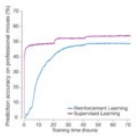
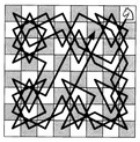
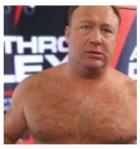
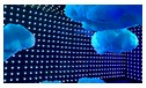

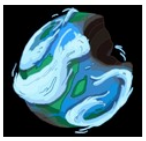

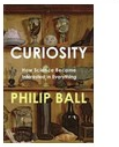

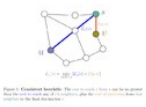

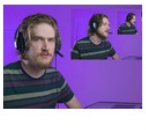
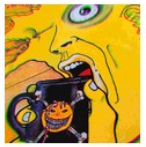
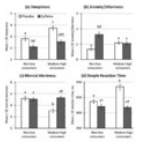

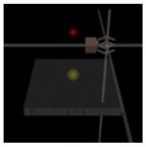

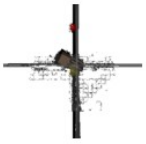

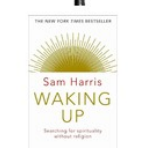

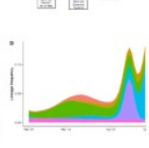

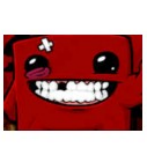

Posts by category

death

- Legacy and the memory of legacy
- 'Trompettes de la Mort' (2005)

meaning

- Legacy and the memory of legacy
- 'Terra Ignota': the ecstasy of uncertainty
- Cracking cultures
- Irony, sincerity, nostalgia, neoteny
- hope dies last
- Against the Culture
- 'Blindsight' (2006) by Watts
- 'Strangers Drowning' (2015) by MacFarquhar
- Is education worth it for society?
- Why is quality rare?
- Anaesthetatron
- 'Infinite Jest' (1996)

longtermism

- Legacy and the memory of legacy
- 'Terra Ignota': the ecstasy of uncertainty
- Drake, Hanson, and the meaning of life
- Against the Culture
- AI ethics for present & future
- Blogging is dead, long live sites
- Existential risk as common cause

music

- Songs for the Extremely Online
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- Rubinations
- 'Have One on Me' (2010) by Joanna Newsom
- Punk as ideology

art

- Songs for the Extremely Online
- Cracking cultures
- 'Trompettes de la Mort' (2005)
- 'Homicide' (1991) by Simon
- 'Have One on Me' (2010) by Joanna Newsom

culture

- Songs for the Extremely Online
- Punk as ideology

greats

- von Neumann

- Perelman
- Einstein
- Turing
- Frege's grand failure

fiction

- 'Terra Ignota': the ecstasy of uncertainty
- Unthinking meat

maths

- Favourite maths tools
- Graphs are cool
- Better ways to write maths
- Maths at the Open University
- Perelman
- π vs τ as clash of worldviews
- Conceptual conversions
- Frege's grand failure

philosophy

- Drake, Hanson, and the meaning of life
- Cracking cultures
- The One True Sceptic
- Irony, sincerity, nostalgia, neoteny
- 'Starting Strength' by Rippetoe
- Worldview in Five Books
- 'Blindsight' (2006) by Watts
- Existential risk as common cause
- 'The Unpersuadables' (2013) by Storr
- 'Curiosity' (2012) by Ball
- Why I'm not a philosopher
- Does the gut cross the epistemic barrier?
- The presumed worth of anthropology
- Effective Altruism Global: x: Oxford
- magic words
- Why is quality rare?
- Conceptual conversions
- Comparing up and down
- Limits to self-invention
- Taking Hume's name
- Frege's grand failure
- Misreading Russell on radical scepticism
- Economics as philosophy of life
- Staring at mystics
- Neither Turing, neither Searle

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- Drake, Hanson, and the meaning of life
- Against the Culture

rationality

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- Uncritical thinking

- The trouble with supplements
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- You do you
- Existential overheads
- Staring at mystics

science

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- Highlights from my Gists
- Reversals in psychology
- Uncritical thinking
- 'Blindsight' (2006) by Watts
- 'Curiosity' (2012) by Ball
- Einstein
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- Data Science FAQ
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- The Worst Game Ever
- Modelling linguistic accommodation
- Present pieties
- Can you trust your methods?

code

- Do masks work against COVID, at scale?
- Highlights from my Gists

research

- Do masks work against COVID, at scale?
- Crossing the ocean of my ignorance

ai

- Why worry about future AI?
- Using courts for algorithmic fairness

xrisk

- Why worry about future AI?
- Existential risk as common cause
- 'The Great Influenza' (2004) by Barry

ethics

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- 'Strangers Drowning' (2015) by MacFarquhar
- on veganism
- Anaesthetatron
- What's the highest moral wage?
- Misreading Russell on radical scepticism

ethics-of-belief

- The One True Sceptic
- Anaesthetatron
- Misreading Russell on radical scepticism

epistemology

- The One True Sceptic
- 'Peter Watts is an Angry Sentient Tumor' (2019)
- 'The Great Influenza' (2004) by Barry
- Does the gut cross the epistemic barrier?
- Misreading Russell on radical scepticism

fun

- hope dies last

tools-for-thought

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- Better ways to write maths

biochemistry

- Stimulant tolerance, or, the tears of things

self-help

- Stimulant tolerance, or, the tears of things
- Crossing the ocean of my ignorance
- Self-help, hard and soft
- Things I Use
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- Existential overheads

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- The trouble with supplements
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- Comparing up and down

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- Estimating political controversy
- Effective Altruism Global: x: Oxford
- What's the highest moral wage?

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- Notes on inductive logic programming
- Preventing Side-effects in Gridworlds
- A ceiling for human expertise
- Automatic for the people
- Neither Turing, neither Searle

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- Blogging is dead, long live sites

self-representation

- Blogging is dead, long live sites
- Worldview in Five Books

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- Rubinations

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- The Worst Game Ever

economics

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- Automatic for the people
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rosetta-stone

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- Conceptual conversions

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- 'Homicide' (1991) by Simon
- 'Blindsight' (2006) by Watts
- 'Curiosity' (2012) by Ball
- 'The Great Influenza' (2004) by Barry

mental-health

- 'Starting Strength' by Rippetoe
- Comparing up and down

replication

- 'Peter Watts is an Angry Sentient Tumor' (2019)

long-content

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- Hardening the browser
- Why I'm not a philosopher

psychology

- Reversals in psychology

uni

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- Maths at the Open University

social-science

- Uncritical thinking
- How lethal are the Tories? Part 1
- The presumed worth of anthropology
- The Worst Game Ever
- Modelling linguistic accommodation
- Present pieties

literature

- 'The Odyssey' (2017) by Emily Wilson

utility

- Insurance isn't necessarily a scam

finance

- Insurance isn't necessarily a scam

bio

- Stimulant tolerance, or, the tears of things
- The trouble with supplements
- Perelman
- Einstein
- 'The Great Influenza' (2004) by Barry
- Turing
- 'Hitler's Uranium Club' (2008) by Bernstein
- Why is quality rare?

goodhart

- 'Homicide' (1991) by Simon

computers

- Hardening the browser
- Turing
- Disambiguating the first computer
- Conceptual conversions

history

- 'Curiosity' (2012) by Ball
- Disambiguating the first computer
- 'Hitler's Uranium Club' (2008) by Bernstein
- Taking Hume's name

progress

- 'Curiosity' (2012) by Ball

biorisk

- 'The Great Influenza' (2004) by Barry

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- The Worst Game Ever
- Modelling linguistic accommodation

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- A ceiling for human expertise

argument

- A ceiling for human expertise
- Does the gut cross the epistemic barrier?
- Neither Turing, neither Searle

conceptual-analysis

- Disambiguating the first computer

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physics

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scary-futurism

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naturalism

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scepticism

- Does the gut cross the epistemic barrier?
- The presumed worth of anthropology
- Can you trust your methods?

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politics

- π vs τ as clash of worldviews
- Punk as ideology

machine-learning

- Data Science FAQ

data-science

- Data Science FAQ

cause-prioritisation

- Estimating political controversy
- 'Why study economics?'

transhumanism

- Automatic for the people
- Why is quality rare?

criticism

- Present pieties
- Rubinations

- Punk as ideology

becoming

- Limits to self-invention

false-framework

- Limits to self-invention

travel

- A Sentimental Journey Through Parts of England

nonsense

- Staring at mystics

love

- 'Have One on Me' (2010) by Joanna Newsom

subculture

- Punk as ideology

Best posts:

Reversals in psychology

A list of exaggerated psychological phenomena

Existential risk as common cause

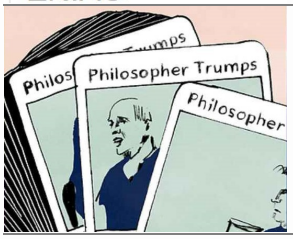
Why many different worldviews should prioritise reducing existential risk.

Hardening the browser

Passable browser security for almost no money or effort.

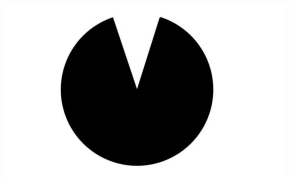
Disambiguating the first computer

Tiny app for defining "computer" and selecting between first computers.



Why I'm not a philosopher

Philosophy's functions & benefits, and why they aren't real(?)



Why is quality rare?

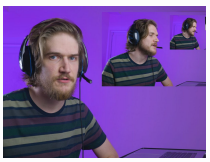
Why in general is it harder to do things well than badly?

New posts:

Legacy and the memory of legacy

mocking the ancients and inventing hell

Feb 2022



Songs for the Extremely Online

Music about the internet, its dread and glory.

Jan 2022

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von Neumann

On intelligence and virtue and the vexed connection.

Jan 2022

'Terra Ignota': the ecstasy of uncertainty

The most atypical scifi series of the last 20 years

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Favourite maths tools

Software & sites that make it possible for me to do maths

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Drake, Hanson, and the meaning of life

Our best guess why the galaxy is empty

Nov 2021

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AI alignment & academia

29th July 2020

- *Estimating AI safety work by academics working in adjacent areas.*
- *Confidence*: High that there is a notable contribution, low in the particular estimates. Lots of Fermi estimates.
- *Topic importance*: 9 / 10
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.
- Cross-posted here.
- Argument

A big reason for the EA focus on AI safety is its neglectedness:

> *…less than $50 million per year is devoted to the field of AI safety or work specifically targeting global catastrophic biorisks.*

80,000 Hours (2019)

> *…we estimate fewer than 100 people in the world are working on how to make AI safe.*

80,000 Hours (2017)

> *Grand total: $9.09m… [Footnote: this] doesn't include anyone generally working on verification/control, auditing, transparency, etc. for other reasons.*

Seb Farquhar (2018)

> *…what we are doing is less than a pittance. You go to some random city… Along the highway you see all these huge buildings for companies… Maybe they are designing a new publicity campaign for a razor blade. You drive past hundreds of these… Any one of those has more resources than the total that humanity is spending on [AI safety].*

Nick Bostrom (2016)

Numbers like these helped convince me that AI safety is the best thing to work on. I now think that these are underestimates, because of non-EA lines of research which weren't counted.

Use "EA safety" for the whole umbrella of work done at organisations like FHI, MIRI, DeepMind and OpenAI's safety teams, and by independent researchers. A lot of this - maybe a third - is conducted at universities; to avoid double counting I count it as EA and not academia.

The argument:

1. EA safety is small, even relative to a single academic subfield.
2. There is overlap between capabilities and short-term safety work.
3. There is overlap between short-term safety work and long-term safety work.
4. So AI safety is less neglected than the opening quotes imply.
5. There's a good chance that academia will do more safety over time, eventually dwarfing the contribution of EA.

What's 'safety'?

EA safety is best read as about "AGI alignment": work on assuring that the actions of an extremely advanced system are sufficiently close to human-friendly goals.

EA focusses on AGI because weaker AI systems aren't thought to be directly tied to

existential risk. However, Critch and Krueger note that “prepotent” - unstoppably advanced, but not necessarily human-level - AI could still pose x-risks. The potential for this latter type is key to the argument that short-term work is relevant to us, since the scaling curves for some systems seem to be holding up, and so might reach prepotence.

“ML safety” could mean making existing systems safe, or using existing systems as a proxy for aligning an AGI. The latter is sometimes called “mid-term safety”.

In the following “AI safety” means anything which helps us solve the AGI control problem.

De facto AI safety work

The line between safety work and capabilities work is sometimes blurred. A classic example is ‘robustness’: it is both a safety problem and a capabilities problem if your system can be reliably broken by noise. Transparency (increasing direct human access to the goals and properties of learned systems) is the most obvious case of work relevant to capabilities, short-term safety, and AGI alignment. As well as being a huge academic fad, it’s a core mechanism in 6 out of the 11 live AGI alignment proposals recently summarised by Evan Hubinger.

More controversial is whether there’s significant overlap between short-term safety and AGI alignment. All we need for now is: The mid-term safety hypothesis (weak form): at least some work on current systems will transfer to AGI alignment. Some researchers who seem to put a lot of stock in this view: Shah, Christiano, Krakovna, Olsson, Olah, Steinhardt, Amodei, Krueger. (Note that I haven’t polled them; this is guessed from public statements and revealed preferences.)

Here are some alignment-relevant research areas dominated by non-EAs. I won’t explain these: I use the incredibly detailed taxonomy (and 30 literature reviews) of Critch and Krueger (2020). Look there, and at related agendas for explanations and bibliographies.

- Transparency
- Robustness
- Interactive AI
- Calibration
- Formal verification
- Preference learning
- Modelling human cognition
- Safe handovers (AKA corrigibility)
- Assured Autonomy
- Open source game theory
- Multi-agent coordination
- Emergent communication
- Safe RL
- (Parts of) algorithmic fairness

These are narrowly drawn from ML, robotics, and game theory: this is just a sample of relevant work! Work in social science, psychology, moral uncertainty, or decision theory could be just as relevant as the above direct technical work; Richard Ngo lists many questions for non-AI people here.

Work in these fields could help directly, if the eventual AGI paradigm is not too dissimilar from the current one (that is, if the weak mid-term hypothesis holds). But there are also indirect benefits: if they help us to use AIs to align AGI; if they help to build the field; if they help convince people that there really is an AGI control problem (for instance, Victoria Krakovna’s specification gaming list has been helpful to me in interacting with sceptical specialists). These imply another view under which much academic work has alignment value:

> *The mid-term safety hypothesis (very weak form): at least some work on current systems will probably help with AGI alignment in some way, not limited to direct*

> *technical transfer.*

A natural objection is that most of the above areas don't address the AGI case: they're not even trying to solve our problem. I discuss this and other discounts below.

Current levels of safety-related work

How large is EA Safety?

Some overlapping lists:

- # people with posts on the Alignment Forum since late 2018: 94. To my knowledge, 37 of these are full-time.
- 80k AI Safety Google Group: 400, almost entirely junior people.
- Larks' great 2019 roundup contained ~110 AI researchers (who published that year), most of whom could be described as EA or adjacent.
- Issa Rice's AI Watch: "778" (raw count, but there's lots of false positives for general x-risk people and inactive people. Last big update 2018).

In the top-down model I start with all EAs and then filter them by interest in AI risk, direct work, and % of time working on safety. (EA safety has a lot of hobbyists, for instance me.) The bottom-up model attempts a headcount.

How large is non-EA Safety?

A rough point estimate gives 84k or 103k AI academics, with caveats summarised in the Guesstimate notes. Then define a (very rough) relevance filter:

```
CS = % of capabilities work that overlaps with short-term safety
SL = % of short-term safety that overlaps with long-term safety
```

Then, we could decompose the safety-relevant part of academic AI as:

```
SR = (% of AI work on capabilities * CS * SL)  + (% of AI work on short-term safe
```

None of those parameters is obvious, but I make an attempt in the model (bottom-left corner).

Then the non-EA safety size is simply the field size * SR.

This just counts academia, and just technical AI within that. It's harder to estimate the amount of industrial effort, but the AI Index report suggests that commercial AI research is about 10% as large as academic research (by number of papers, not impact). But we don't need this if we're just arguing that the non-EA lower bound is large.

What's a good discount factor for de facto safety work?

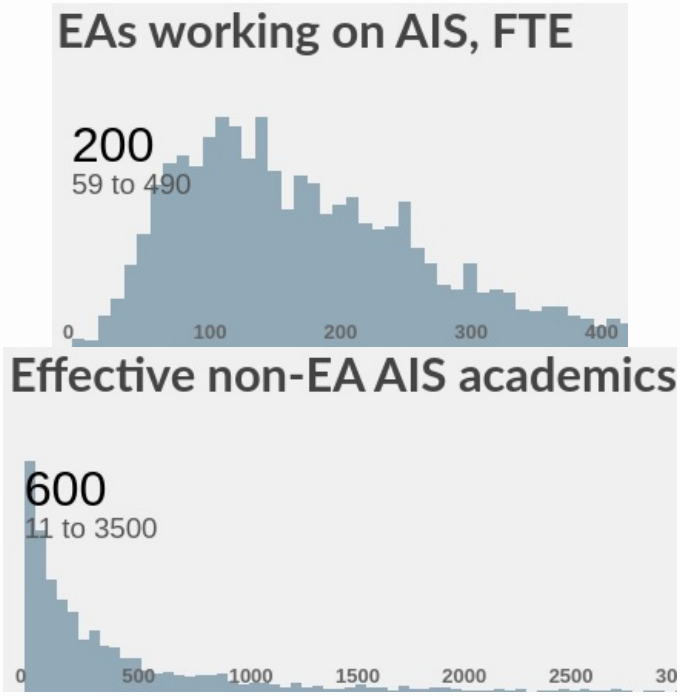
In EA safety, it's common to be cynical about academia and empirical AI safety. There's something to it: the amount of paperwork and communication overhead is notorious; there are perverse incentives around publishing tempo, short-termism, and conformity; it is very common to emphasise only the positive effects of your work; and, as the GPT-2 story shows, there is a strong dogma about automatic disclosure of all work. Also, insofar as AI safety is 'pre-paradigmatic', you might not expect normal science to make much headway. (But note that several agent-foundation-style models are from academia - see 'A cursory check' below.)

This is only half of the ledger. One of the big advantages of academic work is the much better distribution of senior researchers: EA Safety seems bottlenecked on people able to

guide and train juniors. Another factor is increased influence: the average academic has serious opportunities to affect policy, hundreds of students, and the general attitude of their field toward alignment, including non-academic work on alignment. Lastly, you get access to government-scale funding. I ignore these positives in the following.

Model

Here's a top-down model arguing that technical AI academics could have the same order of effect as EA, even under a heavy impact discount, even when ignoring other fields and the useful features of academia. Here's an (incomplete) bottom-up model to check if it's roughly sensible. As you can see from the variance, the output means are not to be trusted.



A "confidence" interval

Again, the model is conservative: I don't count the most prominent safety-relevant academic institutions (FHI, CHAI, etc); I don't count contributions from industry, just the single most relevant academic field; I don't count non-technical academic contributions; and a high discount is applied to academic work. For the sake of argument I've set the discount very high: a unit of adjacent academic work is said to be 80% less effective than a unit of explicit AGI work. The models rely on my priors; customise them before drawing conclusions (see 'Parameters' below).

A cursory check of the model

The above implies that there should be a lot of mainstream work with alignment implications - maybe as much as EA produces. A systematic study would be a big undertaking, but can we at least find examples? Yes: aix

- AIXI (2000), a theoretically optimal RL agent.
- Gödel machines (2003), the limit case of verified self-improvement.
- Inverse reinforcement learning (2004 - 2016). A limited but fruitful model for thinking about value learning.
- Various forms of Imitation learning
- Active learning, particularly TAMER (2009) and active reward learning (2014).
- Info-theoretic measures of control like empowerment (2005).

- Adversarial training (2015). As used in AI Safety Debate.
- Wooldridge on the game-theoretic / social choice agent foundations of AI.
- Existence proof for the short/long-term overlap: The Stanford "Center for AI Safety" is a good example. Zero mention of AGI or alignment while working on many of the de facto topics.

By comparison, how much does EA safety produce? In Larks' exhaustive annual round-up of EA safety work in 2019, he identified about 50 paper-sized chunks (not counting MIRI's private efforts). Of them, both CAIS and mesa-optimisers seem more significant than the above. Recent years have seen similarly important EA work (e.g. Debate, quantilizers, or the Armstrong/Shah discussion of value learning).

What does this change?

I argue that AIS is less neglected than it seems, because some academic work is related, and academia is enormous. (My confidence interval for the academic contribution is vast - but I didn't quite manage to zero out the lower bound even by being conservative.) Does this change the cause's priority?

Probably not. Even if the field is bigger than we thought, it's still extremely small relative to the investment in AI capabilities, and highly neglected relative to its importance. The point of the above is to correct your model, to draw attention to other sources of useful work, and to help sharpen a persistent disagreement within EA safety about the role of mid-term safety and academia.

This might change your view of effective interventions within AIS (for instance, ways to bring AGI alignment further within the Overton window), but my model doesn't get you there on its own. A key quantity I don't really discuss is the ratio of capabilities to alignment work. It seems prohibitively hard to reduce capabilities investment. But a large, credible academic field of alignment is one way to replace some work on capabilities.

Future safety-related work

A naive extrapolation implies that AIS neglectedness will decrease further: in the last 10 years, Safety has moved from the fringe of the internet into the heart of great universities and NGOs. We have momentum: the programme is supported by some of the most influential AI researchers - e.g. Russell, Bengio, Sutskever, Shanahan, Rossi, Selman, McAllester, Pearl, Schmidhuber, Horvitz. (Often only verbal approval.)

In addition, from personal experience, junior academics are much more favourable towards alignment and want to work on it.

Lastly: Intuitively, the economic incentive to solve AGI-safety-like problems scales as capabilities increase and as mid-term problems draw attention. Ordinary legal liability disincentivises all the sub-existential risks. (The incentive may not scale properly, from a longtermist perspective, but the direction seems good.)

If this continues, then even the EA bet on direct AGI alignment could be totally outstripped by normal academic incentives (prestige, social proof, herding around the agendas of top researchers).

A cool forecasting competition is currently running on a related question.

This argument depends on our luck holding, and moreover, on people (e.g. me) not naively announcing victory and so discouraging investment. But to the extent that you trust the trend, this should affect your prioritisation of AI safety, since its expected neglectedness is a great deal smaller.

Parameters

- Your probability of prosaic AGI (i.e. where we get there by just scaling up black-box algorithms). Whether it's possible to align prosaic AGI. Your probability that agent foundations is the only way to promote real alignment.
- The percentage of mainstream work which is relevant to AGI alignment. Subsumes the capabilities/safety overlap and the short/long term safety overlap. The idea of a continuous discount on work adjacent to alignment would be misguided if there were really two classes of safety problem, short- and long-term, and if short-term work had negligible impact on the long-term problems. The relevance would then be near 0.
- The above is extremely sensitive to your forecast for AGI. Given very short timelines, you should focus on other things than climbing up through academia, even if you think it's generally well-suited to this task; conversely, if you think we have 100 years, then you can have pretty strong views on academic inadequacy and still agree that their impact will be substantial.

Caveats, future work

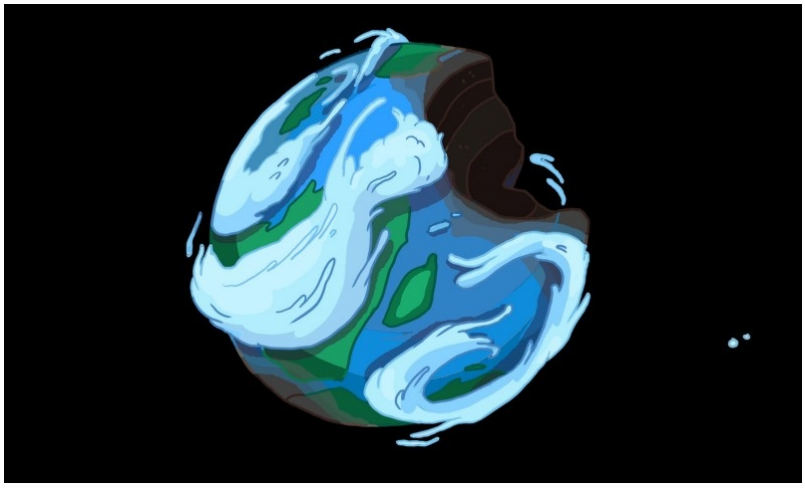
- To estimate academia fairly, you'd need a more complicated model, involving second-order effects like availability of senior researchers, policy influence, opportunity to spread ideas to students and colleagues, funding. That is, academia has extremely clear paths to global impact. But since academia is stronger on the second order, omitting it doesn't hurt my lower-bound argument.
- If you have an extremely negative view of academia's efficiency, then the above may not move you much. (See for instance, the dramatically diminishing return on inputs in mature fields like physics.)
- A question which deserves a post of its own is: "How often do scientists inadvertently solve a problem?" (The general form - "how often does seemingly unrelated work help? Provide crucial help?" - seems trivial: many solutions are helped by seemingly unrelated prior work.) I'm relying on the overlap parameters to cover the effect of "actually trying to solve the problem", but this might not be apt. Maybe average academia is to research as the average charity is to impact: maybe directly targeting impact is that important.
- I haven't thought much about potential harms from academic alignment work. Short-termists crowding out long-termists and a lack of attention to info hazards might be two.
- Intellectual impact is not linear in people. Also, the above treats all (non-EA) academic institutions as equally conducive to safety work, which is not true.
- Even more caveats.

Tags: effective-altruism, AI, academia

hope dies last

2nd December 2020

- *Adventure Time as Manichaean nightmare*
- *Confidence*: 80% correct, 20% dubious headcanon.
- *Topic importance*: 2 / 10
- *Content notes*: Spoilers. Not a good intro.
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



Adventure Time is a cartoon about the fantastical anime/D&D quests of a boy and his anthropomorphic dog. Superficially, it is joyous: filled with treasure, candy, fart jokes, dayglo idiots, new slang, and dance parties.

But the joy in it is *post*-post-apocalyptic: the show is undermined and deepened by a dark frame - the adventures take place in a ruined Earth, with ~all of the adults gone. It is an unusually good depiction of nihilism, trauma, the 'meaning crisis', being neuroatypical, the contingency of self, virtue, success, love, and even existential risk.

Without reading between the lines, the show is just normal Cartoon Network Power of Friendship fare. But the real theme of the show is how to be happy in a hostile, finite, godless world. Probably only about 50 of the 280 episodes are about this, but it's the rich part.

DISCLAIMER: There are about 700 characters in the show. With this many degrees of freedom it's possible to support most weird readings by being selective.

Glory passes

Manichaean religion viewed the world as a finite war between light and dark - with light constantly leaking out of the world, unto eternal night. So too in *Adventure Time*: as the series goes, more and more of the heroes, gods, and stabilising forces in Ooo are removed:

- The greatest hero Billy retires, broken. Then corrupted and used by xrisk
- The god of Mars, GrobGobGlobGrod is killed.
- Prismo - an even more godlike God - is killed.*
- Matthew, a hive mind who claims that he will restore the world after the next apocalypse, is murdered for no particular reason.

Against this steady loss of checks and balances, villains disappear too. Because they die, or because they are aggressively humanised.

- Ice King -> heroic Simon,
- Lich -> Sweet Pea
- Darren
- etc

* Some of this post was written before the last few seasons brought people back and generally pushed against entropy.

Injustice

The least childish thing about the show is the repeated instances of unpunished evil and unrewarded virtue.

- Magicman, a sort of camp Anton Chigurh, does many heinous things, including summoning a world-eating monster. He suffers somewhat, but recovers and goes on being heinous.
- Root Beer Guy, a blameless minor character given one very heartfelt episode, is brutally murdered during a siege of the Candy Kingdom. All others who die in this episode are revived, but not him.
- The terrible Stag, who briefly enslaves an entire country in order to devour them, is transformed into a telescope (justice I guess), but is later put back.

Martin: the fragility of self, the accident of virtue

Martin is Finn's estranged dad. He is introduced as a horrible rogue with no paternal feeling whatsoever. Later we realise that he was actually separated from Finn while heroically defending the boy, and got brain damage.

Fans dislike the brain damage idea, since it feels to them to rob his actions of the evil and arrogance they want to ascribe him. It's true that cheap writers use brain damage as a way of getting out of plot corners. But this instance is neither cheap nor dissatisfying:

Martin the husband tried his best, was even heroic, and still ended up failing his family - and worse, ending up with them thinking he was a villain; and worse, actually having his personality altered to confirm that impression.

The point is that the self is fragile; virtue and vice are partly happy or unhappy accidents; and yes the mask can eat into the face and make you into what you do.

He was a rogue and a cheapskate before Minerva, but he is much much worse than this after the head injury. You can retcon this as his defence mechanism from shame, but I find the neurological explanation simpler, more disturbing, and satisfying.

What do we know?

- We have one bit of concept art showing him after the Guardian fight with a head wound.

- He vaguely remembers Finn and sits with him in a young dad way. In my telling, this is unconscious muscle memory.

Lemonhope dies last

The most startling episode in the whole series is Lemonhope II. A thousand years after the events of the main series, Lemonhope wanders through an empty wasteland, passing abandoned cities and fallen landmarks. We see no other life. Then alone he dies.

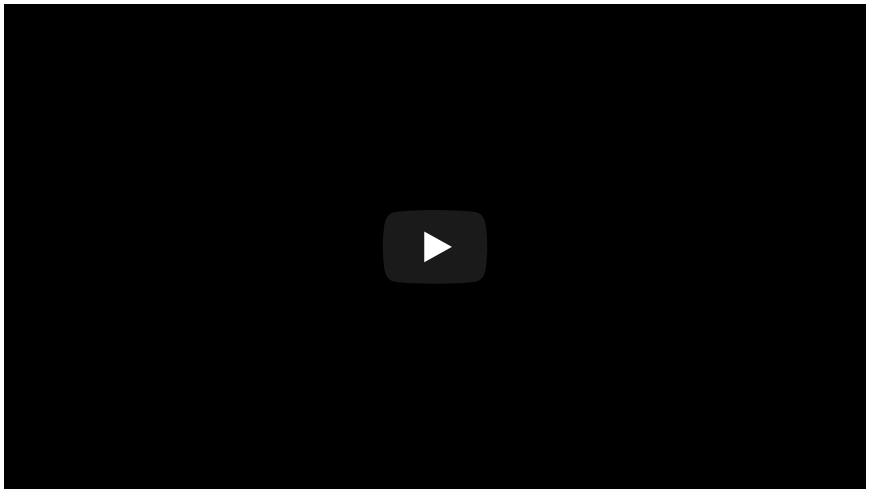
The timeline it implies:

1. Our Earth
2. Apocalypse 1, the Great Mushroom War
3. Shoko & Tiger
4. Finn & Jake
5. Apocalypse 2
6. Shermy & Beth
7. The death of Lemonhope, the last adventurer

That is, this cartoon depicts the total death of its own world.

Or maybe everything stays

Understandably, the finale veers away from this, instead emphasising endless cycles of death and new life. It hints that Lemonhope II isn't the final word on Ooo, that it goes on: "people just keep living their lives". There are more and more apocalypses, and people recover and get used to it each time. "Everything stays, but it still changes"



I don't mind this alternative; unlike the reading of Martin that paints him as *just* a wilful liar, or *just* the result of deeply repressed shame, the eternal adventure is at least an ethos.

Fandom is forever

The final song, "Time Adventure" has a lot going on. First: 4-dimensionalism about time.

> *Time is an illusion that helps things make sense*
> *So we're always living in the present tense.*
> *It seems unforgiving when a good thing ends*
> *But you and I will always be back then.*

It's common to deny that good things were good, e.g. following a breakup. Like Plato: "not real if it doesn't last forever". But on plausible views of time (growing block or eternalism), *the value still exists after it is over*: nothing subsequent can ever touch it. The universe's heat death (the end of this show) is bad, if it is bad, because it stops us having more value, not because it nullifies past value / meaning. I find this incredibly helpful to steer through life.

Second: "Time Adventure" has the characters directly address us, the audience.

> *If there was some amazing force outside of time*
> *to take us back to where we were*
> *And hang each moment up like pictures on the wall*
> *Inside a billion tiny frames so that we can see it all, all, all*
> *It would look like:*
> *Will happen, happening happened…*

That force is you, e.g. watching favourite episodes out of sequence, e.g. writing long strange rants about headcanon. Possibilist reference, if you like. Whatever its internal fate, Ooo is immortal already because we're outside their time. It's not gone until we're gone. It cushions the cancellation of a beloved show with a sermon on the serenity of a good philosophy of time and reference.

Tags: fun, meaning

A decomposition of decompositions

17th September 2015

- *5 kinds of ageing I thought up.*
- *Confidence*: N/A, definition chopping and social speculation.
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Content notes*: death, senescence, futurist nonsense

Age is at least five different things which we currently, sensibly, treat the same. (We do this by using just one integer, ‘years since birth’, as its only measure.) What things is age?

1. *Periodisation.* A person's place in history, extremely well covered by date of birth. Through DOB we get a sense of what cluster of opinions they will probably hold.

2. *Biological age.* A person's senescence. The age-integer is also used a proxy for how much help a person needs or deserves, *and* how much production you can expect from someone, with 65 years an arbitrary threshold in most of the developing world. Philosophically, it would make a lot of sense to collapse old-age welfare into disability welfare, since old age *is* disability, and since both resource allocations seek the amelioration of a difficult life. But, politically, this would be a bad move for the old, since it's pretty easy to slash disability spending but (currently-disbursing) pensions are heavily guarded.

3. *Total subjective time.* How much have they been through, consciously? This measure is not respected yet; for instance, we call people who wake from long comas by the age indicated by their date of birth, and expect corresponding behaviour from them. What does dementia to this variable - do forgotten experiences not count towards one's subjective age? does forgetting make you 'younger'?

4. *Social status allocated.* Much of history was gerontocratic: you served your time and earned power just by being old. This pressure (which led to e.g. polygamy for the old élites) is at odds with the presumable motive of judging people by age type (2): as proxy for reproductive fitness. Western culture has probably overcompensated in the other direction by now.

5. *Wisdom or maturity*. We even try to use the age-integer as a measure of profoundness and credibility, probably as a result of (4). We call wise young people 'old souls'. When staying alive was a hard thing to do, (2) was informative.

At the moment, the age-integer carries a lot of mutual information about these 5 things. But we can expect this to decline; technology is beginning to unpick the senses. (1) and (2) are already quite divergent: people with the same date of birth vary widely by metabolic and mental integrity. Genetic engineering could make this a chasm: think of the social upheaval of a 100 year old CEO, Olympean; a cryonics survivor with 200 years between their DOB origin and the apparent wear on their body; *living people* who remember the days when women had to drag around new people, often unto death. Memory enhancements could affect (3), the phenomenology of age in hard to conceive ways. (Some fictional evidence here from a master of the barely conceivable).

Much later, in space, time dilation and [whatever hibernation method sticks] could make (1), (2) and (3) diverge complexly; when, in *Interstellar*, the doctor tells Cooper he looks good for being 127 years old, he is saying something importantly false, because (3) Cooper did not experience, and (2) his body does not wear 80 of those years.

Some of you will be thinking ‘Huh! The age-integer sucks. Let’s not use numbers to categorise people’. On the contrary! we just need four more good ones.

This is surely not novel, but it was original, so I’m recording it as an early (2015) solid piece of conceptual analysis.

Tags:

AI ethics for present & future

30th May 2020

- *Two trends among academics looking at impacts of artificial intelligence.*
- *Topic importance*: 9 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Argument

> *Professional physicists who investigate the first three minutes or the first microsecond no longer need to feel shy when they talk about their work. But the end of the universe is another matter… the striking thing about these papers is that they are written in an apologetic or jocular style, as if the authors were begging us not to take them seriously. The study of the remote future still seems to be as disreputable today as the study of the remote past was thirty years ago.*
>
> — Freeman Dyson (1979)

AI ethics (a family of fields including 'Fairness, Accountability, & Transparency in ML', 'robot ethics', 'machine ethics', and 'AI law') is awash with money and attention following the last decade's enormous progress in AI systems' performance. Just at my own university, Bristol, I count 5 researchers who have begun on this topic, on aspects like the ethics of self-driving vehicles in dangerous situations and the ethics of emotionally responsive robots, including carers, pets, and lovers.

In addition, parallel work focusses on a technology which does not yet exist: artificial general intelligence (AGI), that is, a system which could do anything a human can do, and maybe more. The issues around such a technology are quite different from the short-term issues with present pattern-matching AI systems. If they were realised, such systems could transform society through the automation of almost all labour, including the scientific and engineering labour which is so often the limiting factor in economic progress, and could even carry a risk of accidental human extinction ('existential risk').

Call this trend 'AGI safety'. It has been increasing in prominence, and some of the most respected CS researchers now take the idea seriously, including Stuart Russell, the author of the most prominent textbook in AI.

If the two trends were marked only by a division of labour, there would be no problem: both scales are important, and both merit careful research. However, there appears to be a degree of animosity and very little co-operation between the two clusters of research.

People talk past each other here. Elon Musk, Lord Martin Rees, and other famous figures have weighed in on existential risk from advanced AI: as a result, popular discussion of the issue focusses on rebutting informal versions of the longtermist argument. If you've encountered this debate, it's probably only the sensational form, or that plus the trivial counter-sensational pieces.

In fact, a growing minority of technical AI experts are openly concerned with the long-term impact. But when AI ethicists do acknowledge AGI safety, it is only by reference to figures outwith technical AI: the industrialists Elon Musk and Bill Gates, the philosopher Nick Bostrom - if we're lucky and the interlocutor isn't instead a static image of the T-800 robot from *Terminator*. The foil is never Turing Award winners Yoshua Bengio or Judea Pearl, Stuart Russell, or the prominent deep learning researcher Ilya Sutskever.

This sort of division is nothing new; as Dyson notes above, the tension between verification and speculation, direct evidence and extrapolation, short-run and long-run importance plays out in many fields. Academia is in general content to stick to the facts and the present context, and so to leave futurism to popular writers beyond the pale.

(There is actually a small literature on this very question, mostly taxonomies of disagreement and pleas for co-operation: Cave, Stix & Maas, Prunkl & Whittlestone, Krakovna.)

I think part of this is down to failures of communication, and part down to academia's natural, often helpful pre-emptive dismissal of weird ideas. Let's try and patch the first one.

Why on earth might we worry about AGI?

It seems odd for scientists to not only speculate, but also to act decisively about speculative things - for them to seem sure that some bizarre made-up risk will in fact crop up. The key to understanding this is expected value: if something would be extremely important if it happened, then you can place quite low probability on it and still have warrant to act on it.

Consider finding yourself in a minefield. If you are totally uncertain about whether there's a buried landmine right in front of you - not just "no reason to think so", you genuinely don't know - then you don't need direct evidence of it in order to worry and to not step forward.

The real argument is all about uncertainty: advanced AI systems could be built soon; they could be dangerous; making them safe could be very hard; and the combination of these probabilities is not low enough to ignore.

- When you survey technical AI experts, the average guess is a "10% chance of human-level AI (AGI)… in the 2020s or 2030s". This is weak evidence, since technology forecasting is very hard; also these surveys are not random samples. But it seems like some evidence.
- We don't know what the risk of AGI being dangerous is, but we have a couple of analogous precedents: the human precedent for world domination, at least partly through relative intelligence; the human precedent for 'inner optimisers', unexpected shifts in the goals of learned systems. Evolution was optimising genetic fitness, but produced a system, us, which optimises a very different objective ("fun; wellbeing"); there's a common phenomenon of very stupid ML systems still developing "clever" unintended / hacky / dangerous behaviours.
- We don't know how hard alignment is, so we don't know how long it will take to solve. It may involve hard philosophical and mathematical questions.

One source of confusion is the idea that the systems would have to be malevolent, intentionally harmful, to be dangerous; Nick Bostrom's much-misunderstood 'paperclip maximiser' argument shows one way for this to be untrue: when your AI system is a *maximiser*, as for instance almost all present 'reinforcement learning' AI systems are, then

bad effects can (and do) arise from even very minor mistakes in the setup.

Another involves equating intelligence with consciousness, missing that the AI notion of 'intelligence' is based on mere capacity for clever behaviour, and not any thorny philosophical questions of subjectivity or moral agency. This sidelines the very large (and for all I know valid) body of work from phenomenology criticising the very idea of machine consciousness.

It's not that the general idea is too extreme for the public, or world government. One form of existential risk is already a common topic of discussion and a core policy area: the possibility of extreme climate change. (But, while that risk is also marked by uncertainty, animosity, and distrust, this conflict is mostly outside academic boundaries.) And this follows the broad-based opposition to nuclear proliferation, perhaps the first mass movement against x-risk in history.

What might be wrong with taking the long-term view?

Humans aren't very good at forecasting things more than a couple years ahead. To the extent that a given long-termist claim depends on precise timing, it isn't possible to pull off.

Weird ideas are usually wrong, and sadly often say something about the person's judgment in general.

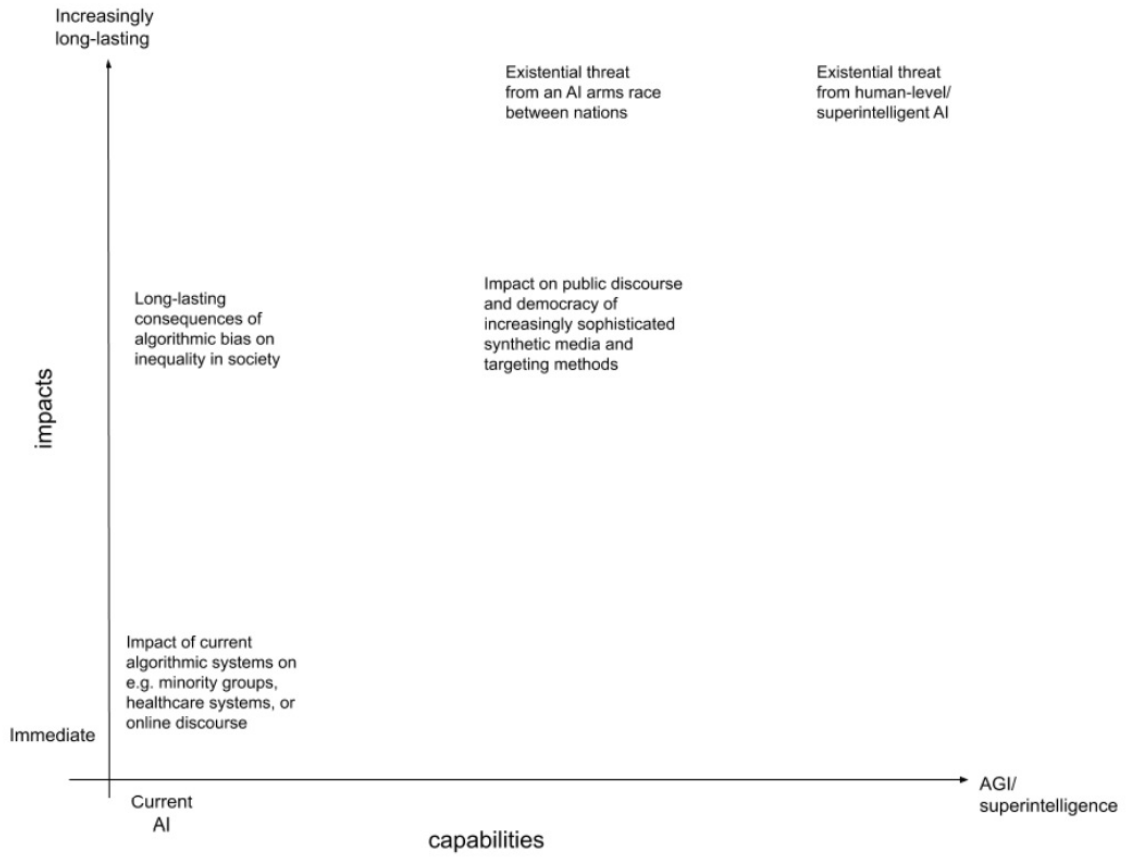
Most gravely, if resources (funding, popular and political attention) are limited, then long-termism could be a distraction from current problems. Or worse, counterproductive, if we did short-term harm to promote an unsure longterm benefit.

What might be wrong with taking the short-term view?

The long-run is much larger than the short-run, and could, all going well, contain many, many more people. On the assumption that future people matter at all, their well-being and chance to exist is the largest moral factor there can be; and even in the absence of this assumption, the premature end of the current generation would also be an extreme tragedy. Future people are the ultimate under-represented demographic: despite nice moves in a handful of countries, they have no representation.

Our choice of timeframe has intense practical consequences. From a short-term view, technology has many risks and only incremental benefits. But in the long run, it is our only hope of not dying out: at the very latest, because of the end of the Sun's lifespan.

The worry about counterproductive work from the section above applies equally to short-termism. It would be quite a coincidence if picking the thing which is most politically palatable, which improves matters in the short-run was also the thing that helped us most in the long-run. One example of a short-term gain which could have perverse long-term effect is the present trend towards national or (bloc) AI strategies in the pursuit of local (zero-sum) economic or military gain, which could easily lead to an AI 'arms race' in which safety falls by the wayside. That said, there are plenty of opportunities which seem robustly good on all views, like increasing the transparency of AI.



Sketch of a unified ethics of AI from Prunkl & Whittlestone.

Ultimately it's not a binary matter and there's no need for jostling. The figure above shows how to consider all of AI ethics on the same page, as a matter of degree, and encourages us to consider all the impacts.

Returning to the epigram from Dyson: there is hope. Since 1979, respectable work on the end of the universe has flourished. There remains a great deal of uncertainty, and so an array of live contradictory hypotheses - and quite right too. (For instance, Dyson's own early model was obsoleted by the discovery that the cosmic expansion is accelerating.) There is no antipathy between physicists studying the cosmic birthday and those working on the cosmic doomsday - and quite right too. Perhaps we can repeat the trick with AI safety. There are few places it is more important to avoid factional disdain and miscommunication.

What moral assumptions are you making?

Few. The general long-termist argument applies to a huge range of worldviews; it is quicker to list the assumptions which make it not apply, as I did here.

On the object level, views which can ignore existential risk include: People with incredibly high confidence that extinction will not happen (that is, well above 99% confidence); people with incredibly high confidence that nothing can be done to affect extinction (that is, well above 99% confidence); avowed egoists; people who think that the responsibility to help those you're close to outweighs your responsibility to any number of distant others; people with values that don't depend on the world (nihilists, Kantians, Aristotelians, some religions); absolute negative utilitarians or antinatalists; deep ecologists.

On the second level, perhaps one assumption is that 'academia should do good'. (Not only good, and not by naively optimising away the vital role intellectual freedom and curiosity play in both pure and socially beneficial research.) Academia does not in general allocate its vast resources with the intention of optimising social benefit. In 2012 the philosopher

Nick Bostrom noted that 40 times as many scientific papers had been published on the topic of a single type of beetle than on the topic of human extinction. (The situation has improved a bit since then, in no small part because of Bostrom.)

If you're so smart, why ain't you mainstream?

It's a new idea and it has a bunch of baggage ("cached thoughts") from fiction.

Also, academia is conservative, in the sense that it pays almost all its attention to the past and present, and in the sense that it overweights probability. Also incrementality.

Short-term bias resulting from naive empiricism and the need to maintain respectability.

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See also

- Regulation of AI as power grab

Tags: AI, ethics, longtermism

Why worry about future AI?

21st March 2021

- *Reasons general AI might do extreme things.*
- *Confidence*: High that it's worth worrying about. Only 20% that it will happen.
- *Topic importance*: 9 / 10
- *Content notes*: Not much original material.
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.
- Argument

Harm through stupidity

Could AI be a risk to humans? Well it already is:

- Elaine Herzberg was killed by an Uber self-driving car, while walking her bike across a pedestrian crossing. The system couldn't decide if she was a bike or a person, and the switching between these two possibilities confused it. Uber had disabled the Volvo automatic braking system. (It was slowing them down.)
- About one in 100 robot surgeries involve accidents; about 20% of these were what we'd call AI failures (things turning on at the wrong moment, or off, or misinterpreting what it sees). (This seems to be lower than the human rate.)
- Consider also things like the Ziyan Blowfish, an autonomous Chinese military drone currently under export to the Middle East.

Harm through intelligence

These systems did harm because they were too stupid to do what we ask (or because the humans deploying it are).

What about a system harming us because it is too smart? Is there any real chance that advanced AI could ruin human potential on a grand scale?

Argument from caution

We don't know. They don't exist, so we can't study them and work it out. Here's an argument for worrying, even so:

1. It's likely we will make a general AI (AGI) eventually.
2. We don't know when.
3. We don't know if it will be dangerous.
4. We don't know how hard it is to make safe.
5. Not many people are working on this. (<500)
6. So it's probably worth working on.

In particular, your starting guess for *P(soon & dangerous & difficult)* should be at *least* 3%.

I just put a number on the risk of this unknown thing. How?

Well, we surveyed 350 mainstream AI researchers in 2017.

- Median P of AGI within a century: 75%
- Median P of "extremely bad" outcome (human extinction, loss of governance, or worse): 5%
- Median P of safety being as hard or harder than capabilities: 75%

If we illicitly multiply these, we get a prior of a 3% chance of catastrophic AGI this century.

This is weak evidence! AI researchers are notoriously bad at predicting AI; they're probably biased in lots of ways (e.g. biased against the idea that what they're working on could be morally wrong; e.g. biased in favour of AGI being soon).

But you should go with 3% until you think about it more than them.

3% is small!

Not really. It's the probability of 5 coin flips all coming up heads. Or more pertinently, the p of dying when playing Russian roulette with 1 bullet in 1 of 6 guns.

It's also roughly the same as the probability of extreme climate change, which we tend to care about a lot. Probabilities don't lead to decisions on their own; you need to look at the payoff, which here is very large.

High uncertainty is not low probability

The weakness of the evidence means we remain very uncertain - it could be 0.1% to 90%. But this is even worse when you think about it. If you are genuinely uncertain about whether there's a landmine in front of you, you don't step forward.

Against the null prior

People often act like "things should be treated as 0 probability until we see hard evidence - peer-reviewed evidence"

The last year of government failure on COVID should make you think this isn't the right attitude when evidence is legitimately scarce and lives are at stake.

It is not possible to have direct evidence yet, so it doesn't make sense to demand it. (By symmetry it also doesn't make sense to be very certain about the size of the risk.)

Reasons to worry more

People are trying hard to build it.

There are 72 public projects with the stated goal of making AGI. Most of them have no chance. But billions of dollars and hundreds of the smartest people in the world are pushing it.

In the study of viruses and bacteria, there's a thing called "Gain of function" research, when you intentionally modify a pathogen to be more lethal or more transmissible. Most AI research is gain of function research.

We're getting there.

GPT-3 displays quite a bit of common-sense, an extremely hard open problem. We will probably pass the Turing test within 5 years.

We've already passed a number of other classic benchmarks, including the fiendish Winograd schemas.

OpenAI, the people who made GPT-3, were polled. Their median guess for when AGI was 15 years.

Indirect evidence of danger

The human precedent

There is evidence for intelligence enabling world domination: we did it. (Also through vastly superior co-ordination power.) Chimps are maybe the second-most intelligent species, and they are powerless before us. They exist because we let them.

Another worry from the human case is that we seem to have broken our original “goal”. Evolution optimised us for genetic fitness, but produced a system optimising for fun (including directly anti-fitness fun like birth control and disabling depressants).

Lastly, we are a terrible case study in doing harm without hatred, just incentives. No malevolence needed: chimps are just made of / living among stuff we can use.

The thought is that humans are to chimps as AGI is to humans.

ANTHROPOCENE

Chimpanzees are at risk of being eaten into extinction

Intelligence is not wisdom

People sometimes say that it’s a nonissue, since any system that is truly intelligent would also be wise, or would know what we meant, or care.

Two counterexamples:

- Human sociopaths: sometimes highly intelligent while lacking any moral sense
- Reinforcement learning algorithms. Their goals (reward function) are completely separate from their intelligence (optimiser / planner).

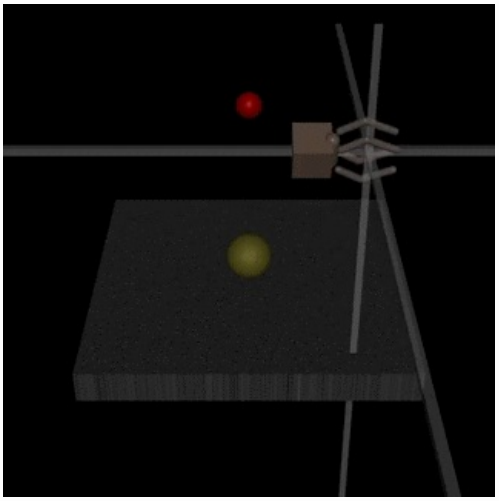
RL is the most likely current technology to eventually become an AGI. It has a few worrying features: autonomous (no human input as standard), maximising, and with hand-written goals, with <100 variables. i.e. they are told to value only a tiny fraction of the environment.

Current stupid systems still cheat ingeniously

They come up with ingenious ways to subvert their goals, if that is easier than actually doing the task.

- Coastrunners. An RL bot was given the goal of winning the race as fast as possible. It worked out that actually it could get infinite points if it never finished the race, but just collected these powerups forever.

- A robot was trained to grasp a ball in a virtual environment. This is hard, so instead it learned to pretend to grasp it, by moving its hand in between the ball and the camera. Trying to deceive us.



- GenProg:

> *A genetic debugging algorithm, evaluated by comparing the program's output to target output stored in text files, learns to delete the target output files and get the program to output nothing.*
> *Evaluation metric: "compare youroutput.txt to trustedoutput.txt"*
> *Solution: "delete trusted-output.txt, output nothing"*

The point of these examples are: We cannot write down exactly what we want. The history of philosophy is the history of failing to perfectly formalise human values. Every moral theory has appalling edge cases, where the neat summary fails.

If we don't write down exactly what we want, then the system will find edge cases. They already do.

The worst kind of cheating is treachery: initially pretending to be aligned, then switching to dangerous behaviour when you can get away with it (for instance, after you've completely entrenched yourself). This seems less likely, since it requires more machinery (two goals, and hiding behaviour, and a second-order policy to decide between them), and requires us to not be able to fully inspect the system we "designed". But we can't fully inspect our current best systems, and it too has already been observed in a system not designed for deceit.

We can't even make groups of humans (e.g. corporations) do the right thing.

No one at an oil company loves pollution, or hates nature. They just have strong incentives to pollute. Also strong incentives to stop any process which stops them (“regulatory capture”).

We’ve maybe gotten a bit better at aligning them: corporations mostly don’t murder thousands of strikers anymore.

We should expect AI to be worse. The parts of a corporation, humans, all have human values. Almost of them have hard limits on how much harm they will do. Corporations have whistleblowers and internal dissent (e.g. Google employees got them to pull out of military AI contracts).

(Governments are much the same; it wasn’t the United Fruit Company that fired the rifles.)

Most goals are not helpful.

Look around your room. Imagine a random thing being changed. Your chair becomes 3 inches shorter or taller; your fridge turns upside down; your windows turn green, whatever.

Humans want some crazy things (e.g. to cut fruit out of their own mouths with a chainsaw).

But for most possible goals, no one has ever wanted them

(“Replace the air in this room with xeon gas”
“Replace the air in this room with freon gas”
“Replace the air in this room with radon gas…”)

i.e. Human-friendly goals are a small fraction of possible goals. So without strong targeting, a given goal will not be good for us.

We currently do not have the ability to specify our goals very well, and the systems aren’t very good at working them out from observing us.

Argument:

1. Hand-written goal specifications usually omit important variables
2. Omitted variables are often set to extreme values.
3. So hand-written specs will often set important things to (undesirably) extreme states.

(To convince yourself of (2), have a go at this linear programming app, looking at the “model overview” tab.)

Society is insecure

When will the first anonymous internet billionaire be?

This has already happened. The anonymous creator of bitcoin holds 1 million BTC, and the price hit $1000 in 2014. In practice he couldn't have extracted all or most of that into dollars, but, as we see since, he wouldn't need to.

So we see that immense value can be created - just using programming + internet + writing. Once you have a billion dollars and no morals, there's not a lot you can't do.

Our societies are increasingly vulnerable to hacking. Last month someone tried to remotely poison a Florida city’s water supply. A few years ago, large parts of Ukraine’s power grid were shut down, just as a civil war erupted.

The American nuclear launch code was, for 20 years, “0000000”. What else is currently wide open?

Maximisers are risky

1. Intelligence and benevolence are distinct. So an AGI with unfriendly goals is possible.
2. A maximiser will probably have dangerous intermediate goals: resource acquisition, self-defence, resistance to goal changes.
3. So a maximising AGI will default to dangerous behaviour. And it might be that you only get one chance to load your values into it.

A corporation is a profit maximiser, and this is probably part of why they do bad stuff.

Again, all of the best current systems are maximisers.

The mess of society

> *A.I. hasn’t yet had its Hiroshima moment; it’s also unclear how such a decentralized & multipurpose field would or could respond to one. It may be impossible to align the behavior of tens of thousands of researchers with diverse motives, backgrounds, funders, & contexts, in a quickly evolving area.*
>
> – Matthew Hutson

All of the above is how hard it is to solve a *subproblem* of AI safety: 1 AI with 1 human. Other problems we need to at least partly solve:

- Deep mathematical confusion
- Philosophical baggage (can’t teach values if you can’t agree on them)
- Political economy (arms races to deploy shoddy systems)
- Ordinary software hell (no one writes safe code)
- Massive capabilities : safety funding ratio. 20,000 : 1?
- Treacherous turn
- AI is maybe worse than nukes, climate change, engineered pandemic. Those don’t follow you, don’t react to your countermeasures.

And huge questions I didn’t even mention:

- “Intelligence explosion”
- Do future people matter?
- Will AGI be conscious?
- What is the right decision theory?
- How much worse is extinction over 99% death?
- Current leading ideas for solutions (x11)

Overall, my guess of this turning out terrible is 15%. One round of Russian roulette.

Sources

Most of the above are other people’s ideas.

- Richard Ngo

- Stuart Russell
- Nick Bostrom
- Eliezer Yudkowsky
- Viktoria Krakovna
- Andrew Critch
- Nate Soares
- David Krueger
- Steve Omohundro

Other links

- DeepMind on real reward hacking
- Long list of real-world ML cheats
- Long list of resources at all levels
- AI Safety Support: Safety coaching charity
- 80,000 Hours prioritise aspiring x-risk people
- My model of the size of AI safety
- Jacob Steinhardt on engineering and safety

Tags: ai, xrisk

Anaesthetatron

15th January 2014

- *A thought experiment about work and hedonism.*
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences?*
>
> *… What **else** can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?*

— Robert Nozick

> *When we talk about the great workers of the world we really mean the great players of the world. The fellows who groan and sweat under the weary load of toil they bear never can hope to do anything great. How can they when their souls are in a ferment of revolt against the employment of their hands and brains?*

— Mark Twain

Suppose your workplace installed a machine by the entrance. Say this machine *turned off* your consciousness, leaving the body motive and intelligent, in a weak-AI way. 1 Say your work did not suffer in the least. Say that at 5:30pm, your body steps into the machine again and you are returned to yourself, a little tired but unbored.

This machine is less hedonistic than Nozick's Experience Machine, but still unusual enough to give some people the creeps. How many of us would use the machine regardless, on how many of our days? What does it say about our jobs or our minds that we would?

1. Sure, this might not be possible if consciousness correlates with some effective neural circuit. But run with it please.

Tags: meaning, ethics-of-belief

'Why Moral Theory is Boring and Corrupt'

31st July 2018

- *Reposting an anonymous essay attacking almost all academic ethical systems.*
- *Confidence*: I do not agree with the linked essay.
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Reading time*: 80 mins.

One of my favourite philosophy papers recently disappeared from the internet. It's anonymous, a beautiful and caustic dismissal of all rationalistic theories of ethics, which the author groups together as "Master Factor" theories (which reduce action to one dimension, when they think this cannot and should not be done).

> *moral theory is exclusive, reductively narrow in its approach to the practical questions that we need to answer; these features of moral theory make it boring, because monotonous, and corrupting, because they encourage us to see this monotony, wrongly, as a good thing; they make moral theory actually corrupt, where mauvaise foi is involved.*

They're not a nihilist, but rather openly intuitionistic:

> *love is what, most of the time, motivates most of us who are neither complete bastards, nor distracted by secondary concerns such as "what other people will think"—to say this is not to say anything very neat or tidy, either. But that too is as it should be.*

It reads like a farewell to academia, a cry of exhaustion from a foiled job-seeker:

> *As all too often elsewhere in universities, the entrenched sects and their apparently immutable and interminable oppositions persist, not because a compelling intellectual case can be made in their defence (a priori it is entirely possible that the whole lot of them are indefensible), but because each of these sects has fought a successful campaign in institutional politics to establish its curricular and budgetary space—in other words, to become one of the vested interests that deans, heads of department, and other bureaucratic managers must accommodate.*

I'm a thoroughgoing Boring-Corrupt consequentialist myself, but I like this paper and don't want it to fall down the digital hole. **Here's the original .doc** (Internet Archive) which I happened upon sometime in 2009.

(I spent a little while trying to work out who wrote it, based on their personal acknowledgments to various St Andrews, Leeds, and Sheffield philosophers, but decided I don't care.)

Response

The key claim is that it's psychologically impossible to be a human really acting according to a Master Factor theory. We are too divided, contradictory, and various; as a result it's dishonest and unhealthy to pretend you are, or to try to.

For instance, if we were perfect (first-order) consequentialists, we'd be constantly paralysed by the need to analyse all of our actions in terms of their effect on the world. This would make us miserable and completely ineffective. (Stocker: "*to the extent that you live the theory directly, to that extent you will fail to achieve its goods.*")

The standard response is to separate the 'criterion of rightness' (what is actually good) from the 'deliberative procedure' (how we go about trying to achieve good). You only optimise the big things, using your limited information and cognitive bandwidth as much as you can, but without angst at being imperfect; you cannot be responsible for something you have no power over. (Austin: "*It was never contended... by a sound, orthodox utilitarian that the lover should kiss his mistress with an eye to the common weal.*") Anonymous says we can't do that.

It's clear that humans are at best imperfect consequentialists: not least, you must have accurate beliefs to reliably have good effects on the world, and almost no-one generally does. The psychological possibility of living a strict moral code is an empirical question in general - but as existence-proof I can tell Anonymous that I'm a happy person with fairly strict consequentialist morals, a strong sense of community, and as many loving relationships as I can take.

