead, the countercultures provided membership-based tribal identities. Unfortunately, identity is not community, although the countercultures often confused the two. These identities were mainly harmful, I think; they did not provide much commonality or social support within a counterculture, and they accentuated the differences between them. Still, for many participants, they persist to the present day. That energizes the culture war.

In "The personal is political" I explained how each counterculture also attempted to create a level of social organization larger than a family and smaller than a nation-state, to provide the intermediate-scale groups that humans naturally crave. So I won't go into detail here, but briefly:

- Monists flocked to rural communes, which mostly failed, for predictable reasons. Those that succeeded became subcultures.

- Renewed practical support from churches as community-builders was an enduring contribution of the dualist counterculture. Churches are places of ritual, and it is ritual that holds communities together. On the whole, the rump of the dualist counterculture is in better shape now than the monist rump, and church community may be the reason. Megachurches are a particularly successful version. Those function as subsocieties—a distinctive feature of the subcultural mode.

Failure to transcend the oppositional attitude and cope with success

You can't be a *counter*-culture if you take over the mainstream. You can't be romantic rebels if you control the most powerful government in the world. You can't rail against the culture industry when you run it.

Because the '50s systematic mainstream *was* a hollow shell, both countercultures rapidly gained unexpected, albeit partial, success. Unfortunately, they had no realistic plans for what to do when they won (as I explained in "Idealistic, extreme, and impractical" above). What does the dog do when it catches the car? Rebellion becomes ridiculous and dysfunctional.

The monist counterculture railed against capitalism, but its brilliant cultural creations—its music, its graphic design styles, its clothes, its films—were perfect consumer products. Hippies and the culture industry quickly coopted each other, fusing monist values with capitalist commodity fetishism. That diffused holistic peace-love-freedom-wow-man themes throughout American culture, but also distorted and trivialized the most serious achievements. The punk subculture was a reaction to mid-70s corporate rock: the hippies, punks said, had "sold out" to the music business.

Success was a mixed blessing for politics, too. As either movement achieved one of its aims, supporters for whom it was the critical issue—whether ending the draft, or defeating the Equal Rights Amendment—lost interest.

In 1989, Jerry Falwell, the co-founder and public face of the Moral Majority, disbanded the organization, declaring "Our goal has been achieved… The religious right is solidly in place and religious conservatives in America are now in for the duration." That seemed true. But it was also true that donations had decreased dramatically, as the golden Reagan years dissipated moral panic; and so the Moral Majority was no longer financially viable.

Paul Weyrich had co-founded and named the Moral Majority, and acted as its behind-the-scenes organizational strategist. In 1999, three years into Bill Clinton's presidency, and ten years after Falwell's declaration of success, he wrote a brilliant "Letter to Conservatives," proposing conservative subculturalism:

> We probably have lost the culture war. I no longer believe that there is a moral majority. I do not believe that a majority of Americans actually shares our values. If there really were a moral majority out there, Bill Clinton would have been driven out of office months ago.

> [We must] look at ways to separate ourselves from the institutions that have been captured by the ideology of Political Correctness, or by other enemies of our traditional culture. I would point out to you that the word "holy" means "set apart," and that it is not against our tradition to be, in fact, "set apart." We have to look at a whole series of possibilities for bypassing the institutions that are controlled by the enemy.

> The promising thing about a strategy of separation is that it has more to do with who we are, and what we become, than it does with what the other side is doing and what we are going to do about it.

This is a perfect articulation of the subcultural mode, and of its political model: Archipelago. Subcultures are not opposed to each other. They separate from each other in order to pursue their own purposes, without attempting to impose them on anyone else.

1 Comment

Wreckage in a sea battle

Both sides of the culture war now believe they are losing.

Both sides are wrong: they lost decades ago.

We all lost.

You don't need me to tell you that politics has become dysfunctional. That it is polarized by a culture war. That too many people are turning to extremism because their governments can't get anything done.

Both American countercultures have been dead for more than a quarter century. However, they are still locked in combat as decaying kaiju zombies: the *culture war*. Their trail of collateral damage scars our social landscape.

Or, as I put it in the introduction to this chapter, the countercultures were galleons built to escape the conflagration of systematic civilization. But galleons are archaic, clumsy, ornately ridiculous vessels, ill-suited to contemporary conditions. With the rejection of rationality, they came unmoored from their foundations. They drifted, collided, and battled, until finally breaking up. Now the wreckage is sinking.

The left and right of current American electoral politics are direct descendants of the 1960s-80s monist and dualist countercultures. In the 2016 Presidential campaign, Trump's signature issue is "build a wall"—a concrete manifestation of dualism, whose concern is to harden boundaries and sever connections. Clinton responds by advocating "building bridges" instead. She means that metaphorically,[1] as a statement of monism, the impulse to eliminate boundaries and connect everything. I think, though, that this may be the last American national election to be fought along the monist-dualist axis.

Overview of this page

The sections of this page are:

We are doing politics wrong
> The culture war blocks sensible solutions to urgent and important social, cultural, psychological, and practical problems.

Baby Boomer bafflement
> Many people get stuck in the "native mode" of their twenties. The culture war is mainly fought by those who participated in one of the countercultures back in the day, can't understand why it failed, and are still trying to make it work. This section also summarizes the rest of the page as a series of bullet points.

Let go of the sacred myths of your tribe
> The culture war chooses symbols and myths, rather than pragmatic issues, as the battlefield. Sacred abstractions make compromise difficult—but, fortunately, they are not what anyone really cares about.

Why are THOSE PEOPLE so awful?
> Because they, like you, are fighting about identity, status, dominance, and tribal survival—not, as both sides claim, "values."

Disentangling the culture war
> If both sides understood what they actually want and care about most, it would help resolve the conflict.

We are doing politics wrong

The social world is going to hell. I don't need to list the disasters happening just today; check your social media feed for full details.

Politics is supposed to be the way to deal with vast problems and impending catastrophes. It is totally not working. It's the problem, not the solution.

This is obvious and uncontroversial. For instance, throughout the past five years, polls have found that less than 20% of Americans have approved of the job Congress is doing. Less than 10%, sometimes! Democracy is, by definition, not functioning when most people disapprove of the government. The two Presidential candidates are both loathed, to an unprecedented extent. The major parties, though supposedly representing the monist and dualist value systems, are both widely considered to promote little more than the interests of their corporate donors. Media coverage of politics is awful; deliberately making everything worse in pursuit of advertising dollars. The electorate is hyperpolarized, and Democrats and Republicans hate and distrust each other more than in decades.

This seems to be approaching a breaking point: in many parts of the world, extremist parties, bizarre policies, and absurd candidates are gaining momentum. This reflects not a public desire for extremism, but a revulsion with dysfunctional politics-as-usual, and recognition that fundamental change of *some* sort is urgent.

> Campaign poster: Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords

Tragically, the oppositional attitude of the *counter*-cultures, and their mirror-image structural duality, was a perfect fit for the American two-party system. In the "Great Rotation" of the meanings of left and right, "values" captured the political process. That removed many important issues from democratic consideration—because they aren't about "values." This is, I think, the root cause of current political dysfunction.

It has also been terrific for the ruling class—both politicians and plutocrats. When politics is mostly about sex, drugs, religion, and cartoon frogs, it is much easier to cut backroom deals that capture regulatory agencies and redirect trillions of tax dollars to business interests. So long as a policy question does not line up with the monist-vs.-dualist axis, it is not "political" and therefore can be sold to the highest-bidding lobbyists.

For the past decade, globally, macroeconomic policy has been run largely for the benefit of the financial industry, at an enormous cost to everyone else. This is not a right-vs.-left issue. It is not even a rich-vs.-poor issue. It's an everybody-else-vs.-the-financial-industry issue. How can subsidies in excess of a trillion dollars a year persist, with no popular support from either the right or the left? *Because* it's not about "values," it is "not political" under the current definition of politics. The Great Rotation removed the single most important policy issue from the democratic process.

Baby Boomer bafflement

The culture war persists largely because most Baby Boomers[2] do not understand why their countercultures failed. Although the countercultures have been *over* for a quarter century, participants on both sides do not accept this obvious fact, and are unwilling to draw any conclusions from it. This refusal is what animates the undead Japanese movie monsters—or, to switch metaphors in mid-ocean, it is the reason doomed navies are still fighting from sinking wrecks.[3]

Many participants still have a wistful certainty that someday, somehow, the glorious counterculture of their youth will rise again, and its eternal truth and justice will triumphantly replace the corrupt mainstream. (This requires deliberately not-noticing that there hasn't *been* a mainstream for decades.) They maintain a rosy nostalgia for the hippie or Reagan eras. They cherish salvation fantasies for the future "after the Revolution," or "when we take back America." This is entirely unrealistic, on both sides.

Both sides resent the other as the apparent explanation for their own counterculture's failure. I suspect one reason the culture war has heated up dramatically in the past few years is that Baby Boomers realize they will pass out of public life over the next decade, and now is their last chance to impose their values on everyone else. It's the final, desperate push before their time runs out. Realizing that victory is unlikely within their lifetime accounts for some of bitterness of the war.

Maybe understanding that opposition from the other tribe was *not* the reason for failure can help overcome polarization?

- Your counterculture did not fail because the other counterculture opposed it. (They did, but that's not why.)
- Your counterculture failed because the majority did not agree with it.
- The majority rejected your counterculture because it was plainly wrong about many things.
- It would help if you understood how younger generations relate to meaningness; they are right that some of your main issues are illusory.
- You need to let go of the sacred myths of your tribe. Decades ago they inspired genuinely positive social change, but now they produce only frustration and hatred and stalemate. Everyone born after 1970 thinks they are idiotic. You are stuck pretending to believe, but even you secretly know they aren't true.
- Your counterculture and the other one also agree about many things!
- Some of what you agree about is wrong; you should admit that and drop it.
- Some of what you agree about is right; you should work together to support it.
- Much of what you imagine you fight about is symbolic, not substantive. Your advocacy of these issues is mostly a statement of tribal identity, and claims for high status within your tribe.
- When your symbolic issues blow up into actual political conflicts, often you are fighting to establish tribal dominance, not to accomplish pragmatic improvements in society.
- If you understand what you really disagree about, and why, you may be able to find pragmatic compromises, instead of both sides demanding total victory.

Let go of the sacred myths of your tribe

Both countercultures were eternalisms: claims about the Ultimate Truth Of Everything that explains all meanings. Eternalism is always harmful: it makes you stupid (because the Eternal Truth is not always so); emotionally, morally, and socially immature; and vicious when you feel you have to defend it even in cases where it's obviously wrong.

Both countercultures were attempts to rescue eternalism from the threat of nihilism. Both failed, because eternalism can't work. But when the only alternative seems to be nihilism, any amount of pretense, deceit, and distortion seems justified in defending even a failed eternalism.

The countercultural eternalisms function much like religions, even when, on both sides, they are largely non-theistic ("political correctness," patriotic nationalism). They are grand narratives that start from the sacred principles of monism and dualism, and elaborate into vast mythologies that are supposed to make the central Truth believable. But the mythologies themselves are not believable,[4] and both Truths are false. Continuing to pretend you believe them is morally wrong, not only—but not least—because that pretense has ruined politics.

Some of the hardest-fought culture war battlegrounds are not about "values" as such, much less policy proposals; they are over symbols. That's what makes it a *culture* war. Here's Scott Alexander, in "Five Case Studies On Politicization":

The Red Tribe and Blue Tribe have different narratives, which they use to tie together everything that happens into reasons why their tribe is good and the other tribe is bad.

Sometimes this results in them seizing upon different sides of an apparently nonpolitical issue when these support their narrative; for example, Republicans generally supporting a quarantine against Ebola, Democrats generally opposing it. *[A quarantine is a boundary—the essence of monism vs. dualism.]* Other times it results in a side trying to gain publicity for stories that support their narrative while sinking their opponents' preferred stories – Rotherham for some Reds; Ferguson for some Blues.

When an issue gets tied into a political narrative, it stops being about itself and starts being about the wider conflict between tribes until eventually it becomes viewed as a Referendum On Everything: "do you think the Blue Tribe is right on every issue and the Red Tribe is terrible and stupid, or vice versa?"

Some examples are entirely symbolic.[5] A Boomer/countercultural example was flag burning; everyone seems to have lost interest, but that was huge on several occasions over several decades. Current Millennial/atomized examples are the fights over pronouns and dead gorillas.

More typically, symbolic politics contest issues that have some practical importance, but not nearly enough to justify the effort that goes into them; or in which symbolic meanings overlay and distort an underlying practical matter. Abortion—"a condensation symbol for changes in women's roles, the family, and acceptable sexual behavior"[6]—is an example I have used repeatedly. I've done that because it's perhaps uniquely central to the culture war.

To be fair to the right, I would like to give an example from the left that is equally important and equally distorted, but I can't think of one. Gun control is similar in being mainly symbolic: primarily of the culture war itself, but also race, gender, community, and the proper relationship between individuals and the state. However, both left and right are at fault for distorting guns' meanings and magnifying them far beyond practical import.[7] Recycling is a left-only structural parallel to abortion—a moralizing "condensation symbol" for monist conscientiousness—but no one actually cares about it.

Keystone XL was less central than abortion, but still "a top-tier election issue for the 2014 elections for the United States Senate, House of Representatives, governors in states and territories, and many state and local positions as well."[8] In case you missed the fuss, Keystone XL was a proposed oil pipeline. The environmental lobby, and the American left in general, devoted extraordinary efforts to preventing its construction. As far as I can tell, the possible environmental consequences were minor; there are many more important environmental policy questions which the movement has fought much less hard. Although *notionally* environmentalists' concern was possible spills, everyone understood that Keystone was *symbolically* about global warming, and therefore *really* about global warming—even though everyone also understands that in practice it would have had almost no effect. Other policies affect carbon emissions far more, and might have been altered with far less effort. So why did the left choose to draw a line in the sand at Keystone XL?

In "The toxoplasma of rage," Alexander suggests an explanation.[9] Advocacy groups deliberately choose *bad* examples because those generate the most controversy. The one they promote is obviously wrong, so the Tweedledum side objects loudly. However, the general principle is considered correct by everyone on the Tweedledee side, so they feel they have to defend it. Their specific arguments are perforce lousy—even if the principle *is* right—so Tweedledum senses blood in the water and closes in for the kill. But the underlying, broader issue seems critical, so

Tweedledee will defend the unconvincing symbolic example to the death. The brutality of the ensuing battle generates huge publicity for the cause. (And also, to be cynical, donations to the advocacy organization, and advertising revenue for the media that cover it and fan the flames.)

> If you want to signal how strongly you believe in taking victims seriously, you talk up the least credible case you can find. A rape that obviously happened? Shove it in people's face and they'll admit it's an outrage, but they're not going to talk about it much. There are a zillion outrages every day. A rape allegation will only spread if it's dubious enough to split people in half along lines corresponding to identity politics. People start screaming at each other about how they're misogynist or misandrist or whatever, and your Facebook feed gets hundreds of comments in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS about how my ingroup is being persecuted by your ingroup.[10]

> Wreck of the Birkenhead: rescue from a sinking ship

For both sides, it is obvious that the other mythology is false. *That* eternalism is a sinking ship. It's about to disappear beneath the black waves of nihilism.

Secretly, both sides also know their own mythology has been shot full of holes, too. It is taking on water at a terrifying rate—but from the splintered deck you stand on, it looks *less bad* than the other.

I call out to you:

> It's a pile of water-logged junk; the rest will sink soon; why don't you come join us in our fleet of nimble new watercraft?

I would like to encourage stuck-in-the-past counterculturalists to learn the later modes of meaningness. Then you can engage with this world, as it is, instead of trying to live in fantasies of what should have happened, decades ago; or maybe will someday happen, if only your counterculture triumphs.

The subcultural mode of relating to meaningness developed effective solutions to many of problems the countercultures tried, and failed, to address. Subculturalism gave rise to other problems, some of which the atomized mode addressed effectively. We now live in a world shaped by these movements.

Many counterculturalists *can't even see* the central problems of meaning that younger generations face.[11] Looking through a countercultural lens, the only thing that matters is whether the monist or dualist values overpower the other set. From that point of view, the social, cultural, and psychological concerns of younger generations are trivial—because younger people mostly don't care about monism vs. dualism. But these new problems of meaning are generated by the world we all live in; and they are inescapable, except by retreating into fantasies of total countercultural victory.

Why are THOSE PEOPLE so awful?

They actually *are* awful. It's not just that they are the Other Tribe.

Or, at least, they are *acting* awfully. They are behaving atrociously because they, like you, are fighting about identity, personal adequacy, dominance, and tribal survival. And they, like you, recognize they are losing. When you feel that you are losing a life-or-death struggle, you abandon rules of engagement; any atrocity is justified.

During the countercultural era, political conflict concerned substantive social issues, and genuine differences in values. Nowadays, the zombie culture war is mostly about identity—trumpeting loyal membership in your political tribe—and about your status within that tribe. That means participants have little motivation to engage in actual political struggles. What appears to be politics is often ritual posturing, communicating to one's own tribe, rather than engaging with the other one. When culture warriors pretend to promote the old myths, everyone knows they are unworkable, so this is mere theatre.

Both countercultures, back then, tried to make membership in the counterculture the main source of identity and of community. This worked badly; the countercultures were too big to function well that way. However, may of the participants still do identify closely with their counterculture, and do still try to take it as their community, or extended family.

On that basis, anything that contradicts the mythology is taken as a personal attack on one's self, and as violence against one's clan, rather than disagreement about issues. Unfortunately, this perception is often justified. When the two sides of the culture war do engage, it is mainly just tribal conflict. It's meta: a fight about the fight itself. The big question is *who is going to win*, not —as in the '60s-80s countercultural era—"how can we change society for the better?"

James Davison Hunter coined the term "culture war" in a classic 1991 book. He wrote:

> Each side ardently believes that the other embodies and expresses an aggressive program of social, political, and religious intolerance. According to their respective literature, each side has wittingly or unwittingly spawned a political agenda that is antidemocratic and even totalitarian in its thrust.
>
> Both claim to speak for the majority, both attempt to monopolize the symbols of legitimacy, both identify their opponents with a program of intolerance and totalitarian suppression. Both sides use the language of extremism and thereby sensationalize the threat represented by their adversaries.
>
> Perceived threats typically engender a sense of cohesiveness among the threatened members. In the act of opposing an adversary, the community expresses a common moral indignation, and asserts its moral authority anew. Thus, not only is the community drawn together, united as a collectivity, but it is reminded of its heritage, its duty, and its mission to the larger world. Standing against an adversary is the ritual reaffirmation of the community's identity in the face of what may be a far greater adversary, its own internal moral disintegration. It is part of a natural collective response to the threat of the community's own structural insecurity and moral instability.[12]

As I wrote earlier, the moralization of politics has been a disaster. It is reinforced by the two-track class system, which relies on the illusion that you are morally superior to everyone in the other tribe.

When everyone in the other tribe is *eeeeevil*, they cannot be trusted to honor a compromise. The war can only be a bare power struggle for domination; for total victory; for the outright elimination of the other tribe. Not, in America at least, a literal genocide: but many on both sides of the culture war believe that the country can only be saved when everyone who holds the wrong ideology has been bullied into holding the correct one.

In America, surveys show that both sides are increasingly fearful of the other, and increasingly angry at them. Each side's perception that their tribe is besieged, threatened, and may not survive, is entirely realistic. *Both* are probably doomed. Frantic bailing keeps the wrecks above water—

but Generation X mostly doesn't care, and the Millennials are not organized enough to keep ships afloat after the Boomers are gone.

At risk of sounding preachy: all this is Buddhism 101. Confusion leads to fear; fear leads to anger; anger leads to aggression; aggression leads to more confusion, fear, and anger; those lead to death and damnation.

Standing down requires breaking the confusion/fear/anger/aggression cycle. This page and the next try to address the confusion part—which, according to Buddhism 101, is where it always starts, and has to end.

Disentangling the culture war

The culture war can be fun—when you feel like you are winning. Then, there is no motivation to negotiate, compromise, or look for mutually acceptable solutions. However, both sides feel like they are losing much of the time, and most people probably recognize that the culture war is harmful, and should, ideally, somehow, stop. On the other hand, the other side is obviously hateful and wrong, so that doesn't seem realistic.

Anyway, straight-up compromise is mostly impossible, because there are sacred values involved, and you can't compromise about sacredness.

Progress has to come from better understanding of what both sides actually care about. That must be disentangled from claims they feel they must defend because it's part of their contrived mythology. I believe that each tribe's account of its own values and interests is wrong, so both tribes misunderstand not only what the other side wants, but what they want themselves. When that is clarified, both sides may find that many concrete issues, which they had infused with abstract sacredness, are not critical after all. Having discovered their actual interests, they can negotiate pragmatic solutions.

I don't have a full understanding of either tribe's values and interests, but I hope to contribute some insights. I also suggest that recent empirical studies of *how* people hold sacred moral, political, and religious values have much to offer. I would point to work by, for example, Scott Atran on negotiating with fundamentalists, Jonathan Haidt on the moral psychology of liberals vs. conservatives, and Jason Weeden and Robert Kurzban on political motivations.

It might seem idealistic that either side would be willing to make a serious effort to resolve the culture war. Perhaps so; but it's important enough that we ought not to rule it out. However… time may have run out. The current culture war is led by Baby Boomers, whose age may make them resistant to new ideas; and anyway they will be aging out of power soon. So maybe it doesn't matter! On the other hand, a new "echo" culture war has emerged recently, conducted largely by Millennials over social media. The atomized, echo war has some—not all—of the same dynamics as the countercultural one, so some of the same resolution methods may apply.

Much of my analysis is on the next page, "Completing the countercultures." I apply the fundamental method of the *Meaningness* book: understanding a conflict in terms of confused stances, disentangling their fixations and denials of meaning, and thereby shifting to a complete stance. That is a bit abstract. The remainder of this section makes some other, tentative, basic suggestions that are not particularly connected with the *Meaningness* framework.

Disentangling morality from politics would be enormously helpful. This might require a better popular understanding of the functions of morality—both its legitimate and its illegitimate ones. In the culture war, moral judgement functions mainly to maintain self-esteem through self-justification and tribal identification, including demonizing the other tribe.[13] That is, you try to

convince yourself, and your community, that you are a good person because you are On The Right Side, and you loathe the other tribe more than anyone. Besides the harm done, this actually doesn't work very well. Self-righteous contempt delivers a momentary confidence boost, but in the long run hatred doesn't feel all that great. Also, it forces you into constant anxious competition to see who is best at proclaiming tribal dogmas. There are other, better bases for self-esteem. Could we make this common knowledge?

Research[14] suggests that the differences in values between the tribes are much smaller than both think. Most supposed conflicts in fundamental values are actually disagreements about concrete issues (is euthanasia OK? is cultural appropriation OK?) that were given symbolic significance through mythological reasoning. Research finds that there *are* differences in fundamental values, but they are only matters of degree: differing emphasis when evaluating competing moral considerations. For example, Haidt and his collaborators found that conservatives give greater weight to purity, as a fundamental principle, and progressives give greater weight to care for others. (The division between pure and impure is a dualist concern, and connection with others is a monist one.) But everyone recognizes the significance of both.

Arnold Kling, in *The Three Languages of Politics*, similarly suggests that progressives are primarily concerned with oppression, conservatives with civilization vs. barbarism, and libertarians with freedom vs. coercion. When each group talks politics, they make claims exclusively in terms of one of these moral axes, ignoring the other two. Consequently, they talk past each other; no one hears arguments from the other groups.

On this account, progressivism, conservatism, and libertarianism are all simplistic: they sacrifice moral accuracy for ideological consistency. It is much easier to make moral judgements by taking only one of three factors into account—but you will often get the wrong answer.

Kling's framework gives me hope: everyone can agree that oppression is bad, civilization is good, and freedom is good. There is no fundamental values conflict: conservatives do not favor oppression, and progressives do not favor barbarism—despite accusations from the other side in both cases. And no one favors coercion for its own sake. In some concrete cases, there are tradeoffs between the considerations; these can be negotiated only when all are recognized and understood.

Several empirical studies suggest that opposing political groups *can* come to understand each other if they learn to talk in terms of the other side's preferred fundamental values. Not only that; they can often even change the other side's mind that way:

> We presented two messages in support of same-sex marriage. One message emphasized the need for equal rights for same-sex couples. It is framed in terms of a value—equality—that research has shown resonates more strongly among liberals than conservatives. The other message was designed to appeal to values of patriotism and group loyalty, which have been shown to resonate more with conservatives. (It argued that "same-sex couples are proud and patriotic Americans" who "contribute to the American economy and society.") Conservatives supported same-sex marriage significantly more if they read the patriotism message rather than the fairness one.

> In a parallel experiment, we presented two messages in support of increased military spending. One argued that we should "take pride in our military," which "unifies us both at home and abroad." The other argued that, through the military, the poor and disadvantaged "can achieve equal standing," by ensuring they have "a reliable salary and a future apart from the challenges of poverty and inequality." Liberals expressed significantly greater support for increasing military spending if they read the fairness message rather than the patriotism one.[15]

That's Robb Willer and Matthew Feinberg, in "The Key to Political Persuasion," summarizing their "From Gulf to Bridge: When Do Moral Arguments Facilitate Political Influence?." Scott Alexander riffs on another of their papers, on persuading conservatives to care about global warming by using the language of moral purity.

As Willer, Feinberg, and Alexander all note, few people are currently either willing or able to switch moral languages.[16] (Partly because political arguments are not *meant* to persuade the other side: they are meant to demonstrate conformity—or, even better, virtuosity—to your own.) What would motivate more people to learn? Can we agree to reward members of our own tribe for calming down the other?

The ability to coordinate three incommensurable moral systems, or to explain a topic in terms of a system other than your own, may require ethical meta-systematicity. That ability is, unfortunately, uncommon. I've also called it "ethical fluidity," and it's closely related to the complete stance and the fluid mode. Elsewhere, I've suggested the possibility of developing a curriculum that helps people develop meta-systematic cognitive ability, and to transition into fluidity.

Perhaps you'd like to try an exercise? One that might help develop meta-systematic skills, and perhaps propel you toward fluidity?

1. Write another brief argument—a few sentences—explaining why legal same-sex marriage is a good thing, in terms of the values language preferred by social conservatives: decency, loyalty, sanctity, purity, respect. Make it significantly different from Willer and Feinberg's "proud and patriotic, contributing to America." (This is easier than parts 2 and 3: some social conservatives *do* support same-sex marriage based on fundamental conservative values.)

2. Write an argument explaining why same-sex marriage should be prohibited, in terms of the values language progressives prefer: oppression, care, fairness, equality. (This is more difficult, but it's entirely possible—although I doubt you could convince many progressives.)

3. Explain why same-sex marriage should be prohibited, in the values language libertarians prefer: freedom, procedural justice, rationality. (This question is extra credit for advanced students!)

(This is an "ideological Turing Test.")

In "The illusion of understanding," I reviewed research that showed that people *think* they understand politics much better than they actually do. Experimenters asked people to explain how a proposed policy, which they favored, would work. (Rather than to explain why it is Right!) Mostly, they couldn't, which led them to realize they didn't know.

The result was that they expressed more moderate opinions, and became less willing to make political donations in support of the programs, after discovering that they didn't understand them as well as they had thought. I find this cheering.

Weeden and Kurzban, in research summarized in *The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind: How Self-Interest Shapes Our Opinions and Why We Won't Admit It*, find that differing pragmatic interests explain Americans' political opinions better than differing ideological "values." Supposed moral considerations are often just rationalizations for advocating government policies that will benefit you and your community (often at the expense of many or most other people).

Their discussion of sexual politics inspired mine in "The personal is political." Analyzing politics, as I did there, in terms of three competing reproductive strategies may help both sides of the culture war understand each other's interests, find unexpected areas of agreement, and negotiate pragmatic truces where there are genuine conflicts.[17]

To recap, the three strategies are:

1. *Opportunistic* mating without marriage, and with minimal parental investment—especially, minimal support by fathers. This is most common among the underclass and lower working class.

2. *Early* marriage (teens or early twenties); many children, starting shortly after marriage; emphasis on life-long monogamy; and high total parental investment, spread over many children. This large-family strategy became typical in the upper working class and lower middle class.

3. Marriage and children *delayed* to late twenties or into the thirties in order to accumulate resources (university education and establishing a career); multiple sexual relationships before marriage; fewer children; highest per-child parental investment. This is typical of the upper middle class.

I found that setting aside "Biblical values" rhetoric, and understanding social conservatism as self-interested advocacy for government support for the large-family strategy, makes me more— not less—sympathetic. I don't want a large family, but I can now see why people who do would adopt "moral" views that had previously made no sense to me. I don't have a problem with their pursuing that strategy, so long as they leave others alone to pursue different ones.

