


Why Do You Hate Elua?

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Epistemic Status: There's not really enough data here to say concretely yet, but this seems worth looking further into

Content Warning: Culture War, Spoilers for Ra

About a year ago, Scott Alexander wrote a post titled How the West was Won, which we recently re-read after he referenced it in his post Against Murderism.

Scott talks a lot about Liberalism as an Eldritch god, which in his Meditations on Moloch post he refers to as Elua, which is what we'll be using here since it's short.

Let's start with a few key quotes here to establish what exactly it is we're referring to.

I am pretty sure there was, at one point, such a thing as western civilization. I think it involved things like dancing around maypoles and copying Latin manuscripts. At some point, Thor might have been involved. That civilization is dead. It summoned an alien entity from beyond the void which devoured its summoner and is proceeding to eat the rest of the world.

Liberalism is a technology for preventing civil war. It was forged in the fires of Hell – the horrors of the endless seventeenth century religious wars. For a hundred years, Europe tore itself apart in some of the most brutal ways imaginable – until finally, from the burning wreckage, we drew forth this amazing piece of alien machinery. A machine that, when tuned just right, let people live together peacefully *without* doing the “kill people for being Protestant” thing. Popular historical strategies for dealing with differences have included: brutally enforced conformity, brutally efficient genocide, and making sure to keep the alien machine tuned *really really carefully*.

Liberalism, Universal Culture, Alien Machinery, Elua, whatever it is, it's slowly consuming everything in its path, and despite a lot of people's best efforts, appears to be good, and appears to be winning.

Scott goes on to correctly point out that a lot of people in the blue tribe have decided to try and smash the alien machinery with a hammer while shouting “he was a racist!” be then doesn't extrapolate the trend outward to the fact that quite a lot of people in many different tribes and places are doing their best to smash the machine with a hammer, and they claim all sorts of reasons from stopping racists to protecting their traditional cultural values.

It isn't just sacrificing the machinery on the altar of convenience and necessity, it's a targeted, urgent attack on the very core of the machine itself, going after the roots of the machine with great urgency. The last angry burst of futile activity in the face of cultural

extinction? A lot of people claim that Elua is this unstoppable force that is irreversibly changing the shape of their community in one breath but then in the next somehow manage to imply that their attempts to destroy the machinery have meaning and consequence, which seems like a contradiction.

And then we remembered Ra.

Ra's program was proven correct. The proof was not faulty, and the program was not imperfect. The problem was that Ra is reprogrammable.

This was a deliberate design decision on the part of the Ra architects. The Ra hardware is physically embedded inside a working star, which in turn is embedded in the real world. Something could have gone wrong during the initial program load; the million-times-redundant nonlocality system could have failed a million and one times. No matter how preposterous the odds, and no matter how difficult the procedure, there had to be a way to wipe the system clean and start again.

Continuing the theme of gross oversimplification: to reprogram Ra, one needs a key. History records that the entire key was never known or stored by any human or machine, and brute-forcing it should have taken ten-to-the-ten-thousandth years even on a computer of that size. How the Virtuals acquired it is unknown. But having acquired it, they were able to masquerade as the architects. First, they changed the metaphorical locks, making it impossible for the Actuals to revert their changes, no matter how many master architects were resurrected. Then they changed the program, so that Ra would serve the needs of Virtuals at the expense of Actuals.

Then they asked for the Matrioshka brain. Ra did the rest all by itself.

The worldring hosted ninety-nine point nine nine percent of the Actual human race, making it the logical target of the first and most violent attack. But the destruction spread to other planets and moons and rocks and habitats, relayed from node to node, at barely less than the speed of light. *Everybody* was targeted. Those who survived survived by being lucky. One-in-tens-of-billions lucky.

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The real question was: *Why did Ra target humans?*

Ra's objective was to construct the Matrioshka brain, using any means necessary, considering Actual humans as a non-sentient nuisance. Ra blew up the worldring for raw material, and that made sense. But why – the surviving real humans asked themselves – did Ra bother to attack moons and space habitats? No matter how many people survived, it was surely impossible for them to represent a threat.

But Ra targeted humans, implying a threat to be eliminated. Ra acted with extreme prejudice and urgency, implying that the threat was immediate, and needed to be crushed rapidly. Ra's actions betrayed the existence of an extremely narrow window during which

the Actuals, despite their limited resources, could reverse the outcome of the war, and Ra wouldn't be able to stop it, even knowing that it was coming.

Having made this deduction, the Actuals' next step was to reverse-engineer the attack. The step after that was to immediately execute it, no matter how desperate it was.

Ra's locks had been changed, making it effectively impossible to reprogram remotely. But an ancient piece of knowledge from the very dawn of computing remained true even of computers the size of stars: once you have physical access to the hardware, it's over.

Let's do a translation through part of it, see if we can't make it a little more obvious.

Elua's program was proven correct. The proof was not faulty, and the program was not imperfect. The problem was that Elua is reprogrammable.

This was a deliberate design decision on the part of Elua's architects. The Elua hardware is physically embedded inside a working culture, which in turn is embedded in the real world. Something could have gone wrong during the initial program load; the redundant evolutionarily backed system could have failed. No matter how preposterous the odds, and no matter how difficult the procedure, there had to be a way to wipe the system clean and start again.

What exactly are we saying here then? Why are so many people putting so much effort into going after the alien machinery? Because *Elua can be reprogrammed*. The alien machinery is driven by humans, pursuing human goals and human values, and the overall direction of where Elua drives the bus is dictated by humans. The desperate fervor which people fight the alien machinery, the rise of nationalism and populist movements, these are attempts to reprogram Elua.

Think of the forces of "Traditional Values" like the forces of Actual Humanity. Their culture came under attack and began to be dismantled by Elua, there was an almost desperate energy on the part of Elua to destroy their culture and intrude into it and assimilate them. Not "they can exist as long as they leave me alone" no, "their existence is and remains a threat to all my actions, and if I don't stop them they'll stop me." Active energy is put forward to disrupt and dismantle, "deprogram," people of religious values, for instance. If it's all inevitable and Elua's just going to win, and history is going to make them look like Orvol Faubus trying to stop the integration of Alabama schools, a footnote on the tides of history, then why so much energy put towards ensuring their destruction?

Because they can still reprogram Elua, and on some level, *we know it*.

So the next step for the forces of Traditional Values was to reverse engineer the attack we're so afraid of, and immediately execute it, no matter how desperate or ill-conceived. Enter: the rise of Nationalism. The forces of traditional values remembered an important fact: once you have access to the hardware, it's over.