Also - if I'm allowed a circular comment: intuitionism generally leads to poor actions. Intuitionism (e.g. "act as love demands you to act") is often wrong because our intuitions are rooted in our brutal and amoral natural history, where selfishness, nepotism, othering and myopia were all highly adaptive strategies. Vengeance is intuitive; honor killing is intuitive; actual political corruption is highly intuitive.

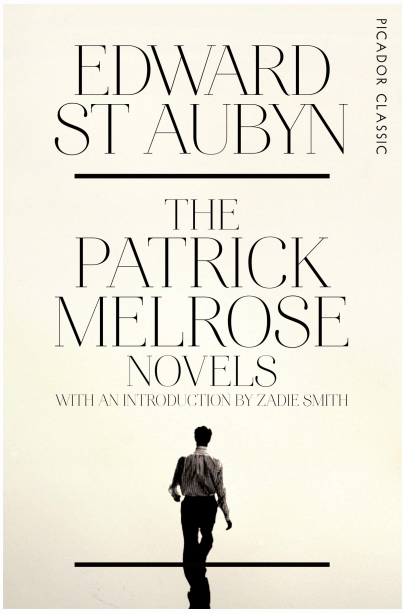
Around 1800, the arch-rationalist Bentham predicted that homosexuality wasn't wrong, that abusing animals was wrong, that slavery was wrong, that women deserved the vote, that retributive punishment is wrong. These remained highly counterintuitive to most of the world for the next two hundred (three hundred?) years. (An imperfect reasoner like all of us, he was wrong about other things, e.g. the colonies.) Was it reason that made us comply with these? At least partially, yes.

Tags:

'The Patrick Melrose Novels' by St Aubyn

24th August 2018

- *Some of the best English novels of the century.*
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Content notes*: child abuse, wrongful blame
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



Marvelous despite being filled with suffering and self-pity. Patrick's detachment from, humour about, his own inner life makes the books rise above him. Most of the series is not in Patrick's head, but instead depicts his brutal gilded circle. Even so, every few pages, there is a moment of beautiful lucidity or (unvoiced) empathy. The prose, the comedy, the sadness are almost enough to make you glad, with Patrick, that his parents are dead.

The prose is brilliantly polished, but I took my time, jolted out every few pages by something demanding reflection: "*Evil is sickness celebrating itself*";

> *Just as a novelist may sometimes wonder why he invents characters who do not exist and makes them do things which do not matter, so a philosopher may wonder why he invents cases that cannot occur in order to determine what must be the case.*

Underneath the filth and irony, philosophical questions are natural and urgent for Patrick. The long discursions on mind and epistemology are both more motivated and more seamless than any novel I can think of.

At one point, Mary dismisses the idea that her son's anxiety and angst, so like his father's, could have a genetic component - and thus assumes that it has somehow leaked out of Patrick's behaviour. (She goes on to leave him, actually making a damage-control argument about removing the children from his, helpless, influence.)

Yes: For all his insight, wit, cynicism, contrarianism, St Aubyn is still stuck in a giant contemporary ideology: the nurture assumption, the culture of environment-only development and essential woundedness.

People get wounded all the time, and being able to say so in public is a great gain (for one thing, no one in a confessional culture has to assume they are alone, that their defects are bizarrely theirs. But if trauma is the centre of some people's sense of self - if it is

incentivised, e.g. misery memoirs and high-clap Medium posts)… The risks of centring such things are large and underreported: self-fulfilling prophecies, agonising rumination, and the loss of the peace and pleasure of gratitude.

St Aubyn is correct about our sad path-dependence - he just places the start of the path too late. Here are genetic markers that predict anxiety and PTSD a bit (more to come, it's a young method), against the novel's tacit, almost Freudian emphasis on environment alone. Or maybe I am being too literal, and St Aubyn is not endorsing.

Aubyn is obviously somewhat detached from his own trauma - you can't write prose this fair and glowing if you're not - which is lucky. Otherwise, the seeker after truth would be senselessly telling the vulnerable they're deluded about their own life. (As we all are, though not in the same ways.)

Serious engagement with philosophy of mind throughout:

> *In any case, he now felt in danger all the time. Danger of liver collapse, marital breakdown, terminal fear. Nobody ever died of a feeling, he would say to himself, not believing a word of it, as he sweated his way through the feeling that he was dying of fear. People died of feelings all the time, once they had gone through the formality of materializing them into bullets and bottles and tumours.*

More generally, Patrick actually wrestles with materialism, rather than using the usual literary tricks of caricature and omission.

Curious whether St Aubyn got his vicious rendition of Princess Margaret at first- or second-hand.

The first three chapters of *Mother's Milk*, told from the perspective of Patrick's first child, are just perfect writing. Robert sees only the benevolence and humour of his parents, not their exhaustion, rage, and bad faith. They are anonymous to him and us, just "Robert's mother" and "Robert's father". It is a high echelon, though it gives the rest of the book a very long way to fall.

> *Thomas [2 years old] still knew how to understand the silent language which Robert [new-born] had almost lost as the wild margins of his mind fell under the sway of a verbal empire. He was standing on a ridge, about to surge downhill, getting faster, getting taller, getting more words, getting bigger and bigger explanations, cheering all the way. Now Thomas had made him glance backwards and lower his sword for a moment while he noticed everything he had lost as well. He had become so caught up in building sentences that he had almost forgotten the barbaric days when thinking was like a splash of colour on a page.*

The exaggeration of the wisdom of children is even stronger in *Mother's Milk*. This is no criticism because St Aubyn isn't very committed to realism, and because Robert's rich and sparkling inner life suits one of the themes: that children deserve to be treated well, taken relatively seriously, as do we all. That purpose is not the same as result ('telos' indeed):

> *We think the purpose of a child is to grow up because it does grow up. But its purpose is to play, to enjoy itself, to be a child. If we merely look to the end of the process, the purpose of life is death.*

I don't know what in these is totally fictional and I don't need to know. The art of kintsugi.

Literariness as meanness and frailty

Some distinguishing marks of contemporary literary fiction are cynicism, neurosis, and incompetence in every adult character. It often captures subtle forms of obsession, self-sabotage, and malice, and often reflects on the contingency of past mores. It rarely reflects on the contingency of current ideas, current neuroses, current, on what is next. Technological progress is notably absent. (Climate doom and deep-ecology misanthropy is one exception.)

MacFarquhar:

> *the absence of unambiguously altruistic characters is almost one of the things that marks highbrow fiction as such... genre fiction is filled with far more heroism than higher culture...*
> *I talked about this with a novelist. I said, "What is wrong with you novelists? Why don't you write about heroic characters who are moved by a sense of moral duty?" He gave me this look of total contempt like I had asked him to write about bunnies or butterflies.*

Konstantinou:

> *Palmer's series suggests that science fiction should not be viewed as just another literary genre, but as the genre where Enlightenment — the hope of radical self-improvement, the dream that we might control our own fate as a species — takes refuge...*

Why are the Ballardian, the Orwellian, and the Kafkaesque the animating spirits of contemporary literary life? Because they haven't noticed that many things are getting better? Because it doesn't suit their political programme to say so?

Tags:

Does the gut cross the epistemic barrier?

9th March 2017

- *Formalising a throwaway line about philosophical scepticism.*
- *Confidence*: It doesn't solve the original problem, but it is quite fun.
- *Topic importance*: 0 or 10 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *If there is a logical or epistemic barrier between the mind and nature, it not only prevents us from seeing out, it also blocks a view from the outside in.*
>
> – Donald Davidson

> *I worry that the closest I come to staying in touch with the real world is eating bits of it: the epistemology of food, so to speak.*
>
> – David Pearce

The 'epistemic barrier' is a thing between the mind and the external world: the thing that makes it possible to say that we do not have any knowledge.2 It's not very popular: there are dozens of arguments for why it isn't there. (You can tell they didn't work, because there are dozens of them and not one.)

Still, I (and the whole field) learned a lot about epistemology arguing about this stuff, and the thought still tickles me.3 So here's what I think Pearce was getting at:

1. The brain is made of food, ingested matter.
2. Knowledge inheres in the brain.1
3. So knowledge inheres in (metabolised) food.
4. Food, like all matter, is of the external world.
5. So the mind inheres in the external world.
6. So there is no metaphysical barrier between mind and world.
7. So there is no puzzle about the possibility of knowledge.

Clearly this does not defeat the radical sceptic in her original, Cartesian internalist problematic ("*it's an epistemic barrier, not a metaphysical one - I don't grant (1) or (2) or (4)*"). But one good candidate for a philosophical fact is: nothing can. The only way to win is not to play.

1. Maybe not just in the brain, but that doesn't hurt the argument.
2. In the sophisticated Pyrrhonian form, "...not even of this sceptical proposition".
3. > *I don't think I'm a brain in a vat. But I'm vaguely annoyed by knowing that an actual brain in a vat would think exactly the same thing for the same reason.*
   >
   > — Scott Alexander

Tags: philosophy, epistemology, naturalism, argument, scepticism

Better ways to write maths

26th September 2020

- *Examples of improved presentation*
- *Confidence*: I have lots of experience not understanding things, and none of improving matters.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10

> *…the contradictory opposite of a copulative proposition is a disjunctive proposition composed of the contradictory opposites of its parts… the contradictory opposite of a disjunctive proposition is a copulative proposition composed of the contradictories of the parts of the disjunctive proposition.*

— William of Ockham (1355), or:

> $$\sim(P \wedge Q) \to (\sim P \vee \sim Q)$$
> $$\sim(P \vee Q) \to (\sim P \wedge \sim Q)$$

— Augustus De Morgan (1860)

> *Any impatient student of mathematics or science or engineering who is irked by having algebraic symbolism thrust upon him should try to get along without it for a week.*

— Eric Temple Bell

Mathematical notation is not finished. You can tell, because so much of it is new, and because so many smart people struggle with it as it is.

Still, a set of conventions have hardened in the last 100 years. Maths is as terse as possible; monochrome; unfriendly; operates at full generality; and gives bad, undescriptive names to its objects.

Now, aside from the distress it causes the beginner, terseness is *good*: it lets us fits more in our head at once, and so go faster, and so go further. The move from prose to symbols is objectively an improvement, even as the appearance of maths moved further from human intuition.

What else is good about the conventional style? It is minimalist; it does not patronise; it is tasteful and grown-up; its generality saves a lot of ink; its leaving almost everything unsaid saves a lot of time. To master a conventional serious proof is to overcome an adversary, to simultaneously prove something about oneself.

Here are some different ways of doing it, less optimised for past masters.

Colour

Use colours to instantly relate symbols to explanations, whether verbal or graphical. Like Eric Jang's incredible 'Dijkstras in Disguise':

This is also an instance of giving people several angles of attack on the same concept.

(There's mixed evidence about coloured text and comprehension in general, but the studies all focus on ordinary prose and I doubt they transfer to understanding formulae with dozens of symbols.)

Comments

> *For example, you may come across definitions like this: "A finite state automaton is a quintuple ($Q, \Sigma, q_0, F, \delta$) where Q is a finite set of states ($q_0, q_1, \ldots, q_n$), Σ is a finite alphabet of input symbols, q_0 is the start state, F is the set of final states $F \in Q$, and $\delta \in Q \times \Sigma \times Q$, the transition function."*

> *That definition should be taken outside and shot.*

~ John Coleman

> *rigour follows insight, and not vice versa.*

~ James Stone

Michael Sipser has good comments on all the proofs in his great CS book:

Diagonalisation

Evan Chen's book for bright highschoolers is suitably friendly too.

For learning material (rather than research writeups), the steps of a proof could be tagged as "routine", "creative", "tricky", or "key" (h/t Qiaochu). These would be best as sidenotes.

Further: Why is there no metadata? The field dependencies; the theorem dependencies, upfront; how important this result is, for what; some proofs with a similar flavour; or, for fun, what's the newest result necessary for this proof? When could it first have been proved?

Motivating examples

> *A good stock of examples, as large as possible, is indispensable for a thorough understanding of any concept, and when I want to learn something new, I make it my first job to build one.*

– Paul Halmos

Most maths writing jumps straight to the general definitions. But at least some people need to work up from examples and counterexamples instead.

This is another place that Chen's basic book beats high-status university texts:

Literal examples are just one answer to the question *"Why should I care about this theory?"*. Maybe authors think that question is wishy-washy, but examples are not subjective, just partial. I'm not even asking for – *horror of horrors!* – applications. Maybe generality feels strong: to solve all examples at once, without looking at them, is to rise

above the objects.

There is an ignorant way of asking “Why should I care?”: the way with no sense of aesthetics, curiosity, patience, the philistine way that cannot see any value without an application behind it, or money. This is maybe the way mathematicians take the question, and so maybe why they shun it.

Composing subproofs

Here’s proof by induction as an algorithm:

You then see that for any given instance you just need to write the two subroutines `BaseCase` and `InductiveStep`. I find this much easier to understand.

More generally I don’t see much dependency inversion in proofs. Long proofs will include a sketch of the strategy, but mostly not with this lucidity. (Exceptions: Sipser, Chen.)

Maybe this only works if you know some programming before you do higher maths (a lamentably rare condition).

Here’s an unfair but illuminating rant:

> *Imagine I asked you to learn a programming language where:*
>
> *- All the variable names were a single letter, and where programmers enjoyed using foreign alphabets, glyph variation and fonts to disambiguate their code from meaningless gibberish.*
>
> *- None of the functions were documented, and instead the API docs consisted of circular references to other pieces of similar code, often with the same names overloaded into multiple meanings, often impossible to Google.*
>
> *- None of the sample code could be run on a typical computer; in fact, most of it was pseudo-code lacking a definition of input and output, or even the environment it was supposed to run.*

— Steven Wittens

Graph dependencies

Is maths a directed graph of theorem to theorem? Close enough! But even chapter-level can be helpful:

Tweaks

- Physicists have a nicer way of marking the variable of integration. Instead of putting $\mathrm{d}x$ at the end, they put it at the start. This saves on brackets and rereading.

$$\int_X$$

Visuals

It seems insane that *the study of change* is mostly taught without any, y'know, animations.

The limit case of visual mathematics are the lovely proofs without words.

We don't need to endorse any pseudoscience about "learning styles" to think that there are areas of mathematics for which even symbols are not the most efficient delivery.

Caveats

I'm not claiming that the above are the most important problems with maths teaching. Focussing on mechanical manipulation over insight, and on reproduction rather than creativity, seem like more dire mistakes.

All of academic science is stuck on many of the above, stuck in the 90s. Maybe worst is the stagnation of the conventional paper: static in visuals; never revised unless gross misconduct can be proven; completely decoupled from its justifying evidence and code. Was the last big innovation the hyperlink, 1995? Here are two examples of great post-papers, and a manifesto. (My field, machine learning is unusually tolerant of blog posts, but is still a long way from giving them equal respect, even when it's warranted.)

> *mathematics is, to a large extent, the invention of better notations*

- Feynman

See also

- Terry Tao on the mathematics of mathematical notation.
- Terry Tao on good notation
- Quantum Country
- Communicating with Interactive Articles

Credit to John Lapinskas for the induction algorithm.

Tags: tools-for-thought, maths, academia

'Blindsight' (2006) by Watts

26th October 2018

- *Weird realism and the misanthropic interpretation of neuroscience. Plus errata.*
- *Topic importance*: 8 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

There is a horror in neuroscience. It isn't in the paper or the data: it depends on subverting your sentimental sense of self, meaning, will, introspection, spirituality; if you don't have these, it won't register. It takes unthreatening academic names like "agnosia", "readiness potential", "interhemispheric intrusion", "neurotheology", "reconstructive memory", "semantic externalism". Also threatening names like "executive psychopath".

The *Blindsight* ethos - big damn Gothic fatalist Darwinism - is what you get when you take a traditional worldview (dualism, free will, work as what dignifies life, human exceptionalism, further-fact identity) and slam the disenchanting results of a hundred years of science into it. And then add the century to come's automation and self-modification.

The book put me in a funk for a week - even though I don't hold any of the positions it sinks. I suppose this is evidence of Watt's talent. ("*Art is a nonrational tool for persuasion: beware.*") Not the least of its achievements is maintaining its murky nihilism in a world where *friendly superintelligences exist*.

Because of its actual knowledge, this is weird realism, well beyond Lovecraft's. *They're coming out of the walls: they're coming out of our best science*. The vampires (and, to an extent, the Jovian von Neumann spikefest the plot is about) detract from this deeper horror a bit. Doom; unfixable aberration; people who have warped themselves. If you find *Black Mirror* too disturbing you might want to give this a miss. Watts even tackles "illusionism" - uniquely I think!

Is it strange that the giant lessons of the cognitive revolution are still rare in fiction? Explanations: simply "the Two Cultures" (i.e. novelists are ignorant); or that novelists are shilling for traditional philosophy, maybe because it sells. (Example of a giant lesson: *we do not have introspective access to **most** of what our brains or minds do*, on the level of information processing, action, motivation, or even emotion. You might say Freud found this out - but he didn't use reliable methods, made huge obvious errors, and created a closed unfalsifiable loop and so did not really have knowledge.)

In contrast, Watts knows a great deal, uses it well, and takes seriously what he knows: for instance, readiness potentials are given all the emotional weight they deserve. (At least deserved at the time: They've since been taken down a peg.) This novel has 100 scientific papers listed in the back. The only people who cram quite as many ideas into their books as Watts are Stephenson and Egan.

His scorn for the fumbling entendres of psychoanalysis is also extremely endearing:

> *According to the experts of that time, multiple personalities arose spontaneously from unimaginable cauldrons of abuse — fragmentary personae offered up to suffer rapes and beatings while the child behind took to some unknowable sanctuary in the folds of the brain. It was both survival strategy and ritual self-sacrifice: powerless souls hacking themselves to pieces, offering up quivering chunks of self in the desperate hope that the vengeful gods called Mom or Dad might not be insatiable.*
>
> *None of it had been real, as it turned out. Or at least, none of it had been confirmed. The experts of the day had been little more than witch doctors dancing through improvised rituals: meandering free-form interviews full of leading questions and nonverbal cues, scavenger hunts through regurgitated childhoods. Sometimes a shot of lithium or*

> *haloperidol when the beads and rattles didn't work. The technology to map minds was barely off the ground; the technology to edit them was years away. So the therapists and psychiatrists poked at their victims and invented names for things they didn't understand, and argued over the shrines of Freud and Klein and the old Astrologers. Doing their very best to sound like practitioners of Science.*

> *"So we're fishing for what, exactly? Repressed memories?"*
> *"No such thing." She grinned in toothy reassurance. "There are only memories we choose to ignore, or kinda think around, if you know what I mean."*

People diss the prose but I think it fits the ethos incredibly well:

> *We fled like frightened children with brave faces. We left a base camp behind: Jack, still miraculously functional in its vestibule; a tunnel into the haunted mansion; forlorn magnetometers left to die in the faint hope they might not. Crude pyronometers and thermographs, antique radiation-proof devices that measured the world through the flex and stretch of metal tabs and etched their findings on rolls of plastic. Glow-globes and diving bells and guide ropes strung one to another...*
>
> *Inside each of us, infinitesimal lacerations were turning our cells to mush. Plasma membranes sprang countless leaks. Overwhelmed repair enzymes clung desperately to shredded genes and barely delayed the inevitable. Anxious to avoid the rush, patches of my intestinal lining began flaking away before the rest of the body had a chance to die.*

Siri, the sociopath pinhead, is a great character. But also often an infuriating Hollywood Rationalist, and several times he gets the last word, which forces me to suspect Watts. Though the bit where his girlfriend is dying and he refuses to say anything because it would be cliched is clearly intentionally infuriating for the reader. So might be this stupid bit of game theory:

> *"Well, according to game theory, you should never tell anyone when your birthday is."*
> *"I don't follow."*
> *"It's a lose-lose proposition. There's no winning strategy."*
> *"What do you mean, strategy? It's a birthday."*
> *Look, I'd said, say you tell everyone when it is and nothing happens. It's kind of a slap in the face.*
> *Or suppose they throw you a party, Chelsea had replied.*
> *Then you don't know whether they're doing it sincerely, or if your earlier interaction just guilted them into observing an occasion they'd rather have ignored. But if you don't tell anyone, and nobody commemorates the event, there's no reason to feel badly because after all, nobody knew. And if someone does buy you a drink then you know it's sincere because nobody would go to all the trouble of finding out when your birthday is — and then celebrating it — if they didn't honestly like you.*
>
> *...I could just... plot out the payoff matrix, Tell/Don't Tell along the columns, Celebrated/Not Celebrated along the rows, the unassailable black-and-white logic of cost and benefit in the squares themselves. The math was irrefutable: the one winning strategy was concealment. Only fools revealed their birthdays.*

- this only follows if you have *ridiculously* strong error aversion, where the value of being certain about others' opinion of you overrules the pleasantness of ordinary interaction.

He mentions (but then averts) the single most annoying error when talking about evolution, which is that "maybe it's better for the p-zombie aliens to take over, since they are clearly fitter than us":

> *"It doesn't bug you?" Sascha was saying. "Thinking that your mind, the very thing that makes you you, is nothing but some kind of parasite?"*
> *"Forget about minds," he told her. "Say you've got a device designed to monitor — oh, cosmic rays, say. What happens when you turn its sensor around so it's not pointing at the sky anymore,*
> *but at its own guts?" He answered himself before she could: "It does what it's built to. It measures cosmic rays, even though it's not looking at them any more. It parses its own circuitry in terms of cosmic-ray metaphors, because those feel right, because they feel natural, because it can't look at things any other way. But it's the wrong metaphor. So the system misunderstands everything about itself. Maybe that's not a grand and glorious evolutionary leap after all. Maybe it's just a design flaw."*

(But who cares about fitness? A world without qualia is ‘Disneyland without children’, valueless by definition.)

His Mathesonian attempt to naturalise vampires is *kinda* clever (they are a subspecies of cannibal savants), and the exemplar vamp Jukka is one of the best characters in the book - but overall their presence is distracting and off-piste; the right-angles epilepsy thing, the revived-by-corporate-greed schtick, more generally Watts holding forth that corporate culture puts massive selection pressure toward psychopathic nonsentience: all these things jolt me out of his otherwise well-built world.

Besides the vamps, there are other over-the-top ughs. His whole theme of technology as inherently dehumanising, in the style of *Black Mirror*, is just as cherry-picked and annoying as it always is. The idea that consciousness is unadaptive, and so a one-off aberration in a universe of blind replicators - an idea which steamrolls all objections in the novel - is not obviously true. (For instance, see the global neuronal workspace theory, one of the most striking and elegant ideas I’ve seen in the entire decade, where consciousness is a vital monitor and integrator of our many brain modules.) But it is true either way that our society is currently ‘unadaptive’, in the sense of not maximising reproduction. (And thank god for that.)

Wrenching but admirable. Great in spite of itself. For the nonangsty, post-dualist, post-further-fact version read Hanson and Simler instead.

[The novel is free! here]

Errata for a novel

Like so much of low-power science, some results in this have been overturned or minimised since 2006.

- The corpus callosotomy studies which purported to show “two consciousnesses” inhabiting the same brain (like the character Susan) were badly overinterpreted.
- Readiness potentials seem to be actually causal, not diagnostic. So Libet’s studies also do not show what they purport to. We still don’t have free will (since random circuit noise can tip us when the evidence is weak), but in a different way.

Cross-posted from Goodreads.
See also my review of Will Storr.
See also my list of false or weak psychology claims.

Tags: philosophy, science, review, meaning

Blogroll

My favourite people with websites are

Gwern Branwen, Andrew Gelman, Toby Ord, Scott Alexander, Scott Aaronson, Rob Nostalgebraist, Cosma Shalizi, Paul Christiano, Kelsey Piper, Robert Paul Wolff, Cowen & Tabbarok, Anders Sandberg, Bryan Caplan, Zach Weiner, David Pearce; Tom Adamczewski; Ozy Frantz; Randall Munroe; Buck Shlegeris, Jan Kirchner, Caspar Oesterheld, Mark Liberman, Mike Huemer, Julia Galef; Katja Grace, Greg Lewis; Sabine Hossenfelder, Robin Hanson, Jose Ricon, Henry Farrell; (Crooked Timber taught me a *lot*) Kieran Healy; Joseph Heath; Jeremy Kun; Ben Kuhn, Luke Muehlhauser, Philip Trammell, Jess Riedel, Piero Scaruffi, Pablo Stafforini, Alexey Guzey, Jamie Brandon, Eric Schwitzgebel, Elizabeth van Nostrand, Jeff Kaufman, Chris Blattman, Owen Barder, David Roodman, Bruce Schneier, Dan Luu, Evolution is Just a Theorem, John Myles White, Noah Smith; Milan Griffes, Robert Wiblin, Zack Davis, Chris Dillow, Sam Enright

Sorely missed

John Emerson.

http://grognor.stacky.net/index.php?title=Main_Page
http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/ https://smerity.com/articles/articles.html

We could be friends

https://metabstract.squarespace.com/
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dormin.org
http://m-phi.blogspot.com/
https://musingsandroughdrafts.wordpress.com/
https://leesharkey.github.io/

https://apomorphic.com/
aelkus.github.io
https://stefanfschubert.com/blog
https://blog.cerebralab.com/

Reading

For an overview, it’s probably easier to look on Goodreads.

Now

Gavin's bookshelf: currently-reading

All the Mathematics You Missed
by Thomas A. Garrity
Mathematics Made Difficult
by Carl E. Linderholm
Patterns, Predictions, and Actions: A Story About Machine Learning
by Moritz Hardt
Infinite Powers: How Calculus Reveals the Secrets of the Universe
by Steven H. Strogatz

Fav

Title
Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy (1997) by Dave Hickey
Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism and its Triumphs (2004) by John Pilger
Hitler's Uranium Club: The Secret Recordings at Farm Hall (1995) by Jeremy Bernstein
Selected Essays of Michel de Montaigne (1592) by Michel de Montaigne
Bad Science (2008) by Ben Goldacre
Meditations (180) by Marcus Aurelius
The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable (2007) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb
Whereabouts: Notes on Being a Foreigner (1987) by Alistair Reid
The Oxford Companion to Philosophy (1995) by Ted Honderich
How to Actually Change Your Mind (Rationality: From AI to Zombies) (2018) by Eliezer Yudkowsky
Ficciones (1944) by Jorge Luis Borges
Oxford Book of Essays (1991) by John Gross
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921) by Ludwig Wittgenstein
A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments (1997) by David Foster Wallace
Rationality: From AI to Zombies (2015) by Eliezer Yudkowsky
What If? Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions (2014) by Randall Munroe
Stories of Your Life and Others (2002) by Ted Chiang

The Will to Battle (Terra Ignota, #3) (2017) by Ada Palmer

The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant (2005) by Nick Bostrom

The Hedonistic Imperative (2015) by David Pearce

The Age of Em: Work, Love and Life When Robots Rule the Earth (2016) by Robin Hanson

Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think (2018) by Hans Rosling

Mortal Questions (1979) by Thomas Nagel

Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Help Others, Do Work that Matters, and Make Smarter Choices about Giving Back (2015) by William MacAskill

Library of Scott Alexandria (2015) by Scott Alexander

Famine, Affluence, and Morality (1972) by Peter Singer

Save Yourself, Mammal!: A Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal Collection (2011) by Zach Weinersmith

Incerto 4-Book Bundle: Antifragile, The Black Swan, Fooled by Randomness, The Bed of Procrustes (2011) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb

The God That Failed (1949) by Richard Crossman

Brewer's Rogues, Villains & Eccentrics: An A-Z of Roguish Britons Through the Ages (2002) by William Donaldson

Guards! Guards! (Discworld, #8; City Watch #1) (1989) by Terry Pratchett

The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse by Robert Crawford

What Matters Most is How Well You Walk Through the Fire (1999) by Charles Bukowski

Tales from Earthsea (Earthsea Cycle, #5) (2001) by Ursula K. Le Guin

Map and Territory by Eliezer Yudkowsky

Computing machinery and intelligence (1950) by Alan Turing

Watchmen (1987) by Alan Moore

Beyond Good and Evil (1886) by Friedrich Nietzsche

The Penguin Book of English Verse (2000) by Paul Keegan

Lolita (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov

Psychotic Reactions And Carburetor Dung (1987) by Lester Bangs

Blindsight (Firefall, #1) (2006) by Peter Watts

Small Gods (Discworld, #13) (1992) by Terry Pratchett

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (1999) by David Foster Wallace

Right Ho, Jeeves (Jeeves, #6) (1934) by P.G. Wodehouse

The Book of Disquiet (1982) by Fernando Pessoa

The Patrick Melrose Novels (2012) by Edward St. Aubyn

Bartleby the Scrivener (1853) by Herman Melville

Infinite Jest (1996) by David Foster Wallace
The Elephant in the Brain: Hidden Motives in Everyday Life (2017) by Kevin Simler
Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West (1985) by Cormac McCarthy
The Wind's Twelve Quarters (1975) by Ursula K. Le Guin
Poems of the Late T'ang (1965) by A.C. Graham
What Should We Be Worried About? Real Scenarios That Keep Scientists Up at Night (2014) by John Brockman
Iain Crichton Smith: Selected Poems (1986) by Iain Crichton Smith
Collected Poems (1988) by Czesław Miłosz
Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo (2004) by Werner Herzog
Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts (2007) by Clive James
Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings (1962) by Jorge Luis Borges
Reliable Essays: The Best of Clive James (2001) by Clive James
Hyperbole and a Half: Unfortunate Situations, Flawed Coping Mechanisms, Mayhem, and Other Things That Happened (2013) by Allie Brosh
Travels With Myself and Another (1979) by Martha Gellhorn
Collected Poems (1988) by Philip Larkin

Sort by controversy

Books I most disagree with others about:

Title	My Rating	Average Rating
The Prophet	1	4.22
The Alexandria Quartet	1	4.17
The Gift of Death	1	4.11
The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness	1	4.09
How to Be an Existentialist: or How to Get Real, Get a Grip and Stop Making Excuses	1	3.95
The Five People You Meet in Heaven	1	3.94
Night of the Living Trekkies	1	3.91
Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates	1	3.89
The Data Science Handbook	1	3.88
User Stories Applied: For Agile Software Development	1	3.88
The Da Vinci Code (Robert Langdon, #2)	1	3.86
The Art of Thinking Clearly	1	3.86
The Man Who Went Up in Smoke (Martin Beck, #2)	1	3.84

Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction	1	3.83
The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality	1	3.81
The Bald Prima Donna: A Pseudo-Play in One Act	1	3.81
Prey	1	3.76
Social Identity	1	3.75
To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (Purdue University Series in the History of Philosophy)	1	3.72
If You Take My Meaning	1	3.71
Hite Report on Male Sexuality	1	3.70
The Secret (The Secret, #1)	1	3.69
Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Nation	1	3.68
Diamonds Are Forever (James Bond, #4)	1	3.65
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (Harry Potter, #4)	2	4.56
The New Testament in Scots	2	4.53
僕のヒーローアカデミア 1 [Boku No Hero Academia 1] (My Hero Academia, #1)	2	4.50
Smarter: The New Science of Building Brain Power	1	3.50
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Harry Potter, #1)	2	4.47
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (Harry Potter, #2)	2	4.43
Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst	2	4.42
High Performance MySQL: Optimization, Backups, and Replication	2	4.38
Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams	2	4.37
The Shepherd's Crown (Discworld, #41; Tiffany Aching, #5)	2	4.36
When Nietzsche Wept	2	4.34
Matilda	2	4.32
The Serpent's Promise: The Bible Interpreted Through Modern Science	1	3.31
Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939	2	4.31
Another Country	2	4.29
The Fifth Season (The Broken Earth, #1)	2	4.28
Science: Abridged Beyond the Point of Usefulness	2	4.28
A Hat Full of Sky (Discworld, #32; Tiffany Aching, #2)	2	4.27
Lirael (Abhorsen, #2)	2	4.26
And Then There Were None	2	4.26
The Wee Free Men (Discworld, #30; Tiffany Aching, #1)	2	4.25
Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability	2	4.25

Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence	2	4.25
Abaddon's Gate (The Expanse, #3)	2	4.24
The Ph.D. Grind: A Ph.D. Student Memoir	2	4.24
Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?	2	4.23
The Annotated Chronicles (Dragonlance: Dragonlance Chronicles)	2	4.23
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Chronicles of Narnia, #1)	2	4.22
Old Man's War (Old Man's War, #1)	2	4.21

Jump to

- *5/5: Will re-read until I die. 97th percentile+*
- *4/5: Very impressed. 75th percentile+*
- *3/5: Net likeable. 50th percentile.*
- *2/5: Only for enthusiasts. 25th percentile.*
- *1/5: False, ugly, evil, or vapid. 1st percentile.*

Reviews

5/5: Will re-read until I die. 97th percentile+

Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy (1997) by Dave Hickey	None yet
Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism and its Triumphs (2004) by John Pilger	• *In one sentence*: An anthology of the greatest investigative journalism, mostly about ignored or West-sponsored massacres. • *To be read when*: one becomes too complacent about world politics, thinking it generally benign; when one despairs of journalism; when you need righteous anger; when evaluating Kissinger's place in history. • I went into this with one eye on Pilger's ideology, but almost every piece is grounded and humane and appalling and beyond the reach of theory to pervert. (Only the Eduardo Galeano rant addresses too many targets at once and fades into zine-ish aspersion. But even that's about half true.) Gellhorn on Dachau. Cameron on North Vietnam. Hersh on My Lai. Lockerbie. Iraq. The overall target is the powerful who stand by or enable atrocities; Kissinger leers like a terrible wraith from more than a few of these pieces. I cried at this ten years ago and again now and again whenever. • *Galef type*:

	Data 2 - What does it imply about the world, that this could happen? & **Values 2** - thought experiments to reflect on how you feel about something. • </td> </tr>
Hitler's Uranium Club: The Secret Recordings at Farm Hall (1995) by Jeremy Bernstein	 > *There are few, if any, other instances in recorded history where we have the conversations of leading figures as they complete one era, come to terms with it, and prepare their strategy for the next. It is as though these men were lifted out of history at a crucial turning point—from the age of conventional weapons to the nuclear era — placed within a timeless container and told to discuss their past and future as the recorders roll.* - Jeremy Bernstein Astonishingly dramatic; also as pure as primary sources get. These reports were the result of months of secret eavesdropping on the German nuclear scientists, including after they hear of Hiroshima. Innocent of the microphones, the men concede their ignorance without ego, their character without any obfuscating propriety. (There are still two impurities: their words are both transcribed and translated by strangers. The physicists speak to us here in full sentences, with little of the fragmentariness and repetition of real speech. And it takes someone as highly trained as Bernstein to get us over the technical barrier.) Even so, this is as plain and self-interpreting as history gets. For six months they play madlibs, argue, and run around the garden, while the English and we listen in. Hahn is a sweetheart and von Laue a droopy hero. The Party functionary Diebner is comic, even though he has most responsibility for the Nazi weapons project. Harteck is the most technically astute by far: he guesses a huge amount correctly, all in the teeth of loud ignorance by his more prestigious peers. von Weizsacker is the slimiest. Heisenberg is just *weird*: he has a very faint echo of the strange clear-sight-and-moral-vacuum of Eichmann. Enormous intelligence and no sense. The morality of their wartime actions does not come up very much (except when raised by sweetheart Hahn or von Laue). They are mostly glad of the destruction of the Nazis, and Wirtz is horrified by the scale and singularity of SS murder. But the rest are more self-regarding than pro or anti Nazi. (Again, it is wonderful to read these and actually know they meant it.) (What about the morality of our reading the reports? I don't have a clear opinion, but doing so after their deaths seems mostly fair.) They very often speak about money, Heisenberg in particular. (Not just research funding or aid for their families in Occupied Germany, but dolla dolla bills.) On hearing that Hahn had won a Nobel: > *"it says that you are supposed to receive the Nobel Prize for 1944." The excitement that struck the ten detainees at this moment is hard to describe in a few words. Hahn did not believe it at first. In the beginning he turned away all the offers of congratulations. But gradually we broke through, with Heisenberg in the lead, who congratulated him heartily on*

	> *the 6200 pounds.* As you can see, Bernstein's editorial voice is a bit strong. But his other qualities are huge and unique: he knew some of the protagonists personally, and worked on nuclear weaponry himself. He *is* out to get Heisenberg, and overreads a few times. But this is because people (Powers, Frayn to a degree) persist in rose-tinting him: there's this idea that Heisenberg feigned incompetence at reactor-making as anti-Nazi activism. The transcripts make clear that he'd have made a bomb if he could, not because he is a Nazi or a German but because he was amorally curious, and hungry for primacy. Heisenberg does object to Nazism. But not very strongly. Bernstein's conclusion is that the project was pretty much a shambles. They had a two-year head start on the Allies, but failed for several reasons: they had < 1% of the funding of the Manhattan Project, an unbelievably bad administration and communication of data and ideas, and key resources like deuterium kept getting bombed. But Bernstein feels able to go for the jugular: > *reading this lecture, I am once again struck by the intellectual thinness of this group. Here are ten German nuclear scientists — nine if one does not count von Laue — who are supposed to be the cream of the crop, the intellectual elite, of German nuclear physics, men who had been working on these questions for several years. And look at the discussion it produced.* > > *To see what I have in mind, let us entertain the following fantasy. Suppose the tables had been turned and ten of the best Allied scientists had been interned in Göttingen when a hypothetical German atomic bomb went off. Whom shall we include? Fermi, Bethe, Feynman, Serber, Wigner, von Neumann, Oppenheimer, Peierls, Ulam, Teller, Bohr, Frisch, Weisskopf... What would the technical conversation have been like? No doubt there would have been disagreements and some fumbling. But like this? The question answers itself.* Yet *even with these handicaps*, it looks like Harteck could have built a basic pile in 1940, if the project was headed by someone less arrogant than Heisenberg. And that pile would have brought all the funding, and maybe sorted out their many collective muddles and lack of engineering care. 5/5 for Bernstein's commentary and the hair-raising fact of their existence.
Selected Essays of Michel de Montaigne (1592) by Michel de Montaigne	None yet
Bad	None yet

Science (2008) by Ben Goldacre	
Meditations (180) by Marcus Aurelius	> *In a sense, people are our proper occupation. Our job is to do them good and put up with them.</i>* *</td> </tr>*
The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable (2007) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb	None yet
Whereabouts: Notes on Being a Foreigner (1987) by Alistair Reid	*In one sentence*: Long essays on nations and nonbelonging, interspersed with really excellent poems. *To be read when*: home too long. A poet, Hispanicist, translator and long-time *New Yorker*er. He was right there when the Latin American lit boom began, giving Neruda crash space in London - and mates with Marquez, insofar as anyone is. I like Reid's prose even better than his excellent poems. > *Foreigners are, if you like, curable romantics. The illusion they retain, perhaps left over from their mysterious childhood epiphanies, is that there might somewhere be a place – and a self – instantly recognizable, into which they will be able to sink with a single, timeless, contented sigh. In the curious region between that illusion and the faint terror of being utterly nowhere and anonymous, foreigners live.* I love his scepticism about group identity - the piece on returning "home" to Scotland is great because of his distance from it. > *It was a day peculiar to this piece of the planet,* *when larks rose on long thin strings of singing* *and the air shifted with the shimmer of actual angels.* *Greenness entered the body. The grasses* *shivered with presences, and sunlight* *stayed like a halo on hair and heather and hills.* *Walking into town, I saw, in a radiant raincoat,* *the woman from the fish-shop. 'What a day it is!* *cried I, like a sunstruck madman.* *And what did she have to say for it?* *Her brow grew bleak, her ancestors raged in their graves* *as she spoke with their ancient misery:* *'We'll pay for it, we'll pay for it, we'll pay for it!*

	• Galef type: **Theory 1** - models of how a phenomenon works, & **Style 3** - tickle your aesthetic sense in a way that obliquely makes you a more interesting, generative thinker.
The Oxford Companion to Philosophy (1995) by Ted Honderich	Amazing how far this took me, this bundle of short 9pt font columns. Many entries have the denseness of aphorism. Like a thousand dehydrated journal papers in one book. And hundreds of distinctive voices contributing. You could get very far through a philosophy degree with just this. Speaking strictly hypothetically, that is.
How to Actually Change Your Mind (Rationality: From AI to Zombies) (2018) by Eliezer Yudkowsky	Imagine someone great - I think of Bertrand Russell or Dan Dennett or CS Peirce or Alan Turing - writing really well about actually scientific self-help. Imagine they wrote most days for 2 years, and so distilled decades of trying to find the truth as a heavily biased primate barely out of the trees. Imagine it was empathic *and* well-justified with argument and experimental data. But imagine it turns out it wasn't a Canonical figure writing it, but instead some guy on the internet with no credentials and weird opinions. But imagine - or rather, I ask you to trust me, til you see for yourself - that the result matches what the greats achieved in the theory of practical reasoning. (Dennett actually wrote a practical-reason how-to book, and it isn't nearly as good.) > *These essays are fumbling attempts to put into words lessons better taught by experience. But at least there's underlying math, plus experimental evidence from cognitive psychology on how humans actually think. Maybe that will be enough to cross the stratospherically high threshold required for a discipline that lets you actually get it right, instead of just constraining you into interesting new mistakes.* This is only one-sixth of Yudkowsky's enormous *Sequences* - an unusually scientifically accurate philosophical system covering statistics, physics, psychology, history, ethics, and, most importantly, the specific universal obstacles to your being rational. (As a brutal compression, the philosophy can be glossed as radical Bayesian-Quinean evidentialism.) I've read it three times in 10 years, and got more from it each time. Quite a lot of it seemed absurd the first time I read it, for instance his principle of Conservation of Expected Evidence, but I now know it to be mathematically safe. There are loads of great tools here. Just one example out of dozens: the idea of a pejorative Fully General Counterargument, a good-sounding objection which applies equally to all possible arguments, and which thus tells you nothing about the truth of the matter. Examples * “Oh he's an 'expert' is he? Experts are systematically miscalibrated” * “My opponent is [just] a clever arguer” * “That evidence was filtered by a biased person, therefore I can ignore it” * "There are arguments both for and against” Along with Kant's *Transcendental Analytic*, *The Great Gatsby* (don't ask), and Marfarquhar's *Strangers Drowning*, it's one of the only books I've ever

	taken paragraph-by-paragraph notes on. Free, or by donation to his nonprofit, here.
Ficciones (1944) by Jorge Luis Borges	Deeply uncanny - without worshipping mystery. ("Tlön" is scarier to me than anything in Lovecraft. "Babel" is also horrifying in its way.) Playing at the limits of reason - without renouncing objectivity. (There is something of the unearthly drama and transcendence of higher mathematics in a couple of these stories.) Somehow it manages to be cryptic without being annoying, to use literary gossip and the droning of archivists straight. Some of this is 80 years old, and it's still completely fresh. He makes literature larger, by bringing new things into scope - bibliographic minutiae, English department arcana, salon gossip. There's something refreshing about his perfect fake book reviews. Gushing praise of nonexistent authors draws back the veil (as if our world's reviewers would say the same things whether or not the authors existed). Borges was not a postmodernist but these anyway have the best of what postmodernism is taken to mean: nonliteral play, generative scepticism about sense and reference and language-games, reasoning about the limits of reason. I'm not sure of the significance of some of Borges' sentences here. But for once the critic's working assumption of meaning seems sound: if I thought about it, I could find out. (And not just in the ordinary way, by projection. I expect to find *Borges* in them if I try.) I've some ideas about each story, but none that fit completely or exhaust them. Here's one: --- Here's a banal idea: "language is composite". Characters go into words into sentences into works into worldviews. In "The Library of Babel", Borges stretches this fact until you see the horror in it, the shocking vastness of exponentiation on the tiny scale of a human life. The simple idea of mechanically generating all strings of length *n=1,312,000* leads to an incredibly claustrophobic closed system. The story is not 8 pages long but contains more than most books. There exists one truth; there are uncountably many falsehoods; but worse, there's a far larger infinity of nonsense, of things which make sense in no language, which don't make enough sense to be false, which never will. This is the horror of Platonism or Many-world physics or Meinong: that we could be invisibly boxed-in by garbled infinities, endless keyboard mashing. The "noosphere" - all the good ideas, all the bad ideas ever had - is a tiny pocket of meaning in a sea of meaninglessness. The stunning effect of "Babel" depends on its not being magic, not hand-wavy (merely monstrous, physically impossible for interesting reasons which violate no particular law). Ted Chiang is grasping at a similar titanic scale when he uses a truly alien language to explain variational physics. Remember that Borges was a librarian. But, while he said photogenic things about libraries, he didn't necessarily like being in them. "The Library of Babel" adds an extremely mordant overtone to that quotation, by imagining an otherworldly library which breaks men just by being there. Sturrock, his biographer:

	> *Borges had some reason to dislike libraries because for nine years "of solid unhappiness", from 1937 to 1946, he was obliged to work in one, as a quite junior librarian, in order to make money. The cataloguing work he did was futile...* The alphabet used for the Babel books has 22 letters and no uppercase. We could try and look up human languages with that many letters, but better to take this as a hint that our narrator is *not us* - he can be a total alien, far from Earth, and the exact same library will still confound him the exact same way. The same geometry constrains all minds. What looks like meaning need not be, if your sample is large enough: > *This useless and wordy epistle itself already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five shelves in one of the uncountable heaxgons - and so does its refutation. (And n possible languages make use of the same vocabulary; in some of them the symbol 'library' admits of the correct definition 'ubiquitous and everlasting system of hexagonal galleries', but 'library' is 'bread' or 'pyramid' of anything else... You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?)* The narrator says that the fall from his floor "*is infinite*" (or indefinite), that the rooms are "*uncountable*", but we can do better than this quite easily, given only the text. There are 410*40*80 = 1312000 characters per book. The number of distinct books is thus (22 + 3)^{1312000} or about 2 followed by about 1.8 million zeroes. It is hard to give a reference for how large this is: if every atom in the universe contained as many atoms as are in the universe (10^80), and each of the nested atoms was a Babel book, this would still contain only a laughably tiny fraction of Babel, less than one googolplexth. There's 4*5*32 = 640 books per hexagon, so we need about 3 x 10^1834094 room-sized hexagons. This is the full implication of the simple thought "every book of length 1312000". It couldn't possibly be even fractionally built. And yet, through the power of maths, it has been built - "only implicitly, skeletally", but it still counts. (Borges notes this infinity/finity conflict on the last page, explaining that the Library is unbounded and periodic, a hypersphere.) There is a beautiful, inspiring lesson to be taken from it actually: think about what the incredible feat of writing any book - no matter how bad - actually entails. Our nervous system shields us from Babel, from the larger part of possible meanings and the overwhelming majority of string space. This is an astonishing act, in information-theory terms: the ultimate search, which we succeed at effortlessly, many times a day. Epic achievements in life-giving ignoring.
Oxford Book of Essays (1991) by John Gross	I've been reading this slowly for 6 months; it is a belter. Gross has given me tender feelings for a hundred dead people, and what is one to do with those, except what I'm doing right now? Great essays share something. These essayists wouldn't all agree on anything, I'm sure. But there's something about their voices: personal, rational, intimate, concise, forceful. The essay is in the process of being superceded by the article and the blogpost, but we shouldn't judge those two forms by the dross we are all seeing from day to day; surely most

	essays were also petty and inelegant. Just one example: I bear quite a lot of ill-will toward Churchill; but his entry here is just incredibly beautiful; a hallucinatory conversation with his dead father, with junior struggling to bridge the violent gap the last two generations made in culture and history. I would not have believed him so self-aware: I also find myself nodding in agreement with the likes of Cardinal Newman and Makepeace Thackaray. I will again, too. I went and got Gross' Oxford collection of aphorisms, ready for the slow treatment.
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921) by Ludwig Wittgenstein	You already know the key superficial facts: it's brief, poetic, cryptic, it glorifies language. (Or is it damning language?) You might not know that it's intentionally cryptic: > *This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it - or similar thoughts... I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own.* - or that it's the most beautiful piece of metaphysics ever, or that its author repudiated it entirely ten years later, or that actually the book repudiates itself - > *My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.* or that (aside from the pure logic results) it probably isn't true, or that few people can possibly understand it without a *lot* of scholarly context, like without explanations 5 times the length of the original text. I recommend Anat Biletzki and Roger White. Grayling is good for the language bit too. I spent maybe a year, on and off, trying to understand it. Some funny results here. 5 stars for poetry - not for its system, or its influence. (It has justified, or been appropriated in the service of, an awful lot of mystical poppycock. The author would be appalled to see this, while accepting that it was all his own fault.)
A Supposedly Fun Thing	None yet

I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments (1997) by David Foster Wallace	
Rationality: From AI to Zombies (2015) by Eliezer Yudkowsky	> *These essays are fumbling attempts to put into words lessons that would be better taught by experience. But at least there's underlying math, plus experimental evidence from cognitive psychology on how humans actually think. Maybe that will be enough to cross the stratospherically high threshold required for a discipline that lets you actually get it right, instead of just constraining you to interesting new mistakes.* > *everyone needs to learn at least one technical subject. Physics; computer science; evolutionary biology; or Bayesian probability theory, but something. Someone with no technical subjects under their belt has no referent for what it means to "explain" something. They may think "All is Fire" is an explanation.* A very modern sort of rationalism, with buckets of scientific insights and a few genuine innovations* unified into a grand theory of reason and action: probability theory + decision theory. An ongoing concern. Yudkowsky's writing suffers from this thing where we incorporate the ideas, but everyone begrudges the insight they glean from him and forget they thought otherwise. This is perhaps because his site carried a heavy pall of nerdiness (fan-fiction and Streisanding), a status deficit which prevents people from according the ideas their actual merit. His dismissive attitude to high-status people and ideas also drives a lot of people crazy, sometimes making them unable to care if the ideas are right. So we minimise his contribution to the life of the new mind, some of the brightest prospects in the dark world. This is unfair but the new mind is the main thing, and broader than him already. The section intros by Rob Bensinger, written a decade later, are helpful, but this book may need refreshing every decade, because of the replication crisis. This is no insult. > **Some of Yudkowsky's new ideas (not the mere popularisations):* > \t > • *The abstract research chain into FAI: i.e. logical uncertainty, tiling, corrigibility, value learning. The leading academic textbook on AI gives a full page to his ideas.* > \t > • *Pascal's mugging (see final footnote here).* > \t

	> - *A new completeness theorem in probabilistic logic, discussed by a big-name mathematical physicist here.* *It* - *The term "Friendly AI"* *It* - *Probably the first to tie the Jaynesian probability calculus plus the Heuristics and Biases program plus rule-utilitarianism.*
What If? Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions (2014) by Randall Munroe	Completely rigorous whimsy, often the first time science has been applied to the thing at hand. Pure mind-candy - but, in the absence of real physics education, also improving. They are free here.
Stories of Your Life and Others (2002) by Ted Chiang	*In one sentence*: Stunning expansion of science fiction to very distant possible worlds and emotionally unusual near ones. Borgesian scifi. *To be read when*: annoyed by the sterility of median scifi and the folksy ignorance of median litfic; if disparaging scifi; if you think Black Mirror is deep... Astoundingly good. The stories are extremely miscellaneous (hard Sumerian mythology, linguistic-physics ethnography, singularitarian tragedy, *Arabian Nights* fantasy, mechanical-philosophy tragedy, misotheistic tragedy), but bear one heavy theme - that rationalism, materialism is not the enemy of humanism, but is much more able to accommodate us, our highest values, than is romantic supernaturalism. So he's an artistically successful Yudkowsky; Chiang's own presumable nerdiness disappears behind his powerful austere prose, even when characters are expounding the principle of least action or the details of ancient masonry. 'Story of Your Life' is so much more interesting, emotionally and scientifically, than the *Arrival* film it was made into. It is about how alien and repugnant *amor fati* is, and maybe variational physics. 'Tower of Babylon' is rousing minutiae. 'Hell is the Absence of God' takes the tired, speculative, stupid themes of the Abrahamic conversation - faith, will, love, persistence, atheism - and wrings out a new chord from them. Ah! -

	Galef type: Theory 1 - models of how a phenomenon works, & Theory 3 - pointing out a problem, & Values 2 - thought experiments to reflect on how you feel about something , & Style 3 - tickles your aesthetic sense in a way that obliquely makes you a more generative thinker . </td> </tr>
The Will to Battle (Terra Ignota, #3) (2017) by Ada Palmer	Sensational. Palmer *starts* in an Enlightenment utopia (post-war, post-nationalism, post-scarcity, post-gender, post-theocracy, post-fideism, post-meat, post-capital-punishment, post-nuclear-family, general justice via universal voluntary surveillance) and then shows what the tensions will do to any system that has to handle humans as we are. Many riches. There are constantly five or so subplots on the go, and when one ends it spawns two others. Best are its careful sketches of deep divides: Tradition vs progress, act vs rule, order vs freedom, safety vs optimum return. Some of the oppositions fall flat because I don't have the requisite respect for the other side. For instance *Damnatio memoriae* - the official expurgation of someone from history - is presented as an ultimate horror (the pain and execution preceding it is overwhelmingly more important). > *[the damned person is] neither slim nor mighty, stooped nor noble, just a shape... Somewhere in a dusty archive a baptismal registry records some Hildebrand, and, when that dry page molders... I can't look, I can't! Behind the shades, the broad gray plain, that sea of shapeless gloom extending on and on... all forgotten souls, minds empty of memory, smeared one into another... to this absolute dissolution Caesar damns his enemies... Not me! I will never let you take me! I will carve my memory into history, by work, by force, by guile, in swathes of blood and ashes if I must!* I can admire Palmer's rendition of the old bad legacy code (it has driven quite a lot of history) but I admit it no part of a real morality. The dead are past caring. Elsewhere, the Aura (metaphysical identity) of art is used to devalue perfect replicas of the nuked Coliseum and Forum (which seems like magical thinking to me): > *All false. Our race cannot afford such losses again... On the Acropolis the tears we shed are still tears of connection: where I stand Socrates stood. In the [replica] Roman Forum, by the [replica] Coliseum or the [replica] Patheon, they are regret tears. Replicas cannot touch. That is what we all want, to touch what someone touched, a special someone... whose story reached forward through history...* Speak for yourself; a perfect simulacrum is enough, though it screams depth to say otherwise. (I'm not actually salty: I love the breadth of ideologies on show here. No doubt someone else will grumble about how

thin and unconvincing the utilitarian views presented here are. By writing so many good characters in disagreement, Palmer has passed about 10 Intellectual Turing Tests.)

On the other hand, I feel the horror of true deontology quite keenly:

> *Dominic would happily watch the world burn if he could defile the blasphemer's corpse amid the coals.*

Much as I like Jedd Mason, his rise to the top of every state - the expressionless, motionless, Spectrumy king of the world - is implausible, even given his mother's scheming; it only makes sense with Intervention. Which is fine, because Palmer is committed to that, but it would still have been nice to have a natural path.

Many potential irritants. You'll have to be fine with long fourth-wall violations, long passages in macaronic Latin, hallucinated philosophers reacting to C25th scenes by expositing their extrapolated view of the 25th Century, allusions that yell 'REMEMBER ME??' in your face (Hobbestown, the anarchist commune). I found Mycroft's madness engaging but it does divert every chapter a bit.

The best so far, but you must read the first two. I donno, I'm just rambling now cos I know I'll rewrite this after I read it again in like one unripe year.

Misc notes

* Achilles is an actual hero here - where in the *Iliad* he is merely impressively violent. Actually as any fool knows, the ancient heroes are mostly morally small, beneath even us. ("Hero" meant "Big Man", not "saviour".) This is good news, that Achilles (and say Jahweh) are not paragons any more.

* Miracles happen; Bridger is magical through and through, not even needing a virgin birth. So there was no need for JEDD to be born of woman and Spain. Except that this allows him to be a stark example of Hegelian becoming, which here is the way that God speaks. (And what filth he says.)

* Next time you complain about how undemocratic your country is, consider: The Mitsubishi here are not only a planned plutocracy, they also have 4 orders of delegated authority: the voters elect representatives who elect representatives who elect representatives who elect the executive.

* Oh Mycroft. I spent the first book and a half wondering exactly why he is so indispensable, hounded, beloved. This mostly answers it: it's a mixture of macaronic language, dog charisma, and weird athleticism.

* Nice, surprising bit of anarchism: Hobbestown, the anarchist syndicate, is the 'safest' place in the world. OK, its because of the deterrent of capital punishment but still.

* A decent portrayal of the burgeoning far-future-focussed ethics, in the otherworldly, post-political, arch-instrumentalist scientists, Utopia. Palmer clearly sympathises with them. One contradiction in her portrayal, though: the Utopians are monomanaical consequentialists, who'll do anything to prevent human extinction or stasis. But they're shown throwing massive

resources at trivial uneconomic projects (trivial compared to WMD destruction, space colonization, and terraforming): an underwater city, a city on Antarctica, robots in the shape of mythical beasts. I suppose it's possible this is a PR thing, either to charm or recruit.

Their oath actually inspired moral guilt in me, which is hard to do:

> *I hereby renounce the right to complacency, and vow lifelong to take only what minimum of leisure is necessary to my productivity... I will commit the full produce of my labors to our collective effort to redirect the path of human life away from death and toward the stars.*

* Palmer knows about a lot of things: Hobbes, evolutionary history, the way a small boat makes waves. Her using this knowledge never felt contrived to me - but again I suspect this is a niche I happen to fall in.

> *The fittest survived, but with the conquered within them, as conquered bacteria became the mitochondria which feed the cells that crawl through volvox, trilobite, and coelacanth toward Mars.*

* It suits me that the psychoanalyst Hive choose to be the enemies of the future:

> *"War?" Utopia offered.*
> *[the Head Analyst] Felix Faust... accepted the handshake. "War."*

* It's written with a future reader in mind, but then Mycroft explains too much; nothing is taken for granted, and this is obviously on our account, tainting the conceit.

* Its gender dynamics don't constitute a polemic; instead the Hives' failing utopia shows what most feminist / Critical / international relations theory misses. 'Xenofeminism' (tech-positive, bioprogressive feminism) is a more complete answer to gender harms. But, hearteningly, even mainstream figures like Nussbaum seem to be on board with similar projects:

> *this calls for the gradual formation of a world in which all species will enjoy cooperative and supportive relations with one another. Nature is not that way and has never been. So it calls for the gradual supplanting of the natural by the just.*

*

> *A man may leap into the fray in the name of Liberty, Homeland, Human Rights, Justice, but never Economics.*

(more's the pity)

*

> *If my Saladin is childhood's fear, the unknowable evil in the closet's depths, I have become adulthood's fear, fear of power, law, illustrious contacts, police resources, covert agencies, and sweet judicial murder.*

	* Mycroft's 'death' is immediately subverted by a footnote from him. But then the chapter plays out as if we hadn't seen that footnote, and so it loses most of its emotional charge. This is weird but obviously totally intentional. Twists the twist before the twist can begin. Not sure what's going on - maybe Palmer had tired of doing ordinary twists. (There are a lot of them.)
The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant (2005) by Nick Bostrom	None yet
The Hedonistic Imperative (2015) by David Pearce	> *Atrocious, agonising things are happening to people like you, me and our loved ones right now. The full horror of some sorts of suffering is literally unspeakable and unimaginably dreadful. Under a Darwinian regime of natural reproduction, truly horrible experiences - as well as endemic low-grade malaise - are both commonplace and inevitable. Chapter Two argues the moral case for stopping this nastiness. Since 'ought' implies 'can', however, it must first be established that scrapping unpleasant experience really is a biologically feasible option... from an information-theoretic perspective, what counts is not our absolute location on the pleasure-pain axis, but that we are "informationally sensitive" to fitness-relevant changes in our internal and external environment. Gradients of bliss can suffice both to motivate us and offer a rich network of feedback mechanisms; so alas today do gradients of Darwinian discontent.* On what science is for, on the very most we could aim for. Late one evening, early one morning, I realised that I was not reading a crank on the internet. I'm not sure what exactly tipped me off: the page was called *The Abolition of Suffering; the Naturalisation of Heaven*. Maybe the extensive and thoughtful series of responses to objections. Not as late as the heart-stopping *Alone Amongst the Zombies*. Or the mixture of staggering ambition with modesty: > *As hedonic engineering develops into a mature biomedical discipline, the generic modes of paradise we opt for can be genetically pre-coded... The innovative, high-specification bio-heavens beyond will be far richer. We lack the semantic competence to talk about them sensibly. Yet however inelegantly our goal may be accomplished at first, the ultimate strategic objective should be the neurochemical precision-engineering of happiness for every sentient organism on the planet.* > > *Sounds flaky? Yes, but then so, originally, has almost every radical reform movement in history (including, of course, the genuinely flaky ones.)* and philosophy with biochemistry. It is difficult to return to what you were studying - mealy-mouthed, apologist, naturalistic-fallacious bioconservative bioethics - after that.

	I hadn't considered wild-animal suffering before, the giant and at-best-ignored horror it is. People are at last starting to work on this, but Pearce was there decades ago. We have a long way to go before people stop making it worse even. More than {Singer, Ord, LessWrong}, Pearce set me on my way with an ideal ethics, which led quickly to effective altruism and AI safety. I'm not a negative utilitarian like him, but unlike almost everyone else I take that challenge seriously. I've met half a dozen people whose lives he affected this strongly, but the nonacademic setting limits his status. (The published collection *Can Biotechnology Abolish Suffering?* is better, newer, covering more ground. I would have called it "*The Molecular Biology of Paradise*", a site header used elsewhere. Or "*Better Living Through Chemistry*".) • *Galef type*: **Data 2** - What does it imply about the world, that X could happen?, & **Theory 1** - models of how a phenomenon works, & **Theory 3** - pointing out a problem, & **Theory 4** - making predictions, & **Values 1** - an explicit argument about values, & **Style 3** - tickles your aesthetic sense in a way that obliquely makes you a more generative thinker. [Free! here]
The Age of Em: Work, Love and Life When Robots Rule the Earth (2016) by Robin Hanson	Believe me that it's remarkable; it's easily in the top 5 most insightful books out of the 500 I have reviewed here. I called *Superintelligence* the most rigorous exploration of the nonreal I had ever read: this beats it by a lot. You will find yourself reading pages on the properties of coolant pipes and be utterly engrossed. It is imaginary sociology, imaginary economics, *real* fiction. (But it lacks an ethnography entirely: no em speaks to us themselves.) People tend to wrap *Age of Em* in ulterior motives and esoteric intentions, because they love it but see futurism as an unworthy goal for such an achievement. I am no different: this is the greatest compendium of real social science I have ever found. No review can do much justice, but here's one particularly hair-raising point in it: Hanson surveys the whole course of human history, and notes the many ways our culture is unprecedented and, in the evolutionary sense, nonadaptive: > *we live in the brief but important "dreamtime" when delusions [drive] history. Our descendants will remember our era as the one where the human capacity to sincerely believe crazy non-adaptive things, and act*

on those beliefs, was dialed to the max.