Relatedly, Charles Murray points out that upper-middle-class liberals conform to key conservative values better than conservatives do: honest hard work, stable marriages, responsible parenting, and functional community. He advocates that they "preach what they practice," rather than promoting an ideology that excuses and promotes dysfunctional behavior in the lower classes. This also makes sense to me.[18] It could be helpful for both conservatives and liberals to admit that strategies 2 and 3 have much in common, and have things to learn from each other.

On this analysis, both conservatives and middle-class liberals deliberately conflate strategies 1 and 3. It's rhetorically convenient for social conservatives to lump together everyone else, indistinguishably, as sexual deviants. However, the typical sexual behavior of people pursuing strategies 1 and 3 is entirely different. Middle class liberals, when having casual sex before marriage, are usually careful not to get pregnant; the same cannot be said for the underclass. Conservatives choose, unhelpfully, not to recognize that sexual permissiveness has different consequences for different groups.

At the same time, liberals' admirable concern for the oppressed leads them to express solidarity with members of the underclass pursuing strategy 1. This may blind them to the realities of underclass dysfunction—notably including the bad consequences of teenage pregnancy and single-parent families. The incentives faced by people pursuing strategy 1 are radically different from those in strategy 3—more different than either is from strategy 2. Pretending otherwise, however well intentioned, does no one any good—including not the underclass themselves.

If it is true that the fundamental issue dividing social conservatives and liberals is early marriage and large families vs. late and small, there are genuine differences of pragmatic interest. Both will naturally want the government and other institutions to support their own strategy. However, if both sides recognize that this is what they really disagree about, perhaps they can agree to let each other get on with their own strategy, and to allow an even playing field rather than demanding policy preferences for their tribe.

1. 1.Which is unfortunate, considering that America needs concrete bridges quite badly. A 2013 study by the American Society of Civil Engineers found that more than one in ten of the country's existing bridges were not structurally sound.
2. 2.Identifying the Baby Boom generation with counterculturalists is a convenient oversimplification. The monist (hippie) counterculture *was* almost entirely a Baby Boomer phenomenon. However, the youngest members of the demographic baby boom, born in the late '50s and early '60s, were too young to participate, and are not culturally Boomers. The dualist (Evangelical) counterculture was led by the generation before the Boomers. It attracted many Boomers, but also many from the first few years of Generation X, who were born in the second half of the 1960s and came of age in the early 1980s, when the Reagan Revolution was at its peak. Polls find that many of them still identify strongly with the dualist counterculture. However, most people in Generation X overall were, and remain, subculturalists.
3. 3.Jonathan Haidt and Sam Abrams write, in a recent article on political dysfunction: "The end of the Cold War coincided with the baton pass from the Greatest Generation to the baby boomers, who may be more prone to hyper-partisanship. Political views of people in their 50s and 60s are strongly affected by the events they experienced in their teens and twenties. The Greatest Generation – shaped profoundly by the two world wars – entered public life psychologically prepared to put national interests above partisanship, particularly when faced with external threats such as the Soviet Union. But as the last members of that generation retired from public life in the 1990s, they passed the baton to a generation whose political instincts were shaped by the internal American culture war that began in the 1960s. The baby boomers developed their political identities by fighting one another."
4. 4.The collapse of belief in all grand narratives is the defining feature of postmodernity. The countercultural mode was the last gasp of modernity, and the subcultural mode was the first phase of postmodernity.
5. 5.This does not mean that the underlying issues are unimportant, or that they are not worth fighting over. However, I would suggest that it is more productive to contest a relevant policy proposal, rather than a symbol.
6. 6."Abortion Politics as Symbolic Politics: An Investigation into Belief Systems."
7. 7.For an unusually sophisticated discussion of the ethics and politics of gun control, see the "No Silver Bullet" special issue of *The Critique*, with fine contributions from both sides.
8. 8.According to Wikipedia.
9. 9.Alexander doesn't discuss Keystone XL, but other controversies in which advocates chose peculiarly unconvincing examples to fight over.
10. 10.From "Toxoplasma"; lightly edited for concision.
11. 11.This whole discussion comes out of my experience of trying to explain to American Baby Boomer Buddhists why their invented religion seems irrelevant and silly to Generations X and Y. I've found that most younger Buddhists immediately understand and agree with my critique. Most in the Boomer generation can't hear it. There are exceptions, though! I don't mean to condemn the whole generation.
12. 12.Quotes from Hunter lightly edited for concision.
13. 13.In *The Moral Fool*, Hans-Georg Moeller writes: "Morality is the condition of the market of social esteem. Morality is neither customary behavior nor a set of principles, but the actual social differentiation between those who are deemed good and those who are deemed bad or evil." And: "Morality is not so much an inner conviction that prevents people from doing bad things as a rhetorical device that helps them justify their actions before and after they act. In fact morality often leads people to commit extreme acts in the name of good—that others will view as bad or even evil. The Zhuangzi observes that this is the primary effect of morality. A society in which there is a lot of moral talk will not have fewer crimes. All the moralists in the world have not, so far, prevented war and murder.

There is no correlation between more moral talk and a better world. Moral language, in fact, seems to be part of the problem, not the solution."

14. 14.This discussion is subject to the caveat that social psychology is currently (2016) experiencing a crisis of replicability. Common research methods have been found to be unreliable, and it appears that much of what was thought to be known in the field is not true. I'm not close enough to the field to have an opinion about which of the studies I cite are likely to hold up.
15. 15.Quotes from "The Key to Political Persuasion," lightly edited for concision.
16. 16.Relatedly, research by Haidt, and by Willer and Feinberg, shows that liberals and conservatives believe they understand each other's values much better than they actually do.
17. 17.This analysis is highly tentative and may be entirely wrong; but perhaps even then it can show the *form* of a resolution of cultural conflict through understanding.
18. 18.This does not imply that I agree with most of what he says, there or elsewhere.

35 Comments

Galleon Goteborg reconstruction sailing by London Bridge
Galleon courtesy George Owens

The countercultures of the 1960s-80s took attitudes to *boundaries* as their central themes. The monist counterculture—the 1960s youth movement—wanted to eliminate all boundaries and level all distinctions; the dualist counterculture, or religious right, wanted to make them absolute.

Meaningness suggests that oppositions between such mirror-image pairs of confused stances can be resolved by complete stances that correct their metaphysical errors. Specifically, monism and dualism share the mistaken idea that boundaries must be perfectly crisp. Participation, the complete stance regarding boundaries, recognizes that they are always both nebulous and patterned. (I'll explain all this jargon shortly.)

Below, I apply that conceptual framework to two illustrative countercultural battlegrounds: gender and national borders. These are clear, easy, and important examples because:

- it's obvious that they are about boundaries
- it's obvious that these boundaries are both nebulous and patterned, so everyone already understands and accepts the complete stance
- except that, even still now, ideologues sway many people by claiming otherwise
- gender was perhaps the most important *cultural* issue in countercultural politics[1]
- war was perhaps the most important *social* issue.

The same style of analysis would apply to many other contentious topics. The aim here, though, is not to resolve any concrete issues, but to show how the framework applies in general.

This may seem academic, because after the countercultural era ended most people rejected its most extreme monist and dualist positions. However, it has continuing relevance to our current culture war, which is partly a legacy of the countercultures. I will also preview the ways subsequent modes of meaningness have moderated and complicated the monist/dualist conflict.

Additionally, monism and dualism are confusions of meaning that everyone sometimes falls into personally. Even if this page had no relevance to contemporary politics, seeing how monism and dualism played out decades ago may help understand them psychologically.

Boundaries are nebulous yet patterned

Confused stances are defensive responses to *nebulosity*. "Nebulosity" is the unstable, uncertain, fluid, complex, and ill-defined nature of all meanings. These properties often seem unwelcome. The lack of any solid ground makes it difficult to build a durable personal identity, social structure, or political movement.

Confused stances are attractive because they deny nebulosity, and attempt to fixate meanings: to nail them in place so they will behave themselves. That is impossible, so the confused stances are all factually wrong and harmful. The culture war "values" issues are exceptionally nebulous, which makes the denial especially counterproductive here.

I have suggested that monism and dualism are the central themes of the two countercultures. These two confused stances concern boundaries: both physical boundaries and the boundaries between categories. Monism denies boundaries and distinctions; dualism fixates them as perfectly sharp.

Boundaries are generally nebulous; they represent real patterns, but are not objectively fixed. So, monism and dualism are both wrong.

> Mandelbrot fractal
> The boundary of the Mandelbrot fractal is literally infinitely complicated

Boundaries are not merely existent and nebulous, they are complicated. If you imagine putting one under a metaphorical magnifying glass, broadening out and fuzzing the line, you would see the elaborate swirling patterns of sameness and difference in the vicinity: both within and without.

Close to the boundary, it becomes impossible to say which side some items are on. Some also pass through freely; whereas others are stopped. Typically boundaries are *selectively* permeable.

Both monism and dualism deny complexity, which is part of their appeal. They promise simplicity and clarity. But they can do that only by hiding the variability and ambiguity of reality. It is this complexity which the complete stance recovers.

However, they are both also partly right. Monism recognizes that boundaries are never absolute; dualism recognizes that they are important, and can't (and shouldn't) be wished away. It would help cool the culture war if each side could concede what is right in the other's fundamental stance.

Complete stances neither deny nor fixate meanings. They recognize both nebulosity and *pattern*: the fact that meanings are, to varying extents, also reliable, distinct, enduring, clear, and definite.

I call the complete stance with regard to boundaries "participation." It is simply the recognition that boundaries are always both nebulous and patterned. That combines the valid insights of both monism and dualism; which is what makes it "complete." (The title of this page is a slight pun: ideally, I would like to see the complete stance *finish* the war between the countercultures; in theory it could do that by including what is right in both of them.)

At an individual, psychological level, the fundamental method for resolving a confusion of meaning is to look for unacknowledged nebulosity; to notice why it is unwanted; to watch how patterns of meaning are fixated and denied in order to avoid recognizing nebulosity; and to work out what it would imply if this nebulosity were acknowledged as inherent and unavoidable, but not a defect in the fundamental nature of reality. "This nebulosity is not a cosmic problem"—

maybe not much of a problem at all!—is a summary of all the complete stances. The fluid mode extends this method from the individual to the social and cultural level.

Nebulosity and pattern are both obvious everywhere, so the complete stances are obviously right (and the confused ones are obviously wrong). However, the confused stances are more appealing, so we keep returning to them.

The seeming clarity of the confused stances is particularly appealing—ironically—when you feel stressed and therefore confused. The culture war is stressful; when you feel confused and threatened by challenges to your "values," you retreat to a simple, extreme view that you know is wrong, but that seems defensible in its absolutism.

Gender

Second-wave feminism emerged during the countercultural era. It focussed initially on workplace equality, and broadened into a general equality movement. The theme of equality—sameness—resonated with the monist counterculture. The two joined in an alliance which evolved into the mainstream left.

Second wave theorists mostly argued that gender was a lie: an imposed and arbitrary social and cultural fiction with no basis in reality. They denied the existence, or at least the legitimacy, of any difference between male and female—sometimes even at the crudest biological level. Even to this day, there are gender-studies professors who claim that it has no physiological or genetic basis whatsoever.

Symmetrically: dualist theorists insisted that men and women are properly, essentially, immutably, and totally different; and that society and culture must reflect and enforce the boundary between them. Even to this day, there are religious leaders who claim that on October 27th, 4004 B.C., God decreed the gender roles of 1950s Topeka Kansas as universal and eternal.

During the countercultural era, when we tried hard to reject rationality, these extreme claims seemed somehow plausible. Once the era ended, the spell broke. Gender can't be wished away, nor is it ever an entirely hard and fast division.

On average, the sexes are distinct from each other in many ways, but individuals of each sex span the range of variation. Men are diverse; women are diverse. Most men are obviously men and most women are obviously women. Some people don't fit neatly into either category, for various reasons. There is no essential characteristic that makes someone definitely male or female, masculine or feminine. Most people are reasonably comfortable with the somewhat-different expectations contemporary society and culture have for men and women. A minority find them burdensome. No one conforms to them perfectly consistently—nor can, nor should.

This common-sense understanding, that gender is a strongly patterned but nebulous distinction, is the unexciting core of a complete stance. Most people now accept it—implicitly, at least. Both countercultural approaches are obviously wrong. Despite some irritations, the mingled ambiguity and definiteness of gender isn't a big problem for most people most of the time.[2] It's mostly only professional ideologues and committed amateur culture warriors who still promote absolutist monist or dualist views.

Since the end of the countercultural era, subculturalism and atomization have further complicated the meanings of gender. The lesbian sex wars split countercultural second-wave feminism into numerous subcultural third-wave sects, which took diverse stances on the metaphysics of gender, with further contributions from LGBTIQA movements. In atomization, intersectional fourth-wave feminism lost coherence, and deploys whatever shards of contradictory, shattered

subcultural ideologies are convenient in the moment. I will discuss these developments later in the book.

And what of the fluid mode, which supposedly reflects the complete stance? I'll give a brief account here, which may seem incomprehensible at this point; the fluidity chapter should make it clear.[3]

Let's go back to the metaphor of putting a boundary under a magnifying glass to see the details of its complex nebulosity. On the micro scale, gender manifests in a pattern of interaction between specific people in a specific situation at a specific time. Observed carefully, one sees that *what counts as* a masculine or feminine way of interacting is a continually renegotiated, ongoing accomplishment of the participants. This does not mean it is arbitrary; indeed, it is responsive to the particulars of the situation in exquisitely fine detail. It is also, usually, so routine that it goes unnoticed. It is only when it breaks down that the nebulosity of gender comes momentarily into consciousness—before participants more-or-less skillfully repair the breach and restore its ordinary smooth operation.

This micro-level continual re-accomplishment necessarily *orients to* macro-scale universalist ideologies. In no social situation can we be entirely unconscious of numerous, diverse theories of what all men and women always are, or always ought to be. We can never act without some awareness of how our actions will be interpreted as meaningful according to those accounts. However, our micro-scale activity—what we say, how we say it, our body language—is never *governed by* any of these ideologies. They are social facts we have to work with, but not systems of rules we could conform to, even if we wanted to. Besides their extensive contradictions with each other and with obvious realities, they are not specific enough to guide action in concrete situations. They require extensive interpretation in order to become relevant. Yet we cannot choose not to perform that interpretation.

Because gender is patterned, we can never be perfectly free of it—as many second-wave feminists hoped. Because it is nebulous, we can never perfectly embody it—as many religious conservatives hoped. Between these extremes, there is an open space, in which we can take a comfortably playful attitude to choice. We all continually construct gender together; we may as well enjoy making it a collaborative work of art when we can.

Although almost no one maintains a hardcore monist or dualist gender ideology consistently, there's always a tug toward them, because they simplify thinking. When trying to win an argument, it's always tempting to say "well, there's no real difference between men and women, so…"; or "despite shared humanity, men and women have totally distinct proper roles, so…"—and people do say both these things frequently. It would be helpful to accomplish a cultural consensus that we don't believe these things, so we should stop saying them and acting as though we did.

That would help clarify specific conflicts, because monism and dualism obscure the practicalities. Although some gender issues are important practically, the culture war imposes imaginary additional meanings to co-opt them as ideological battlegrounds, fought from essentialist monist or dualist positions, making them into Giant Referendums On How The Other Tribe Is Wrong About Everything.[4] In the 2016 trans bathroom controversy, for instance, this was clearly deliberate: an engineered conflict, designed to increase ideological hostility among voters.

Dropping monism and dualism would still leave plenty of room for disagreements; but they would have to be argued on specific, practical grounds, instead of abstract, metaphysical ones. The complete stance itself answers no practical questions. It leaves open issues such as "what constitutes workplace equality" and "who uses which bathrooms." However, it points out that

these issues don't have to be so goddamn serious, and that the big-picture ideologies are all quite childish and silly.

Trans issues have come to new prominence in American politics in the past couple of years, with the "TERF wars" and court battles over bathroom use. Trans people are also theoretically interesting for forcing metaphysical questions about gender boundaries: what does it even *mean* to ask whether they are male or female?

Most people are willing to admit that trans people have some characteristics of both genders, but many also insist that the *essential* determinant is one particular characteristic. That's the "real" one. What makes *that* one special?

Some dualists[5] would like to point to some physical characteristic, like maybe the Y chromosome, as essential. But what basis is there for that? The Bible has nothing to say about chromosomes; this can't be a religious claim. Y chromosomes *correlate* statistically with penises, social dominance, and various other typically-masculine characteristics. However, there are some people with Y chromosomes whom everyone believes from birth to be female, because there's no indication—physical or mental—of masculinity, apart from the chromosome itself. And vice versa.[6]

Some monists would like to say that, since there no differences between men and women other than what is oppressively imposed by culture and society, you are whatever gender you say you are, and everyone must agree and treat you that way. Just as progressives were coming to a consensus on this point, it got complicated by an apparent analogy with Rachel Dolezal, who is trans black. Her career as an NAACP chapter president and university Africana Studies teacher was disrupted when her white parents pointed out that she was born white, with blue eyes and blond hair, and has no black ancestors. She continues to insist that she is *really* and *essentially* black because she self-identifies as black, and feels black on the inside.

Some social justice activists agree that she is, indeed, authentically black, and transracial identity is totally valid. Most do not. Many transgender people have written essays arguing that any claimed parallel between transracial and transgender identity is spurious. I'm sympathetic politically, but philosophically I think this is a hard case to make.[7]

Recognizing that gender can't simply be wished away, I think it is reasonable to balk at the idea that someone is of a particular sex simply because they say so. On the other hand, recognizing that there is no objective fact about what sex anyone is, I think it is reasonable to agree that anyone who passes as a particular sex might as well be treated as being that sex for most purposes. Further, as far as those who present androgynously or as "none of the above," we might do well to say "whatever!" and let them get on with it. One is entitled to disapprove of "deviants dressing wrong" privately, if that is your opinion, but eccentric attire is rarely adequate grounds for public censure. ("This nebulosity is not a cosmic problem!") In all three cases, insisting that there is some Ultimate Truth of gender that must be obeyed is metaphysically unsupportable, and also seems petty.

It would help if we could agree that gender is a private matter, thereby restoring part of the public/private boundary that the countercultures destroyed. Although the public/private boundary is necessarily nebulous, other people's ways of doing gender are mostly none of your business. This is obvious as a criticism of the right, but it applies equally to the left. For example, some leftists are harshly judgemental of women who choose to be supported by their husbands; this is wrong.

Sovereignty, borders, and war

The concept of a sovereign state was invented in the systematic era. Its Westphalian model is an epitome of dualism. It holds that there are precisely-defined, permanent borders between states. Every square inch of land is part of exactly one state, and shall remain so eternally. The government of a state holds sway uniformly at every point within its borders. It has no right to exert any influence beyond its state borders.[8]

This is highly unnatural; choiceless era kingdoms worked quite differently. Borders were mostly vague and shifting, and while the king's rule may have been absolute in the capital, his power faded gradually, informally, with distance. The main job of a king was to meddle in the affairs of neighboring kingdoms, which led to wars and/or border adjustments.

The Westphalian system was invented to prevent war.[9] The First World War marked the end of the systematic era, and the beginning of the era of crisis and social breakdown. Not only did Westphalian sovereignty fail to prevent the World Wars, it arguably caused them.

The dualistic Cold War profoundly shaped the countercultural era. Opposition to the Vietnam war —a proxy battle of the Cold War—was one of the main drivers of the monist (hippie/student radical) counterculture. The Reagan administration's anti-Soviet military buildup was one of the main drivers of the dualist counterculture.

A monist approach would eliminate national boundaries. Wars are between states; without countries and borders between them, there could be no wars. Lennon's lyrics for "Imagine" express this view; his last line, "the world will live as one," is the epitome of monism. I do say he was a dreamer: countries and borders cannot be wished away.

Nor are they ever entirely hard and fast divisions. Many states attempted isolationism in the mid-20th-century, but it is impossible. Only North Korea even pretends now, and it is heavily dependent on China.

Beginning around the end of the countercultural era, which coincided with the end of the Cold War (1991), diplomats and international institutions quietly revised the system of international relations, to reflect the obvious reality that states and borders are patterned but nebulous. The European Union (1992) developed a model for blurred sovereignty, with borders that remain existent but enormously more permeable than previously. The World Trade Organization (1995), and the series of treaties it sponsored, greatly increased both the permeability and complex selectivity of borders. The Rwandan (1994) and Bosnian (1995) genocides changed the minds of many anti-war leftists, and *de facto* established the principle that the great powers have not only the right but the responsibility to intervene in the internal affairs of sovereign states to prevent humanitarian catastrophes. As dualists had always insisted, bad guys are bad and can't be wished away; and wars can be fought for noble causes. More recently, failures in the Middle East have convinced many rightists that—as monists had always insisted—many wars cannot be won by military force.

Maybe it counts as success that in the current politics of the developed nations, global trade and immigration have mainly replaced war as the political issues concerned with borders.

This new era of international relations remains a work in progress, and probably always will. It has gotten many details wrong; but the principle that national borders are both nebulous and patterned is significant progress. As with gender, the meanings of national boundaries must be continually renegotiated, and interpreted in specific situations with reference to multiple

ideologies. Almost everyone now does accept that national boundaries are both necessary and necessarily permeable. The Westphalian framework lingers as a ritual fiction; or as a subordinated system to which the new *de facto* non-systematic international relations are meta.

Popular ideologues sometimes talk as if totally open or closed borders were feasible options. And even the more careful pundits often frame the fight as quantitive: a more open border, or a harder one? Such rhetoric appeals to monist and dualist sensibilities, but is unrealistic, unhelpful, and nearly meaningless. Workable answers concern the complex pragmatic specifics of how borders operate. Which people, goods, services, money, and armies are allowed to cross, for what reasons?

Later in *Meaningness and Time*, I will discuss how the subcultural, atomized, and fluid modes regard nation-states.

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1. 1.I've suggested tentatively that the culture war may be primarily about reproduction, with the rest mere decorative obfuscation. And, regulating gender roles seems to be mainly an indirect way of regulating reproduction.
2. 2.The word *most* is important. Suffering can be extreme for those who accept the nebulosity of their gender, but find it rejected by others; and for those who recoil from, and cannot accept, the nebulosity of their own gender, or that of people they care about.
3. 3.This account draws heavily both on ethnomethodology and on Kegan's account of "stage 5" as context-responsive non-systematic activity that is meta to multiple formal systems.
4. 4.I've taken this trope from Scott Alexander's "Five Case Studies On Politicization."
5. 5.Gender essentialists include both some conservative Christians and some radical feminists, who have allied on many sexual deviance issues since the mid-1970s. I have to admit I find this very funny.
6. 6.The biochemical mechanisms that typically result in either a "male" or "female phenotype" are extremely complicated and currently not fully understood. There is definitely no single "master factor" that determines maleness or femaleness in humans.
7. 7.All the attempts I read actually argued instead that claiming to be black when you were born apparently white is morally wrong, because you aren't really black; whereas claiming to be female when you were born apparently male is not morally wrong, because you *are* really female. This simply assumes by fiat the conclusion it then claims to prove.
8. 8.The Westphalian scheme has *never* been descriptively accurate—never mind prescriptively adequate—even for the core European countries that invented and adopted it. The Channel Islands and Andorra are two entertaining anomalies. The Channel Islands are legally part of Duchy of Normandy, which has not existed for many centuries. They are not part of the United Kingdom, although they are self-governing possessions of the British Crown, and Queen Elizabeth II is their Duke. (*Not* their Duchess. I imagine there is an excellent reason for this.) Islanders are legally both British citizens and EU citizens. The Channel Islands are legally part of the British Islands, but not part of the British Isles (please don't confuse these!). They are not members of the European Union, but remain part of the European Community, which hasn't existed since 1993, but which continues to grant them important legal trade rights from beyond the mortal veil. There's much more, but it starts to get complicated. Andorra is legally a Parliamentary Co-Principality, with the President of France and the Bishop of Urgell in Spain as Co-Princes. It is not part of either France or Spain. The President of France, *ex officio* Prince of Andorra, is a reigning monarch, unelected by his or her subjects (but elected by the French people). Then it gets complicated.
9. 9.It takes its name from the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the catastrophic Thirty Years War—Europe's worst before WWI, with many millions left dead.

11 Comments

Punks: the first mass elective subculture
Punks courtesy Paul Townsend

The *subcultural mode* marked a fundamentally new approach to meaningness. It abandoned *universalism*—the delusion that meanings must be the same for everyone, everywhere, eternally. It recognized that different people are actually different, and need different cultures, societies, and psychologies.

The subcultural mode also created *subsocieties*: a new mode of social organization, intermediate between the family and state. Membership in subsocieties was voluntary, based on emotional affinity and cultural enjoyment, rather than ethnicity or geography. Subsocial organization began to resolve the problems of the self/society relationship that the countercultures tried, and failed, to renegotiate.

The first several pages of this chapter explore subcultural solutions: how subcultures addressed the problems of society, culture, and self that followed from the wreck of counterculturalism. These approaches were, I think, *almost right*.

However, they were also inadequate, and doomed. The remaining pages explain why the subcultural mode proved unworkable, and inevitably disintegrated into the atomized mode.

The fluid mode will need to recover what worked in the subcultural mode, while addressing its flaws and limitations.

Subcultural solutions

Examples provide some intuitive understanding of subcultures: punk, Wicca, goth, anarcha-feminism, SF fandom, straight edge, BDSM, New Romantic.

Subcultures were not just hobbies or musical genres; they were ways of being. They provided the same kinds of life-meaning that the systematic and countercultural modes did—but *more* so. You were not stuck with the universalist monoculture of a nation; you could choose a subculture that was particularly meaningful for you. Ideally, they combined a distinctive artistic style, religion, politics, ethics, social role, belonging and identity.

Whereas the countercultures:

1. failed to find new foundations for their universalist systems
2. … and so were revealed as idealistically impractical
3. failed to address the differences in people's interests, values, purposes, and needs
4. failed to provide strong social bonds—only membership in a nation-sized counterculture
5. failed to transcend their oppositional (*counter*-cultural) attitude

Subcultures, in contrast:

1. felt no need for foundations or justifications, having abandoned universalist claims
2. made no attempt to solve the Big Problems of nation-sized societies and cultures
3. affirmed and enhanced the diversity of interests, values, purposes, and needs
4. provided strong social bonds within human-scale subsocieties of like-minded people
5. were refuges from social conflict, because subcultures had no reason to oppose each other

Subcultural failure: boundary issues

Although subcultures still exist, they no longer function as they did during the *subcultural era* (1975-2000). It's mostly no longer possible to rely on one to define your cultural, social, and personal identity.

Each subsociety created a boundary, between its members and the rest of the world. Each subculture also created a boundary: between its meanings and meanings that did not belong. Getting these boundaries right was critical, but difficult.

To function, the boundaries had to be somewhat permeable, but not too permeable. A subsociety needs to allow in a trickle of new members, to replace drop-outs and to allow for manageable growth. If the boundary is too rigid, the group will dwindle and collapse. If the boundary is too vague, members are not sufficiently committed, and also the group can suffer from dilution by mass immigration when its culture becomes popular.

A subculture needs to be somewhat open to new ideas, as a source of creative friction and innovation, but it also needs to maintain sufficient distinctiveness to avoid merging into others.

Subcultures and subsocieties also tended to schism, creating new internal divisions. The resulting, smaller sub-sub-cultures often lacked critical mass: enough talented people to create enough meaning.

The best size for a social group is a few hundred people: big enough to provide reliable support, but small enough that you can find a unique role, valued by all members. The best size for a culture is millions: enough to supply thick meanings for all dimensions of being.

This mismatch meant that either subcultures blew up into mass movements (as the most successful musical genres did) which offered little social support; or, if they remained small, the meanings they could provide were too narrow and too thin.

Finally, there were problems at the interface between the subculture or subsociety and nation-sized institutions such as the state, mainstream religions, and the market economy. Neither side understood the other's needs, or even acknowledged the others' legitimacy. States and religions sometimes persecuted subcultures as challenges to their authority; exploitation by the culture industry was often even more destructive.

On the other hand, subcultures did not even try to provide all the functions of large systematic institutions. That made the mode parasitic: a fully subcultural society is not possible, because subcultures and subsocieties cannot do the work of states or large corporations.[1]

Most subcultures and subsocieties had little awareness of these problems—much less adequate tools to address them. By around the year 2000, however, most people felt intuitively that subculturalism had failed.

After subculturalism

The atomized mode simply dropped the subculture and subsociety boundaries. Now everyone could access all culture, globally, through the internet. You didn't have to be a member of a tribe to listen to a particular kind of music. You could take any shard of art and remix it with anything else.

Destroying the tiresome narrowness and shallowness of subculturalism gave an exhilarating sense of freedom. Not only could you take any meaning from anywhere (breadth), you could explore it in unprecedented depth.

Unfortunately, with boundaries gone, all coherence was lost. In the atomized mode, nothing makes sense. We live now in a world of decaying systematic institutions, facing atomized peoples, with mutual hostility, paranoia, and incomprehension.