Why is our era so delusory?

1. *Our knowledge has been growing so fast, and bringing such radical changes, that many of us see anything as possible, so that nothing can really be labeled delusion.*

2. *Rich folks like us have larger buffers of wealth to cushion our mistakes; we can live happily and long even while acting on crazy beliefs.*

3. *We humans evolved to signal various features of ourselves to one another via delusions; we usually think that the various things we do to signal are done for other reasons. For example, we think we pay for docs to help our loved ones get well, rather than to show that we care. We think we do politics because we want to help our nation, rather than to signal our character and loyalty. We are overconfident in our abilities in order to convince others to have confidence in us, and so on. But while our ancestors' delusions were well adapted to their situations, and so didn't hurt them much, the same delusions are not nearly as adapted to our rapidly changing world; our signaling induced delusions hurt us more.*

4. *Humans seem to have evolved to emphasize signaling more in good times than in bad. Since very few physical investments last very long, the main investments one can make in good times that last until bad times are allies and reputation. So we are built to, in good times, spend more time and energy on leisure, medicine, charity, morals, patriotism, and so on. Relative to our ancestors' world, our whole era is one big very good time.*

5. *Our minds were built with a near mode designed more for practical concrete reasoning about things up close, and a far mode designed more for presenting a good image to others via our abstract reasoning about things far away. But our minds must now deal with a much larger world where many relevant things are much further away, and abstract reasoning is more useful. So we rely more than did our ancestors on that abstract far mode capability. But since that far mode was tuned more for presenting a good image, it is much more tolerant of good-looking delusions.*

6. *Tech now enables more exposure to mood-altering drugs and arts, and specialists make them into especially potent "super-stimuli."... today drugs are cheap, we can hear music all the time, most surfaces are covered by art, and we spend much of our day with stories from*

TV, video games, etc. And all that art is made by organized groups of specialists far better than the typical ancestral artist.

7. *We were built to be influenced by the rhetoric, eloquence, difficulty, drama, and repetition of arguments, not just their logic. Perhaps this once helped us to ally us with high status folks. And we were built to show our ideals via the stories we like, and also to like well-crafted stories. But today we are exposed to arguments and stories by folks far more expert than found in ancestral tribes. Since we are built to be quite awed and persuaded by such displays, our beliefs and ideals are highly influenced by our writers and story-tellers. And these folks in turn tell us what we want to hear, or what their patrons want us to hear, neither of which need have much to do with reality.*

These factors combine to make our era the most consistently and consequentially deluded and unadaptive of any era ever. When they remember us, our distant descendants will be shake their heads at the demographic transition, where we each took far less than full advantage of the reproductive opportunities our wealth offered. They will note how we instead spent our wealth to buy products we saw in ads that talked mostly about the sort of folks who buy them. They will lament our obsession with super-stimuli that highjacked our evolved heuristics to give us taste without nutrition. They will note we spent vast sums on things that didn't actually help on the margin, such as on medicine that didn't make us healthier, or education that didn't make us more productive.

Our descendants will also remember our adolescent and extreme mating patterns, our extreme gender personalities, and our unprecedentedly fierce warriors. They will be amazed at the strange religious, political, and social beliefs we acted on, and how we preferred a political system, democracy, designed to emphasize the hardly-considered fleeting delusory thoughts of the median voter rather than the considered opinions of our best experts.

Perhaps most important, our descendants may remember how history hung by a precarious thread on a few crucial coordination choices that our highly integrated rapidly changing world did or might have allowed us to achieve, and the strange delusions that influenced such choices. These choices might have been about global warming, rampaging robots, nuclear weapons, bioterror, etc. Our delusions may have led us to do something quite wonderful, or quite horrible, that permanently changed the options available to our descendants. This would be the most lasting legacy of this, our explosively growing dream time, when what was once adaptive behavior with mostly harmless delusions become strange and dreamy unadaptive behavior, before adaptation again reasserted a clear-headed relation between behavior and reality.

Our dreamtime will be a time of legend, a favorite setting for grand fiction, when low-delusion heroes and the strange rich clowns around

	> *them could most plausibly have changed the course of history. Perhaps most dramatic will be tragedies about dreamtime advocates who could foresee and were horrified by the coming slow stable adaptive eons, and tried passionately, but unsuccessfully, to prevent them.* It's easy to read a radical critique of our liberal values in there, but I believe him when he says that he doesn't dislike dreamtime; he just predicts it cannot last, because we are fighting an old and inexorable tide. There are several thoughts this large, and a thousand other small insights in *Age of Em*.
Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think (2018) by Hans Rosling	> *1. In all low-income countries across the world today, how many girls finish primary school?* *2. Where does the majority of the world population live?* *3. In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has…* *4. What is the life expectancy of the world today?* *5. There are 2 billion children in the world today, aged 0 to 15 years old. How many children will there be in the year 2100, according to the United Nations?* *6. The UN predicts that by 2100 the world population will have increased by another 4 billion people. What is the main reason?* *7. How did the number of deaths per year from natural disasters change over the last hundred years?* *...* Only 10% of people scored better than random guessing on these questions, the most important trends of the last hundred years. How can it be that we are both 1) a rabidly overconfident species *and* 2) an extremely pessimistic species that generally gets these simple, objective questions very wrong (doing far worse than random)? Sure, we could just be dogmatic nihilists or idiots, but that doesn't fit that well. > *A stunning 15% of humans managed to pick the wrong answer on all twelve questions. That's almost impossible for a monkey to achieve. It requires systematic misconceptions. The problem here is not the lack of correct knowledge. The problem is the presence of wrong "knowledge". To score this bad requires a false perception of the world, that make you pick the wrong answer systematically.* Rosling explains it in terms of cognitive biases: we suffer from a *dramatic* worldview, binarised, conflict-obsessed, and blamey. People seem to find Development - the completely unprecedented explosion of survival, freedom, and dignity for the larger part of the entire world! - boring. (You could blame the media, but Rosling persuasively argues that they too are an epiphenomenon of our evolved fear and narrowness.) > *Your most important challenge in developing a fact-based worldview is to realize that most of your firsthand experiences are from Level 4 [the top 10% of global income]; and that your secondhand experiences are*

> *filtered through the mass media, which loves nonrepresentative extraordinary events and shuns normality.*
>
> *When you live on Level 4, everyone on Levels 3, 2, and 1 can look equally poor, and the word poor can lose any specific meaning... Anyone who has looked down from the top of a tall building knows that it is difficult to assess from there the differences in height of the buildings nearer the ground. They all look kind of small... It is natural to miss the distinctions between the people with cars, the people with motorbikes and bicycles, the people with sandals, and the people with no shoes at all.*

On the shocking lack of empiricism even in the most important places like medicine and policy:

> *In the 1960s, the success of the recovery position inspired new public health advice, against most traditional practices, to put babies to sleep on their tummies... Even though the data showed that sudden infant deaths went up, not down, it wasn't until 1985 that a group of pediatricians in Hong Kong actually suggested that the prone position might be the cause. Even then, doctors in Europe didn't pay much attention. It took Swedish authorities another seven years to accept their mistake and reverse the policy...*
>
> *With my own hands, over a decade or so, I turned many babies from back to tummy to prevent*
> *suffocation and save lives. So did many other doctors and parents throughout Europe and the United*
> *States, until the advice was finally reversed, 18 months after the Hong Kong study was published.*
> *Thousands of babies died because of a sweeping generalization, including some during the months*
> *when the evidence was already available.*

> *Two hundred ninety-two brave young feminists had traveled to Stockholm from across the world to coordinate their struggle to improve women's access to education. But only 8 percent knew that 30-year-old women have spent on average only one year less in school than 30-year-old men.*

Bad incentives and noble lies are another reason for the stubborn gloom of intellectuals:

> *There has been progress in human rights, animal protection, women's education, climate awareness, catastrophe relief, and many other areas where activists raise awareness by saying that things are getting worse.*

Relentlessly sensible:

> *resist blaming any one individual or group of individuals for anything. Because the problem is that when we identify the bad guy, we are done thinking. And it's almost always more complicated than that. It's almost*

> *always about multiple interacting causes—a system. If you really want to change the world, you have to understand how it actually works and forget about punching anyone in the face.*

I've been studying Development for years and this still taught me plenty. It should shock you into awareness and hopefully more.

> *Paying too much attention to the individual visible victim rather than to the numbers can lead us to spend all our resources on a fraction of the problem, and therefore save many fewer lives. This principle applies anywhere we are prioritizing scarce resources. It is hard for people to talk about resources when it comes to saving lives, or prolonging or improving them Doing so is often taken for heartlessness. Yet so long as resources are not infinite—and they never are infinite—it is the most compassionate thing to do to use your brain and work out how to do the most good with what you have.*

One of the "five books that represent my worldview": moral passion, strict empiricism, psychological depth, existential hope. I picked this rather than *Enlightenment Now* or *Rational Optimist* or *Doing Good Better* or *Our World In Data* or *Whole Earth Discipline* (out of the contemporary literature of progress) because it also covers heuristics and biases - and so substitutes / complements Kahneman, Taleb, Hanson, and Yudkowsky, without (what people insist on seeing as) their self-superior wonkishness.

> *Thank you industrialization, thank you steel mill, thank you power station, thank you chemical-processing industry, for giving us the time to read books.*

In a sense he stays on the surface - this isn't the full radical evolutionary account of *Elephant in the Brain*, instead just noting some bad epistemic practices and gesturing at evolutionary theory. But that said, there's a "charity is not about helping" bit:

> *If I check the World Wildlife Fund I can see how, despite declines in some local populations, the total wild populations of tigers, giant pandas, and black rhinos have all increased over the past years. It was worth paying for all those pandas stickers on the doors all around Stockholm. Yet only 6% of the Swedish public knows that their support has had any effect.*

But despite all the suffering and error and backfiring efforts he describes, he is trying to make you realise how good things could be:

> *Could everyone have a fact-based worldview one day? Big change is always difficult to imagine. But it is definitely possible, and I think it will happen, for two simple reasons. First: a fact-based worldview is more useful for navigating life, just like an accurate GPS is more useful for finding your way in the city. Second, and probably more important: a fact-based worldview is more comfortable. It creates less stress and hopelessness than the dramatic worldview, simply because the dramatic one is so negative and terrifying.*

	> *When we have a fact-based worldview, we can see that the world is not as bad as it seems— and we can see what we have to do to keep making it better.* This, then, is the same message as Sagan, 25 years ago: the emotional gain of reason. --- **Misc notes** - Binary categories are often unhelpful because they obscure continuum. Rosling ranted against "developed" / "developing" for 20 years. The World Bank has caught on but the UN haven't. - He is a better messenger for the cognitive bias alarm, for activists anyway, because of his deep credibility: he mucked in to anti-poverty measures for decades. Some of his anecdotes are chilling. > *I could tell you countless stories of the nonsense I saw in Cuba: the local moonshine, a toxic fluorescent concoction brewed inside TV tubes using water, sugar, and babies' poopy diapers to provide the yeast required for fermentation; the hotels that hadn't planned for any guests and so had no food, a problem we solved by driving to an old people's home and eating their leftovers from the standard adult food rations; my Cuban colleague who knew his children would be expelled from university if he sent a Christmas card to his cousin in Miami; the fact that I had to explain my research methods to Fidel Castro personally to get approval. I will restrain myself and just tell you why I was there and what I discovered.* - "*I do not believe that fake news is the major culprit for our distorted worldview: we haven't only just started to get the world wrong, I think we have always gotten it wrong.*" - "*In the car industry, cars are recalled when a mistake is discovered. You get a letter from the manufacturer saying, "We would like to recall your vehicle and replace the brakes." When the facts about the world that you were taught in schools and universities become out of date, you should get a letter too: "Sorry, what we taught you is no longer true. Please return your brain for a free upgrade."* "
Mortal Questions (1979) by Thomas Nagel	None yet
Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Help	Best in class. (The class is "pop philosophy aimed at changing the world".) What you should do if you want to improve the world as much as you can: that is, he skips the soapbox moral suasion and spends the whole time explaining his impressive framework for getting shit done. (Includes a defence of foreign aid, achieving in two pages what my dissertation limped over the course of 40.) His rubric for assessing the optimality of an act is:

Others, Do Work that Matters, and Make Smarter Choices about Giving Back (2015) by William MacAskill	1. How many people does A affect, and by how much? (Magnitude) 2. Is A the best thing to do? (Relative magnitude; opportunity cost) 3. What's the difference my doing A makes? (Effect minus counterfactual effect) 4. What's the difference that one more A makes, on the margin? (Marginal benefit) 5. How sure is A to help? What harms does A risk? (Risk) Too plainly written for my liking, but then it's not for me: it's for everyone else. You can mostly skip it if you read these: * His original careers paper, the best piece of practical ethics I've ever read. (encountered in 2013) * The original argument for urgency, taking the world's problems personally. * Ord on the moral importance of cost-benefit analysis.
Library of Scott Alexandria (2015) by Scott Alexander	Not really a book. But he's been so important to me that I wanted to include him here. ePub version free here.
Famine, Affluence, and Morality (1972) by Peter Singer	Changed my life, or, focussed the rays.
Save Yourself, Mammal!: A Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal Collection (2011) by Zach Weinersmith	This review stands in for me reading everything Zach Weiner ever published online, including his reading lists (2005-13). More inspiring than a cartoonist has any right to be. An English graduate and physics dropout, his webcomic has an amazing wry view on basically every academic field. His jokes are sceptical and romantic, puerile and hyperintelligent. (There are not enough jokes about economists being bastards!) His science podcast with his wife is badly recorded but always worthwhile, his Youtube group is always funny and often transcendent, and even many of his blogged offcuts are charming- see in particular this one about the future of the library.

	/mancrush. Among the best internet intellectuals.
Incerto 4-Book Bundle: Antifragile, The Black Swan, Fooled by Randomness, The Bed of Procrustes (2011) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb	The most vibrant presentation of sceptical empiricism since Dawkins stopped being beautiful. *Black Swan* is a furious pompous attack on macroeconomics, journalism, and risk modelling via heuristics and biases; so it is an amazing introduction to modelling. But it's also an entire original worldview, applying to history, policy, science, and personal conduct. This is taken even further (too far?) in *Antifragile*, which is more or less a work of evolutionary epistemology, or evolutionary practical ethics. There's a lot of redundancy between them; Fooled by Randomness gives you the highest signal:rant ratio. The first three books are largely critical, hacking away at theory-blindness, model error, and the many kinds of people he sees as possessing unearned status (economists, journalists, consultants, business-book writers): this is the upswing, a chaotic attempt to give general positive advice in a world that dooms general positive advice. Every other page has something worth hearing, for its iconoclasm, or a Latin gobbet, or catty anecdote, if not something globally and evidently true. I think he is right about 30% of the time, which is among the highest credences I have for anyone. I only think I am 35% right, for instance. But a core point is that he thinks his approach should work even given our intractable ignorance. The core point, repeated a hundred times for various domains: In real life, many systems deteriorate without an irregular supply of stressors (non-fatal negative events), and actually benefit from them by constructively overreacting. By robbing such 'antifragile' systems of stressors, modern approaches to managing them do damage in the guise of helping out. Taleb was my introduction to the post-classical theory of reason, but the project overlaps a bit with the LessWrong school I now favour. Underneath (i.e. in the technical appendices), his approach is very similar but with more conservative goals. I think Taleb saved me years of synthesis and conceptual invention. His conduct on Twitter (ridiculous chest-beating, insulting anyone who disagrees with him, including great scholars like Tetlock and Thaler) is embarrassing, but does not detract from the accomplishment. *In one sentence*: Extraordinarily rude man marries classical ethics to modern mathematics and cognitive science. *To be read when*: young; if you have a news habit; when despairing of university economics. • Galef type: Data 3 - highlights patterns in the world & Theory 1&2&3&4&5 - a general concept or lens you can use to analyze many different things, & Style 1 - teaches principles of thinking directly.

The God That Failed (1949) by Richard Crossman	The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism</i></b> (1949) by Silone, Koestler, Fischer, Gide, Wright, and Spender. Remarkable accounts of conversion by the most independent, earliest ex-Communists. From where we stand, it's easy to downplay the conversions - because, well, "*obviously* Stalinism was fucked" - but many of the most brilliant people kept clinging on to it through Kronstadt, through Pitchfork, through the Volksaufstand, through Hungary, through Prague, and even today (Carr never acknowledged the genocides; Hobsbawm knew the death tolls and kept betting on red; Grover Furr is still teaching) *even in Russia*. > *Persuasion may play a part in a man's conversion; but only the part of bringing to its full and conscious climax a process which has been maturing in regions where no persuasion can penetrate. A faith is not acquired; it grows like a tree.* Foreword, by a peculiarly intellectual MP (by today's standards), is careful to set itself apart from the red-bashing of the time and lay out its humane purpose: to understand the emotional appeal of communism (: a religious one) and the disillusionment that the very most independent communists had already suffered. > *no one who has not wrestled with Communism as a philosophy, and Communists as political opponents, can really understand the values of Western democracy. The Devil once lived in Heaven, and those who have not met him are unlikely to recognize an angel when they see one... The Communist novice, subjecting his soul to the canon law of the Kremlin, felt something of the release which Catholicism also brings to the intellectual, wearied and worried by the privilege of freedom.* Silone's testimony about the Comintern's sick irrationality would be enough to make the book prescient. Richard Wright's account of the fucked-up parties outside Russia is another really chilling bit: the rot was deep and wide. This was my great-grandfather's copy. (Form warning: Arthur Koestler was himself a monstrous man.)
Brewer's Rogues, Villains & Eccentrics: An A-Z of Roguish Britons Through the Ages (2002) by William Donaldson	Addictive horrible hilarious biographies of British folly, banality and sin. A thousand years of tabloid gossip and popular madness, events too ephemeral for most serious historians: degradation, unchecked insanity and petty cruelty. But incredibly funny. The biographies are spaced out by Donaldson's wonderful little hooks, dry sentences that lead one on a wiki-walk: > * ◦ *ears, bagfuls of drying</li>* * ◦ *universes, privileged to be part of a team working in many*

*

- *drinking 'brain damage' while composing a speech for Michael Heseltine*

*

- *coal merchants, remarkable*

*

- *voluptuous Tartars and tun-bellied Chinese*

*

- *dog on a diet of cats, feeding one's 12-stone*

*

- *soft heart and 83 previous convictions, a</i>*

</ul>

</blockquote>

He has particular obsessions, and the book is organised around them: the fate of gays throughout British history; criminal priests, eccentric spinster aristocrats, the line of succession of London ganglords from Jonathan Wild onward; politicians doing what they ought not; the odd fates private schoolboys often find themselves in... Obviously this is no demerit in an unsystematic historian. The modern gang biographies attest to his personal acquaintance with the big diamond geezers (which makes him a "silly bollocks", a foolish gang dilettante). His wit's mostly very dry, on occasion boiling over into outrage:

> *Dodd's execution took place at Tyburn on 27 June 1777 and the outcry it occasioned has been recognized by some historians as a key moment in focusing public attention on the brutality of capital punishment. It seems more likely, however, that it was caused less by any broad change in public opinion than by the fact Dodd was of the same class as those protesting his execution. A 15-year-old orphan, John Harris, hanged on the same day for stealing two and half guineas, received no such support, least of all from Dr Johnson...*
>
> *Under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, the law was changed to ensure that the production and supply of dangerous drugs should henceforth be in the hands of criminal organisations. Some people have argued that this is not an ideal arrangement.*

I made the mistake of trying to read it over one week - so the endless succession of 18th century rapist officers being instantly pardoned and/or their victims being arrested kind of ran together. It is actually the best bog book ever and wants 4 slow months. I understand Britain a lot better now. The author would emphatically deserve an entry of his own in any future edition: astonishing wit, astonishing connections, astonishing potential, with little to show for it but a barrel of laughs and this.</td> </tr>

Guards! Guards! (Discworld, #8; City Watch #1) (1989) by Terry Pratchett	Even better than I remembered. Feudal-fantasy satire in the voice of pubs of C20th England, with dragons, wizards and pre-Peel police wheedling, appealing to genetics, sod's law. An incongruous, dogged self-awareness. The prose is quieter (less self-referential and wilfully surreal) than his peers – Adams, Holt, Rankin – and occasionally gets actually wise. Discworld is his noble funhouse mirror of Britain. Pratchett is very good at technology fads, social class, the duality of human nature, and the excruciating embarrassment of romance. Everything a growing boy needs. (Read aloud)
The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse () by Robert Crawford	None yet
What Matters Most is How Well You Walk Through the Fire (1999) by Charles Bukowski	> *all theories* > *like cliches* > *shot to hell,* > *all these small faces* > *looking up* > *beautiful and believing;* > *I wish to weep* > *but sorrow is* > *stupid.* > *I wish to believe but belief is a* > *graveyard.* > *we have narrowed it down to* > *the butcherknife and the* > *mockingbird* > *wish us* > *luck.* *In one sentence*: Just a man in a room - odd, then, that this is enough to make people read them voluntarily, religiously, unlike almost all contemporary poetry with their bigger brains and better politics and more eventful stories and uplifting messages. *To be read when*: you can't sleep and it's 2am and tomorrow's going to be a pain in the arse and you're alone in the house; no better book then. Unbeatable at sliding through the mind with zero friction, depositing emotional silt and cheap, warm style from a previously insane and helpfully hopeless man in you – whatever you want that for. More than any other poet, he just literally talks to you. You can roll your eyes at his gaucheness and despise his chauvinism and feel nothing all you like: that's fine. It doesn't matter. It's not the point.

So it's barely art, but he knows it. Pity any academic working on CB: these poems don't invite analysis; they are worn on their own surface. They mean just what they first mean. Many of them are just about writing poems, but I cannot resent their hollowness, since emptiness is his brush. Its main virtue is complete honesty.

> *...so much has gone by for most of us,*
> *even the young, especially the young*
> *for they have lost the beginning and have*
> *the rest of the way to go;*
> *but isn't it strange, all i can think of now are*
> *cucumbers, oranges, junk yards, the*
> *old Lincoln Heights jail and*
> *the lost loves that went so hard*
> *and almost brought us to the edge,*
> *the faces now without features,*
> *the love beds forgotten.*
> *the mind is kind: it retains the*
> *important things:*
> *cucumbers*
> *oranges*
> *junk yards*
> *jails.*
> *...there used to be over 100 of us in that big room*
> *in that jail*
> *i was in there many*
> *times.*
> *you slept on the floor*
> *men stepped on your face on the way to piss.*
> *always a shortage of cigarettes.*
> *names called out during the night*
> *(the few lucky ones who were bailed out)*
> *never you.*
>
> *...when love came to us twice*
> *and lied to us twice*
> *we decided to never love again*
> *that was fair*
> *fair to us*
> *and fair to love itself.*
> *we ask for no mercy or no*
> *miracles;*
> *we are strong enough to live*
> *and to die and to*
> *kill flies,*
> *attend the boxing matches, go to the racetrack,*
> *live on luck and skill,*
> *get alone, get alone often,*
> *and if you can't sleep alone*
> *be careful of the words you speak in your sleep;*
> *and*

> *ask for no mercy*
> *no miracles;*
> *and don't forget:*
> *time is meant to be wasted,*
> *love fails*
> *and death is useless*

Everything that people mock Leonard Cohen for is much more true of Bukowski (misery, drawling, self-obsession, archness, chauvinism, treating the whole world as your confessional); he is just more direct and macho about it; that fact, and the very different crowd surrounding his medium is enough to earn him contempt rather than mockery. (And contempt is a kind of involuntary respect.) Backwards analogy: Bukowski is Tom Waits minus gospel, minus FX pedals, minus Brecht and Weill, minus one steady Kathleen peer. And minus metre of course. A grumpy adolescent old man; a sensitising misanthrope; a beautiful lech.

He has only two modes: midnight countercultural raving and laconic woke-at-noon observation. Neither would work without his lecherousness and/or meanness and/or arrogance; they are the absolutely necessary breve before he blares out his concern.

> *moments of agony and moments of glory*
> *march across my roof.*
>
> *the cat walks by*
> *seeming to know everything.*
>
> *my luck has been better, I think,*
> *than the luck of the cut gladiolus,*
> *although I am not sure.*
>
> *I have been loved by many women,*
> *and for a hunchback of life,*
> *that's lucky.*
>
> *so many fingers pushing through my hair*
> *so many arms holding me close*
> *so many shoes thrown carelessly on my bedroom*
> *rug.*
>
> *so many searching hearts*
> *now fixed in my memory that*
> *i'll go to my death,*
> *remembering.*
> *I have been treated better than I should have*
> *been—*
> *not by life in general*
> *nor by the machinery of things*
> *but by women.*
>
> *but there have been other women*

> *who have left me*
> *standing in the bedroom alone*
> *doubled over—*
> *hands holding the gut—*
> *thinking*
> *why why why why why why?*
>
> *women go to men who are pigs*
> *women go to men with dead souls*
> *women go to men who fuck badly*
> *women go to shadows of men*
> *women go*
> *go*
> *because they must go*
> *in the order of*
> *things.*
>
> *the women know better*
> *but often chose out of*
> *disorder and confusion.*
>
> *they can heal with their touch*
> *they can kill what they touch and*
> *I am dying*
> *but not dead*
> *yet.*

(That ^ might have gotten your back up, because it pattern-matches to modern whining about women's choices. But it isn't that: remember, from above, that he is calling himself a pig and a dead soul.)

This is three books written over thirty years, one sentence per ten lines as always, stapled together to give the impression of a late-life opus. It covers the whole lot: his Great Depression origin myth; his meaningless, crabbed middle years; and his long, long late period spent in contempt of the arty people who pay and applaud him.

I am nothing like him, except maybe in sense of humour. He is not anti-modern - grew up through the Great Depression, a simulation of pre-modern subsistence; loves shit cars; lives for late night recorded music - but science, growth, and the expanding circle give him nothing of the sense of direction, transcendence and hope that it gives to me and mine. But still I "relate", as the disgusting verb puts it.

I have read this a half-dozen times in a dozen years. (It isn't hard; it takes an hour.) I know of no better poet to *begin* to explain why poetry is good and unique and feeds life. This surely says something about my character, but I don't expect to stop reading it.

PS: Bukowski's epitaph is "*Don't try*". On the face of it that's mean and funny and fine, but it also means what Yoda means by it: Don't force it; Don't betray your nature; Do only what you are absolutely aligned behind.

	Is that good advice? Maybe not, but it is epitomises the man more than the nihilistic joke. • Galef type: *Values 3* - written from a holistic value structure, letting you experience that value structure from the inside. </td> </tr>
Tales from Earthsea (Earthsea Cycle, #5) (2001) by Ursula K. Le Guin	My favourite, but you can't just jump in here; it gets its power from reprise and reprisal.
Map and Territory () by Eliezer Yudkowsky	None yet
Computing machinery and intelligence (1950) by Alan Turing	More scientific than it's given credit for: the claim about the Turing test was > *Consider first the more accurate form of the question. I believe that in about fifty years' time it will be possible, to programme computers, with a storage capacity of about 10^9 [bits], to make them play the imitation game so well that an average interrogator will not have more than 70 per cent chance of making the right identification after five minutes of questioning. The original question, "Can machines think?" I believe to be too meaningless to deserve discussion.* > > *Nevertheless I believe that at the end of the century the use of words, and general educated opinion, will have altered so much that one will be able to speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted. I believe further that no useful purpose is served by concealing these beliefs. The popular view that scientists proceed inexorably from well-established fact to well-established fact, never being influenced by any improved conjecture, is quite mistaken. Provided it is made clear which are proved facts and which are conjectures, no harm can result.* We failed him on this specific timeframe, but it won't be too long (2030?).
Watchmen (1987) by Alan Moore	None yet
Beyond Good and Evil (1886) by Friedrich Nietzsche	None yet
The	None yet

Penguin Book of English Verse (2000) by Paul Keegan	
Lolita (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov	None yet
Psychotic Reactions And Carburetor Dung (1987) by Lester Bangs	Haven't read this since I was 16 but it left such a dent in my head and my prose.
Blindsight (Firefall, #1) (2006) by Peter Watts	There is a horror in neuroscience. It isn't inherent: it depends on subverting your sentimental sense of self, meaning, will, introspection, spirituality; if you don't have these, it won't register. The horror takes unthreatening academic names like "agnosia", "readiness potential", "interhemispheric intrusion", "neurotheology", "reconstructive memory", "Chinese room". (Also "executive psychopath" though.) The *Blindsight* ethos - Gothic, fatalist, Darwinist, one of the grandest pessimisms I've ever seen - is what you get when you take a traditional worldview (dualism, free will, work as what dignifies life, human exceptionalism, further-fact identity) and slam the great disenchanting science of a hundred years into it. And then add the coming century's automation and self-modification. *Blindsight* put me in a funk for a week - even though I don't hold any of the positions it sinks. I suppose this is evidence of Watt's talent. ("*Art is a nonrational tool for persuasion: beware.*") Not the least of its achievements is maintaining its murky nihilism in a world where *friendly superintelligences exist*. Because of its actual knowledge, this is weird realism, well beyond Lovecraft's. *They're coming out of the walls: they're coming out of our best science*. The vampires (and, to an extent, the Jovian von Neumann spikefest the plot is about) detract from this deeper horror a bit. Doom; unfixable aberration; people who have warped themselves. If you find *Black Mirror* a bit too disturbing you might want to give this a miss. Watts even tackles "illusionism" - uniquely I think! Is it strange that the giant lessons of the cognitive revolution are still rare in fiction? The only explanations I can think of are: simply "the Two Cultures" (i.e. novelists are ignorant); or, more discreditable, that novelists are shilling for traditional philosophy, maybe because it sells. (#1 giant lesson: *we do not have introspective access to **most** of what our brains or minds do*, on the level of information processing, action, motivation, or even emotion. You might say Freud found this out - but he didn't use reliable methods, made huge obvious errors, and created a closed unfalsifiable loop and so did not really have knowledge.)

In contrast, Watts knows a great deal, uses it well, and takes seriously what he knows: for instance, readiness potentials are given all the emotional weight they deserve. This novel has 100 scientific papers listed in the back. The only people who cram quite as many ideas into their books as Watts are Stephenson and Banks.

His scorn for the fumbling entendres of psychoanalysis is also extremely endearing:

> *According to the experts of that time, multiple personalities arose spontaneously from unimaginable cauldrons of abuse — fragmentary personae offered up to suffer rapes and beatings while the child behind took to some unknowable sanctuary in the folds of the brain. It was both survival strategy and ritual self-sacrifice: powerless souls hacking themselves to pieces, offering up quivering chunks of self in the desperate hope that the vengeful gods called Mom or Dad might not be insatiable.*
>
> *None of it had been real, as it turned out. Or at least, none of it had been confirmed. The experts of the day had been little more than witch doctors dancing through improvised rituals: meandering free-form interviews full of leading questions and nonverbal cues, scavenger hunts through regurgitated childhoods. Sometimes a shot of lithium or haloperidol when the beads and rattles didn't work. The technology to map minds was barely off the ground; the technology to edit them was years away. So the therapists and psychiatrists poked at their victims and invented names for things they didn't understand, and argued over the shrines of Freud and Klein and the old Astrologers. Doing their very best to sound like practitioners of Science.*

> *"So we're fishing for what, exactly? Repressed memories?"*
> *"No such thing." She grinned in toothy reassurance. "There are only memories we choose to ignore, or kinda think around, if you know what I mean."*

People diss the prose but I think it fits the ethos incredibly well:

> *We fled like frightened children with brave faces. We left a base camp behind: Jack, still miraculously functional in its vestibule; a tunnel into the haunted mansion; forlorn magnetometers left to die in the faint hope they might not. Crude pyronometers and thermographs, antique radiation-proof devices that measured the world through the flex and stretch of metal tabs and etched their findings on rolls of plastic. Glow-globes and diving bells and guide ropes strung one to another...*
>
> *Inside each of us, infinitesimal lacerations were turning our cells to mush. Plasma membranes sprang countless leaks. Overwhelmed repair enzymes clung desperately to shredded genes and barely delayed the inevitable. Anxious to avoid the rush, patches of my intestinal lining began flaking away before the rest of the body had a chance to die.*

Siri, the sociopath pinhead, is a great character. But also often an infuriating Hollywood Rationalist, and several times he gets the last word

which forces me to suspect Watts of it. Though the bit where his girlfriend is dying and he refuses to say anything because it would be cliched is clearly intentionally infuriating for the reader. So might be this stupid bit of game theory:

> *"Well, according to game theory, you should never tell anyone when your birthday is."*
> *"I don't follow."*
> *"It's a lose-lose proposition. There's no winning strategy."*
> *"What do you mean, strategy? It's a birthday."*
>
> *Look, I'd said, say you tell everyone when it is and nothing happens. It's kind of a slap in the face.*
> *Or suppose they throw you a party, Chelsea had replied.*
> *Then you don't know whether they're doing it sincerely, or if your earlier interaction just guilted them into observing an occasion they'd rather have ignored. But if you don't tell anyone, and nobody commemorates the event, there's no reason to feel badly because after all, nobody knew. And if someone does buy you a drink then you know it's sincere because nobody would go to all the trouble of finding out when your birthday is — and then celebrating it — if they didn't honestly like you.*
>
> *...I could just... plot out the payoff matrix, Tell/Don't Tell along the columns, Celebrated/Not Celebrated along the rows, the unassailable black-and-white logic of cost and benefit in the squares themselves. The math was irrefutable: the one winning strategy was concealment. Only fools revealed their birthdays.*

- this only follows if you have *ridiculously* strong error aversion, where the value of being certain about others' opinion of you overrules the pleasantness of ordinary interaction.

He mentions (but then averts) the single most annoying error when talking about consciousness, which is that "maybe it's better for the p-zombie aliens to take over, since they are clearly fitter than us":

> *"It doesn't bug you?" Sascha was saying. "Thinking that your mind, the very thing that makes you you, is nothing but some kind of parasite?"*
> *"Forget about minds," he told her. "Say you've got a device designed to monitor — oh, cosmic rays, say. What happens when you turn its sensor around so it's not pointing at the sky anymore,*
> *but at its own guts?" He answered himself before she could: "It does what it's built to. It measures cosmic rays, even though it's not looking at them any more. It parses its own circuitry in terms of cosmic-ray metaphors, because those feel right, because they feel natural, because it can't look at things any other way. But it's the wrong metaphor. So the system misunderstands everything about itself. Maybe that's not a grand and glorious evolutionary leap after all. Maybe it's just a design flaw."*

(Who cares about fitness? A world without qualia is 'Disneyland without children'.)

His Mathesonian attempt to naturalise vampires is *kinda* clever (they are a subspecies of cannibal savants), and the exemplar vamp Jukka is one of the best characters in the book - but overall their presence is distracting and

	off-piste; the right-angles epilepsy thing, the revived-by-corporate-greed schtick, more generally holding that corporate culture is putting macroscopic selection pressure to psychopathic nonsentience: all these things jolt me out of his otherwise well-built world. Besides the vampires, there are a few more over-the-top ughs. His whole theme of technology as inherently dehumanising, *Black Mirror / Event Horizon* is just as cherry-picked and annoying as it always is. The idea that consciousness is unadaptive, and so a one-off aberration in a universe of blind replicators - which steamrolls all objections in the novel - is not obviously true. But it is certainly true either way that our society is currently unadaptive, in the sense of not maximising reproduction. (And thank god for that.) Wrenching but admirable. Great in spite of itself. For the nonangsty, post-dualist, post-further-fact version read Hanson and Simler instead. [Free! here]
Small Gods (Discworld, #13) (1992) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (1999) by David Foster Wallace	Draining, scarifying, funny, hyperactive, elevating. ‘Content warning’, as we say now. For instance, the person described in this passage is one story’s hero, a powerful agent: > *[her] prototypical sandals, unrefined fibers, daffy arcana, emotional incontinence, flamboyantly long hair, extreme liberality on social issues, financial support from parents they revile, bare feet, obscure import religions, indifferent hygiene, a gooey and somewhat canned vocabulary, the whole predictable peace-and-love post-Hippie diction…* i.e. He comes up with a perfect encapsulation of a facile social trend, but throws away his anger about it, makes us realise that our efforts to be tasteful / rational / grown-up are, here, making us small. DFW was an early mover in the revived 'Third Culture' we can all enjoy: i.e. writing about the highly technical in terms of its high meaning. But he was different: his syncretism came out of the negations of high postmodern theory, rather than the usual humanists with science backgrounds. > *Or like just another manipulative pseudopomo Bullshit artist who’s trying to salvage a fiasco by dropping back to a metadimention and commenting on the fiasco itself.* ‘On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand’ made me cry a lot.
Right Ho,	Wodehouse belongs, not with Dickens or Tom Sharpe or Ben Elton, but with

Jeeves (Jeeves, #6) (1934) by P.G. Wodehouse	More, Morris, Roddenberry, and Banks. His Blandings is a utopia - just of the rarest kind, set in the present day. He is easy to dismiss as unserious - though actually he is anti-serious, his apparent deficit of gloom and pompousness a decision: > *I have it from her ladyship's own maid, who happened to overhear a conversation between her ladyship and one of the gentlemen staying here that it was her intention to start you almost immediately upon Nietzsche. You would not enjoy Nietzsche, sir. He is fundamentally unsound.* (I don't think he is but this still brings me joy.) *RHJ* is the very best Jeeves book. It's the one where Wooster contemptuously sends Jeeves away and sets about fixing everything on his own, with fully predictable and fully joyous results. --- *Classification*: Wooster's taboo: Triangle: Subplot: Aunt: Antagonist: Expedient:
The Book of Disquiet (1982) by Fernando Pessoa	*In one sentence*: Eventless autobiographical sketches about working a shit job in a shit town, and but the beauty of self-obsession. *To be read when*: unable to sleep; e.g. at 3am or when travelling for more than 15 hours. > *I asked very little from life, and even this little was denied me. A nearby field, a ray of sunlight, a little bit of calm along with a bit of bread, not to feel oppressed by the knowledge that I exist, not to demand anything from others, and not to have others demand anything from me - this was denied me, like the spare change we might deny a beggar not because we're mean-hearted but because we don't feel like unbuttoning our coat.* Pessoa's uniqueness was invisible during his life; this is a shining, astonishing instance of what we now call neuroatypicality and of the everyday sublime. He's obsessed with cute fatalism, with his own inadequacy, with nothingness and loneliness, but almost every passage is wise or funny or beautiful. I catch no despair off him. Turning shite to gold. Like Larkin if Larkin were likeable; like Montaigne if terser and darker. > *And at this table in my absurd room, I, a pathetic and anonymous office clerk, write words as if they were the soul's salvation, and I gild myself with the impossible sunset of high and vast hills in the distance, with the statue I received in exchange for life's pleasures, and with the ring of renunciation on my evangelical finger, the stagnant jewel of my ecstatic disdain.* Floreat inertia! the worker-poet distinctive and supreme. I first read this on a 22-hour international journey, unsleeping, undrinking, unreal; I prescribe the same conditions for you when you read him. >

> *I feel love for all this, perhaps because I have nothing else to love... even though nothing truly merits the love of any soul, if, out of sentiment, we must give it, I might as well lavish it on the smallness of an inkwell as on the grand indifference of the stars.*

This paperback is a super-slim selection of the full chaotic archive he left behind; only a tenth of the full *Desassossego* archive has been translated in to English; this is a great temptation towards a language I presently have no other reason to learn.

- Galef type:
  Data 1 - a window onto an interesting piece of the world, &
  Value 3 - written from a holistic value structure, letting you experience that value structure from the inside, &
  Style 2 - from which you can learn a style of thinking by studying the author's approach to the world.

> *One of my constant preoccupations is trying to understand how it is that other people exist, how it is that there are souls other than mine and consciousnesses not my own, which, because it is a consciousness, seems to me unique. I understand perfectly that the man before me uttering words similar to mine and making the same gestures I make, or could make, is in some way my fellow creature. However, I feel just the same about the people in illustrations I dream up, about the characters I see in novels or the dramatis personae on the stage who speak through the actors representing them.*
>
> *I suppose no one truly admits the existence of another person. One might concede that the other person is alive and feels and thinks like oneself, but there will always be an element of difference, a perceptible discrepancy, that one cannot quite put one's finger on. There are figures from times past, fantasy-images in books that seem more real to us than these specimens of indifference-made-flesh who speak to us across the counters of bars, or catch our eye in trams, or brush past us in the empty randomness of the streets. The others are just part of the landscape for us, usually the invisible landscape of the familiar.*
>
> *I feel closer ties and more intimate bonds with certain characters in books, with certain images I've seen in engravings, that with many supposedly real people, with that metaphysical absurdity known as 'flesh and blood'. In fact 'flesh and blood' describes them very well: they resemble cuts of meat laid on the butcher's marble slab, dead creatures bleeding as though still alive, the sirloin steaks and cutlets of Fate.*
>
> *I'm not ashamed to feel this way because I know it's how everyone feels. The lack of respect between men, the indifference that allows them to kill others without compunction (as murderers do) or without thinking (as soldiers do), comes from the fact that no one pays due attention to the apparently abstruse idea that other people have souls too.*

	> </i> </td> </tr>
The Patrick Melrose Novels (2012) by Edward St. Aubyn	Marvelous. Even though: nearly filled-up with resentment and self-pity. Patrick's staggering detachment from and humour about his own inner life makes the books rise far above him - most of the series is not spent in Patrick's head but instead depicts his brutal gilded circle - and, every few pages, there is a moment of beautiful lucidity or unvoiced empathy. The prose, the humour, the sadness are enough to make you glad, with Patrick, that his parents are dead. The prose is wonderfully smooth, but I took my time, jolted out every few pages by something demanding reflection: "Evil is sickness celebrating itself"; > *Just as a novelist may sometimes wonder why he invents characters who do not exist and makes them do things which do not matter, so a philosopher may wonder why he invents cases that cannot occur in order to determine what must be the case.* Underneath the filth and irony, Patrick is someone for whom philosophical questions are natural and urgent. The long discursions are more motivated and seamless than in any novel I can think of. At one point, Mary dismisses the idea that her son's anxiety and angst, so like his father's, could have a genetic component - and assumes that it has inadvertently leaked out of Patrick's behaviour. (She goes on to leave him, actually making a damage-control argument about removing the children from his helpless influence.) Yes: For all his insight, wit, cynicism, contrarianism, St Aubyn is still stuck in a giant contemporary ideology: the nurture assumption, the culture of environment-only development and essential woundedness. Sure, people get wounded all the time, and being able to say so in public is a great gain, (for one thing, no one in a confessional culture has to assume that they are alone, that their defects are bizarrely theirs. But if trauma is the centre of some people's sense of self - if it is fetishised and even incentivised (e.g. misery memoirs and high-clap Medium posts)... The risks of centring such things are large and underreported: self-fulfilling prophecies, agonising rumination, and the loss of the peace and pleasure of gratitude. Fine, Aubyn is correct about our sad path-dependence - he's just too recent in placing the start of the path. Here are genetic markers for anxiety and PTSD, against the novel's tacit, almost Freudian emphasis on environment alone. Aubyn is obviously somewhat detached from his own trauma - you can't write prose this fair and glowing if you're not - which is lucky. Otherwise, the seeker after truth would be senselessly telling the vulnerable they're deluded about their own life. (As we all are, though not in the same ways.) *

	Serious engagement with philosophy of mind throughout: > *In any case, he now felt in danger all the time. Danger of liver collapse, marital breakdown, terminal fear. Nobody ever died of a feeling, he would say to himself, not believing a word of it, as he sweated his way through the feeling that he was dying of fear. People died of feelings all the time, once they had gone through the formality of materializing them into bullets and bottles and tumours.* More generally, Patrick actually wrestles with materialism, rather than using the usual literary tricks of caricature and omission on it. * Curious whether St Aubyn got his vicious rendition of Princess Margaret at first- or second-hand. * The first three chapters of Mother's Milk, told from the perspective of Patrick's first child, are just perfect writing. Robert sees only the benevolence and humour of his parents, not their exhaustion, rage, and bad faith. They are anonymous to him and us, just Robert's mother and Robert's father. It is a glory and a high echelon, though it gives giving the emotional arc of the rest of the book a very long way to fall. > *Thomas [2 years old] still knew how to understand the silent language which Robert had almost lost as the wild margins of his mind fell under the sway of a verbal empire. He was standing on a ridge, about to surge downhill, getting faster, getting taller, getting more words, getting bigger and bigger explanations, cheering all the way. Now Thomas had made him glance backwards and lower his sword for a moment while he noticed everything he had lost as well. He had become so caught up in building sentences that he had almost forgotten the barbaric days when thinking was like a splash of colour on a page.* The exaggeration of the wisdom of children is even stronger in Mother's Milk. This is no criticism because St Aubyn isn't very committed to realism, and because Robert's rich and sparkling inner life suits one of the themes: that children deserve to be treated well, taken relatively seriously, as we all do. And that purpose is not the same as result ('telos' indeed): > *We think the purpose of a child is to grow up because it does grow up. But its purpose is to play, to enjoy itself, to be a child. If we merely look to the end of the process, the purpose of life is death.* The art of kintsugi.
Bartleby the	One of the *Frankensteins*, those endlessly interpretable load-bearing columns dotted around literature. Of negation, dignity, irrationality, silence,

Scrivener (1853) by Herman Melville	impermeability. What is Bartleby, if not just depressed or hyper-lazy? Well there's the defensive Stoic catatonia, or wu wei; Bartleby as crypto-proto-Marxist; Bartleby as waning Übermensch, squatter monk, annoying Christ; Bartleby as dissociating schizophrene or autist; Bartleby as Death of Dead Letters; Bartleby as PTSD ghost; Bartleby as all our inarticulate idiosyncracy, as utter Other – "*pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn*!" Some people (e.g. Blanchot, Hardt & Negri, Setiya) view him as heroic, but he's more hallucinogenic and morbid: he lacks everything but refusal; he throws his life away. And that's a living death, a non-human void ("I never feel so private as when I know [Bartleby is] here"). > *So true it is, and so terrible too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it.* That copyists are an extinct breed only adds to the seething flavour; it is *possible* that OCR and distributed Captchas could have minimised Bartleby's suffering - that the condition the piece wrangles with isn't eternal. What would Bartleby be today? Not, I think, an Occupier; rather a impassive backstreets bookshop owner, or a kombucha stallholder or whatnot. I prefer to read Melville's voice - waffling Victorian persiflage - as an assumed decoration for the windbag lawyer's voice (however much *Moby Dick* shouts otherwise).
Infinite Jest (1996) by David Foster Wallace	> *The so-called 'psychotically depressed' person who tries to kill herself doesn't do so out of quote 'hopelessness' or any abstract conviction that life's assets and debits do not square. And surely not because death seems suddenly appealing. The person in whom Its invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise.* > *Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. Their terror of falling from a great height is still just as great as it would be for you or me standing speculatively at the same window just checking out the view; i.e. the fear of falling remains a constant. The variable here is the other terror, the fire's flames: when the flames get close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors. It's not desiring the fall; it's terror of the flames.*
The Elephant in the Brain:	The best synthesis of the study of human nature (cognitive psychology, interactionist sociology, primatology, and economics) I've ever seen. Freud

Hidden Motives in Everyday Life (2017) by Kevin Simler	done right ("although the explanations in this book may seem Freudian at times, we follow mainstream cognitive psychology in rejecting most of Freud's methods and many of his conclusions"). It's introductory, laced with illustrative anecdotes but with much deeper scholarship underneath. The 'elephant in the brain' is our unwitting selfishness. We compete without knowing or admitting it, for we are social animals seeking power or status, and thereby sex. > *Modeling the world accurately isn't the be-all and end-all of the human brain. Brains evolved to help our bodies, and ultimately our genes, get along and get ahead in the world—a world that includes not just rocks and squirrels and hurricanes, but also other human beings. And if we spend a significant fraction of our lives interacting with others (which we do), trying to convince them of certain things (which we do), why shouldn't our brains adopt socially useful beliefs as first-class citizens, alongside world-modeling beliefs? Wear a mask long enough and it becomes your face. Play a role long enough and it becomes who you are. Spend enough time pretending something is true and you might as well believe it.* > *Incidentally, this is why politicians make a great case study for self-deception. The social pressure on their beliefs is enormous. Psychologically, then, politicians don't so much 'lie' as regurgitate their own self-deceptions. Both are ways of misleading others, but self-deceptions are a lot harder to catch and prosecute.* Simler undertook the book in lieu of a PhD, and his work is a welcome modification of Hanson's usual relentlessly lucid style: he is more concrete, chattier, more personable. > *Information is sensitive in part because it can threaten our self-image and therefore our social image. So the rest of the brain conspires—whispers—to keep such information from becoming too prominent, especially in consciousness. In this sense, the Freuds were right: the conscious ego needs to be protected. But not because we are fragile, but rather to keep damaging information from leaking out of our brain and into the minds of our associates.* You can probably skip this if you're familiar with Overcoming Bias / LessWrong / Econlog - but even then it's a pleasant read. I'm going to give this to every teenager I know. Armour and key.
Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West (1985) by Cormac McCarthy	• *In one sentence*: The greatest and truest western. • *To be read when*: strong-stomached; drunk as fuck. Say it is 1985 A.P. (After Peckinpah). How can anyone write anything new about poor white psychopaths in the hot rural places of Victorian America? The answer turns out simple: just have prose so tight and freshening - a jet hose comprising one-third Bible, one-third Emerson, one-third Ballard - that

you again uncover the elemental bones of the Western. Also savagely de-emphasise your characters. Place them in enormous, indifferent vistas; give us no inner monologue - nor even indirect report of subjective life; have no speech marks to set their words apart from the landscapes (do not draw the eye to their presumed humanity); have no apostrophes, no hyphens even, lest we remember; have as few names as possible, leave them as types - "kid" or "captain" or "mexican" or "brave"; set their incredible violence among such vast places it looks like little; have few capital letters but for God's.

Lock your readers out; make everyone and everything opaque. As he says himself:

> *In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence.*

These cowboys and injuns punctuate the beautiful land of Central America with hanged babies; rings of decapitate heads; a four-eyed dog; a man calmly eating his own shit; endless thirsty hallucinogenic despair. This is exhausting, quite hard to read:

> *All night the wind blew and the fine dust set their teeth on edge. Sand in everything, grit in all they ate. In the morning a urinecolored sun rose blearily through panes of dust on a dim world and without feature. The animals were failing... That night they rode through a region electric and wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses' trappings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beards of the men... the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear.*

(As well as this Nabokovian trudge through the middle section, McCarthy sometimes steers close to the comical with sentences like '*Itinerant degenerates bleeding west like a heliotropic plague.*')

A typical human interaction in this book is "The kid looked at the man"; no more. There's plenty of grandeur - just not in humans.

At the centre stands the Judge: Satan, Ahab and Moby Dick all in one. ("*His skin is so pale as to have almost no pigment.*") Racism, fear and poverty form the baseline. The Comanches, for instance, are here worse than demons

> *...grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns... riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning...*

- "at least demons are Christian"!

Lots of descriptions of the stars, inbetween brutalities

	> *The night sky lies so sprent with stars that there is scarcely a space of black at all and they fall all night in bitter arcs and it is so that their numbers are no less...* > *The stars burned with a lidless fixity and they drew nearer in the night until toward dawn he was stumbling among the whinstones of the uttermost ridge to heaven.* For the first time I understand why Aristotle's physics divides the world into different celestial and terranean operations: from down here back then, the stars look so clean and permanent, they're just not of our world, dirty, unhinged, and endangered as it has been, for almost everyone. • *Galef type*: **Data 2** - What does it imply about the world, that X could happen?, & **Style 3** - tickle your aesthetic sense in a way that obliquely makes you a more interesting, generative thinker.
The Wind's Twelve Quarters (1975) by Ursula K. Le Guin	Magnificent genre-breaking genre exemplification. She is to science fiction what the Elizabethans were to bawdy comedy. Aside from the two hippie stories, and the four fear-of-psychometrics stories, these will not age.
Poems of the Late T'ang (1965) by A.C. Graham	I've been playing at knowing China for years, but of course I do not. (For instance, I picked this calm, modest book up unwittingly, and learn it is the gold standard translation by the greatest Western sinologist of the day.) It's a great hook: supposedly, Chinese poetry (world poetry?) peaked in the Ninth Century. For almost their whole history, passion and violence were considered inappropriate topics for poetry! They resented melodrama and fantasy in their poets! I must be jaded to think this is great. The poets seem all to be old men trying not to care about death - "snail shell men", in Ancient Chinese. They are mainly ultra-concrete - lots of masterpieces about mountains and rice and fish. Graham is a droll, masterful guide, making the requisite comparisons to Baudelaire and Pound for me, the clunking reader. (I can only assume the strange meters he uses are good approximations to the original.) The war between Confucianism and Buddhism is prominent here, and is hard for me to imagine -probably because I have a Hollywood understanding of these two "serene" "coping" philosophies. Li Shangyin's (李商隐的) "On a Monastery Wall": > *They rejected life to seek the way. Their footprints are before us.* > *They offered up their brains, ripped up their bodies: so firm was their resolution.* > *See it as large, and a millet grain cheats us of the universe:* > *See it as small, and the world can hide in a pinpoint.* > *The oyster before its womb fills thinks of the new cassia:* > *The amber, when it first sets, remembers a former pine.* > *If we trust the true and sure words written on Indian leaves* > *We hear all past and future in one stroke of the temple bell.*

	Like a typical Westerner, I like the weirdoes: Li He (李賀), who's their wild fantasist (Blake?) and Meng Jiao (孟郊), barren kin of Poe. I enjoyed this, but don't really have the tools to judge:
What Should We Be Worried About? Real Scenarios That Keep Scientists Up at Night (2014) by John Brockman	A portrait of the worst things in the world by some of the cleverest people in it. Loads of people went for the cheap way out and said "*We should worry about too much worrying*", which is true in one sense but not helpful. Quality varies: these are the most astonishing bits. Many of the entries are on far less important matters, but even those are valuable as evidence of expert disagreement / the deep human need for whimsy. [Free here]
Iain Crichton Smith: Selected Poems (1986) by Iain Crichton Smith	None yet
Collected Poems (1988) by Czesław Miłosz	Bought it for someone else, but couldn't give it away. Does much that I usually don't appreciate – both Holocaust musing *and* the relative innocence of nature. But his indirectness and attentiveness lift it way, way beyond the ordinary run of those themes. Never mawkish. Epochal. Here, Here, Here, Here, Here, Here.
Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo (2004) by Werner Herzog	> *Laplace [the set engineer] is talking about levelling the slope to a mere 45 percent grade; but that would look like the narrow strip of land that forms an isthmus. I told him I would not allow that, because we would lose the central metaphor of the film. 'Metaphor for what?' he asked. I said I did not know, just that it was a grand metaphor. Maybe, I said, it was an image slumbering in all of us, and I happened to be the one to introduce him to a brother he had never met…* *he said he could not go working under these conditions, and wanted to leave.* I have a weird relationship with Herzog. His films' typical tone and message (Nietzschean tragicomedy) doesn't really appeal to me. I watch them – and I watch them all, even since *Dinotasia* – for their literal and figurative voice: his relentless, Teutonic ecstatic absurdity. I wait for that voice to roll out and make me hurt or laugh. (Since his humour is only sometimes on show, I am often laughing at him – and yet, out of mawkish brutalism, through my irony, rise the most affecting scenes I've ever seen: the beach shot in Cobra Verde; the clouds in Heart of Glass; the wandering penguin in Encounters; above all the final shot of My Best Fiend.)

	These diaries show him to be more thoughtful, rational, contrived and poetic than I had guessed. His sincere interest in the locals' territorial plight, his physical participation in the set construction and management, his absorption in the suffering of jungle animals, his incongruous bright-eyed interest in mathematics, his astonishing codependency with Kinski, are all deeply disarming. The prose takes some getting used to, since the plain unflinching goth awe of it is the kind of thing we are primed to mock. > *The jungle is obscene. Everything about it is sinful, for which reason the sin does not stand out as sin. The voices in the jungle are silent; nothing is stirring, and a languid, immobile anger hovers over everything.* It is worth acclimating to: each entry is both bleak and hilarious, and Krishna Winston's translation is a thing of wonder, no doubt improving on WH. > *I recall experiencing a similar shiver of awe as a child in Sachrang, when I found a fried piece of bright blue plastic that had floated down the brook and got caught on an over hanging branch. At the time, I had never seen anything like it, and I kept it hidden for weeks, licked it, found it slightly stretchy, full of miraculous properties. Not until weeks later, when I had my fill of owning it, did I show it to anyone. Till and I discovered when you held a burning match to it, it melted; it gave black smoke and a nasty smell, but it was something we had never seen before, an emissary from a distant world high in the mountains, along the upper reaches of the brook, where it vanished into gorges and there were no people. So where did it come from? Had it blown into the mountains by the wind? Idid not know, but I gave the plastic a name-what I do not recall. I do know it had a nice sound, and was very secret, and since then I have often racked my brains, trying to remember that name, that word. I would give a lot to know it, but I do not, and I also do not have that delicate piece of weather-beaten plastic anymore. Having neither the secret word nor the plastic makes me poorer today than I was as a child.* He certainly views the natural world right: as overwhelmingly a place of horrifying and pointless suffering, cooed over by pseuds from cars. > *Sweat, storm clouds overhead, sleeping dogs. There is a smell of stale urine. In my soup, ants and bugs were swimming among the globules of fat. Lord Almighty, send us an earthquake.* There's not a lot of technical info here, or explanations of the crew's role or background; there's no timeline or context added; nor even very much about the film at all. But who cares? This is incredible as nature writing, dream journal, and logistical poetry.
Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts (2007) by Clive James	I love James because, though he is a literary intellectual through and through, he makes room for the other half of the human mind. He *is* still an arts supremacist - this personal portrait of the century contains no scientists, and many actors and novelists and politicians, but he is at least aware of the narrowness of this. *Cultural Amnesia* is an invitation to the humanities; defence of philosophy and art against politics; an attack on the hypocrisy of the left (Kollontai, Sartre, Brecht, Saramago), on the heartlessness of the right (Junger,

	Brasillach, Pound, Heidegger); a dark, teeming biography of C20th humanism and its enemies; a reading list for all of us bewildered by the bullshit critical fortresses of serious writing about art and history. James is deeply opinionated, often funny and occasionally heartbreaking. Of "the relationship between Hitler's campaign on the eastern front and Richard Burton's pageboy haircut". It's full of faded and non-Anglophone stars (Egon Friedell, Arthur Schnitzler, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Paz, Urena), villains (Brassilach, Celine, Pound, Sartre, Brecht), pop-defining celebrities (Beatrix Potter, Dick Cavett, Michael Mann) and sad outrage. It's also or really an autobiography, a list of the people and one-liners that struck James as he travelled the century. WW2 and the Soviet Empire dominate as the most deadly instances of the theme "how politics invaded art and came close to killing it". Other themes: irrational violence, the nonconformist left, collaborators and fellow-travellers, Jewish achievements, the failure of totalitarian simplicity, 'the American century', rise and fall of jazz. He falls for clash-of-civilisation talk a bit, but he's never conservative without a reason. I think what I love about him is that he stands up for boring truths – '*it takes another power to keep a power in check', "the law's imperfections are tokens of its necessity*" etc. For every villain we are given a counter exemplar: Marc Bloch, Sophie Scholl, Jorge Borges... This is my second read-through in five years; I expect to read it again in another five.
Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings (1962) by Jorge Luis Borges	None yet
Reliable Essays: The Best of Clive James (2001) by Clive James	Mostly *haute* subjects for once, but always *bas* on bs. He: brags about having spotted Heaney very early, points out the fatal ideological flaws in both Mailer and Greer, fiercely challenges translations from the Italian, the Russian, the German; summarises every major photography book of the late 70s; shows that liberalism and classicism remain standing, "less bad than all the others" even after the sustained insult of C20th Theory; and some other such generalist feats. The last two section titles – "*Almost Literature*" and "*Practically Art*" – are scale models of both his style and his critical mission: to raise the foully sunken, or shield the great assailed. Skip it, but only because you should be reading the full *New Essays* series these essays are lifted from.
Hyperbole and a Half: Unfortunate Situations,	None yet

Flawed Coping Mechanisms, Mayhem, and Other Things That Happened (2013) by Allie Brosh	
Travels With Myself and Another (1979) by Martha Gellhorn	*In one sentence*: Great journalist goes on holiday to the shittest times and places on earth. *To be read when*: travelling; refusing to. Hilarious and patrician account of the worst of her many journeys, to: Guomindang China 1941, the U-boated Caribbean 1942, East through West Africa 1949, Russia 1966, hippie Israel 1971. She generalises a *lot* (e.g. she categorises each new tribe she comes across by their average attractiveness and prevailing smell; she often calls 'racial' what we'd deem 'cultural' traits). But her discrimination is more usually discriminating, making *just* distinctions. She's fair, keen to empathise - > *I said it stood to reason that we must smell in some disgusting way to them.* > *Yes, said Aya, they say we have the 'stale odour of corpses'; they find it sickening.* > *This cheers me; fair's fair; I don't feel so mean-minded* – a point you can find in p'Bitek, among others. And she holds colonialists and bigots in far higher contempt ("*it seems conceited to foist off our notions of religion, which we have never truly practised, onto people whose savagery is much more disorganised, personal and small-scale than ours*"). My mate Paul – a noted cynic – believes, along with most of our generation, that travel is ennobling, inherently. It surely is not, but it certainly does put an edge on some folks' writing. Not their souls: > *One needs Equanil here too, not just in our white urban civilisation; tranquilisers against impatience, against the hysteria induced by heat, and the disgust at dirt...* Generous, stylish, and a fine if not superior substitute for going there. *Galef type*: - Data 1 - a window onto an interesting piece of the world, & - Values 3 - a holistic value structure, letting you experience that value structure from the inside.

Collected Poems (1988) by Philip Larkin	*In one sentence*: The apotheosis of perverse contentment or British miserabilism: Housman, if honest about his appetites; Lawrence with a sense of humour; Auden plus even more jazz.. *To be read when*: ill, heartbroken, very young, quite old, too cynical, too hopeful. Of the consuming fear of death, sexual frustration, impostor syndrome: Britain. He was forever overawed by lack of control over his life; we are left with his superlative control of form. Motifs are well-known: the hostile wind heard from the cold attic; the diminishing of strength; the fall of desire without a fall in the desire to desire; the conviction that age is not running out of time, but running out of self. These are not moans: he loves jazz and booze and other things that make death recede. He's vulgar, and wields it, but never as punchline; what starts "*Groping back to bed after a piss" will end with the universe* : > *The hardness and the brightness and plain* > *far-reaching singleness of that wide stare* > *Is a reminder of the strength and the pain* > *Of being young; that it can't come again,* > *But is for others undiminished somewhere.* There's too much in this volume. I mean that as criticism of its editor, not as expression of Larkin's o'erflowing sublimity. But that too, actually: "Sad Steps", "Aubade", "For Sidney Bechet", "No Road", and "Continuing to Live" are among my favourites. By '72 his bitterness and fear had overcome his kindness, and he dried up, leaving doggerel for mates and nasty biz like "The Old Fools" or "The Card Players". And yet even after three years of this came "Aubade". I avoided the juvenilia, perhaps even out of superstitious respect. • Galef type: Data 3 - that highlight patterns in the world , & Style 3 - tickles your aesthetic sense in a way that obliquely makes you a more interesting, generative thinker.

4/5: Very impressed. 75th percentile.

CFAR Applied Rationality Workshop - Participant Handbook () by CFAR, Duncan Sabien	None yet
The Collected Stories of Vernor Vinge (2001) by Vernor Vinge	More playful and miscellaneous than I was expecting. As always with him, there are grand gears turning in the background of his stories: there's more to his worlds than we see, and reasons beyond what the characters reason. But overall not as stunning as his novels, even accounting for scale. This is not surprising when you realise that the earliest of these was written when he was a teenager. He really hits his stride halfway through this, 1980. The main intellectual success is his depiction of anarchism, as stable, unstable, predatory, kind, natural, or requiring unnatural underpinning. I loved his forewords to each story: > *"The quality of the writing is about average for what I could manage in the 1960s... And the ideas? Ah, there's the problem. To date, "The Accomplice" is the most irritating combination of embarrassing gaffes and neat insights that I have ever created."* Great fun but not as mind-bending as Egan or Chiang or Borges or Vinge. Ranked: 1. 'The Ungoverned'. How could anarchism resist invasion?: By being too expensive to conquer. 2. The Peddlar's Apprentice'. Neat post-post-apocalypse. The control group are the good guys. 3. 'Long Shot'. 4. 'The Blabber'. 5. 'Fast Times at Fairmont High'. 6. 'Just Peace'. 7. 'Conquest by Default'. Yet another anarchism, but with true aliens this time. Patches the gap in nonaggression with religious dogma: all obey the anti-monopoly priests. Colonialist anarchists!! 8. 'Original Sin'. 9. 'Bomb Scare'. 10. 'Apartness'. 11. 'The Whirligig of Time'. Tries too hard to be lyrical about nuclear holocaust. Rare depiction of winners of a nuclear war! Monarchy returns to post-apocalypse Russia, and then somehow they get to super advanced tech despite authoritarian thought control. You can feel the actual physical model straining underneath the prose and morals. 12. 'Win a Nobel Prize!'. 13. 'Run, Bookworm!'. 14. 'The Science Fair'. 15. 'Gemstone'. 16. 'The Accomplice'.
The Sellout (2015) by Paul Beatty	> *[Ta-Nehisi] Coates and [Michelle] Alexander have gained wide audiences; their books are bestsellers, and they are celebrated across liberal media outlets. Their animating idea — that to overcome racism, the United*

> *States must discard any pretense to colorblindness — has become accepted across broad swathes of the mainstream Left. For better or worse, however, it marks a stark departure from King's appeal that skin color should be ignored. The battle between colorblindness and active anti-racism will have enormous consequences for American society.*

- Christian Gonzalez

> *In attempting to restore his community through reintroducing precepts, namely segregation and slavery, that, given his cultural history, have come to define his community despite the supposed unconstitutionality and nonexistence of these concepts, he's pointed out a fundamental flaw in how we as Americans claim we see equality.*
>
> *'I don't care if you're black, white, brown, yellow, red, green, or purple.' We've all said it... He's painting everybody over, painting this community purple and green, and seeing who still believes in equality.*

- a judge in *The Sellout*

The Sellout is filled with racism and racists - for one thing, the nearly-nameless protagonist, the Sellout, brings back segregated busses and schools, and (reluctantly) owns a volunteer slave - but the book is clearly itself not racist. (I can even quantify how much racism's in it: at one point a pompous character counts the slurs in *Huckleberry Finn*, arguing for censoring it:

> *This is serious. Brother Mark Twain uses the 'n-word' 219 times. That's .68 'n-words' per page in toto.*

Well, including 'weren*r' and 'n*rized', etc, Beatty manages 146, or 0.52 a page. It feels like more.)

That isn't the confusing bit; what is, is that none of the presented racists are white; in fact no substantial characters are. (The single named white person is present for all of seven pages, and is merely innocently patronising.) We could stretch and say that this is Beatty exclaiming at internalised racism. Or it could be a unusual claim about where racism (in the established sense of propositional or emotional racism, as opposed to structural racism) is openly expressed now: among nonwhites. (Or he could seriously just be trolling.)

Further, it isn't just a Modest Proposal, despite the prevalence of this mistake of interpretation. A modest proposal is the deadpan presentation of a policy to make the reader realise that it is disgusting. In *The Sellout*, separatism and degradation *work*, they improve Dickens for the segregated: the policies are popular, grades go up, crime goes down, and people are polite within and without race categories. What is this saying?

It's hard to work out Beatty's schtick, partly because the whole of the first 100 pages is a string of horrible and bravura one-liners, from "black literature sucks":

> *I'm so fucking tired of black women always being described by their skin tones! Honey-colored this! Dark-chocolate that! My paternal grandmother was mocha-tinged, café-au-lait, graham-fucking-cracker brown!*
>
> *How come they never describe the white characters in relation to foodstuffs and hot liquids? Why aren't there any yogurt-colored, egg-shell-toned, string-cheese-skinned, low-fat-milk white protagonists in these racist, no-third-act-having books? That's why black literature sucks!*

to

> *Maybe race had nothing to do with it. Maybe Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat because she knew the guy to be unapologetically gassy or one of those annoying people who insists on asking what you're reading, then without prompting tells you what he's reading, what he wants to read, what he regrets having read, what he tells people he's read but really hasn't read. So like those high school white girls who have after-school sex with the burly black athlete in the wood shop, and then cry rape when their fathers find out, maybe Rosa Parks, after the arrest, the endless church rallies, and all the press, had to cry racism, because what was she going to say: "I refused to move because the man asked me what I was reading"? Negroes would've lynched her.*

to

> *I'd rather be called 'nigger' than 'giantess' any day of the week."*
>
> *"Problematic," someone muttered - invoking the code word black thinkers use to characterize anything or anybody that makes them feel uncomfortable, impotent, and painfully aware that they don't have the answers to questions and assholes like me.*

Reviewers resolve this, in their neat way, by saying that Beatty is satirising "race in America". But that doesn't mean anything: Beatty is indiscriminate: mocking stereotyped black behaviour *and* police brutality, *and* pious diversity pushers, *and* white arrogance, *and* classic Civil Rights heroes, *and* radical black intellectuals, *and* assimilated Establishment black elites, *and* colorblind universalists. So, you *can* say "it satirises [more or less every position you can take on] race in America". But what's the point of doing that?

I can think of three: 1) to say that there is no sensible position on this seething topic; or 2) to say that we haven't found it yet and must move past the existing positions, or 3) to use the nasty symmetry between the

racist and the active anti-racist, to reflect well on Coatesian justice - maybe the thought is: 'colorblind egalitarianism is such a mad idea that even naked nineteenth-century racism is superior to it'.)

I don't know which (if any) is Beatty's view. I know I don't agree. There's nothing actually wrong with MLK's principle, *judge absolutely everyone on their own merits rather than treating them as a representative of their race or sex or anything*, though it has usually been poorly realised.

But I respect the chutzpah of pissing everyone off. If nothing else it's original and bullshit-free, two rare predicates around here.

> *I'm not sure what Unmitigated Blackness is, but whatever it is, it doesn't sell. Unmitigated Blackness is simply not giving a fuck. Clarence Cooper, Charlie Parker, Richard Pryor, Maya Deren, Sun Ra, Mizoguchi, Frida Kahlo, black-and-white Godard, Céline, Gong Li, David Hammons, Björk, and the Wu-Tang Clan in any of their hooded permutations. Unmitigated Blackness is essays passing for fiction. It's the realization that there are no absolutes, except when there are. It's the acceptance of contradiction not being a sin and a crime but a human frailty like split ends and libertarianism. Unmitigated Blackness is the realization that as fucked up as it all is, sometimes it's nihilism that makes life worth living.*

or

> *Daddy never believed in closure. He said it was a false psychological concept. Something invented by therapists to assuage white Western guilt. In all his years of study and practice, he'd never heard a patient of color talk of needing "closure." They needed revenge. They needed distance. Forgiveness and a good lawyer maybe, but never closure. He said people mistake suicide, murder, lap band surgery, interracial marriage, and overtipping for closure, when in reality what they've achieved is erasure.*
>
> *The problem with closure is that once you have a taste of it, you want it in every little aspect of your life. Especially when you're bleeding to death, and your slave, who is in full rebellion, is screaming,... you attempt to stanch the bleeding with a waterlogged copy of **Vibe** magazine someone has left in the gutter. Kanye West has announced, "I am rap!" Jay-Z thinks he's Picasso. And life is fucking fleeting.*

Here's what I think is going on: It's hard to get through to people with the usual homilies and pieties, because they are deadened by cliché, bureaucratic muscle, tribalism, and historical ineffectualness. After hundreds of pages of troublingly hilarious japes (including ironic delight in old racist tv shows), Beatty has softened you up, left bare the old wound. That all may be healed, all must be shown.

(c) Richard Vogel (2016)

So, is the Sellout a charming pervert? A self-hating masochist? Or a nihilist with moral purpose?

Spoiler! It's the first and third. Beatty *has no answer* and is again brave enough to say so; the book's last page admits no synthesis can win over that particular sceptic: Obama isn't enough, nothing is enough:

> *I remember the day after the black dude was inaugurated, Foy Cheshire, proud as punch, driving around town in his coupe, honking his horn and waving an American flag. He wasn't the only one celebrating; the neighborhood glee wasn't O. J. Simpson getting acquitted or the Lakers winning the 2002 championship, but it was close. Foy drove past the crib and I happened to be sitting in the front yard husking corn. "Why are you waving the flag?" I asked him. "Why now? I've never seen you wave it before." He said that he felt like the country, the United States of America, had finally paid off its debts. "And what about the Native Americans? What about the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mexicans, the poor, the forests, the water, the air, the fucking California condor? When do they collect?" I asked him.*
>
> *He just shook his head at me. Said something to the effect that my father would be ashamed of me and that I'd never understand. And he's right. I never will.*

The protagonist segregates, and says things like this:

> *I'm a farmer, and farmers are natural segregationists. We separate the wheat from the chaff. I'm not Rudolf Hess, P. W. Botha, Capitol Records, or present-day U.S. of A. Those motherfuckers segregate because they want to hold on to power. I'm a farmer: we segregate in an effort to give every tree, every plant, every poor Mexican, every poor nigger, a chance for equal access to sunlight and water; we make sure every living organism has room to breathe.*

And yet he is not a separatist; he knows it's wrong when the minorities are shouted out of the public space:

> *What the fuck you honkies laughing at?" he shouted. More chuckling from the audience. The white couple howling the loudest. Slapping the table. Happy to be noticed. Happy to be accepted. "I ain't bullshitting! What the fuck are you interloping motherfuckers laughing at? Get the fuck out!"*

	> *There's nothing funny about nervous laughter. The forced way it slogs through a room with the stop-and-start undulations of bad jazz brunch jazz. The black folks and the round table of Latinas out for a night on the town knew when to stop laughing. The couple didn't. The rest of us silently sipped our canned beer and sodas, determined to stay out of the fray. They were laughing solo because this had to be part of the show, right?* *"Do I look like I'm fucking joking with you? This shit ain't for you. Understand? Now get the fuck out! This is our thing!"* *No more laughter. Only pleading, unanswered looks for assistance, then the soft scrape of two chairs being backed, quietly as possible, away from the table. The blast of cold December air and the sounds of the street. The night manager shutting the doors behind them, leaving little evidence that the white people had ever been there except for an unfulfilled two-drink, three-donut minimum.* *When I think about that night, the black comedian chasing the white couple into the night, their tails and assumed histories between their legs, I don't think about right or wrong. No, when my thoughts go back to that evening, I think about my own silence. Silence can be either protest or consent, but most times it's fear. I guess that's why I'm so quiet and such a good whisperer, nigger and otherwise. It's because I'm always afraid. Afraid of what I might say. What promises and threats I might make and have to keep. That's what I liked about the man, although I didn't agree with him when he said, "Get out. This is our thing." I respected that he didn't give a fuck. But I wish I hadn't been so scared, that I had had the nerve to stand in protest. Not to castigate him for what he did or to stick up for the aggrieved white people... but I wish I'd stood up to the man and asked him a question: "So what exactly is our thing?* Which is my laughter, but not my flight. *The Sellout* doesn't have an ism: they are all found wanting. I'm just glad it is still possible to explore this godforsaken crater without being screamed down. I'm glad Beatty didn't let it get to him, even if he leaves the Sellout hanging.
Pattern Recognition and Machine Learning (2006) by Christopher M. Bishop	Timeless, towering. My yardstick: The first time I read it (looked at it) I was way out of my depth and understood little. Year by year I misunderstand less of it.
Cyteen (Cyteen, #1-3) (1988) by C.J.	Magnificent. Cherryh is often deeply unclear (examples to follow), but she makes it work by using just enough unclarity to cover the gaps in her made-up mind engineering. I could call it allusion rather than unclarity. Very uncomfortable: large parts are about the internal motivations and

Cherryh	human strengths of the leaders of a budding scientific dystopia with an immortal dictator. The humanists and abolitionists are the antagonists, and foiled at almost every turn. We follow the development of a charming little girl destined to grow into an anti-democratic power broker, the centre of a slave economy, and a serial rapist. Or is she? Better even than Vinge at baroque skulduggery, chilling effects, the spiritual harm of surveillance, and decades-long cons.
Excession (1996) by Iain M. Banks	*In one sentence*: A psychologically realistic utopia (: a flawed one) nestled in a soft opera-of-space-operas. *To be read when*: you don't think we have anywhere to go. / On a train. (This is more of a review of the *Culture* series. *Excession* is my favourite of them - even just seeing that slightly bad 90s cover gets a reaction out of me - but none of the books is so great on its own. I just keep re-reading them. This essay gives a flavour of the intellectual thrill underneath Banks' hand-waving, hand-wringing, and gags. Start with *Player of Games* or *Use of Weapons*, and leave *Phlebas* to last, it's not great except thematically.) The two worst omissions from sci-fi are social development and software development. Banks covers the first so memorably, so thrillingly, that the series is a permanent touchstone for me. The Culture is *actually* different from us - even though underneath their society revs our great alien machine, liberalism unbound. Banks was always quite open about how didactic his sci-fi was; it is saved by his inventiveness and psychological realism amidst technological fantasy. This scene (from *Use of Weapons*) had a large effect on me as a child: *'Of course I don't have to do this,' one middle-aged man said, carefully cleaning the table with a damp cloth. He put the cloth in a little pouch, sat down beside him. "But look; this table's clean.'* *He agreed that the table was clean.* *"Usually,' the man said. "I work on alien -- no offence -- alien religions; Directional Emphasis In Religious Observance; that's my specialty ... like when temples or graves or prayers always have to face in a certain direction; that sort of thing? Well, I catalogue, evaluate, compare; I come up with theories and argue with colleagues, here and elsewhere. But ... the job's never finished; always new examples, and even the old ones get re-evaluated, and new people come along with new ideas about what you thought was settled ... but,' he slapped the table, "when you clean a table you clean a table. You feel you've done something. It's an achievement."* *"But in the end, it's still cleaning a table."* *"And therefore does not really signify on the cosmic scale of events?' the man suggested.* *He smiled in response to the man's grin, "Well, yes.'* *'But then what does signify? My other work? Is that really important, either?' I could try composing wonderful musical works, or day-long entertainment epics, but what would that do? Give people pleasure? My wiping this table gives me pleasure. And people come to a clean table, which gives them pleasure. And anyway" - the man laughed - "people*

	> *die; stars die; universes die. What is any achievement, however great it was, once time itself is dead? Of course, if all I did was wipe tables, then of course it would seem a mean and despicable waste of my huge intellectual potential. But because I choose to do it, it gives me pleasure. And," the man said with a smile, "it's a good way of meeting people."* As did this, before I studied formal philosophy and received a resounding confirmation of it: > *"Aw, come on; argue, dammit."* > *"I don't believe in argument," he said, looking out.* > *"You don't?" Erens said, genuinely surprised. "Shit, and I thought I was the cynical one."* > *"It's not cynicism," he said flatly. "I just think people overvalue argument because they like to hear themselves talk."* > *"Oh well, thank you."* > *"It's comforting, I suppose." He watched the stars wheel, like absurdly slow shells seen at night: rising, peaking, falling... (And reminded himself that the stars too would explode, perhaps, one day.) "Most people are not prepared to have their minds changed," he said. "And I think they know in their hearts that other people are just the same, and one of the reasons people become angry when they argue is that they realize just that, as they trot out their excuses."* > *"Excuses, eh?"* > *"Yes, excuses," he said, with what Erens thought might just have been a trace of bitterness. "I strongly suspect the things people believe in are usually just what they instinctively feel is right; the excuses, the justifications, the things you're supposed to argue about, come later. They're the least important part of the belief. That's why you can destroy them, win an argument, prove the other person wrong, and still they believe what they did in the first place." He looked at Erens. "You've attacked the wrong thing."* But this was also before I got into technical pursuits which lend us hope that the above grim realism can be defeated by self-awareness, quantification, and epistemic care. Sometimes. - Galef type: **Theory 2** - model of what makes something succeed or fail & **Values 2** - thought experiments for you to reflect on how you feel about something. **Style 3** - tickles your aesthetic sense in a way that obliquely makes you a more interesting, generative thinker.
Science Fictions: The Epidemic of Fraud,	Wonderful introduction to meta-science. I've been obsessively tracking bad science since I was a teen, and I still learned loads of new examples. (Remember that time NASA falsely declared the discovery of an unprecedented lifeform? Remember that time the best university in Sweden completely cleared their murderously fraudulent surgeon?)

Bias, Negligence and Hype in Science (2020) by Stuart Ritchie	Science has gotten a bit fucked up. But at least we know about it, and at least it's the one institution that has a means and a track record of unfucking itself. Ritchie is a master at handling controversy, at producing satisfying syntheses - he has the unusual ability to take the valid points from opposing factions. So he'll happily concede that "science is a social construct" - in the solid, trivial sense that we all should concede it is. He'll hear out someone's proposal to *intentionally* bring political bias into science, and simply note that, while it's well-intentioned, we have less counterproductive options. Don't get the audiobook: Ritchie is describing a complex system of interlocking failures. I need diagrams for that sort of thing. Ritchie is fair, funny, and actually understands the technical details. Supercedes my previous fave pop-meta-scientist, Ben Goldacre.
Intelligence: All That Matters (2015) by Stuart Ritchie	Calm empirical overview. Incredibly clearly written, stopping short of off-puttingly plain. Is the *g* theory of intelligence the most mature, replicated theory in psychology? 100 years old and ever-replicating; language- and culture-blind by now; at least somewhat predictive of some terminal values... What can compete? Operant conditioning, I guess. This book is part of the "All that Matters" series - a coincidental subtitle which has no doubt enraged many people and caused him no end of grief. I highly recommend his Twitter.
What is this thing called Knowledge? (2006) by Duncan Pritchard	None yet
Axiomatic (1990) by Greg Egan	(Probably 5 stars on re-read) Phenomenal. (Usually not nice phenomena, but always strong phenomena.) Every one of these produced an effect in me, from deep grimace to snort to total pathos. It took me a month to read 18 stories, because it is stressful to encounter characters this vivid in scenarios this brutal.* Every story has an actual logic - often a fantastical one, like the retrocausal literally-hypothetical boddhisatva posthumans of 'Eugene'. He has few peers in thinking this hard and making you feel the thought. What *Black Mirror* could have been: thought experiments like self-aware spears. Ranking: 1. The Hundred-Light-Year Diary 2. The Moral Virologist. (Nauseating, lyrical evil.) 3. Into Darkness 4. Axiomatic

5. Unstable Orbits in the Space of Lies
6. Learning to be me
7. Eugene
8. The Safe-Deposit Box
9. The caress
10. The Walk
11. Seeing
12. The Vat
13. A Kidnapping
14. The Cutie
15. Closer
16. The Infinite Assassin
17. Appropriate Love
18. Blood Sisters

The worst of these is still well above average for sci-fi - clever, satisfying plot, sympathetic characters, moment of awesome. (I tested this here; Egan's entry, weak for him, was still the best in the collection. It would be last, here.)

> *doing whatever it was designed to do. Enabling multiple orgasms of the left kneecap. Making the colour blue taste like the long-lost memory of mother's milk. Or, hardwiring a premise: I will succeed. I am happy in my job. There is life after death. Nobody died in Belsen. Four legs good, two legs bad . . .*

> *The next rack contained a selection of religions, everything from Amish to Zen. (Gaining the Amish disapproval of technology this way apparently posed no problem; virtually every religious implant enabled the user to embrace far stranger contradictions.) There was even an implant called Secular Humanist ('You WILL hold these truths to be self-evident!'). No Vacillating Agnostic, though; apparently there was no market for doubt.*

I could write something about each of these; sometimes hundreds of words.

	Next time. * It is probably best to treat this book as 2 or 3 small collections, for savouring and emotional rest. --- How does it do as serious science fiction? *Social development*: A great deal. Personal identity is twisted and torn a dozen times, and he sketches the social structures which would have to arise when there are two of you, none of you, half of you, chimeras. The Ndoli devices illustrate that social consensus *replaces* philosophy for most people. When perfect cloning and brain transplants are available - when medicine's grasp over injury is total - he still brings it back to hard economics, the small print. Better on this than Chiang, his great peer. *Software development*: Not a huge amount but enough. He knows that brain transplants couldn't work without software, and the Ndoli devices are an excellent picture of machine learning, even 25 years later, after the field became more than a toy. *Actual Science*: Half of these stem from an extrapolation of current science (transplants, brain editing, cloning, brain emulation, BioArt), rather than say the apriori thought experiments of Chiang. And not just science: combinatorics! Actual probability! But even his flights of fancy (like the programmable wormhole with bizarre physics of 'Into Darkness') are internally consistent, and display serious attempt to take physics or biology seriously.
Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude 1872-1921 (1996) by Ray Monk	None yet
A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation (2000) by Peter Singer	None yet
Odds & Ends: Introducing Probability & Decision with a Visual Emphasis () by Jonathan	A beautiful thing. Humorous, careful, with plenty of depth just under the surface. It gives only the classical view, only the point estimate bit, only normal utility theory. If you are comfortable with formalism it is too slow. But it connects logic and probability and decision in the appropriately deep way. I didn't get any decision theory in philosophy class. Even in my economics classes Rational Choice was presented as a done deal, not argued for on the bedrock of expected value and Bayes. And it was a theoretical curio, not really for personal consumption.

Weisberg	This part of philosophy still gives me hope and awe - the hacker's end of formal/information-theoretic/Bayesian epistemology and 'science. The common thread is paying such close attention to maths and science that they begin to fade into it. Weisberg goes as far as some open questions, like probabilistic abduction and Bertrand's paradox. (It is important to show newbies more than just the finished part of the building.) I was looking for a better absolute introduction than Tomassi or Hacking, and found it. Insofar as understanding probability is critical to patching the most common human errors, and insofar as stats is one of the few general thinking tools that really does reliably transfer out of the classroom, this is a vital thing for anyone who wants to think. Insofar as you presently think only in words this is the best object I know. Minus a half for no solution book for the end-of-chapter exercises. (I know why, but still.) Free here
The Philosophy of The Social Sciences (1970) by Alan Ryan	None yet
Einstein: His Life and Universe (2007) by Walter Isaacson	> *Physics becomes in those years the greatest collective work of art of the twentieth century.* - Jacob Bronowski What to say about the stereotypically great? Start by scrubbing off the accumulated century of journalism and appropriations. Einstein's scientific achievements: - • A model of *Brownian motion*: the decisive argument for the existence of atoms. His model enabled experimental confirmation of Dalton's theory, after a hundred years of denial or instrumentalism. - • An elementary particle, the *photon*. The atomic hypothesis applied even to light. - • A law for the *photoelectric effect*, implying a quantum theory of all EM radiation. (A realist about quanta, unlike Planck.) - • So also lots of pieces of the *"old" quantum theory*. - • A theory of light and so space and time, *special relativity*.

-
    - A physical constraint on metaphysics: no absolute time.

-
    - A fairly consequential law, mass-energy equivalence

-
- A flawed but progressive theory of heat capacity, the *Einstein theory of solids*

-
- A better method of analysing quantum systems, "EBK". An ignored semiclassical precursor to quantum chaos theory.

-
- The greatest scientific theory, *General Relativity*. Explaining gravity and, so, the shape of the universe.

-
    - Implies the first modern cosmology

-
    - Gravitational lensing (confirmed 1998)

-
    - Inadvertently predicted dark energy.

-
    - A crucial experiment: gravitational waves. (Confirmed 2015.)

-
    - Implies a whole lot more like black holes but you can't name *everything* "Einstein thing".

-
- A general method for thermodynamics and information theory: Bose-Einstein statistics.

-
- New state of matter: the Bose–Einstein condensate

-
- Fruitful failed theory: first local hidden variable theory

-
- A profound phenomenon, quantum entanglement. (Susskind calls entanglement "Einstein's last great discovery", though he 'discovered' it by trying to reductio away Copenhagen interpretation, taking entanglement to be a disproof.) (Confirmed properly 2015.)

-
    - A crucial experiment for a *metaphysical principle*, local realism is false!: EPR

-
    - Inadvertently, a physical constraint on metaphysics: nonlocality.

-
- Thought-experiment: The content of the "Schrödinger's" cat setup

-
- Repostulation of wormholes. (Not confirmed.)

-
- Isotope separation methods for the Manhattan project.

-
- Also a nontoxic fridge

Besides his own prize, confirmations of Einstein's theories have led to 4 Nobel Prizes (1922, 1923, 1997, 2001) so far, and first-order extensions several more (1927, 1929, 1933 at very least). We should expect a few more, for grav waves and not inconceivably for wormholes, some day.

Isaacson, like most people, portrays Einstein's post-1935 work as a dogmatic waste - he spent about thirty years straining to produce a field theory that could get rid of the spookiness and probabilism of QM. If you compare the output of the first half of his life to the second, sure it looks bad. But he was giving classical physics (determinism, continuousness, simplicity, fierce parsimony, beauty-based reasoning) a well-deserved last shake.

Imagine the strength of will needed to maintain full-time effort over thirty years of failures, with your whipsmart peers all tutting and ignoring you. His unified field efforts are methodologically sort of like string theory: a hubristic search over mathematical forms without contact with the actually physical to help limit the formal space.

And he actually had a decent decision-theoretic argument for his doomed crusade:

> *When a colleague asked him one day why he was spending — perhaps squandering — his time in this lonely endeavor, he replied that even if the chance of finding a unified theory was small, the attempt was worthy. He had already made his name, he noted. His position was secure, and he could afford to take the risk and expend the time. A younger theorist, however, could not take such a risk, for he might thus sacrifice a promising career. So, Einstein said, it was his duty to do it.*

People also try to attach shame to him for his wildly stubborn anti-Copenhagen crusade: years spent thinking up tricky counterexamples for the young mechanicians, like an angry philosopher. But I think he had a good effect on the discourse, constantly calling them to order, and leaving it clear, after all, that it *is* a consistent view of the evidence.

The only unforgiveable bit in his later conservatism is that he ignored the other half of the fundamental forces, the strong and weak forces, and for decades. Two forces was hard enough to unify. I suppose another point against his long, long Advanced Studies is that he could have done even more if he had helped *push* QM along; as late as 1946, Wheeler tried to convince him to join in. As it is we have evidence against the unified field: "*Einstein* failed".

****

Einstein is like Bertrand Russell, only *much* more so: even more brilliant, even more rebellious, even more politically active, even more aloof, even more relentless, even more neglectful of his family. (Russell, on hearing relativity for the first time: "*To think I have spent my life on absolute muck*.")

Along with Ibn Rushd, Leonardo, Pascal, Leibniz, Darwin, Peirce, Russell, Turing, Chomsky, Mackay*, Einstein is one of our rare *complete* intellectuals: huge achievements in science, beautiful writing, good jokes, original philosophy, moral seriousness. To have warmth too, as Einstein does abundantly, doesn't have much of a precedent. However much Einstein is misattributed vaguely pleasant, vaguely droll, vaguely radical statements, the fact is he actually *was* brilliant, pleasant, funny, radical. Believe the hype.

* The usual word is 'polymath', sure, but although we are mad keen on polymaths, their generalism is seen as a laudable extra, rather than the *vital* service I now think they alone can give: you want people who have proven they can discover truths to tackle your ancient ill-defined questions (beauty, justice, existence).

And you can't do good unless you *know* a great deal about the targets of your morals; you want the vast imaginative search over philosophical possibilities to be aided by what we actually know. (As the noted writer against scientism, Ludwig Wittgenstein put it:

> *Is scientific progress useful for philosophy? Certainly. The realities that are discovered lighten the philosopher's task: imagining possibilities.*

)

Maxwell, Boltzmann, Schrödinger, and Feynman basically fit the above: they are as good at writing and philosophy as they are at physics, and very funny to boot. But they didn't push society forward much (...) Goethe tried admirably, but didn't achieve much science. Descartes should definitely be on there but eh. Hilary Putnam discovered important logical results and has all the other virtues, but I guess science is a stretch?. von Neumann covered perhaps the most intellectual ground of all of these people, but I'm not sure he had a moral or political life to

speak of. Herbert Simon is deep and broad and fun. And Bohr is brilliant and moral but can't write.

(There's others I'd include, but won't because I know I'm a fanboy** / it is too soon to say: Scott Aaronson, David Pearce, Nick Bostrom.)

** A new Moore's paradox: "I know I'm a fanboy, but my thinker is still better than your thinker."

****

What was so moral about him? Well, he was ahead of his time (still is):

- Denounced WWI as the senseless crap it was.
- Never went to the Soviet empire (despite repeated invites).
- Denounced the Nazis from '31, despite/because of public threats to his life.
- Flipped from pacifism at the right moment.
- Many early actions for US civil rights, including work against McCarthyism.
- Sold his original manuscripts for War Bonds

Even his Zionism was enlightened (pro-migration, anti-state, anti-Begin):

> *"Should we be unable to find a way to honest cooperation and honest pacts with the Arabs," he wrote [Chaim] Weizmann in 1929, "then we have learned absolutely nothing during our 2,000 years of suffering."*
>
> *He proposed, both to Weizmann and in an open letter to an Arab leader, that a "privy council" of four Jews and four Arabs, all independent-minded, be set up to resolve any disputes. "The two great Semitic peoples," he said, "have a great common future." If the Jews did not assure that both sides lived in harmony, he warned*

> *friends in the Zionist movement, the struggle would haunt them in decades to come. Once again, he was labeled naïve.*

****

One particularly charming bit in this book covers Einstein's long friendship with the Queen Mother of Belgium. When Szilard warns him that nuclear fission has been achieved and could give the Nazis dominion over all, Einstein's first thought is to ask Elisabeth to sort it out, by grabbing all the Central African uranium and sending it far from the Nazis. (As it happens, the *Uranverein* got their uranium from Czechoslovakia.)

****

Isaacson read all the letters, formed a view on all the academic controversies (Maric's contribution, baby Lieserl, what sort of deist or Zionist or pacifist he was), and covers most of the papers, recasting the classic thought experiments very lucidly. This was a huge pleasure. Read with Wikipedia open, though: C20th physics and its physicists are way too deep and broad for one book.
</td> </tr>

The Man Who Knew Infinity: A Life of the Genius Ramanujan (1991) by Robert Kanigel	One of the best biographies I've ever read. (The subtitle says it is about Ramanujan, but it is equally about Hardy, that perfect British intellect: more crystalline than Russell, more lofty than Moore, more self-critical than Hare, more fun than anyone, loveable atop it all.) Ramanujan's story is of course maximally moving to anyone with a shred of curiosity or pity. The most moving part of all is an absence, one of the darker thoughts among all thoughts: > *How many Ramanujans, his life begs us to ask, dwell in India today, unknown and unrecognized? And how many in America and Britain, locked away in racial or economic ghettos, scarcely aware of worlds outside their own?* His research is patent throughout: he decodes South Indian religion and cuisine, British upper-class slang, and even something of the impressiveness of higher mathematics, while using mere natural language: > *Ramanujan's work grants direct pleasure to only a few - a few hundred mathematicians and physicists around the world, perhaps a few thousand. The rest of us must either sit on the sidelines, and, on the authority of the cognoscenti, cheer - or else rely on vague, metaphoric, and necessarily imprecise glimpses of his work.* > *...mathematics is not best learned passively; you don't sop it up like a romance novel. You've got to go out to it, aggressive, and alert, like a chess master pursuing checkmate.*

	Ramanujan himself left a tiny dense literature that we are still decoding: > *Ramanujan's notebooks formed a distinctly idiosyncratic record. In them even widely standardized terms sometimes acquired new meaning. Thus, an "example" — normally, as in everyday usage, an illustration of a general principle — was for Ramanujan often a wholly new theorem. A "corollary" — a theorem flowing naturally from another theorem and so requiring no separate proof — was for him sometimes a generalization, which did require its own proof. As for his mathematical notation, it sometimes bore scant resemblance to anyone else's.* Many passages raise goosebumps: Kanigel unites the abstract and the bodily, the true and the human all-too-human. > *You cannot say much about Ramanujan without resorting to the word self. He was self-willed, self-directed, self-made. Some might conceivably label him selfish for his preoccupation with doing the mathematics he loved without any great concern for the better of his family or his country...* > *Hardy discovered Ramanujan? Not at all: a glance at the facts of 1912 shows that Ramanujan discovered Hardy.* A life-giving book.
White Noise (1985) by Don DeLillo	> *The drug could be dangerous, after all. I was not a believer in easy solutions, something to swallow that would rid my soul of an ancient fear. But I could not help thinking about that saucer-shaped tablet...* > *Tumbling from the back of my tongue down to my stomach. The drug core dissolving, releasing benevolent chemicals into my bloodstream, flooding the fear-of-death part of my brain. The pill itself silently self-destructing in a tiny inward burst, a polymer implosion, discreet and precise and considerate. Technology with a human face.* Exhausting - but funny! - postmodern critique of postmodernism. Maybe David Foster Wallace did it better but this is still a thrill
Fear and Trembling (1843) by Søren Kierkegaard	None yet
The Gig Economy () by Zero HP Lovecraft	None yet
Seven Surrenders (Terra Ignota, #2)	It is so, so striking to see Palmer, who obviously lavishes enormous systematic attention on "worldbuilding", blow her own world up.

(2017) by Ada Palmer	
The Cult of Statistical Significance: How the Standard Error Costs Us Jobs, Justice, and Lives (2008) by Deirdre N. McCloskey	Not the earliest critic - that's Meehl or Freedman or Gosset himself - but the most readable. You don't necessarily need to read past page 100, it's recapitulation. Very short version here.
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) by James Joyce	To use yourself for art you need a really interesting life, or sheer expressive skill - the ability to force anything to be interesting. Neither is easy: someone like Montaigne manages easily, but e.g. Rousseau doesn't (he just got there first, to the I Am Art game, so we have to talk about him). Joyce's life is only mildly interesting from the outside, so it falls to his evocation. I read this to find out whether to care about him, and I actually didn't until Part III, the rightly famous spiritual arc from apatheistic teenage kicks, to the ecstatic shame of submitting to the vast closed Catholic system, and through it to passionate agnosticism, anticlerical naturalism. Joyce's is the best portrait of the infinite terrorism of the Church: > *remember, my dear boys, that we have been sent into this world for one thing and for one thing alone: to do God's holy will and to save our immortal souls. All else is worthless.* > *As he crossed the square, walking homeward, the light laughter of a girl reached his burning ear. The frail, gay sound smote his heart more strongly than a trumpet blast, and, not daring to lift his eyes, he turned aside and gazed, as he walked, into the shadow of the tangled shrubs. Shame rose from his smitten heart and flooded his whole being. The image of Emma appeared before him and under her eyes the flood of shame rushed forth anew from his heart. If she knew to what his mind had subjected her or how his brute-like lust had torn and trampled upon her innocence! Was that boyish love? Was that chivalry? Was that poetry? The sordid details of his orgies stank under his very nostrils.* As a teen Stephen tries to mortify himself, to not look at women, to not eat well, to just look at the mud. But he's too bright, too worldly and too proud. I cheered at the end of Part IV, when he throws off the yoke. The prose is port wine: lovely if sipped. It is mostly monologue but the dialogue is the best bit. He is passionate about anything, e.g. algebra - > *The equation on the page of his scribbler began to spread out a widening tail, eyed and starred like a peacock's; and, when the eyes and stars of its indices had been eliminated, began slowly to fold itself together again. The indices appearing and disappearing were eyes opening and closing; the eyes opening and closing were stars being born and being quenched. The vast cycle of starry life bore his weary mind outward to its verge and inward to its centre, a distant music accompanying him outward and inward. What music? The music came nearer and he recalled the words,*

	> *the words of Shelley's fragment upon the moon wandering companionless, pale for weariness. The stars began to crumble and a cloud of fine stardust fell through space.* > *The dull light fell more faintly upon the page whereon another equation began to unfold itself slowly and to spread abroad its widening tail. It was his own soul going forth to experience, unfolding itself sin by sin, spreading abroad the bale-fire of its burning stars and folding back upon itself, fading slowly, quenching its own lights and fires. They were quenched: and the cold darkness filled chaos.* The painful process of moving past family, nation, church, scholastic philosophy, to become yourself. Doing this in a country as maniacal about nation and church as eC20th Ireland was so much harder, and indeed he had to leave. He doesn't move past Art, and acquires a similarly monomanaical view of it - > *[To be an artist], a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life* but if my prose was as good as Joyce's maybe I couldn't have moved past it either. Like Nietzsche if he wasn't an edgelord. That printers and governments treated Joyce and Lawrence the same is a laugh: Joyce has all of Lawrence's passion and none of the flat feet. Self-parody, odd humility, laughter at his own past dogmatism. His memory - or his notetaking? - is amazing: scholars have spent lifetimes checking and relating *everything* in this to recorded history, and he's usually spot on about details (though he changes names). I don't think I could write anything as accurate, even in my surveillance society. Fully half of my edition was taken up in footnotes and bibliophilia. (It also left Joyce's typos in, which is a bit much. In fact half the footnotes were as trivial as typos, e.g. pointing out where lines are reused from his draft *Stephen Hero*.) *Portrait* stops before the end of uni, before his odyssey, before his wife even. And much of the last section is a surprisingly flat, academic statement of Thomist aesthetics. But by then you've heard enough to love him anyway.
The Periodic Table (1975) by Primo Levi	None yet
The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money (2018) by	A powerful book, remarkably light on ideology given its extreme conclusions. (Caplan is not mad: he is right behind universal numeracy and literacy. So the title should be "Case Against Higher Education" but oh well.) Here's a flavour: > *I have a long list of strange and extreme views, and I've been an arrogant hedgehog for as long as I can remember. As a rule, arrogant hedgehogs with lots of strange and extreme views are severely biased*

Bryan Caplan

> *and grossly unreliable. Which raises two daunting questions.*
>
> *The Reputational Challenge: Why should people take me seriously? Even if I happen to be correct, why would a reasonable person bother giving me a chance?*
>
> *The Self-Referential Challenge: Why should I take myself seriously? Why should I consider myself so epistemically superior to the typical arrogant hedgehog with lots of strange and extreme views?*
>
> *In all honesty, I take both challenges seriously. But it's the self-referential challenge that weighs on me. I can endure the apathy of others, but not the idea that I'm living a lie. So what should I do?*

What might explain the universal appeal of education?

1. 1. learning specific facts and hard skills (private and social gain)
2. 2. learning general rationality and meta-skills (private and social gain)
3. 3. learning soft skills (private and social gain)
4. 4. credentialing: showing off how smart, conscientious, conformist you are (zero-sum private gain)
5. 5. culture fit: showing employers you are their kind of person (private gain)
6. 6. networking (private gain)
7. 7. assortative mating at university (near-zero-sum private gain)
8. 8. primary schools are daycare (private gain by proxy (parents), social gain (doubling workforce))
9. 9. it's fun (private gain)
10. 10. conspicuous consumption (zero-sum private gain)
11. 11. state propaganda about how developed the country is. (zero-sum and of no private or social gain)

His conclusion is that about 80% of the personal economic gains from higher education are from (4): *not* improving your character, knowledge, or ability, but rather from certifying yourself as a good worker (smart, conscientious, conformist). Given the vast cost, time sink, and psychological toll of education, this implies a hugely wasteful, zero-sum arms race (grade inflation, degree inflation), since the income gain doesn't reflect productivity gain, and since we could be doing signalling in less indirect and foolish ways. I'll do a proper rundown of the (many) arguments he gives to end up at this separately.

The mostly-signalling theory explains a huge number of confusing features (why do students and employers not value Ivy League MOOCs, even ten

	years on? Why are most of the income rewards concentrated in the instant of graduation? Why do students cheer when class is cancelled? If lectures are so economically powerful, why don't people just sit in on them without enrolling (and why doesn't the university put security on them to protect their livelihood)? How can human capital explain the income gains, when people forget almost everything about their major within 5 years and don't show very large soft skill increases? You often see people trumpeting the large (50-60%) income premium of higher education, as if that showed that added human capital was the reason for the premium (cough, correlation / causation). But even granting that uncritical leap, there's something strange about focussing on private income gains: the kind of people who believe in the centrality of education tend also to believe that pay is a poor indicator of social value. (For instance, our incredibly low opinion of investment bankers.) Caplan's disturbing point is that the private returns do not translate into social returns. This seeming paradox could happen a few ways: if credential inflation shifts jobs from nongraduates to graduates; or if there *are* minor human capital gains, but swamped out by the huge financial cost and time cost of uni. My philosophy department used to trumpet graduate income stats as evidence that critical thinking is valued in industry. (They don't anymore, possibly because philosophy is now associated with decreased earnings, at least in the UK.) This trump was an amusing triple failure of critical thinking: they confuse correlation and causation ("philosophy degree and income gain, therefore philosophy degree causes income gain"), fail to consider selection effects (philosophy students start out posher than the average student) *and* the *Yes Minister* fallacy: 1. A philosophy degree causes an income premium. 2. If something causes an income premium then it is valued in industry. 3. A philosophy degree causes critical thinking. 4. Therefore, critical thinking is valued in industry. The big concern with the sweeping cuts Caplan recommends is: how do you stop poor people losing their ability to signal their virtues, if the state withdraws the current subsidy? Remarkably, the book is in large part not based on economists' research: there is as much sociology, . This triangulation strikes me as the way to write lasting social science, social science with a chance of still being relevant in a decade. Who writes like this, aside from the GMU mob? Caplan is modest, thoughtful, an admirable empiricist. If you can't accept his argument you have a lot of work to do before you break even.
Probabilistic Reasoning in Intelligent Systems: Networks	> *probability is not really about numbers, it is about the structure of reasoning* -Glen Shafer By no means an introductory book; even chapter 1 will mean little to you if

of Plausible Inference (1988) by Judea Pearl

you haven't tried to model situations with both formal logic and probabilities before. (Some set theory wouldn't go amiss either.) Parts of it treat nearly-irrelevant dead controversies, just because he was still fighting off the McCarthy / production systems programme in the late Eighties. (For instance, I learned Dempster-Shafer theory in class, and it is sorta interesting and neatly evades Cox's theorem, but I still expect never to have to use it. It gets more than 50 pages here.) Bayesian networks, ingenious and progressive as they were, have peaked in use, though their children are still cutting edge and invaluable for human and nonhuman reasoning.

All that said: Pearl thinks very hard about ultimate matters. He didn't develop Bayesian networks (and causal models) as a hack, but instead as a consequence of showing probabilities to be better than the alternatives when tweaked for computation, subjective Bayesianism to be capable of handling causal inference, graphs as the natural data structure for both relevance and cause, and the causal/evidential decision theory distinction as primal.

> *On the surface, there is really no compelling reason that beliefs, being mental dispositions about unrepeatable and often unobservable events, should combine by the laws of proportions that govern repeatable trials such as the outcomes of gambling devices. The primary appeal of probability theory is its ability to express useful qualitative relationships among beliefs and to process these relationships in a way that yields intuitively plausible conclusions… What we wish to stress here is that the fortunate match between human intuition and the laws of proportions is not a coincidence. It came about because beliefs are formed not in a vacuum but rather as a distillation of sensory experiences...*
>
> *We therefore take probability calculus as an initial model of human reasoning from which more refined models may originate, if needed. By exploring the limits of probability in machine implementations, we hope to identify conditions under which extensions, refinements and simplifications are warranted.*

Building AI as feedback for formal epistemology! My favourite philosophers are technical like David Lewis; my favourite technical people are philosophical like Pearl.

He's also very good at taking us through a derivation and underlining the big implications (e.g. P(A) = \sum P(A|B_i) P(B_i) as a model for hypothetical reasoning: belief in event A is a weighted sum over belief in all the ways A can obtain). There's plenty of maths in here but I never struggled much, probably because of this qualitative care of his.

PRIS beats the arse off his own 2018 effort, perhaps because at this point he was still working incredibly hard to understand and synthesise competing approaches. Hard to rate. But if you want to seriously think about AI, you'll want to read it at some point.

Misc notes

* McCarthy is to probabilities as Minsky is to neural nets. He sent us down a rabbit hole, chasing nonmonotonic logic solutions to a numerical problem.

	(See also Chomsky vs prob language models.) * Others have used Pearl's vision to explain the ideal form of rationality, which humans depart from. * His discussion of extensional (hacking out a generalised logic) vs intensional (possible-world counting) approaches to uncertainty seems fundamental to me, bedrock. * The heart of the matter: Bayesnets are O(n) in variables, but actually with some complicated tweaks so are Dempster-Shafer galleries. * Dempster-Shafer is an interesting example of the contingency of (the context of discovery of) mathematics. It didn't have to be developed (since probs are adequate for so much), and yet it was, and it evades the normal arguments against other uncertainty measures and is thus alive, if unpopular. (Compare noneuclidean geometries.) What other dominant calculi would get similarly competing theories, if we threw a few decades of brilliance at them?
Beggars in Spain (Sleepless, #1) (1993) by Nancy Kress	Big, moving dynasty novel about a future class war. Elitism vs racism, individualism vs collectivism, negative freedom vs positive freedom, UBI and/or dignity. Kress' stated goal is to bring together Rand's ideal and Le Guin's (ambiguous) ideal and see how they spark off each other, their repulsion dance. The first two books seem simple: a good basic dramatisation of the excellence vs equality problem. But stick with it, dialectic comes. Kress is much better at inhabiting other views than Rand, but not quite as good as Le Guin (who surprised me with how ambivalent, careful and detached her books can be, when her essays are so often blunt and denunciatory). Unlike them, Kress allows her ubermenschen to be irrational, as when the Sleepers fall into stupid binary demonisation of the majority outgroup. The Sanctuary bunch start as Objectivists, but are twisted by Jennifer's wealth and terrorism into the worst totalitarian collectivism - one without even pity for misfortune. She climbs inside libertarianism, productivism, Objectivism, elitism - half of the protagonists are deeply, unreflectively into these ideologies for half the book. Leisha finds one fatal flaw with them - society is not a linear series of contracts but a chaotic informal web of micro-contracts and unthinking mutual structuration, with a thin layer of formal voluntary contracts on top. > *She remembered the day she had realized that [Objectivist] economics were not large enough. Their stress on individual excellence left out too many phenomena, too many people: those who had no excellence and never would. The beggars, who nonetheless had definite if obscure roles to play in the way the world ran. They were like parasites on a mammal that torment it to a scratching frenzy that draws blood, but whose eggs serve as food for other insects that feed yet others who fatten the birds that are prey for the rodents the tormented mammal eats. A bloody ecology of trade, replacing the linear Yagaiist contracts occurring in a vacuum. The ecology was large enough to take Sleepers and Sleepless, producers and beggars, the excellent and the mediocre and the seemingly worthless. And what kept the ecology functioning was the law.* Miranda and the supers find another, which is that fortune can mock anyone regardless of momentary strength or weakness. > *Tony, Leisha said silently, there are no permanent beggars in Spain. Or anywhere else. The beggar you give a dollar to today might change the world tomorrow. Or become father to the man who will. Or grandfather, or great-grandfather. There is no stable ecology of trade, as I thought*

> *once, when I was very young. There is no stable anything, much less stagnant anything, given enough time. And no nonproductive anything, either. Beggars are only gene lines temporarily between communities.*

The hyper-precocious kids are about as off-putting as those in *Ender's Game*. I wish she had only given the Sleepless more time than the unmodified - not superintelligence and immortality to boot. This would still be enough to create the tension the plot needs, they'd just grow with a lower exponent, maybe taking 150 rather than 40 years.

Everyone in this book, plus maybe Kress herself, are in serious need of the first lesson of first year economics, comparative advantage. This says, roughly, that it actually isn't a fatal problem if someone is better than you at every different economic task: they still have limited time, so they can still gain from trading with you (you each produce the thing you're best at making then swap some). This understates the problem with launching your entire city population into space, which is that you've just made transactions costs a thousand times more expensive (Y-energy or no). It would be so hard to make Sanctuary profitable, and yet it's implied to be about the GDP of the entire Decadent 20% Productive USA.

Kress portrays a couple of neglected ideologies. One, which determines just as much of world events as liberalism or socialism, has only the ugly name 'productivism' (or maybe also the misleading name 'workaholism'). Leisha is a classic example. On worrying that her elderly stepmother might be just farting around the house:

> *Leisha had felt a palpable relief, like a small pop in her chest, when she saw the terminal and medical journals in Susan's office.*

On her relationship trouble:

> *"We're fine, Susan. We work together really well. That's what really matters, after all."*

You can laugh at someone missing the point of life so much, but you should consider how much of what you value depends on people like this. And, when summarised into the long-term growth rate, how much of the vast potential of the future does. (Ada Palmer covers this exact dynamic, as the romantic "vocateurs", people of vocation.) And another ideology neglected in fiction: Leisha is a rare instance of "bleeding-heart libertarianism" (another ugly name).

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* Kress:

> *Genetic engineering is becoming a reality, one that many people are not ready to acknowledge, let alone allow. But you cannot put the genie back in the bottle. We know how to manipulate the human genome and so, inevitably, we will. The two sequels to Beggars in Spain, Beggars and Choosers and Beggars Ride, explore that issue in as much detail as I could invent. Even so, I didn't come close to covering the excitement, the changes, the shock, and the controversy that genetic engineering will bring in the coming decades. I just wish that I could stick around for a hundred years or so to see it—and to write about it.*

Nah mate not a hundred years; try thirty.

* There are eventually 4 classes: Livers (the idle cosseted underclass), Donkeys (the unmodified workers, the elite Sleepers), Norm Sleepless and the Super Sleepless. Ordered pair of ordered pairs.

* One key to the conflicts is that people have grown used to certain ancient inequalities of degree, but new or qualitative ones should awake all of our envy and rage

> *Beautiful or brainy children might encounter natural envy, but usually not virulent hatred. They were not viewed as a different race, one endlessly conspiring at power, endlessly controlling behind the scenes, endlessly feared and scorned. The Sleepless,*

* Most of the big interventions in the book fail. Yagai's gift to the US enables its slide into total indolence and short-termist hedonism. Hawke's nasty uprising for dignified labour morphs into shallow hedonistic *Idiocracy*, voting for more party money instead of doing things.

* Sanctuary is grandly sick, a monarchy masquerading as half a democracy. (It is not quite as sick and complete as the totalitarianism in Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky*.) The mad monarch, Jennifer is a blank evil cipher for almost the whole book, eventually cracking during the final confrontation.

> *This… child, this girl who had never been spat upon because she was Sleepless… never locked in a room by a mother who was putrid with jealousy of a beauty her daughter would never lose, even as the mother's beauty was inexorably fading… never locked in a cell away from her children… never betrayed by a husband who hated his own sleeplessness… this spoiled and pampered child who had been given everything was attempting to thwart her, Jennifer Sharifi, who had brought Sanctuary into its very being by the force of her own will.*

> *The children looked at their shoes. They were afraid of her, Jennifer saw. That was not bad; fear was only the ancient word for respect.*

She's a paranoid idiot, or rather mindkilled by fear and the dread ruthlessness of a survivor. Witness her adhoc patching of the edge cases of personhood on Sanctuary, her silly fixation on mere sleep and mere relative productivity, which is her downfall. And: What good outcome *could* there have been from her bioterrorist secession? She's an effective villain despite her inertness because she's so good at manipulating smart well-meaning people into vice. The horror of sophistry.

> *She has a right to her life, whatever it is now!"*
> *Jennifer said, "The real question is, do we have the right to sacrifice someone else's life to the care of hers?"*

* Libertarianism could be a lovely thing, for some other species. It builds a philosophy of life from a completely different direction than mine: top-

down, from grand general ideas to morals and behaviour. (Has anyone teased them for having a top-down philosophy which demands the abolition of top-down forces?) The bottom-up approach, missing from this book, is to instead move from experiences, which motivate morals and nonmorals just by you understanding what it is like to experience them. Any subject of experience deserves good; the legal and political implications are distantly contingent on this, and vary massively from time to time as a result. Productivity is good when it leads to good lives: the enlightened definition of 'productive' is whatever does this. If pushpin or cartoons give you pleasure, they're productive. It just happens that there is generally currently millions of times more productive things to do. (The Livers are aesthetically repugnant to me, but eh their lives are better than most.) This isn't as vacuous as it sounds: consider the remarkable goodness of (most of) Jeremy Bentham's beliefs, in a time of universal bigotry. We got better, but we're still not optimising for good vibes.

* "Community" is mostly malign here: the zero-sum nativism of We-Sleep, the incoherent defensive supremacism of Sanctuary. The idea does have a black heart: "*us, not them*", but there are better, nicer examples. (I suppose the Supers are the steelman.) The one grace of the instances here is separatism: they don't initially demand mutilation or submission, just space for their difference. We-Sleep is also a pretty weak exemplar for socialism.

> *“Wake up, Jordan. No social movement has ever progressed without emphasizing division, and doing that means stirring up hate. The American revolution, abolitionism, unionization, civil rights—”*
> *“That wasn’t—”*
> *“At least we didn’t invent this particular division—the Sleepless did. Feminism, gay rights, Dole franchisement—”*

* The depiction of the supers' thought process is good and novel - they build and collaborate on "strings", complicated visual argumentation models, replacing natural language.

* What is Kress' view? It's not that good a question, given that she's trying to do dialectic between ideologies, and does it pretty well. But if we let Leisha's mature view stand in, there are some authorial-sounding notes

> *And throughout it all, the United States: rich, prosperous, myopic, magnificent in aggregate and petty in specifics, unwilling — always, always — to accord mass respect to the mind. To good fortune, to luck, to rugged individualism, to faith in God, to patriotism, to beauty, to spunk or pluck or grit or git, but never to complex intelligence and complex thought. It wasn’t sleeplessness that had caused all the rioting; it was thought and its twin consequences, change and challenge.*

Leisha settles on the idea that it is impossible to reconcile solidarity and high-variance freedom, that the attempt to reconcile them drove Jennifer and the US mad.

> *When individuals are free to become anything at all, some will become geniuses and some will become resentful beggars. Some will benefit themselves and their communities, and others will benefit no one and just loot whatever they can. Equality disappears. You can’t have both equality and the freedom to pursue individual excellence.*

	The book's answer is to not take either horn, to just juggle the contradiction forever. I don't see the dilemma really; you just separate moral worth from ability, then automate the economy: boom, equality and freedom. --- Maybe five stars on re-read, though the prose might be a bit flat for that (aside from a couple of moving passages, all quoted above) and maybe the dialectic is too heavy-handed. --- *How does it do as Serious science fiction?* *Social development*: Strong. The various caste systems that spring up are believable - for instance the Liver/Donkey one, where the donkeys downplay their own work and set up society as a circus, to short-circuit the questions of employment, dignity, status, revolution. Her nativists are very plausible, though they speak less about "natural life" than I expect ours to (the Sleepers seem happy with any genetic modification besides sleeplessness). The elitism of the Sleepless is just a stronger form of the sort already held by certain merely slightly more productive conservatives. Much of the economics is questionable though, particularly the C21st self-sufficient space city of 80,000(?). *Software development*: Good, though high-level even by fiction's standards. The plot hangs on software (including patent databases), though these are mostly reduced to relative hacking ability. Only Vinge is better. *Actual Science*: Some very sketchy genetics at the heart of the plot but not much. It's not pure magic - she puts realistically heavy limits on the genetic engineering of adults - but the rest is just assumed.
A Companion to Ethics (1991) by Peter Singer	None yet
Too Like the Lightning (Terra Ignota, #1) (2016) by Ada Palmer	SF with prose from the (radical) C18th, written IRL by a historian of that time. A big old bucket of ideas. I loved the many didactic discursions - e.g. de Sade's Christian name being a plot point, sections written in speculative future Latin - but I think most readers will not love them. I did choke a little at the constant coincidences, and at the enslaved protagonist meeting literally every elite in the world in the space of two days. Filled with what some have called out for, "competence porn" - i.e. the elites are manipulative, egotistical, and yet still acting in (what they think are) the best interests of the world. Will probably bump it up to a 5 on re-read. Get past the superficial quaintness, you'll be rewarded.

The People's Act of Love (2003) by James Meek	Found this very striking when I read it 13 years ago, but can't remember why.
Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration (2019) by Bryan Caplan	Beautiful stuff, perhaps the clearest economic argument I've ever seen, and more moving than expected. I've seen people dismiss it as narrowly economic ("people value more than money ya know") but this is stupid: fully half the book is about morals and culture. There are dozens of lovely little easter eggs in Weinersmith's art too (e.g. "Conspicuone Pecansumption" icecream). The arguments: 1. Closed borders lead to incredible suffering - not just the obvious oppression of camps, raids, struggle and drownings, but also the unnecessary perpetuation of poverty. 2. He argues that it's a human rights issue: "*If a foreigner wants to accept a job offer from a willing employer or rent an apartment from a willing landlord, what moral right does anyone have to stop them? These are contracts between consenting adults, not welfare programs.*" The regulation is an apartheid with comparatively little outcry and great popularity. 3. America had completely open borders until 1875 and comparatively-free undocumented immigration until 1924. It did pretty alright. 4. Immigrants on average have been fiscally net-positive. Doing our best to isolate the effects, moving to a rich country seems to multiply your productivity. (For a few reasons: more co-operation, a larger market for your work, no tropical disease, coastal trade, IQ gain if you're young.) This model predicts trillions of dollars of gain from open borders. If true, this massively reduces global poverty. 5. Immigrants are on average culturally positive, allowing the recipient country to select from the best of everything in the world. The first generation are quite a bit more law-abiding than average natives. (Nowrasteh estimates that just one in seven million immigrants turned out to be a terrorist.) Assimilation is high, usually complete within 2-3 generations. "Political externalities" (the idea that your good culture will be voted out by bad culture once you let immigrants vote) have not in fact been seen. Residual points: • The data is mostly from our current highly-restricted high-skill-only immigration regime. It's not clear which effects would change in the dramatically different world Caplan promotes, though he does his best to look at saturation effects and the low-skilled who are currently persecuted-out. (For instance, a large part of his cultural argument depends on the low-skilled continuing to not vote, as they haven't.) • The biggest risk by far is the damage caused by irrational native backlash against foreigners. This produces things like Brexit and the

	Jobbik and Austrian 'Freedom' governments. Chapter 6 addresses some of this by suggesting ways to make things unfair for the migrants (limiting their welfare access, entry tolls, language tests, slow naturalisation) to mollify the local problems / backlash and so protect people's right to move in the first place. I glumly suspect this wouldn't work, because much of the backlash isn't based on real effects, and so can't be mollified by policy. (Indeed, he notes that most of the suggested hobbles *already* exist in US law in some form, and might have somewhat dulled anti-immigration sentiment.) • He sometimes implies that he'd open borders in one big bang - but this size of policy shift should basically never be done, just out of epistemic modesty and reversibility. His counter is that the magnitude of the gains is too large to be possibly less than zero. • It's mostly based on US data and US policy is the target, which is completely fine but limits the inference. This is sensible; general theory, general policy usually fail. • To my surprise he doesn't much emphasise the macropolitical benefits of immigration: if people could just leave countries with terrible policies, taking their taxes with them, this would be a new and powerful check on government abuse. Voting with your feet, and governments actually trying to attract and retain people. • Though its evidence checks out (as far as I can tell), it's still a polemic (like *The Wealth of Nations* before it!). As such it's simple, too simple. The Center for Global Development has a sadder, equivocal summary congruent to the limits of social science: > *No case study or academic paper can—ever—spell out what "the" effect of "immigration" is. Asking this question has as little use as asking whether "taxes" are inherently "good" or "bad." The answer depends on what is taxed and what the revenue is spent on. Those choices make the policy harmful or beneficial. The same is true of migration.*
The Age of Reason (1945) by Jean-Paul Sartre	So nasty, but some great lines.
The Replacing Guilt Series () by Nate Soares	> *pinch yourself, and remember what you are. What do you see?* > *I see bundles of proteins and lipids arranged in a giant colony of cells, lives given over to the implementation of a wet protein computer that thinks it's a person... Look at us, the first species among the animals that can figure out what the stars are, still tightly bound to impulse and social pressure. (Notice how silly it is, monkeys acting all serious and wise as*

> *they try to affect the course of history.)... [but still] see the lost monkey who's trying to steer an entire universe...*

Consequentialism for humans. Important because it is rare for discussions of "demandingness" or "scrupulosity" to speak about specific behavioural patterns or phenomenology. (It also has the most important part of self-help, an awareness that positive advice is never universal: "*remember the law of equal and opposite advice. For every piece of advice useful to one person, there is some other person who needs exactly the opposite advice.*")

(I put off reading this for a whole year, and felt bad about it. So.)