The fluid mode, ideally, combines the strengths of all previous modes. Like the systematic mode, it should support nation-sized institutions, to provide necessary social, cultural, and physical infrastructure. Like the countercultural mode, it should support innovative cultural production that is wide, deep, and (like the subcultural mode) diverse. It should support close-knit, voluntary subsocieties of an optimal size. Like the atomized mode, it should allow everyone access to all cultural products.

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1. 1.In "Archipelago," I discuss a hypothetical model for how subcultures and nation-sized systems *could* have coexisted harmoniously, and supported each others' proper roles. Unfortunately, this potential utopia was not attempted.

2 Comments

Steampunk image of girl with airship
Image courtesy stephane

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

The *subcultural mode* of relating to meaningness recognized what earlier modes denied: that people are different, and different sorts of people flourish in different cultural and social surrounds.

The systematic and countercultural modes were *universalist*: they tried to force a single culture on everyone. To answer "why?," they had to construct an eternalist structure of justifications, supposedly founded on some ultimate cosmically correct principle.

Subculturalism abandoned all that. Steampunks had no interest in reforming society so that everyone would wear vernier goggles and ride in zeppelins. To the question "why steampunk?" there are only individual answers ("I'm into it because…"). Justifications turn on nebulous aesthetic criteria ("ray guns are not *strictly* Victorian, but this one is brass"), not some absolutist Cosmic Plan.

There have been subcultures for as long as there have been cities. Mainly they were ethnic or sectarian. You were born into them; leaving and joining was difficult; there were only a handful in any place; and their influence on the mainstream culture was small.

In the 1980s, subculturalism exploded outward. The new subcultures were composed mainly of 20-somethings and were chosen freely. They multiplied dizzyingly, and replaced the countercultures as the mode of cultural innovation and production.

Freed from the demand to justify universal claims, many of the subcultures implicitly or explicitly abandoned eternalism. Some implicitly or explicitly embraced nihilism—notably, many in the early days of punk, the first subculture of the era.

The subcultures mostly also declared themselves free of responsibility for worrying about the Big Social Problems generated by the systematic mode. The countercultures arose as earnest attempts to solve those problems—and failed. Punk aggressively refused to offer any alternative. Later subcultures simply ignored them. Subcultures are about "us," our deliberately human-scaled subsociety; not about "mundanes," the society-at-large whose problems seem hopeless, or at any rate beyond our abilities.

Freed from responsibility, subculturalism is explicitly play. Unlike the countercultures, which took themselves Very Seriously, subcultures reveled in absurdity. This made for *great* art—in my opinion, as someone for whom the mode is more nearly native than any of the others. It also enabled a welcome shift from sincerity to ritual, which started to resolve some of the pathologies of self, which systematicity produced and the countercultures failed to overcome.

Choosing to ignore the broader society and its problems made the subcultural mode parasitic. *Someone else* had to keep the machinery of civilization running while the subcultures played dress-up and make-believe. Failure to develop mutually-beneficial relationships with nation-scale institutions, and with individuals outside the subculture, contributed to the mode's downfall. A nation cannot long persist if its best and brightest devote themselves to frivolities.

Fortunately, practicality and absurdity are not incompatible; the boundary between them is nebulous. The fluid mode must combine playfulness and seriousness, ritual and sincerity, inseparably.

2 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

Subsocieties provided a new mode for the society-self relationship: an innovative renegotiation of individuation vs. integration; a bigger break with the past than the countercultural mode. The new approach centered *voluntarism* and *recognition of the diversity of individuals*, not just demographic classes.

The local scene

A subsociety was a close-knit group of a few hundred to a few thousand members sharing strong personal social bonds, organized around a subculture. They thought of themselves as *elective tribes*, in contrast with the mass societies both of "the mainstream" and of the 1960s-90s countercultures.

Subsocieties provided a comforting sense of "coming home to my people." The self could now relate mostly only with a subsociety of like-minded folks, organized around subculture that expressed their personality and values. Members could largely ignore the systematic nation-state (which was less intrusive then than it has become). A subculture, and your role in a corresponding subsociety, could anchor your identity.

Subsocieties were mostly local, and based on in-person interactions, due to the technological limitations of the era:

- On the one hand, they did not have the millions of dollars and millions of members that the countercultures relied on to create broadcast media channels. The monist counterculture dominated the music industry and published many magazines with nation-wide distribution (*Rolling Stone* for example). Plus, it was significant enough for the overall culture that

mainstream media covered it constantly. A decade later, the dualist counterculture had the financial resources to operate several nationwide radio and television networks, which broadcast the Evangelical message to tens of millions. San Francisco's Wiccan punk scene, with a few dozen members, didn't.

- On the other hand, the internet mostly didn't exist, so during the subcultural era San Francisco's Wiccan punk scene couldn't interact with London's in the way it might have in the 21$^{\text{1st}}$ century. But by that time it had been atomized into irrelevance.

So subsocieties were primarily urban. Only major cities had a critical mass of subculture fanatics who could form a tribe around their peculiar interest.

That said, improving communication technologies did help spread subcultures. Inexpensive photocopying enabled "zines," the precursor of blogs, which were a vital aspect of subcultures. The switch from vinyl LPs to cassette tapes broke the mainstream music industry's monopoly. Indie and DIY music production enabled subcultural bands to reach an audience of hundreds of fanatics, whereas countercultural bands had to sign to Hollywood labels who wouldn't do deals without mass market appeal.

Boundary work

Subsocieties were a renewed attempt to renegotiate the self-society boundary, taking a quite different approach from counterculturalism. The monist counterculture tried to eliminate boundaries; the dualist one tried absolutize them. When those approaches tried to reform the self-society boundary, the distance between self and "society," taken to mean the entire nation, was too vast; and both failed.

Subsocieties created a boundary at an intermediate level between the individual and the state, and with an intermediate complexity of organization. Subcultures are all about *working with* boundaries that are both patterned and nebulous: creating, defining, adjusting, enforcing, nurturing, weeding, …

Subsocieties maintained their membership boundaries primarily through *costly signaling* requirements that excluded the uncommitted (called "poseurs" at the time):

- Extreme norm transgression (e.g. deviant sexual practices)
- Physical pain or other hazing
- Unemployability (hair styles, tats, etc)
- Ridiculousness/contemptibility
- Proliferation of esoteric knowledge (shibboleths)
- Proof of creative competence
- Monetarily expensive public gear (outfits)
- Gear that had to be hand-made or was difficult to source (you couldn't reliably find the vintage thing in thrift shops; all the Victorian lace hats of that style got bought by the first dozen people in on the trend).

Subsocieties rarely had a clear understanding of these dynamics. They attacked particular boundary-maintenance issues with available tools, but didn't reflect on the general problem. Overall, they failed: either they got overwhelmed with MOPs, or gradually made themselves so repellent that membership dwindled to zero. The subcultural mode might have been more successful if they'd taken a step back and taken a more theoretical approach.

To be fair, they were only groping toward ways of being that work "for us," rather than trying to solve the problems of society in general. Few people during the era were aware that subculturalism *was* an era with a limited lifespan.

However, workable methods for maintaining intermediate-scale social boundaries *has* to be part of the way forward in the fluid mode, and understanding the subsocieties of the subcultural era may provide insights into how that might work.

Comment on this page

> Map of an imaginary archipelago
> From Scott Alexander's map of Raikoth, by permission

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

If subculturalism had worked, *Archipelago* would have been its natural political expression. Understanding why each cannot work casts light on the other—and on how we can do better in the fluid mode.

I have stolen the term "Archipelago" from a brilliant essay by Scott Alexander, "Archipelago and Atomic Communitarianism." Mostly this page will encourage you to go read that. I'll also give a bit of a summary, and draw out the connections with subculturalism (which he also made explicit, but not in as much detail).

(The nautical implications of "archipelago" also fit with the sea-of-meaningness trope I have stolen from Will Buckingham's *Finding Our Sea-Legs*, which inspired my description of the "fluid mode" and my caricaturing the countercultures as "wrecked galleons.")

The ultra-condensed summary of Archipelago is this. People have radically different opinions about how society should be organized. Probably *many* of these ideas are right—for different sorts of people. So, ideally, everyone who wants to live in a fundamentalist theocracy can go do that, and everyone who wants to live in a socialist welfare state can go do that, and everyone who wants to live in rationalist capitalist minarchy can go do that. If we had many spare islands, each type of society could set up on a different one, and not step on each others' toes. We don't, so there would need to be an overarching governmental structure whose main job was to keep the different systems from interfering with each other.

As Alexander writes, Archipelago "doesn't look like a practical solution for real problems." However, "I do think it's worth becoming more Archipelagian on the margin rather than less so, and that there are good ways to do it."

I agree. So this page will use the *Meaningness and Time* framework to analyze the obstacles to Archipelagian developments, and to suggest possible approaches to working around them.

In terms of ideology (rather than practicalities) the principal obstacle is *universalism*. That is the idea that meanings must be the same for everyone, everywhere. The countercultures both took universalism to an extreme, and spawned the culture war that has plagued us since.

The countercultural mode is native for the Baby Boom generation. Currently, most major institutions (particularly governments) are led by Baby Boomers. Statistically, they are far more politically polarized than subsequent generations—because they are committed to universalism, and so to imposing their political vision on everyone else.

Over the next decade, Generation X will inherit control of states and other major institutions from the Baby Boomers. The subcultural mode is native for Generation X—which suggests that politics may soon shift toward a more Archipelagian, and less polarized, model. I think this will be a good thing!

In the meantime, Gen X has been, famously, "waiting on the world to change." Compared with both Boomers and Millennials, Generation X has tended to sit out politics—because their subcultural orientation has had no possibility of political implementation.

Comment on this page

Mop
Image courtesy Wikimedia

Subcultures are dead. I plan to write a full obituary soon.

Subcultures were the main creative cultural force from roughly 1975 to 2000, when they stopped working. Why?

One reason—among several—is that as soon as subcultures start getting really interesting, they get invaded by muggles, who ruin them. Subcultures have a predictable lifecycle, in which popularity causes death. Eventually—around 2000—everyone understood this, and gave up hoping some subculture could somehow escape this dynamic.

(You can read very brief previews of my analysis of subculture dynamics in this table and/or this page.)

The muggles who invade and ruin subcultures come in two distinct flavors, mops and sociopaths, playing very different roles. This insight was influenced by Venkatesh Rao's *Gervais Principle*, an analysis of workplace dynamics. Rao's theory is hideous, insightful nihilism; I recommend it.[1]

The birth of cool

Before there is a subculture, there is a scene. A *scene* is a small group of *creators* who invent an exciting New Thing—a musical genre, a religious sect, a film animation technique, a political theory. Riffing off each other, they produce examples and variants, and share them for mutual enjoyment, generating positive energy.

The new scene draws *fanatics*. Fanatics don't create, but they contribute energy (time, money, adulation, organization, analysis) to support the creators.

Creators and fanatics are both *geeks*.[2] They totally love the New Thing, they're fascinated with all its esoteric ins and outs, and they spend all available time either doing it or talking about it.

If the scene is sufficiently geeky, it remains a strictly geek thing; a weird hobby, not a subculture.

If the scene is unusually exciting, and the New Thing can be appreciated without having to get utterly geeky about details, it draws *mops*.[3] Mops are fans, but not rabid fans like the fanatics. They show up to have a good time, and contribute as little as they reasonably can in exchange.

Geeks welcome mops, at first at least. It's the mass of mops who turn a scene into a subculture. Creation is always at least partly an act of generosity; creators want as many people to use and enjoy their creations as possible. It's also good for the ego; it confirms that the New Thing really is exciting, and not just a geek obsession. Further, some money can usually be extracted from mops—just enough, at this stage, that some creators can quit their day jobs and go pro. (Fanatics contribute much more per head than mops, but there are few enough that it's rarely possible for creatives to go full time with support only from fanatics.) Full-time creators produce more and better of the New Thing.

The mop invasion

Fanatics want to share their obsession, and mops initially validate it for them too. However, as mop numbers grow, they become a headache. Fanatics do all the organizational work, initially just on behalf of geeks: out of generosity, and to enjoy a geeky subsociety. They put on events, build websites, tape up publicity fliers, and deal with accountants. Mops just passively soak up the good stuff.[4] You may even have to push them around the floor; they have to be led to the drink. At best you can charge them admission or a subscription fee, but they'll inevitably argue that this is wrong because capitalism is evil, and also because they forgot their wallet.

Mops also dilute the culture. The New Thing, although attractive, is more intense and weird and complicated than mops would prefer. Their favorite songs are the ones that are least the New Thing, and more like other, popular things. Some creators oblige with less radical, friendlier, simpler creations.

Mops relate to each other in "normal" ways, like people do on TV, which the fanatics find repellent. During intermission, geeks want to talk about the New Thing, but mops blather about sportsball and celebrities. Also, the mops also seem increasingly entitled, treating the fanatics as service workers.

Fanatics may be generous, but they signed up to support geeks, not mops. At this point, they may all quit, and the subculture collapses.

The sociopath invasion

Unless *sociopaths*[5] show up. A subculture at this stage is ripe for exploitation. The creators generate cultural capital, i.e. *cool*. The fanatics generate social capital: a network of relationships —strong ones among the geeks, and weaker but numerous ones with mops. The mops, when properly squeezed, produce liquid capital, i.e. money. None of those groups have any clue about how to extract and manipulate any of those forms of capital.

The sociopaths quickly become best friends with selected creators. They dress *just like* the creators—only better. They talk *just like* the creators—only smoother. They may even do some creating—competently, if not creatively. Geeks may not be completely fooled, but they also are clueless about what the sociopaths are up to.

Mops *are* fooled. They don't care so much about details, and the sociopaths look to them like creators, only better. Sociopaths become the coolest kids in the room, demoting the creators. At this stage, they take their pick of the best-looking mops to sleep with. They've extracted the cultural capital.

The sociopaths also work out how to monetize mops—which the fanatics were never good at. With better publicity materials, the addition of a light show, and new, more crowd-friendly product, admission fees go up tenfold, and mops are willing to pay. Somehow, not much of the

money goes to creators. However, more of them do get enough to go full-time, which means there's more product to sell.

The sociopaths also hire some of the fanatics as actual service workers. They resent it, but at least they too get to work full-time on the New Thing, which they still love, even in the Lite version. The rest of the fanatics get pushed out, or leave in disgust, broken-hearted.

The death of cool—unless…

After a couple years, the cool is all used up: partly because the New Thing is no longer new, and partly because it was diluted into New Lite, which is inherently uncool. As the mops dwindle, the sociopaths loot whatever value is left, and move on to the next exploit. They leave behind only wreckage: devastated geeks who still have no idea what happened to their wonderful New Thing and the wonderful friendships they formed around it. (Often the geeks all end up hating each other, due first to the stress of supporting mops, and later due to sociopath divide-and-conquer manipulation tactics.)

Unless some of the creators are geniuses. If they can give the New Thing genuine mass appeal, they can ascend into superstardom. The subculture will reorganize around them, into a much more durable form. I won't go into that in there. I will point out that this almost never happens without sociopaths. An ambitious creator may know they have mass-appeal genius, and *could* be a star, but very rarely do they know how to get from here to there.

Resistance

So what is to be done?

This is a geek question. The subculture lifecycle is a problem only from a geek perspective. As far as mops are concerned, it provides reliable, low-cost waves of novelty entertainment and casual social relationships. As far as sociopaths are concerned, it generates easily-exploited pools of prestige, sex, power, and money.

From a utilitarian point of view, mops hugely outnumber geeks, so in terms of total social value, it's all good. Can't make omelettes without breaking some eggheads.

So what is to be done?

Geeks can refuse to admit mops. In fact, successful subcultures always do create costly barriers to entry, to keep out the uncommitted.[6] In the heyday of subcultures, those were called poseurs.[7] Mop exclusion keeps the subculture comfortable for geeks, but severely limits its potential. Often there's a struggle between geeks who like their cozy little club as it is, and geeks who want a shot at greatness—for themselves, or the group, or the New Thing. In any case, subculture boundaries are always porous, and if the New Thing is cool enough, mops will get in regardless.

The optimal mop:geek ratio is maybe 6:1. At that ratio, the mops provide more energy than they consume. A ratio above about 10:1 becomes unworkable; it's a recipe for burnout among supporting fanatics. Ideally, the ratio could be controlled. I think few subcultures understand this imperative, and I'm not sure how it could be done even if one did understand. Mops move in herds. Usually either there are only a few, or their numbers quickly grow too large.

Sociopaths only show up if there's enough mops to exploit, so excluding (or limiting) mops is a strategy for excluding sociopaths. Some subcultures do understand this, and succeed with it.

Alternatively, you could recognize sociopaths and eject them. Geeks may be pretty good at the recognizing, but are lousy at the ejecting. Mops don't recognize sociopaths, and anyway don't care. Mops have little investment in the subculture, and can just walk away when sociopaths ruin it. By the time sociopaths show up, mops are numerically most of the subculture. Sociopaths manipulate the mops, and it's hard for the geeks to overrule an overwhelming majority.

Anyway, horribly, geeks *need* sociopaths—if the New Thing is ever going to be more than a geeky hobby, or a brief fad that collapses under the weight of the mop invasion.

So what is to be done?

Be slightly evil

The subcultural mode mostly ended around 2000. There still are subcultures, new ones all the time, but they no longer have the cultural and social force they used to. The "classical model" of subcultures no longer works, for the reasons given here, plus others I'll describe in upcoming writing. I don't think it can be rescued.

However, the *fluid mode*—my hoped-for future—resembles the subcultural mode in many ways. The same social dynamics may play out, unless there is a powerful antidote.

A slogan of Rao's may point the way: *Be slightly evil*. Or: geeks need to learn and use some of the sociopaths' tricks. Then geeks can capture more of the value they create (and get better at ejecting true sociopaths).

Specific strategies for sociopathy are outside the scope of this book. However, I have an abstract suggestion.

Rao concludes his analysis by explaining that his "sociopaths" are actually nihilists, in much the same sense as I use the word. Serious subcultures are usually eternalistic: the New Thing is a source of meaning that gives everything in life purpose. Eternalistic naïveté makes subcultures much easier to exploit.

"Slightly evil" defense of a subculture requires realism: letting go of eternalist hope and faith in imaginary guarantees that the New Thing will triumph. Such realism is characteristic of nihilism. Nihilism has its own delusions, though. It *is* worth trying to create beautiful, useful New Things —and worth defending them against nihilism. A fully realistic worldview corrects both eternalistic and nihilistic errors.

Combining what works in eternalism and nihilism amounts to the complete stance—which is essentially the same thing as the "fluid mode."

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1. 1.

Rao postulates three groups in any organization: the Clueless, the Losers, and the Sociopaths. The Clueless mistakenly believe that the organization is actually supposed to do whatever it pretends to be for: selling widgets, saving endangered herons, or educating school-children, for instance. They are dedicated to this mission and work hard, and creatively, to further it. The Losers have a job because they need a paycheck; their motivation is to make work reasonably pleasant in exchange for minimal effort. The Sociopaths recognize the reality that the organization is just the setting for a power game played among themselves. Nobody really cares about widgets, herons, or other people's children. The Losers also understand this, but don't have what it takes to play the game.

In subcultures, Geeks are roughly parallel to the Clueless; they are passionate about whatever the subculture is supposedly about. Mops substitute for Losers: they show up for a reasonably pleasant time in exchange for minimal effort. Sociopaths are Sociopaths. The detailed dynamics are rather different, though; for instance, the Gervais Principle says that organizations begin with Sociopaths and end up with mostly Clueless, whereas subcultures begin with Geeks and end with mostly Mops.

- 2.I'm using "geek" here to mean "someone fascinated by the details of a subject most people don't care about." There's another sense of "geek," meaning the sort of person you'd expect to find at a science fiction convention. There's significant overlap, but in the first sense there are gardening geeks and golfing geeks, and most probably aren't geeks in the second sense. They might create gardening subcultures, though.
- 3."MOP" is an abbreviation for "member of the public"; it seems to be fairly common in Britain. My American (mis-)use of it here is probably somewhat non-standard. Other terms that could be used are "casuals" or "tourists."
- 4.All the categories here—creators, fanatics, mops, sociopaths—are necessarily nebulous: ambiguous and changing over time. There is no "fact of the matter" about whether someone is an unusually enthusiastic mop, or a fanatic who is less committed than some other fanatics; nor whether someone who creates occasionally but mainly acts to support the subculture counts as a fanatic or creator. Anyone may shift roles, too.
- 5.I am using "sociopath" here in Rao's informal sense, not a technical, clinical one.
- 6.I'll discuss these barriers more extensively in upcoming writing.
- 7."Poseur" was perhaps directed even more at sociopaths than mops, but didn't clearly distinguish between the two.

55 Comments

Gangnam Style! What's it about?

(Who knows!)

Gangnam Style! What genre is it?

(Who cares!)

In our present, *atomized* mode of meaningness, cultures, societies, and selves cannot hold together. They shatter into tiny jagged shards. We shake the broken bits together, in senseless kaleidoscopic, hypnotic reconfigurations, with no context or coherence.

This may sound like a problem. Overall, my description of the atomized mode may sound like a panicked condemnation. However, there is much to like about atomization, and—I will suggest—it provides vital resources for constructing the next, fluid mode.

Atomized culture

The previous, subcultural mode failed because individual subcultures did not provide enough breadth or depth of meaning; and because cliquish subsocieties made it too difficult to access the narrow meaningness they hoarded.

The global internet exploded that. Everything is equally available everywhere—which is fabulous! Now, there are no boundaries, so bits of culture float free. Unfortunately, with no

binding contexts, nothing makes sense. Meanings arrive as bite-sized morsels in a jumbled stream, like sushi flowing past on a conveyer belt, or brilliant shards of colored glass in a kaleidoscope.

With no urge for context to make culture understandable, everything is equally appealing everywhere. The atomized mode returns to the *universalism* of the countercultural mode—but by default, rather than design. In the 1960s, for the first time, everyone in an American generation listened to the same music, regardless of genre—as an expression of solidarity. Now, everyone in the world listens to the same music, regardless of genre, again—just because it's trending on YouTube.

Gangnam Style has been watched 2.9 billion times on YouTube.[1] Even counting repeat views, it's probably well-known to most young people on the planet. Its genre is, in fact, K-pop; but may be the only K-pop song most Westerners have ever heard.

Genre—which defined many subcultures—has disintegrated. Atomization seemed at first like subculturalism taken to an extreme, but it is a qualitatively new mode. K-pop may be a subculture in Korea, but in America it's just YouTube. It's normal for a Top 40 hit to mash up country-style pedal steel guitar with bubble-gum-pop vocals, hip-hop rapping, EDM bass, and black metal blast beats. "Authenticity"—the aesthetic ideal of subculturalism—is impossible because there are no standards to be authentic to.

In atomized culture, intensity—shock, novelty, extremes—substitutes for structure. There are no systematic principles for comparing value, so immediate emotional appeal trumps formal qualities. The *avant garde* has finally expired as an irrelevant archaism. Duchamp couldn't out-irreverence or out-peculiar Psy.

Atomized society

In atomization, the subcultural mode's local communities cannot hold together, because they no longer deliver adequate meaning. The subcultural solution to the problems of self and society—intermediate-scale subsocieties that buffer individuals from national institutions—failed.

Instead, society moves onto global interactive media. Internet social networks support larger, geographically dispersed virtual communities. You no longer need to be in the happening place to get access to a genre or scene. You may not know the gender, race, or nationality of some of your closest friends. It is wonderful to find people who share your nearly-unique interests—but can online relationships replace in-person ones? Can electronic communities provide the same benefits as local ones?

The vestiges of systematic social organization are crumbling. As culture and society atomize, it becomes impossible to maintain a coherent ideology. Religions decohere into vague "spirituality," and political isms give way to bizarre, transient, reality-impaired online movements. Decontextualized, contradictory, intensely-proclaimed religious and political "beliefs" displace legacy systems of meaning. These are not beliefs in an ordinary sense, but advertisements of personal qualities and tribal identification. The atomized mode generates paranoia, because without the systematic mode's "therefores," its *structure of justification*, there are no memetic defenses against bad ideas.

Atomized politics abandons the outdated convention that political arguments should make sense. Occupy, the Tea Party, ISIS, the "tumblr SJW" and "alt-right" social media movements, and the 2016 American Presidential campaign ignored "therefore" in favor of claims that were false and absurd, but not duplicitous, because they were not intended to be believed—just reacted to for their intense emotional impact.

Legacy systematic institutions—especially states—find themselves increasingly unable to cope with the rate of change, or to adapt to an environment of pervasive incoherence. This leaves cracking systems of government facing atomized populations, mutually uncomprehending because of their different modes of processing meaning, producing increasingly intense paranoia on both sides. States are starting to fail, as parts of the world become ungovernable. Others are abandoning democracy for authoritarianism, in desperate attempts to hold social structures together.

Atomized self

Woman looking through a kaleidoscope
Giant kaleidoscope image courtesy Bill Whittaker

We build selves by internalizing meanings from our culture and from social relationships. As culture and society atomize, we are bombarded with a kaleidoscopic chaos of brightly-colored atoms of meaning, and it becomes impossible to construct or maintain a coherent self.

The unity of self that was a reality in the choiceless mode, and a promised (but impossible) ideal in the systematic and countercultural modes, is a forgotten fairy tale. The subcultural mode reluctantly accepted personal fragmentation, but sought, anxiously, to manage it. The atomized mode is comfortable with a self that is a rushing jumbled stream, like the society and culture it internalizes.

A "stage 4" self is a system of principles and projects that structure all the details of one's internal world, and that resolve priority conflicts among values, tasks, and relationships. This is impossible in the atomized mode.

The always-on internet delivers massively more interruptions, entertainments, relationships, and chores than humans evolved for. Even a relational, "stage 3" self is atomized into a turbulent stream of interaction, because relationships are electronically mediated.

"Authenticity" of self, like authenticity of culture, becomes meaningless when there is no "thine own" to be true to. When it's obviously impossible to form a systematic self, the task is to surf your own incoherence. Increasingly, this is a practical problem, not an existential threat. We are gradually building skill at it—and this points toward the fluid mode, which accepts incoherence, but can also discover and build patterns within it.

Pathologies of atomization: the new problems of meaningness

In the countercultural mode, as mainstream meanings imploded, finding new foundations for meaning seemed the most urgent problem of meaning. We've long since abandoned that quest. The problems we face now are quite different. I will devote a full page to them later, and have mentioned some above.

Overall, the problem is that without structures and boundaries, shards of meaning do not relate to each other, so it's impossible to compare them. There is no standard of value, so everything seems equally trivial—or equally earth-shaking, or equally threatening. Our lives are so full of so many tiny tasty things, and so many crises and outrages, that it may all fail to add up to much.

The loss of coherence, of "therefore," gives a misimpression of nihilism, of meaninglessness. In the atomized mode, though, there's *overwhelming* quantities of meaning. We suffer from FOMO,

browser tab explosions, and Facebook trance. Projects, creativity, and fundamental values suffer when they are challenged by cacophonous internet alerts a million times a day.

Meanings no longer fit together to point anywhere. This resembles the choiceless ("traditional") mode, which also feels no need for grand unified schemes that make everything make sense. In both modes, incoherence—the lack of large-scale structures of meaning—does not particularly seem a problem. We can navigate locally anyway.

The difference is that we now need to manage hugely more complexity, diversity, volume, and urgency of meanings. Individuals can get by in the atomized world without coherent understanding. Societies cannot.

Civilization still needs large systematic institutions—states, corporations, markets, universities— to survive. The atomized mode corrodes the social systems we depend on. Some are nearing collapse. I do not know whether people who grew up in that mode, and disdain systematicity, can keep the machinery of civilization running.

After the atomized mode

The atomized mode is actually impossible. No one is entirely incapable of understanding "therefore," of coordinating meanings, or ranking values. As I explained at the beginning of this history of meaningness, all the modes are merely "ideal types": simplified extremes that cannot exist in the real world.

In reality, we have always been in the fluid mode, because complete choicelessness is impossible; totally consistent systems are impossible; and absolute atomization is impossible. Eternalism and nihilism are impossible; we always know better. The fluid mode recognizes that structures of meaning are valuable but always nebulous; systems are powerful but always incomplete.

We have always been in the fluid mode, but now at last we are in a position to recognize it. Now, at last, we have the cultural, social, and psychological resources we need to get good at it. Atomization supplies the critical realization that perfect coherence is neither necessary nor even desirable. Fluidity builds on that, to re-form systems as relative tools rather than eternal absolutes.

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1. 1.In late 2016, as I'm publishing this page, Gangnam Style might seem a quaintly old-fashioned choice for an example of atomized culture. Does anyone even remember it? I wrote the first draft of this page in early 2013, when Gangnam Style was everywhere. In 2016, it is temping to replace it with an up-to-date example. However, that would equally be ancient history in 2019. I hope people will still be reading *Meaningness* then. Short of rewriting the page every few weeks, it's inevitable that any example of contemporary culture will be obsolete by the time you read it.
2. 2.Fear Of Missing Out.

4 Comments

Next Page: Not a good decade for thinking →

> Sushi and sake
> A fabulous decade for eating and drinking, though

The atomization of culture—its loss of logical or even aesthetic coherence—has made serious intellectual work much more difficult than it was twenty years ago. Significant new ideas are

scarce. We understand that systems of meaning, which used to be the vehicle for thought, are no longer credible.

We are only beginning, tentatively, to develop alternative ways of thinking. These acknowledge both nebulosity (which undercuts conceptual systems) and pattern (which makes accurate thought possible).

I wrote the following in January, 2014, as a casual rant, and posted it in a private forum. It alluded to ideas about atomization that I only began publishing here in 2016. Now, in early 2017, those may seem obvious features of your Facebook feed—rather than recondite theories which I developed, haltingly, years ago. As I am still making slow progress in polishing text for publication: here is the rant.

Raw. Perhaps the style suits the subject…

text separator

My girlfriend asked me over dinner: "So, where is the most exciting thinking happening now?"

That was a puzzler. After I stalled by saying "In my head, mostly," and we traded various jokes about arrogance and narcissism, I had to admit that I couldn't think of any. (We had both drunk rather a lot of sake, which is still affecting me, or I wouldn't post something like this.)

"Maybe this isn't a good time for thinking," I said.

Which seemed accurate to her; but we agreed it was odd.

There are, of course, good and bad places and times for thinking. Athens in 450 BC was a famously good time. England in 700 CE was not.

The Manhattan Project was a good place and time to think—about atomic bombs, at least.

I was at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab through the 1980s. It was self-consciously similar to the Manhattan Project. Public expectations for AI were at an all-time high.[1] We had unlimited funding from the Department of Defense. The lab selected ferociously smart students and staff. (In 1982, there were 2000 applicants for each available position as a graduate student.) Human-level computer intelligence was just around the corner.

Not.

That was a failed Manhattan Project. We had brilliant, fascinating, innovative theories, all of which were utterly wrong. It *seemed* like a fabulous place to think, but the intellectual culture was subtly broken, and we were all fooling ourselves.

Still, the 1980s overall were an exciting time. Molecular biology was taking off. My best friend was doing something important with molecular genetics at Harvard. (I can't remember what.) I did a bunch of graduate-level coursework in that stuff, 'cuz it was so cool.

Also, the whole French post-structuralist thing was happening, which (like AI) was mostly flashy theories about nothing, but it felt like fireworks at the time.

So mostly that was a failure, but molecular biology was real. On the other hand… biology turned into "normal science" (i.e. routine crank-turning). Hard to be excited about it now.[2]

So what was the last exciting thing to happen in the world of ideas? Evopsych was exciting for about six months ten or fifteen years ago. But once you'd got your head around its few key ideas, the rest was obvious deductions. Verifying the details has become normal science again.

Some of us here are thirsty for "insight porn"… and there's little to be had. Maybe it's only sold under the counter and I'm too naive to find it. Or maybe I'm old and jaded; or my brain has rotted and I wouldn't recognize an insight if it bit me in the hippocampus.

"So if you went back to MIT, would you find no interesting conversations there?" my girlfriend asked.

I don't know—I haven't hung around a university in twenty years. But I figure if anything was happening—other than normal science—I'd hear about it eventually. And I ain't hearing *nothin'*.

So maybe you will humor me (since I'm drunk) and will allow, for the sake of the argument, that this is not a good decade for thinking.

Why not?

Well, *I have a theory*.

It's a weak inference from a broader story about what is happening in our general global culture. I really truly intend to write that up properly Any Day Now.[3]

The theory starts from the fact that we are in the *post-systems era*. That isn't my idea, it's standard-issue 1980s French stuff—one of the few things they actually got right.

The problem is, mostly the only model we have for *scarily smart people* to express insights is to build conceptual systems. But those don't work no more.

The not-really-all-that-smart people haven't noticed that yet, and are still building systems, which is lame. (We can roll our eyes at anyone who comes up with a conceptual system. Nothing needs to actually be *said*, because that's just *so* 20th century.)

So what do the *scarily smart people* do? They trade absurdly erudite jokes about nothing on twitter and complain about the scarcity of insight porn. (Not mentioning any *names* here. You know who you are.)

Then what?

Well, according to my theory (which looks distressingly like a conceptual system…) the next stage in cultural evolution is *disposable assemblages*. To quote myself:[4]

> Finding or creating a consistent, coherent, universal culture, society, or self is NOT our task; that is the doomed dream of modernism.
>
> Our new spiritual task is to devise diverse watercraft for sailing the turbulent seas of meaning. Not great -isms, but elegant windjammers.
>
> Ships that sail the seas of meaning must be: collaborative; creative; improvised; intimate; disposable; beautiful; and spiritual.
>
> Less poetically, meaningness-crafts are fluid, shared structures that organize meanings in ways that foreground whatever matters most.

This is what we are not yet good at. It's a new requirement.

Until we learn how to build such craft, the present will remain… a lousy time for thinking.

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1. 1.Since I wrote this, the late-eighties AI hype wave has been surpassed by a new late-twenty-teens AI hype wave.
2. 2.I wrote this shortly before I learned about CRISPR, which may end old age, sickness, and death. That could be quite interesting.
3. 3.Hold your breath! Definitely. Any day now.
4. 4.This was in a series of tweets in 2013.

15 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This page (when written) will sketch a preview of the *fluid mode*. It will be only a preview, because *most* of *Meaningness and Time* will be about the fluid mode. This page specifically relates fluidity to its history: its evolution out of recent previous modes of meaningness.

One way of expressing fluidity is to say that cultural conditions are now right for understanding and acceptance of the complete stance. There is a widespread tacit understanding that social, cultural, and psychological systems do not "work," and cannot "work," if "work" involves any sort of guarantee. In other words, eternalism is unworkable. There is also widespread tacit understanding that nihilism is unworkable (and, in fact, silly). The atomized mode ideally dissolves all patterns, which is obviously impossible. So tacitly we all understand that meaning must be *both nebulous and patterned*—and this is exactly the complete stance. "The fluid mode" consists of working out what that may mean for society, culture, and self.

The fluid mode goes meta on the previous modes. That is, it understands meaning as a dynamic process of evolution through social, cultural, and psychological change. It recognizes all the problems that the previous modes tried to solve, synthesizes what was right in each attempt. It also abandons what was wrong in each.

The countercultures wrongly rejected rationality, because the systematic mode had absolutized it. The subcultures rejected universalism—rightly, but absolutely, which made nation-scale structures impossible. Atomization made coherence impossible, which could become disastrous. During the eras of these three modes, rational, large-scale, coherent systems became increasingly inconceivable—but without them, civilization is impossible.

The fluid mode must reinstate rationality, universality, and coherence, but with recognition of their nebulosity. In fluidity, systems are relativized, not eliminated.

The fluid mode follows the atomized one. Atomization's great contribution is an instinctive appreciation of nebulosity. At an intuitive, kinesthetic level, we have all become much more comfortable with ambiguity, chaos, uncertainty, and volatility. What's missing is an understanding of how pattern arises:

- impermanently
- creatively
- biologically
- collaboratively
- spontaneously
- in dependence on the non-human realm

Atomization bears new problems of meaningness: the overwhelming torrent of meaning spewed by the internet; its triviality, causing distraction from value judgements; and perceived tensions between internet and "real life."

Atomization is a fact; it can't be reversed. The question to ask is "how can we live enjoyably and effectively in a world in which society, culture, and self *are* atomized?" Part of the answer is: by constructing temporary assemblages of greater meaning—while recognizing that they can't be *answers* or eternal or ultimate or universal or any of those obsolete absolutes.

Fluidity addresses atomization's defects with watercraft that sail the sea of meanings. (This nautical metaphor will get quite complex, I'm afraid!) These ships must be collaborative, creative, improvised, intimate, transient, beautiful, playful, and spiritual.

18 Comments

The diagram below summarizes the historical motions of modes of meaningness.

Time flows from top to bottom. The horizontal axis locates modes with respect to eternalism and nihilism—the denials of the nebulosity and patterns of meaningness.

Diagram showing the motion of modes of meaningness with respect to eternalism and nihilism, over time

The details of this chart should not be taken too seriously. In particular, *relative* horizontal motions are meant to be meaningful, but not their absolute positions. For instance, the fluid mode ("Waterworld") should be less nihilistic than the atomized mode ("Kaleidoscope"), but trying to locate it relative to the subcultural mode probably makes no sense. I have, however, put the fluid mode exactly in the center, to indicate that it should avoid both eternalism and nihilism.

The black lines with crosses on them indicate opposition. In both cases, there's influence as well as conflict. Philosophical nihilism did flow into the "late modern mainstream" of the 1950s, although that was denied. The dualist "Moral Majority" counterculture borrowed heavily from the monist "hippie" counterculture, although it mostly didn't admit that. In fact, every mode of meaningness has taken pieces from every past and contemporary one. Creating meaning is hard, and great artists steal whenever they can.

The atomized kaleidoscopic mode is furthest over toward nihilism (not counting philosophical nihilism, which is mainly theoretical). However, full nihilism denies all meaning; whereas the problem in the atomized mode is more that there is *too much* meaning, than too little. It has just lost the coherence of pattern, and so becomes senseless and overwhelming.

3 Comments

Underwater fantasy

"Fluidity" is a positive vision for the future of society, culture, and our selves. Visions may be inspiring, but they're useless unless they respect present realities. My conception of fluidity emerges from an analysis of the successes and failures of recent modes of meaningness.

This page, then, is the turning point of *Meaningness and Time*: from the recent past and present to the near future. It both looks back, extracting lessons from *How meaning fell apart*, and looks forward, sketching a nebulous preview of *Sailing the seas of meaningness*.

(If you have not read *How meaning fell apart*, it will help to read its overview, or to look at the summary chart. They explain how each mode attempted to solve problems of meaning the previous ones created, and how each was partly successful but eventually failed.)

The fluid mode should deliver the benefits of each previous mode, while minimizing the problems each created:

- The choiceless mode's sense of secure meaning in community, without its narrowness and material poverty
- The systematic mode's elegance, effectiveness, and enabling of nation-scale institutions, without its oppressive rigidity
- The countercultures' positivity, thickness and breadth, without their anti-rational idiocy
- The subcultures' diverse and creative subsocieties, without their parasitism
- The atomized mode's appreciation for nebulosity and provision of universal access, without its triviality

Is this possible? I think so—and the rest of *Meaningness and Time* sketches how.

Our tool for analyzing modes of meaningness, and for constructing the fluid mode, is the complete stance. That recognizes the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern, and thereby avoids the errors of both eternalism and nihilism. It particularly recognizes the nebulosity and pattern of boundaries and connections, and thereby avoids the errors of monism and dualism. These four confused stances account for most of the failures of the existing modes.

Metasystematicity is closely related to the complete stance. It is the attitude that systems of meaning are of great value (because meaning is patterned), but none can be complete or fully correct (because meaning is nebulous). Instead, we must deploy multiple systems, comprehend and negotiate the conflicts and synergies among them, and be willing to act even when no system can guide us.

Because systems emerge in particular social, cultural, and psychological circumstances, metasystematicity requires a historical perspective: an understanding of how meaningness develops through time. That was the aim of *How meaning fell apart*.

Here I ask: which aspects of these previous modes of meaningness are worth rescuing from historical oblivion, and how must they be transformed to function effectively as the future comes into focus?

Overview

We can understand the countercultural, subcultural, and atomized modes as attempts to address the defects of the systematic mode, and to restore lost benefits of choicelessness. They successively rejected three of systems' key principles: *rationality*, *universality*, and *coherence*. These principles contribute to the oppressive rigidity of the systematic mode, because it takes them as eternalistic absolutes. Jettisoning them brought significant benefits. Unfortunately, each anti-systematic move was also, in part, regressive: walking back in longing for the choiceless mode.

Rationality, universality, and coherence contribute to systems' beneficial functioning. Since the breakdown of the systematic mode, rational, large-scale, coherent systems have become increasingly inconceivable. Unfortunately, without them, civilization is impossible. A collapse of our legacy systems, under assault from anti-rational, anti-universal, anti-coherent myopia, would be catastrophic.

The fluid mode must restore all three principles, but in relativized forms that recognize their inseparable nebulosity and pattern. This requires a better understanding of the nature of meaningness—which I hope *Meaningness*, the book, supplies.

This page suggests that the fluid mode should:

- *Simulate choiceless community*, providing social and cultural structures that allow us to live *as if* in a close-knit traditional tribe, but with the benefits of a postindustrial civilization.
- *Relativize systems*, restoring respect for their aesthetic elegance and practical effectiveness, while dispelling their foundational certainties so they can accommodate alternatives.
- *Enjoy mass-culture creativity*, as in the countercultures: appreciating their optimistic visions, their motivating drive, and their thickness and breadth of meaning.
- *Rework subsociety boundaries*, so they provide diverse communities for diverse people, without parasitizing larger-scale cultural and social structures.
- *Embrace atomization*, the technology-driven force that makes nebulosity inescapably obvious, and develop better cultural, social, and psychological tools for finding sense within it.

These are desiderata: mere hopes and wishes. *Sailing the seas of meaningness* explains *how* the fluid mode may work. It is not structured in terms of previous modes of meaningness—although it takes them as background. This page extracts principles from the history, so we will rarely require further reference to it.

Simulate choiceless community

Nearly all humans have had a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. We lived in wandering clans, of a dozen to a few score, which were parts of wider tribes of a few hundreds or thousands. Some anthropologists say we spent about four hours a day working, which was enough to meet all material needs. Everyone's work was recognized as meaningful and valuable by everyone else. Most of the rest of the time was spent in enjoyable cultural and social activities. Band membership was elective (chosen): if you didn't get along with one, you could usually join another.

This sounds like a good deal to me! It seems that such a highly-meaningful, socially supportive, leisure-filled life would *feel right*, because our brains evolved for it.

It is a utopian fantasy, though, unless we also admit the nasty, brutish, and short aspects of hunter-gatherer life. Not just the material poverty, but the social and cultural narrowness: like being stuck with your middle-school clique, listening to the same twenty dumb songs, for your entire life. Having choices is usually good. Personal development beyond communal values, into more sophisticated ways of being, is good for those who can manage it.

Can't we have the benefits without the limitations? Especially, can't we get the benefits of both the choiceless (traditional, communal, premodern) and systematic (bureaucratic, rational, modern) modes?

Cultures and societies may function well just to the extent that they manage that. We can't go back to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, even if we wanted to. But we can provide substitutes for its key features, or "simulations" that give similar benefits. In fact, every subsequent mode has worked partly by doing that:

- The systematic mode substituted eternalistic certainty for choicelessness, and prescribed definite social roles for everyone

- The countercultures affirmed humanistic, communal values against the dehumanizing, individualizing machinery of systematicity
- Elective, "neo-tribal" subsocieties provided social support and "DIY" participatory culture; many members dropped out of systematic society, and found ways to live without employment
- Internet social networks can enable close elective bonds, and exciting participatory culture, in the atomized era.

The countercultural, subcultural, and atomized modes can all be seen as attempts to compromise between the choiceless and systematic modes, or to combine their benefits. Why is this so urgently necessary?

In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life, by the developmental psychologist Robert Kegan, suggests an answer. To make sense of life within systematic society, you have to build a systematic self. Otherwise, the expectations of modern institutions seem arbitrary, selfish, cruel, and deranged. Unfortunately, empirical studies find that only a minority of people in modern societies manage to create such selves. The majority are, in Kegan's words, "developmentally traditional people in a modern world." Friction from this mismatch causes great stress, especially in work life and in dealing with state institutions.

Society should work for as many people as possible. It certainly should work for the majority—who are not currently capable of coping with systematicity. That would mean they could live "as if" in the choiceless mode.

I hope the fluid mode will create a *deliberately developmental society*, based on a recognition that people vary in capacity. Ideally:

- Societies and cultures should provide the *feelings* of belonging, security, and coherent, shared meanings we found in hunter-gatherer bands.
- They should make material abundance available to all, with relatively little effort, with no requirement to conform to elaborate systematic demands.
- There should be a clearly-marked path for personal development beyond the communal mode. It should encourage and reward those who pursue it—but not penalize or denigrate those who can't, or choose not to.

This is a tall order. Fulfilling it completely is not feasible with our current material technology and economy, nor with available social and cultural "technologies." However, that is not required for the initial transition to the fluid mode. It's a longer-term goal. Each previous mode's way of simulating choicelessness also depended on innovations in technology, economics, social organization, and culture, so this is nothing new.

Although progress is never guaranteed, virtually unlimited material abundance seems plausible in a few decades. That would enable new economic arrangements, such as a "guaranteed basic income," for example. That would have social and cultural consequences that we can only speculate about—but which it would be good to start preparing for.

An immediate transition to abundance might result in a catastrophic crisis of meaning: what would everyone do all day? In the absence of close community and participatory culture, perhaps most people would spend their time watching TV, and experiencing the symptoms of nihilism—depression, rage, and anxiety—because life without imposed structure seems meaningless.

Relativize systems

The systematic mode asked: how can we do things better? And its answer was: by building knowledge up from rational foundations. That led to Renaissance art, the scientific revolution, constitutional democracy, internet cat videos, and most everything else that makes life better for us than for subsistence farmers.

Although rationalist epistemology worked astonishingly well for centuries, it is not actually correct. Nebulosity is unavoidable, and ultimate foundations are impossible. Attempts to force nebulous reality to fit rigid systems inevitably fail. And before failing, they result in alienation, anomie, totalitarianism, existentialism, and other such evils.

These problems led the three following modes to abandon the three epistemological principles of rationality, universality, and coherence. Accordingly, the countercultures proposed unrealistic reforms to soften systematicity; the subcultures carved parts of life away from the systematic matrix, but remained parasitic on it; and the atomized mode is simply oblivious to it.

Those developments were mainly steps backward, although the post-systematic modes were right that rationality had failed. Despite that, the systematic mode's epistemology is more sophisticated than both those of the choiceless mode and those of the post-systematic modes. Rationality powers its elegance and effectiveness.

As with the choiceless mode, we should ask: How do we get the benefits of systematicity without the costs?

I will suggest this is possible, in the fluid mode, by adopting a *meta-rational* epistemology. Meta-rationality retains the virtues of systematic rationality, but also incorporates an understanding of nebulosity and pattern. Abandoning the futile quest for absolute foundations, it enables forms of flexibility the systematic mode lacked. It allows multiple interpenetrating systems to co-exist, without demanding that all apparent conflicts be resolved in favor of one or another. Meta-rationality treats rationality, universality, and coherence as often-valuable tools, not as cosmic absolutes.

Meta-rationality is cognitively challenging:

- "Developmentally traditional people in the modern world" are not competent in systematic rationality. They cannot *understand* the question "how can we get the benefits of systematicity without the costs"—because they are blind to its beneficial operation. As far as they are concerned, safe drinking water, impartial courts, and cat videos might as well rain from heaven.

- Those who have progressed to a systematic worldview, but no further, cannot believe the question has an answer, because they cannot imagine the possibility of anything better. The only alternatives appear to be a return to communal irrationality, or a nihilistic breakdown. This makes them willfully blind to systematicity's costs.

Building a meta-systematic society and culture, when few people can follow meta-rational explanations, will be difficult. Nevertheless, I will suggest ways it may be possible. I will also suggest ways of making meta-rational understanding more broadly available. A clearly-marked path from personal systematicity to meta-systematicity is a further requirement for a deliberately developmental society.

In a sense, that is the project of *Meaningness* overall! But I will make more specific pedagogical proposals as well.

Enjoy the creativity and vision of mass culture

The systematic mode had an attractively optimistic vision: that we could do everything right, which would solve all problems. This vision was discredited by the endless catastrophes and breakdowns of the first half of the Twentieth Century.

The countercultures provided alternative optimistic visions. Those enabled a wave of delightful cultural creativity. Their universalism implied that "we, nationally or globally, are all in this together." That gave them the critical mass of innovators needed to develop a panoply of new thick and wide meanings, attractive to tens or hundreds of millions of people.

Unfortunately, the universalism of the countercultures meant that their social reforms failed. People differ, and need different social, cultural, and personal arrangements. The fluid mode must recognize that. The countercultures' anti-rationality also resulted in failure: their alternative, optimistic visions were wildly unrealistic.

Unlike the countercultures, the two subsequent modes have been unable to provide thick, broad, and positive culture. The essence of subculturalism was the rejection of mass-scale culture—which allowed creative diversity, but usually failed to achieve the scale needed to provide sufficient thickness and breadth of meaning. The atomized mode does resemble the countercultural mode in producing culture with global appeal, but its incoherence results in triviality, whereas the countercultures' depth of meaning grew from coherent visions.

The subcultural and atomized modes also lost the countercultures' optimism, and often slid into Lite Nihilism. As of 2017, most people in developed societies expect the future to be pretty much the same as the present, except worse. The possibility of a positive vision is met with derisive cynicism. This is understandable, as due to the collapse of eternalism, which had underwritten the belief in progress. But it is unfortunate and unprecedented.

How can we engender optimistic cultural creativity, like that of the countercultures—without their anti-rational idiocy, destructive antagonism, and totalitarian universalism?

In the fluid mode, this requires:

1. Recovering a relativized rationality.
2. Adopting the complete stance of participation, which resolves the opposition of monism and dualism. I explained how in "Completing the countercultures."
3. Recognizing the nebulosity and pattern of both universalism and particularism. I'll sketch that in the next section of this page.

As for the first point: meta-rationality is the antidote to countercultural anti-rationality, as well as to systematic rationalist eternalism. Two partly-correct observations motivate anti-rationalism: that rationalism implies oppressive systematic rigidity, and that it implies nihilism.

- By recognizing the nebulosity of meaningness, meta-rationality loosens up absolutist, rationalist systems.
- By recognizing the patterning of meaningness, meta-rationality refutes and dispels nihilism.

Fluid social institutions and culture can grow from this understanding.

Rework subsociety boundaries

The subcultural mode abandoned universality, in favor of rigorous particularism. Different subcultures provided different bodies of meaning, suitable for different sorts of people. Finding the right subculture let you "be yourself." Finding the right subsociety gave you a feeling of "coming home to my own people, at last." This new mode provided a much better—nearly *customized*—self/society fit than the systematic and countercultural ones could.

Not needing to justify any universal claims, subcultures no longer had a use for any eternal rock of certainty. They maintained coherence thematically, with aesthetic judgements and with ritual, rather than with a foundational structure of justifications. This put them on track toward the complete stance: neither eternalist nor nihilist. Many subcultures did abandon eternalism—tacitly, at least—and most avoided nihilism.

Freed from pompous eternalism and dour nihilism, subcultures became explicitly play. Steampunk is deliberately ridiculous, and not *meant* to be taken seriously. But it is also not trivial genre entertainment, as it may appear to outsiders. The subcultures began to explore the possibility that seriousness and playfulness are not mutually exclusive. That inseparability should be a major, explicit aspect of the fluid mode.

Subculturalism enabled a new kind of creativity. Punks called it "DIY" (do it yourself): they rejected the resources of the culture industry, to escape its exploitative power. But "yourself" was an individualist self-misunderstanding. The tacit realization was that *we make meaning together*, as a subsociety, or "scene." The meanings we make are meant *just for us*.

Functional communities range from dozens to thousands of people. When a subculture gained an audience of millions, the subsocieties that produced it exploded in size, became dysfunctional, and disintegrated.

Recognizing the problem, subsocieties found ways to limit membership. One strategy was to avoid mass appeal by making the subculture increasingly esoteric and repellent to outsiders. Eventually, the mode failed because the cultures it produced became ever narrower, shallower, and unsatisfying.

At their best, subsocieties and subcultures were refuges from the screeching chaotic dysfunction of nation-scale systematic social institutions and the nation-scale culture war. Particularism allowed members to deny responsibility for anything outside their subculture. Most did their best to simply ignore all that and enjoyed playing in their sandbox. This made the mode parasitic: keeping civilization running was *someone else's* problem. Society as a whole cannot take this attitude. Meanwhile, nation-scale social institutions often regarded subcultures as threats, and attempted to destroy them, sometimes successfully. Nation-scale economic institutions often saw subcultures as opportunities for exploitation, which also destroyed some.

The failure of the countercultures showed that universalism, as an absolute, cannot work. However, the particularism of the subcultural mode also did not work as an absolute:

- Rejecting mass culture as inherently rubbish was a mistake
- We need effective nation-scale social institutions
- The attitude that subsociety membership makes you special was psychologically harmful

The fluid mode must relativize both universalism and particularism:

- Sameness and difference are not absolute; they shade into each other
- Any two people, or two groups, are similar in some ways and dissimilar in others
- Some principles apply almost universally; others make sense only for some people

- Therefore, social institutions must address different issues at different scales
- Because subsocieties are elective, many coexist in a single city. Organizing government structures geographically no longer maps social differences; we need an alternative

Supportive subsocieties were a great accomplishment of the subcultural era. I hope the fluid mode can create something similar. That will require explicitly reworking the relationship between subsocieties and larger groups. Both sides must understand and respect the needs of the other. Subsocieties must acknowledge their dependence on the effective functioning of states and economies, and must contribute to them. States and economies must acknowledge the worth of elective communities with distinctive values, and cede control over some matters to them.

This will not be easy. However, a proper understanding of the nature of boundaries may take us quite a long way. The boundaries between social groups *are* always both nebulous and patterned: selectively permeable. Boundaries exist only through constant maintenance activity: judgements of who and what is on one side or the other, who and what may pass, and the actions taken accordingly. Such judgements can never be fully systematized, but undergo continual renegotiation. And so boundaries naturally evolve as circumstances change.

This understanding illuminates the vertical relationship between subsocieties and larger institutions; the horizontal relationship between different subsocieties; and the relationship between individuals and subsocieties.

Embrace atomization

The atomization of culture, society, and self has liquefied experience. This mode contributes the critical realization that perfect coherence is neither necessary nor even desirable.

At a practical, intuitive, kinesthetic level, we have become much more tolerant of nebulosity: of paradox, volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Accepting nebulosity is a major step toward the complete stance, and toward the fluid mode.

Abandoning coherence *altogether* produces an overwhelming ocean of meanings that do not relate to each other in any way. That gives an impression of pervasive triviality. Value judgements —even aesthetic ones—seem impossible when nothing hangs together. Society cannot function without coherent relationships.

And yet… we *do* make value judgements, and society *does* still function. We have developed skills for navigating the seas of meaning. Mainly without explicit understanding, we constantly re-create *relative* coherence. We have learned to assemble atoms of meaning into temporary sea-worthy vessels, and to let go of those as they dissolve.

We are, in other words, already in the fluid mode. As we always have been.

Now we just need to get good at it.

4 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This page will introduce the *fluid mode* of society, culture, and self.

For a preview, see this page.

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This page will introduce the implications of the fluid mode for personal psychology and our conceptions of our selves and close relationships.

For an overview, see the Fluidity section of "Developing ethical, social, and cognitive competence."

1 Comment

> Prithi and Carlos
> Image courtesy Sajjad Hussain M

Meta-systematicity manifests as the forefront of all domains of meaning, including in personal psychology, rational understanding, social organization, and culture. Observing meta-systematicity across these domains reveals structural parallels, so that insight from each domain illuminates the others.

This page braids together three purposes:

- It casts light on meta-systematicity in general by showing its dynamics specifically in self-understanding and in relationships;
- It illustrates meta-systematicity in relationships with an example of tech startup cofounders;
- It gives a glimpse of meta-systematic social organization through the case of technology companies; by analogy with meta-systematic relationships; and by application of the understanding of meta-systematicity in general.

The topic poses a chicken-and-egg problem. The ability to think meta-systematically is a prerequisite to learning what meta-systematicity *is*—just as the ability to think systematically is a prerequisite to learning what systematicity is.[1] So the path from systematicity to meta-systematicity is difficult, gradual, and takes years.

A map of the way ahead helps. Learning about *how one learns* to be meta-systematic may be the best way to learn what it *is* to be meta-systematic.

I illustrate the path to personal and relational meta-systematicity with a series of snapshots of the development of a fictional character, Prithi. She is the CTO (Chief Technology Officer) of an imaginary technology startup. She cofounded it with her college friend, and now co-CEO, Carlos.

Each snapshot features a monologue in which Prithi explains how she understands some problem in a fictional interpersonal situation. Each story is simple and concrete, to make understanding easier. However, it would still be easy to miss the points, which are subtle and abstract. I will ask you to listen to each monologue in a peculiar, difficult way: at three levels simultaneously. There are the *events*: who said what. There are the *meanings* Prithi ascribes to those events. And there is the *way* those meanings come to be, and how they interact with the events, characters, and each other. The first two levels, the events and their meanings, are simplified specifics I invented to give substance for the third, which is the topic of this page.

The third level, the *dynamics of meaning*, progresses from systematic to meta-systematic. In the systematic mode, meanings are structured by a collection of rules, policies, principles, and procedures that interlock as a coherent system. Systems can function extremely effectively, but are brittle in the face of *nebulosity*—uncertainty, change, ambiguity, and indefiniteness. The meta-systematic mode addresses nebulosity by expanding concern outside any system, to consider how systems relate to the unspecifiable details of reality, and to each other.