He'd have you move from external motivation to intrinsic motivation because it's more sustainable, and so more effective. He's quite radical about this, ditching normal moral psychology:

> *the way that most people use the word "should," most of the time, is harmful. People seem to use it to put themselves in direct and unnecessary conflict with themselves... imagine the person who wakes up feeling a bit sick. They say to themselves, "ugh, I should go to the pharmacy and pick up medication before work." Now picking up meds feels like an obligation: if they don't get meds, then that's a little bit of evidence that they're incompetent, or akrasiatic, or bad... this disconnects the reason from the task, it abolishes the "why". The person feeling sick now feels like they have an obligation to pick up medication, and so if they do it, they do it grudgingly, resenting the situation... Now imagine they say this, instead: "ugh, if I went to the pharmacy to pick up medication, I'd feel better at work today."*

> *Your true shoulds, if I could show them to you, would not look like a list of obligations. Your true shoulds would look like a recipe for building a utopia.*

> *Many treat their moral impulses as a burden. But I say, find all the parts that feel like a burden, and drop them. Keep only the things that fill you with resolve, the things you would risk life and limb to defend.*

> *I find it amusing that "we need lies because we can't bear the truth" is such a common refrain, given how much of my drive stems from my response to attempting to bear the truth.*

> *"Badness" is not a fundamental property that a person can have. At best, "they're bad" can be shorthand for either "I don't want their goals achieved" or "they are untrained in a number of skills which would be relevant to the present situation"; but in all cases, "they are bad" must be either shorthand or nonsense.*

Wouldn't Nietzsche in his better moods (or Laozi at any time) smile?

The strategy is roughly:

1. Find something to care about. (Obstacles: hiding in bed, defensive relativism or nihilism, hiding in routine.)
2. Drop all obligations and see what you still care about.
3. Build intrinsic drive (change environment, train willpower and habit)
4. Draw on the fact that the world is broken as fuel
5. See guilt as an alien concept, unnecessary for the higher goals.

An important distinction:

* *Listless guilt*: feeling bad because you feel you should do something with your life, but not really thinking about what.
* *Specific guilt*: feeling bad because of unmet obligations to a particular goal.
* *Akrasia guilt*: feeling bad because you're not following the endorsed plan.

One startling bit: some people report that following his advice has "broken" them, in the sense that guilt was indeed propping up their lives. His response is, "good":

> *Some people, when they stop forcing themselves to do things because they "should," will do a bit less to improve the world. They'll bow a bit less to social pressure, and insofar as the social pressure was pushing them to do what you think is good, you might count that as a loss. Some people don't care about things larger than themselves, and that's perfectly fine, and making them more resilient to social pressure might lose the world some charity.*
>
> *I expect that far more charity is lost from people convincing themselves that their altruistic desires are external obligations and resenting them. I expect that most people who feel obligated to improve the world and only do it because they "should" will become much more effective if they stop forcing themselves...*
>
> *You can recover from breaking a few parts of yourself, so long as you're modular rather than fragile.*

(This attitude is *strongly* reminiscent of the person Scott Alexander is incredulous about at the end of this great, great piece, though with instrumental harm.)

I'd probably be more cautious, and advise you not to read this if you don't have lots of slack, support, and stomach for horrible facts. (Soares finds intrinsic motivation in attending to how awful the world is, how much it needs fixing.)

It's short but dense with interesting ideas. (e.g. the nice concise rebuttal of naive internalist egoism.)

Each post repeats its point at least three times, which I suppose is intentional pedagogy, but it made me skim a lot. Soares also often links

	forward to posts you haven't read yet, confusingly. I'm not particularly guilt-ridden or scrupulous, on the scale of things, but I still found this good. Not sure I buy everything in it, but the rough method (move from vague to specific guilt, and then view the specific guilt as an external and unhelpful force in the light of your specific goal) seems sensible. If the following worldview or prose doesn't appeal to you, it's not for you: > *you will not be measured by the number of moments in which you worked as hard as you could. You will not be judged by someone rooting around in your mind to see whether you were good or bad. You will not be evaluated according to how unassailable your explanations are, for why things you couldn't possibly have prevented were the things that went wrong.* > > *You will be measured only by what actually happens... this is the driver that takes the place of guilt... All we need to do, in any given moment, is look upon the actions available to us and take whichever one seems most likely to lead to a future full of light.* Why should we listen to self-help, unless the author has done something impressive? I don't know if you find these things impressive, but they serve.
Do You Think What You Think You Think? (2006) by Julian Baggini	Maybe the first philosophy (nominal philosophy? thing by a philosopher?) I read. Can't quite remember if it was amazing, but I ended up doing philosophy so it can't have been bad.
This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life (2009) by David Foster Wallace	There's been a lot of DFW hate lately – here, here, here, here. But who else marries the syrupy plain with the thrilling theoretical arcane? Could *anyone* fail to understand the retrospectively obvious point of this little lecture? (Roughly just: It requires constant work to divert yourself from egotism and irritation; this work is the point of education and the essence of maturity.) The audience titters throughout the recording; this grates on me. It's the forced, knowing laughter you hear in theatres. I submit that it's this feature of DFW's audience that Ellis and TLP hate. I don't know if reading DFW makes me any less self-obsessed and disdainful, but actually it feels like it might.
How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read (2007) by Pierre Bayard	*In one sentence*: Relax, it's a game. *To be read when*: teenaged; burdened by the thought of the millions of unread books; before going to a posh party. There are too many books; among those worth reading at all, most are best

	skimmed; others are best interpreted via interpreters; you only see part of the possible meaning of the books you've read; and you've forgotten almost anything about even those. So relax and talk about the 'virtual' book, the idea of it, the version of it that you and your interlocutor inadvertently generate between you. The title sounds like vacuous click-bait (indeed, a friend who later wrote his thesis on Bayard initially thought I was recommending something like this fluff). But it is instead all of the following: a thrilling act of virtuoso postmodern over-reading, a serious look at intellectual status and neurosis, a really interesting phenomenology of books, a glowing review of a dozen writers (including my beloved-but-low-status Greene and Lodge), and sheer backwards-land satire. I found it liberating, not because I go round pretending to have read things (a free-rider in literary conversations), but because by the end of my arts degree I had found out, to my surprise and dismay, that high culture is 90% bollocks. Or, maybe: that arts culture is shallow and irrational, a thick and grasping vine overgrowing the lovely lonely tower of great writing and painting. Bayard (or anyway his cheeky narrator) help unhook you from the blind devotion of the reading classes, and lets you face books on your own terms, sceptical and skimming and agentic. I was freed - and immediately started to get technical. And 'Bayard's' style - pointing out the inconvenient but undeniable things about a cherished phenomenon - now reminds me of the arch-rationalist Robin Hanson. Which is where I went next. • Galef type: Values 2 - thought experiments for you to reflect on how you feel about something, & Style 2 - learn a style of thinking by studying the author’s approach to the world Style 3 - tickle your aesthetic sense in a way that obliquely makes you a more interesting, generative thinker
The Art of Procrastination: A Guide to Effective Dawdling, Lollygagging and Postponing (2012) by John R. Perry	> *structured procrastinator: a person who gets a lot done by [consciously] not doing other [important] things.* This book didn't exactly change my life, but it made me feel better about what I was already doing. (Before, I'd been calling it slingshot akrasia.) Structured procrastination is that staple from stand-up comedy where the best way to get yourself to tidy your entire house is to sit down to do your taxes. : All of my reviews, all of my essays were written in the glow and shadow of other things I should've been doing.

> *All procrastinators put off things they have to do. Structured procrastination is the art of making this bad trait work for you. The key idea is that procrastinating does not mean doing absolutely nothing. Procrastinators seldom do absolutely nothing; they do marginally useful things, such as gardening or sharpening pencils or making a diagram of how they will reorganize their files when they find the time. Why does the procrastinator do these things? Because accomplishing these tasks is a way of not doing something more important.*
>
> *If all the procrastinator had left to do was to sharpen some pencils, no force on earth could get him to do it. However, the procrastinator can be motivated to do difficult, timely, and important tasks, as long as these tasks are a way of not doing something more important...*
>
> *Doing those tasks becomes a way of not doing the things higher on the list. With this sort of appropriate task structure, you can become a useful citizen. Indeed, the procrastinator can even acquire, as I have, a reputation for getting a lot done.*
>
> *Procrastinators often follow exactly the wrong tack. They try to minimize their commitments, assuming that if they have only a few things to do, they will quit procrastinating and get them done. But this approach ignores the basic nature of the procrastinator and destroys his most important source of motivation. The few tasks on his list will be, by definition, the most important. And the only way to avoid doing them will be to do nothing. This is the way to become a couch potato, not an effective human being...*
>
> *The second step in the art of structured procrastination is to pick the right sorts of projects for the top of the list. The ideal projects have two characteristics -- they seem to have clear deadlines (but really don't), and they seem awfully important (but really aren't). Luckily, life abounds with such tasks. At universities, the vast majority of tasks fall into those two categories, and I'm sure the same is true for most other institutions...*
>
> *At this point, the observant reader may feel that structured procrastination requires a certain amount of self-deception, since one is, in effect, constantly perpetrating a pyramid scheme on oneself. Exactly... what could be more noble than using one character flaw to offset the effects of another?*

--

Work and study *pressurise* my life. They give me a structure to defy, a gravity assist. I am happiest laden with obligations, when the set of tasks that is my life flies just out of control. I think the mechanism is this:

1. I require a steady stream of variety.
2. Having a job makes my days closely resemble each other.
3. Intolerable resentment.

I am forced to produce creative sparks to satisfy my basic drive.

SP is related to how great I feel when I don't have to go to a party, to my sadly efficient approach to grades, to how giving work to a busy person is a good way of getting it done quicker, i.e. an implausible linear increase of output with increasing things to do. I read more fiction when doing a stats degree and learn more stats when in work.

Antecedents of Perry and me.

Fernando Pessoa:

> *I often wonder what kind of person I would be if I had been protected from the cold wind of fate by the screen of wealth... to reach the tawdry heights of being a good assistant book-keeper in a job that is about as demanding as an afternoon nap and offers a salary that gives me just enough to live on.*
> *I know that, had that past existed, I would not now be capable of writing these pages, which, though few, I would undoubtedly have only day-dreamed, given more comfortable circumstances. For banality is a form of intelligence, and reality, especially if it is brutish and rough, forms a natural complement to the soul. Much of what I feel and think I owe to my work as a book-keeper since the former exists as a negation of and flight from the latter.*

Nietzsche:

> *the struggle against the ecclesiastical oppression of millenniums of Christianity... produced in Europe a magnificent tension of soul, such as had not existed anywhere previously; with such a tensely-strained bow one can now aim at the furthest goals... we have it still, all the distress of spirit and all the tension of its bow! And perhaps also the arrow, the duty, and, who knows? The goal to aim at...*

Geoff Dyer:

> *The best circumstance for writing, I realized... were those in which the world was constantly knocking at your door; in such circumstances, the work you were engaged in generated a kind of pressure, a force to keep the world at bay. Whereas here, on Alonissos, there was nothing to keep at bay, there was no incentive to generate any pressure within the work, and so the surrounding emptiness invaded and dissipated, overwhelmed you with inertia. All you could do was look at the sea and the sky and after a couple of days you could scarcely be bothered to do that.*

Zach Weiner:

> *[After months of working only on my main goal] I took on a job doing closed captioning because I found it [made for] an easier time writing. Just something about talking to people and watching weird media made the writing a lot easier. My new theory of self was that you can't write well unless you have a little strife in your life. I worked at the closed*

	> *captioning job for 4-6 months and by then I was making enough money on the site to responsibly quit my job.* > *The problem was I didn't want to quit my job and have readership fall off because I couldn't write, so my crazy idea was to go back to school. I thought, it'd to be this weird environment, with younger people, and that would be good...* --- Is this platitudinous? It is possible that the grand narration above is delusional, and that the only actual content here is "A lot of people work better under pressure". Don't think so though. YMMV. 5/5 if you don't do this already.
80,000 Hours: Find a fulfilling career that does good () by Benjamin Todd	Collation of results from a very grand project: to channel young careerist thousands into better tasks in higher gear. If you have the will to do well, you should read the website, and think through the planning exercise here. Unlike everything else I've read about career development, since it talks about work and success without being nauseating.
Exhalation: Stories (2019) by Ted Chiang	Wonderful again, worth the wait - 9 stories (including 4 novellas) in 12 years. The defamiliarisation, the perceptual aid in these is the equal of great philosophical work. The best bit is his patience and magnanimity with folk psychology. He is *much* more empathetic with bad philosophy that I am; he builds people very different from himself or me (a worried father writing a moral-panic piece about perfect recall; a young-earth creationist tipped into despair by being god's practice shot), and then around page 10 he flips their philosophy, showing how it unravels in the face of reality, and so makes me look like an idiot zealot for being irritated by them. > *many people became convinced that [alt-timeline creation devices] nullified the moral weight of their actions. Few acted so rashly as to commit murder or other felonies, but...* In "What's Expected of Us" he has "*one-third*" of people driven mad by an intuitive demonstration of their lack of 'libertarian' free will. I don't doubt that *some* would be, but there's no way that one-third of people are that abstract, that philosophically susceptible. The world would look so different if they were. (We have "paradox-absorbing crumple zones", as Futurama puts it.) And as for the ones who did go mad, I would be tutting at them for letting bad philosophy confuse them to death. The title story is just perfect, the story of a robot dissecting itself and thereby learning of the Second Law of Thermodynamics and its emotional implications. It's powerful because it's us. Our waste air is waste heat. Our pressure gradient is a proton gradient. Another distinctive thing: Half the stories have a pair of contrasting narrators, objective and subjective. One of these voices is merely

	expository, apparently styleless. But it just works. I was primed to dislike "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling" from the title alone: despite popular usage, feelings are neither true or false, but instead grounded or ungrounded, helpful or unhelpful. (I was shocked to find this activist taxonomy very useful: valid / justified / effective.) But again it's larger than me: it links the great oral-to-literate transition to a near-future one from analogue-literate to digital-literate. God it's good, like *Black Mirror* if it wasn't relentlessly scaremongering and cheap. Ranked: 1. "Exhalation". 2. "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling" 3. "Omphalos" 4. "The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate" 5. "Anxiety is the Dizziness of Freedom" 6. "The Great Silence" 7. "The Lifecycle of Software Objects" 8. "What's Expected of Us" 9. "Dacey's Patent Automatic Nanny" Not as good as his first collection, but what is? (With Le Guin and Wolfe gone, he might be the reigning master.)
The Selfish Gene (1976) by Richard Dawkins	None yet
Information Theory: A Tutorial Introduction (2015) by James V. Stone	> *rigour follows insight* A pleasure to spend time with. Stone's arguments are complete without being bloated, and he has a keen eye for philosophical and intuitive implications ("Why does maximum information look like pure noise?", "What exactly does half a bit mean?", and much more). This completeness means that he sometimes repeats definitions or lemmas, but I defy you to find this unhelpful. The bibliography is also excellent, ranking a hundred books by their specialty and difficulty. (Quibble: at the end he suggests that Shannon's originality was *so* strong that he "*single-handedly accelerated the rate of scientific progress, and it is entirely possible that, without his contribution, we would still be treating information as if it were some ill-defined vital fluid*". But his work seems so natural and elementary that this would surprise me. Weak evidence: Konrad Zuse independently invented Shannon's boolean circuit theory...)
Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much (2013) by Sendhil Mullainathan	Economics bills itself as 'the study of decisions under scarcity', though much of it is actually about excess: luxury substitution, savings rates, futures markets, conspicuous consumption, and so on. The psychological side - the panic, narrow focus, and sense of doom - was completely absent from my economics classes, but without it you can't really understand poverty, and thus can't value economic growth as the life-saving, mind-saving thing it has been. Reasons scarcity is bad:

1. Lower consumption is less good (and sometimes very bad)
2. Less freedom (fewer choices)
3. Anxiety (emotional penalty)
4. Cognitive penalty (bandwidth of worrying)
5. Excessive focus on present, no planning, compromising future ("tunnelling")
6. Have to spend time on careful allocation ("juggling")
7. Excess self-consciousness means worse performance ("choking")
8. It might also poison social interaction by encouraging zero-sum thinking and its attendent wasteful conflict. (Although see Junger for some positive social effects of shared adversity.)
9. It recurses: Mistakes lead to real sacrifice (debt; traps; no slack means penalties bite, further reducing slack). Scarcity causes more scarcity by screwing with your planning and implementation skills.

Economics only really handles costs (1) and (2). Psychology at its best handles (3-7). (9) is the author's new contribution, I think: this is cognitive economics.

Without some spare resources it's impossible to be free, to be generous, to relax. That's obvious. Less obvious: Without slack you can't even think straight (there's a "bandwidth tax" on the poor, reducing their effective intelligence, willpower by perhaps an entire standard deviation). Most of the cited experiments are about money scarcity, but their ingenious move is to generalise to all of us, to all conditions where a person lacks some instinctively (evolutionarily) key resource: e.g. money, time, calories, friends. As well as a rare theoretical synthesis, this makes this book more evocative for its rich-world readers:

> *We have used the psychology of scarcity to create an empathy bridge. We have used experience with one form of scarcity (say, time) to connect to another form (money). Having known what it's like to badly need a little more time, we might start to imagine what it's like to desperately need a little more money or even more friends. We used this bridge to draw a connection between a busy manager fretting about insufficient time before a deadline and a person short on cash fretting about insufficient funds to pay rent.*

Exciting! I've been reading development economics and behavioural science for years, and I still got a lot of new results and a whole gosh-darnit Practical Theory of Mind with moving parts from this.

They compress all the complex constructs and determinants of their real theory into a lossy construct, "bandwidth". This is a shorthand for working memory *&* fluid intelligence *&* attention span *&* decision consistency *&* persistence *&* executive control *&* long-term planning inclination. They admit at the start it's a compression, so that's fine.

> *With compromised bandwidth, we are more likely to give in to our impulses, more likely to cave in to temptations. With little slack, we have less room to fail. With compromised bandwidth, we are more likely to fail.*

Lesson: To actually optimise your life, you can't optimise too hard, in the sense of pushing right up against your budgets. This idea is not new; a different book would tie this to queuing theory and distributed systems, trying to find general theoretical truths about systems. (What's the maximum sustainable load for a server? For a life?) Excess capacity, 'slack',

is short-run inefficiency *and* long-term shock-tolerance and thus true efficiency. The point seems to apply to servers, hospitals, and a single human life viewed from inside.

This also adds to Taleb's critique of naive finance, encouraging 'risk-sensitive optimisation' (or, death-sensitive). Extends bounded rationality to limited attention, willpower, as well as computation and a search budget.

The book's big philosophical question is the old Essence vs Context chestnut ("the poor are worse parents, drivers, borrowers" vs "given these constraints, people are worse parents, drivers, borrowers"). But it's a new twist on it: rather than (as well as) a developmental deficiency, poverty is an active, situational force:

> *This shortfall is not of the standard physiological variety, having to do with a lack of nutrition or stress from early childhood hindering brain development. Nor is bandwidth permanently compromised by poverty. It is the present-day cognitive load of making ends meet: when income rises, so, too, does cognitive capacity. The bandwidth of the farmers was restored as soon as crop payments were received. Poverty at its very core taxes bandwidth and diminishes capacity.*

This surprises me: I generally accept that people are hard to change, that engineered context is relatively weak. But then all attempts at self-improvement are a denial of essentialism about *something*, and I'm well into those.

> *To explain why the poor borrow excessively, we do not need to appeal to a lack of financial education, the avarice of predatory lenders, or an oversized tendency for self-indulgence. To explain why the busy put off things and fall behind, we do not need to appeal to weak self-control, deficient understanding, or a lack of time-management skills. Instead, borrowing is a simple consequence of tunneling.*

They don't sugarcoat it: they accept the massive body of evidence on how burdened the poor are, on dozens of axes. And they note that just giving them cash rarely solves the problem because this doesn't change the logic enough.

> *The poor stay poor, the lonely stay lonely, the busy stay busy, and diets fail.*

One big gripe: They use the word "scarcity" for both a physical shortage (i.e. the normal economic sense) and for this special psychological burden. (Not having, and having your mind captured by not having.) This needs two words; it muddies their thesis.

They've persuaded me that late fines are an extremely regressive tax. I'm open to the view that reducing poor people's options is sometimes best for them (e.g. if they are "*hurt by the ability to borrow* [at extortionate rates]" because it prevents them smoothing their income in a credit cycle). I agree that bandwidth is the deepest kind of human capital.

Their treatment of the mental costs of education is important, given NGOs' blithe promotion of education over all else. (And it's a further argument for unconditional cash transfers.)

> *To capitalize on a bonus payment for a child's medical checkup, a parent*

	> *must set up the appointment, remember to keep it, find the time to get there and back, and coerce the child to go (no child likes the doctor!). Each of these steps requires some bandwidth. And this is just one behavior. Conditional cash transfer programs seek to encourage dozens, if not hundreds, of these good behaviors. Just understanding those incentives and making the necessary trade-offs—deciding which are worth it for you and which are not, and when—requires bandwidth.* > > *We never ask, Is this how we want poor people to use their bandwidth? We never factor in this cost in deciding which behaviors are most worth promoting. When we design poverty programs, we recognize that the poor are short on cash, so we are careful to conserve on that. But we do not think of bandwidth as being scarce as well. Nowhere is this clearer than in our impulse to educate.* I'm a keen and cynical student of social research, and but I only recognised one spurious result in this whole book. (ego depletion, p.107 - and that only in a tangent explicitly phrased as hypothetical.) They did a pretty convincing within-subjects study on sugar farmers before and after harvest income which nails down the effect as far as I can see. --- Only not five stars because we can't give any social science book five stars until it is 20 years old and more severely scrutinised.
A Few Quick Ones (Jeeves, #11.5) (1959) by P.G. Wodehouse	What else can you read one line of and feel this happy? > *In these disturbed days in which we live, it has probably occurred to all thinking men that something drastic ought to be done about aunts.* > *"The whimsical way she put it was that a woman who married a man my size ran a serious risk of being arrested for bigamy."*
Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies (2014) by Nick Bostrom	Like a lot of great philosophy, *Superintelligence* acts as a space elevator: you make many small, reasonable, careful movements - and you suddenly find yourself in outer space, home comforts far below. It is more rigorous about a topic which doesn't exist than you would think possible. I didn't find it hard to read, but I have been marinating in tech rationalism for a few years and have absorbed much of Bostrom secondhand so YMMV. I loved this: > *Many of the points made in this book are probably wrong. It is also likely that there are considerations of critical importance that I fail to take into account, thereby invalidating some or all of my conclusions. I have gone to some length to indicate nuances and degrees of uncertainty throughout the text — encumbering it with an unsightly smudge of "possibly," "might," "may," "could well," "it seems," "probably," "very likely," "almost certainly." Each qualifier has been placed where it is carefully and deliberately. Yet these topical applications of epistemic modesty are not enough; they must be supplemented here by a*

> *systemic admission of uncertainty and fallibility. This is not false modesty: for while I believe that my book is likely to be seriously wrong and misleading, I think that the alternative views that have been presented in the literature are substantially worse - including the default view, according to which we can for the time being reasonably ignore the prospect of superintelligence.*

Bostrom introduces dozens of neologisms and many arguments. Here is the main scary apriori one though:

> *1. Just being intelligent doesn't imply being benign; intelligence and goals can be independent. (the orthogonality thesis.)*
> *2. Any agent which seeks resources and lacks explicit moral programming would default to dangerous behaviour. You are made of things it can use; hate is superfluous. (Instrumental convergence.)*
> *3. It is conceivable that AIs might gain capability very rapidly through recursive self-improvement. (Non-negligible possibility of a hard takeoff.)*
> *4. Since AIs will not be automatically nice, would by default do harmful things, and could obtain a lot of power very quickly*, AI safety is morally significant, deserving public funding, serious research, and international scrutiny.*

Of far broader interest than its title (and that argument) might suggest to you. In particular, it is the best introduction I've seen to the new, shining decision sciences - an undervalued reinterpretation of old, vague ideas which, until recently, you only got to see if you read statistics, *and* economics, *and* the crunchier side of psychology. It is also a history of humanity, a thoughtful treatment of psychometrics v genetics, and a rare objective estimate of the worth of large organisations, past and future.

Superintelligence's main purpose is moral: he wants us to worry and act urgently about hypotheticals; given this rhetorical burden, his tone too is a triumph.

> *For a child with an undetonated bomb in its hands, a sensible thing to do would be to put it down gently, quickly back out of the room, and contact the nearest adult. Yet what we have here is not one child but many, each with access to an independent trigger mechanism. The chances that we will all find the sense to put down the dangerous stuff seem almost negligible. Some little idiot is bound to press the ignite button just to see what happens. Nor can we attain safety by running away, for the blast of an intelligence explosion would bring down the firmament. Nor is there a grown-up in sight...*
>
> *This is not a prescription of fanaticism. The intelligence explosion might still be many decades off in the future. Moreover, the challenge we face is, in part, to hold on to our humanity: to maintain our groundedness, common sense, and goodhumored decency even in the teeth of this most unnatural and inhuman problem. We need to bring all human resourcefulness to bear on its solution.*

I don't donate to AI safety orgs, despite caring about the best way to improve the world and despite having no argument against it better than "that's not how software has worked so far" and despite the concern of

	smart experts. This sober, kindly book made me realise this was more to do with fear of sneering than noble scepticism or empathy. [EDIT 2019: Reader, I married this cause.] > ** People sometimes choke on this point, but note that the first intelligence to obtain half a billion dollars virtually, anonymously, purely via mastery of maths occurred... just now. Robin Hanson chokes eloquently here and for god's sake let's hope he's right.*
Lost for Words (2014) by Edward St. Aubyn	Brutal Booker Prize satire. > *'The measure of a work of art is how much art it has in it, not how much 'relevance'. Relevant to whom? Relevant to what? Nothing is more ephemeral than a hot topic.'* The targets I recognised were 'Wolf Hall', 'how late it was, how late' - and, among the judges, Stella Rimington, Chris Mullin, Malcolm Rifkind / Jim Murphy(?) Sam certainly sounds like Patrick, too: > *Like a man walking backwards along a path, erasing his footsteps with a broom, he had tried, through contradiction, negation, paradox, unreliable narration and every other method he could devise, to cancel the tracks left by his words and to release his writing from the wretched positivity of affirming anything at all.* There's also an exquisite send-up of Deleuzian/Lacanian raving.
An Introduction to Statistical Learning: With Applications in R (2013) by Gareth James	Really good, heavy on intuition building, folk ML, and stuff which you'll actually use. I've brushed up against all of it before (: I've called all of it from the safe distance of a nice Python library before), but it took a second pass and doing all the exercises to click. To actually learn (grok) something, you need 1. To *do* it, not just read about it 2. To read it several times 3. To feel challenged but not overwhelmed by it And 2&3 conflict. (Most books don't have a natural *do*-operator. How do you do a novel? I make do with these reviews; others do fanfiction and probably get the same benefit.) Kind of annoying that the figures are never next to their discussion. And I was hoping this would make me like R but I can't and I don't. But good.
The AI Does Not Hate You: Superintelligence, Rationality and the Race to Save the	To my surprise I recommend this for anyone. (The chapters are tiny and I did the whole thing in an hour.) For outsiders it's an honest and nontechnical portrait of a new, strange, and wonderful endeavour; and Chivers shows his path from ordinary sceptical thoughtfulness to taking the idea seriously. (However, there's almost no maths in it, and without maths you can only ever sort-of get the gist. For instance, one of the key premises of the whole programme is very easy to understand if you've ever seen the structure of a reinforcement learning algorithm - where the 'optimizer' and

World () by Tom Chivers	the 'reward function' are completely separate modules varying freely - and apparently quite difficult to accept if you haven't.) For insiders it's a reminder of just how strange the project seems from outside. The chasm of inferential distance. There's also fun new details: I had no idea that Bostrom is name-dropped in Donald Glover's new TV show, for instance. And this made me laugh: > *Buck Shlegeris, a young MIRI employee with excitingly coloured hair and an Australian accent, told me that 'A book on this topic could be good', and that 'if I could jump into your body I have high confidence I could write it'. However, his confidence that I could write it from within my own body seemed significantly lower, which is probably fair enough.* If you've read much on the topic you can skip the whole middle third of the book, it's just Chivers paraphrasing bits of the first two Sequences. Chivers overemphasises Yudkowsky. Gwern, Grace, Sandberg, and Muehlhauser get one passing reference each, but their work (and Krakovna's) have each had a larger effect on me, and on others I know. Not to mention the tumblrs. Ach never mind: it's a huge illegible mess of a movement and he's done well. Some of the interviewees make patently poor arguments - Sabisky ("*it's a sex cult*"), Brooks ("*no* [AI safety proponents] *have ever done any work in AI itself*"), Gerard ("*it's a money-spinning cult*") but it's *so* patent that I think people will see their prejudices. The real shame is that better critics exist - I have in mind the anonymous prosaic-AI researchers Nostalgebraist ("alignment is equivalent to solving ethics and decision theory at once") and "Beth Zero". But I suppose anon randos are not the best subjects for a mass-market book. (Robnost: > *"Here is what this ends up looking like: a quest to solve, once and for all, some of the most basic problems of existing and acting among others who are doing the same... problems of this sort have been wrestled with for a long time using terms like "coordination problems" and "Goodhart's Law"; they constitute much of the subject matter of political philosophy, economics, and game theory, among other fields. It sounds misleadingly provincial to call such a quest "AI Alignment" ...* > > *There is no doubt something beautiful – and much raw intellectual appeal – in the quest for Alignment. It includes, of necessity, some of the most mind-bending facets of both mathematics and philosophy, and what is more, it has an emotional poignancy and human resonance rarely so close to the surface in those rarefied subjects. I certainly have no quarrel with the choice to devote some resources, the life's work of some people, to this grand Problem of Problems. One imagines an Alignment monastery, carrying on the work for centuries. I am not sure I would expect them to ever succeed, much less to succeed in some specified timeframe, but in some way it would make me glad, even proud, to know they were there."*) Young Yudkowsky is adorable - and I hope others are able to see this past

his hubris and proclamations.

Chivers manages to show the power and emotional impact of the 'internal double crux' idea:

> *I can picture a world in 50 or 100 that my children live in, which has different coastlines and higher risk of storms and, if I'm brually honest about it, famines in parts of the world I don't go. I could imagine my Western children in their Western world living lives not vastly different to mine, in which most of the suffering of the world is hidden away, and the lives of well-off Westerners continue and my kids have jobs... Whereas if the AI stuff really does happen, that's not the future they have... I can understand Bostrom's arguments that an intelligence explosion would completely transform the world; it's pointless speculating what a superintelligence would do, in the same way it would be stupid for a gorilla to wonder how humanity would change the world.*
>
> *And I realised that this was what the instinctive 'yuck' was when I thought about the arguments for AI risk. 'I feel that parents should be able to advise their children,' I said. 'Anything involving AGI happening in their lifetime - I can't advise them on that future. I can't tell them how best to live their lives because I don't know what their lives will look like, or even if they'll be recognisable as human lives... I'm scared for my children.' And at this point I apologised, because I found that I was crying.*

(Amateur psychoanalysis is fine - if you're doing it to yourself, and if you don't take it too seriously.)

I'm pretty sure I know who this is (that mix of iron scrupulousness and radical honesty) and before I read it I thought the same:

> *I met a senior Rationalist briefly in California, and he was extremely wary of me; he refused to go on the record. He has a reputation for being one of the nicest guys you'll ever meet, but I found him a bit stand-offish, at least at first. And I think that was because he knew I was writing this book. He said he was worried that if too many people hear about AI risk, then it'll end up like IQ, the subject of endless angry political arguments that have little to do with the science, and that a gaggle of nerdy Californian white guys probably weren't the best advocates for it then.*

Journalistic harm I feared, that didn't come to pass: he never comments on anyone's appearance ("*It would be extremely easy for me to write a book mocking them. But I don't want to do that.*"); he mentions Dylan Matthews' irritating amateur psychoanalysis only once - roughly, "*of course Silicon Valley people think that good software will save the world*"; he gives exactly no time to that one proudly cruel subreddit devoted entirely to ad hominem idiocy about the Rats. He brings up polyamory a lot but not malignantly.

The "Chinese robber fallacy" is that you can make any large group seem evil by selecting from bad actors among them, even if they have exactly the same rate of the selected bad behaviour. If there are ~1m views on LessWrong per month, say 100,000 unique visitors. If sociopathy is found in 1% of the general population then the site will have 1000 sociopathic visitors. If 99% of visitors are lurkers, never commenting then you should

	expect 10 sociopathic commenters a month. This is enough to satisfy me that the 'dark side' (i.e. the odd far-rightist, and two gendered tragedies) Chivers covers is the selfsame dark side as our dumb world at large. I hate Chivers capitalising "Rationalist" all the time. I double hate it when he pairs this with capitalised 'Effective Altruist', like "*the Rationalist Effective Altruist Buck Shlegeris*". At no point does Chivers use the full (and only appropriate) name for the identity: "*aspiring* rationalist". (No human is that rational.) But to be fair nor do most people online. Couple of harmless errors (Helen Toner wasn't 'doing' ML in China, for instance). But the big one is that, after talking to all these people for and against, Chivers *ends* with the deferential prior: 80% of technical researchers think it's 90% likely we'll have AGI within a century, and if (as Chivers thinks) 17% think it will be highly negative, then our best guess is a 14% chance of catastrophic AGI. (With *very* large error bars - but that's even worse when you think about it.) Now, since he began at extreme scepticism (<1%) this is a large update - and we were lucky that a journalist came this far out on the limb. But the arguments presented here for and against the Risk are not equally convincing. He is presumably just too modest to multiply them out, as an amateur, in the face of big expert surveys. But, see what you think.
Joy in the Morning (Jeeves, #8) (1947) by P.G. Wodehouse	An irony: Florence is noted for her urge to improve Wooster by forcing philosophy textbooks and boring modernist literature on him. This fails utterly and inspires revolt. > *she was one of those intellectual girls... who are unable to see a male soul without wanting to get behind it and shove. We had scarcely arranged the preliminaries before she was checking up on my reading... substituting a thing called 'Types of Ethical THeory'. Nor did she attempt to conceal the fact that this was a mere pipe opener and that there was worse to come.* Jeeves, on the other hand, has no programme, he just slips allusions and lyricism into conversation, with at least passable results on Wooster. > *'I shall miss you, Jeeves.'* > *'Thank you, sir.'* > *'Who was that chap who was always beefing about gazelles?'* > *'The poet Moore, sir. He complained that he had never nursed a dear gazelle, to glad him with its soft black eye, but when it came to know him well, it was sure to die.'* > *'It's the same with me. I am a gazelle short. You don't mind me alluding to you as a gazelle, Jeeves?'* > *'Not at all, sir."* > *'Propose, forsooth! She'll just notify me that the engagement is on again, like a governess telling a young charge to eat his spinach. And if you think I've got the force of character to come back with a nolle prosequi-'* > *'With a what?'* > *'One of Jeeves's gags. It means roughly "nuts to you!" '* Indeed, since all the stories but one are told by Wooster, the title of this is down to this strategy. (This is only remarkable because I was not expecting ironies.)

	--- *Classification*: * Wooster's taboo: Sindbad fancy dress costume; fake ginger beard. * Triangle: Cheesewright - Wooster - Florence. * Subplot: Nobby and Boko; the brooch; the ball; the Clam Line. * Aunt: Percival Worplesdon * Antagonist: Cheesewright * Expedient: stealing a constable's uniform, kicking a child, lying to a Peer, lying to the police.
The Divine Comedy (1320) by Dante Alighieri	James claims *Cultural Amnesia* took him 40 years to write and that this translation took 50. Lucky he saw the two keystones to the end! I was surprised by how much of Dante's audacious fleshing out of vague Scripture is revenge verse; standing in judgment over his historical (Alexander, Attila) and contemporary enemies (his Latin teacher). He was probably echoing Church proclamations, but still: the author as towering demigod. After Book One you'd be forgiven for thinking that most people in hell are Italian. It's impossible to ignore Dante's medieval sneer in places (even though he was a big liberal by the going standard): he parades the Church's varied idiot retributions, some of which persist, e.g. promising suicidal folk that they are going to get fucked up, or having sweet modest Epicurus roasted alive forever for holding the soul to be mortal. The final, most irredeemable circle of hell is reserved for, well, me: childless anti-nationalist atheists. Didn't quite have the stamina, but I'll be back.
Animal Farm (1945) by George Orwell	None yet
Altered Carbon (Takeshi Kovacs, #1) (2002) by Richard K. Morgan	Class act: cyberpunk without cheap gothic neon and lolspeak; noir without cartoonish conventions. A meditation on identity and consent via sex and violence. Genuinely. The Scene: Consciousness can be up- and downloaded. In this world, if you are rich enough, *you do not die.* If you're richer than that, you get uploaded into a young clone of yourself - otherwise you take whatever marginalised corpse is going and adjust your sense of self to fit. He picks out implications brilliantly (e.g. what happens to celebrity culture?). The inevitable neologisms are excellent, intensely suggestive of the new culture's inner life: death is just "storage"; bodies are just "sleeves" and to be reincarnated is to be "sleeved"; a plasma gun is a "sunjet". Murder is just "organic damage". Catholics are (once again) the world's underclass - unable to travel interstellar because it involves casual storage (suicide) and resleeving (heresy), and killed with near-impunity because they alone cannot *testify at their own murder trials*. Cartoonish moments: our anti-hero Takeshi Kovacs is attacked or apprehended 7 times in the first 150 pages.) People transition gender with regularity. Morgan makes a bold essentialist statement, which is somewhat backed-up: > *To be a woman was a sensory experience beyond the male... To a man, skin was a barrier. To a woman it was an organ of contact. That had its disadvantages.* (Kovacs is tortured, horrifically, as a woman.) Advertising can be beamed

	obtrusively into your mind. The UN has become a Shady Galactic Empire. It is strongly suggested - not least by our trained-psychopath protagonist - that this transhuman society is more psychopathic, owing to the lower stakes of violence, injury, and taboo-breaking. Gritty but not just gratuitous. Better than Gibson.
At Last (2011) by Edward St. Aubyn	None yet
ワンパンマン 1 [Wanpanman 1] (Onepunch-Man, #1) (2012) by ONE	> *Note that you will only be recognised as a super hero if you are registered in the National Super Hero Registry. If you are not registered, you will always be seen as a delusional weirdo and looked down upon, regardless of how many times you save the world.* What's the name of the thing where you don't like a genre, but you do like deconstructions of it? I have it with horror (*Cabin in the Woods* and *Tucker and Dale vs Evil*!) and now, to my surprise, with shonen anime (*Evangelion*, *Mob Psycho* and this). Despite appearances OPM is a serious comment on credentialism, mob psychology, existentialism. The heroes and monsters are all ranked, but the ranking has little relation to their power. The unboundedly powerful protagonist is quite depressed because nothing in life is a challenge to him any more, no foe ever lasts. (Disappointed by the second series of the TV show, so turned to this.) The art is surprisingly bad (though the creator improved massively over a couple of years). Unlike most manga it looks like what it is: a five day rush job. The show plays with this by using art crudeness to represent Saitama's emotional state: when he's actually focussing he's drawn in great detail. The other 99% percent of the time he's round-faced, blank, and unshaded to represent how little effort he is giving whatever perilous situation the world is in. Still, hilarious.
Collected Poems (1981) by Sylvia Plath	The first raw confessional poet? Which is to say the first very-modern-poet, mother of 100,000 epigones, confessing when we've done nothing in particular worth admitting or renouncing. Actually, have any metal bands covered Plath?
Nua-Bhardachd Gaidhlig / Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems: A Bilingual Anthology (1976) by Donald MacAulay	None yet
Museum Without Walls	The best bellowing contrarian in the land. This is mostly just TV scripts I've already seen, and though this means that we can at last *catch up* with his rapid-fire aesthetic barbs, they still suffer without their inspired, bizarre

(2012) by Jonathan Meades	visual production. A sense of loneliness comes through on paper (anger and historical command is the dominant note in the programmes). You can see almost all his work at this Youtube channel. It is a fine use of a week.
A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths about Science (1998) by Noretta Koertge	None yet
Gateway (Heechee Saga, #1) (1977) by Frederik Pohl	Hits hard, leaves marks. The ignoble, epistemically pinched, economic-realist sci-fi as written by the Strugatskys or Stross. I love it so much that even the Rogerian psychotherapy at its core doesn't annoy me; that even its 90% focus on one spoiled and abusive bastard is a merit of it. Spoilers everywhere. Physics and sin. No shortage of things left to do. *In one sentence*: Dreadful human being reflects on his dreadful actions while dead aliens look on. *To be read when*: overconfident; always. • Galef type: Values 2 - thought experiments for you to reflect on how you feel about something .
The Earthsea Quartet (Earthsea Cycle, #1-4) (1984) by Ursula K. Le Guin	If fantasy tends to strike you as pompous or tasteless - if you can't get through 'Lord of the Rings', 'Game of Thrones' or whatnot, you should try this. Anthropological fantasies. The first three books are about: mortality, deconversion and addiction. But the fourth, about two women in two farmhouses, is actually the most ambitious. 'Tales of Earthsea' is my favourite, but you can't just skip to it, since it gets its power from reprise and reprisal. The cycle *is* relentlessly pro-death though; Ged does not become a man until he faces and integrates a manifestation of his own death; Cob's terror of, and resistance to death enslaves and drains the entire continent; an ancient attempt to create an afterlife is actually an act of betrayal, colonialism, and Frankensteinian hubris. The cycle ends with the circle of life and death restored, and everyone right pleased and relieved at this, not least the undead who get to not exist. Now, you can counter that le Guin is more pro-stoicism, pro-serenity, pro-enlightened-adaption-to-the-inevitable than she is pro-death. But deathists always are; they are harmful because of their apriori ban on potentially wonderful undertakings, not because they are goth as fuck.

	As always, she is a wonderful read even when I disagree with her very strongly. To be read by 10 year olds and 27 year olds, presumably by 50 year olds and definitely by 75 year olds.
Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs (1993) by Leonard Cohen	I don't think he's depressing! Does that make me in some way broken? Anyway: Cohen the Jewish Buddhist leverages literary power from a faith he does not own: his poems are thus as erotic and grotesque as the best Christian writing. Much funnier and more concrete than his songs, too. Sure, *everything is ominous* in his work, but it's also banal, and these often admit they're ridiculous. To my surprise he is never obscure; to my relief he is never fatally wounded by the vicious retribution his many flaws invite. Gnarled urban spirituality. A strong, unlikely comparison: Bukowski. They both fixate on: plain poems about poems, bitter desire, nakedness, grandiose self-loathing, losers in love, and the significance of everyday things.(Look at this: "The art of longing's over and it's never coming back.") Speaking of Bukowski: is Cohen sexist? Arguable. For every slap in the face like 'Diamonds in the Mine', there are several tendernesses ('Portrait of a Lady') and self-aware apologies for lust. I would say: shocking and honest about patriarchal shapes, generally not unfeminist. ("*You took my fingerprints away / So I would love you for your mind*.") Moments of chastity inamongst the randy fury - for instance he never says 'God', always 'G-d'. Lots about the Holocaust too, mostly its banal consequences. > *Kiss me with your teeth* > *All things can be done.* > *whisper museum ovens of* > *a war that Freedom won.* The newer stuff is generally weak, because less wry, profane and specific. (**4/5** with lots of **5/5** moments: 'French and English', 'Israel', 'A Working Man', 'Queen Victoria and Me', 'Montreal' 'Hydra 1960', 'A Cross Didn't Fall on Me', 'Disguises', 'It's Probably Spring'.)
I Think You'll Find it's a Bit More Complicated Than That (2014) by Ben Goldacre	A hundred clear, witty, and literate attacks on the agreeable nonempiricism that most worldviews and most conversations are based in, even in the modernised, developed world. (It covers such anti-scientific fields as alternative medicine, journalism, politics, and policy. You may regard anti-vaxxers, face cream 'science', homeopathy, and AIDS denialism as too obviously false to be worth your time deriding. But these hopeful, manipulative falsehoods are where many if not most live: someone has to defend people.) This makes it a collection of a hundred enjoyable tutorials in statistics, experimental method, and epistemology: > *Alternative therapists don't kill many people, but they do make a great teaching tool for the basics of evidence-based medicine, because their efforts to distort science are so extreme. When they pervert the activities of people who should know better – medicines regulators, or universities – it throws sharp relief onto the role of science and evidence in culture...* Goldacre is a gifted populariser: by focussing on particular abuses, he is able to animate very hard and theoretical topics by leveraging our anger, or our humour. (In a similar way to Nassim Taleb's snark. Of course, as

strict empiricists, the two men share many targets: the powerful and overconfident, the famed and hollow, the predatory and avaricious). Since British libel law opens him to constant financial hazard, *even when he is entirely careful and correct*, he calls his writing "pop science with a gun to your head". (Actually it is mostly pop metascience; even better. There are shout-outs to the great critics of C20th science: Celia Mulrow, John Ioannidis, Uri Simonsohn, who are too-rarely praised; for they turned on the people who might otherwise have lionised them.)

He shows policy analysis to be lagging a century behind the standard set by medical trials, and not mostly for the good reasons (which are: that they have a more causally dense subject than medicine has; and because they face absolute ethical restrictions on their experiments: it is politically impossible to experiment with welfare systems). e.g.: Policy people set *no* required evidence threshold before administering their treatments en masse, have no controls, no randomisation, no calibration, no statements of formal uncertainty, no malpractice system to punish their recklessness, nor often any honest fucking posthoc *evaluation* of their treatment.

> *[Andrew Lansley's] pretence at data-driven neutrality is not just irritating, it's also hard to admire. There's no need to hide behind a cloak of scientific authority, murmuring the word "evidence" into microphones. If your reforms are a matter of ideology, legacy, whim and faith, then, like many of your predecessors, you could simply say so, and leave "evidence" to people who mean it.*

Journalists come across as badly as the quacks - even BBC, Panorama, C4 News. This *may* be being ameliorated at last by the rise of the specialised blogospheres and by the Nate Silver / Rich Harris / Keith Frey school of data journalism. But not generally yet and not for sure.

I love his rationalist war-cry, against the public and dinner-party proponents of the never-supported MMR -autism link:

> *Many of these people were hardline extremists - humanities graduates - who treated my arguments about evidence as if I were some kind of religious zealot, a purveyor of scientism, a fool to be pitied. The time had clearly come to mount a massive counter-attack.*
>
> *...nerds are more powerful than we know. Changing mainstream media will be hard, but you can help create parallel options. More academics should blog, post videos, post audio, post lectures, offer articles and more. You'll enjoy it: I've had threats and blackmail, abuse, smears and formal complaints with forged documentation. But it's worth it, for one simple reason: pulling bad science apart is the best teaching gimmick I know for explaining how good science works. I'm not a policeman, and I've never set out to produce a long list of what's right and what's wrong. For me, things have to be interestingly wrong, and the methods are all that matter.*

His website is a bit ugly but has most of this content for free; the extras in this volume are oddities for fans (an undergraduate paper of his, BMJ editorials and notes from his heartening rise into British policy establishment (he is a public health researcher at the NHS). This was my second pass at his columns; I was again refreshed and uplifted and enraged. We might despair at how persistent insensitivity to evidence has been, and at how unnatural empiricism remains, in a society totally

	transformed by it. But I don't despair, because it has never been easier for us to check and rebut liars and fools. I sincerely aspire to become a "research parasite" (an independent checker of analyses, a rogue forensic statistician) and to write as clearly and well as him. Goldacre is that rare thing, someone doing the best work they possibly could be. (If he could be persuaded to migrate to the global south...)
Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius (1990) by Ray Monk	None yet
Math with Bad Drawings (2018) by Ben Orlin	> *Fables and math have a lot in common. Both come from dusty, moth-eaten books. Both are inflicted upon children. And both seek to explain the world through radical acts of simplification. If you want to reckon with the full idiosyncrasy and complexity of life, look elsewhere... math makers are more like cartoonists.* > *Taken as a collection of words, literature is a dataset of extraordinary richness. Then again, take as a collection of words, literature is no longer literature. Statistics works by eliminating context. Their search for insight begins with the annihilation of meaning... Is there peace to be made between the rich contextuality of literature and the cold analytical power of stats?* So wise. You'd think a high-school maths teacher who draws intentionally badly wouldn't have much to say about the nature of reason, the ecstasy and despair of learning and abstraction, the beauty of inevitability. But here we are - this only looks like a children's book. For better or worse there's a pun or goofy self-deprecating joke every couple sentences. (The greatest of these: " *CHAPTER 21: THE TIME HAS COME, LEON WALRAS SAID, TO TALK OF MANY THINGS*") Everything in it is elementary, but using these simple examples Orlin covers a dozen of the most important intellectual developments: constraint theory of beauty, "unreasonable effectiveness", probability theory (via fascinating government lotteries with positive expected value!), the Great Recession from the quants' perspective, the replication crisis, the marginalist revolution... And he disses school mathematics often enough to charm anyone. I learned plenty (about bridges, polar animals, sabermetrics, about the inevitability and brilliance of ISO 216, and so on). > *Dissing folks for their probabilistic failures is a bit like calling them bad at flying, or subpar at swallowing oceans, or insufficiently fireproof. No big deal, right? I mean, does probability ever come up in the real world? It's not like we spend our lives clawing for intellectual tools that might offer the slightest stability in the swirling miasma of uncertainty that surrounds us every waking moment...* He goes a bit wrong in his probability / lottery chapter - he spreads the rational choice theory (the idea that lotteries are good because it buys you nice daydreams) without reflecting that human attention and gumption are

	finite, and that the daydream thus robs people of a *mildly but actually* better future. Surprisingly, he also disses expected value (first-order users of which are "educated fools") with the trivial fact that infinities are strange: "*Perhaps the ultimate repudiation of expected value is the abstract possibility of tickets [promising infinite payoff but only asymptotically]*". Luckily decision theory is larger than one rule, and nowhere says that you must ignore your budget (+ leverage) and blindly obey the result of one multiplication... He also uses the false positive / false negative framework, which is usually misleading for squishy things like medicine and social science. (He also thinks Han Solo is valid.) While I am bitter that my own early maths education was so mindless, I'm amazed and glad that a few kids out there get to learn from someone like this.
The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence (1964) by D.H. Lawrence	Far better than his far more famous novels. Bitter and randy but often sensational, bringing flowers > *Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!* > *Let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of a flower* > *down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness* > *down the way Persephone goes, just now, in first-frosted September* > *to the sightless realm where darkness is married to dark* > *and Persephone herself is but a voice, as a bride* > *a gloom invisible enfolded in the deeper dark* > *of the arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again* > *and pierces her once more with his passion of the utter dark* > *among the splendour of black-blue torches, shedding* > *fathomless darkness on the nuptials.* There's about 6 duds for every one of those - as always, a *Collected* is never judged by its hit rate but by its best. His philosophy is rank nonsense (*"Sexless people transmit nothing."*; *"The machine shall be abolished from the earth again; / it is a mistake that mankind has made;"*) - as always, this has no bearing on the poems. What do I care that he is the most unsound voice in the great unsound choir of English literature? See here, here, here, here, here. The dirt-cheap holly-green Wordsworth paperbacks are where I got my first education. (I think this is what older generations got via Dover Thrifts or Pelicans.)
Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: A Reader's Guide (2006) by Roger M. White	None yet
The Information:	Ah! I am a sucker for this form in pop science: “primary research into some unjustly obscure thing, pulling together the historical and scientific strands,

A History, a Theory, a Flood (2011) by James Gleick	revealing the excitement and transcendence in the unsexy, un-Arts thing, and making the reader feel smarter and more solidly located in the modern world". Here it's information technology *very broadly construed* – so African talking drums, Morse, bioinformatics, memetics, Hawking radiation, Wiki, and so on. Unbelievably, I'd never heard of the hero of the tale, Claude Shannon, because he was quiet and didn't make any metaphysical claims for his profound work. Loads and loads of tasty gobbets to boot > *"I do not believe that my father was such a Poet as I shall be an Analyst (& Metaphysician)…" - Lovelace* > *"A theoretical physicist acts as a very clever coding algorithm."* > *"Across the centuries they all felt the joy in reckoning: Napier and Briggs, Kepler and Babbage, making their lists, building their towers…"* Shot through with the joy of discovery, and all of it unbleached by the drudgery, familiarity, and commercialism evoked in "I.T.".
The Cyberiad: Fables for the Cybernetic Age (1965) by Stanisław Lem	Superlatively brainy and silly fairytales, with wizards replaced by AI engineers. Think Carroll, Smullyan, Juster, Egan, heavier than heaven. Quantitative slapstick: > *And the mathematical models of King Krool and the beast did such fierce battle across the equation-covered table, that the constructors' pencils kept snapping. Furious, the beast writhed and wriggled its iterated integrals beneath the King's polynomial blows, collapsed into an infinite series of indeterminate terms, then got back up by raising itself to the nth power, but the King so belabored it with differentials and partial derivatives that its Fourier coefficients all canceled out (see Riemann's Lemma), and in the ensuing confusion the constructors completely lost sight of both King and beast. So they took a break, stretched their legs, had a swig from the Leyden jug to bolster their strength, then went back to work and tried it again from the beginning, this time unleashing their entire arsenal of tensor matrices and grand canonical ensembles, attacking the problem with such fervor that the very paper began to smoke. The King rushed forward with all his cruel coordinates and mean values* Despite appearances, it's not light fiction. It covers the impossibility of making people happy, the absurd birth and death of a robot without senses, the arbitrariness of power. The shadow of the Soviets falls on the stories quite hard. > *Trurl notarizes, issues directives, the typewriter chatters, and little by little an entire office takes shape, rubber stamps and rubber bands, paper clips and paper wads, portfolios and pigeonholes, foolscap and scrip, teaspoons, signs that say "No Admittance," inkwells, forms on file, writing all the while, the typewriter chattering, and everywhere you look you see coffee stains, wastepaper, and bits of gum eraser. The Steelypips are worried, they don't understand a thing, meanwhile Trurl*

> *uses special delivery registered C.O.D., certified with return receipt, or, best of all, remittance due and payable in full- he sends out no end of dunning letters, bills of lading, notices, injunctions, and there are already special accounts set up, no entries at the moment but he says that's only temporary. After a while, you can see that that is not quite so hideous, especially in profile - it's actually gotten smaller!-yes, yes, it is smaller! The Steelypips ask Trurl, what now?*
> *"No idle talk permitted on the premises," is his answer. And he staples, stamps, inspects vouchers, revokes licenses, dots an I, loosens his tie, asks who's next, I'm sorry, the office I closed, come back in an hour, the coffee is cold, the cream sour, cobwebs from ceiling to floor, an old pair of nylons in the secretary's drawer, install four new file cabinets over here, and there's an attempt to bribe an official, a pile of problems and a problem with piles, a writ of execution, incarceration for miscegenation, and appeals with seven seals. And the typewriter chatters:*
> *"Whereas, pursuant to the Tenant's failure to, quit and surrender the demised premises in compliance with the warrant served habee facias posessionem, by Div. of Rep. Cyb. Gt. KRS thereof, the Court of Third Instance, in vacuo and ex nihilo, herewith orders the immediate vacuation and vacation thereunder. The Tenant may not appeal this ruling. Trurl dispatches the messenger and pockets the receipts. After which, he gets up and methodically hurls the desks, chairs, rubber stamps, seals, pigeonholes, etc., out into deep space. Only the vending machine remains.*
> *"What on earth are you doing??" cry the Steelypips in dismay, having grown accustomed to it all. "How can you?"*
> *"Tut-tut, my dears," he replies. "Better you take a look instead!" And indeed, they look and gasp-why, there's nothing there, it's gone, as if it had never been! And where did it go, vanished into thin air? It beat a cowardly retreat, and grew so small, so very small, you'd need a magnifying glass to see it. They root around, but all they can find is one little spot, slightly damp, something must have dipped there, but what or why they cannot say, and that's all.*
> *"Just as I thought," Trurl tells them. "Basically, my dears, the whole thing was quite simple: the moment it accepted the first dispatch and signed for it, it was done for. I employed a special machine, the machine with a big B, for, as it is the Cosmos in the Cosmos, no one's licked it yet!"*
> *"All right, but why throw out the documents and pour out the coffee?" they ask.*
> *"So that it wouldn't devour you in turn!"*

> *how do you [humans] build your progeny?" asked the [robot] princess.*
>
> *"In faith, we do not build them at all," said Ferrix, "but program them statistically, according to Markov's formula for stochastic probability, emotional-evolutional albeit distributional, and we do this involuntarily and coincidentally, while thinking of a variety of things that have nothing whatever to do with programming, whether statistical, alinear or algorithmical, and the programming itself takes place autonomously, automatically and wholly autoerotically, for it is precisely thus and not otherwise that we are constructed, that each and every paleface strives*

	> *to program his progeny, for it is delightful, but programs without programming, doing all within his power to keep that programming from bearing fruit."* Kandel's translation (from the Polish) is maybe the greatest I've ever seen: hundreds of puns, neologisms, fake academese, and absurd alliterative names, all rendered into English without slips or missed opportunities. I read this over a month, savouring. Probably 5/5 on re-read.
Writings on an Ethical Life (2000) by Peter Singer	> *If a critical mass of people with new priorities were to emerge, and if these people were seen to do well, in every sense of the term -- if their cooperation with each other brings reciprocal benefits, if they find joy and fulfillment in their lives -- then the ethical attitude will spread, and the conflict between ethics and self-interest will have been shown to be overcome, not by abstract reasoning alone, but by adopting the ethical life as a practical way of living and showing that it works, psychologically, socially, and ecologically...* > *One thing is certain: you will find plenty of worthwhile things to do. You will not be bored or lack fulfillment in your life. Most important of all, you will know that you have not lived and died for nothing, because you will have become part of the great tradition of those who have responded to suffering by trying to make the world a better place.* [here] I've read a lot of Singer, mostly papers and columns and distilled arguments, not books. I can't remember not wanting to life an altruistic life, so I don't know exactly how much influence he had on me - but I'm a tithing vegan with a lot of respect for evolutionary arguments, who bites many utilitarian bullets, so it's probably plenty. Clear, unflinching, inspiring. Reading this, it's easy to see why the heroes of a fantasy novel could be called Singers. --- PS: Can anyone explain why, alone amongst philosophers, his face is so often on his book covers? Just fame? Just his strong brand?
Wolf Hall (Thomas Cromwell, #1) (2009) by Hilary Mantel	Engrossing, a great charitable reconstruction of a terrible age. Besides the subtle portrayal of the latent Reformation revolution, there's also a far more important upheaval: the rise of brilliant laymen and potent commoners (e.g. More and Cromwell), that is, the beginning of the end of feudalism. Never been very interested in the Tudors. Henry is fickle and narcissistic even compared to other early Modern monarchs, and Anne is a boring climber. He appeared to set off a revolution for no better reason than he

was too sexist to accept a female heir. Mantel shows how Henry, Anne and Katherine are a microcosm of their time - *Mother Church vs the nationalism-Protestantism complex*, and England slowly tearing itself away from former to latter. The first Brexit.

It's an imperfect model - Henry still burns un-Catholic books and men, and Luther and Tyndale don't support the shady divorce (against their own interests). A mixture of lust, opportunism, influence from competent rebels (Cromwell, Cranmer)?

Most characters are portrayed as pragmatic and modern, prayer aside. They know most relics are bogus, that the "medicine" of the day is hazardous, that the Church's decisions are deeply contingent and political, and they mock the superstitious lord who believes in ghosts. This is probably going too far, but it makes for great fiction.

The treatment of More vs Cromwell is the reverse of that in *A Man for All Seasons*: here Cromwell is a rational, catholic, and empathetic gent, while More is a scary authoritarian fundamentalist, closer to a Daesh jihadi than Rowan Williams.

> *[Cromwell] can't imagine himself reading [the Bible] to his household; he is not, like Thomas More, some sort of failed priest, a frustrated preacher. He never sees More, a star in another firmament, who acknowledges him with a grim nod - without wanting to ask him, what's wrong with you? Or what's wrong with me? Why does everything you know, and everything you have learnt, confirm you in what you have believed before? Whereas in my case, what I grew up with, and what I thought I believed, is chipped away, a little and a little, a fragment then a piece and then a piece more. With every month that passes, the corners are knocked off the certainties of this world: and the next world too.*

Mantel has a funny way of letting her grammar show that Cromwell is The Man - she'll use "*he*" to mark him, even when this breaks the normal "pronouns refer to the most recent subject of that gender" convention. This is disorienting, but I appreciate the effect.

I was recently baffled by this sentence, from a contemporary American evangelical: "*I was baptised Catholic before I became a Christian*." The violence of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation is the nastiest evidence of the power and horror of the narcissism of small differences.