So what matters is not so much what Prithi says, as how she comes to say it. Listen for incremental shifts in how she, systems, and meanings relate to each other. This may require repeated re-readings. I will try to help: with analysis after each monologue, and in some cases by interrupting Prithi to comment on what she is saying in real time.

For understanding relationship dynamics, the story context of business leadership is just set-dressing. *How* Prithi thinks and feels and acts could be illustrated equally well in the context of a marriage, for example.[2] (In fact, the cofounder relationship is often likened to one.) However, the operation of a business or other organization can also shift from systematic to meta-systematic. Prithi will describe this change in the final snapshot. Then I'll say more about meta-systematic organizations in an epilogue.

This page is significantly influenced by Robert Kegan's psychological framework. He describes stages of personal development over a lifetime, numbered 0 to 5. Adults may progress from the communal, pre-systematic mode (stage 3), through the rational, systematic mode (stage 4), to the fluid, meta-systematic mode (stage 5). I've labeled the seven snapshots 4, 4.2, 4.4, and so on. The decimal notation is not quantitative; it's an artificial expository device for pointing out the gradual nature of the transition.[3] These steps are not sudden jumps, but arbitrary markers, spaced about a year apart, in a continuous process. By breaking the long transition down into pieces, I hope to make it, and the endpoint, seem feasible and understandable, and not inscrutable magic.

Each snapshot shows Prithi participating in more-or-less the same event. Retelling that story over and over lets you compare her reactions at different points in her development, apples-to-apples, as it were. Still, the details change as she reacts differently. Meanwhile, in the background, you can imagine her company growing from ten people to a thousand over the course of the page, and the several years of development it represents.

There may come a point, part way through this page, where it stops making sense and starts to sound abstract or implausible. If its overall trajectory seems attractive, you might consider the possibility that this point represents your own growth edge. Reflection around that step might be particularly helpful.

4. A system for relating

> Yesterday the big sale Carlos was working on fell through. It was supposed to be a three-year contract with a giant multinational. They backed out at the last minute and signed with a bigger, older competitor of ours, who are "more stable," although their products are inferior. It turns out our prospective client was sending all our confidential technical proposals to the other guys, and stringing us along to get our ideas for free. Carlos was *so* mad at them, and burned some bridges. But he also blamed himself for not figuring it out earlier.
>
> We left the office right after; he told me he was going to start yelling at his staff if he didn't get away right then. We did a long walk along the Embarcadero and then way the heck out to the Presidio. I was mostly just listening. That's the best way to handle it when someone's upset. Don't try to fix things or suggest solutions or tell them they did or didn't do the best they could. Anyway, when we founded the company, we

agreed that sales was his thing. I stay out of it, except when he needs me there to explain tech stuff to a prospective customer.

He kept asking me if I'd be as angry as he was. I was pretty sure I wouldn't have been. The outcome isn't fatal, and who would have thought such a respected company would be so flagrantly unethical? But I couldn't tell him that, because it would have been ignoring how upset he was. And he and I are really different, although we work well together. That's a lot of *why* we work well together! My explaining how I would have felt would be irrelevant to how he did feel. It would be like making him wrong for feeling that way. Or at least interfering in his work to make sense of his own emotional process. Instead I wanted to just let him know that I understood how he felt, without judging it.

Prithi's monologue might at first sound like the pre-systematic communal mode, because it is about feelings and relationships, which are central for that mode. But stages are defined by dynamics: by *how* you process meanings, not by which meanings you process. Relationships and emotions are always important. The question is whether you treat them pre-systematically, systematically, or meta-systematically. So understanding what makes this monologue systematic, not communal, will bring us to the starting point of the journey from systematicity to meta-systematicity.

In the communal mode, differences in feelings, opinions, and goals are inherently a problem for a relationship. In that mode, Prithi might try to persuade Carlos that he should feel about his failure the same way she did. Or she might think she should feel about it the way he did. Or she might feel like she wasn't being a loyal cofounder because her views weren't aligned with his. Startup cofounders in the communal mode try to sweep conflicts under the rug, which stores up trouble for later.

Prithi worked hard to understand Carlos' feelings, but it didn't bother her not to feel the same way. In the communal mode, you can take another person's point of view; but in doing so, you lose your own perspective, because feelings are supposed to be shared. Prithi maintains her own feelings *at the same time* she recognizes his. For the systematic mode, emotional differences are not inherently a problem, because the relationship itself is formally structured, not just a bundle of of shared feelings.

Prithi exercises her systematic theory of how emotions *should* be processed in relationships, which includes not interfering with Carlos' process. It's not that Prithi is oblivious to Carlos' feelings, or unsympathetic. She cares about them as a matter of genuine relational concern, as well as pragmatically and ethically. However, his experience is *his* experience; she's "just visiting" his way of being. According to her conceptual framework, a successful outcome of this interaction will result in better understanding, but it will leave both of their ways of feeling and relating untouched.

Prithi defines herself as a rational system, interfacing with another rational system, according to a well-defined API. We call that API "professionalism."[4] It includes understanding that people have different roles and responsibilities in an organization, and different ways of making sense of feelings, people, and work; and that we work best together by respecting and allowing those differences. Prithi understands not just that Carlos has different feelings about the deal falling through. At stage three one can recognize that. At stage four, she understands the larger picture that his conceptual structure for success and failure and business ethics, which generates the feelings, is different. She understands that he too has a stage four worldview; he generally subordinates his feelings and personal relationships to his principles and his organizational role. For example, by not taking out his frustration on his staff![5]

But… she's being a bit rigid in her professionalism, in her non-intervention, in her insistence on sticking to *her* specific theory of how to do the relationship when he's asking for something different. Prithi takes herself as the author of her personal system, and so—ironically—gets unconsciously defined by it. Synchronizing feelings for the sake of relationship harmony seems like regression to stage three for her. At the level of meaning, her problem is to figure out how to maintain her policy of keeping feelings to herself in the face of his repeated request that she violate it. His request is reasonable, but at stage four it does not occur to her to question the model.

She was, therefore, responding to Carlos not as a whole person, but in terms of an abstract principle, and in terms of their formal roles in the company. What makes this stage four is not this particular principle (a meaning). It's the dynamics. The way she's holding the meaning, as a fixed fact ("the best way"), has limited her space of possible actions unnecessarily.

Moving on toward the fluid mode, Prithi will gain greater freedom and flexibility by relativizing roles, principles, and systematic frameworks. But at this stage of development, she cannot yet see that she might operate effectively outside her own system, because she is subject to it as an ideological commitment. She would understand "operating outside the system" as just a reversion to unprincipled communalism. If meta-systematic fluidity were explained to her, she'd misunderstand it as an incoherent attempt to compromise between systematicity and the communal mode.

4.2. A glimpse of meta-systematicity

> Carlos kept asking me how I would feel if I'd screwed up like that. And I kept turning the conversation back to how *he* felt, because I was pretty sure I wouldn't have been nearly as upset as he was. I kept waffling and evading the question, because I didn't want to invalidate his feelings. I thought they were reasonable, even if I would have felt differently.

> But afterwards, I woke up in the middle of the night, replaying our conversation. We've been friends for years, and of course we sometimes disagree, but I think we've done a good job of resolving conflicts by asking "What's best for the business? What evidence do we have? How do we do a cost-benefit analysis here? Whose area of responsibility does this decision lie in?" But recently I've started to worry he feels I'm distancing him. We're still getting along, but are we still friends? It's not that I'm not taking his emotions seriously; but we don't want to get that in the way of our work.

> I wonder if, in that conversation, I might have closed off an opportunity for him to learn something. I mean not that I would be *teaching* him, but just explaining a different way of thinking about it. Maybe my attempt to honor *his* way of thinking was counterproductive? Or, not the honoring, but my evasiveness… Maybe the way I decided how to respond is not optimal. But I'm not sure what I could have said that would've changed how he thought, or whether it could help for him to hear "no I wouldn't feel that way." Maybe I need to read more about interpersonal dynamics.

> Or, I guess, maybe I should somehow have been feeling for some more intuitive or creative way of working with his upset? You can get lost in psychobabble woo that way, though.

In this second snapshot, Prithi recognizes that her principled, rational, systematic ideas about how relationships should work are open to question. She has some ability to imagine a meta-systematic alternative, but mostly can't yet act on it.

At stage four, Prithi thought she had a rational theory of relationships, but in fact it had her. Because she took it as a justified, true belief, she *was* that system of relating, as nearly as she could manage. In the first monologue, the conflict she described was between her principles and Carlos' repeated request. Now she experiences a conflict between her principles and her growing recognition that they are not absolute, and are open to doubt. She has begun to recognize that she is subject to a system. This is a first step toward a self larger than any ideology, with the greater freedom and power of reflecting on and using multiple systems.

If you do not share Prithi's particular theory of relationships, you may be feeling superior now. She *is* being a bit stubbornly stupid. But recall that specific meanings—such as this theory—are not the point. What matters are the dynamics of how she relates to it. Holding any other principle in an absolute way would equally imply that she is operating in the systematic mode (and being a bit stubbornly stupid). This stubbornness responds to the fear that the only alternative to rigid rational principles is an irresponsible, emotional relativism: the communal mode she has left firmly behind.

Confronted with evidence that a principle is not always right, the systematic mode attempts to fix the framework; or—failing that—to replace it with some other explicit truth. ("Maybe I need to read more about interpersonal dynamics.") The content can change, but within stage four, the *way it is held* remains the same. It retains an unconscious commitment to the idea that *some* system must be correct.

In 4.2, the possibility of *reflecting on* "the way I decided" arises. Prithi begins, hesitantly, to expand beyond her personal system. She begins to have some perspective on it, some recognition of how it works, which allows her to question its costs and adequacy.

On the way *in* to stage four, you fear that you may not always be able to conform to your system. On the way *out*, you become dissatisfied with its reliable bureaucratic functioning, because it's emotionally isolating, intellectually limiting, and wearyingly familiar. You may wake up in the middle of the night and wonder how your life became so superficial, mechanical, and stale.

The first step beyond systematicity is *suspicion*. That begins after seeing enough systems fail, and enough irreconcilable conflicts between pairs of systems that both seem more-or-less valid. Is it possible that loyalty to *any* system might be a mistake?

So Prithi now wonders if she could "feel for" some other way of being. The *nebulous possibility* of fluidity, a new dynamics of meaningness, appears on the horizon, although she says she doesn't know how or whether it could work. At this point, it is common to describe the imagined future way of being as "intuitive" or "creative." This is not exactly wrong, but it expresses a sense of mere unknowing; of the possibility being too vague to describe. That can be frightening. Exiting stage four, as the personal system you identify with starts to lose its grip, it resists its loss of control. It makes progress toward five feel like regression toward stage three ("lost in psychobabble woo").

Prithi also still understands the problem as one of how *she* would "work with" his upset. That is an individualist, stage four conception. Stage three tends toward emotional fusion, and stage four toward emotional self-containment. Stage five understands the self-other "boundary" as patterns of interaction that are real and necessary, but nebulous and permeable. Self and other actively co-construct, and ongoingly redefine, systems of meaning, including what it means to be inside, outside, or shared. But here Prithi can only distantly sense this possibility.

4.4. Learning meta-systematic skills

Carlos asked me several times how I would feel if I'd screwed up like that—and gotten screwed like that. At first I kept turning the conversation back to why he felt what he did. But eventually I realized I was being annoying and unhelpful. So instead I told him explicitly that it seemed like explaining that would distract from what he was feeling, and from helping him understand why.

And he said "But that's not what I want from you! I *know* what *I'm* feeling, and why. What I want to know is whether there's some better way I could be dealing with it. Admit it, I know *you* wouldn't get so angry! Why not?"

So then we had a long talk about different ways he and I react when things go wrong, and how we make sense of success and failure, and about ethics in business. In the end he said that he realized part of his upset came from having assumptions violated that are maybe excessively rigid and unrealistic. And I realized that saying what I would think or feel or do in his shoes could be helpful, even though sales isn't my area of expertise. Just listening non-judgmentally isn't always the right approach. So I learned something, too. I think I have a better understanding of how to deal with other people's upset.

Also, I think it's improved our relationship; there's a new sense that we can take input from each other in ways that go beyond just our professional roles. Our having to interface professionally with each other, while carrying all the responsibilities in this business—which are getting intense in new ways, as it's grown—doesn't mean we aren't friends. Again.

In this snapshot, Prithi opens to the possibility of *co-creating the meaning* of the event. By explaining her evasiveness to Carlos, and then dropping it, she allows for a revision of her theory of relationships in the light of his different understanding. These are meta-systematic dynamics: they subordinate the systematic ideology to the process of ontological remodeling. This is the qualitative, collaborative transformation of one's self, eventually allowing its meaning to remain inseparably nebulous and patterned.

However, at this point Prithi takes the possibility as one of theory revision to improve a systematic self—a stage four dynamic. Stage four is all about holding true beliefs, and about methods for successful problem-solving. Stage five takes those for granted; its dynamics focus instead on ontological transformations of nebulous circumstances.

In their conversation, both Carlos and Prithi discovered bugs in the operation of their personal administrations, and installed fixes they designed in consultation. They have co-created meanings, but each will own them individually, and as new but fixed commitments. In 4.8, we'll see meaning scintillating in their interaction, jointly owned and constantly re-forming. At 4.4, even if revisions require significant re-architecting of their personal processes, the improvements will merely return each to a state of smooth, systematic individual functioning. That is the aim of stage four self-management.

So, overall, 4.4 is defined as having developed some skill in meta-systematicity, but not deploying it consistently. Also, it understands meta-systematic operations mainly from within a stage four conceptual framework, as ways of enhancing a system. In the cognitive domain, 4.4 is excitement about learning meta-rational skills, but taking them as new ways of accomplishing the goals of rationality, such as discovering truths and evaluating principles.[6] This is not wrong, but it is a limited view.

4.5. The chasm of nihilism

> I kept trying to just let Carlos go on about his feelings—because what's it matter what I do or don't feel? People have feelings, and they don't mean anything. You just have to get on with the job. Different people have different feelings; so what?
>
> Anyway, I was pretty sure that talking about it would just mean unloading my negativity on him, and what good is that. But he insisted, so I decided to just give it to him straight. I'm tired of pretending.
>
> "In the bigger picture," I said, "you could say we all just evolved to maximize our personal advantage, so you can't really expect people to do anything else. You could say those guys behaved 'unethically,' but basically that's just a social convention. Well, of course they were doing what was best for them! We happened to be collateral damage, but that's just the luck of the draw.
>
> "They're in business to make money; we're in business to make money. We're past the point of money meaning anything; it's just more of the same. We could walk away from the company now and be done. Why not? What do you have to prove? If you want to keep score by counting dollars and deals, that's fine, but you might as well be playing a video game. It's empty. If you run your life by your sales numbers, it's going to be an endless emotional rollercoaster, and about nothing."
>
> Carlos didn't like any of that. As I expected. He went on about "ethics" and "our mission" and stuff. It's all BS, and he must know that at some level, but he's still pretty idealistic.
>
> Well, we don't think about things the same way, but it doesn't matter. We can still work together, I guess. It's tiresome, though.

Something appears to have gone badly wrong here.

Crossing the bridge from four to five, it is possible to fall into a gap of nihilism. That is called "4.5" in the developmental literature. It is probably not a necessary step, although it is quite common, particularly for tech folks.

In my cheery depictions of 4.2 and 4.4, Prithi is drawn forward by a gradually clearer view of stage five: a better way of being. At 4.5, we see how she has also been shoved forward by an increasingly clear understanding of the defects of stage four.

In the systematic mode, you must semi-consciously blind yourself to anything that contradicts the system. In a group, everyone colludes to pretend things are going as they should when they aren't, and to hope everything will work out somehow. When you see through this, it's nauseating and infuriating. How could all those people around me be so stupid?

Systems offer false promises of meaning. When you've seen those fail enough times, you resolve never to get fooled again. For instance, you recognize that corporate "mission statements" are sanctimonious kitsch, designed to dupe dullards. The lie becomes increasingly offensive, and it's hard not to attack it.

In relationships, rigorously containing your emotions, managing the emotions of less systematic people, and carefully channeling all interactions productively—skills that were triumphant accomplishments of stage four—come to feel like endless scutwork. Holding everything together, emotionally and practically, for people who are too childish to hold themselves together becomes

claustrophobic and oppressive. Part of you wants to just say what you feel, but you know precisely why that's a bad idea.

You recognize that that all ethical systems are shams. None of them can give the absolute grounding for moral judgements that they claim. They all sometimes give awful advice. Anyway, mostly there is no right or wrong; it's all gray areas. At 4.5, you may adopt explicit amoralism.

From 4 through 4.4, systems give definite answers to questions of meaning: you are *justified*, by principles, in caring about the things you do.[7] Fear of losing that caring is a major reason for holding back from development, for getting stuck. That fear is realistic! At 4.5, "what is meaningful?" becomes an oppressive existential quandry, or has a definite negative answer. You may convince yourself that everything is completely meaningless: the stance of nihilism.

Prithi sounds contemptuous of Carlos' assertions of meaning, because at 4.5 they sound like naive idealism, which she has put firmly and permanently behind her. (The word "just" often serves to deny or minimize meaningfulness. Notice how often Prithi used it here.)

When you lose all faith in systematicity, but can see no workable replacement, you may fall into crippling dysfunction. I know people who, at this point, became completely non-functional for several years. Feeling that you have lost the capacity for confident, competent self-administration can render you practically catatonic.

Prithi has a milder case. She is still functioning as a startup CTO, although she may often feel that she's running on empty ("you just have to get on with the job") and her staff may now find her bitterness frightening and demotivating. She is cynical, but not (yet) despairing. In the language of *Meaningness*, she displays mainly *materialism*, the stance which denies "higher purposes" but admits "mundane" ones—"personal advantage," as Prithi says. Sometimes she goes a step further, into Lite nihilism: the business is "past the point of meaning anything."

4.5 is a profound change in the dynamics of meaningness, based on an ontological misunderstanding, and usually supported by extensive (although fallacious) intellectual reasoning. It is similar in feel to depression, and they often go together, but nihilism is not primarily a mood disorder. Mistaking it for generic depression can actively impede moving beyond it.

I said "something *appears* to have gone badly wrong." However, there is much that is *right* in 4.5 nihilism. It is a genuine growth step forward from 4.4 because its recognition of the limits of systems, and the defects of systematicity, are accurate. It's true that "missions" are usually self-aggrandizing or cynical propaganda (although genuine purpose is possible). It's true that ethical systems are all fallacious and sometimes harmful (although accurate ethical judgement is possible).

Post-systematic Prithi *does* have a "bigger picture." In the first two sentences of her lecture to Carlos, "you could say… you could say," she points out the relevance of two ethical views, without holding out either as an absolute. She has relativized not just a particular system, but systematicity itself, so she is no longer subject to any ideology. What she cannot yet manage is to coordinate multiple ethical systems, in context, to make a wise meta-systematic judgement.

In her relationship with Carlos, she is newly brave and honest. This was probably an exceptionally bad time to start, but a new sort of intimacy has become possible. She's finally willing to break out of her system, to expose her feelings and her way of making sense. (In 4.4, she discussed her feelings conceptually but did not allow them to break through into her way of talking.) She's suspending her rigid self-containment for a moment, taking a risk, and "giving it to him straight." The "tiresome" burden of pretense no longer seems worth the effort.

Post-systematic nihilism results when you finally give up on systematicity, but find nothing better to replace it with. If you have developed meta-systematic skill before letting go of systematicity, and can see the way forward, there is no need for nihilistic hostility, depression, or anxiety.

Let's rewind to 4.4, imagine that Prithi was able to mostly skip 4.5, and head cheerily onward into 4.6.

4.6. Pulling away from systematic limits

In this snapshot, as in 4.4, Prithi displays a mixture of systematic and meta-systematic understanding. What's different is that the overall dynamics are now fluid (although carrying significant systematic baggage), whereas 4.4 had systematic dynamics overall (although Prithi was growing significant meta-systematic skills). The balance has shifted toward fluidity.

> At first I evaded Carlos' question. My policy, at least as a default, is mostly just to listen, because when people are really upset, they need first to talk, and to feel that they are being understood. Then I can play back what they've said, maybe in more precise language than they'd managed, if I'm following their process accurately. That might help them see more clearly how they are thinking about it. Or they may say "no, it's not like that," and I'll get a better picture myself. I don't interfere with their process unless it looks like someone's headed off a cliff. It's much better for them to work through it themselves. And Carlos wasn't heading off a cliff!
>
> But Carlos didn't want to talk about how angry *he* was; he wanted to talk about why I wouldn't be angry. So for a couple minutes I felt kind of stuck. That's not how this sort of conversation is supposed to go! I'm a pretty good people manager, for a techie, and I know how this works. I'm not going to let go of that so easily.

The residual fourishness in this monologue is that Prithi has a set system for addressing a particular sort of situation ("my policy"). On the other hand, she recognizes that it admits exceptions. It is only "a default," although she "doesn't let go of it easily." She would like to restrict the exceptions to specified criteria ("going off a cliff"), thereby including the limits of the system within the system. But, in this case, that doesn't make sense, which for a while leaves her feeling "stuck"—because she's clinging to her old, systematic way of being.

> But Carlos is incredibly smart in his own way, and I trust him even when he does something I don't really understand. So I started explaining how I would have felt, and that opened out into a broad discussion about what success and failure mean.

Here she breaks free of her stuckness, and suspends her policy, operating outside any criterion. That's fiveish.[8]

> And about why we are even doing this! I mean, when we started, obviously we wanted to be successful, we wanted to make buckets of money, we wanted to make cool stuff, but I don't think we had really thought that through. Now we've done all those things. Do we check off "found a startup" in our task management apps and move on to the next thing? "Success" means something different for us now than it did then. It's not really clear what. Just setting the same bar higher—more customers, more employees, bigger valuation—that's not going to be satisfying in the long run.
>
> I've been struggling with this myself for the past year or so. I've wondered if I've gone as far with CTOing as I want to. I hadn't admitted this to Carlos, but I've toyed with the idea of leaving the company to take on something quite different. Maybe I should start an Effective Altruism organization instead, for example. But in the end,

whatever your project is, it will succeed, or fail, and you're just back in the same place. When you don't know what you are capable of, doing *anything* difficult is really exciting. But when you're confident you can succeed at most things, you have to ask "do this? do that? do what? why do anything?"

This echoes Prithi's nihilistic doubts at 4.5. She recognizes, rightly, that any definite positive answer to "what is meaningful?" will ultimately fail: "you're just back in the same place." But at 4.6, Prithi glimpses an alternative to both the positive certainty of stage 4 and the negative certainty of 4.5 nihilism. Meaningness can become a *permanently open* question. The possibility of *groundless caring* begins to emerge.

However, another part of her still has the sense that finding her true purpose is a problem that could somehow, in principle, be solved. "It's not really clear what" suggests that the issue is epistemological: there is a correct answer, a truth, but she doesn't know it. The fluid mode recognizes the problem is ontological: purpose is real and vital, but necessarily nebulous.

> So it turned out we talked as much about my feelings as about his! Carlos does think about things very differently from me, and he wound up intervening in my process at least as much as I was intervening in his. Although I think he was honestly mostly just trying to understand how I was thinking about it.
>
> In retrospect, I wish we'd talked this through a year ago. I'd been stuck with some pretty fixed ideas about what we are doing and why, and they weren't working anymore. The discussion has freed me up to reevaluate my role, and to talk about how my real attitude toward the company has kept changing, year after year. That was a huge relief. Admitting my doubts felt like a big risk, but it turns out he's supportive of whatever I decide to do.

Prithi now values the reevaluation of ontological commitments more for the sake of allowing the ongoing unfolding of meaning than for any specific systemic improvement it may deliver. This is definitional for stage five.

Prithi attributes this move beyond systematicity to her trust in Carlos. It would be equally accurate to attribute it to her growing trust in her competence in navigating territory she "doesn't really understand," without any map to guide her. She's excited not that she has discovered new truths, or that the interaction has improved her self-system, but that it's that it's freeing her from taking *any* system as a fixed truth.

She reflects meta-systematically on the limitations of her own mostly-transcended systematic self. Her default way of being is shifting into meta-systematic fluidity. The question of her role is no longer a problem to be solved, but an inherently open-ended process of transformation. Involving Carlos in defining the meaning of her work life is now a reality, and not just a matter of occasionally "taking input" from him. On the other hand, she still partly conceives of this as an individual process with a definite end-point. She speaks of "his process" versus "my process," and says *she* will "reevaluate" her role, and "decide what to do."

A possible misunderstanding here is that the shift from systematicity to fluidity is one from goal orientation to process orientation. In fact, you can prioritize either goals or processes (or, ideally, both) at any developmental stage. What differs is the way you relate to them.

- If you are *process-oriented at stage four*, your concern is to carry out processes systematically. They should conform to your principled theory of correctness, or to proper organizational policies and procedures.

Fixed goal formats, like the SMART criteria, express the essence of goal orientation for stage four. They are entirely appropriate at that stage, and particularly valuable when first moving into it. However, they can also limit serendipitous redefinition as unexpected obstacles or opportunities arise.

- If you are *goal-oriented at stage five*, you recognize that what *counts as* achieving a goal is always somewhat nebulous. Ticking off a minor goal often involves a judgement call; declaring it complete is partly a matter of interpretation. Major goals redefine themselves, transmute and expand, as circumstances change and as you change. There can be no final accomplishment—that would just put you "back in the same place." Success at stage five is no less important, but what "success" means becomes a permanently open question.

4.8. Mostly meta-systematic

Why wouldn't I have been angry? For a couple minutes, I deflected Carlos' question, saying I wanted to give him space to work things out himself. But he called me on that. When we discussed my reluctance, I realized that, although that was genuinely one motivation, I was also hiding something, partly even from myself.

As we talked it through, I had to admit that, in Carlos' position, I really *would* have been angry. I could be calm about it only because I considered sales not my problem. That's been the fundamental division of responsibility in the company from the start. "I'm in charge of tech, and I deliver." It was often a gargantuan effort, and I thought I had to be in control of everything to make it happen. But in enterprise sales… you *can't* be in control when you're trying to make a deal with a company a hundred times larger than you. Meeting engineering targets is tough, but he's had to deal with way more uncertainty than I have.

I knew that, but I'd always implicitly considered it *his* problem—because I didn't want to deal with it. On reflection, I knew I'd often have been terrified. And, yes I'd be furious about their double-crossing us. I mean, I *was* furious, once I admitted that. Although it was also moderated by my taking success and failure more analytically than Carlos does.

When we began, it was just the two of us, so "CTO" was almost a joke. It just meant I wrote all the code, while he hustled for money. We both also did whatever was necessary. I did the bookkeeping and assembled the flat-pack furniture and negotiated our first office space lease. But then we hired people to do all those things. And once we had half a dozen engineers, "CTO" really meant system architect: I made the design decisions. We grew some more, and "CTO" came to mean hiring and coordinating our system architects, who understood technical issues I couldn't keep track of anymore. That was hard, letting go of complete control of the technology! And recruiting and line management is not what I enjoy, or am especially good at. It's really the job of a VP of engineering. So we hired one of those, and now—at last—I'm a real CTO.[9]

My job is to communicate an inspiring technical vision, inside and outside the company: to our staff, enterprise customers, partners, investors, the IT media, and the professional community.

And… *(deep breath)* that's a sales role.

In discussion, together we realized that, although officially we are co-CEOs, I was avoiding taking full responsibility for the company's success overall. And by doing

that, I was artificially limiting my effectiveness—and maybe the company's effectiveness.

It was comfortable to think of myself as a geek, just in charge of the tech side of the company. But that hasn't been completely true ever, not from the beginning, and particularly not since I moved into the real CTO role. So… I'm going to rethink "co-CEO," and take it as meaning not just that Carlos and I make the big decisions together, equally—as we always have—but that the *whole company* is my job. And his job. Even if we emphasize different aspects.

I'm feeling a bit of vertigo. It's going to take some work to keep reminding myself of how it feels to expand that way; to not fall back into just being Alpha Geek. But it's also exciting looking forward to what I'm becoming next!

Prithi increasingly lives as the dynamic space within which diverse systems operate, interact, and evolve, rather than as a single static structure of principles for action.

That dynamic space is not enclosed by her skull, nor limited to her sphere of responsibility. It is co-defined by Carlos, and to varying extents by everyone she interacts with. It includes "our staff, enterprise customers, partners, investors, the IT media, and the professional community." This is not communal-mode merging; she's still perfectly clear that she and Carlos are dissimilar people. (And it's certainly not the monist fantasy of "becoming one with everything.") It's an understanding that meaning plays out in interaction, not in her head. She has not ceded territory; she has expanded by recognizing that she contributes to, but does not need to individually own, the space.