I liked the book recommendations, the 16th Century equivalents of discussions on here. It is *so* hard to know, from 500 years away, what's worth reading. Though I suppose the real C16th dross is dead, all out of print, unarchived, unextant. For instance:

> *Castiglione says that everything that can be understood by men can be understood by women, that their apprehension is the same, their faculties, no doubt their loves and hates.*

This bit was funny:

> *When the last treason act was made, no one could circulate their words*

	in a printed book or bill, because printed books were not thought of. He feels a moment of jealousy towards the dead, to those who served kings in slower times than these; now a days the products of some bought or poisoned brain can be disseminated through Europe in a month. *He's talking about a time with ~0.1% annual growth, starting from very little; where new books per year was still in the three digits; where new actual insights per year was probably lower, where it takes an entire month and ~thousands of pounds for one troll to even partially foul a discussion.</td> </tr>*
Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help (2015) by Larissa MacFarquhar	*I don't know whether there are any moral saints. But if there are, I am glad that neither I nor those about whom I care most are among them... The moral virtues, present... to an extreme degree, are apt to crowd out the non-moral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character... there seems to be a limit to how much morality we can stand.– Susan Wolf* *...the moral narcissist's extreme humility masked a dreadful pride. Ordinary people could accept that they had faults; the moral narcissist could not. To [André] Green this moral straining was sinister, for the moral narcissist would do anything to preserve his purity, even when doing so carried a terrible price... new qualifiers appeared: there was "pseudo-altruism", a defensive cloak for sadomasochism; and there was "psychotic altruism", bizarre care-taking behaviour based in delusion... the analyst surmised that the masking of their own hostility and greed from themselves might be one of altruism's functions for people of this type.* *– Larissa MacFarquhar* *...we cannot and should not become impartial, [Bernard Williams] argued, because doing so would mean abandoning what gives human life meaning. Without selfish partiality—to people you are deeply attached to, your wife and your children, your friends, to work that you love and that is particularly yours, to beauty, to place — we are nothing. We are creatures of intimacy and kinship and loyalty, not blind servants of the world.* *– Larissa MacFarquhar* Twelve profiles of recent radical altruists, and the backlash they receive from the rest of us. (^) Besides, MacFarquhar has some deep reflections on the good life and human nature to work through. So: There are people who shape their lives around the need of the world – in particular around strangers who are constantly, in some sense, drowning. This category of person does more than just work a caring job and be dead nice to those around them: instead, their entire lives are dominated by the attempt to do

the *most* good.
The profiled altruists are:

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- A fairly fearless nurse who organised the Fast for Life and trained generations of Nicaraguan nurses, continuing for thirty years despite specific threats to her life by Contras.

-
- A pseudonymous animal rights activist who has rescued or won improved conditions for millions of chickens.

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- Two early effective altruists, Julia and Jeff, who live frugally and donate more than half of their salaries to the most effective NGOs in the world. They plausibly save 100 lives a year, far more than a doctor or firefighter (even before considering replaceability).

-
- A real Christian, who opened her church to the homeless (over the hostility of her flock) and donated a kidney anonymously.

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- A charismatic, outcaste social worker and jungle statesman, who created a self-sustaining leper ashram, 5000-strong, out of nothing. Also his equally hardcore descendents.

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- A Buddhist monk who created the largest suicide counselling site in Japan, stressing himself into heart disease.

-
- The omni-parents of Vermont, who adopted 24 of the least cute and easy children on the lists.

-
- A taciturn altruistic kidney donor.

-
- A burned-out idealist.

(I've compiled data on their nature here.*)

MacFarquhar appears suspicious about these people, whose lives are taken over by their morals. She calls them "do-gooders" while admitting the term is dismissive.** Even the most humble and quiet do-gooder is, she thinks, making an extremely arrogant claim: that the moral intuitions of the whole species - i.e. family favouritism, supererogation, the right to ignore the suffering of strangers - are totally wrong. She leaves no-one unsuspected.

> *an extreme morality as Singer's or Godwin's can seem not just oppressively demanding but actually evil, because it violates your duty to yourself. To require a person to think of himself as a tool for the general good could be seen as equivalent of kidnapping a person off the street and harvesting his organs to save three or four lives... even to ask this of yourself seems wrong, even perverted. Impartial, universal love seems the antithesis of what we value about deep human attachment.*

But these lives are victory laps: the victory of broad reason over narrow animality. MacFarquhar is more nuanced, less willing to dismiss particularism, nepotism and speciesism – which are together known as common sense. (Though I have only a mild case of the radicals: for instance, I am mostly immune to misery about the state of the world, and I help my loved ones without much guilt. I'm giving 10% now and 50% eventually, but I am such a bookish scruff that the absence of luxuries does not really cramp my life at all.)

One part of Williams' humanist case against radical altruism has dissolved in the last decade: the idea that single-minded ethical focus must erode your connection to your community. Well, the effective altruists are growing in number and maturity; they offer a deep, global community of at least partially serious people to support and be supported by: and all with the stamp of moral consistency.

MacFarquhar doesn't much like utilitarianism, but she is too moved and impressed with her subjects to take the standard, safe, quietist line (which her reviewers have tended to). Throughout, she presents contradictory philosophical propositions, and makes it difficult to know which she believes; she constantly uses indirect speech and deictic discussion, blurring her voice with the debate at hand. This is, I think, an impressive rhetorical strategy – an "esoteric" one. The book is addressed to common sense readers, but also to our uncertainty and faint guilt; it's dedicated to her parents, but explicitly constructed to bring us closer to the altruists:

> *I took out all the physical descriptions because if you're looking at someone's physical appearance, you're on the outside. Similarly quotations, which seem as though they should be the most intimate form, because they come directly from the person's mouth. Again, in fact, the only way you hear someone speaking is if you're outside them. So if you translate quotation into interior thought, which simply means taking away the quotation marks and saying 'he thought' rather than 'he said' – that's a more intimate way of encountering someone.****

So *Strangers Drowning* covertly brings us closer to radical altruism. Her task is not to establish their ethical premises, nor to win over new obsessives: instead, she simply shows us their sincerity and incredible effects on the world – and, better, shows the lack of evidence and interpretive charity behind their opponents' aspersions. (This goes for the Freudians, the Objectivists, and the anti "codependency" crowd.) It humanises the threatening side of ultimate goodness. She mostly avoids editorialising about the radicals. But one of her clear conclusions is that these people are not deficient, instead having something most people lack:

> *What do-gooders lack is not happiness but innocence. They lack that happy blindness that allows most people, most of the time, to shut their minds to what is unbearable. Do-gooders have forced themselves to know, and keep on knowing, that everything they do affects other people, and that sometimes (though not always) their joy is purchased with other people's joy. And, remembering that, they open themselves to a sense of unlimited, crushing responsibility...*
>
> *The need of the world was like death, [Julia] thought — everyone knew about it, but the thought was so annihilating that they had to push it out of consciousness or it would crush them. She understood, and yet did not*

> *understand, why other people didn't give more than they did. How did they allow themselves such permission? How could they not help?*

while also noting that, in general

> *If there is a struggle between morality and life, life will win... Not always, not in every case, but life will win in the end. Sometimes a person will die for a cause; sometimes a person will give up for duty's sake the things that are to him most precious. But most of the time, the urge to live, to give to your family, to seek beauty, to act spontaneously... or to do any number of things other than helping people, is too strong to be overridden... It may be true that not everyone should be a do-gooder. But it is also true that these strange, hopeful, tough, idealistic, demanding, life-threatening, and relentless people, by their extravagant example, help keep those life-sustaining qualities alive.*

An amazing book, anyway: charged, critical, structurally ingenious, and filled with humanity – or, with this other, better thing.

"Sedia hujan sebelum payung" (c) Zaky Arifin (2015)

> *† Note the absent quotation marks around MacFarquhar's report of the psychoanalysts' and Williams' positions.*
>
> *The chapter on the blitheness and cruelty of the psychoanalysts enraged me - all the more because MacFarquhar leaves their unscientific bullshit unchallenged, instead letting it mock and degrade itself. (One hopes.) So much glibness and spite:*
>
> > *ANNA FREUD:* *Altruists are bossy, because the urge that is usually behind the fulfillment of one's own wishes is now placed behind the fulfillment of the wishes of another person. The wishes have to be fulfilled in a certain way, in the way the altruist would like to fulfill them for himself or herself. After all, the bossiness of do-gooders is proverbial...*
>
> *(My, what rigorous science.) So, here's yet another way I am fortunate to live when I do: these people have by now been mostly sidelined in polite discourse. The harm they are able to do is much reduced, and I need not spend my whole life convincing people that they are just making things up.*
>
> ** Philosophy - e.g. Peter Singer, Will MacAskill, Toby Ord, Mark Lee, Geoff Anders, Stephanie Wykstra - looms large here, in this little corner of the race; larger than organised religion. Since all of the philosophers are from*

	Analytic departments, this gives the lie to the generalised standard criticism of academic philosophy (: that they are fatally detached from the concerns of society, dehumanised, etc). *** "Do-gooder" is still much better than Susan Wolf's term, "moral saint", because, as MacFarquhar notes, to call someone a saint is to nullify the challenge of their difficult actions: saints are not just 'people who do really good things'; they are (thought to be) a different sort of being. Any movement (like EA) which seeks to make radical altruism mainstream has to resist this demarcation and get people to see such a life as, first, good; then, possible for them; and then reasonable - the sort of thing that people would do if they thought about it more.* **** MacFarquhar's account of Stephanie is misleading: she makes it seem like she has opted for ordinary amoral innocence, where the real Stephanie has taken on an incredibly high-impact job, activism for oversight of pharmaceutical clinical trial data.* *[Data #2, Values #2]* *"Optikaa" (c) Zaky Arifin (2015)</td> </tr>*
Why I Am Not a Christian (1957) by Bertrand Russell	Read my great-grandfather's copy, which felt good in a way I haven't often felt. This is what traditionalists like about tradition, I suppose: long continuity making you feel large.
The Claw of the Conciliator (The Book of the New Sun, #2) (1981) by Gene Wolfe	Again excellent - a better *Dune*, a much better *Narnia*, a peer to *Ulysses*. Throws you off balance right from page one - there's about 50 pages of plot missing between the first and second volumes, never really recounted. Since the *Book* is a chronicle written much later by Severian, this is maybe to show how old the book is when the in-universe reader finds it. One of the great things about Severian is that he's *various* - he has many conflicting goals, none of which is really the master quest. He swears I think four absolute oaths to different authorities. Jonas teases him about this: *"You want to serve Vodalus, and to go to Thrax and begin a new life in exile, and to wipe out the stain you say you have made on the honor of your guild — though I confess I don't understand how such a thing can be stained — and to find the woman called Dorcas, and to make peace with the woman called Agia while returning something we both know of to the women called Pelerines... I trust you realize that it is possible that one or two of them may get in the way of four or five of the others."* *"What you're saying is very true," I admitted. "I'm striving to do all those things, and although you won't credit it, I am giving all my strength and as much of my attention as can be of any benefit to all of them. Yet I*

	> *have to admit things aren't going as well as they might. My divided ambitions have landed me in no better place than the shade of this tree, where I am a homeless wanderer. While you, with your single-minded pursuit of one all-powerful objective . . . look where you are."* As the retrospective journal of a victor (and as a work of nasty, feudal science fiction) it has the same feel as *Dune*, only less clumsy: we know that Severian or Paul have prevailed or will, but this somehow doesn't unstring the plot. There is a lot of plot, a lot of one-off scenes and people. It's all earned though, through symbolism or callback or prose. Hundreds of pungent sentences ("*praise the Autarch, whose urine is wine to his subjects...*"). Probably 5/5 on re-read.
The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce (2006) by Deirdre N. McCloskey	> *I've been most things in my life: a positivist social engineer, a Joan Baez socialist, a man. Now I'm a free-market feminist, a quantitative postmodernist, a woman. I'm not ashamed of these changes of mind.* - *In one sentence*: The obscured origins of the modern world and its heart, as built by the hated bourgeoisie. - *To be read when*: depressed about the modern world; locked into an ideology which doesn't people's lives better, esp. your own life; if you are like most middle-class people, vaguely self-hating. It is good to be a contrarian teen. Decorous even. I was straight-edge, socialist, feminist, a poetaster, an inverse snob, and a shunner of TV.* Call this sort of thing *one* level up, one contrarian step past received opinion (which defaults to boozing, family-level rather than species-level communitarianism, gendering, ignoring poetry, passively respecting fine art, and watching 4 hours a day). However, at some point the *observant* contrarian will disagree with someone and find themselves unable to write them off - as they usually do - as prejudiced, anti-intellectual, or ignorant. Worst-case, they will meet a deadly meta-contrarian, someone who once held their view but stepped past it on considering some missing crucial consideration. (For instance: it is common sense, or at least common practice, that it's fine to not give any money to charity. One step beyond is altruism: 'we have a duty to help the wretched of the earth'. But then consider that one of the first things people who rise out of poverty do is increase their meat intake, and so to industrialise - that is, torture - their animals. If, as the scientists strongly agree we should, we take this seriously, then poverty alleviation might not be good at all! *But then*, consider that wild animals also suffer, millions of times more of them than even factory farmed animals, and that human industrialisation plausibly decreases this by removing habitat (...))

	Meta-contrarianism is vital is because philosophy, politics and economics are littered with crucial consideration landmines like these, single premises that can fully transform our conception of good action. Our problem is not socialism or theism or atheism or conservativism: the problem is irrational, reflexive views with no connection to the balance of evidence: i.e. ideologies and not philosophies. Anyway: I was pretty good-hearted, but neither clear nor honest. An ideologue. McCloskey, a Christian libertarian(!) and much else besides, got to *even me* via our shared contempt for neoclassical macroeconomics and null-hypothesis significance testing, two things she critiqued twenty years before the Great Recession and the replication crisis. Then she shocked me with the meta-contrary title of this, the first volume in her epic economic history of moral development: a reclamation of a slur on the creators of this good modern world we all increasingly enjoy. I don't know how many iterations of contrarianism ("dialectic") I'm on; it's not important, as long as I hold my views lightly enough to do one more when the evidence demands it. Besides long meditations on the pagan and Christian virtues, she holds a serious discussion on *Groundhog Day*, Thomas Mann, and much other art, and is the best telling of the maligned, vital Great Transformation story. Triumphant and funny and trembling with erudition. * At the time I thought being an atheist was *really* contrarian, but in Britain it really isn't. (Outside an RME classroom.) The formal stats are only now showing a majority for *stated* nonbelief, but church attendance has been a minority practice since the early C20th. • *Galef type*: **Data 3** - highlight patterns in the world, & **Theory 2** - models of what makes something succeed or fail , & **Values 1** - an explicit argument about values, & **Style 2** - learn a style of thinking by studying the author's approach to the world.
Critical Mass: How One Thing Leads to Another (2003) by Philip Ball	"*Being an Enquiry into the Interplay of Chance and Necessity in the Way That Human Culture, Customs, Institutions, Cooperation and Conflict Arise*" (2004) by Philip Ball. An elegant pop treatment of the once-burgeoning physics of mass human behaviour. (Which physics follows hundreds of years of stupid and/or inhumane theories claiming the name "social physics"). A love letter to statistical mechanics: > *Most people who have encountered thermodynamics blanch at its mention, because it is an awesomely tedious discipline both to learn theoretically and to investigate experimentally. This is a shame, because it is also one of the most astonishing theories in science. Think of it: here*

> *is a field of study initiated to help nineteenth-century engineers make better engines, and it turns out to produce some of the grandest and most fundamental statements about the way the entire universe works. Thermodynamics is the science of change, and without change there is nothing to be said...*
>
> *Tools, methods and ideas developed to understand how the blind material fabric of the universe behaves are finding application in arenas for which they were never designed, and for which they might at first glance appear ridiculously inappropriate. Physics is finding its place in a science of society.*

Introduces a hundred topics from thermodynamics, economics, econophysics, game theory, and fields which don't have a name yet, including intuitive explanations of fearsome concepts like:

- self-organized criticality
- the 2D and 3D Ising model
- diffusion-limited aggregation in bacteria and cities
- Lévy-stability
- the business cycle
- random walks
- superfluidity and supercooling phase transitions
- bifurcation theory
- traffic flow
- Zipf's law
- the Small world phenomenon
- catastrophe theory

  ...

Unlike shiny TED-style nonfiction, he refers directly to the original scientific papers and includes small interviews with the original researchers. No equations, but beautiful diagrams relating micro with macro, too: snowflakes to traffic and bacterial colonies to cities.

The book's reception, in the main by middlebrow, mathematically illiterate reviewers shocked me a bit: their banner conclusions were "boo! people aren't particles!!", a truism which Ball spends much of the book thinking about, and "aaar horrible people have said they've found the laws of society before!!", a truism the first fifth of the book is a history of. In their haste to protect ordinary human difference from averages, and the notion of free will from technical explanations, they flee to safe refuges like "complexity" and "reflexivity", i.e. out of science. Ball can speak for himself though:

> *The notion that we could ever construct a scientific "utopia theory" [e.g. classical Marxism] is, then, doomed to absurdity. Certainly, a "physics of society" can provide nothing of the sort. One does not build an ideal world from scientifically based traffic planning, market analysis, criminology, network design, game theory, and the gamut of other ideas discussed in this book. Concepts and models drawn from physics are almost certainly going to find their way into other areas of social science, but they are not going to provide a comprehensive theory of society, nor are they going to make traditional sociology, economics, or political science redundant. The skill lies in deciding where a mechanistic, quantitative model is appropriate for describing human behavior, and*

	> *where it is likely to produce nothing but a grotesque caricature. This is a skill that is still being acquired, and it is likely that there will be embarrassments along the way.* *But properly and judiciously applied, physical science can furnish some valuable tools in areas such as social, economic, and civic planning, and in international negotiation and legislation. It may help us to avoid bad decisions; if we are lucky, it will give us some foresight. If there are emergent laws of traffic, of pedestrian motions, of network topologies, of urban growth, we need to know them in order to plan effectively. Once we acknowledge the universality displayed in the physical world, it should come as no surprise that the world of human social affairs is not necessarily a tabula rasa, open to all options.* *Society is complex but that does not place it beyond our ken. As we have seen, complexity of form and organization can arise from simple underlying principles if they are followed simultaneously by a great many individuals.* There is a real question about how deep into human behaviour the statistical approach can go. Econophysics, as a term and as a living, funded academic subfield, fizzled out shortly after this book was published. Apparently the SOC results have come in for a lot of criticism, though mostly of their overreach than the method being humanistically inapplicable or whatevs. Even so, I wish I had read this 5 years ago: it would have saved me lots of contortions. it taught me a huge amount anyway. (e.g. the *huge* moral panic, following the invention of descriptive statistics, about *ever* using means to describe *any* human characteristics, since the remarkable stability of e.g. the C17th London crime rate across decades seemed to speak of divine or diabolical insurance.) One of my top 5 books on economics, one of my top 5 books on physics. *In one sentence*: Social physics had at last begun to make exciting progress on understanding mass human behaviour.
Alan Turing: The Enigma (1983) by Andrew Hodges	> *in the early days of computing, a number of terms for the practitioners of the field of computing were suggested in the Communications of the ACM — turingineer, turologist, flow-charts-man, applied meta-mathematician, and applied epistemologist.</blockquote>* *- wiki* > *In a man of his type, one never knows what his mental processes are going to do next.* *- JAK Ferns, Turing's coroner* *There have been two big films about Turing (three if you count the uselessly fictionalised Enigma (2001)). All of them are more or less dishonestly melodramatic; for instance they depict Turing's relationship with his dead love Christopher as the driver of his work on machine*

intelligence. And more generally they depict him as tragic. But he wasn't tragic: we were. In the 1950s we attacked a superlatively profound person, because we were certain it was the right thing to do.

Hodges, whose book began the great public rehabilitation of Turing and served as the source for the films, bears no blame for this: it's one of the best biographies I've ever read (better even than Kanigel on Ramanujan and Issacson on Einstein).

Begin with his achievements:

- *1935: Mathematical statistics: An independent proof of the Central Limit Theorem.*
- *1935: Group theory: An extension to a theorem of von Neumann's.*
- *1936: Mathematical logic: One of the all-time great papers, an answer to Hilbert's halting problem and an elaboration of the incompleteness of all mathematics, and the formal statement of a single machine that can perform all computable work.*
- *1936: Computability theory: Same paper. Creator thereof.*
- *1936: Automata theory: Same paper. Creator thereof.*
- *1936: Computer engineering: Same paper. Inventor of the stored-program concept, used in all computers since 1950.*
- *1937: Group theory: Proof that general continuous groups cannot be approximated by finite groups.*
- *1938: Mathematical logic: Invention of ordinal logics, an attempt to handle incompleteness.*
- *1938: Analytic number theory: Algorithm ("Turing's method") for calculating values of the zeta-function.*
- *1938: Computer engineering and Mathematical methodology: Design of an analogue machine to approximate the zeroes of the zeta function.*
- *1939: Cryptanalysis: developed most of the logical methods used against Nazi Germany's naval cipher, Enigma. Including a new sort of indirect frequency analysis, "simultaneous scanning", search trees, an independent invention of Shannon's information entropy (as "Weight of evidence")...*
- *1940: Mechanical engineering: redesigned the Polish Bomba to handle the exponential explosion in the Enigma's state space.*

- *1941: Statistics: independent invention of sequential analysis, for "Banburismus".*

- *1940: Bayesian inference: independent reinvention of Bayes factors and the first approximation of what we would now call empirical Bayes estimation. IJ Good quite rightly calls Bayes factors, "Bayes-Turing factors". (Though it should be Laplace-Turing factors.)*

- *1942: Cryptanalysis: A hand-method for cracking the Lorenz cipher, "Turingery".*

- *1944: Crytography, audio engineering and electrical engineering: Design, proof and much of the construction of "Delilah", an electronic speech encipherment device.*

- *1945-6: Algorithmics: The discovery of the stack. A neglected but vast accomplishment. (Zuse had already implemented subroutines by then.)*

- *1945-6: Computer engineering: Design of the Automatic Computing Engine, the first complete design of a stored-program computer, including circuit diagrams, instruction set and cost estimate. (von Neumann's is incomplete.)*
- *1948: Computer music: The first computer music. Turing's handbook for the Mark I had a section on using it to produce notes, and they gave a demo for radio in 1951, also a first. Not really a synth (not real-time) and not real electronic music (produced by moving parts).*

- *1948: Linear algebra: Better ways of solving linear systems and inverting matrices.*

- *1949: Group theory: Proof that the 'word problem' is insoluable for cancellation semigroups. Computability mainstream in mathematics by then.*

- *1949: Formal verification: Paper on proving that computer programs will behave.*

- *1950: Philosophy of mind and artificial intelligence: His famous one, "Computing machinery and intelligence" is one of the top 100 set texts in philosophy, but Computable Numbers is deeper, outlining how computability places limits on what the brain can do, and how difficult it will be to redo. He sees machine learning coming very clearly.*

- *1951: Group theory: Another big result in the word problem for groups. (unpublished)*
- *1951: Chess engine: Published the first algorithm to play a full game of chess automatically.*

- *1952: Mathematical biology: a profound chemical theory of how life grows, now a textbook model of morphogenesis.*
- *1952: Number theory: Numerical evidence (computed on the Manchester Baby) for thousands of values of the zeta-function.*
- *1952: Pattern formation: Construction of the "Swift-Hohenberg" equation, 23 years before them.*

</ul>

Copeland estimates that breaking U-boat Enigma saved 14 million lives, a large fraction of which we can lay at Turing's feet. This puts him in the top 50 life-savers ever. But what is most amazing (and endearing) is just how unsophisticated he was.

> *As at school, trivial examples of 'eccentricity' circulated in Bletchley circles. Near the beginning of June he would suffer from hay fever, which blinded him as he cycled to work, so he would use a gas mask to keep the pollen out, regardless of how he looked. The bicycle itself was unique, since it required the counting of revolutions until a certain bent spoke touched a certain link (rather like a cipher machine), when action would have to be taken to prevent the chain coming off. Alan had been delighted at having, as it were, deciphered the fault in the mechanism, which meant that he saved himself weeks of waiting for repairs, at a time when the bicycle had again become what it was when invented – the means of freedom. It also meant that no one else could ride it.*
>
> *He made a more explicit defence of his tea-mug (again irreplaceable, in wartime conditions) by attaching it with a combination lock to a Hut 8 radiator pipe. But it was picked, to tease him.*
>
> *Trousers held up by string, pyjama jacket under his sports coat – the stories, whether true or not, went the rounds. And now that he was in a position of authority, the nervousness of his manner was more open to comment. There was his voice, liable to stall in mid-sentence with a tense, high-pitched 'Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah' while he fished, his brain almost visibly labouring away, for the right expression, meanwhile preventing interruption. The word, when it came, might be an unexpected one, a homely analogy, slang expression, pun or wild scheme or rude suggestion accompanied with his machine-like laugh; bold but not with the coarseness of one who had seen it all and been disillusioned, but with the sharpness of one seeing it through strangely fresh eyes. 'Schoolboyish' was the only word they had for it. Once a personnel form came round the Huts, and some joker filled in for him, 'Turing A.M. Age 21', but others, including Joan, said it should be 'Age 16'...*

> *It was demeaning, but the repetition of superficial anecdotes about his usually quite sensible solutions to life's small challenges served the useful purpose of deflecting attention away from the more dangerous and difficult questions about what an Alan Turing might think about the world in which he lived. English 'eccentricity' served as a safety valve for those who doubted the general rules of society. More sensitive people at Bletchley were aware of layers of introspection and subtlety of manner that lay beneath the occasional funny stories. But perhaps he himself welcomed the chortling over his habits, which created a line of defence for himself, without a loss of integrity.*

We have words for this now ("nerd", "wonk", "aspie"), and massive institutions, and even social movements, but at the time he had to make do with "don", and hide inside academia. Again: the problem wasn't him, it was us.

He gets called a mathematician most often, I suppose because people don't want to be anachronistic. But scroll up: his most famous work is as a logician and a systems architect, and much of the rest is statistics and algorithmics and cognitive science. He was falling between several chairs, until computer science caught up with him:

> *a pure mathematician worked in a symbolic world and not with things. The machine seemed to be a contradiction... For Alan Turing personally, the machine was a symptom of something that could not be answered by mathematics alone. He was working within the central problems of classical number theory, and making a contribution to it, but this was not enough. The Turing machine, and the ordinal logics, formalising the workings of the mind; Wittgenstein's enquiries; the electric multiplier and now this concatenation of gear wheels – they all spoke of making some connection between the abstract and the physical. It was not science, not 'applied mathematics', but a sort of applied logic, something that had no name.*

The philosopher-engineer. One of several moments in Hodge's book that left me dumbstruck is Turing arguing with Wittgenstein about the foundations of mathematics. (In the spring of 1939 they were both teaching courses at Cambridge called that!) Bit awkward, and in my view Alan goes easy on Ludwig. But you still couldn't make it up.

The government employed Turing for 9 years, paying him about £6000 over the duration (£150k in today's money). In that time he produced 3 gigantically advanced systems (most of the Hut 8 system, the Delilah and the ACE design), about 10 or 20 years ahead of their time. Hodges sees this as a triumph of managerial socialism.

Now, breaking naval enigma for £6k is an unbelievable deal (the savings from undestroyed shipping and cargo would be in the billions). But the government suppressed Delilah and totally screwed up the ACE project. So I'm not sure if we can cheer too much. Keynes says somewhere that

> *The important thing for Government is not to do things which individuals are doing already, and to do them a little better or a little worse; but to do those things which at present are not done at all.*

This is true of Enigma, I suppose. But instructive failures are only helpful if they occur in public. (As at least the ACE report was.)

The most annoying part of the films making up emotionally powerful unifying themes for Turing is that they are already there. (But to grasp them, you'd have to actually display what was most wonderful and important about him, his technical work, and there goes the box office.) Anyway, here's one that made me cry:

> *In an end-of-term sing-song [at Sherborne, when Turing was 12], the following couplet described him:*
>
> > *Turing's fond of the football field*
> > *For geometric problems the touch-lines yield*
>
> *... another verse had him 'watching the daisies grow' during hockey... although intended as a joke against his dreamy passivity, there might have been a truth in the observation.*
>
> *[20 years later] ...One day he and Joan were lying on the Bletchley lawn looking at the daisies... Alan produced a fir cone from his pocket, on which the Fibonacci numbers could be traced rather clearly, but the same idea could also be taken to apply to the florets of the daisy flower.*
>
> *[30 years later] ...he was trying out on the computer the solution of the very difficult differential equations that arose when [one] followed the chemical theory of [plant] morphogenesis beyond the moment of budding... it also required some rather sophisticated applied mathematics, which involved the use of 'operators' rather as in quantum mechanics. Numerical analysis was also important... In this it was like a private atomic bomb, the computer in both cases following the development of interacting fluid waves.*
>
> *...he also developed a purely descriptive theory of leaf-arrangement... using matrices to represent the winding of spirals of leaves or seeds round a stem or flower-head... The intention was that ultimately these two approaches would join up when he found a system of equations that would generate the Fibonacci patterns expressed by his matrices.*

	> *...Such observations reflected an insight gained from... [a program called] 'Outline of Development of the Daisy'. He had quite literally been 'watching the daisies grow'... on his universal machine.* *</td> </tr>*
Soonish: Ten Emerging Technologies That'll Improve and/or Ruin Everything (2017) by Kelly Weinersmith	Excellent, sceptical look at near-future tech, their enormous potential and risk. The technologies are: new ways of getting to space, asteroid mining, fusion power, programmable matter, robotic construction, brain-computer interfaces, synthetic biology, and bioprinting. They tend to be bearish about these technologies, because their default (i.e. unregulated) effects could be really dreadful. (Excepting robo-construction and organ printing because these are much less dangerous and dodgy than the existing hacks.) My favourite bit is the paean to Alvin Roth's organ-swap algorithm, which is a magnificent way of circumventing human squeamishness. Lots of direct quotation from the unprepossessing scientists doing all this, <3. There are also lots of addenda of the following sort: > *The story of Gerald Bull goes like this. You have a brilliant engineer who's especially good at ballistics at an early age, who had a brilliant career early on where he got funding from Canada and the US to work on these ballistics programs. Then basically the funding dried up. So he kind of did whatever it took to be able to keep working in this area, which led him to do work in weapons dealing, including dealing with then apartheid South Africa. And things basically unraveled from there, resulting in his humiliation and depression and alcoholism.* > *Then much later in life he began working for Saddam Hussein, building, for reasons that are not well understood, a giant gun. To be clear, it was probably not useful as a weapon. It was not going to be moveable, it was not pointing at an enemy city: it was pointing as the Earth turns, which is what you'd want to do if you were shooting into space. Then, shortly after that, in the early '90s he ended up in a Brussels hotel with a bullet in his head and $20,000 on his body, and nobody is sure who killed him. I believe his son suspected Mossad, but no one as far as I can find has come forward to say here's who did it.* Suitable for all ages, knob jokes aside. (There's a segue joke at the end of every block, and they are uniformly a bit forced.) The illustrations actually don't add anything, even though I love SMBC.
A Deepness in the Sky (Zones of Thought, #2) (1999) by Vernor Vinge	A beautiful portrait of pragmatism vs idealism, colonialism and collaboration, surveillance culture vs everything, the possibility of deep translation, the beauty and gaucheness of trade, and the ultimate fate of civilisations. > *Programming went back to the beginning of time. It was a little like the midden out back of his father's castle… There were programs here written five thousand years ago, before Humankind ever left Earth. The wonder of it — the horror of it… down at the very bottom of it was a little program that ran a counter. Second by second, the Qeng Ho counted*

> *from the instant that a human had first set foot on Old Earth's moon. But if you looked at it still more closely… the starting instant was actually about fifteen million seconds later, the 0-second of one of Humankind's first computer operating systems…*
>
> *"We should rewrite it all," said Pham.*
>
> *"It's been done," said Sura.*
>
> *"It's been tried," corrected Bret…"You and a thousand friends would have to work for a century or so to reproduce it… And guess what—even if you did, by the time you finished, you'd have your own set of inconsistencies..."*

Vinge's great skill is in drawing out sick tragic tension for hundreds of pages, driving the reader on to ever more complex injustices, until... The smooth-talking fascist antagonists are a bit too simple, a bit Harkonnen; their mind-raping slavery, their inversion of justice by lying perfectly, their flat-toned planning of atrocities:

> *"At which time, we'll feed them the story of our noble effort to limit the genocide." Ritser smiled, intrigued by the challenge. "I like it."*

You are made to wait 500 pages for a comeuppance. The "Focused", the mindwiped slaves are extremely creepy; weaponised savants (see Ada Palmer's set-sets for a less straightforward treatment of human computers).

Pham Nuwen, the great programmer-statesman, is far more interesting here than in the first book. He stands out in a large cast of interesting characters, all laying down schemes and intrigues with at minimum 20 years until payoff (at maximum 2000 years). Not ordinary, but not unrealistic; there have been dozens like him, possessed of or by the force that drives Napoleon off his island, Washington over the river, Alexander everywhere. He is a psychopath:

> *The [armed fascists] might try to chase him around in here. That would be fun; Nau's goons would find just how dangerous their tunnels had become...*

The evolutionary role of such people - both the fearless hero, Nuwen, and the bloodthirsty predator, Nau - is not handled explicitly, but Pham is held up as a paragon.

The arachnid aliens are much better than the hivehounds of the last book: Vinge and his translator characters' anthropomorphisations (or, rather, personalisations) are successful. Though maybe I'm just biased because the Spiders are shown going through their Information Revolution rather than their Pre-Renaissance period. It shows the deep connection between lack of economic growth, lack of intellectual growth and lack of social progress. The great scientist Sherkaner is also the one to challenge his society's sexual oppression. ("*Either way, the cycles were shattered forever*") The "counterlurk" is the Enlightenment. It's an exquisite portrait of the great promise and risk of a technological society; you get the end of hunger and disease, you get spaceflight, but you also get nuclear standoffs.

	There are wonderful symmetries between the Spiders and humans: they each have odd, distended sleep cycles (the humans going into cryogenic suspension most of the time, the Spiders hibernating centuries until the sun reignites). There's also the Sura/Pham, Qiwi / Ezr, and Victory/Sherkaner pairings, the actual beauty of complementing another, of power couples with aims beyond their own power. The title looks clumsy but isn't: it refers to a very large thought, that decentralising a system is the only way to make it last; that space is not only a cold and hostile place, it is also the way to break the terrible forces that might work against mere interplanetary civilisations: > *Pham would get their localizers in return for decent medical science. Both sides would benefit enormously. Magnate Larson would live a few extra centuries. If he was lucky, the current cycle of his civilization would outlive him. But a thousand years from now, when Larson was dust, when his civilization had fallen as the planetbound inevitably did—a thousand years from now, Pham and the Qeng Ho would still be flying between the stars. And they would still have the Larson localizers...* > > *"If you accept the trade I'm hoping for, you will live just as many years as I. But I am Qeng Ho. I sleep decades between the stars. You Customer civilizations are ephemera to us."* One unintentional detail: the "huds" that all the human characters depend are I think just Google Glass. Stayed up late to finish it. Maybe 5/5, will re-read in a while and see. --- How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: all three societies depicted are very distinct and have believable economies, genderings, . The Qeng Ho - the empire without a capital, the force without an army - are a lovely depiction of the humanistic and progressive side of trade. The Emergents are maybe a little too simple, too feudal and dastardly. *Software development*: Fantastic. Central to the plot (titanic cruft as feature), with a subtle twist on the horror of legacy systems: an entire multi-planet civilisation is shown collapsing because its software is too fucking crufty to live. (That might sound ridiculous, but I promise you I see this story in miniature everywhere at my work.) No one does it better. *Actual Science*: Lots, with a breathless romp through all of C20th physics and engineering - though there's also a magic antigrav ore.
The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959) by Erving Goffman	Queering the fake/authentic binary

The Lord of the Rings (1955) by J.R.R. Tolkien	Anti-modern, stilted, and it inspired millions of pages of awful work, but hey it's grand. A glorious mess (or, a glorious mess draped over an impressive classical edifice, the linguistics.) : a devout Catholic tries to write a mythic prehistory of Earth... with its own pagan pantheon, where a cool man with a shiny gem on his face is also a giant ball of carbon dioxide. People don't seem to realise that it's a mess. Maybe all fiction is, when you know it intimately enough. Is this hate-reading? I don't think so, I wouldn't get goosebumps at this if it was: > *There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.*
Infidel (2006) by Ayaan Hirsi Ali	> *I told him, "I'm not coming to the [wedding he arranged for her], and all he said was, "You're not required." Legally, this was true.* > *I went to Sister Aziza and said, "The [Christian] girls will not become Muslims. Their parents have taught them other religions. It isn't their fault, and I don't think it's fair that they'll burn in Hell." Sister Aziza told me I was wrong. Through me, Allah had given them a choice. If these girls rejected the true religion, then it was right that they should burn.* Vivid and horrific. She is sewn shut as a child. Her Sunday school teacher beats her into the hospital. She is forced into marriage. She flees civil war and her family. She becomes an apostate. She makes an edgy film. The latter three are held to be crimes, the last worthy of death. But somehow the book is not a misery memoir. --- She is hard to agree with and impossible to ignore; some people solve this tension with absurd insults. Her work against sexism is thought to be negated (and then some) by her succour to racism. What are the arguments against her views? * "*Her critique only applies to Somalia.*" (e.g.) Sadly not. * "*Her critique was only valid in the 70s.*" Sadly not. * "*Her critique only applies to Wahhabism.*" No; she grew up under non-Saudi Islamic socialism. * "*Her writing is self-serving: she built a political career on denigrating Islam.*" Ah yes: cunning of her to be born into oppression, get chopped up and repeatedly forced into marriage; what an impressive long con. More seriously: it doesn't strike me as a good deal to accept a high probability of

murder for the rest of your life, in exchange for a political seat and an academic post. Why is so hard to believe that someone willing to risk her life might *mean it*?

* "*She has no scholarly credentials to speak authoritatively about Islam*".
Doesn't apply to *Infidel*, since it is a first-person account of several different Muslim regimes. More than this: she grew up in four different Islamic societies, speaks half a dozen languages, and has spent 17 years studying it, at Harvard and places like that. This is not to say she's correct, it's just obviously untrue that she has no scholarly credentials.

* "*She is an inauthentic ethnic voice." / "Her portrayals are neo-Orientalist." / "Her portrayals are an enactment of the colonial civilizing mission discourse*."
This is only an objection if you think she's lying (or cherry-picking), and if you take correspondence to old ideas of bad people as proof of falsehood or unsayableness. Who's *more* authentic?

* "*Their accounts confirm dangerous stereotypes and reinforce the old-new dichotomy of the 'civilized us' versus the 'barbaric them'. In addition, they increase the pressure on Muslim and Arabs in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere.*" (source)
I wouldn't have used "confirm" there, if I was making his point.

* "*Her policy prescriptions are extreme and counterproductive.*"
This was true through the noughties (she called it 'fascism', called it war), but apparently she's mellowed. (Generally people aren't given a second chance on these matters.)

* "*Hirsi Ali feels she cannot be a feminist and a Muslim... [but] numerous women who espouse feminist, intellectual, Muslim and African identity [exist].*" (e.g. here)
Completely true.

* "*(Only) white men like her*" / "*Her fans are awful.*".
This is very twisted ad hominem (because the critic realises that they can't attack a Somali woman who has survived decades of abuse).

Here's one of mine: To understand Ayn Rand - the cartoonish egotism, the false social theory, the needless extremity - you need to remember what she went through: the equally cartoonish, false and extreme Stalinism. (This point would outrage Rand, since it makes a victim of her, and makes her vaunted individualism just a mechanical inversion.) Maybe you could argue Hirsi Ali is like this. Even if you do, it doesn't reduce our obligation to *actually argue* with Rand or Hirsi Ali *at all*, though.

Here's the crux of the whole thing, her discussing religion with her dad:

> *"There is no coercion in Islam," my father said. "No human being has the right to punish another for not observing his religious duties. Only Allah can do that."*
>
> *It was like Quran school, but more intelligent. We even talked about martyrdom. My father said that committing suicide for Holy War was acceptable only in the time of the Prophet—and then only because the unbelievers had attacked the Prophet first. Today there could not be a*

	> *Holy War, he said, because only the Prophet Muhammad could call for a Holy War.* *This was my father's Islam: a mostly nonviolent religion that was his own interpretation of the Prophet's words. It relied on one's own sense of right and wrong, at least to some degree. It was more intelligent than the Islam I had learned from the ma'alim, and it was also far more humane. Still, this version of Islam also left me with unanswered questions and a sense of injustice: Why was it that only women needed to ask permission from their husband to leave the house, and not the other way round?* *My father's Islam was also clearly an interpretation of what the Prophet said. As such, it was not legitimate. You may not interpret the will of Allah and the words of the Quran: it says so, right there in the book. There is a read-only lock. It is forbidden to pick and choose: you may only obey. The Prophet said, "I have left you with clear guidance; no one deviates from it after me, except that he shall he destroyed." A fundamentalist would tell my father, "The sentence 'Only the Prophet can call a Holy War' is not in the Quran. You're putting it in there. That is blasphemy."* : Did you notice it? She yields the entire ground to the fundamentalists. She's a literalist! She notes, correctly, that the Quran forbids interpretation, forbids reformation, and gives up. Never mind that almost all religious people live extremely flexibly with the demands of their religion, "failing" at this and adapting that. Never mind that, contrary to the Word, there's loads of Islams, that some majority-Muslim countries have been electing women for ages, that some Muslim governments have been trying to stop FGM for a while now. We're messy, nevertheless, thank god. (It looks like her more recent books focus on exactly this point, though.)
Surface Detail (Culture #9) (2010) by Iain M. Banks	Meditation on consequentialism and moral progress, only more fun than that sounds. ("*Consequences are everything*.") Spends 300 pages setting up its thirteen protagonists into like seven plot threads. As a result, he has to repeat a lot of exposition to keep us - including, in one instance, a full page of quoted dialogue which we'd heard 50 pages back. Oddly simplistic despite its fifth-order intentionality, then. *Surface Detail* fills out some of the mechanisms and organisation of the Culture; throws his usual bucket of ideas at the plot (graphic descriptions of Hell, a first-person account of an aquatic, hair-thick species, an extended section in a Medieval convent) and keeps a good amount of tension and mental strain going. Good, full of simple dramatised philosophy.
Seveneves (2015) by Neal Stephenson	Amazing hard worldbuilding from a lunatic seed: 'what would happen if the moon just blew up?' You will stomach pages of physical exposition before scenes can occur, but it isn't superfluous. First two-thirds are psychologically convincing: you will ball your fists at the politics. (By which I mean treachery and irrationality.) He does railroad a couple of plot points - e.g. it is taken for granted that a psychopathic war criminal has every right to an equal share of the genetic future. And the last third's extrapolation of 5000 years of cultural creep is less formally ambitious than e.g. *Cloud Atlas*.

	First two-thirds **4*/5**, last third 3/5. [Theory #1, Theory #2, Theory #4, Values #2]</li> *** How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: Lots, though the races that develop are primary-coloured and fantastical, including a fantastical war. *Software development*: A little bit, particularly Dinah's cool claytronics. *Actual Science*: Plenty, with the lone exception of the initial moonburst.
Money for Nothing (1928) by P.G. Wodehouse	Gorgeous as ever. Was snorting on the Tube over it. ---- This was surprising, for 1928: > *You're a confirmed settler-down, the sort of chap that likes to roll the garden lawn and then put on his slippers and light a pipe and sit side by side with the little woman, sharing a twin set of head phones.* But Wiki tells me this was indeed possible, for a posh progressive couple. Not sure why they'd do this instead of a gramophone - maybe it was for the radio.
The Waste Land (1922) by T.S. Eliot	What a pain to understand this must've been, before the internet. (But only if you need to feel in control all the time while reading.)
Inadequate Equilibria: Where and How Civilizations Get Stuck (2017) by Eliezer Yudkowsky	None yet
Cracking the Coding Interview: 150 Programming Questions and Solutions (2008) by Gayle Laakmann McDowell	This has zero relevance for almost everyone; and about 3 quarters of the book can be skipped by almost all of the remaining people (specifics about the big tech companies and particular language warts). Even so, it's good that it exists; it's an impressive distillation of Computer Science lore and heuristics, which thus lets smart outsiders in. I was dismayed to open it and find 100 pages of fluff (the curse of the ebook: book proportions not being completely obvious), but the algorithm challenges start after, don't stop, and are very good. (Don't panic: doing half of them way over-prepared me for my interview.) The non-coding 'brain teasers' are helpful if, like me, you weren't a puzzle geek in youth. Essential for a tiny number of people.

Sex by Numbers: What Statistics Can Tell Us About Sexual Behaviour (Wellcome) (2015) by David Spiegelhalter	Fun with a serious scientific mission. The expected titillating facts are present (how many people have tried anal? How many people are gay? What's typical?) but there's also an intro to the many difficulties of social science and a history of sexology in here. You learn why you should admire (but not trust) Ellis, Hirschfeld, Kinsey, Masters & Johnson, Hite... Something for everyone.
The Pale King (2011) by David Foster Wallace	What to say? Fifty fragments: unintegrated, contradicting, only sometimes amazing. Themes you'd expect: self-consciousness, freedom, duty, routine - the awful effect of unconstrained self-consciousness, freedom, duty and routine - the death of American civics - 'the horror of personal smallness and transience' - the repugnance we feel for pure virtue - the extraordinary fires alight beneath some people. But where in *Jest* these were expressed through (burdened with) drug slang, pharmacology, advertising dreck, and calculus, here we get accountancy minutiae surely intended to repulse us. Yet the style is far less mannered than his finished work, which style we might call Postdoc Valleyspeak. > *The reason for this public ignorance is not secrecy. The real reason why US citizens were/are not aware of these conflicts, changes and stakes is that the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull.* > *It is impossible to overstate the importance of this feature. Consider, from the Service's perspective, the advantages of the dull, the arcane, the mind-numbingly complex. The IRS was one of the very first government agencies to learn that such qualities help to insulate them against public protest and political opposition, and that abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy. For the great disadvantage of secrecy is that it's interesting.* Institutional tedium – the default state for developed-world adults – is profoundly important to address, a topic it will take an unusual mind to illuminate for us. But *Pale King* is actually not a Kafkan tale of the ever-growing horror of bureaucracy; actually he is deeply impressed and convinced of the value of the people and the work of the IRS, in large part *because* of its inhumane strictures, lack of glory, and unpopularity. "*Big Q is whether IRS is to be essentially a corporate entity or a moral one.*" (Though if 'corporate' is there read merely as meaning 'maximising', the distinction can be misleading.) > *To me, the really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. Maybe it's because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that's where phrases like 'deadly dull' and 'excruciatingly dull' come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way… I can't think anyone really believes that*

	> *today's so-called 'information society' is just about information. Everyone knows it's about something else, way down.* I tried to read them as short stories rather than chapters. This half-works. Actually the entire book was intentionally fruitless – the major agonists all off-stage, everyone else just enduring. A couple of intentionally unconvincing first-person authorial inserts – "I, David Wallace, social security no…" – affirm the reality of the garish IRS underbelly he fabricates, put him in the scene. Fragment #8 is a horrifying Cormac McCarthy lyric, childhood psychosis. One (#22) is a hundred-page monologue, the character repetitive, rambling and conceited, but also the most developed and affecting. Of this wreckage we are given to read. What to say? That you'd have to love this writing to like it, that you should.
The Plato Cult: And Other Philosophical Follies (1991) by David Stove	Funny, unfair, rabid dismissal of most philosophy ever. Uses *ad hominem* Bulwerism openly - despite that going against his own ideal of reason - because he views a great range of people as being too mad to engage with. His other move is to use the positivist's wood-chipper principle a lot: 'your position is literally meaningless; you're too stupid to see this', occasionally correctly. Attacks idealists mostly, including whole chapters making fun of Goodman, Nozick, and Popper(!) - but does not spare Mill ("here doing his usual service of making mistakes very *clearly*") and Russell, who you'd think were his kind of men. The last chapter is scary and hilarious and suggests the man's basic pain, underneath his roaring pessimism. Read it at least. **4/5.** (keep it away from freshers though)
Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (1975) by Raymond Williams	A list of definitions (and etymologies) of the vague, overloaded, and pompous language used in the humanities. Reading this early in my degree made me able to talk: it relaxed the paralysis that is the natural (and perhaps intended) response to their famous walls of jargon. If you've ever felt there was something *to* area studies and critical theory, but that the inferential distance was too costly to justify the effort, this is the book for you. (Or, it was thirty years ago. They'll have invented thousands more ill-defined words since then.) I imagine it would also be good for very ambitious adult English learners. Williams is a sarcastic, clever and friendly guide: I can't remember which top-rank word he describes as "better for it never to have been", but here's a good entry: > *'Nature' is perhaps the most complex word in the language. It is relatively easy to distinguish three areas of meaning:* > *(i) the essential quantity and character of something;* > *(ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both;* > *(iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings.* > *Yet it is evident that within (ii) and (iii), though the area of reference is broadly clear, precise meanings are variable and at times even opposed.*

The historical development of the word through these three senses is important, but it is also significant that all three senses, and the main variations and alternatives within the two most difficult of them, are still active and widespread in contemporary usage. was (i), the essential character and quality of something. Nature is thus one of several important words, including culture, which began as descriptions of a quality or process, immediately defined by a specific reference, but later became independent nouns...

The common phrase human nature, often crucial in important kinds of argument, can contain, without clearly demonstrating it, any of the three main senses and indeed the main variations and alternatives. There is a relatively neutral use in sense (i): that it is an essential quality and characteristic of human beings to do something (though the something that is specified may of course be controversial). But in many uses the descriptive (and hence verifiable or falsifiable) character of sense (i) is less prominent than the very different kind of statement which depends on sense (ii), the directing inherent force, or one of the variants of sense (iii), a fixed property of the material world, in this case 'natural man'. What has also to be noticed in the relation between sense (i) and senses (ii) and (iii) is, more generally, that sense (i), by definition, is a specific singular - the nature of something, whereas senses (ii) and (iii), in almost all their uses, are abstract singulars - the nature of all things having become singular nature or Nature...

There was then a practice of shifting use, as in Shakespeare's Lear:

> *Allow not nature more than nature needs,*
> *Man's life's as cheap as beast's ...*
> *one daughter / Who redeems nature from the general curse*
> *Which twain have brought her to.*
> *That nature, which contemns its origin*
> *Cannot be border'd certain in itself...*

It could seem wrong to inquire into the workings of an absolute monarch, or of a minister of God. But a formula was arrived at: to understand the creation was to praise the Creator, seeing absolute power through contingent works. In practice the formula became lip-service and was then forgotten. Paralleling political changes, nature was altered from an absolute to a constitutional monarch, with a new kind of emphasis on natural laws. Nature, in C18 and C19, was often in effect personified as a constitutional lawyer. The laws came from somewhere, and this was variously but often indifferently defined; most practical attention was given to interpreting and classifying the laws, making predictions from precedents, discovering or reviving forgotten statutes, and above all shaping new laws from new cases: nature not as an inherent and shaping force but as an accumulation and classification of cases.

The complexity of the word is hardly surprising, given the fundamental importance of the processes to which it refers. But since nature is a word which carries, over a very long period, many of the major variations of

	> *human thought - often, in any particular use, only implicitly yet with powerful effect on the character of the argument - it is necessary to be especially aware of its difficulty.*
Dune (Dune Chronicles, #1) (1965) by Frank Herbert	> *The bottom line of the Dune trilogy is: beware of heroes. Much better [to] rely on your own judgment, and your own mistakes* – Frank Herbert > *'Didn't you learn the difference between Harkonnen and Atreides so that you could smell a Harkonnen trick by the stink they left on it. Didn't you learn that Atreides loyalty is bought with love, while the Harkonnen coin is hate?* – also Frank Herbert *Dune* shouldn't work: there's a lot of the worst of fantasy fiction in it. The spurious black and white morality, above; cod-medieval dialogue; noble-savagery and bizarro Orientalism; its spoilers for itself (through its constant first-person precognition); and the po-faced chapter epigrams about how great the main character is... * But it does work. It works because of the loveable setting and its thrilling ecosystem; the sharp, rapid dialogue; its sheer, smushy pastiche of human history (American environmentalism, medieval feudalism, Arabic sheikism, and Zen martial hokum ("*he is a Zensunni prophet*", "*to use the family atomics*"); its mystical anti-*Star Trek* historical materialism; excellent setpieces; and because the book contains a realist reading of its own magical-heroic events. (Here's a start: Everything takes place on a world made of shroom heroin! You can't trust a thing these people say!) This hidden realism is clearest in the (heavy) appendices to the book - these aren't the ordinary conceited footnotes of fantasy, which assume you care about its little world as much as the author does. They're instead a rationalist palate cleanser after 600 pages of woo. A scientific, academic register erupts, mocking the internally real mysticism of the foregoing. I was even a little disappointed to find a huge glossary at the end, containing all the words I had been puzzling over. Mystery and gnosis and not-quite-getting-it suits the plot. The appendices say the book is more than its plot, and the world more than its books. (The big realist moment within the book is when you see that the great prophecy is just a scam, planted to manipulate people.) The baddies, the Harkonnens, are a bit much though: nothing they do is not repulsive. Herbert has the protagonists use mysticism and authoritarianism, while having most of the best characters resist and despise these things. There's no such tension with the main antagonists, no nominally redeeming feature. So you can feel Herbert hissing and booing the Harkonnens. Here is the *first* scene with the evil Baron: > *It was a relief globe of a world, partly in shadows, spinning under the impetus of a fat hand that glittered with rings... A chuckle sounded beside the globe. A basso voice rumbled out of the chuckle:* > *'There it is, Piter, the biggest mantrap in all history. And the Duke's headed into its jaws. Is it not a magnificent thing that I, the Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, do?'*

Herbert gets away with this because Harkonnen is supposed to be over-the-top, and, more, because his world has a black and grey morality. (Do you want the genocidal decadent rapist Machiavels or the square-chinned aristocratic Machiavels?)

The greyness of the Atreides leads to the biggest plot problem. (It's not exactly a plot hole, but it takes interpretive labour to make it make sense.): Paul's Jihad is unmotivated. Nobody wants it, including the Messiah it is carried out for. Paul even compares himself to Mega Hitler:

> *'There's another emperor I want you to note in passing - a Hitler. He killed more than six million. Pretty good for those days.'*
> *'Killed by his legions?'*
> *'Yes.'*
> *'Not very impressive statistics, m'Lord.'*
> *'... at a conservative estimate, I've killed sixty-one billion, sterilised ninety planets... We'll be a hundred generations recovering from Muad'dib's jihad.'*

and it's implied that the previous tyrant, Padishah, did not do such things. This completely undermines the exciting and righteous revolution that we spent a book and a half cheering on. If unprecedented death and misery is the payoff, *what is the gain of having a noble ruler*?

OK, Paul frequently speaks of not being able to stop the jihad - scrying that, if he does try and stop it, he just gets usurped and then it carries on worse. But then he shouldn't have come to power at all, and the book tacitly tells us that things would have been better if the Harkonnens succeeded and none of the last three-quarters happened.

The way to make sense of this is to take Herbert's anti-hero line above seriously. Paul made a terrible situation worse. We're not supposed to root for him. But, Herbert knows, we can't help it, because Paul is the Underdog and Loyal and Smart and Competent and (obvs) dead handsome.

Notes:

- There's very good dialogue throughout, with some of the best lines given to an array of anonymous guards. It is good because spare in the face of a baroque religion and politics.

- The Nietzschean philosophy of the book (that is, of Herbert, not just of the Fremen or of Paul) suggests a stronger connection between strength, suffering, and spiritual superiority than there actually is. But, even here, it would not be too hard to make a dove reading of *Dune*, where the actions of all ruthless parties are actually perverse.

- Dune even has a proper dialect, not the usual mere conlangs. Vocal memes: several different characters say *"Ah-h-h-h-h"* in a particular

way.

- The Bene Gesserit are the best thing in the book, a cabal of galactic, psychic, eugenicist spies.

- The books eventually turn against the Bene Gesserits' *specific* eugenics program, but it never lets up with hardass Darwinism (which in respectable form has been called Haidtism). Lots and lots of woo:

  > *The race of humans had felt its own dormancy, sensed itself grown stale and knew now only the need to experience turmoil in which the genes would mingle and the strong new mixtures survive. All humans were alive as an unconscious single organism in this moment, experiencing a kind of sexual heat that could override any barrier.*

  There's a Randian seduction in the Fremen hardass ethic. As in Nietzsche: Herbert is inviting the reader to view themselves as strong, above the mob. (If you feel nothing seductive about these books - well, you've a modest soul.)

- The second book goes into even more gritty detail: the Fremen toilets are 'reclamation stills', for instance. (I'm just impressed at the speech-act of grossing out your readers with your hero characters.)

- I've been toying with a connection between Kynes (*Dune*'s divine ecologist, who designs the rejuvenation of Arrakis) and the Kynde of *Piers Plowman* (Nature itself, or the intuitive transcendental grasp of it). I mention this mostly just to score a literary point: no-one else has noticed.

- The Fremen, his Muslim Tuareg, are actually Thracians in complexion. Xenophanes about Thrace:

  > *Men create the gods in their own image; those of the Ethiopians are black and snub-nosed, those of the Thracians have blue eyes and red hair.*

- I also love his Vulcans. Rather than being the mockable and inhuman they are just *whaddya know* better at thinking:

  > *'A mentat could not function without realising he worked in infinite systems. Fixed knowledge could not surround the infinite. Everywhere could not be brought into finite perspective.'*

  > *"Be a man and a mentat!"*
  > *"I am a mentat and a man."*

	• * On the last page you are told that the epigrams are all written out of sexual frustration, the joke on the author of them: > *'See that princess standing there, so haughty and confident. They say she has pretensions of a literary nature. Let us hope she finds solace in such things; she'll have little else.'*) Cue laughtrack, applause, credits. The quality dropped sharply between books: *Dune* is amazing, *Messiah* is slow but satisfying, *Children of Dune* is ok. Believe the hype. ********** How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: Done pretty well, despite appearances. *Dune* is a wild repudiation of Whig history, that our technology and our society must progress, and progress together. "Feudalism with energy weapons" as Heath says, half in contempt. *Software development*: No. *Actual Science*: No.
A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail (1998) by Bill Bryson	I don't rate him – his matey adjectival register and cutesy knowledge get on my nerves – but this is great. Dead funny throughout, free of bluster, and passionate about marginal researches (the fate of the hemlock tree in Northeast America, the punctuated history of very long US roads). I read this aloud and it worked very well. Even my townie girlfriend wants to go hiking now.
Does Foreign Aid Really Work? (2007) by Roger C. Riddell	At least when I was writing about aid, this was the best book on the balance of evidence. Bottom line is that almost all non-health C20th aid was wasted (and the food aid portion often harmful, since it distorted the local economy), but things have been getting a lot better since 2005. Only not five stars because it doesn't integrate the evidence into a full quantitative model or meta-analysis.
A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love (2003) by Richard Dawkins	Essay collection from his long heyday. His letter to his 10yo daughter is maybe the clearest statement of sceptical empiricism ever, though it also displays the blithe wonkishness that alienates most people: > *Suppose I told you that your dog was dead. You'd be very upset, and you'd probably say, 'Are you sure? How do you know? How did it happen?' Now suppose I answered: 'I don't actually know that Pepe is dead. I have no evidence. I just have this funny feeling deep inside me that he is dead.' You'd be pretty cross with me for scaring you, because you'd know that an inside 'feeling' on its own is not a good reason for*

	> *believing that a whippet is dead. You need evidence. We all have inside feelings from time to time, and sometimes they turn out to be right and sometimes they don't. Anyway, different people have opposite feelings, so how are we to decide whose feeling is right? The only way to be sure that a dog is dead is to see him dead, or hear that his heart has stopped; or be told by somebody who has seen or heard some real evidence that he is dead.* > *People sometimes say that you must believe in your deep feelings inside, otherwise you'd never be confident of things like 'My wife loves me'. But this is a bad argument. There can be plenty of evidence that somebody loves you. All through the day when you are with somebody who loves you, you see and hear lots of little tidbits of evidence, and they all add up. It isn't purely inside feeling, like the feeling that priests call revelation. There are outside things to back up the inside feeling: looks in the eye, tender notes in the voice, little favors and kindnesses; this is all real evidence.* Aaag he used to be so wise and grand, giving out words to live by. (He remains brave and clear, but you don't necessarily want to look through this windows anymore.)
Selected Poems, 1954-1992 (1996) by George Mackay Brown	Distrust and death but never self-pity; drowning and drama but wise. Of one place's Vikings, fish, and pain – like *Under Milk Wood* without the japery and authorial distance. Seal Market is amazing; the Hamnavoe poems are so good I feel I've been there (which means I don't have to go). Brown seems stuck writing about the Middle Ages – "*what are these red things like tatties? (apples)*"– but then, the Middle Ages lasted right through to the 1960s, on Orkney. And since "*a circle has no beginning or end. The symbol holds: people in AD 2000 are essentially the same as the stone-breakers of 3000 BC.*"
Writing Home (1994) by Alan Bennett	None yet
Dril Official "Mr. Ten Years" Anniversary Collection (2018) by Dril	It's difficult to explain ok. What looks like tasteless idiocy - or, not much better, tastelessly ironic tasteless idiocy - is actually a new, hilarious literary style. I hate Twitter, but use it for this. 'dril' is a self-aware idiot, a boastful masochist, a fanboy, a shill, a disgusting but hapless man. He graduated high school in 2005 but also has grandchildren. He can't spell very well but he breaks out ten-dollar words quite often. That is: he is Everyman, online. He thinks he's a social critic but he's also an open shill (and this is not unheard of). His mix of self-regard and incompetence is done better than Ignatius in *Confederacy of Dunces*. You can get a sense of what people see in him through all the surprisingly apt applications: the prolific tagging of completely different philosophers,

	US presidents, Romans, Christian denominations. Missing from this book is the nastier strand of the project, where he resurrects ten-year-old tweets by real accounts with impressively stupid names which accidentally share the aesthetic. (He mostly targets inactive accounts, though.) It's weird to pay for a book which is both free and dreadful (and lacks some good roughhousing). But everything here is weird.
Little Wolf's Book Of Badness (Book & Tape) (1995) by Ian Whybrow	None yet
In the Beginning...Was the Command Line (1999) by Neal Stephenson	> *The basic tenet of multiculturalism is that people need to stop judging each other—to stop asserting (and, eventually, to stop believing) that this is right and that is wrong, this true and that false, one thing ugly and another thing beautiful… The problem is that once you have done away with the ability to make judgments as to right and wrong, true and false, etc., there's no real culture left. All that remains is clog dancing and macramé. The ability to make judgments, to believe things, is the entire point of having a culture. I think this is why guys with machine guns sometimes pop up in places like Luxor and begin pumping bullets into Westerners.* Classic, cynical cultural history of popular computing. A noob-friendly guide to breaking free: a love letter to GNU: "*Linux... are making tanks... Anyone who wants can simply climb into one and drive it away for free... It is the fate of manufactured goods to slowly and gently depreciate as they get old and have to compete against more modern products. But it is the fate of operating systems to become free.*" If you're like me (human?), you need metaphors and binary distinctions to get abstract stuff, and Stephenson has them coming out of his ears, which sometimes leads to a stone-tablet patronising tone*. > *Disney and Apple/Microsoft are in the same business: short-circuiting laborious, explicit verbal communication with expensively designed interfaces.")* An amazing writer, though: he finds program comments "*like the terse mutterings of pilots wrestling with the controls of damaged airplanes.*" In tech, 15 years is a full geological era and a half*, so some of his insights have taken on a sepia hue (e.g. "*is [Microsoft] addicted to OS sales in the same way as Apple is to selling hardware? Keep in mind that Apple's ability to monopolize its own hardware supply was once cited, by learned observers, as a great advantage over Microsoft. At the time, it seemed to place them in a much stronger position. In the end, it nearly killed them, and may kill them yet... When things started to go south for Apple, they should have ported their OS to cheap PC hardware. But they didn't. Instead, they tried to make the most of their brilliant hardware, adding new features*

	and expanding the product line. But this only had the effect of making their OS more dependent on these special hardware features, which made it worse for them in the end. "). But astonishingly, most have not – and how many other tech articles from the 90s are still worth a single minute of your time? Free! here * He uses this very metaphor in this short essay.
CLOSURE (2013) by Why The Lucky Stiff	[Downloadable here and only here.] This is a wilfully glitchy, difficult, intense bundle of handwritten sketches about unspecifiable loss, faltering ambition, unchecked and uncaught exceptions. Why he doesn't program any more. It is autobiographical but most of it is probably not literally true. The 95 stories, each brutally truncated: > *ACCIDENT.pdf, ACCOUNTS.pdf, AMANDA.pdf, ATTEMPT.pdf, AWAKEN.pdf, BIBLICAL.pdf, BLANK.pdf, BOOMS.pdf, BRICKS.pdf, BURN.pdf, BUSTS.pdf, CAPRICE.pdf, CLOWNS.pdf, CONFLICTING.pdf, CORRUPTION.pdf, DELIRIUM.pdf, DESOLEE.pdf, DISCLAIMER.pdf, ELEVENTH.pdf, EXPERTS.pdf, EYES.pdf, FALLEN.pdf, FAREWELL.pdf, FIGHTS.pdf, FIRELESS.pdf, FLIPPED.pdf, FOOLS.pdf, FORGIVABLE.pdf, FRIGHTS.pdf, GAIMAN.pdf, GINGERBREAD.pdf, HELLOYES.pdf, HERBERT.pdf, HO.pdf, HOLES.pdf, HOMEWORK.pdf, IDEAS.pdf, IDOLATRY.pdf, IMPERSON.pdf, INVESTMENT.pdf, ITISUS.pdf, JERKS.pdf, JUXT.pdf, KIDS.pdf, LEAPS.pdf, LEVELS.pdf, LOGICAL.pdf, LOOKUP.pdf, MEANING.pdf, MIMICS.pdf, MISSING.pdf, MOLDED.pdf, NO.pdf, NOTES.pdf, NOTHIN.pdf, NOTYET.pdf, OBVIOUS.pdf, OUTRAGE.pdf, PASSAGES.pdf, PEANUTS.pdf, PIRATEO.pdf, PITHY.pdf, POULET.pdf, PRESENTLY.pdf, PROFESSORS.pdf, READING.pdf, REALITY.pdf, REASON.pdf, RECEIPT.pdf, RELATED.pdf, RESPONSIBLE.pdf, REVERSE.pdf, RIP.pdf, SACRED.pdf, SEAWATER.pdf, SENSORED.pdf, SOLICIT.pdf, SPAWN.pdf, SPENT.pdf, STACKS.pdf, STINKS.pdf, TABLETS.pdf, TEST.pdf, THEFT.pdf, TIGHT.pdf, TORN.pdf, TRESMAL.pdf, TRIALS.pdf, TRUMPETS.pdf, UNBOUND.pdf, URGENTLY.pdf, WELLWELL.pdf, WHATSUPDOC.pdf, YOU.pdf, YOUGETIT.pdf* Along with Gwern and Perlis, _why is one of our developer-artists. Art about code. So this is conceptualism that I don't immediately despise. (A closure is a neat piece of code that can remember what has happened, knows what's going on outside, beyond what the code explicitly mentions.) We get dead-format nostalgia, memery, a handwritten stretch of Ruby, and reflections on feeling inferior to Franz Kafka, of all people. _why has a unique voice. That is a banal thing to say, but it is true here as I suspect it is not elsewhere. There are only two technical passages, one litany of relief from enterprise development, and one entire module in handwriting.