The discovery of Prithi's self-protective strategy was not the result of personal, psychological introspection; it was collaborative. And what she and Carlos uncovered was not primarily mental contents, but something she was *doing*—revealed by observing what she was *not* doing.

The central *event* in this monologue is this insight that Prithi has been hiding an internal conflict from herself. Such insights can occur at any developmental stage. Let's look at *meanings* of such events, and *dynamics* that lead to conflicts and to regressive or insightful resolutions.

Understanding how each mode resolves conflicts of meaning may be the best way of understanding how the mode operates. Likewise, understanding how each *fails* to resolve conflicts may be the best way of understanding how you move to the next one.

In stage three, conflicts between desires are subordinated to the maintenance of a relationship. In stage four, conflicts between relationships are subordinated to the maintenance of a system. In stage five, conflicts between systems are subordinated to the maintenance of an open space for meanings to interact.

In stage three, you may hide an emotional conflict from yourself because it can't be accommodated in the context of the relationships it arises in. For example, you may feel torn between loyalty to your boss, who has made an unpopular decision, and loyalty to your team, which is conspiring behind her back. Such tensions surface during the three-to-four transition. The communal mode could only resolve this by denying the meaningfulness of one of the two relationships completely, leaving the underlying emotional conflict unaddressed. That would be a regression. Alternatively, the event could drive the insight that you need organizing principles to distinguish the different responsibilities you have in different sorts of relationships; how each sort is limited; and how to relate different relationships to each other. In the work context, professionalism is the system that provides that structure. Its dynamics expand from the personal relationships in a social community to include the systemic role relationships in a work group—regardless of the personalities involved.

In stage four, you may hide a role conflict from yourself because it can't be accommodated in the context of the system it arises in. This may be a conflict between two roles (Prithi is both CTO and co-CEO) or between formal role boundaries and reality (Prithi is officially responsible only for tech, but cares about everything in the company and has had a *de facto* sales role). Such tensions of definition surface during the four-to-five transition. The systematic mode could only resolve this by denying one side of the conflict, by insisting that Prithi's responsibility is limited to a single formal job description. She would have to blind herself to her competent contribution to aspects of the business that "aren't her problem." That would be a regression. Alternatively, the event could drive the insight that systems are always artificially limited, and she needs meta-systematic skills to relate systems to each other and to reality. Snapshot 5 and the Epilogue will show how that works in startup leadership.

In both transitions, you need many small, concrete insights before you get the hang of the pattern and move to the next stage. That's why it takes years.[10]

At 4.8, Prithi is most of the way there, and so resolves this conflict meta-systematically fairly easily. What she and Carlos uncover is her pattern of protecting herself from fear of nebulosity (the amorphous uncertainty of enterprise sales) by applying a limited, formal self-definition. As that self-system reaches its limit and breaks down, she lets go of the temptation to cling, and instead takes it as an opportunity for expanding her view.

Prithi now understands herself as having multiple self-systems, all valid. So there is the Prithi who protected herself by limiting her responsibility to what she could control—which is totally valid. When she recognizes it, Prithi does not chastise or abandon that part of herself. She just will no longer be ruled by that definition—or any other. There is programmer-Prithi, who thinks the most important thing is to get the technical decisions right. And that's true! And there's engineering-manager-Prithi, who thinks the most important thing is to make sure the development team operates effectively. And that's true! And there's CTO-Prithi, who thinks the most important thing is to create and communicate a vision of the future—and that's true! So long as she is open to all these possibilities, no conflict is necessary. Meta-systematicity encourages respect among systems, even when they contradict irresolvably.

However, Prithi here is not yet quite *at* stage five. There's still a trace of over-emphasis on an individual viewpoint: "what I'm becoming next." At stage five, the space of meaning is not personal. Here at 4.8, holding that space open is still challenging ("a bit of vertigo"; "will take some work").

In a context in which one of her systematic selves is expert, it will naturally try to take control, and she will need to remind herself not to identify with it, even temporarily. Meta-systematicity goes beyond knowing you are several selves you can switch between. Fluidity does not attempt to construct a meta-system for choosing what system to apply when. Nor is any system either alien (unambiguously outside) or a possession (unambiguously inside).

5. A deliberately developmental organization

Carlos and Prithi
Some years older and wiser
Image courtesy rawpixel

Yesterday the strategic partnership arrangement we'd been working on fell through. All along, they were intending to do a deal with another company, and were pretending to negotiate a partnership as a way of getting a deeper look into our technology development roadmap.

We took our usual long walk out to the Presidio, to decompress and talk it over. We were thoroughly annoyed, which we thought was funny. After all these years, we still get ticked off when someone pulls this sort of nonsense? It's also funny that Carlos still takes it more obviously emotionally, whereas I at least pretend to be detached and analytical in my anger. Hot and cold.

Apparent interpersonal conflict may be as intense at stage five as at any other. However, it occurs within the fluid open space where meanings interact—just as conflicts between one's own selves do. Stage five identifies with the space, not with one's personality or chosen principles. That doesn't negate personal differences ("hot and cold"), nor partiality, nor principles, nor strong emotions. It does give freedom to watch conflicting meanings interact across the boundaries of persons, organizations, or tribes, without an automatic compulsion to defend some particular one. Sometimes one can learn even from people who are being hostile or unethical.

Recognizing contradictions without needing to resolve them can be entertainingly absurd. Prithi's amusement at her own pretense in hiding her anger, and Carlos and Prithi laughing at themselves in conflict with others, is a sign of their being meta to their own self-systems. Their combination of anger and humor also shows their being larger than identifying with their own company. That wouldn't, for instance, stop them taking the other company to court if warranted, though.

> Nowadays we're mostly annoyed with the default culture of business that says selfish game-playing is normal and acceptable—more than being mad at specific people or companies. But we've realized selfishness is an intrinsic aspect of being human. You can't remove it; and anyway, it's not inherently bad. Wanting more is part of why we work and create, as well as motivating harmful or ethically sketchy behavior.[11] So we try to work out structures that minimize its negative consequences. Nothing works perfectly, but active measures have helped. We've had to come up with new approaches every couple years, as the company has grown.

This final snapshot shifts the focus from Prithi's relationship with Carlos to their joint facilitation of effective relationships among others. That is, from personal to organizational psychology. Prithi and Carlos are becoming the creative, reflective space within which others evolve.

> Each major expansion has meant we had to put in place qualitatively different organizational modes. It's not just formal structures; the way everyone relates to each other has to change, too. That's been difficult, for us and everyone.

> The company's gotten big enough that Carlos and I can't know what's actually going on inside. We still try, but mostly we rely on our group leaders. And the natural tendency in their position is to try to grab and hold territory, to expand their division, so they look important. Then you get departments working against each other, which is how big companies get slow and stupid and full of politics that makes everyone miserable.

> So we try to redirect that drive, guiding our leaders away from empire-building. We reward them for letting go of definitions, for seeing bigger pictures, not for gaining territory.

> When I realized that CTOing is partly a sales role, I had to do that myself; to rethink what I am. I took several sales training courses—and got Carlos to coach me, too. That probably made me a better CTO, but it also changed the way I feel about and relate to people in general. Sales, for us, is about creating genuine connections, not tricking people into buying things they don't need. Skill in connecting is helpful outside work too.

Prithi has come to take her own fluidity for granted. It is a reliable fact that, in the face of difficulties, she will act out of a realm of unspecifiable possibility, not ruled by any systematic theory of business management.

> When you manage a business whose details you can't know, the temptation is to think of it as a big machine, or a manufacturing plant. Then you try to optimize output by moving boxes around in the org chart, and your actions are all "move 27 engineers from department A to department B," even though you have no idea what they do. They are engineers, right? and the spreadsheet says we need to increase output in B. You think people are their job descriptions. Like machines on the factory floor that have defined inputs and outputs. Then they're forced to *pretend* to be their job descriptions, and that's a disaster.

> A system of formal responsibilities is a critically important tool as you go from a hundred people to a thousand; but you also have to realize it's just a representation. An org chart is not reality, and you don't change reality by changing the representation. You have to keep asking "how does this representation relate to the nuts-and-bolts reality of how these particular people work together?"

Prithi here expresses a core concern of meta-rationality, which understands relationships between representations and reality not as truths but as tools. This is meta-systematicity in its cognitive manifestation.[12]

> We can't afford to have anyone limited by a job description. Like, when we started, I didn't know how to negotiate an office lease, but it had to be done, so I read some stuff and then just plunged in. Realistically, nobody can do everything. When being a regional comptroller, you need to know the GAAP rules for amortizing development costs, and when being a front-end developer, you need to know the Javascript rules for type coercion. But in *principle* you should be willing to learn either or both, if you had to. Beyond that, there's learning to *think like* an accountant or a programmer. Or, more realistically: for an accountant to think like a facilities manager or market strategist; and for a programmer to think like a product manager or UX designer.

> So we aim to develop and reward "fluid competence," more than excellence in a specific role. We encourage an attitude of "OK, this needs to be done, I can probably do it"—combined with wanting to actually figure out *how* to do it, not faking it or going through the motions or trying to stay safe by doing it by the book. And not covering up when you screw up! We praise and reward people for screwing up on hard things, if they are open about it.

Learning technical skills in very different fields is one of the best strategies for developing meta-systematicity—if you recognize that they imply different ways of thinking and feeling and acting, not just different lists of formal rules to master.

> Last year, we introduced ongoing, mandatory interpersonal skills training for all employees. We hoped it would particularly help our more technical people broaden their competence. I knew a lot of the engineers would hate the idea. Some said the company was turning into a cult, and we lost a few of our best people. It was a calculated risk. Most stayed, and some say the training has radically improved their lives—outside work as well in it. Others resent it. Qualitatively, it seems to be a big plus overall. It probably shows up in our numbers too, but it's not like we could have a control group. Maybe we'd be doing even better without it.

> Our approach isn't The Right Way. It's one way, which is working, so far. It's given us a unique reputation in the industry. We can't be "a great place to work" for

everyone. Many people prefer an environment where they can get on with doing the job they were hired for, which they know they can do well. I totally get that! My job often terrifies me. It would be way more comfortable to write code all day, or even to be a conventional CEO. But the unfolding world keeps enticing me into the unknown. "OK, this looks like the next thing, let's figure out how to do it."

Just as Prithi's specific theory of relationships at stage four was not definitional of stage four, her specific approach to management here is not definitional of stage five. As she says, interpersonal training and rewarding broad competence are not The Right Way. What is fiveish is the attitude of reasoned experimental curiosity, not aiming for any final conclusion or achievement, but for ongoing responsive fluidity.

In 4.6, Prithi showed a wistful longing for some ultimate principle that would let her decide what to do—whether to leave the company for another project—even as she recognized that no such principle can exist. Here she's left that behind without a trace. Purpose is an unrolling dynamic, a collaborative improvisational dance of self and world, continually revealing new openings and obstacles and their meanings. Stage five means letting go of eternalistic promises of certainty, understanding, and control, in favor of appreciating the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern.

> Looking back over our past decade, the most striking thing is not how Carlos and I have grown the business, but how the business has kept growing us. We still have the capacity to surprise each other.

Epilogue

The story of Prithi and Carlos is about meta-systematicity in a two-person relationship. However, situating that relationship in organizational leadership allows me to switch topics here.

Meta-systematicity in organizations

Management theory is the domain where meta-systematicity is most widely appreciated, discussed, and understood. I plan to write about this in the "Fluid society" chapter of *Sailing the Seas of Meaningness*. That chapter will not be ready for some time, so I'll make some preliminary observations here now, out of place.

Entrepreneurship is inherently meta-systematic.[13] Entrepreneurs create companies, which are new systems. Especially in the tech industry, the products and services they provide are often also novel systems. Rapid growth requires constant reorganization. System transformation is the essence of fluidity, and usually the basis for successful entrepreneurship. (Although innovating by rote formula, like "Uber, but for X," is much easier, and you may get lucky with it.)

It's a commonplace now that all organizations operate in volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous (VUCA) circumstances. "VUCA" is business-ese for nebulosity, which the systematic mode attempts to deny or control out of existence. There's widespread understanding that this is impossible, and that meta-systematic approaches are a better alternative. There is no solid ground; it's a whitewater world, so organizations have to be fluid too.

A simplified history of the evolution of management practice may help understand this.

Traditional theories assumed workers were pre-systematic. The job of management was to provide a systematic framework within which employees worked, prototypically in manufacturing. The company as a whole could operate systematically, despite the pre-systematicity of most employees. (We could call this the "three in four" model.) Systematic executives could then optimize operations using rational, often mathematical, methods.

As postindustrial economies shifted to "knowledge work," management practice recognized that individual employees may work systematically, and so can and must be given much greater autonomy to exercise their specialized expertise. At first this left the company's structure unchanged: systematic employees worked in a systematic framework optimized by systematic executives. ("Four in four.") They were understood as having specific technical, professional skills, which amount to the ability to act in accord with a particular rational system (such as GAAP or Javascript).

But as VUCA intensified, companies that had dominated their industries with relentless rational optimization and technical excellence suddenly failed when market conditions changed out from under them. Their systematic approach used fixed analysis methods that became irrelevant or inappropriate in the changing environment. Some companies are still stuck in this "zombie era" of management.[14]

Leaders had to learn to rethink their systems increasingly often. "Adapting to changing market conditions" means not just introducing new products or entering new markets or changing market position. It means rethinking the fundamental mindset of the company, because otherwise you find yourself weighed down by "how we do things" and unable to react.

This culminates in meta-systematic fluidity: continuous ontological remodeling. This is now almost conventional wisdom, and considered best practice, in dynamic industries such as tech.[15] Meta-systematic management is widely admired in theory, but putting it in practice is difficult, and not so common even in tech. It demands meta-systematicity in senior executives.

Even then, the assumption commonly remains that most employees can only function systematically. That means that the company's overall operation is still systematic at any moment in time, albeit with leaders injecting frequent doses of structural change. ("Four in five.")[16]

Some now recognize that executives alone cannot provide sufficient fluidity. They can't have sufficiently intimate knowledge of the details of their employees' work—which may be even more subject to VUCA than the company overall. Just as a previous generation had to learn to trust workers to function systematically without detailed supervision, managers now need to learn to trust workers to function meta-systematically. That is, management needs to delegate continuous reformation of parts of the company to the employees who understand that part. ("Five in five.")

This might sound "nice" and democratic to workers, or terrifying for managers, but increasingly it's just necessary. *No one knows* how to structure organizations in the whitewater world; there are no longer any standard principles that work reliably. You cannot see the world clearly through the lens of a system—any system. Effective organizational functioning *has* to be a collaborative improvisational dance with the environment, figuring it out together as you go along.

You can't afford not to involve as many of your people as possible in that effort. Ideally, every employee should contribute to the continual redefinition what the company is and how it functions. Realistically, most can't do that today. The capacity must be developed. Especially, systematic employees must develop meta-systematic competence, so they can go beyond formal professional expertise to respond rapidly and accurately to emerging business conditions, exercising judgement that goes beyond any set criteria.

Because meta-systematicity is rare, takes years to develop, and is not taught in school, companies have to train it in-house.[17] This makes for what Robert Kegan and his collaborators call a *deliberately developmental organization*.[18]

This requires huge management effort, but appears to have correspondingly huge financial as well as human payoffs—in Kegan et al.'s case studies at least. The deliberately developmental approach is not easily put into practice, but there's a growing enthusiasm for it and increasing bodies of theory and practical resources.[19]

This understanding naturally extends to the concept of a *deliberately developmental society*, in which a nation-scale culture explicitly recognizes the value of adult development, not just teaching specific facts and narrow skills. In 2019, critical political, educational, and economic systems are visibly crumbling. It's urgent to bring more of the population to systematicity; and bringing some others to meta-systematicity is critical to enabling that.

The development of the cofounder relationship

Some venture capitalists say that startup success depends more on the cofounder relationship than any other factor. It can be their main reason for choosing to invest, or not, in a founding team. Conflicts between cofounders may be the most common reason for startup failure.[20] So, many resources aim to help strengthen these relationships: blog posts, podcasts, coaching, and bootcamps.

Tech startup founders are invariably cognitively systematic, from their education and early-career work in either STEM or business. However, many may not have developed to systematicity in their emotional lives and relationships. Most cofounder relationship advice I've found is about moving from being driven by emotions and personal relationships (stage three) to professionalism (four):

- Don't let conflicts or resentments fester.
- Fight fair; disagree constructively.
- Respect each others' strengths and give space for each others' emotional needs.
- Make sure everyone's concerns are taken into account.
- Negotiate explicitly about who has responsibility for which decisions.
- Let go of your ego and don't insist on proving you are right all the time.

This is probably exactly what many straight-out-of-school founders need. It's too basic for someone who's gained some maturity from several years work experience, perhaps in a team leadership role.

Putting coherent organizational systems in place is the main job of scaling a startup from tens of people to hundreds. This page starts from the prerequisite, stage four. That is already more mature than many startup founders. When investors say "it's time to bring in professional management" or "adult supervision," the point may be to force a professional, systematic mode of relationship on the executive team. Or, to bring in technical expertise in building systematic administration, which the founders lack. Much of the work in this scale-up phase *can* be done by applying off-the-shelf systematic patterns. You do need org charts.

But system-building won't cut it for more than a few years in a VUCA environment. A medium-sized systematic company is a duckling sitting in open water, soon to be devoured by piranhas (smaller, faster competitors) or a hippopotamus (a much larger one). You had better grow your meta-systematic wing feathers fast.

Some consultants and coaches offer meta-systematicity training. They seem to market their services only to senior executives in larger companies. There's not much information available on the web, and there seems to be little awareness in the startup community. I hope that will change soon. Since entrepreneurship is inherently meta-systematic, earlier training in personal and

organizational fluidity should be valuable. And as more companies adopt the "five in five" model, it will be increasingly necessary throughout the organization.

What did I just read??

I mean, what even *was* this stuff? And where did it come from?

If you find this page interesting, I would suggest considering what parts of it are believable or useful and why. You may have to proceed meta-systematically…

I have no relevant academic credentials. And, while I have started, grown, and sold a small, successful tech company, I was a solo founder. What I've said about business is mostly not based on personal experience.

My understanding draws on many fields; developmental psychology was the biggest influence on this page.[21] Kegan's is one of several broadly similar theories of "postformal operations."[22] These theories inspire me not because they are well-grounded as science, but because they make sense of my experience, and what I know anecdotally about exceptional prowess in technical research and in organizational leadership. Some experimental work has been done to test postformal theories. I'm not necessarily qualified to judge this research, and I haven't investigated it in depth, but I haven't found the studies scientifically persuasive. (Particularly in view of the current replication crisis in psychology.) I write about Kegan's version because it's simple and fits my anecdata, not because it has the best experimental support.[23]

So. You will have to figure out for yourself how to evaluate what you have just read. What considerations would be relevant? What would it even *mean* for it to be accurate or useful?

Such investigation is the *essence of meta-systematicity*—because there are no predetermined criteria or methods, and no preexisting problem definition or conceptual framework to decide how to think about it. If you choose to proceed, you will ask how my story relates to reality, and to other conceptual systems you know—crossing a chasm of nebulosity without a net.

Future directions

Although this is possibly the most detailed and practical explanation yet given of the path to meta-systematicity, it still seems unhelpfully brief and abstract. To make it more concrete, I have begun writing a "fluidity workbook" full of exercises. If I had a spare six months, it would also be fun to expand this page into a business novel. My inspiration is Eliyahu Goldratt's cult bestseller *The Goal*. The book would take Prithi, Carlos, and their company from stages three through five, illustrating each step with a new business situation that would plausibly prompt the next form of development.

Although I'm deeply interested in meta-systematic leadership, I may be more obviously qualified to teach meta-systematicity to individual technical contributors. I wrote a preliminary curriculum sketch, "What they don't teach you at STEM school," a couple years ago. I am currently writing an introductory textbook, *In the Cells of the Eggplant*.

Thanks

1. 1.Imagine explaining your doubts to a holistic crystal healer. "There's no good evidence this works. It seems highly improbable, given everything we know about crystals and healing. Several of your claims are clearly factually false. When you say you rely on 'holistic intuition,' you just mean you are making it up as you go along; you have no specific method." If the healer has not yet learned to think rationally—systematically—they can only hear this as a string of insults, or delusional assertions of your personal or tribal superiority. Words like "evidence," "probability," "knowledge," "truth," and "method" do not mean the same thing to them as they do to you. These terms function only within a web of systematic understanding of what systematic understanding is. This chicken-and-egg difficulty is part of the reason only a minority can think, feel, or act systematically. Analogously, a systematic thinker can only hear an explanation of the limits of systematicity and the advantages of meta-systematicity as delusional assertions of the superiority of inscrutable nonsense. This incomprehension is one reason so few can think meta-systematically.
2. 2.In writing this page, I've drawn on a discussion of the development of a marital relationship from systematicity to meta-systematicity in *A Guide to the Subject-Object Interview*, by Robert Kegan and his collaborators, who I'll discuss repeatedly in this page. I've re-staged it: in order to re-present the material without violating copyright; because the tech industry context may be more interesting to my readers; and as an interesting exercise for me personally. The *Guide* is a technical manual; see below for better starting points for learning about the theory.
3. 3.There are other similar theories of adult development with different numbers of stages. I've adopted Kegan's numbering somewhat arbitrarily. Details of his theory are open to doubt (as I discuss briefly below). However, this page does not depend on most aspects of the framework. It relies only on the conceptual distinction between systematicity and meta-systematicity, which many other thinkers have pointed out, in varying terms. For more on his framework, see my "Developing ethical, social, and cognitive competence," or his *The Evolving Self.*
4. 4.An API (application programming interface) is a formal definition for how a program can work together with another one. The value of an API is that the separate developers of the two programs can coordinate without needing to know anything about how the other program works, or how the other development team works. Also, a program can work together with any other program that uses the same API; it doesn't matter which. Professionalism is a set of standards of behavior that aim to save you from having to understand all the details of your co-workers' personal and emotional lives. You can relate to people in terms of their formal roles, rather than their personality quirks and transient upsets. That is: systematically, rather than communally. In practice professionalism can never be fully achieved, nor should it be, but as a default it is efficient and reduces interpersonal stress—for those capable of it.
5. 5.If Prithi were subordinate to Carlos, it would be highly unprofessional for him to insist on her giving an evaluation of his screw-up. But they are co-CEOs: a risky and unusual arrangement that can nevertheless work well, because it gives the CEO someone to talk to as an equal. Carlos was also unprofessional in "burning bridges" with a potential client. That's part of what made this a screw-up. Everyone screws up sometimes; professionalism is a commitment, not an app you can just install and let run.
6. 6.Misunderstanding meta-rationality as an extension of rationality prompts the demand "just show us how these meta-rational methods work, if they are so great!" The assumption is that meta-rationality must be just a specialized class of rational methods, which might be excitingly different from other ones, like encountering a new branch of mathematics or a new programming paradigm. If they are of value, they must have the same purpose as other rational methods, and will be incorporated in and subordinated to rationality. At 4.4, one may have genuinely learned to think in a new way, while still regarding it as a specialized

type of expert theory-revision and problem-solving within a comfortably rationalist framework.

7. 7.This is "eternalism," in the language of *Meaningness*. Nihilism simply inverts eternalism. The opposite of a wrong idea is usually also a wrong idea, although it may be a necessary step toward a better idea.

8. 8.It's not threeish, because she's not abandoning her principled theory in favor of emotional sharing or relationship maintenance. It's usually a good theory, and she may often act with reference to it—but she will no longer be governed by its rules, even when she's acting in accord with it.

9. 9.*The Manager's Path: A Guide for Tech Leaders Navigating Growth and Change* is a practical manual for the series of personal and organizational transformations from startup tech lead to CTO, by Camille Fournier, who has lived them.

10. 10.I have described this years-long path of self-transformation, progressing through repeated insights into limiting self-definitions and hidden conflicts, in a very different style elsewhere, as "shadow eating."

11. 11.Fluid operation *above and around* systems is very different from communal-mode operation *without* a system. Fluidity fully recognizes and incorporates the effective functioning of systems, which the communal mode is blind to. A possible misunderstanding is that fluidity is amoral because it holds no absolute ethical principles. Since conflicts between fundamental principles are sometimes unavoidable, none can be absolute. However, fluid ethics hold principles in high regard, and may deploy them more effectively than systematic ethics, because fluidity has additional resources for resolving dilemmas.

12. 12.See also Venkatesh Rao's "The Amazing, Shrinking Org Chart," on fluid corporations.

13. 13.This goes double for venture capital. Startup founders have only to find *a* way to create a successful company, mostly through one-off improvisations. Venture capitalists have to understand general patterns of business success. It is tempting to rely on systematic rationality (metrics, criteria, theories) when evaluating startup investment opportunities. That's what you learn in business school, but mostly it doesn't work. The best investors seem to deploy meta-rationality instead.

14. 14.Thanks to Venkatesh Rao for this term.

15. 15.Some early theorists of meta-systematic management include John Seely Brown (the visionary leader of Xerox PARC), Chris Argyris (who worked with Donald Schön), and Bill Torbert (who worked with Robert Kegan).

16. 16.These models are necessarily simplified abstractions. Any real organization will include people at all stages of development, and different sub-organizations will operate somewhat differently. And, developmental "stages" are themselves simplified abstractions, which are heuristically useful categories but not ultimately true as ontology.

17. 17.Ben Horowitz makes an inspiring case for in-house training, led by senior managers, in *The Hard Thing About Hard Things: Building a Business When There Are No Easy Answers*.

18. 18.*An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*. Schools increasingly fail to teach systematicity, so companies have to do that too. The book describes a developmental pipeline, implemented by a property management company, from pre-communal stage-two teenagers through to stage-five meta-systematicity. One advantage of training meta-systematicity in-house is that senior executives may be less panicked about delegating transformational authority if they've been intimately involved in training the necessary skills.

19. 19.There is also a danger of turning meta-systematicity and/or the developmental approach into a management fad, replete with buzzphrase cliches, hype ungrounded in evidence, and superficial implementations that predictably fail.

20. 20.A widely-quoted statistic is that 65% of startups fail as a result of cofounder conflict. I traced this back through the citation chain, and it's erroneous. The original study sent a paper survey to venture capitalists in 1984 asking them how they related to their portfolio companies. (Michael Gorman and William A. Sahlman, "What do venture capitalists do?,"

Journal of Business Venturing, 4:4 (July 1989), pp. 231-248.) The VCs cited "ineffective senior management" as the most important factor in 65% of troubled or failing companies. Since it is the responsibility of senior management to fix things, this is almost tautological, and the number in some sense should be 100%. In any case, the study says nothing about founders (as opposed to senior management in general), and nothing about interpersonal conflict (just "ineffectiveness"). Anecdotally, however, cofounder conflict is indeed a common way for startups to fail.

21. 21.For those interested in business applications, Kegan et al.'s *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization* is the most recent publication. Also see Garrett McAuliffe's "The Evolution of Professional Competence," which reviews and synthesizes research on fluid management by Kegan, Schön, Torbert, and others. (Chapter 21 in Hoare's *Handbook of Adult Development and Learning*.) For more general discussion of Kegan's framework, I recommend *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* and *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, which I have summarized elsewhere.

22. 22.For reviews, see Eeva Kallio's "Integrative thinking is the key: An evaluation of current research into the development of thinking in adults," *Theory & Psychology*, 21:6, pp. 785-801; or, in more depth, chapters 8-12 in Demick and Andreoletti's *Handbook of Adult Development*. My thanks to Matthew Mezey for suggesting the latter.

23. 23.Although I am inspired by the work of Kegan and his collaborators, I have no affiliation with them, and what I say may not present their ideas accurately. Conversely, I have reservations about some aspects of their work, and do not necessarily endorse everything they say.

34 Comments

Next Page: Fluid society →

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This page will introduce the social implications of the fluid mode.

For a preview, see "Desiderata for any future mode of meaningness."

Comment on this page

Next Page: Fluid culture: metamodernism →

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This page will introduce the cultural implications of the fluid mode.

For a preview, see "Desiderata for any future mode of meaningness."

For introductions to metamodernism, see Philip Damico's "Introduction" and Seth Abramson's "What Is Metamodernism?" and "Metamodernism: The Basics."

Hanzi Freinacht[1] has developed metamodernism beyond culture narrowly, into a general conception including cognition, personal psychology, and social organization. He draws on many of the same sources I do, and points in many of the same directions. His web site is Metamoderna. Tom Amarque has produced a fine podcast interview with him; if you are familiar with my work, you'll find many of the same themes raised.

Naturally, I differ with each of these thinkers on some points.

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8 Comments

This page introduces a series of appendices that supplement *Meaningness* with reference information, including a glossary and suggestions for further reading elsewhere.

Comment on this page

This is a glossary of words I've used in non-standard ways in *Meaningness*. Ones in blue link to pages that discuss them in more detail.

190-proof nihilism
> *190-proof* or *full-strength* nihilism is the stance that nothing has any meaning whatsoever. It contrasts with lite nihilism, which admits that some things are sort of maybe slightly meaningful, in some way that doesn't really count.

accomplishment
> "Accomplishing" a stance means adopting it consistently whenever its dimension of meaningness comes up. This is difficult and rare; perhaps psychologically impossible.

adoption
> "Adopting" a stance means using its pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting to address the dimension of meaningness it relates to. Often one adopts a stance only momentarily, and typically without noticing it.

allied stance
> Some stances ally with others, based on a shared emotional "texture," or on making similar promises, or because they provide plausibility for each other. For example, the stance True Self allies with monism because it is a ploy for explaining away your apparent limitations and differences from other people. Other stances clash with each other. For example, True Self does not go well with nihilism, because the True Self is supposed to be extremely meaningful, and nihilism denies all meaningfulness.

antidote
> *Antidotes* destabilize a confused stance with patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that reveal its errors and harms, and that guide you toward adopting the corresponding complete stance instead.

appropriation
> "Appropriating" a confused stance means using it as a communicative tool, while actually adopting the corresponding complete stance instead.

atomized mode
> The *atomized mode* of relating to meaningness abandons coherence, but provides access to all of globalized culture via the internet. The atomized mode resembles nihilism because systems of meaning are impossible. There are no standards for comparing value, so everything seems equally trivial, and equally a crisis. However, whereas the threat of nihilism is the loss of all meaning, the atomized world delivers far *too much* meaning, in a jumbled stream of bite-sized morsels, like sushi flowing past on a conveyer belt, or brilliant shards of colored glass in a kaleidoscope.

chaos
> Chaos is the stance that nothing happens for any particular reason; the universe is essentially random.

choiceless mode

In the *choiceless mode*, you are unaware of differences of opinion concerning meaningness. You take meanings for granted, without asking "why" questions. It could also be called the *communal mode* or "tradition."

commitment

Committing to a stance means resolving to adopt it consistently, whenever the dimension of meaningness it addresses comes up.

complete stance

Complete stances acknowledge the nebulosity and pattern of meaningness, avoiding the errors of fixation and denial. They are more difficult to adopt than confused stances, but are more accurate and more workable in the long run. *The complete stance* (singular) is the most fundamental, natural one. It recognizes both meaningfulness and meaninglessness, and recognizes that they are inseparably intertwined—although some things are clearly more meaningful than others.

confused stance

Confused stances try to avoid the anxiety of nebulosity through fixation and denial within a dimension of meaningness.

Cosmic Plan

"Cosmic Plan" refers to any idea of an ultimate source of meaning, such as God, the Absolute, destiny, Reason, highest consciousness, or whatever. All such ideas are inherently eternalistic.

countercultural mode

The *countercultural mode* of relating to meaningness attempts to develop a new, alternative, universalist, eternalist, anti-rational system for society, culture, and self, that is meant to replace the mainstream. I discuss two countercultures in depth, the monist "hippie" counterculture of the 1960s-70s, and the dualist "Moral Majority" counterculture of the 1970s-80s. Both failed because neither's vision appealed to a majority, and they could not accommodate diversity, due to their universalism.

denial

Denial is the psychological strategy of refusing to admit the existence or significance of a dimension of meaningness. It is one defense against the anxiety provoked by nebulosity. See also fixation, another defense.

dualism

Dualism is the confused stance that everyone and everything is a clearly distinct, separate, independently-existing individual. Dualism denies connections and fixates boundaries. Compare *monism*, which fixates connections and denies boundaries.

enjoyable usefulness

Enjoyable usefulness is the stance that purposes are co-created in an appreciative, compassionate dance with the world; both mundane and higher purposes can be meaningful; you might as well find things to do that are both enjoyable for you and meaningful for others.

epistemology

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge, belief, and truth. *An* epistemology is a specific theory of what can be known and how; what a belief is, what justifies a belief; and what it means for something to be true. Compare *ontologies*: understandings of how things are.

eternal ordering principle

An "eternal ordering principle" (or Cosmic Plan) is any supposed fundamental basis for the universe, providing an ultimate source of value, ethics, and explanation. God, Fate, Rationality, The Absolute, Cosmic Consciousness, Progress, Science, and many other candidate fundamental principles have been proposed. The view of this book is that there is no such thing.

eternalism

Eternalism is the stance that sees the meaning of everything as fixed by an external principle, such as God or a Cosmic Plan. It forms a false dichotomy with nihilism, which regards everything as meaningless. The stance of meaningness recognizes the fluid mixture of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in everything.

ethical eternalism

Ethical eternalism is the stance that there is a fixed ethical code according to which we should live. The eternal ordering principle is usually seen as the source of the code.

ethical nihilism

Ethical nihilism is the stance that ethics are a meaningless human invention and have no real claim on us.

ethical responsiveness

Ethical responsiveness is the stance that ethics are not a matter of personal or cultural choice, but are fluid and have no definite source.

existentialism

In this book, *existentialism* means the stance that meaningness is subjective. In contrast, eternalism and nihilism both assume that meaningness must be objective. Usually existentialists also say meaning should be a purely individual creation: a perfectly free choice, possible only when you throw off all cultural assumptions and social pressures. That is not actually possible, and existentialism collapses into nihilism when you seriously attempt it. The complete stance is that all three are wrong: meaningness is neither subjective nor objective. It is a collaborative accomplishment of dynamic interaction.

fixation

Fixation is the psychological strategy of attaching spurious certainty and definiteness to pattern. It is one defense against the anxiety provoked by nebulosity. See also denial, the other defense.

fluid mode

The *fluid mode* of relating to meaningness is the cultural and social analog of the complete stance. It incorporates the accurate insights of eternalism and nihilism, recognizing that meaningness is always both patterned and nebulous. Likewise, the fluid mode acknowledges structures of meaning without attempting rigid foundations. Its values are collaboration, creativity, improvisation, intimacy, disposability, aesthetics, and spiritual depth through community participation.

higher purpose

"Higher" purposes, such as creative production, disinterested altruism, and religious salvation, apparently transcend animal existence. These could also be called "eternal" or "transcendent." Their value should survive your physical death, or have significance in realms beyond the material. Mission is the stance that only higher purposes are meaningful.

intermittently continuing

Intermittently continuing is the stance that selfness comes and goes, varies over time, and has no essential nature.

Lite nihilism

Lite nihilism is the stance that reluctantly admits *some* things are *slightly* meaningful, but holds that their meaningfulness is inadequate or defective: trivial, or of the wrong sort. It is intermediate between *190-proof nihilism* (nothing has any meaning whatsoever) and *existentialism* (things only have the subjective meanings you personally give them). We tend to cycle through these three [without noticing that they contradict](https://meaningness.com/stances-are-unstable) each other.

maintain

To *maintain* a stance is to adopt it continuously for an extended period. That is: to use it consistently to address the sorts of problems of meaningness it applies to.

materialism

Materialism is the confused stance according to which only self-aggrandizing, mundane purposes (such as money, sex, power, and fame) count as truly meaningful. It forms a mirror-image pair with mission, the confused stance according to which only selfless,

transcendent, higher purposes are truly meaningful. "Materialism" also refers to the metaphysical belief that only things made from physical matter exist. *Meaningness* rarely uses the word in that sense.

meaningness

"Meaningness" is the quality of being meaningful and/or meaningless. It has various dimensions, such as value, purpose, and significance. This book suggests that meaningness is always nebulous—ambiguous and fluid—but also always patterned.

miserabilism

Miserabilism is the stance that everything is awful. It is often confused with nihilism, because they have similar emotional effects—especially rage and depression. They are conceptually quite different, because awfulness is a meaning, and nihilism denies all meanings. However, it is common to slip back and forth between miserabilism and nihilism without even noticing you are doing it.

mission

"Mission" is the stance that holds that only your unique, eternal, transcendent purpose is truly meaningful.

mode of meaningness

"How meaning fell apart" suggests a series of *modes* of relating to meaningness. In the *choiceless* mode, meaningness is taken as given, without question. In the *systematic* mode, meanings have to be justified. (This is closely connected with eternalism.) As systematic justifications break down, the *countercultural*, *subcultural*, and *atomized* modes are successive attempts to relate to the fragmentation of meaning. Finally, the *fluid* mode synthesizes the functional aspects of all the previous ones.

monism

Monism is the confused stance that All is One; that my true self is mystically identified with the Cosmic Plan; that all religions and philosophies point to the same ultimate truth. Monism denies boundaries and fixates connections. Compare *dualism*, which fixates boundaries and denies connections.

MOP

A *member of the public* who participates in a subculture only casually.

muddled middle

Confused stances come in mirror image pairs: extreme views on meaningness. Each pair shares an underlying mistaken metaphysical assumption about the nature of meaning. A *muddled middle* is an attempt to compromise between the extremes, to find a correct middle way. These fail because they do not correct the metaphysical error. The stance that corrects the error is complete, meaning that it neither fixates nor denies any aspect of meaningness.

mundane purpose

Mundane purposes are those we share with other social mammals: food, security, reproduction, and position in social dominance hierarchies. They also include limited altruism, on behalf of one's immediate relatives. Materialism is the stance that only mundane purposes are meaningful; higher purposes are not. Mission is the mirror-image stance that only higher purposes are meaningful, and mundane ones are not.

must

Wistful certainty, a ploy for maintaining the eternalist stance, follows this pattern of thinking: "There *must* be a…" For example, "There *must* be a true meaning to life." *Wistful* certainty occurs when one can't think of a reason there "must" be whatever it is. One is sure, however, because eternalism wouldn't work if whatever it is weren't true.

native mode

Your *native mode* of relating to meaningness is the one you are most comfortable using. Typically people adopt the mode that is most popular during their late teens and early twenties. Thus, for most Baby Boomers, the countercultural mode is native; for Generation X, it is the subcultural mode; and for Millennials, the atomized mode.

nebulosity

Nebulosity is the insubstantiality, transience, boundarilessness, discontinuity, and ambiguity that (this book argues) are found in all phenomena.

next stance

Because stances are unstable, it's common to wobble from one to the next, without even noticing. There are predictable patterns of which stances are likely to come after one as it becomes untenable, based on the emotional resonance of the first stance's failure with the next one's promise.

nihilism

Nihilism is the stance that regards everything as meaningless. It forms a false dichotomy with eternalism, which sees everything as having a fixed meaning. The stance of meaningness recognizes the fluid mixture of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in everything.

nihilist apocalypse

The *nihilist apocalpyse* is the catastrophic social breakdown that eternalism fears would occur if people lost faith in eternalism. Eternalism sees no alternative to itself other than nihilism; and it sees ethical behavior as impossible without eternalistic justification. In fact, there are other alternatives, so a nihilist apocalypse seems unlikely. However, nihilism actually can lead to unethical action, so one should not dismiss the possibility altogether.

nihilizing

Nihilizing is refusing to see meanings that are right in front of you. It is the active form of the stance of nihilism, the denial of meaningfulness.

nobility

Nobility is the stance that resolves specialness and ordinariness. Nobility consists in using whatever capacities one has on behalf of others.

non-existence

Confused stances allied with nihilism often insist that a particular sort of meaning is entirely non-existent. Such meanings are usually actually only nebulous (vague), rather than absent.

obstacle

Stances toward meaningness are unstable because they are inaccurate, emotionally unsatisfactory, or both. These inaccuracies and unappealing aspects are *obstacles* to adopting the stance.

ontology

An *ontology* is an understanding of how things are. Typically an ontology includes an explanation of what sorts of things there are, what their characteristics are, and how they relate to each other. Compare *epistemologies*, theories of what can be known and how.

ordinariness

Ordinariness is the confused stance that no one is better than anyone else, and that one's value derives from herd membership.

participation

Participation is the stance that there is no single right way of drawing boundaries around objects, or between self and other. Things are connected in many different ways and to different degrees; they may also be irrelevant to each other, or to you. Connections are formed by meaningful, on-going interaction.

pattern

Pattern is the quality that makes phenomena interpretable: regularity, causality, distinctness, form.

ploy

Eternalist *ploys* are patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that stabilize the eternalist stance by denying nebulosity and fixating meanings.

proving too much

An argument *proves too much* if it is a special case of one that would prove other things that are obviously false. Proving too much is not itself a logical error; it just shows that there must be a mistake somewhere in the reasoning. It's fair then to conclude that the

argument doesn't work, and move on. However, it's often worth figuring out exactly where the flaw is, and why the argument might seem convincing anyway.

rationalism

Rationalisms are ideologies that claim that there is some way of thinking that is the correct one, and you should always use it. Some rationalisms specifically identify which method is right and why. Others merely suppose there must be a single correct way to think, but admit we don't know quite what it is; or they extol a vague principle like "the scientific method." Rationalism is not the same thing as *rationality*, which refers to a nebulous collection of more-or-less formal ways of thinking and acting that work well for particular purposes in particular sorts of contexts. See also: meta-rationalism.

rationality

Meaningness and *The Eggplant* use the word *rationality* specifically for more-or-less formal, systematic rationality (and therefore not as including informal reasonableness). Rational methods are explicit, technical, abstract, atypical, non-obvious ways of thinking and acting, which have some distinctive virtue relative to informal ones.

really

"Really" is a weasel-word. It is used to intimidate you into accepting dubious metaphysical claims. When someone uses it, substitute "in some sense," and then ask "in what sense?"

reasonable respectability

The stance that one should contribute to social order by conforming to traditions.

rejection

To *reject* a stance is to try to avoid ever adopting it as a way of thinking, feeling, or acting with regard to meaningness. This is the opposite of committing to it. Both are difficult because [stances are unstable](/stances-are-unstable) and we naturally slide in and out of them without even noticing.

religiosity

Religiosity is the confused stance that the sacred and profane are kept always clearly distinct by the eternal ordering principle.

resolution

Confused stances are *resolved* by dissolving their fixations and accepting what they deny. Specific antidotes—counter-thoughts—can help with this.

romantic rebellion

Romantic rebellion is the confused stance of defying authority, in an unrealistic way, to make an emotional, artistic, or personal status statement.

secularism

Secularism, as the word is used in this book, refers to the confused stance that nothing is sacred.

selflessness

"Selflessness" is the confused stance that there is, or should be, no self. Some interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* are examples, as are some Christian ideas of saintliness.

specialness

Someone is thought to be special if they are given a particular distinct value by the (imaginary) Cosmic Plan. This is not actually possible.

stabilization

Stances toward meaningness are inherently unstable, because they fail to fit reality or are emotionally unattractive. One uses specific patterns of thinking, feeling, talking, and acting to *stabilize* a stance, making it easier to remain in it. Typically this is unconscious, but with practice one can deliberately deploy particular patterns to move from one stance to another.

stance

A stance is a basic attitude toward meaningness, or toward a dimension of meaningness. Most stances wrongly fixate meaningness, or deny the existence or nebulosity of a dimension of meaningness. Typically stances come in pairs, which form false dichotomies. The simplest examples are eternalism and nihilism.

subcultural mode

The *subcultural mode* abandons the attempt to find universal meanings suitable for everyone. Earlier modes of meaningness claimed to base such meanings on some foundational eternal ordering principle—but there is none. Subculturalism abandons eternalism and instead provides multiple "neotribal" systems of meaning that are meant to appeal only to small communities (subsocieties) of like-minded people.

system

"Systems," in this book, are conceptual, methodological, and institutional structures that make claims about meaningness. These include, for instance, religions, philosophies, political ideologies, and psychological frameworks. A system includes a *structure of justification*, which explains *why* you should believe its claims, and typically grounds in an eternal ordering principle. I contrast systems with stances, which are much simpler attitudes toward meaningness.

systematic mode

The *systematic mode* attempts to justify all meanings with some explanatory structure. Typically, this system builds on a foundational eternal ordering principle. The systematic mode is eternalistic, claiming to offer absolute certainty, understanding, and control. In the late twentieth century, it became clear that this is impossible, and the systematic mode failed.

texture

The *textures* of the complete stance are ways of being that recognize the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern. They are [wonder](/wonder), [curiosity](/curiosity), [humor](/humor), [playfulness](/play), [enjoyment](/enjoyment), and [creation](/creation).

thought soup

Thought soup is the incoherent mass of disconnected fragments of dead ideologies that survive in popular culture as ways of talking, and therefore of thinking and feeling and acting: clichés, bromides, plot points and story arcs. Its metaphors and intuitions powerfully influence the ways we relate to meaningness, in ways we're never fully conscious of.

total responsibility

Total responsibility is the stance that we each create our own reality and are solely responsible for everything that happens in it.

true self

The "deep" or "true" or "authentic" self is an imaginary, inaccessible superior identity, which has a magical connection with the Cosmic Plan. "Depth psychology" is particularly big on the true self, but this confused idea has become wide-spread.

ultimate

"Ultimate" and "ultimately" are words that often turn up in discussions of meaningness. They can be legitimate, but are often advertising hype, obfuscation, or intimidation.

utilitarianism

Utilitarianisms are ethical theories that say that the morally correct action, in any situation, is that which maximizes the amount of "utility" (goodness, more-or-less) in the world as a whole. A workable utilitarianism would allow you to decide what to do at every moment through plain arithmetic: adding up the utility resulting from each possible action, and choosing the best. This is never possible in practice, and every utilitarianism fails as a general ethical theory. Nevertheless, "the greatest good for the greatest number" is the best way of looking at some moral quandaries. Utilitarianism is closely allied with rationalism, due to its spurious mathematical flavor.

victim-think

The stance that "it's not my fault and I am too weak to deal with it."

wavering

When you have committed to a stance, but have not accomplished it, then you are "wavering." Wavering means that you are trying to adopt a stance consistently, but are finding it difficult or impossible to do so.

Meaningness mainly re-presents material well-understood elsewhere. I have gathered ideas from several fields and explained them in terms a different audience will understand. Since most of the book is not yet written, you may want to go back to my sources to fill the gaps. You may also want to know where the ideas came from, to understand them in their original context; or go deeper and further than *Meaningness* ever will.

This page describes some of the texts that have most influenced the work, with brief explanations of how they are relevant. Some are articles, but most are full-length books. (I've linked those to Amazon, who send me about $3/day in exchange. So they want me to say "As an Amazon Associate I earn from qualifying purchases.")

I have roughly categorized them by subject. I plan to add more texts, and more categories, as work on *Meaningness* proceeds. Here are links to the current categories:

- Fundamental texts
- Rationality and meta-rationality
- Computation, AI, and cognitive "science"
- Psychology
- Ethics
- Society, culture, and politics

Fundamental texts

These are all brilliant, major works. Historians agree that they represented significant intellectual breakthroughs at the time.

Most are also extremely hard going. That is at least partly because their authors were working at the edge of what was thinkable at the time, and struggling to explain insights that were at the limits of the authors' own understanding. In several cases, I recommend alternative, secondary sources that re-presented these breakthrough works in later eras, when the ideas had been worked through and became better understood. Reading the originals is valuable, but may prove impossible without a guide.

Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche introduced the problem of nihilism and eternalism—the fundamental theme of *Meaningness*—to Western thought. It's not much of an exaggeration to say that, ever since, the Continental branch of philosophy has consisted of working through Nietzsche's ideas.

Nietzsche is fun and easy to read. Working at the edge of the thinkable, much of what he says is obviously wrong. It is often unclear whether he has made an actual mistake, or was joking, or was insane; or if he wasn't sure—and didn't care—whether he was serious.

I've read almost all his books, and recommend almost all of them, although his last few works are the best.

My favorite is *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, which summarizes much of his thought. It is probably his most straightforward presentation of nihilism and eternalism. The single-page chapter "How the 'True World' finally became a fable" is an intense summary of his summary—and also of the whole Western philosophical tradition and what is

wrong with it.[1] He thought he was about to work out the solution to nihilism, and proclaimed it as:

> Bright day; breakfast; return of *bon sens* and cheerfulness; Plato's embarrassed blush; pandemonium of all free spirits.

Unfortunately he had a total, permanent mental breakdown a few months later, and so never wrote up the answer.

Nietzsche's most famous work is *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which is also the only one I *wouldn't* recommend. It's a tedious melodramatic parable, and the thinking is atypically muddled. People seem to like it because it's a story.

Mipham

In Buddhist philosophy, the problem of nihilism and eternalism goes back a couple thousand years. I use Buddhism's word "eternalism" because there's nothing equivalent in Western philosophical language. That's because eternalism has been Western thought's main topic from the beginning. Fish have no word for water, and the two main Western ideologies—Christianity and rationalism—are both eternalistic. India had both eternalistic and nihilistic ideologies, and Buddhism positioned itself as the "neither of the above" alternative.

Unfortunately, the Buddhist analysis of nihilism and eternalism is a godawful mess. The first major author, Nagarjuna, was severely confused, but he was so extremely holy that you aren't allowed to contradict him. So there's two thousand years of brilliant thinkers trying to understand and explain the issues without quite saying that Nagarjuna got everything wrong. Despite that constraint, they made considerable progress over the centuries.

The Nyingma branch of Buddhism, to which I belong, considers Ju Mipham's *Beacon of Certainty* the definitive text. I think it gives a simple, obviously correct solution to the problem of eternalism and nihilism that Nietzsche first raised in the West. My original idea for *Meaningness* was to write a short, straightforward explanation of Mipham's answer. I have failed spectacularly: *Meaningness* is several hundred thousand words so far, and is maybe 15% finished.

The *Beacon of Certainty* may be the most difficult book I've ever read. I absolutely do *not* recommend it—although I'm including it here because it *is* the root text for *Meaningness*. To make any sense of the *Beacon*, you need to have spent years studying less-difficult Buddhist texts.

Unfortunately, there is no less-difficult text I can recommend.[2] The whole field sucks. Your best bet is to get oral explanations from someone who has mastered it. They are sometimes willing to say things in person that they wouldn't dare write.

Mipham and Nietzsche wrote their major works around the same time in the late 1800s. Their life stories and works are parallel in fascinating ways.[3] They both wrote abstruse academic philosophy and they both wrote wild, prophetic, heterodox quasi-religious allegories. I wish I could introduce them to each other.

Heidegger

Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* was the first and most important Western attempt to solve Nietzsche's problem of nihilism and eternalism.

The first part of *Being and Time* analyzed *what life is like* in a completely new way, which I think points toward the solution. Heidegger abandoned the fundamental eternalist assumption that meaning must come from some ordering principle such as God or rationality. He showed how life is structured instead by "circumspection," a non-dual awareness in which everyday circumstances show up as always already meaningful in our interactions with them. This understanding of meaning as neither objective nor subjective, but interactive is fundamental to *Meaningness*.

Then Heidegger took a wrong turn. The further analysis of meaning he developed in the second half of the book was definitely mistaken (as he later acknowledged).

Being and Time was probably the most influential philosophy book of the 20th century. Jean-Paul Sartre completely misunderstood it and based his *Being and Nothingness* on his further distortion of Heidegger's most-mistaken part. That was the root text for mid-20th-century existentialism, and a lot of subsequent pretentious and harmful intellectual nonsense. More productively, Michel Foucault—discussed below—mainly wrestled with Nietzsche's and Heidegger's problems.

Being and Time is extremely hard going—up there with the *Beacon of Certainty*. I'd recommend reading Hubert Dreyfus' *Being-in-the-World* first or instead. That is an explanation of the first, accurate part of Heidegger's book. It's not easy, but it's much easier than *Being and Time* itself.

I've written about how Heidegger and Dreyfus influenced *Meaningness* briefly here.

Wittgenstein

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote two main books. His first, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, was one of the central texts of *logical positivism*—the major rationalist-eternalist movement of the first half of the 20th century. Later, he realized that couldn't work, and wrote *Philosophical Investigations* to explain why. The book is probably the most influential in all of analytic philosophy. (The two major schools of 20th century Western philosophy were the Continental (French and German) and analytic (English-speaking) traditions.)

Working in parallel with Heidegger, but independently, Wittgenstein analyzed everyday practical activity, and came to the same conclusion. Meaning resides in interaction, rather than in our heads or in objects.

In a weird parallel, just as 20th century existentialism began as a drastic misunderstanding of *Being and Time*, analytic philosophy not only missed Wittgenstein's main point, but has mostly promoted its exact opposite. *Philosophical Investigations* argues that language acquires its nebulous meaning only in everyday practical use, and that philosophical problems mainly derive from taking it out of context. Analytic philosophy has tended instead to attempt to eliminate nebulosity by taking language out of context, in order to figure out precisely what it should mean. Wittgenstein was too radical for his age, and his supposed followers headed straight back to the apparent comfort of rationalist eternalism.

Philosophical Investigations is difficult, but not impossible to read if you have a basic knowledge of 20th century philosophy. I don't know of a good summary or introduction to it. (If you do, please leave a comment below!) I would say that if you are going to read only one of this or Dreyfus' *Being-in-the-World*, go for Dreyfus. It's less difficult, more clearly relevant to current concerns, and—this is a controversial call—Heidegger is more important than Wittgenstein.

Garfinkel

Harold Garfinkel founded the discipline called *ethnomethodology*, which is the empirical study of everyday practical activity. Like Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Garfinkel found that meaning lives in interaction. But whereas they derived their conclusions from informal reflection on personal experience, ethnomethodology observes other people doing meaningful things in meticulous detail—typically through obsessive analysis of video tapes. Particularly interesting for me are the many ethnomethodological studies of laboratory scientists running experiments.

Garfinkel's major work is *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. It's completely incomprehensible until you have got the main ideas from a less dense text by someone else. John Heritage's *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology* is the best theoretical introduction, although it's still not easy, and does not cover all important aspects of the field. Kenneth Liberman's *More Studies in Ethnomethodology* is a collection of examples, and could be a good way to get into the field bottom-up. Lucy Suchman's *Plans and Situated Actions*—discussed below—might be an alternative starting point, uniquely accessible to the STEM-educated, although it was not intended for the purpose.

Garfinkel was probably strongly influenced by Heidegger and Wittgenstein,[4] although he didn't acknowledge that. He was a coyote trickster… Carlos Castaneda wrote his first two books of fictional psychedelic anthropology as his Bachelor's and PhD theses under Garfinkel's supervision. Some scholars believe Castaneda's imaginary guru, the "Yaqui sorcerer" Don Juan Matus, was based partly on Garfinkel.[5] Don Juan advised Carlos to erase his personal history; Garfinkel seems to have followed that same advice, and it's hard to figure out quite where his ideas came from.[6]

It's also hard to figure out quite where they went. Ethnomethodology imploded in the early 1990s, for reasons I only partly understand. I want to encourage its recent revival.

Rationality and meta-rationality

Rationalism, an eternalist ideology, is false, as Heidegger and Wittgenstein explained. However, formal rationality often works. Indeed, it's the basis of modern civilization, and therefore hugely valuable and important. So how and when and why does rationality work? Meta-rationalism is the empirical investigation of that question. It has found some preliminary answers. *Meta-rationality* is the use of that understanding to improve the use of rationality.

Orr

Julian E. Orr's *Talking about Machines: An Ethnography of a Modern Job* is a detailed ethnomethodological study of *circumrationality*. That is the informal, "merely reasonable" work needed to make a rational system work. (My "Parable of the Pebbles" introduces this idea.)

The book describes the work of Xerox copier repair technicians. The rational systems they *make* work are (1) the operation of high-tech, rationally-engineered office equipment, and (2) the formal relationships between Xerox, customer companies that run the copiers, and the technicians themselves.

The engineers designing the copiers had little knowledge of how they were used in practice. Their products worked great in the lab. In the real world, they broke down every few days or at most weeks, and a Xerox technician had to drive to the customer site to repair them. The design engineers did not take into account relevant, uncontrollable context: customers ran them too much or too little, too sporadically, loaded supplies upside down, put in the wrong kind of toner

to save money, pushed the wrong button, forgot to remove staples, housed the copiers in unventilated rooms where they overheated, squirted oil in random holes in hope of fixing the machine when it broke down, …

Xerox supplied the repair technicians with manuals with detailed instructions for how to diagnose and repair failures. These manuals were written rationally, from first principles, on the basis of what engineers thought might go wrong, rather than what did go wrong in practice. Most of the time they were unusable, due to not covering common failure modes, giving instructions that made no sense or that were physically impossible to carry out, suggesting a fix that would work but was more complicated or expensive than the practical one; or being outright false.

Circumrationality bridges the unavoidable gap between a tidy rational system and the nebulosity of reality. A copier malfunction report is highly nebulous. Is it actually not working, or is the customer confused? Is it not working because it is broken or because its environment is hostile? If it is broken, what is wrong with it? This is initially uncertain and may never be definable. Copiers are enormously complex, and even individual design engineers do not understand every aspect of one. Taking bits apart, cleaning them, and putting them back together may solve the problem without your ever knowing what actually caused it.

Repairing a copier is usually improvisational; the rational plan in the manual won't work. It's done by finger-feel and by ear and by eye, as well as by constructing a plausible causal narrative from practical experience and reflection on a pattern of symptoms.

Talking about Machines is fairly short and easy to read. Orr omitted nearly all the dense jargon and peculiar syntax most ethnomethodologists employ. If you have experience fixing machines, you will enjoy numerous moments of recognition, as technicians gradually diagnose puzzling failures and improvise solutions.