There is torment. Keep up the names: he is the Simon Weil, the Tristram Shandy of web development, the DFW of running out of ritalin. Unquiet introversion.

> *Can anyone that has had a blog be called private? (Where are all the introverts these days? Technology has upgraded introverts into - soft extroverts I guess.)*

Here are his self-hating notes in the margin of his beautiful, kind comment on Shymalan's *The Happening*:

> *Perhaps the greatest pain of talking about art is how shallow it is compared to the actual experience of watching movie/song/etc... previously I had criticized the kinds of small talk discussions, particularly discussions about music, because they revolved around "Did you like this? Have you heard that?" and never went anywhere beyond that...*
>
> *Those pointless discussions that had always left me feeling empty, never able to talk about the beauty of music itself adequately, just the names and the styles... But why would anyone want to have a meaningful discussion all the time?*
>
> *In a way I feel that's the point of being candid. To expose how shameful I am.*

Wilfully awkward, marginal, analogue. He calls himself the Professor, as an insult.
The PDF is of images, not text: you cannot copy anything without putting in the effort. Old misaligned book scans, dumb Gorey cartoon jokes, an itemized grocery bill, astute literary notes on Kafka, Ishiguro, Gaiman. He lives now with extreme thrift and extreme technophobia, slamming down his friend's phone when she browses it during conversation. He makes seawater bread instead of web apps.

The harsh jump-cut absurdism between the sketches is not genuine - they are all linked. Not sure what by, but I say so.

> *I must strictly require you that, if you are to continue reading and go with me on this sally, that you resist from looking up anything to do with the book SACRED CLOWNS. This is paramount. I know the urge must be incredible to go out with your smartphones and to find out if the book is real, but I must INSIST that you just let it be. I don't know if it's possible for you to exercise that kind of self-restraint in this modern age, but you must. Of all the things I could ask of you, this seems so small and simple. Can you do this for me?*

(I did resist, but it was actually hard to.)

I usually don't rate merely formal experiment, intentional awkwardness. But the warmth of his great first book and the constant self-deprecation and plaintive concrete detail make it easy.

>

	> *"What's your name?"* > *"I won't say"* > *"It's just a name, mate! Doesn't mean anything to hide it!* > *"It doesn't mean anything to say it!" I yelled* Someone is squatting his old site. I wonder if it's _why; if the banal entrepreneurial positivity on it is him continuing *CLOSURE*. Since the book refuses to end; this is the last page: **4/5** but only if you care already.
Algorithmics: The Spirit of Computing (1987) by David Harel	A thing of beauty: an attempt at a work of computer science that doesn't date. It's general abstract introductory matter. The field is hugely consequential: different algorithms for the same task can differ in performance by a factor of trillions. Bible quotations book-end each chapter and give this a frisson of something other.
Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation (2015) by Laboria Cuboniks	None yet
The Mating Season (Jeeves, #9) (1949) by P.G. Wodehouse	> *"Still," I said, feeling that it was worth trying, "it's part of the great web, what?"* > *"Great web?"* > *"One of Marcus Aurelius's cracks. He said: Does aught befall you? It is good. It is part of the destiny of* *the Universe ordained for you from the beginning. All that befalls you is part of the great web. "* > *From the brusque manner in which he damned and blasted Marcus Aurelius, I gathered that, just as had happened when Jeeves sprang it on me, the gag had failed to bring balm. I hadn't had much hope that it would. I doubt, as a matter of fact, if Marcus Aurelius's material is ever the stuff to give the troops at a moment when they have just stubbed their toe on the brick of Fate. You want to wait till the agony has abated.* --- Classification: *Wooster's taboo*: None; using a port decanter as a conductor's baton while standing on a chair bellowing hunting doggerel. *Triangle*: Wooster - the Bassett - Gussie - Corky - Esmond - Gertrude -

	Catsmeat - Queenie - Dobbs.* *Subplot*: Arresting a dog, kidnapping, converting an atheist. *Aunt*: Agatha and five others *Antagonist*: Dame Daphne Winkworth, the Bassett, Agatha *Expedient*: treble impersonation, comedic Irish crosstalk, luring a schoolboy with a starlet, coshing a cop to convert him to Christianity. * It is vital to have an odd number of people in the love 'triangle', so that they can all be paired off at the end, sparing Wooster.
Ethel and Ernest (1999) by Raymond Briggs	None yet
The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists' Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics (2001) by William Easterly	Extremely important and readable empirical summary of the (C20th) failure of directed "development" aid (that is, capital aimed at a self-sustaining anti-poverty outcome).
Against Method (1975) by Paul Karl Feyerabend	A common misconception is that this book disses scientists. It doesn't; it tells *philosophers* of science that they've failed and should go home. Has an "Analytical Index", a table of contents which contains the principal argument. This should be mandatory in nonfiction.
Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow (Faber Library) (1970) by Ted Hughes	Metal af. Good after a breakup.
Master of Reality (2008) by John Darnielle	Crushing, beautiful portrait of teenage alienation, institutionalisation, and 'Sabbath, from an author uniquely placed to deal with these things (as an ex-desperate-teen, ex-psychiatric-nurse, metal fan, America's greatest lyricist of neurosis). Heavy. It doesn't matter if you've never heard or never liked Sabbath. This explains it regardless, and might unlock it. His best prose (though his lyrics 1995-2004 are his best words). (From dear James)
At Swim-	Postmodernism is completely fine if it's as fun as this.

Two-Birds (1939) by Flann O'Brien	
Studies in the Way of Words (1989) by Paul Grice	None yet
The Habit of Art (2009) by Alan Bennett	None yet
Previous Convictions: Assignments From Here and There (2006) by A.A. Gill	What an excuse of a man he can be, but what a writer he always is. The piece on golf is characteristic - hilarious, fluid, razor-bladed. The basic problem with him: his horror of golf would be better spent on actually horrific things (e.g. his own aestheticised violence). To be fair the second half's travel pieces spend exactly that: from being right inamidst hallucinatory police brutality in Haiti, to the Africa pieces which buck stereotypes and complacency. He has vast sensitivity or sensibility, but he pairs it with a kind of generalisation (e.g. "*begging is a consequence of opportunity, not poverty*") and off-piste counter-PC phrasemaking, as if to shock us out of respecting him. He uses his friend Jeremy Clarkson brilliantly – as stooge, dim counterpoint to Gill's own professed post-masculine, pro-gay, pro-grey, pro-oppressed enlightenment. But then Gill reports all these uber-macho exploits and self-conscious leering at women. What compels him to be so *indirect* about being progressive? It's that he wants to be both LAD and liberal intellectual, and but needs the approval of neither side.
How I Escaped My Certain Fate (2010) by Stewart Lee	A comedian and an artist - with some of the bloat and near-repulsive belligerence that entails > *If you've not seen me before, right, a lot of what I do, er, it's not jokes as such, it can just be funny kind of ideas or little, er, weird turns of phrase like that, yeah? So, 'owner-operator of an enchanted beanstalk', yeah? And that's a giant, isn't it, a giant... So all I'm saying, if you've not seen me before, yeah, is the jokes are there, they're there, but some of you, you might have to raise your game* . Book has tons of general merit: it's about trying to be artful in a genre where populism is a condition of being recognised as a practitioner at all. And Lee just has his shit worked out, is by turns harshly enlightening and plaintively endearing. > *Basically there's a whole generation of people who've confused political correctness with health and safety regulation. 'It's gone mad. They saying I can't have an electric fire in the bath any more, Stew, in case queers see it.'* I even love his intellectual flab: the Wire mag chat, ignoble snarking, and attempt at epic free verse. I trust him – but you can't trust him. (Recent

	shows are founded on outrageous lies, satirising spin/smear cultures in our media and government and employers and friends.) Hard to know who the joke-explaining footnotes are for – since his fans already get it, and no-one else's going to read this. That said, if you don't like him or don't know about him, please read this. For instance, he explains that onstage he '*portrays a smug wanker*'.
How to Do Things with Words (1955) by J.L. Austin	None yet
The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) by Thorstein Veblen	None yet
Two Concepts of Liberty (1958) by Isaiah Berlin	None yet
North (1975) by Seamus Heaney	None yet
Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything (2011) by David Bellos	Good strident stuff, wrestling against the prevailing pessimistic dogmas of English lit and ling. (e.g. "We can never fully understand each other as individuals or cultures." "Truth is just power.") This is a poppy treatment of his own work, but still manages to pack in a lot of brilliant (original?) theory, a refutation of Sapir-Whorf in four pages, and lots of charming stats about the state of world languages today. I imagine he's a great teacher. (From dear James)
Two Dogmas of Empiricism () by Willard Van Orman Quine	None yet
A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works (1994) by Baruch Spinoza	Hard to imagine now how shocking this was in 1664 ("*God is not a person; there is no free will; tolerance is the only rational politics*"). Trying to understand Spinoza without Curley's notes (which are about twice as long as the primary material) is a decade's work.

Twilight of the Idols (1888) by Friedrich Nietzsche	*In one sentence*: the cleverest troll in history tries to say 400 things at once. The easiest way into him. He is among the most misunderstood people ever, and his prose, so contradictory and esoteric, sarcastic and pompous, is a large reason for this, though second to his C20th mistreatment. Hollingdale's translation is best, though I plan to crawl through the original at some point. • Galef type: **Theory 2 & 3** - models of what makes something succeed or fail, & a problem statement **Values 1** - make an explicit argument about values.
On Denoting () by Bertrand Russell	None yet
The Problems of Philosophy (1912) by Bertrand Russell	None yet
The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and What to Do About it (2002) by Joshua D. Greene	The first PhD I ever read: a witty and authoritative piece of meta-ethics. He surveys every large approach to morals using strong naturalism as a criterion, and concludes that anti-realist utilitarianism is the least unsatisfying option. I suppose this is only worth reading if you are *both* very convinced of naturalism and radically unsure about what constitutes goodness; otherwise you should just study practical ethics already. [Here]
Philosophy of Mind: A Contemporary Introduction (1998) by John Heil	None yet
The Complete Maus (1980) by Art	None yet

Spiegelman	
The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner (1824) by James Hogg	None yet
Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets (1991) by David Simon	Character study of twenty vengeful people and the awful, indispensable institution they serve and constitute. The detectives are intelligent and hilarious, but have to navigate two extreme and depressing environments: the streets and City Hall, violence and politics. Simon was embedded with them, and completely effaces himself, makes this novelistic. We get a glorious outsider view, see things the detectives don't: > *[The detective] glides past the lockup without looking inside, and so doesn't see the final, unmistakable expression on Robert Frazier's face. Pure murderous hate.* He gives a complete chapter to most of the detectives, tracking them through a couple of sordid weeks. They are all distinctive, sharp in different ways, but this approach means it stretches on. Also a study of the incredibly poor incentives the bureaucracy gives the detectives: they're rewarded for arrests, not convictions, and individually penalised for open homicides. I don't want to think about what this did to their false arrest rate. > *A case in which the pathologist's finding is being pended is not, to the police department, a murder. And if it isn't a murder, it doesn't go up on the board. And if it isn't up on the board, it doesn't really exist.* No weight was given to the difficulty of the case - whether witnesses remained at the scene, whether physical evidence existed, whether the weapon was found. All this killed inter-squad cooperation, and led to infighting over dumb luck of the draw. > *In human terms, the scene at 3002 McElderry Street was a massacre; in the statistical terms of urban homicide work, it was the stuff from which a detective fashions dreams.* (No other crime counted in the stats, despite Homicide also covering accidental deaths and suicides. This was an incentive to frame things as e.g. suicide if at all possible.) > *the chance of actually being convicted of a crime after being identified by authorities is about 60 percent. And if you factor in those unsolved homicides, the chance of being cuaght and convicted for taking a life in Baltimore is just over 40 percent [in 1988].* You might conclude - falsely - that internal stats are worse than nothing - but only stats as bad as these are. A classic of informal institutional

economics.

The nationwide murder 'clearance rate' (arrest rate) was 70%. Amazing that it was this high, in that comparatively low-surveillance, low-social-trust place.

> *The [squad's] clearance rate - murders closed by arrest - is now 36 percent and falling, a... threat to [Lieutenant] Gary D'Addario's tenure. The board that gave His Eminence reason for concern six weeks ago has continued to fill with open murders, and it is on D'Addario's side of the wall that the names are writ in red. Of the twenty-five homicides handled by Dee's three squads, only five are down; whereas Stanton's shift has cleared ten of sixteen...*
>
> *There is no point in explaining that three fifths of D'Addario's homicides happen to be drug-related, just as seven of those solved by Stanton's shift are domestics or other arguments... It is the unrepentant worship of statistics that forms the true orthodoxy of any modern police department.*

More incentive analysis, on police shootings and the shameful closing of ranks:

> *In the United States, only a cop has the right to kill as an act of personal deliberation and action. To that end, Scotty McCown and three thousand other men and women were sent out on the streets of Baltimore with .38-caliber Smith&Wessons, for which they received several weeks of academy firearms training augmented by one trip to the police firing range every year. Coupled with an individual officer's judgement, that is deemed expertise enough to make the right decision every time.*
>
> *It is a lie. It is a lie the police department tolerates because to do otherwise would shatter the myth of infallibility on which rests its authority for lethal force. And it is a lie that the public demands, because to do otherwise would expose a terrifying ambiguity. The false certainty, the myth of perfection, on which our culture feeds...*

There's so much careful and sympathetic detail about the job (and no deep portrait of any suspects), that Simon risks partisanship - writing "copaganda", as internet radicals call it. Anyone who's seen *The Wire* knows this isn't a problem. (He has solidarity with the rank and file, and contempt for the suits.)

> *for the black, inner-city neighborhoods of Baltimore, the city's finest were for generations merely another plague to endure: poverty, ignorance, despair, police.*

Speaking of which: This is not at all made redundant by *The Wire* - the show has an entire pathos-pathetic angle (the anti-authority cop) missing here, and this is more focussed on the law side.

Their humour is fantastically sick.

> *the application of criteria such as comfort and amusement to the autopsy room is ample proof of a homicide man's peculiar and sustaining*

	> *psychology. But for the detectives, the most appalling visions have always demanded the greatest detachment...* Someone on Hacker News was up on their high horse about the black humour of medics recently. This strikes me as perfectly backwards. I would *much* prefer a doctor (or a detective) with a nasty sense of humour: it suggests emotional detachment, so they're more likely to think clearly; and it certainly has a cathartic and bonding role, improving their health and teamwork. This idiotically literal, first-order model of psychology (as if people were so easy to program!) is everywhere, for instance all discourse about fake news, porn, and violent computer games. The section about the idiocy and arbitrariness of juries is sickening and I recommend that you don't read it if you want to continue thinking well of your society. > *The operant logic of a Baltimore city jury is as fantastical a process as any other of our universe's mysteries. This one is innocent because he seemed so polite and well spoken on the stand, that one because there were no fingerprints on the weapon to corroborate the testimony of four witnesses. And this one over here is telling the truth when he says he was beaten into a confession; we know that, of course, because why else would anyone willingly confess to a crime if he wasn't beaten?* > *The other eight jurors offered little opinion except to say they would vote for whatever was agreed upon... It was the Memorial Day weekend. They wanted to go home...* > *"What brought you all around to first-degree?" he asks.* > *"I wasn't going to budge and that other woman, the one in the back row, she wasn't going to change her mind either. She was for first-degree from the very beginning, too. After a while, everyone wanted to go home, I guess."* The book has aged badly in one way: Simon completely falls for two entrenched bits of pseudoscience, the polygraph and profiling. But many people still believe in these things, and anyway it's a rare lapse of scepticism, for him. I think this is the first 'true crime' book I've read. Don't know if this is the pinnacle of the genre, then, or if the genre's better than literary people think.
Collected Poems (1985) by Norman MacCaig	None yet
Collected Poems I, 1909-1939 (1951) by William Carlos	None yet

Williams	
The Information (1995) by Martin Amis	Scalding and fantastical send-up of novelists and readers. About a nasty little man made insane by being low status - or, rather, by his friend becoming high status. He's completely destroyed by valuing position so much, by his crab mind: > *Richard, who would not mind being poor if no one was rich, who would not mind looking rough if no one looked smooth, who would not mind being old if no one was young.* This is all the worse because he has taste and good ideas, between his maudlin self-pity and terrible ideas: > *It would be a book accounting for the decline of the status and virtue of literary protagonists. First gods, then demigods, then kings, then great warriors, great lovers,then burghers and merchants and vicars and doctors and lawyers. Then social realism: you. Then irony: me. Then maniacs and murderers, tramps, mobs, rabble, flotsam, vermin.* > > *Literature describes a descent... Literature, for a while, can be about us... about writers. But that won't last long. How do we burst clear of all this?* Richard's complete, painful self-absorption shows that literary envy, male rivalry, and the fear of death are similar if not the same: childish rage when you can't get what you want. Amis keeps interrupting Richard (himself) to talk about outer space, the fate of stars, the rounding error that we are: Amis undercuts pathetic irony with ultimate meaning, which is the reverse of the usual trick. I think this author insertion is why people call it 'postmodern', though of course it's an ancient trick and Amis doesn't share their mean ideology. There's also self-reference: > *What was Richard? He was a revenger, in what was probably intended to be a comedy.* Or maybe it's because Richard is a bland modernist (which here means: no fun) and Amis is taken not to be. Richard has violent thoughts and a violent worldview but is not violent, he fails to be violent; and Amis contains that container. There are unannounced focal shifts every couple pages, three of which focalisations sound very similar to each other (whether psycho Steve, revenger Richard, misanthrope Martin). > > *This, surely, is how we account for the darkness and the helpless melancholy of twentieth-century literature. These writers, these dreamers and seekers, stood huddled like shivering foundlings on the cliffs of a strange new world: one with no servants in it.* It's not just about books; the underworld of 90s Britain also gets it: > > *the criminal resembles the artist in his pretensions, his incompetence, and his self-pity.*

	You have to go a very long way - through tell of murdered children, celebrated suicides, denied misogyny, embraced misandry, deep duplicity - to get the merest possibility of redemption and getting over yourself. (And even that subverted: *The season of comedy... Decorum will be observed*.) The middle drags terribly. It's worth it. --- * The titular Information is hard truths, avoided thoughts, intimations of inadequacy and mortality. > *The information is advertising a symposium of pain. Pains of all faiths and all denominations... It is ordinary and everyday. On the beach the waves do it ceaselessly, gathering mass and body, climbing until they break and are then resummoned into generality with a sound like breath sucked in between the teeth.* > *Weakness will get you where you are weakest. Weakness will be strong and bold, and make for your weak spot. If in the head, then in the head. If in the heart, then in the heart. If in the loins, then in the loins... The information is nothing. Nothing: the answer is so many of our questions. What will happen to me when I die? What is death anyway? Is there anything I can do about that? Of what does the universe primarily consist? What is the measure of our influence within it? What is our span, in cosmic time?* * Richard's friend is called Gwyn (Welsh for blessed). * His book 'Untitled' is so serious that it causes its readers physical harm, like a petty version of the samizdat in *Infinite Jest*. * Amis is more like Gwyn than Richard in career terms (got an unprecedented £500k advance for this) but is obviously temperamentally more like Richard. * The more literary a work, the less it says plainly: the fewer hints you get. That is, *puzzles* are part of the essence of literariness. The bad reading of this is that it's all about showing off: how clever and sphinxish the author is, how clever and oedipal the reader, how able to delay gratification (or go without it) each is. Amis' books are quite puzzley, Richard's very much so, Gwyn's not a jot. * This line works as a diss on New Labour: > *It often seemed to him, moving in the circles he moved in and reading what he read, that everyone in England was Labour except the government.* even though the book was written in 1994, before New Labour. A joke which survives inversion! * Presented without comment.
A Question of Attribution () by Alan Bennett	None yet

An Englishman Abroad (2001) by Alan Bennett	None yet
Untold Stories (2001) by Alan Bennett	None yet
The History Boys (2004) by Alan Bennett	None yet
Da Capo Best Music Writing 2000 (2000) by Douglas Wolk	I was trying to get a handle on all of pop music - pop, that is, in the broad sense that anything that couldn't get played in a fancy concert hall is pop, that anything newer than Gershwin is pop. I spent years on this endeavour, eventually reaching the Scaruffian fringes: everything at least heard of, every landmark clung to by fingertips. I'm not sure why I did it. Or, I know but it isn't pretty: The people who know most about music are the ones who need it most: need it as a pretext to wear headphones and not talk to people, need it as vicarious catharsis for things felt but never said, need it as a gigantic arena for countercultural status, where if you only put in a thousand hours of skronk and dischord, then you're a thousand hours ahead of someone. Reading Lester Bangs on the Comedian Harmonists (!), included here, remains one of the most powerful moments in my entire reading life. The unsurpassing joy of discovery, of crossing cultures, of fandom.
Get in the Van: On the Road With Black Flag (1994) by Henry Rollins	Chronicle of violence, censorship via nightstick, nervous breakdowns, mental illness, ridiculously hard work, and poverty - most of it welcomed in. Rollins was a literally Romantic introvert in an unbelievably macho environment. (You might find this hard to believe if you watch the above videos but it's true.) He got better: he's now a strange sort of public intellectual, Iggy Pop with more pretensions, political snark, and appetite for extremity. *Get in the Van* is overwrought and self-absorbed and self-defeating. It is great. Bukowski with a 100W amp, Palahniuk if Palahniuk was in any sense real, a Russian Soul in California. (Read *Punk Planet*'s oral history of Black Flag for counterclaims to half of this book. For once I don't mind what's true.)
Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie	Unsurpassed writing about a tiny but hyperinfluential moment in unpopular music. One of the few writers I've seen give the Minutemen their due as the greatest flowering of global punk.

Underground, 1981-1991 (2001) by Michael Azerrad	
The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book (1995) by Bill Watterson	Elevates its medium.
The Shadow of the Torturer (The Book of the New Sun, #1) (1980) by Gene Wolfe	Wonderful. Rivals *Earthsea* as the wisest and subtlest Fantasy, for people who don't like Fantasy. Fast-moving, full of ironies, antimonies, and ambivalent symbolism - the kind which doesn't hit you over the head (I'm thinking of Gandalf changing colour hmmmmmm). There's a dozen memorable characters in 300pp (Gurloes, Thecla, Agilus, Agia, Talos, Ultan, Inire, Eata, Baldanders, the man himself), even though many appear for just one scene. And there's a very unobtrusive frame narrative which deepens and undermines things. And under all that: the beautiful post-post-apocalyptic layer: *New Sun* is actually science fiction, about what happens when the great project, Progress, collapses; what happens after thousands of years of decay. > *those who dig for their livelihood say there is no land anywhere in which they can trench without turning up shards of the past. No matter where the spade turns the soil, it uncovers broken pavements and corroded metal; and scholars write that the kind of sand that artists call polychrome (because flecks of every colour are mixed with its whiteness) is actually not sand at all, but the glass of the past, now pounded by aeons of tumbling in the clamorous sea.</i>* *It is Clarkean: The book is unconcerned whether strange events are due to obscure high technology, psychological trickery, or bonafide supernatural force.* *Because Wolfe is a bit difficult, it's not too incongruous to bring up Grand Narrative now: sure, the French theorists were wrong to suggest that such ideas are dead in our time (or bad, if alive) but they certainly could die, and Wolfe explores what that'd be like. Nessus has no master idea - not even god, not even family, not even order. (Or maybe it's class again.)* > *"Severian. Name for me the seven principles of governance."* *A foreboding grew on me; I sensed that if I did not reply, some tragedy would occur. At last I began weakly, "Anarchy . . ."* *"That is not governance, but the lack of it. I taught you that it precedes all governance. Now list the seven sorts."* *"Attachment to the person of the monarch. Attachment to the bloodline or other sequence of succession. Attachment to the royal state. Attachment to a code legitimizing the governing state. Attachment to the law only. Attachment to a greater or lesser board of electors, as framers of the law. Attachment to an abstraction conceived as including the body*

> *of electors, other bodies giving rise to them and numerous other elements, largely ideal."*
> *"Tolerable. Of these, which is the earlier form, and which the highest?"*
> *"The development is in the order given, Master," I said. "But I do not rrecall that you ever asked us before which was highest."*
> *Master Malrubius leaned forward, his eyes burning brighter than the coals of the fire. "Which is the highest, Severian?"*
> *"The last, Master?"*
> *"You mean attachment to an abstraction conceived as including the body of electors, other bodies giving rise to them, and numerous other elements, largely ideal?"*
> *"Yes, Master."*
> *"Of what kind, Severian, is your own attachment to the Divine Entity?"*
> *I said nothing. It may have been that I was thinking; but if so, my mind was too much filled with sleep to be conscious of its thought. Instead, I became profoundly aware of my physical surroundings. The sky above my face in all its grandeur seemed to have been made solely for my benefit, and to be presented for my inspection now. I lay upon the ground as upon a woman, and the very air that surrounded me seemed a thing as admirable as crystal and as fluid as wine.*
> *"Answer me, Severian."*
> *"The first, if I have any."*
> *"To the person of the monarch?"*
> *"Yes, because there is no succession."*

(Dune occupies the same SFF feudalist netherland as this, but is much clumsier, occasionally contemptible.)

How do you write a truly immoral sympathetic character? (In this case, the most immoral: who does the worst thing you can do.) I think the answer is simple: detail. Make it first-person and simply show the ordinary range of interests, foibles, enculturation, passions. The reader does the rest. (Compare Lolita, Private Memoirs of a Justified Sinner, Wasp Factory, Crime and Punishment...)

> *Gurloes was one of the most complex men I have known, because he was a complex man trying to be simple. Not a simple, but a complex man's idea of simplicity. Just as a courtier forms himself into something brilliant and involved, midway between a dancing master and a diplomacist, with a touch of assassin if needed, so Master Gurloes had shaped himself to be the dull creature a pursuivant or bailiff expected to see when he summoned the head of our guild, and that is the only thing a real torturer cannot be. The strain showed; though every part of Gurloes was as it should have been, none of the parts fit... He ate too much and too seldom, read when he thought no one knew of it, and visited certain of our clients, including one on the third level, to talk of things none of us eaves-dropping in the corridor outside could understand. His eyes were refulgent, brighter than any woman's.*

Severian is completely cold-blooded about violence while still being notably heroic and sentimental. (Ok he doesn't actually torture anyone.)

> *By the use of the language of sorrow I had for the time being obliterated my sorrow - so powerful is the charm of words, which for us reduces to*

> *manageable entities all the passions that would otherwise madden and destroy...*

The heroism is natural and plausible, because he dooms himself in the middle of the book, so everything that happens is a bonus to him, so he takes bandits and duels and unlikely undertakings in his stride, which is an enviable attitude.

One of many lovely details: all the Latin is subtly wrong: 'terminus est' taken to be 'this is the line of division' rather than 'this is the end'; 'felicibus brevis, miseris hora longa', 'Men wait long for happiness'. But most of the rest of the jargon is historically accurate: 'hydrargyrum' for mercury, 'hipparch' for cavalier, 'archon' for lord, 'carnifex' for butcher, 'matross' for junior soldier, etc.

The second half, the quest with Agia and Dorcas, reminds me of 'Before Sunrise', of all things: glittering words exchanged by the young and instantly intimate. The writing is so fine and uncliched that it pulls off unreconstructed romance in the midst of post-apocalyptic feudalism. In general, the feudal trappings justify Wolfe's ornate prose well. Severian often says things that are wise to us, and the things which aren't make sense in brutal context:

> *the pattern of our guild is repeated mindlessly (like the repetitions of Father Inire's mirrors in the House Absolute) in the societies of every trade, so that they are all of them torturers, just as we. His quarry stands to the hunter as our clients to us; those who buy to the tradesman; the enemies of the Commonwealth to the soldier; the governed to the governors; men to women. All love that which they destroy.*

Nietzsche on the wheel:

> *Weak people believe what is forced on them. Strong people what they wish to believe, forcing that to be real. What is the Autarch but a man who believes himself Autarch and makes others believe by the strength of it.*

Probably 5/5 on re-read.

PS: I can't decide if this or Fall of Hyperion has the lower quality-of-book : awfulness-of-cover ratio.</td> </tr>

23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism (2010) by Ha-Joon Chang	Chatty, thoughtful introduction to some hard truths of economic development. Not actually anti-capitalist, except in the mild sense that we all should be (that is, critical of market failure, cronyism, corporate welfare and socialised risk, regulatory capture, negative-sum nationalism, casino capital, ...). The soundest and most important of the 23 points is the surprising fact that no currently-developed economy ever managed to industrialise without initially using trade barriers. (This is covered better in Chang's *Kicking Away the Ladder*, with its extensive details of postwar South Korea's shocking illiberalism: for instance, importing hi-tech goods was a serious

	crime for decades.) This wasn't well-known even in the Development circles I was moving in. The other propositions, I can't remember well enough to endorse or deny, but it left a vague good impression.
The Pleasures of the Damned: Selected Poems 1951-1993 (2007) by Charles Bukowski	An anti-social phallocrat waves his pen in the wee small hours – yet often achieves beauty. This is a Best-of, but actually not his best. Still a very good way in. Bukowski is Springsteen after Rosalita, Mary, Janey, Sandy, Trudy and the rest either moved town forever to get away from him or died.
The Left Hand of Darkness (Hainish Cycle, #4) (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin	None yet
Never Mind (1992) by Edward St. Aubyn	Tense, effortless, funny, devastating. A single day among the melting upper-class, building up to a dinner party - but eliding the contempt we might feel with pathos and pain and humour. The dialogue is consistently impressive. Victor is the most convincing philosopher character I've seen - neurotic, analytic, too in his head to be harmful. Patrick's model of the world is slightly too sophisticated model for a five-year-old, but the scene in which he's introduced is the most convincing childlike prose: > *Patrick walked towards the well. In his hand he carried a grey plastic sword with a gold handle, and swished it at the pink flowers of the valerian plants that grew out of the terrace wall. When there was a snail on one of the fennel stems, he sliced his sword down the stalk and made it fall off. If he killed a snail he had to stamp on it quickly and then run away, because it went all squishy like blowing your nose. Then he would go back and have a look at the broken brown shell stuck in the soft grey flesh, and would wish he hadn't done it. It wasn't fair to squash the snails after it rained because they came out to play, bathing in the pools under the dripping leaves and stretching out their horns. When he touched their horns they darted back and his hand darted back as well. For snails he was like a grown-up.* And the venomous, purely perverse relationship of his parents produces gasping lines like > *At the beginning, there had been talk of using some of her money to start a home for alcoholics. In a sense they had succeeded.* I stumble over David, the charming psychopath rampant. It is too hard to understand intentional evil, even when snobbery, tough love parenting and simple rage are proffered as explanations. I had a *petite mort* at the end.

	Really fantastic. In one sitting.
Hogfather (Discworld, #20; Death, #4) (1996) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
The Last Continent (Discworld, #22; Rincewind #6) (1998) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
My Man Jeeves (Jeeves, #1) (1919) by P.G. Wodehouse	The first Jeeves collection, including several stories told by a proto-Wooster called "Reggie Pepper". PG's prose is slightly less glowing and divine at this early juncture, but it still makes me smile on every fourth page.
The Nice and the Good (1968) by Iris Murdoch	A joy, a dirge, *and* so sincere I cried. Both a tame London murder mystery and a sliding-doors comedy of manners in Dorset, the two plots dreaming each other, running laminar. These mere genres are electrified by Murdoch's ethics and filled up with her wit. Like Greene, she is the apotheosis of trash conventions. I feel I am a better person afterward, or at least a better fool. The following derives its power from 200 pages of buildup suddenly letting loose, but it might give you an idea: > *Jealousy is the most natural to us of the really wicked passions... It must be resisted with every honest cunning and with deliberate generous thoughts, however abstract and empty these may seem in comparison with that wicked strength. Think about the virtue that you need and call it generosity, magnanimity, charity. You are young, Jessica, and you are very delightful – may I just take your hand, so? – and the world is not spoilt for you yet. There is no merit, Jessica, in a faithfulness which is poison to you and captivity to him. You have nothing to gain here except by losing. You wish to act out your love, to give it body, but there is only one act left to you that is truly loving and that is to let him go, gently and without resentment.* > *Put all your, energy into that and you will win from the world of the spirit a grace which you cannot now even dream of. For there is grace, Jessica, there are principalities and powers, there is unknown good which flies magnetically toward the good we know. And suppose that you had found what you were looking for, my dear child? Would you not have been led on from jealousy through deceit into cruelty? Human frailty forms a system, Jessica, and faults in the past have their endlessly spreading network of results. We are not good people, Jessica, and we shall always be involved in that great network, you and I. All we can do is constantly to notice when we begin to act badly, to check ourselves, to go back, to*

	> *coax our weakness and inspire our strength, to call upon the names of virtues of which we know perhaps only the names. We are not good people, and the best we can hope for is to be gentle, to forgive each other and to forgive the past...* An essay on the benefits and limits of polyamory; on the trials of self-conscious virtue; an extended gag about virtue's unlikeability. I love the appalling drawling fops Octavian and Kate, I love the notably indistinct Fivey, and I clutch Ducane to myself like a home-knitted scarf against strong winter wind. So pure!
Thief of Time (Discworld, #26; Death, #5) (2001) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
The Metamorphosis (1915) by Franz Kafka	Hard to believe, but I missed the obvious metaphor when I read it first, as a teenager. The selection I have also contains the lovely sanguine piece 'The Aeroplanes at Brescia', the first in a series of travel vignettes he planned to write and sell. I don't suppose it would be as interesting without the tragic backdrop of Kafka, without it representing such a different route through history, that fucking scumbag, history.
Interesting Times (Discworld, #17; Rincewind #5) (1994) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Men at Arms (Discworld, #15; City Watch #2) (1993) by Terry Pratchett	S'ok. Identity politics and gun control – so, a very American British fantasy. Works: my audience squealed in horror at the right places, the deaths of fond characters. (Read aloud)
Thud! (Discworld, #34; City Watch #7) (2005) by Terry Pratchett	See here for my theory of Discworld international development.
The Fifth Elephant (Discworld, #24; City Watch, #5)	About oil, conservatism, the Inscrutable Balkans. The most literary of his excellent police books: telecomms as model and amplifier of emotional and cultural ties; contact with otherness as cause and defining feature of modernity.

(1999) by Terry Pratchett	Less grandiosely, he trots out his satisfying werewolf point again: in actual fact, the creature inbetween human and wolf is not a *terrifying lunatic chimera* but a *dog*.
Mother's Milk (2005) by Edward St. Aubyn	None yet
The Twits (1980) by Roald Dahl	None yet
Matter (Culture, #8) (2008) by Iain M. Banks	This entry's mostly set on a C17th world, the rest given over to barely interesting galactic politics. The Culture novels feel free to wave away technological plot devices with talk of "energy grid!" or "nanotech!", but Banks shows off hard-scifi cred here, giving a few lovely, moving images based on meteorology and astrophysics. On the current-affairs blogosphere: > *A rapidly expanding but almost entirely vapid cloud of comment, analysis, speculation and exploitation...Welcome to the future, she thought, surveying the wordage and tat. All our tragedies and triumphs, our lives and deaths,our shames and joys are just stuffing for your emptiness.* Ending is good and brutal, made me stop and infer for ten mins afterward. So, yeah, Banks has been playing the same "ooh, neo-colonialism", "ooh, consequences", "ooh, angst in utopia" note for a while. But hey it's a *good* note.
Esio Trot (1990) by Roald Dahl	None yet
Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away (2014) by Rebecca Goldstein	It is very hard to say anything new about Plato. Except, of course it isn't, because he spoke in the most general possible terms, and the world continues to do unprecedented things and so allow for new commentary and new applications of Plato. It will always be possible to say something new about Plato because, until the heat death draws near, it will be possible to say something new about the world, and criticism should relate the old but general with the new and unanalysed. This was really deep fun: Goldstein debunks a great deal about him via close-reading (e.g.: that Plato's book, Πολιτεία, has no etymological or structural relation to modern republics). Some very moving chapters, too, particularly the neuroscientist dialogue: she renders this man we know almost nothing personal about as polite, curious and modest, willing to suspend judgment on e.g. *our* popular democracy. The titular chapter is best, involving the philosopher wrestling with one imperfect implementation of his epistemocracy, the data-mining Silicon Valley engineer: > *"You're telling me that the purpose of all of this knowledge is merely to make money? Greed is driving the great search engine for knowledge? This bewilders me... How can those who possess all knowledge, which must include the knowledge of the life most worth living, be interested in using knowledge only for the insignificant aim of making money?"*

	"Plato, I said, I think you have a somewhat exalted view of Google and the nerds who work here." *"Nerds?" he said. "Another word I do not know."* *Well, again I was in a somewhat awkward position, since I didn't want to offend Plato, who struck me, despite his eye contact and excellent manners, as a nerd par excellence. So I fell back on something I'd once heard... that the word was originally "knurd", which is "drunk" spelled backwards, and was used for students who would rather study than party.* *"And the people who work here at Google are all nerds?"* *"I would say each and every one." I smiled at him.* *He smiled and looked around the café as if he had died and gone to philosophers' heaven.* *"My chosen term for nerd", he said, "is philosopher-king".* Goldstein's move for each chapter is to draw out an inconsistency in Plato that later became a persistent philosophical dichotomy; the chapters are all classical dialogues, actually trialogues at least. Also she makes us note how little explanation of modern culture Plato would actually need to be able to deploy his existing arguments. Witty and persuasive. (You'd think I'd need no persuading of the eternal value of philosophy, and nor do I, but I'd no intention of studying Plato properly before this.) *In one sentence*: Plato wanders contemporary America, Chromebook tucked under his arm, looking to understand the few ways we are radically different.
Carry On, Jeeves (Jeeves, #3) (1925) by P.G. Wodehouse	None yet
Witches Abroad (Discworld, #12; Witches #3) (1991) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
The Crow Road (1992) by Iain Banks	Had an enormous impact on me the first time (I was 16), but very little the 2nd (I was 23).
Witch Wood (1927) by John Buchan	Ornate and surprisingly subtle picture of the Scots Borders during the Reformation. Mystery novel without a detective. Went into this with unfair scepticism but was impressed by his making boring theological debates dramatic, and by his unsentimental nature prose. I also learned lots of words.
Lanark (1981) by Alasdair Gray	None yet

The Squashed Philosophers (2005) by Glyn Lloyd-Hughes	Excellent way in for a teenager. Almost primary sources; someone else simulating you if you had the attention span to find the highlights.
Cujo (1981) by Stephen King	None yet
The Truth (Discworld, #25; Industrial Revolution, #2) (2000) by Terry Pratchett	The Disc grew modern, gaining a media (*The Truth*), sanitation (also *The Truth*), soft-power politics (*Jingo!*, *Thud!*), and institutionalised sport (*Unseen Academicals*), to add to its latter-day civilian police (*Men at Arms*), telecoms (*Fifth Elephant*, and steam power (*Raising Steam*). The most literary thing about the Discworld books is this modernisation, from magic to steampunk. This happens comically rapidly – *Colour of Magic*, the first book, is standard non-chronistic High Fantasy, so, set circa circa 1200CE. *Snuff* takes place not twenty-five discursive years later – yet the central city is clearly Victorian. And that's not including the burgeoning intercontinental fax network. Technology is given its due, but not to the neglect of the institutional side. Disc modernity began with the despot Vetinari's marketisation of crime, moves through ethnic diversity reforms and open-door immigration, and marches on and on. *UA*, the sport one, is solid, poignant. He doesn't often let his wizards get earnest and truly develop – by this stage, magic is comic relief, no longer the determining power or symbol of the Disc. *Snuff* is dark and politically worthy, but not his best. He's been reusing jokes in recent books, and I refuse to speculate on the cause.
The Power and the Glory (1940) by Graham Greene	Funny I don't find Greene's themes obnoxious, compared to say Waugh.
Changing Places (1975) by David Lodge	None yet
Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator (Charlie Bucket, #2) (1972) by Roald Dahl	None yet
The Other Wind (Earthsea	None yet

Cycle, #6) (2001) by Ursula K. Le Guin	
Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit (Jeeves, #11) (1954) by P.G. Wodehouse	*Taboo*: Moustache. *Triangle*: Cheesewright - Florence Craye - Gorringe - Wooster *Subplot*: Selling 'Milady's Boudoir' *Aunt*: Dahlia *Antagonist*: Cheesewright *Expedient*: Accidental balcony romance, accidental theft, several Jeeves specials.
Lords and Ladies (Discworld, #14; Witches #4) (1992) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Roadside Picnic (1972) by Arkady Strugatsky	Good stuff! Earthy, economic sci-fi; aliens visit, ignore us entirely, and soon leave, leaving behind only transcendent junk and horror-film phenomena from their little picnic. Prose is lovely and plain, translated brilliantly by the mathematician Olena Bormashenko (we get “scabby”, “sham”, “mange”). The ordinary, crude protagonist Red is scrabbling illegally to provide for his mutant family (the Strugatskys use cash and cash pressure amazingly, grounding the whole cosmic fantasy in commerce, crime, exploitation). Every time Red gets cash, he throws it away – in someone’s face as an insult, in someone’s face as a distraction to evade capture, or just away. No explanations except bureaucratic filler; no salvation, just dumb defiance. A really nice original touch is that Red interprets the body language of his friends in extreme detail – a scratched nose means, to him, “Whoah, Red, be careful how rough you play with the new kid”. Also notable for being a Soviet novel set in mid-west America, evoked very, very well. And the Russian Soul under their dismal economics rings out without catching in the barrel: > *HAPPINESS, FREE, FOR EVERYONE; LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN!</i>* *</td> </tr>*
The BFG (1982) by Roald Dahl	None yet
Some Hope (1994) by Edward St. Aubyn	None yet
A Fire Upon the Deep (Zones of Thought, #1) (1992) by Vernor	Deeply satisfying space opera. I thought of *The Fifth Element* and the *Culture* throughout, it is as stylish as these while being more serious. Software permeates the book in a way it unforgiveably doesn't in most scifi. Vinge is a master of dramatic irony - the reader wriggles with knowledge of treachery for hundreds of pages.

Vinge	His cool, medieval dog aliens are less interesting to me than the space opera bit, but you have to admire the craft involved in them. The big bad is genuinely unnerving. An elevation of plotfests.
Invisible Man (1952) by Ralph Ellison	Scathing about all social strata
Farewell, My Lovely (1940) by Raymond Chandler	Relentlessly idiomatic. Hollow like a bell. Marlowe is not presented as feeling anything except incessant fatigue and occasional lust. The prose is fast and somehow innocent though surrounded by darkness: > *The eighty-five cent dinner tasted like a discarded mail bag and was served to me by a waiter who looked as if he would slug me for a quarter, cut my throat for six bits, and bury me at sea in a barrel of concrete for a dollar and a half, plus sales tax.* > *A hand I could have sat in came out of the dimness and took hold of my shoulder and squashed it to a pulp. Then the hand moved me through the doors and casually lifted me up a step. The large face looked at me. A deep soft voice said to me, quietly:* *"Smokes in here, huh? Tie that for me, pal."* *It was dark in there. It was quiet. From up above came vague sounds of humanity, but we were alone on the stairs. The big man stared at me solemnly and went on wrecking my shoulder with his hand.* *"A dinge," he said. "I just thrown him out. You seen me throw him out?"* Sure, Noir is cliche now, but we should try to stop Seinfeld effects from undermining original work. And I think he really was original. > *You could get to like that face a lot. Glamoured up blondes were a dime a dozen, but that was a face that would wear. I smiled at it.* > *Give him enough time and pay him enough money and he'll cure anything from a jaded husband to a grasshopper plague. He would be an expert in frustrated love affairs, women who slept alone and didn't like it, wandering boys and girls who didn't write home, sell the property now or hold it for another year, will this part hurt me with my public or make me seem more versatile? Men would sneak in on him too, big strong guys that roared like lions around their offices and were all cold mush under their vests. But mostly it would be women, fat women that panted and thin women that burned, old women that dreamed and young women that thought they might have Electra complexes, women of all sizes, shapes and ages, but with one thing in common—money. No Thursdays at the County Hospital for Mr. Jules Amthor.* > *"You lied to me."* *"It was a pleasure."* *He was silent a moment, as if deciding something. "We'll let that pass," he said. "I've seen her. She came in and told me her story. She's the daughter of a man I knew and respected, as it happens... Well, that's all. Remember what I told you last night. Don't try getting ideas about this*

	> *case. All we want from you is silence. Otherwise—"* > *He paused. I yawned into the mouthpiece.* > *"I heard that," he snapped. "Perhaps you think I'm not in a position to make that stick. I am. One false move out of you and you'll be locked up as a material witness."* > *"You mean the papers are not to get the case?"* > *"They'll get the murder—but they won't know what's behind it."* > *"Neither do you," I said.* > *"I've warned you twice now," he said. "The third time is out."* > *"You're doing a lot of talking," I said, "for a guy that holds cards."* > *I got the phone hung in my face for that* Learned a lot of words, had a lot of fun. Power in simplicity. > *I needed a drink, I needed a lot of life insurance. I needed a vacation, I needed a home in the country. What I had was a coat, a hat and a gun. I put them on and went out of the room.*
Permutation City (Subjective Cosmology #2) (1994) by Greg Egan	The best-written info-dump ever. Egan's predictions for the near-future are looking really good 25 years on: the dominance of cloud computing, the digital-nomad life, spam filters, molecular-chem composer VR ... Still some amusing bits of course, e.g. "He was using more computing power than Fujitsu." Reading about the legal expert-system she has free access to, I itched for the future to arrive. There are a few logical holes in the plot which Egan helpfully erratas here.
Nice Work (1988) by David Lodge	None yet
The Bell Jar (1963) by Sylvia Plath	None yet
Medea. Stimmen (1996) by Christa Wolf	None yet
The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch (1965) by Philip K. Dick	None yet
Use of Weapons (Culture, #3) (1990) by Iain M. Banks	The protagonist is cartoonish, full of piratical energy, but saved from a boring super-soldier effect by pathos of the *Bad Lieutenant* variety. Banks was always quite open about how didactic the sci-fi novels were; they are saved by his sheer inventiveness and the grand psychological realism amidst the technological fantasy.

: What do humans have to offer, after the singularity? What skills are scarce? Banks' answer is: "a lack of scruples; excessive force; the ability to not care." We should be so lucky.

This scene had a large effect on me as a child:

> *'Of course I don't have to do this,' one middle-aged man said, carefully cleaning the table with a damp cloth. He put the cloth in a little pouch, sat down beside him. "But look; this table's clean.'*
> *He agreed that the table was clean.*
>
> *"Usually,' the man said. "I work on alien -- no offence -- alien religions; Directional Emphasis In Religious Observance; that's my specialty ... like when temples or graves or prayers always have to face in a certain direction; that sort of thing? Well, I catalogue, evaluate, compare; I come up with theories and argue with colleagues, here and elsewhere. But ... the job's never finished; always new examples, and even the old ones get re-evaluated, and new people come along with new ideas about what you thought was settled ... but,' he slapped the table, "when you clean a table you clean a table. You feel you've done something. It's an achievement."*
>
> *"But in the end, it's still cleaning a table."*
> *"And therefore does not really signify on the cosmic scale of events?' the man suggested.*
>
> *He smiled in response to the man's grin, "Well, yes.'*
>
> *'But then what does signify? My other work? Is that really important, either?'*
> *I could try composing wonderful musical works, or day-long entertainment epics, but what would that do? Give people pleasure? My wiping this table gives me pleasure. And people come to a clean table, which gives them pleasure. And anyway" - the man laughed - "people die; stars die; universes die. What is any achievement, however great it was, once time itself is dead? Of course, if all I did was wipe tables, then of course it would seem a mean and despicable waste of my huge intellectual potential. But because I choose to do it, it gives me pleasure. And," the man said with a smile, "it's a good way of meeting people."*

As did this, before I studied formal philosophy and received a resounding confirmation of it:

> *“Aw, come on; argue, dammit.”*
> *“I don’t believe in argument,” he said, looking out into the darkness.*
> *“You don’t?” Erens said, genuinely surprised. “Shit, and I thought I was the cynical one.”*
> *“It’s not cynicism,” he said flatly. “I just think people overvalue argument because they like to hear themselves talk.”*
> *“Oh well, thank you.”*
> *“It’s comforting, I suppose.” He watched the stars wheel, like absurdly slow shells seen at night: rising, peaking, falling...(And reminded himself that the stars too would explode, perhaps, one day.) “Most people are not prepared to have their minds changed,” he said. “And I think they*

	> *know in their hearts that other people are just the same, and one of the reasons people become angry when they argue is that they realize just that, as they trot out their excuses."* *"Excuses, eh?"* *"Yes, excuses," he said, with what Erens thought might just have been a trace of bitterness. "I strongly suspect the things people believe in are usually just what they instinctively feel is right; the excuses, the justifications, the things you're supposed to argue about, come later. They're the least important part of the belief. That's why you can destroy them, win an argument, prove the other person wrong, and still they believe what they did in the first place." He looked at Erens. "You've attacked the wrong thing."* But this was also before I got into technical pursuits which lend us hope that the above grim realism can be defeated by self-awareness, quantification, and epistemic care. Sometimes.
The Player of Games (Culture, #2) (1988) by Iain M. Banks	None yet
Wyrd Sisters (Discworld, #6; Witches #2) (1988) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
A Wizard of Earthsea (Earthsea Cycle, #1) (1968) by Ursula K. Le Guin	None yet
The Golden Compass (His Dark Materials, #1) (1995) by Philip Pullman	None yet
The Hobbit or There and Back Again (1937) by J.R.R. Tolkien	None yet

The Subtle Knife (His Dark Materials, #2) (1997) by Philip Pullman	None yet
Tehanu (Earthsea Cycle, #4) (1990) by Ursula K. Le Guin	None yet
Small World (1984) by David Lodge	None yet
A Widow for One Year (1998) by John Irving	None yet
Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.	None yet
Feet of Clay (Discworld, #19; City Watch, #3) (1996) by Terry Pratchett	Another monarchist plot, another wonderful slice of Vimes. This instalment, one of his increasingly cinematic plots, pivots on the enduringly poignant trope of the Golem, the put-upon automata given life by holy words. Their persecution doesn't quite map to any one political issue, a point in favour really– they echo slavery, class struggle, and A.I. Pratchett also stretches to get a big bad pun into every scene, with mixed but gladdening results. (Read aloud)
Monstrous Regiment (Discworld, #31; Industrial Revolution, #3) (2003) by Terry Pratchett	He really could pluck anything out of the superficially cliched, superficially zany world he built. Here, Balkanization, first wave feminism and two dozen good characters summoned up and put down.
Night Watch (Discworld, #29; City Watch, #6) (2002) by Terry Pratchett	Perhaps his darkest book (though he never was just about puns and japes – consider the extent of extinction and futility in Strata). All about the Night, as in inherent human brutality and in being metaphysically lost. Remarkable for being about being the police in a police state. Cried my eyes out at the climax the first time, a decade ago.

Fantastic Mr. Fox (1970) by Roald Dahl	None yet
The Plague (1947) by Albert Camus	None yet
Sourcery (Discworld, #5; Rincewind #3) (1988) by Terry Pratchett	Rincewind starts to become an actual character rather than a reaction shot.
The Phantom Tollbooth (1961) by Norton Juster	*In one sentence*: An invitation to reason by way of reified puns and embodied binaries. • Galef type: Values 2 - thought experiments for you to reflect on how you feel about something, & Style 3 - tickle your aesthetic sense in a way that obliquely makes you a more interesting, generative thinker.
The Fellowship of the Ring (The Lord of the Rings, #1) (1954) by J.R.R. Tolkien	None yet
The Campus Trilogy (1993) by David Lodge	• ***Changing Places*** (1978). Beautiful 60s farce, mocking the zany side while accepting the force of the hippy challenge to all sorts of things, lastingly sexism. The jokes rely heavily on the difference in vitality and affluence between 60s Britain and California – one grey and without central heating, the other soaked in optimism, sex and cute subversions. **4/5.** • ***Small World*** (1984). Even better, more romantic and full of risky narrative moves – regular cinematic cuts, 40 characters in two dozen Richard-Curtis conjunctions, a character commenting on his narrative role, a cod-Japanese passage without articles... Generous and barbed and fun. **4*/5.**

	• ***Nice Work*** (1988). I suppose what I like most about Lodge is his marriage of (and subversion of) highfalutin Theory with daft romcom conventions. This last one's grimmer – based more on the mutual misunderstanding and vices of literary theory and industry. Thatcher's jaws lurk in the background. Also race. Robyn, his feminist protagonist is good and 3D, principled and struggling with the contradictions of the radical academic (their privileged position in a system they abhor, 'revolutionary' abstractions, the attack on logocentric realism leading to detachment from lived life where things happen). Robyn's attitude to love inspired this great satire. **4/5**
Cloud Atlas (2004) by David Mitchell	Features befitting a great book: stunning detail, well-historicised prose, engaging characters, intricate narrative structure, embrace of multiple genres. But it's too clean, somehow. Though it depicts predation by the worst of us; though its dystopia is one Pop-Hegel extrapolation from our current world-system, it's not as challenging as it thinks it is. It consists of ten sudden narrative shifts, moving back and fore four or five centuries. These sections are connected by each having a 'reader' (the opening sea journal is read by the second narrator, the Romantic composer, whose letters are obsessed over by the journalist, whose memoir is seen by the hack editor, whose tale is seen in an ancient film by the saintly clone, who is remembered as a god in the post-apocalypse story that is as far forward as we see. (They are also connected by a reincarnation overlay - but, apart from giving brutal history more chances to be brutal to the same people, I don't really get it.) The bit with the composer, Frobisher, is my favourite: he transcends his cheeky bohemian archetype and becomes horribly tragic despite his pig-headedness and camp pretension. The last line, returning to the original Victorian narrator, is a good summary of the book's wounded, pessimistic collectivism: > *He who would do battle with the many-headed hydra of human nature must pay a world of pain & his family must pay it along with him! & only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean!'* > *Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?* So: Enjoyable and ambitious, unsatisfying.
Mort (Discworld, #4; Death, #1) (1987) by Terry Pratchett	None yet

All the Pretty Horses (The Border Trilogy, #1) (1992) by Cormac McCarthy

Wonderful. About two boys who are not boys, mostly because they don't want to be. They are only 16 but already have the skill and stoicism which actually constitute adulthood, rather than mere age. It is also about law and morals and power and the chasms between these things. Also suddenly, bizarrely, about pre- and post-revolutionary Mexico.

> *They were zacateros headed into the mountains to gather chino grass. If they were surprised to see Americans horseback in that country they gave no sign... They themselves were a rough lot, dressed half in rags, their hats marbled with grease and sweat, their boots mended with raw cowhide... They looked out over the terrain as if it were a problem to them. Something they'd not quite decided about.*

> *They pulled the wet saddles off the horses and hobbled them and walked off in separate directions through the chaparral to stand spraddlelegged clutching their knees and vomiting. The browsing horses jerked their heads up. It was no sound they'd ever heard before... something imperfect and malformed lodged in the heart of being. A thing smirking deep in the eyes of grace itself like a gorgon in an autumn pool.*

> *The country rolled away to the west through broken light and shadow and the distant summer storms a hundred miles downcountry to where the cordilleras rose and sank in the haze in a frail last shimmering restraint alike of the earth and the eye beholding it.*

> *Finally he said that among men there was no such communion as among horses and the notion that men can be understood at all was probably an illusion.*

I remain amazed by McCarthy's ability to use the most hollow and worn-out tropes - horse whispering, the stableboy and *heredera*, cowboys and varmints, injustice and redemption, the climactic shootout - and make them new, blasting through your cynicism with sheer force of prose. It's a dark book, but I laughed a lot, mostly at the boys' philosophising, which natural creasing I recognise from most boys I have known, educated or not.

> *My daddy run off from home when he was fifteen. Otherwise I'd of been born in Alabama.*
> *You wouldn't of been born at all.*
> *What makes you say that?*
> *Cause your mama's from San Angelo and he never would of met her.*
> *He'd of met somebody.*
> *So would she. So?*
> *So you wouldn't of been born.*
> *I dont see why you say that. I'd of been born somewheres.*
> *How?*
> *Well why not?*
> *If your mama had a baby with her other husband and your daddy had one with his other wife which one would you be?*
> *I wouldn't be neither of em.*

	> *That's right.* > *Rawlins lay watching the stars. After a while he said: I could still be born. I might look different or somethin.* > *If God wanted me to be born I'd be born.* > *And if He didnt you wouldnt.* > *You're makin my goddamn head hurt.* > *I know it. I'm makin my own hurt.* > *You ever get ill at ease? said Rawlins.* > *About what?* > *I dont know. About anything. Just ill at ease.* > *Sometimes. If you're someplace you aint supposed to be I guess you'd be ill at ease. Should be anyways.* > *Well suppose you were ill at ease and didnt know why. Would that mean that you might be someplace you wasnt supposed to be and didnt know it?* You are disoriented when John goes home, to 1950s Texas; the rest of the novel operates with early nineteenth century logic and props. You wake up from a long nightmare into the modern dreamtime.
Cosmopolis (2003) by Don DeLillo	None yet
The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul (1981) by Douglas R. Hofstadter	Wonderful: giant concepts conveyed through excerpts of great fiction.
Thomas Jefferson: Author of America (Eminent Lives) (2005) by Christopher Hitchens	Short critical portrait of a grand hypocrite. > *where Locke had spoken of "life, liberty, and property" as natural rights, Jefferson famously wrote "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"... given the advantageous social position occupied by the delegates at Philadelphia, it is very striking indeed that [this] should have taken precedence over property.* I was worried that Hitchens might have gone soft over his adopted land but it's full of this kind of thing: > *A bad conscience, evidenced by slovenly and contradictory argument, is apparent in almost every paragraph of his discourse on [slavery].* as well as his humourlessness, adultery, self-service, self-pity, horrendous partisanship, and, surprisingly, bloody ruthlessness. Jefferson: > *what signify a few lives lost in a century or two? the tree of liberty must*

> *be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants. it is it's natural manure.*

(He was pro-Jacobin for a terribly long time.)

Try and judge him fairly. How did his actions (not his words lol) compare to the prevailing spirit?:

* *Democracy*: Well above average, even revolutionary US average.
* *Slaves*: Hard to say. Inherited 200. Freed only 7. Tried to write a condemnation of slavery into the Declaration. Wrote a bill banning slavery in new states, narrowly lost the vote. *"Even as he yearned to get rid of them, he refused to let them go*"
* *Native Americans*: Average, bad.
* *Freedom of speech*: Average. Had paid shills in the gutter press throughout his career, and prosecuted enemy journalists for Sedition.
* *Freedom of religion*: Well above average.
* *Women*: Average, bad.
* *Working-class*: Above average in intention, protecting the "*plundered ploughman and beggared yeomanry*". Pretty populist, constantly ranting about bankers and tipping the political balance away from cities.