Orr's investigation of how repair was accomplished led to a major meta-rational remodeling. Xerox eventually accepted that technicians' experience, understanding, and improvisational fixes were critical. Its computer science laboratory PARC built a wiki-like system that let technicians exchange this knowledge globally. The system produced $15 million per year in savings for the company, as problems were diagnosed faster (decreasing labor costs), more accurately (so fewer expensive replacement parts required), and more reliably (so the machines broke down less often, making customers happier).

Dutilh Novaes

Tradition says rationality consists of thinking in accord with a formal scheme. Ideally, you close your eyes, put the grubby material world aside, and enter the *metaphysical realm* of pure abstractions. Discovering Eternal Truth amongst the Platonic Forms by way of Transcendent Reason, you return triumphantly to mundane reality with a Solution for a Problem, and hand it off to lesser beings to implement.

That's not how any of this works.

Mainly, formal rationality consists of writing mathematical squiggles on paper, staring at them, cursing, crossing them out, reading them over again, and writing some more squiggles. Or it consists of typing lines of code at a computer, running them, reading the debugging output on the screen, cursing, reading your code again, adding a semicolon, and running it again. Or of transferring quantities of chemical reagents from one tube to another, ticking them off on a worksheet as you go, lest you lose track of where you are in the laboratory protocol.

The actual practice of rationality is just as material, perceptual, and error-prone as copier repair is.

The question then is why this works. How does covering a page in mathematical notation make possible feats of discovery and invention far beyond what "mere reasonableness" is capable of? Metaphysical answers should not satisfy. What, actually, are we doing? How does ink on paper causally produce a new semiconductor device or cancer treatment?

Key parts of this puzzle are put in place by Catarina Dutilh Novaes in her *Formal Languages in Logic*.

Humans are innately terrible at multi-step reasoning about novel or distant circumstances. In fact, we're terrible at multi-step *anything*, and also at anything novel. Our brains evolved for routine activity in concrete situations, in which we could immediately perceive what action to take next. Brains are excellent at assessing local context to find the relevant factors. They are also great at retrieving relevant background knowledge, derived from experience of similar situations, to make sense of the current one.

We're mostly only capable of multi-step procedures if each step changes the perceivable situation in some way that makes it clear what comes next. ("Doing being rational: Polymerase chain reaction" discusses this, with video analysis of a biologist losing track of what she's doing, and examples of circumrational methods for staying on track.)

We are mostly only capable of single-step inference, consisting of interpreting our situation as meaningful in terms of relevantly similar past situations.

Formal rationality is a collection of technologies for overcoming these limitations by (1) blocking misleading distractions from perceived and/or background factors that our brains want to claim are relevant, but that actually aren't; and (2) making visible where we are in multi-step procedures.

If you are looking at a piece of paper you have covered in mathematical formulae, you are specifically *not* looking at the concrete problem, and can't be overwhelmed with the details of its specificity. The terms in the formulae are inherently meaningless, preventing your brain from insisting you consider details of past situations. The page lays out the steps of the procedure in order; you can't lose your place. The *bottom* formula on the page is the one you should be working on!

Formality is largely a mechanism for *avoiding* thinking (contrary to the rationalist tradition), because we're so bad at it. Dutilh Novaes quotes Alfred North Whitehead:

> By relieving the brain of all unnecessary work, a good notation sets it free to concentrate on more advanced problems. By the aid of symbolism, we can make transitions in reasoning almost mechanically by the eye, which otherwise would call into play the higher faculties of the brain. It is a profoundly erroneous truism that we should cultivate the habit of thinking of what we are doing. The precise opposite is the case. Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them. (p. 185)

Dutilh Novaes works out the mechanisms and consequences of these insights in detail, in the domain of mathematical logic. That's one I personally find exceptionally interesting, but I believe the argument applies to rational practice quite generally. If logic isn't your thing, you might want to read the introduction and chapters 5-7, after skimming or skipping chapters 2-4.

Bowker and Star

Rational systems must view the world though some formal ontology. Usually these include a classification system, which demands that objects belong to categories. Due to nebulosity, no

categorization can be perfectly consistent, complete, or accurate. There are always borderline cases, which could reasonably be assigned to either of two categories, and weird outliers that don't fit in any of them.

In such cases, practical use of the rational system requires "merely reasonable," non-rational, informal, *circumrational work* to figure out how best to classify the anomalies. Or, when that breaks down, *meta-rational work* to remodel the categories or the circumrational support practices.

Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star's *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* explores the ways classification systems are constructed and used in practice. They discuss particularly the "infrastructure" a rational system requires to function. Infrastructure includes both circumrational human practices and artificial technologies such as paper forms, software programs, mechanical sorting devices, and process manuals. They also discuss in detail the meta-rational work of constructing and maintaining rational systems.

The book discusses several classification systems used by governments, with momentous, sometimes horrifying, and sometimes hilarious consequences. These include medical diagnostic categories and racial categories. Despite enormous efforts at rationality, classifying diseases is always sketchy. Because diagnoses are intertwined with criminal and welfare law, boundary cases and anomalies can result in appalling injustices. South African apartheid was monstrous; its application—the practices of racial reclassification of individuals—becomes absurd when examined in detail.

Here we see how meta-rationality can be a liberatory practice, by freeing us from classifications that were originally designed according to some political agenda, and which have come to seem rational, natural, and inevitable.

> Things and people are always multiple, although that multiplicity may be obfuscated by standardized inscriptions. In this sense, with the right angle of vision, things can be seen as heralds of other worlds and of a wildness that can offset our naturalizations in liberatory ways. (p. 307)

Kuhn

No one has read Thomas "Paradigm Shift" Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* because everyone thinks they know what it says. It doesn't say that.

Kuhn had two big ideas, as I discussed in "A meta-scientific revolution." The first was that if you want to know how science works, you have to look and see what scientists do. Rationalist theories explain how science *ought* to work, according to armchair theorizing from first principles. But it doesn't work like that at all. And once you understand how it *does* work, from empirical investigation, you can see that it couldn't and shouldn't work the way rationalism prescribes, either.

Kuhn's second big idea was that science sometimes requires ontological remodeling, and the type of reasoning scientists use for that is quite different from the type of reasoning they use when their ontology is adequate. During crisis periods, when an ontology breaks down, scientists evaluate, select, combine, modify, discover, and create alternatives. "Revolutionary science" requires meta-rational thinking, whereas rationality is adequate for "normal science."

Because he said that scientific progress depends on non-rational processes, Kuhn was widely misunderstood as advocating irrationalism—the only well-known alternative. In a Postscript, added in the second edition, he explains clearly the difference between his view and anti-rational

relativism. If you read the book, don't skip the Postscript! In fact, it might be the best place to start.

Schön

Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action* is the closest thing we have to a manual of meta-rationality.

Schön observed in detail how experts in five technical fields addressed nebulous problems. He found that technical rationality—"the formulas learned in graduate school"—doesn't cut it. Those methods only apply when a problem has already been well-characterized—that is, translated into a formal vocabulary. That is not what a civil engineer encounters in the field: what you find there is water and rocks and dirt, and it's a mess. It's not what a project manager encounters in a tech company: what you find there is a bunch of people squabbling about a slipped schedule, and it's a mess. Rationality solves formal problems, but that's not what expert professionals do. They transform nebulous messes.

Meta-rationality requires understanding the relationship between a particular clear-cut rational system and a particular messy, nebulous reality. The "solution" to a slipped schedule undoubtedly involves fiddling with a GANTT chart, or some similar project-management formalism. However, the mess can't be "solved" entirely, or mainly, in this formal domain. The manager needs to understand how the GANTT chart relates to what people are actually doing.

There can be no fixed method for this; it's inherently improvisational. That does not imply mystical intuitive woo. It means a lot of well-thought-out practical activity, immersing yourself in the mess, and *reflecting* on how specific rational methods could work in this concrete situation.

Mastery of professional practice is not the ability to solve cut-and-dried problems. That's for junior staff, straight out of school. Professional mastery is the ability to re-characterize a nebulous real-world situation *as* a collection of soluble technical problems.

Kegan

Robert Kegan's model of adult psychological development profoundly shapes my understanding of meta-rationality—as well as ethics, relationships, and society. I wrote about his work overall here.

His two major books are *The Evolving Self* and *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*.

Kegan's account of meta-rationality is frustratingly abstract, but his explanation of the ways it restructures the self gives insights not available elsewhere.

I'll discuss Kegan's work again below, in the sections on psychology and ethics.

Computation, AI, and cognitive "science"

Dreyfus

Hubert Dreyfus was both the foremost English-language Heidegger scholar and the most incisive critic of cognitive science, especially artificial intelligence.

What Computers Still Can't Do was the most recent in his series of explanations of how AI went wrong. His arguments were dismissed as idiotic philosophical misunderstandings by the field for

decades, but were mainly proven correct by time. It was AI that was an idiotic philosophical misunderstanding…

Being-in-the-World, which I mentioned earlier as a guide to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, also explained in detail how Heidegger's understanding of everyday activity refutes cognitive "science." (I put the word "science" in quotes to indicate that the field's overall program was not scientific, but ideological, mistaken, and harmful. Lots of good and genuine science was done under the rubric "cognitive science" despite that.)

Dreyfus' *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, written with Sean Dorrance Kelly, has nothing to do with AI, but it's much easier to read than his other books. It's an inquiry into the problem of meaningness: how to avoid both eternalism and nihilism, by recognizing the inseparability of nebulosity and pattern. I wrote a long series of tweets about it, with excerpts from the book, starting here.

Suchman

Lucy Suchman's *Plans and Situated Actions* is a remarkable cross-disciplinary synthesis. Originally trained in anthropology, Suchman also studied ethnomethodology, was a student of Hubert Dreyfus, and had thoroughly assimilated Heidegger's account of everydayness and Dreyfus' critique of cognitivism.

But she worked at Xerox PARC. In the 1970s, essentially all the elements of modern computer systems were either invented at PARC, or given their first practical implementation there. (See *Fumbling the Future: How Xerox Invented, then Ignored, the First Personal Computer* for a history.) PARC's visionary director John Seely Brown then built an AI and cognitive science team that surpassed all but the top few university programs of the time.

So Suchman also learned to think and talk like a cognitive scientist, which made her uniquely positioned to bridge the conceptual gap between rationalist and situated accounts of practical activity. Her book was the biggest direct influence on my PhD thesis work, and much of my understanding of everydayness I owe to her.

In the early 1980s, Xerox bet its future on a physically huge, incredibly expensive, and vastly complicated new office copier. Unfortunately, no one could figure out how to use it.

AI to the rescue! Some of the foremost experts in AI action theory developed an intelligent user interface / tutoring system that told you exactly what you needed to do.

Suchman filmed famous cognitive scientists trying to use it… and the bafflement and swearing that ensued. If you remember Microsoft's rage-inducing Clippy The Intelligent Office Assistant, you can imagine the scene.

By careful analysis of what went wrong in their interactions with the system, she showed how breakdowns were consequences of mistaken rationalist assumptions, and how they could be understood in terms of ethnomethodological conversation analysis.

Suchman's relatively STEM-friendly language made philosophically sophisticated theories of action available to computer professionals. That changed the course of AI research. *Plans and Situated Actions* was even more influential in the fields of human-computer interaction and user experience design.

Agre and Chapman

As I recounted in "I seem to be a fiction," Phil Agre and I eventually *got* Dreyfus' critique of AI, with Lucy Suchman's help. In the late 1980s, together we set about reforming the field to incorporate their insights.

Agre's *Computation and Human Experience* is the overall best account of his work, and of our joint work. It's a unique masterpiece. Like Suchman's book, it's a synthesis of Continental philosophy, empirical ethnomethodology, and deep insights into what can and cannot be computed by brains—but in Agre's book, there's code too.

My book on our work was *Vision, Instruction, and Action*.

A brief theoretical overview was "Abstract Reasoning as Emergent from Concrete Activity," available on this site.

Winograd and Flores

In the late 1960s, Terry Winograd designed SHRDLU, perhaps the most impressive AI system of all time. In the mid-'80s, he recognized that Dreyfus' critique was mainly correct.

The first half of his *Understanding Computers and Cognition*, written with Fernando Flores, is a short, clear meta-rational account of human activity. It is written for the STEM-educated, and may well be the best overall introduction if that's you. For some readers, it may be a bit *too* short, with not quite enough detail to enable you to grasp meta-rationality.

(The second half of the book is based on speech act theory, a rationalist account of language that seems to clash with the meta-rationalism of the first half.)

I took the title of my book *In the Cells of the Eggplant* from a dialog in *Understanding Computers and Cognition*:

> A. Is there any water in the refrigerator?
> B. Yes.
> A. Where? I don't see it.
> B. In the cells of the eggplant.

Was "there is water in the refrigerator" true?

That question can only be answered meta-rationally: "True in what sense? Relative to what purpose?"

Smith

Brian Cantwell Smith is the foremost philosopher of computation. Actually, as far as I know, he is the *only* philosopher of computation. "Philosophy of Computation" is a field that doesn't exist.[7]

"Right—because Church and Turing said everything that can be said about that!" Nope.

What is a computer? A computer is a machine that *means* things. If you fight your way through six CRUD screens on a hotel reservation site, you reach a web page that *means* you have reserved a room on Woolloomooloo Wharf next weekend. If it doesn't mean that, the page is meaningless and you will be greatly discommoded when you arrive and find the hotel is sold out.

Computers are meaning machines—and you will notice that our existing Theory of Computation, which derives from Church's and Turing's work, has nothing at all to say about meaning.

Cognitive science assumed that brains are computers, more-or-less, and that brains and computers mean things the same way. How? Philosophers of mind assumed that AI guys knew how computers mean things—but we didn't. We assumed that the philosophers of mind knew—but they didn't. Once Smith (originally an AI guy) realized this disconnect, he set out to figure out how computers do mean things. Which turns out not to be easy; but he's still making progress.

On the Origin of Objects is his first major report. One observation central to *Meaningness*, and to pretty much every work in this reading list, is that objects are not objectively separable. Yet meanings are *about* objects—Woolloomooloo Wharf, for instance. The objectness of the wharf is not inherent to it, but arises during your interactions with it. *On the Origin of Objects* includes an account of how. My account will be somewhat different—but Smith is one of the few people to ask the question clearly, and to offer a serious and detailed proposal.

Hofstadter

Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach* is a uniquely playful exploration of the philosophy of artificial intelligence. Much of the book is presented in the form of comic dialogs between characters taken from Lewis Carroll. (Plus Terry Winograd, who appears as "Dr. Tony Earwig.") But it also asks serious and deep questions about the nature of intelligence and computation, and gives insightful answers unlike those proposed by anyone else.

I don't think Hofstadter's overall approach was at all right, but all other known AI approaches also look like dead ends to me. If I were forced to choose one to work on, his might be the least unpromising.

I discussed some of Hofstadter's best ideas in "A first lesson in meta-rationality."

Psychology

Baumeister

Roy Baumeister's *Meanings of Life* is the project most similar to *Meaningness* in subject matter. It's an exploration of the ways people think about the same set of topics I cover—purpose, value, self, ethics, sacredness, and so on.

I was annoyed all the way through it, because he says many things I was going to say, which I thought I had thought of first, and which I still haven't had time to write up.

Mostly, he does not attempt to resolve these problems. *Meaningness* does. Or will. Any decade now.

Kramer and Alstad

Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad's *The Guru Papers* was mis-named. It discusses gurus only in passing.

Their book is a sprawling but brilliant discussion of the major topics of *Meaningness*—unity and diversity, self and other, sacred and profane, life-purpose, ethics, ultimate value, and so on. It is a memetic nosology—a classification of contagious harmful ideas, attitudes, and practices.

I wrote a brief introduction, plus extensive quotes, here.

Kegan, again

Robert Kegan's *The Evolving Self* is the most sophisticated explanation I've found of the ways we relate self and other, and the ways we relate to our selves.

The book strikes many readers as a major revelation. It's not only intellectually fascinating, making sense of so much of our lives—it's also useful in practice as a guide to radical personal transformation.

Other readers find nothing meaningful in it. Tentatively, I suspect that's not because they miss the point, but because Kegan's framework simply doesn't apply to everyone.

I wrote a detailed summary here.

Ainslie

George Ainslie's *Breakdown of Will* is one of the best books I know on what it means to be a self.

Selves are inherently nebulous. They begin as incoherent masses of conflicting impulses. We are functional to the extent that we can get those to agree to head in the same general direction most of the time, and not constantly sabotage each other. Kegan's book is one account of how to do that. Ainslie's is another. Their perspectives are extremely different, but—I think—compatible.

Bly

Robert Bly's *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* is another outstanding explanation of what it means to have a self. Again, the question is how to resolve internal conflicts. It's written from an extremely different point of view (Jungian folklore interpretation) than Ainslie's (mathematical game theory) and Kegan's (Piagetian developmental psychology).

The *Little Book* was the basis for my nine-part series on "Eating the Shadow," which begins here. It was also a major influence on my series on dark culture. Eventually I'll present the same material quite differently in *Meaningness*.

Miller

Geoffrey Miller's *Spent: Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior* explains how vast swathes of everyday activity are unconsciously devoted to advertising our personal qualities to others—rather than enjoying ourselves or making ourselves useful. It's a fast, fun read, and you will discover things about yourself that are simultaneously horrifying and humorous.

Spent inspired my piece "'Ethics' is advertising."

Csikszentmihalyi

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience* is a bit dated, and a bit pop, but contains useful insights into enjoyment.

I discussed it in relationship to Vajrayana Buddhism here.

Ethics

Nearly everything that has been written about ethics, whether from a religious or secular rationalist point of view, is eternalistic. That is, it assumes that there must be some correct system of ethics that defines what is morally right. That assumption is mistaken and harmful: there obviously is no such system currently, and there are good reasons to believe there never can be one.

A very few people claim to be ethical nihilists, but they are trolling, psychopaths, or merely confused.

Only a handful of thinkers have tried to work out non-eternalist, non-nihilist accounts of ethics. The mostly-unwritten ethics chapter of *Meaningness* will develop this possibility.

So far, my most extensive writing on ethics has been a debunking of the modern Buddhist version. That series of posts does also include positive proposals, summarizing the *Meaningness* ethical approach, however.

Nietzsche, again

Nietzsche wrote extensively on ethics. In the popular imagination, he was a nihilist and therefore wicked, but in fact he rejected nihilism. His ethical thinking pointed at a complete stance that avoids both ethical eternalism and ethical nihilism.

Among his ethical works, I recommend *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals*. Confusingly, there are now many English translations of each. I read the ones by Walter Kaufmann, the only ones available at the time. Both are included in the collection *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, a bargain at $3.99 on Kindle. The more recent translations may be better; I don't know.

Kegan, again again

Robert Kegan's work began as an extension of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. I think Kegan's stage 5 is the most sophisticated ethical framework available. It requires meta-rationality: relating different ethical systems to each other, and reflecting on their relationship with reality.

Among his several books, only *The Evolving Self* discusses ethics.

Buckingham

In *Finding Our Sea-Legs: Ethics, Experience and the Ocean of Stories*, Will Buckingham writes that "we have always been at sea" when it comes to ethics. For thousands of years, philosophers and prophets have proclaimed the possibility of finding land: solid ground. But no one has ever reached any.

It is time, he says, to turn away from that eternalistic fantasy of ethical certainty. Instead, we can make genuine progress in our actual, groundless situation. Metaphorically, we can learn to be better navigators. We can study the winds and the waves and the stars; and can learn to steer around shoals, thunderstorms and whirlpools, guiding our ships into calmer waters where we can gaze at the sea and the sky and watch fish play.

When we recognize that ethics can only ever be a nebulous muddle—but is no less important for that—we can work together to resolve difficulties "with all the kindness, patience, and care that

we can muster." Buckingham concludes that "there is no way out" of the ocean, yet ethics offers "not an intolerable burden" but "the possibility of joy."

Finding Our Sea-Legs is a fun, easy, sometimes-touching read. I wrote an extended review here.

Society and Politics

Seligman

Adam Seligman, working with other authors, has made major contributions to the understanding of nebulosity, porous boundaries, and meta-rationality, specifically in the political realm.

The two books of his I know are *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity* and *Ritual and Its Consequences*. I reviewed *Ritual* here.

Foucault

Michel Foucault was the most important philosopher in the lineage of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Unfortunately, his deliberate obscurity has allowed tendentious idiots to misuse his subtle ideas in support of simplistic political agendas.

The best introduction to his work may be *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow.

Unfortunately, Foucault's premature death (of AIDS) prevented what might have become a complete meta-rational presentation. His last work—the multi-volume, unfinished *History of Sexuality*—is the best. It's only incidentally about sexuality; it's about self and society, knowledge and power, language and experience.

Lyotard

Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* is one of the two root texts for postmodernism. Knowing this, you might not suspect that it was commissioned by the government of Quebec as a report on the influence of information technology on the exact sciences. Written in 1979, it's astonishingly prophetic about the then-future impact of the internet —but that is not the reason to read it. You might also not suspect that, unlike the voluminous obscurantist blather of later postmodernists, it's only 70 pages and reasonably clearly written.

Lyotard's main topic is the breakdown of the systematic worldview in the face of nebulosity, and the persistence of multiple, functional, partial systems despite that. He aims for "a politics that would respect both the desire for justice [pattern] and the desire for the unknown [nebulosity]." This remains unfulfilled, and obstructed not least by the subsequent development of postmodernism—but I think still a worthy goal.

Haenfler

Ross Haenfler's *Subcultures: The Basics* is a short, easy-to-read, fun and insightful overview of one of the most important cultural forces of the past few decades. Most discussions of this topic are either pomo-academic and abstractly theoretical; or else are pop surveys describing the contents of specific subcultures ("here's what goths wear") without analysis of implications. Haenfler is a sociologist, and his book is about the structure and functions of subcultures, but he avoids jargon, irrelevant theory, and allusions to obscurantist French dudes. It helps that he's an enthusiastic participant in some of the subcultures he describes, not an ivory-tower observer.

Haenfler makes many of the points I intend to cover in my chapter on subcultures. If you were intrigued by the hints in my introduction, but frustrated that I haven't yet delivered on them, you'll probably enjoy his book.

Hobsbawm

Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition*, about fake history, is both insightful and very funny, in a dry and British way. I discussed it here.

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1. 1.Because it's highly condensed, it may be incomprehensible without some knowledge of the tradition. One key to understanding is that "Königsbergian" is a reference to Kant specifically. The supposed "true world" of Nietzsche's stage 3 is Kant's *ding an sich*, "the thing in itself." That is the inaccessible "noumenon," or true reality, as opposed to the defective "phenomenon" that appears to the senses. This is a catastrophically bad idea, which leads straight to nihilism.
2. 2.There are several books that claim to explain the *Beacon*. I haven't read any of them all the way through, but I've skimmed the ones I could find, and I would not recommend any of them. They miss the point, as far as I could tell.
3. 3.I would very much like to know whether Western thought was a significant influence on Mipham. There was much more Western cultural influence in Tibet at the time than is usually recognized—because, a bit later, both Tibetan conservatives and Western Romantics propagated the myth that Tibet was a special pure realm untouched by modernity. I've had to work hard to stop myself from digging into Mipham's personal intellectual history. It's not realistic that there was any direct influence between Mipham and Nietzsche in either direction, but it's not completely implausible that they developed independent, somewhat-similar responses to the same distinctively-modern conceptual problems.
4. 4.Since originally writing this, I've read more about his intellectual history, for example in Anne Rawls' introduction to *Ethnomethodology's Program: Working Out Durkheim's Aphorism*. She makes a good case that Garfinkel's insights were entirely independent of Wittgenstein's; and that, while he studied the phenomenological school that included Heidegger, other members were bigger influences on him.
5. 5.And George Lucas based the character Yoda partly on Don Juan Matus. Since learning this, I cannot help reading Garfinkel in Yoda's voice.
6. 6.Ixtlan, maybe.
7. 7.Since I wrote this, I've learned of William J. Rapaport's *Philosophy of Computer Science*, which is not quite the same thing, but adjacent. It covers, as it says, the philosophy of computer *science* as a field, more than the philosophy of computation as such. It also covers the 1980s-era arguments over computationalism in the philosophy of mind. I haven't read it, but it looks like a useful summary resource for the mainstream views on these topics. My thanks to Jake Orthwein for drawing my attention to it.

18 Comments

This page is unfinished. It may be a mere placeholder in the book outline. Or, the text below (if any) may be a summary, or a discussion of what the page will say, or a partial or rough draft.

This page will present a brief explanation for this appendix. In short, it explains why I chose particular words to use as unusual technical terms.

Comment on this page

Tern amidst clouds, symbolizing Dzogchen

I use the word "complete" to describe stances that allow nebulosity and pattern.

These stances are "complete" in that they don't deny the existence of any dimension of meaningness.

The term "complete" is not ideal. An earlier version of this book used "non-dual"; but that word is taken to mean something else.

I chose "complete" partly because it echoes the Tibetan word Dzogchen. Dzogchen is the branch of Buddhism that most influenced this book. "Dzogchen" means "utterly complete."

Comment on this page

Emptiness

Nebulosity and pattern are key concepts in this book. They are closely related to the Buddhist notions of *emptiness* and *form*. For several reasons, I've chosen not to use "emptiness" and "form," and invented these new terms instead.

First, "emptiness" in English has a common usage with regard to [gloss meaningness]: it is the feeling of alienation that comes with rejecting it. Emptiness in this sense is an emotional correlate of nihilism, or the perception of meaninglessness. "Emptiness" in Buddhist philosophy means something different. Worse, what it means is *related* to the Western use, but in a complex way. Talking about Buddhist emptiness in a non-Buddhist context seems bound to cause confusion.

Second, the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness and form is famously contentious. Various Buddhist schools each have their own explanations, and vitriolically attack each others' interpretations. I don't want to take sides in these battles. I also don't want to argue about whether my own understanding or explanation of emptiness and form is correct (according to the standards of some Buddhist school or other).

Third, the philosophy of emptiness and form is also famously obscure. It is so abstract and vague that it is hard to know whether the divergent interpretations are actually discussing the same thing, or if they talk past one another because they discuss different topics. It is hard to know whether any of the writers in the field are talking about anything at all, or whether they are discussing something purely imaginary. It is hard to know how one could know which of the accounts is right, or even what it would mean for them to be right or wrong.[1]

As a result, it is unclear whether "nebulosity and pattern," as I use the words here, are the same thing as someone's version of "emptiness and form," or not. I don't much care.

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1. 1.As it happens, I do have opinions about these questions. I may present them somewhere, someday; but I'm unsure that it would be useful. In any case, it's a topic that doesn't belong on this web site.

6 Comments

One vase? Or two faces?

The essence of this book is a method for resolving opposing pairs of confusions about meaningness. I would like to call these resolutions "non-dual." Unfortunately, that word is taken to mean something else.

This book's method draws on the Buddhist analysis of eternalism and nihilism. Buddhism often describes the resolution of this opposition as "non-duality."

A quick Google search shows that, in current English, "non-duality" is almost always used to mean something different. Mostly, "non-dual" refers to monism: the doctrine that All is One, and all distinctions are ultimately illusory.

Monism forms a false opposition with dualism: the doctrine that subjects and objects are definitely, objectively separated. In this book, I argue that monism is wrong, and that the main reason people adopt it is because it appears that dualism is the only alternative.

Using "non-dualism" to mean "monism" obscures other possibilities.

Potentially there may be many different alternatives to dualism, of which monism is only one. (This book advocates another.) It would be useful if all such alternatives could be described as "non-dualistic." It is probably too late for that; "non-dual" is well-established as meaning "monist."

"Non-dual" appears to have entered the English language as a direct translation of the Sanskrit word *advaita*,[1] as used in Hindu philosophy. Hindu advaita is monist; it asserts that all beings are One with the Supreme Cosmic Spirit.

Buddhist "non-duality," and the stances I advocate in this book, are not monist; they reject both twoness and oneness.[2] Individuals cannot be objectively separated, but neither are they identical (with each other, or with some sort of Cosmic Something). These stances are "non-dualist/non-monist."

There has been considerable confusion on this point. The Buddhist view is often misunderstood as monist in the West. Often the Buddhist and Hindu "non-dualities" are mixed up. Using "non-duality" to mean "monism" has probably contributed to this confusion.[3]

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1. 1.*A-* means "not," as in "atheist"; *dva* is "two," cognate with "dual"; *-ita* is "-ity." Sometimes the historical relationship between Indian and European languages is obvious.
2. 2.There may or may not be a difference between Buddhist non-duality and the stances I advocate. Buddhist philosophy is sufficiently complex and obscure that it is hard to say for certain.
3. 3.I suspect that this confusion is partly deliberate. "Perennialism" is the evangelical strategy of describing all religions as distorted misunderstandings of monism. Advocates of monism often insist that Buddhist non-dual philosophy is actually monist, and essentially the same as Hindu advaita, but gets some details wrong. Buddhists reply that it is *not* monist, and that these "details" are its central point.

2 Comments