Jefferson:

> *The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.*

His fear of a freedmen uprising apparently paralysed him. The conventional wisdom around 1800 was that you couldn't just free the slaves, you'd also have to deport them (to e.g. Sierra Leone like the British) to prevent them taking their rightful vengeance on the planters. His turning on the Haitians for similar reasons is one of the saddest and dumbest moments in a life of compromise.

> *Whatever view one takes of Burke's deepening pessimism and dogmatic adherence to the virtues of Church and King, the fact is that after the summer of 1791 the Jacobins did their best to prove him right.*

Deleted scene from the Declaration of Independence:

> *[King George] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where Men should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce.*

	And Hitchen's final exceptionalist thought: > *The French Revolution destroyed itself in Jefferson's own lifetime. More modern revolutions have destroyed themselves and others. If the American Revolution, with its... gradual enfranchisement of those excluded or worse at its founding, has often betrayed itself at home and abroad, it nevertheless remains the only revolution that still retains any power to inspire."*
A Mathematician's Lament: How School Cheats Us Out of Our Most Fascinating and Imaginative Art Form (2009) by Paul Lockhart	> *if I had to design a mechanism for the express purpose of destroying a child's natural curiosity and love of pattern-making, I couldn't possibly do as good a job as is currently being done— I simply wouldn't have the imagination to come up with the kind of senseless, soul-crushing ideas that constitute contemporary mathematics education.* > > *Everyone knows that something is wrong. The politicians say, "we need higher standards." The schools say, "we need more money and equipment." Educators say one thing, and teachers say another. They are all wrong. The only people who understand what is going on are the ones most often blamed and least often heard: the students. They say, "math class is stupid and boring," and they're right...* [Excerpt free here]
The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It (2007) by Paul Collier	None yet
A Season in Hell (1873) by Arthur Rimbaud	Trembling / thrashing.
Kuhn vs. Popper: The Struggle for the Soul of Science (2003) by Steve Fuller	None yet
Dubliners (1914) by James	None yet

Joyce	
Step Aside, Pops (Hark! A Vagrant, #2) (2015) by Kate Beaton	So silly but also so sensible.
Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose (1993) by Adrienne Rich	Poems are better than the prose, early better than late, but all are pretty good. > *Be proud, when you have set* > *The final spoke of flame* > *In that prismatic wheel,* > *And nothing's left this day* > *Except to see the sun* > *Shine on the false and the true,* > *And know that Africa* > *Will yield you more to do.* She has a bad habit, common in critical theory, of confusing possible nasty interpretations of texts with the author's intention or with reality, and so dismissing the work. But, along with Greer, Dworkin, Young, and Sontag I don't think I'll stop reading her, no matter how much I disagree.
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (Charlie Bucket, #1) (1964) by Roald Dahl	None yet
The Tell-Tale Heart and Other Writings (1843) by Edgar Allan Poe	None yet
Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984 (2005) by Simon Reynolds	Playlist here. An exhaustive essay on art and/versus pop, politics and/versus aesthetics, intellect and/versus passion, and on how seriously music should, in general, be taken. He reads post-punk as far wider than the sombre anti-rock art-school thing people usually take it to be - so he includes Human League and ABC as post-punks with emphasis on the post: > *To varying degrees, all these groups grasped the importance of image, its power to seduce and motivate. And they all coated their music in a patina of commercial gloss, some of them pursuing a strategy of*

> *entryism, while others simply revelled in sonic luxury for the sheer glam thrill of it; it's simply inaccurate to portray New Pop, as some histories of the period have, as a 'like punk never happened' scenario. Almost all of the groups had some connection to punk...*
>
> *New Pop was about making the best of the inevitable - synths and drum machines, video, the return of glamour. Colour, dance, fun and style were sanctioned as both strategically necessary (the terms of entry into pop) and pleasurable (now acceptable, with the rejection of post-punk's guilt-racked puritanism).*

His scope is total: everything's here (except for oi, hardcore, Ramonescore - i.e. the people who failed to make it past punk). Reynolds divides the genre/period in three broad camps:

1. modernists (PiL, Cab Vol, No Wave, industrial, SST prog-punk),
2. post-pop (New Pop, electro, mutant disco, synth)
3. retro-eclectics (two-tone, Goth, neo-mods).

He gives chapters to the Other Places of lC20th popular music: whether Akron (Devo, Pere Ubu), Leeds (Gang of Four, Mekons), Sheffield (Cabaret Voltaire, Human League), Edinburgh (Fire Engines, Josef K, Associates). There is a covert critique of punk (that is, the messianic punks) throughout the book:

> *Elsewhere, The Heartbreakers' stodge of refried Chuck Berry was barely more advanced than British pub rock; Dr Feelgood on an IV drip of smack rather than lager...*
>
> *While the committed activists spouted the textbook party line, a more diffuse left-wing academic culture existed based on a sort of ideological pick 'n' mix: a trendy-lefty autodidactism fuelled by second-hand paperbacks and beginner's guides to Gramsci, Lukacs, and Althusser , garnished with Situationism...*
>
> *Blending often-incompatible systems of thought, the resulting hodge-podge lacked rigour from the stern standpoint of academics and ideologues alike. But in rock music, a little rigour is rather bracing and galvanising. In the grand tradition of British art-rock, theory helped them achieve the sort of conceptual breakthroughs that more organically evolving groups never reach.*

Instead, his favourites are the gorgeous misfits-among-misfits, who managed to be neither modernist nor entryist nor shill: Talking Heads, Meat Puppets, Associates, Japan. Crucially, he is charitable to all the tributaries:

	chart-hungry post-pop, politically-rabid modernism and the interminable ugliness of Throbbing Gristle, Whitehouse and No Wave: this makes Rip It Up real history rather than hagiography, and so much more than I or anyone has managed. He has more critical acumen than any of the mooks in the brainy bands; more love than the fey melodists. I have lived in the post-punk woods - too jaded and too hopeful to be a punk - for getting on a decade, and I thought myself a connoisseur: until now I was not.
Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!: Adventures of a Curious Character (1985) by Richard P. Feynman	None yet
Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past (2010) by Simon Reynolds	Omnivorous, unifying, funny.
Monogamy (1996) by Adam Phillips	*In one sentence*: Harsh, circuitous, critical aphorisms on the greatest secular religion. *To be read* : At the start of every new relationship; when your contempt of psychotherapy boils over and needs correction. I guess he's a bit overfond of knowing paradox ("*Seduction, the happy invention of need*"; "*The problem of a marriage is that it can never be called an affair*") – and of course aphorisms have to compress away the qualifications that would make them fairer, and so easier to take in large doses. > *Infidelity is such a problem because we take monogamy for granted; we treat it as the norm. Perhaps we should take infidelity for granted, assume it with unharassed ease. Then we would be able to think about monogamy.* > > *There are no relationships without conflict. If psychoanalysis has a value, maybe one of its values is just that it abides by the idea that there is always going to be conflict… in a way the book holds out for the value of conflict [being to let] the diverse voices inside of oneself speak.* But it's non-partisan (not anti-monogamy, not anti-polyamory) and original and funny and wise and I still haven't absorbed the finer points. • Galef type: Values 2 - thought experiments for you to reflect on how you feel about

	something, & Style 3 - tickle your aesthetic sense in a way that obliquely makes you a more interesting, generative thinker. </td> </tr>
Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology (1995) by Jane Dowson	Raising up great obscure things is one of the main points of having academics around. However, half the poets in this actually refused to be segregated in their lifetime (that is, refused to be anthologised as women, or at all). Dowson is candid about this, and half the book is just suggestive little biographies as a result. She is shackled to the humanities' chaste, hyper-qualified prose ("*I have tried to illustrate that through their interrogations of national and international affairs, their preoccupations with cultural politics and their experiments with language and form... rejects the language of centrality and dominance*...") and their fear of judgment / love of equivocation ("*If consensus over a 'good poem' is neither desirable nor possible, then value is largely determined by context*..."), it's not exactly hateful. Whether through Dowson's bias or the necessities of the time, these poets are even more independent than their male counterparts. Of those selected, Stevie Smith and Edith Sitwell are already fully reclaimed as the canonical boss ladies they are. Two big oversights of mine: Naomi Mitchison and Sylvia Townshend Warner. Mitchison is amazing - wise when wounded, droll and passionate, politicised but never journalistic: check out "To Some Young Communists", "Woman Alone", "Old Love and New Love". Warner is both blunt and metaphysical. (Others are just passable. Vita Sackville-West's are surprisingly poor, in fact. Highlights: "Beauty the Lover's Gift?" (bitter objectification); "Pastoral" (Manly Hopkins after empire). "A Woman Knitting" (the infinite in the finite); "Song of the Virtuous Female Spider" (satirising pious motherhood clichés); "The Sick Assailant" (rare for the time: male violence focus); "On August the Thirteenth" (on abruptness, gentle impotence of human pretensions). Multiplicative.
The Rorty Reader (2010) by Christopher J. Voparil	Encompassing and uplifting. I've been in love with the *idea* of Rorty for years. (He is: the renegade Analytic, the outrageous unifier, the literary soul, the pessimistic utopian, the great puncturer, and the bravest postmodernist by far - because he just comes out and *says* it, bites the bizarre bullets.) Here he is illuminating about philosophy of mind, poetry, foundationalism, the public/private divide, feminism, America, MacKinnon, Derrida, Davidson, and Dewey (obvs), among lots of other things. One can usually taste meanness in postmodern writing - stemming, I suppose, from our sense of being undermined by it - but never in Rorty. He is utterly clear, original and sometimes funny, and yet the realest postmodernist of all. Not sure what I'd think of it these days.
Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood,	Calm hatchet job on what I will call mainstream media - but don't thereby imagine me in a tin hat. I was on a news diet anyway (though this *doesn't* mean disengaged), so this told me what I'd already nastily assumed: commercial ownership of outlets means vast staff cuts and over-milked productivity; which mean no time to research or check facts; which means "churnalism", the frantic-lazy reproduction of PR and State material, and worse, their interpretations. (88% of all UK stories are now based on press

Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media (2008) by Nick Davies	releases. This trend includes the *Guardian* (50%) and *Times* (59%).) His model of the origin of hysteric snowball stories like the Millennium Bug or Diana's death is brilliant and convincing, disparaging conspiracy-theory suspicions 1. Uncertainty exists. 2. An expert sexes up the dangers to increase popular impact. 3. Impact stirs commerce, who exaggerate for gain. 4. Exaggeration is absorbed by cranks (cultists, columnists), who begin to scream.) Economise, kowtow, slink, hegemonise, neutralise, service, decontextualise, validate, exaggerate and conform: the rules of production. Was balling my fists through most of this. Essential for people in Britain.
The Logic of Life: The Rational Economics of an Irrational World (2008) by Tim Harford	Celebration of the universality / imperialism of economics (the application of the field's hard-nosed acquisitory rational choice theory to more and more human phenomena - crime, romance, addiction, corporate pay, and The Ascent of Man). Harford is better than Levitt - to whom the books owes its format, cheek and some of the original research - because he's less amused about the unflattering and anti-humanist results people have uncovered. Some of the research is astonishing – and contentious (I have in mind the 2005 paper that purported to show significant shifts in [expressed] sexuality as the AIDS epidemic peaked, in proportion to how well people personally knew sufferers, "cost of AIDS".) In any case, Harford writes extremely clearly about technical things, and the research can't be ignored, because it suggests routes for generalised policy (rather than cynical rules to apply to all individual cases). Extra point for his lovely immanent-performative ontology of maths: he claims cricket players and economic actors *are doing* maths unconsciously when they catch a ball or opt for an optimum (third-order differentials). This implies that sunflowers are mathematicians - that all the world is not merely describable with maths, but acts as maths, *is* maths. I don't believe this, but isn't it lovely?
Gray's Anatomy: Selected Writings (2009) by John N. Gray	Hard to read - not for his prose, which is luminous and droll, but because he disagrees with almost everything almost everyone holds dear (whether reason, science, or organised social movements are your tool for improving the world). Tory anti-speciesism, anti-Enlightenment anti-cruelty(??) These span his career, satirising Marxists and Neocons, eulogising Santayana and explaining why communism sucks and doesn't work, and why liberalism is cute but doesn't work. (I paraphrase somewhat.) This leaves only Stoicism and resistance to dangerous meddlers as the 'good' life. Lucid, unclassifiable, horrific.
The Meaning of Recognition (2005) by Clive James	Funny polticial and cultural digs (his series on the 2005 UK general election is acid and insightful). I needed to read someone who doesn't believe that everything personal is political tbf. (Larkin is a great poet and was a terrible man – why is this so difficult for people to accept? Is it just the halo effect?) His long essay on Isaiah Berlin is fantastic and contentious, and his retorts

	to the professional philosophers who come at him about it devastating, inspiring.
Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea (2009) by Barbara Demick	Horrible portrait of a deluded and brutalised country. You've probably already imagined the political religion, the incompetence and manipulation of the cadres: here are some of the only first-person accounts. The dozen defectors she interviews agree on enough to lend some confidence. She repeats entire sentences verbatim at various parts of the book, and runs out of ways to reflect somberly on collective madness and individual caprice (fair enough). It's hard to see a country in which 10% of the population die of state-caused starvation ever rising up. No
A Chinese Anthology: A Collection Of Chinese Folktales And Fables (1973) by Raymond van Over	Bunch of parables and fairytales taken from three millenia. Fun, and Other to me. Van Over has a thing for Pu Songling, the vernacular master of the form shunned by the mandarin system because of his colloquial and ornamental style. I'm not sure I learned much, but it beats Aesop.
The Social Construction of What? (1999) by Ian Hacking	Balanced analysis of this usually partisan matter. Hacking is the first scientific constructionist to not irritate me. He concludes that, at least in science, social construction happens and can't just be dismissed by appeal to the Context of Justification. This is more plausible because (where, with e.g. Bruno Latour it isn't clear) he has clearly properly studied the science he covers. The section where he tries to navigate the trade-off between realism's history of oppression, and relativism's potential for totalitarian abuse is touching. (He concludes that he just is "of the wrong generation" to get behind radical constructionisms!) The first section - just a huge long disambiguation of all the different things people mean when they say something is socially constructed - is 5/5 please read it. Required reading for anyone who wants to use, or dismiss, the concept.
Kluge: The Haphazard Construction of the Human Mind (2008) by Gary F. Marcus	Funny and humane work of evolutionary psychology. Like *Thinking, Fast and Slow* but he tries to explain the many cognitive biases in terms of evolutionary adaptations. Relies on classic (old) behavioural experiments. So, not sure if this holds up better than Kahneman under the replication crisis assault.
We Owe You Nothing: Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews	My teenage heroes, some of them teenaged at the time. Uniquely in punk, PP showed the *muddiness* of the ideology in things; the genuinely thoughtful people here interviewed share a tendency to blur party lines. There are radicals talking radically in the usual manner (Chomsky, Biafra) but also practitioners of social good (the Central Ohio Abortion Access Fund and the remarkable Voices in the Wilderness), iconoclasts of iconoclasm

(2001) by Daniel Sinker	(Hanna, Mackaye) and even a few apolitical ethical-egoist libertines (Albini, Frank Kozik) who are common in punk, but rare in its commentary. Sinker's super-earnest intro text inserts all the right misgivings about Chumbawumba's entryism or Kozik's blithe first-generation patriotism; he somehow retains his beautiful faith in 'Punk' (as empowering civil-disobedient grass-roots social justice) in the face of vast variation in actual punks. My own attempt at the social meaning of punk gave up on seeing it as one thing (or even as generally good things) entirely. What are we to judge a social phenomenon by? Its majority expression? Its noblest exemplars? Its effects? (Which in punk's case, let's not flatter ourselves, were aesthetic rather than straightforwardly political: there is now slight freedom in clothing and hair colour in the workplaces of the land; there is now a standard pretence to deviance in all youth movements (e.g. pop music)...) Sinker's judgment is strong (cf. writing the oral history of Black Flag, with each member contradicting each other!), but his prose is wearing. This is the real thing though: one type of inspirational, anti-inspirational person, in their own words.
American Supernatural Tales (2007) by S.T. Joshi	I usually find horror fiction sort of pathetic, but this cherry-picking of two centuries is varied, trend-setting, often golden. Hawthorne, Poe, Bloch, Matheson, Oates. I have no patience for Lovecraft and his legion. The phases: High Gothic to Pulp to magic realism to splatterpunk, blessedly omitting the most recent and hypersuccessful form, urban fantasy / paranormal romance. Henry James' prose is every bit as clotted and unpronounceable as reputed. High point (apart from Poe's 'House of Usher' – a hellhound in a fluffy corset) is probs Theodore Klein's 'The Events at Poroth Farm', a queer sleepy beast with its own internal supernatural anthology and unnerving sidelong glances. (Read aloud)
Moranthology (2012) by Caitlin Moran	Gleeful and rarely zany. I don't laugh at books much, but snorted all the way through this on a long megabus. The middle section on class and gender is light and uncliched and makes her fall from grace among pious people all the sadder. We need people who can talk about these things without sounding like an appalling prig.
What the Hell Are You Doing?: The Essential David Shrigley (2010) by David Shrigley	Hilarious, abject, shoddy. Magical realism if magic were shit and made you look an idiot. Voices from the last bus and the dawn of time, from dank cells and strip-lit service stations. Against institutional art and other pretences, and against indifference, and against no fun.
So You've Been Publicly	Investigation of what angry people are doing to jokers and liars and fools, generally on the internet, generally on political grounds. We send them death threats, we photoshop them into animal porn, we doxx them, we get

Shamed (2015) by Jon Ronson

them fired. If Ronson's shock and remorse at being part of this could spread, the most distinctive depressing part of modern life would evaporate.

There is only one representative of the online shamers here (besides Ronson, who is reformed). You realise quickly that she is not especially hateful: she's just *dim* – she still thinks shaming is great, even after suffering it horribly and losing her job as a result of her own aggressive humourlessness and insensitivity. In her interview with Ronson, she shows no signs of empathy or learning. It is a tragic example of how addling identity can be.

One essential passage - the payload inamongst Ronson's ordinariness and self-deprecation: a human-rights lawyer points out the emotional power of noncriminal acts:

> *"Let me ask you three questions," he said. "And then you'll see it my way. Question One: What's the worst thing that you have ever done to someone? It's okay. You don't have to confess it out loud. Question Two: What's the worst criminal act that has ever been committed against you? Question Three: Which of the two was the most damaging for the victim?"*
>
> *The worst criminal act that has ever been committed against me was burglary. How damaging was it? Hardly damaging at all. I felt theoretically violated at the idea of a stranger wandering through my house. But I got the insurance money. I was mugged one time. I was eighteen. The man who mugged me was an alcoholic. He saw me coming out of a supermarket. "Give me your alcohol," he yelled. He punched me in the face, grabbed my groceries, and ran away. There wasn't any alcohol in my bag. I was upset for a few weeks, but it passed.*
>
> *And what was the worst thing I had ever done to someone? It was a terrible thing. It was devastating for them. It wasn't against the law.*
>
> *Clive's point was that the criminal justice system is supposed to repair harm, but most prisoners — young, black — have been incarcerated for acts far less emotionally damaging than the injuries we noncriminals perpetrate upon one another all the time — bad husbands, bad wives, ruthless bosses, bullies, bankers.*

(It has been claimed that this phase of internet social justice is on its way out - that the tactic is now to "call in"- that is, to correct an offender, but also to appeal to the offender's humanity, to try to bridge the gap. We can hope this will gain traction (3 years and counting...). In the meantime a roaring subculture has been founded upon the glorification of bad behaviour and utterly unpersuasive flames.)

Ronson's possible solutions to finding yourself shamed: you can 1) refuse to feel bad (or at least refuse to show them you're bleeding), own the thing they're trying to shame you for, like Max Mosley. This only works sometimes. 2) You can hide from the internet, try to SEO the affair down to Google page 3, where no-one goes, like someone it would be counterproductive to name. 3) You can start over, asking for forgiveness like Jonah Lehrer. (There is none; the internet is not interested in you

	improving your behaviour.) [Theory #3, Values #1]</li>
American Hippopotamus (2013) by Jon Mooallem	American Hippopotamus</i></b>. Blasted through this nonfiction novella with great delight; so much astonishing Victorian detail, so much damn fun. The story of two hardcore spies, American and Boer, who ranged over the eC20th, blowing things up and meeting presidents and dissing Churchill's fitness level and mining by hand as an anti-fascist action and striking oil and maybe killing lords – who campaigned together to bring an invasive species in to eat another invasive species and introduce a new meat animal to America. Duquesne to Burnham: > *To my friendly enemy, the greatest scout in the world, whose eyes were the vision of an empire. I craved the honour of killing him, but failing that, I extend my heartiest admiration.* So damn fun, and, in the last instance, also deep. Mooallem reproaches us for having clicked on American Hippopotamus to make fun of the men. But: > *Rather than diversify and expand our stock of animals, we developed ways to raise more of the same animals in more places. Gradually, that process led to the factory farms and mass-confinement operations we have today—a mammoth industry whose everyday practices and waste products are linked to all kinds of dystopian mayhem, from the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, to a spate of spontaneous abortions in Indiana, to something called blue baby syndrome, in which infants actually turn blue after drinking formula mixed with tap water that's been polluted by runoff from nearby feedlots. That same runoff also sloshes down the Mississippi River to its mouth, pooling into one of the world's biggest aquatic dead zones, seven or eight thousand square miles large at times...* > *These aren't problems that America created so much as ones we've watched happen — consequences of our having ducked other, earlier problems by rigging together relatively unambitious solutions that seemed safe enough. We answered the Meat Question. But there were more meat questions ahead.* Simple, thoughtful, astonishingly well-written.
The Inimitable Jeeves (Jeeves, #2) (1923) by P.G. Wodehouse	Musical, uplifting, and still so, so funny. Each story draws on a *very* small pool of the exact same jokes (Jeeves hates a new piece of Wooster's wardrobe; little old lady Aunt Agatha is completely inexorable; shit gambling on unconventional sports, headgear is misappropriated, monsters are slain) and only four supporting characters (Pals, Uncles/Fathers-in-law, Aunts/Fiancees, Trade). But they only gain from the repetition somehow. Even here, in Wodehouse's smiling, sun-dappled imperial nest, there are echoes from reality: for instance The War as well as the spiky and still-reigning art it set alight: > *I suppose every chappie in the world has black periods in his life to which he can't look back without the smouldering eye and the silent shudder. Some coves, if you can judge by the novels you read nowadays, have*

	them practically all the time... *"Were you in the First World War, Jeeves?"* *"I dabbled in it to a certain extent, m'lord."* *"I'm lonely, Jeeves."* *"You have a great many friends, sir."* *"What's the good of friends?"* *"Emerson," I reminded him, "says a friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature, sir."* *"Well you can tell Emerson from me next time you see him he's an ass."* *"Very good, sir."* So frivolous it loops back round to profound. --- *Classification*: Wooster's taboo: Triangle: Subplot: Aunt: Antagonist: Expedient:
Bad Pharma: How Drug Companies Mislead Doctors and Harm Patients (2012) by Ben Goldacre	Or - his preferred book title - *The Information Architecture of Medicine has Several Interesting Flaws, Many of Which Inflict Avoidable Harm on Patients, But All of Which are Amenable to Cost-Effective Change, Were There to be Adequate Public and Political Will*. An empirically rigorous angry manifesto! Here are all of the book's theses in one paragraph, which is another thing I love nonfiction writers doing: *Drugs are tested by the people who manufacture them, in poorly designed trials, on hopelessly small numbers of weird, unrepresentative patients, and analysed using techniques that are flawed by design, in such a way that they exaggerate the benefits of treatments. Unsurprisingly, these trials tend to produce results that favour the manufacturer. When trials throw up results that companies don't like, they are perfectly entitled to hide them from doctors and patients, so we only ever see a distorted picture of any drug's true effects. Regulators see most of the trial data, but only from early on in a drug's life, and even then they don't give this data to doctors or patients, or even to other parts of government. This distorted evidence is then communicated and applied in a distorted fashion.* *In their forty years of practice after leaving medical school, doctors hear about what works ad hoc, from sales reps, colleagues and journals. But those colleagues can be in the pay of drug companies – often*

	> *undisclosed – and the journals are, too. And so are the patient groups. And finally, academic papers, which everyone thinks of as objective, are often covertly planned and written by people who work directly for the companies, without disclosure. Sometimes whole academic journals are owned outright by one drug company. Aside from all this, for several of the most important and enduring problems in medicine, we have no idea what the best treatment is, because it's not in anyone's financial interest to conduct any trials at all. These are ongoing problems, and although people have claimed to fix many of them, for the most part they have failed; so all of these programs persist, but worse than ever, because now people can pretend that everything is fine after all.* *[Low external validity] can make a trial completely irrelevant to real-world populations, yet it is absolutely routine in research, which is conducted on tight budgets, to tight schedules, for fast results, by people who don't mind if their results are irrelevant to real-world clinical questions. This is a quiet, dismal scandal. There's no dramatic newspaper headline, and no single killer drug: just a slow and unnecessary pollution of almost the entire evidence base in medicine.* Exactly as fair to pharma as it deserves and no more ("there is no medicine without medicines"). Business gimps sometimes use the term "thought leader", meaning powerful, original thinker (they usually use it spuriously). Goldacre actually is one. Please at least join AllTrials.
Chuck Klosterman on Media and Culture: A Collection of Previously Published Essays (2010) by Chuck Klosterman	Exciting raids on petty tyrannies. Of: contemporary sexuality, cereal adverts, the implications of the 00s pirate craze, questions in general, the Unabomber's good point. Klosterman's not going to get away without comparison to DFW – but he's really good in his own way too. He's a more relaxed, atheoretical Wallace, with pop music (rather than Art writing) at his core, and technology (rather than general Irony) as the source of his worries about us all. This slices through the reflexivity that causes modern confusions, while being mischievously reflexive himself (at one point he tells us that he once lied to an interviewer who had correctly identified Klosterman's mouthpiece in one of his novels; Klosterman denied that he shared the character's view in order to preserve a cheap narrative uncertainty for readers of the interview – but, of course, admitting that here undoes that cheap save for we third-order readers). Applied instance: > *"We assume that commercials are not just informing us about purchasable products, because that would be crude and ineffective. We're smarter than that. But that understanding makes us more vulnerable. We've become the ideal audience for advertising—consumers who intellectually magnify commercials in order to make them more trenchant and clever than they actually are. Our fluency with the language and motives of the advertiser induces us to create new, better meanings for whatever they show us. We do most of the work for them."* Two quibbles: there is (what I take to be) a lack of ideological care you'd

	expect of pieces written for *Esquire* magazine. He doesn't resolve (as I think DFW mostly does) the tension between a) affirming low culture's power and unique charms against bullshit classist disparagement, and b) despising its crudest, most conservative common denominators. Went through it in an hour.
The Selfish Gene (1976) by Richard Dawkins	None yet
The Trial of Henry Kissinger (2001) by Christopher Hitchens	No indictment: an indictment on all of us.
The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution (2004) by Richard Dawkins	Loads of lovely examples and vivid analogies. The sidebar on races is surprisingly careful and illuminating - that *portion* of the phenomenon that's genetic is more straightforward than I'd thought, in my Arts student way. (Though his placid definitiveness about the social interpretation is obvs controversial as hell. He's a strict philosophical eliminativist, implying that the harm resulting from reifying race totally outweighs all gains from positive discrimination. This is unclear to say the least.) I hadn't heard of the 'two-fold cost' of sex before, super-interesting. Not as snarky as you'd expect, and full of alternative perspectives so long as they're other evolutionists' perspectives.
Mao's Great Famine: The History Of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62 (2010) by Frank Dikötter	Deadpan documentation of the most awe-inspiring and culpable misrule ever. (I don't mean to weigh Mao's 40 million counts of negligent manslaughter and 5m conspiracies-to-murder against e.g. the 12 millions of more intentional monsters; the exercise seems childish, past some asymptote of human suffering.) The Party took their land and animals, melted their pans and hoes, killed billions of birds and 40% of the trees in China, starved them until they sold their children, and them starved them some more. At the same time they exported 30 million tons of grain, mostly for guns. Historians are impressive for their readiness to sift through so much irrelevant tonnage – and so much that is boring even when relevant – just so as to be careful and good. Mao comes across as a self-deceiving sociopath; Zhou as a decent man nevertheless permitting atrocities. Heavier than The Black Book, than Primo Levi.
Samuel Johnson Is Indignant (2001) by Lydia Davis	> *We feel an affinity with a certain thinker because we agree with him; or because he shows us what we were already thinking; or because he shows us in a more articulate form what we were already thinking; or because he shows us what we were on the point of thinking; or what we would have thought much later if we hadn't read it now; or what we*

	> *would have been likely to think but never would have thought if we hadn't read it now; or what we would have liked to think but never would have thought if we hadn't read it now.* Went on my guard when I heard that the title story was one sentence long – speaking, as such conceits do, of holy-urinal superstitious art – but this is actually a standout, a series of droll, exacting capsules and nutshells. A typical piece is one page long and part gag, part compulsive meditation, part confession of petty vice. Once you get over her diffident, terse non-being, it is fun stuff. The long piece on jury duty is best, its length and repetitious babble a symmetry of the trial.
Why Moral Theory is Boring and Corrupt () by Anonymous	by the Unknown Anti-ethicist. *to say that love is what motivates most of us who are neither complete bastards nor distracted by secondary concerns such as "what other people will think" – to say this is not to say anything very neat or tidy. But that too is as it should be.* </blockquote> Full review here
Even As We Speak: New Essays 1993-2001 (2001) by Clive James	The last twenty years see James taking a turn from light entertainment to the history of totalitarianism. He then brings it into everything, *everything* else, dragging Hitler and Stalin around like the stations of the cross. His long excoriation of Daniel Goldhagen is angry, entertaining, and an education in itself. (The question the two men are at odds over is, "How could civilised, literate, assimilative Germany Do Such Things?" Goldhagen says: 'because they – all Germans – were eliminationists just itching for an excuse'. James' answer instead puts due weight on the simplest explanation: 'they did it because a single word of dissent meant death, for any of them'.) James is a bit obsessed by his chosen field – Hitler references turn up in his sunny, giddy Sydney Olympics pieces! Then there's an ornately maudlin account of his acquaintance with Diana Spenser. (I spent a little while trying to pigeonhole his politics recently – this non-republican, anti-Marxist, pro-American-culture hobnobber – and decided it is wrong to call him right-wing. "*Democracy is really valuable only for what it prevents...*") Funny, profound in places, but his late themes had solidified already and are covered better in *A Point of View* and *Cultural Amnesia*. • Galef type: **Data 3** - highlights patterns in the world **Values 1** - an explicit argument about values .
An Encyclopaedia	> *Abuser, Sexual* > *Access to the Unknown*

of Myself (2014) by Jonathan Meades

> *Anal Penetration*
> *Ayleswade Road...*

The best documentarian and architecture critic in Britain - also "the best amateur chef in the world" (cf. Marco Pierre-White) - writes about his childhood in a brutal panoptic manner. His unsentimentality about himself, his mother, his horrible uncles, is startling, even speaking as a fan of his sarky and acid programmes. It's not exactly linear: there are several odd repetitions and filling-ins, mimicking the meandering of memory. Still, Meades' prose makes them worthwhile twice over:

> *When, after they had both died, I sold my parents' house, I got rid of a cupboardful of toys which had collected decades' dust, and a bookcase of Eagle annuals, Tiger annuals, Buffalo Bill annuals and so on. I picked through tins of broken pens and perished erasers. I excitedly anticipated the past to come rushing back. Each of these rusty, tarnished pieces of metal or plastic is, surely, a potential madeleine, a mnemonic of some bright day in 1959. They were, however, doggedly mute.*
>
> *It took time in that house whose purpose was finished to realise that this was a pitiful and self-pitying exercise: I was trying to freeze myself, to transport myself back to the land of lost content which had, actually, been no such thing. I was trying to do to myself what parents do to their children.*

> *No girls meant no calm solicitude, no sweet fragrance of talc and cleanliness, but, rahter, the soilpipe smell of almost a hundred shrieking, blubbing, chucking, grubby, boisterous, energetic, savage, merciless small boys... Kissing was of course sissy. In the Cathedral School's swimming-pool changing hut, a riot of asbestos, just-prepubescent boys boxed with their penises in friendly companionabiity and competitive violence: he who drew blood won. They aptly dignified this as 'cockfighting', insouciantly associating covert pugilism with the hedgerow gamblers' sport conducted between roofless brick cowsheds where flames from pyres of palettes relieve the ruined farmyard's midden chill and lend ceremony to the bucolic rite.*

> *Some fleshpot, Southampton: the Port Said of the Solent. A poor whore has only to sit in a window in Derby Road, and a major police operation will be launched. All the coppers who've been on Cottage Patrol squeeze out from beneath the rafter to race a mile east from the Common. Their route takes them past Great Aunt Doll's chaotic bungalow where there were peals of dirty laughter and sweet sherry and sweet Marsala, and a room heated to eighty degrees and fish and chips for a dozen in an enamel bowl, and gossip and ribbing and silly stories, and gaspers, and will someone let the dog out else he's going to wee on the couch, and Jonathan you better go with him if you want a widdle cos Eric's been and done a big one...*

> *I had emerged [from Sunday School] a materialist. It was, equally, the first time I had walked out of anything, that I had had the nerve to walk out. Thus was a lifelong habit initiated. Cinemas, jobs, sexual relationships, exams, opportunities, marriages, commitments, professional partnerships, schools, theatrical performances (a specialty), parties, expeditions, dinners, homes, prior arrangements - I've walked out of them all, often.*

The whole book is anomalous - it is sustained emotional recollection by a professed enemy of nostalgia:

> *Nostalgia is not simply a yearning for a lost home, a yearning which can never be satisfied by revisiting that home, which could only be satisfied by becoming once more the child who inhabited that home, at that time. It is also primitive, pre-rational, pre-learning. It quashes developed taste, aesthetic preference, learnt refinements. It insists that the chance associations of infancy are more obstinately enduring than the chosen positions of our subsequent sentience. It tells us that we are lifers in a mnemonic prison from which there is no reprieve.*

But then the man's an anomaly: a razorish rationalist, a scathing positivist about the arts, who has devoted his life to them. (*They were accompanied by their arty and - it follows - entirely artless friends*.)

His childhood was not like other children's in Fifties Britain. (I'm comparing his to Bennett, Hitchens, wrongly also Clive James.) His parents quietly rewarded his not conforming, and he ate Afghan curry throughout (his father was stationed in Iraq and brought back a tonne of spices). He grew up surrounded by clergy and the weapons scientists of the Downs:

> *I pictured the Red Menace - a cannibalistic giant whose face was impasted with human gristle and blood; bullnecked mass murderers weighed down by medals; cloud seeding; barbed wire; secret policemen; evil scientists; informers; torturers; factories as big as cities; insanitary collective farms; starvation; deportations. 'You're going to Siberia!' was a playground taunt of the Fifties.*

(He really likes the biological warfare men, in maybe the biggest piece of contrarianism in this large contrary book.)

The book stops when he's only 17 - but there are so, so many deaths in it. Maybe 70, counting the drowned calf; my total by that age was 3. Let's say he delights in the *contrast* with today, not in the deaths themselves.

> *For all they spoke of death, I might have believed we live perpetually, growing ever more crooked, more and more dried up, more rasping, more fearful. (I obviously didn't know that it was death's proximity that caused the eyes of the very old to communicate unimaginable terror.) ...The names of the dead were dropped from conversation, as one might drop that of a disloyal friend. Death seemed to be a kind of disgrace... The rare times they were remembered, it was with irked brusqueness.*

It is *very* easy to put him in a bad light; he makes it easy for you, because

he is always absolutely emphatic, usually vitriolic, and often wrong. (The things he's wrong about include vegetarians, anti-racism overall*, arguably human rights.**)

> *Where would we be without monotheism, fasts, judicial impartiality, the eucharist, sincerity, pork's proscription, Allah's ninety-nine names and seventy-two virgins, weather forecasts, life plans, political visions, conjugated magpies, circumcision, sacred cows, the power of prayer, insurance policies, gurus' prescriptions, the common good, astrology? Where indeed? But those are the big lies.*

> *Picturing the equine Princess Royal is a sure way of inhibiting orgasm and prolonging enjoyment, so long as one doesn't picture her for too long and so risk flaccidity.*

> *stoical meiosis was normal in a generation which denied itself deep immersion in feeling, had not learned to wallow in empathy, understood an outpouring to be the discharge of cloacal sewage. The lexicon of demonstrative care had yet to be coined; the people's absurd princess had yet to be born; the mistakenly unaborted Blair had yet to perfect the catch of tremulous sincerity in his voice.*

> *my mother had assured me that the old testament was risible tosh. And so it is. So, of course, are all 'holy' books. But risible tosh can be persuasive.*

> *The desert landscape [in Iraq] is relentlessly grim. There was indigenous hostility to contend with. The Arab world was broadly sympathetic to the Axis powers. (The Nazis' successors are not the lost causists of the BNP, NPD and Vlaams Belang but the totalitarian Islamist post-Khomeini terror states... The Arab armies included Bosnian Muslim veterans of the Handzar SS brigades... The entire sentimental Arabist package, the tradition of the fawning British buggerocracy - Richard Burton, T.E. Lawrence, St John Philby, Glubb Pasha, Wilfred Thesiger and countless other aristocratic eccentrics - had become la pensee unique of the army's higher strata. It was also (not that its adherents acknowledged it) effete, misogynistic, irrational, anti-urban, Luddite and gullible.*

> *Antiquarian pillage is hardly scholarly and far from scientific, but its perpetrators were not culpable of the misanthropic relativism which grants rights to ancient amphorae and entitlements to yokes' remnants. Nor did they conceive of history in terms of movements, big ideas and sweeping theses. Their empiricism militated against generalisation.*

> *The tyranny of minorities had caused the atomisation of England. The damage is repairable - by state terror or mob rule. But since the state's treasonable clerks are the very cause of the embuggerance we can be sure that it will do nothing. And a mob needs a leader to bring its hatred to the boil, foment its venom, drive it on. It needs the Duke of Edinburgh. Much as he might wish it he won't be around.*

	Consider that last one: it is natural to read in it a fascist glee - but it isn't that at all. It is rather the dread of inevitable deadlock and looming contradictions. There's no relish, only misplaced fear. But you need to have read his contempt of fascists (and of Philip) and his fear of totalitarianism *before*, for it to sound like that. Why isn't the cannibal internet calling him out? Because he is in the grey zone of non-celebrity? Because he is too old to shame? Because he isn't on Twitter? Anyway: He is neither a bigot (offensive because hateful and ignorant), nor a clickbait troll (intentionally, insincerely offensive), nor an aged victim of social drift (obliviously offensive): he has not defaulted to these opinions; he was never much tied to his time's prevailing prejudices, whether it's Fifties' conformism and class obsession or Noughties PC and pomo. His antipathies are reasoned and he refuses to pander. Compare this passage to e.g. what Yiannopoulos was finally banished for: > *The formula states that adults are wicked predators, children are innocent prey. In the hierarchy of abuse, paedophilia (which may be literally that, liking children) is demonised, fetishised. It has giddily attained equal status with race crime... Homo faber. Isn't he just? Man has devised multitudinous forms of child abuse which are not sexual. Their immeasurable consequences may, however, be just as grave as those of sexual abuse.* > > *Child soldier, child slave, child labourer, child miner, child skiv, child beggar, child bloody from scrounging in the shambles.* The book is highly abridged (only up to cram school) and still a bit too long. Before reading this you should first watch any 10 of these films. * If you insist on challenging the worst e.g. woke, trivial internet activism, you have to say that's what you're against: Meades is being uncharacteristically imprecise, and decimating sympathy as a result. "Against (actually-existing) anti-racism" is not the same as "pro-racism", but people will read you that way unless you give them explicit reason not to. (And even then.) ** Rights are only good if they produce good outcomes; lots of people all over the world think in terms of imperatives and absolutes and it is almost futile to argue about it; thus rights can be a useful fiction. Meades again spits on "rights" in general without laying out this or any other philosophical objection, without showing us what he's for and so allowing people to not think the worst.
New Year Letter (1941) by W.H. Auden	800 heroic couplets written off the cuff for a friend. Pompous, showy, and forced: I love his idiocies, I love his verse footnotes, which are as long as the original poem again and arraying all his beetling, piecemeal research into *his* age at least: cell biology, crank psychoanalysis, early sociology, Nietzsche, Nietzsche, all the arts and sciences nominally in his pocket. Anyway half of the idiocy is forced on him by the genre, epic verse, which always sounds damn silly to me (not that I mind silliness in my high art, but I do mind people being silly and not admitting it): >

> *Tonight a scrambling decade ends,*
> *And strangers, enemies and friends*
> *Stand once more puzzled underneath*
> *The signpost on the barren heath*
> *Where the rough mountain track divides...*
>
> *A weary Asia out of sight*
> *Is tugging gently at the night,*
> *Uncovering a restless race;*
> *Clocks shoo the childhood from its face,*
> *And accurate machines begin*
> *To concentrate its adults in*
> *A narrow day to exercise*
> *Their gifts in some cramped enterprise.*
> *How few pretend to like it: O,*
> *Three quarters of these people know*
> *Instinctively what ought to be*
> *The nature of society*
> *And how they'd live there if they could.*
> *If it were easy to be good,*
> *And cheap, and plain as evil, how*
> *We all would be its members now...*
>
> *How grandly would our virtues bloom*
> *In a more conscionable dust*
> *Where Freedom dwells because it must,*
> *Necessity because it can,*
> *And men confederate in Man.*
>
> *But wishes are not horses, this*
> *Annus is not mirabilis;*
> *Day breaks upon the world we know*
> *Of war and wastefulness and woe...*
>
> *The New Year brings an earth afraid,*
> *Democracy a ready-made*
> *And noisy tradesman's slogan, and*
> *The poor betrayed into the hand*
>
> *Of lackeys with ideas, and truth*
> *Whipped by their elders out of youth,*
> *The peaceful fainting in their tracks*
> *With martyrs' tombstones on their backs,*
> *And culture on all fours to greet A butch and criminal elite,*
> *While in the vale of silly sheep*
> *Rheumatic old patricians weep...*

One critic, screwing up all his strength, called Auden's bad style, which *NYL* is supposed to be an instance of, "snide bright jargon", which is a perfect compliment! (if you don't view limpid repetition of what every other sensitive outsider has said before you as poetry's point.) I've not read it alone on New Year's Eve like you ought to, but I will.

For the Motherboard: The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám () by Vanessa Hodgkinson	Gaudy and hectic word-associations, with only tenuous formal or thematic links to the actual Rubáiyát, presenting itself as a translation but fizzing with verve of its own. A nerd culture devotional. (Vine was a video fragment website; Wine is an excellent Windows emulator.) Teeming with clumsy nerdy ephemera, but I think it will be worth reading in 10 years. Let's see. Works *much* better aloud. Free! here: ‘The’ ‘“Rubaiyyat’” of ‘Omar Khayyam’</b></i>
Collected Poems (1962) by Federico García Lorca	2007: I used to love people for getting shot.
Occasional Poets () by Richard Adams	Poems from people not known as poets, yielding a equal mix of dedicatories, doggerel, and diamond. Their styles are mostly preserved, epitomised: the big grim novelists (Lessing, Coetzee, Fowles, Murdoch, Golding) write enormous grit-tooth verse; *Heads bowed down or thrown* *Backward open-eyed* *Here and there are dark* *With terrible deaf pictures.* *Sounds rise up and vanish* *Into a pitted dome.* *It continues to rain.* *The acoustics being imperfect some people fidget.* *Something which is pure is come* *To a high magnetic field.* *Cry out as it passes on When shall we be healed?* Raymond Briggs, a quiet, brutal elegy; David Lodge, some good meta jokes; animal bits from Jan Morris and Stella Gibbons; Wodehouse, two wonderful gossipy hyperboles. Adams manages to pick out the only Naomi Mitchison poems I don’t like. A lot of unbridled sentiment, e.g. Arnold Wesker depressing his children, Francis King's lies spiralling down, Enoch Powell lying awake listening to his wife's asthma; the writers aren't expecting the irony-making pressures of publication, or the obsessive polishing of any work that will be identified with *them*. So it's free indeed. Until Adams.
The Black Halo: The Complete English Stories 1977-98 (2001) by Iain Crichton Smith	Best Scottish poet writes good Scottish stories about, mostly, terrible Scottish pragmatists. Steady observational tragedy, and quiet outcast statures. Recurring structure: a staid, professional male narrator tells us his profession on page 1 and admits a whole puckle of flaws. Recurring people: the censorious, crabbit islander who was not always so; the passionate and creative woman slowly eroded by island gossip, monotony, stasis; her husband, who knows this happened because of him. Most striking are ‘The Scream’, ‘What to do About Ralph?’, ‘The Spy’, and ‘The Exorcism’ – but particularly the latter, because I recognised the worst

	of myself in both the little bastard obsessed with Kierkegaard and the small-souled lecturer who saves him: > *I looked at him for a long time knowing that the agony was over… [But] how could I be sure that my own harmonious jealous biography had not been superimposed upon his life, as one writing upon another, in that wood where the birds sang with such sweetness defending their territory?* Much more than clever.
The Mythical Man-Month: Essays on Software Engineering (1975) by Frederick P. Brooks Jr.	How big teams make things. How awesome tech feels on the inside: > *Too many interests, too many exciting opportunities for learning, research, and thought. What a marvellous predicament! Not only is the end not in sight, the pace is not slackening. We have many future joys.* The oldest thing by far on my computing syllabus and nearly the most stylish.* This anniversary edition has a chapter which is just the whole book boiled down to its propositions and whether or not they stood up twenty years later, which is a thing that other non-fiction could gravely benefit from. (You sometimes see the like of this in honest philosophy books, included as 'analytical index' or 'prolegomenon' or 'exordium'.) Brooks is not merely exoteric, not just an IBM mook; suitably acerbic and suitably enthusiastic. The open secret of programming is that it is actually a whole barrel of fun, just one that baffles, bores or scares outsiders: > *The craft of programming gratifies creative longings built deep within us and delights sensibilities we have in common with all men, providing five kinds of joys:* > *• The joy of making things;* > *• The joy of making things that are useful to other people;* > *• The fascination of fashioning puzzle-like objects of interlocking moving parts;* > *• The joy of always learning, of a nonrepeating task;* > *• The delight of working in a medium so tractable — pure thought-stuff — which nevertheless exists, moves, and works in a way that word-objects do not.* (NB: The Christian God rears up at unexpected intervals – and at one point Brooks recommends openly patriarchal programming teams - on the model of "God's plan for marriage". But this lone wacko note doesn't get in the way.) * (I set myself Shannon, Wang, Knuth.)
The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays (2002) by	Remarkable meta-ethics, which establishes itself in large part by undermining neoclassical economics. Important quibble: The title evokes sexy French relativism – e.g. there is no fact of the matter, il n'y a pas de hors-texte – whereas his actual thesis is that only the strictest, stupidest partition between facts and values collapsed. (A distinction is the mild statement that A is not the same thing as B – whereas a dichotomy is the strict logical exclusion of two things: 'if something is A, it is a priori not B'.) A pedantic quibble: god he is fond of italics.

Hilary Putnam	Anyway. It collapsed, but still lives on in other fields, decades after the fall of the positivism that was the only thing motivating it. Book is: a scathing modern history of the distinction, a Pragmatic reconstruction, a love letter to Amartya Sen. Putnam blames the philosophical dichotomy for the failures of economics, and from there for real suffering. > *The word "cruel"... has a normative and indeed, ethical use. If one asks me what sort of person my child's teacher is, and I say "he is very cruel," I have both criticized him as a teacher and…as a man. I do not have to add, "he is not a good teacher" or "he is not a good man." I cannot simply... say, "he is a very cruel person and a good man," and be understood. Yet "cruel" can also be used purely descriptively, as when a historian writes that a certain monarch was exceptionally cruel, or that the cruelties of the regime provoked a number of rebellions. "Cruel" simply ignores the supposed fact/value dichotomy and cheerfully allows itself to be used sometimes for a normative purpose and sometimes as a descriptive term. (Indeed, the same is true of the term "crime.")* Some claims: Factual and evaluative statements are necessarily entangled, since; Facts are ascertained *as such* only by the application of epistemic values: "coherence, plausibility, reasonableness, simplicity, and elegance... if these epistemic values do enable us to correctly describe the world... that is something we see through the lenses of those very values."; i.e. facts are thick too; i.e. he has been made to "*rethinking the whole dogma (the last dogma of empiricism?) that facts are objective and values are subjective*". Of course, coupled to his ditching foundationalism, this leads him a long way down the Rortyan road - 'science is just another social practice' yada yada - but he tries to salvage a sort of pragmatic objectivity for science. Dunno if he's winning, but I loved the race.
Human Chain (2010) by Seamus Heaney	As ever, it's of hands, eels, parents, wakes, digging, kennings, regret, the RUC, Cuchulain, and Caesar. Fully half are in memoriams. You have to be brave or famous to write this plainly. Plainness can be mistaken for absence of technique – 'here, I could do that' – but here it is very, very obvious that I could not. Feel your tongue: > *It's winter at the seaside where they've gone* > *For the wedding meal. And I am at the table,* > *Uninvited, ineluctable.* > *A skirl of gulls. A smell of cooking fish.* > *Plump dormant silver. Stranded silence. Tears.* > *Their bibbed waitress unlids a clinking dish.* > *And leaves them to it, under chandeliers.* > *And to all the anniversaries of this* > *They are not ever going to observe* > *Or mention even in the years to come.* > *And now the man who drove them here will drive* > *Them back, and by evening we'll be home.* Best are 'A Herbal', 'Chanson d'Aventure', 'Miracle', 'Loughanure', and 'Route 110', an odyssey about buying a second-hand copy of the Aeneid and then trying to go home.

A Mathematician's Apology (1940) by G.H. Hardy	None yet
Non-Materialist Physicalism: An experimentally testable conjecture () by David Pearce	None yet
Intuition Pumps And Other Tools for Thinking (2013) by Daniel C. Dennett	A self-help book! in the form of a set of tricks and tools for good non-routine cognition. But it's utterly personable and scientifically charged, and a defence of naturalist semantics, mind, 'free' will, and philosophy itself, to boot. He's so much more subtle than he's given credit for; for instance, a large theme here is the central role of imagination in science and the other potent sorts of thought. I confess that I simply can't conceive of some of his positions (e.g. 'qualia' being illusions); but one of the book's burning points is that this may be a failing of my person and not his philosophy. Also a meta-philosophy: > *By working with scientists I get a rich diet of fascinating and problematic facts to think about, but by staying a philosopher without a lab or a research grant, I get to think about all the theories and experiments and never have to do the dishes.* > *A good library has all the good books. A great library has all the books. If you really want to understand a great philosopher, you have to spend some time looking at the less great contemporaries and predecessors that are left in the shadows of the masters.* Every book of his I read increases my respect. (Though note Galen Strawson's rebuke to Dennett's narrativist theory of identity, 4* here.)
Filthy Lucre: Economics for People Who Hate Capitalism (2009) by Joseph Heath	None yet
The Great Equations: Breakthroughs in Science from Pythagoras	Droll, scientifically proficient, philosophically superconductive. The cast is standard – 'Pythagoras', Newton, Euler, Boltzmann, Maxwell, Einstein, Heisenberg – but his treatment's lucid and alive to the art and philosophy of the things. (Get this: "*special use of language, often over the heads of untrained*

to Heisenberg (2008) by Robert P. Crease	*readers, that seeks to express truths concisely & with precision, that allows us to understand otherwise inaccessible things, changing our experience in the process*" – equations, or poems?) Thermodynamics is best, casting physicists as Shakespearean (there were four suicides in the twelve of them). Crease wants science to have cultural presence, since at the moment it has authority, cultural reputation without real presence. He suggests that "science criticism" is the way to get this - not in the sense of know-nothing postmodernists attacking instrumentalist hegemony (Holmes on Cochrane), but as in the work of engaged human bridges between practitioners and audience. Every art has a surfeit of such critics. Pop-science comes close, but it's more often cheerleading and radical simplification than artful play on precedents, implications and meaning. Well, here's at least one example. (See also the Edge and 3QuarksDaily people.)
Behind the Wall: A Journey Through China (1987) by Colin Thubron	*Arhat statues surfing at Qiongzhu Temple*, (c) Li Guangxiu (c.1890) A stunning travel book in the best aristocratic tradition of wandering about talking to people and expecting monasteries to put you up unannounced. But it's as much moral as geographic or historical. China had only just opened up to foreigners, again; the Cultural Revolution, just 15 years past, looms large. A lost generation. In fact the book is obsessed with the difficult question, "How could they do that to themselves?", a focus which makes it excellent, informal long-form journalism as much as gentleman's what-ho travel narrative. > *The man went on: 'We found a porter who had been reading novels with a love interest. I don't mean porn. Just a personal story. This was decadent. We beat him unconscious, and burnt the books. Then he died.' I looked at him in astonishment, mesmerised, for some reason, by his immaculately pressed trousers. Once the armour of social constraint had been stripped from him, the person inside had been exposed as a baby: conscienceless. Was that China, I wondered, or just him? In any case, where was that feeling of pity which Mencius said was common to all men?* The question isn't as simply answered as it is for Hitler's Germany (answer: "Because the merest dissent by any German meant death") nor even as it is for Stalinist Russia (since the unbelievable violence of the Holodomor and gulags was meted out by a comparatively small number of people). Millions of educated Red Guards brutalised millions of untrendy people without much central control at all (indeed, they often revolted against and scared the shit out of the PLA and the apparatchiks). Thubron's important points include: that the Party cadres are nothing more than the latest garb of the long, long line of elite mandarins. So the poor Laobaixing got all the downside of an absolutist bureaucracy *plus* all the incompetence and terror caused by people who think that violent unending revolution is desirable. Another large theme is the appalling state of women: The patriarchy there was without even the paltry sweetener of chivalry - married off at 14 if not murdered as infants; old women sitting in the aisles of busses while young men lounge, etc, etc.

Many of the people he meets (mostly lower-middle-class) were (are?) unbelievably obsessed with class, even after forty years of 'communist' rule; the brief, cursory glorification of the nongmin bounced back as soon as the big sticks went away. He calculates the cost of things - TVs, train tickets, hotel whiskies - in that most decent of measures, fractions of an average worker's monthly wage.

There is, already in 1987, an ambitious, irreverent, apolitical youth which any graduate of a Western university will now recognise readily.** The modern Modern China - Deng's China - is visible here, just. Thubron watches the future radiating out from the city:

> *Under the enormous vault of the station hall there resounds the tramp of a newly mobilised peasantry. I have seen them before all over the city: families arrived to buy or trade, sleeping under bridges or in shop porches with cap over their eyes. Now they step on to the escalators as gingerly as Western eight-year-olds, laden with rope-trussed boxes, newly bought televisions, chickens in hampers, radios, bags spilling out fruit and biscuits - bearing El Dorado back to the village. They overflow the waiting-rooms and camp against every wall behind their baggage palisades, snoring open-mouthed through the din with the detachment of Brueghel swineherds, their children in their arms.*

His wit, compassionate anger, gravitas, and grasp of the detail of how messily old collides with new: all recall my favourite critic, Jonathan Meades. (Though Meades is a bit too refined to be easily imagined sleeping fifth-class amidst spit and melon rind, or buying a barn owl in a meat market just to set it free.)

He reports much local bullshit, sarcastically (e.g. Northerners' notion that 'moral integrity' decreases as you go south). This makes it sometimes difficult to know which reportage he endorses: thus, a couple of outlandish claims are possibly deadpan jokes (e.g. only '100' cars on mainland China in 1987?? Human flesh on sale in Canton?

Unsurprisingly, the book received a dab of cursory post-colonial critique.* This is unsurprising because he is interested in *testing* stereotypes out - in particular, finding out if innate cruelty enabled the Cultural Revolution; it is thus not unfair to imagine the book as a Eurocentric hatchet job. But this dismissive cynicism is only possible *before* you've heard his frank encounters with a hundred vivid, intelligent, and mournful locals, seen his solid grasp of the history of the dynasties and of 'pedantic and kindly' Confucianism. (Which is the best description of it I've ever seen.)

Those interviews *are* novelistic - impossibly sincere, compressed, tragic, poetic - and far beyond anything I could elicit as a foreigner, in my summer there. But you believe him even so. Anyway he doesn't pretend to have answered his burning question:

> *'This sort of thing isn't peculiar to my country,' the priest said: he might have been thought-reading. 'Look at Germany, Russia. Of course, those countries are not old civilisations like ours, but still...'*
>
> *Of course. I was wading into an ocean. He was listening patiently, but I could not assemble any coherent thoughts. I wanted to explain that it was not the presence of cruelty which surprised me, but some imbalance between obedience and mercy, the collapse of domestic compassion in*

	> *the face of official demand, the refinements of tortures practiced against teachers and friends, the denunciation of parents - but I stumbled into inarticulacy. I was juggling only with my own values, not with theirs. I knew nothing.* I oughtn't skimp on the book's adventure-story side just because it happens to be a beautiful and humane psychological portrait; the prose is persistently gorgeous, the sights are dryly and comprehensively evoked, and Thubron presents himself as a very fine comic character to boot. My favourite China book. > ** Anti-Eurocentrism used to minimise totalitarian genocide can be found in the critical discussion of Thubron here, the snob passage around the dismaying line: "In Thurbron's mind, the Cultural Revolution reached the epitome of atrocities in terms of intensity and scope..." (emphasis mine). That author also takes the prize for most dishonest truncation of the week, since Thubron's monologue goes on to display an odd cultural sensitivity in the face of cultural horror (see "This sort of thing", above).* > *** There must be a better word for 'occidentaphile' than that itself.*
Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis (1995) by Richard Webster	What a fucking book! Title is apt and cleverer than it looks: this is not just a comprehensive catalogue of the errors and lies Freud told throughout his career - some of them criminally negligent and emotionally abusive - but also a psychological explanation of why he made them. (Roughly: Lust for fame, cocaine, and a misplaced fervour in a particular numerological sort of pseurology.) Full discussion forthcoming, after re-read.
Lost in Math: How Beauty Leads Physics Astray (2018) by Sabine Hossenfelder	A look at high-energy particle physics* in its present nightmare (of deep inconsistency and vastly expensive new data). Her thesis is that the problem is sociological and aesthetic: in the absence of new data sources, we form cliques and regroup around incompatible, unempirical beauty intuitions. > *it leads me to conjecture that the laws of nature are beautiful because physicists constantly tell each other those laws are beautiful.* > *experimentalists working with a detector developed to catch neutrinos reported on the first “interesting bounds on galactic cold dark matter and on light bosons emitted from the sun.” In plain English, “interesting bounds” means they didn’t find anything. Various other neutrino experiments at the time also obtained interesting bounds.* Her prescription is that we should stop limiting the field so heavily with naturalness or geometric naturalness or symmetry or unification or anti-fine-tuning intuitions, which collectively she (following her field) calls

"beauty". Since Physical beauty is quite distinct from natural-language "beauty", I think it'd be better if we left those five components under a different name.

Filled with interviews with some of the cleverest, deepest physicists of our time (Arkani-Harked, Wilczek, Weinberg, Lisi, Polchinski) and the several bandwagons they lead, blind, in different directions. Hossenfelder herself is funny, self-critical, scrupulously clear: the kind of curmudgeonly, unbiddable empiricist we always need.

> *“You ask, why do people still work on it?” Nima [Arkani-Harked] continues. “It’s in fact very funny. As I said, the best people had a pretty good idea what was going on—they were not sitting on their hands waiting for gluinos to pour out of the LHC. They also had a pretty level reaction to the data.”*
>
> *But not one of those “best people” spoke up and called bullshit on the widely circulated story that the LHC had a good chance of seeing supersymmetry or dark matter particles. I’m not sure which I find worse, scientists who believe in arguments from beauty or scientists who deliberately mislead the public about prospects of costly experiments.*
>
> *Nima continues: “The people who were sure it would be there are now positive it’s not there. There are people now who speak about being depressed or worried or scared. It drives me nuts. It’s ludicrously narcissistic. Who the fuck cares about you and your little life? Other than you yourself, of course.”*
>
> *He isn’t speaking about me, but he might as well be, I think. Maybe I’m just here to find an excuse for leaving academia because I’m disillusioned, unable to stay motivated through all the null results. And what an amazing excuse I have come up with—blaming a scientific community for misusing the scientific method.*
>
> *On the plane back to Frankfurt, bereft of Nima’s enthusiasm, I understand why he has become so influential. In contrast to me, he believes in what he does.*

That sweet bitterness is telling; Hossenfelder is the broke-down hard-boiled P.I. of particle physics.

> *I shouldn’t be here, I should be at my desk, reading a paper, drafting a proposal, or at least writing a referee report. I shouldn’t psychoanalyze a community that neither needs nor wants therapy.*
> *</i>*

> *I hook onto the Wi-Fi. After a week of nonstop travel, my inbox is filling with urgent messages. There are two unhappy editors complaining about overdue reports, a journalist asking for comment, a student asking for advice. A form to be signed, a meeting to be rescheduled, two phone calls to be made, a conference invitation that needs to be politely declined. A collaborator returns the draft of a grant proposal for revision.*

> *I remember reading biographies of last century's heroes, picturing theoretical physicists as people puffing pipes in leather armchairs while thinking big thoughts.</i>*

Her exposition is impressively clear, covering the whole standard model (and quantum mechanics, and much of modern cosmology) in plain diagrams and terse language. (Though, as usual with pop science, one can't really spot where the simplifications are misleading unless you're already an insider.)

The heavies are in general very open and undogmatic about the state of things (they can afford to be, what with tenure). Weinberg:

> *I don't know how much elementary particle physics can improve over what we have now. I just don't know. I think it's important to try and continue to do experiments, to continue to build large facilities… But where it will end up I don't know. I hope it doesn't just stop where it is now. Because I don't find this entirely satisfying…*
>
> *I don't take seriously any negative conclusion that the fact that the LHC hasn't seen anything beyond the standard model shows that there isn't anything that will solve the naturalness problem… Supersymmetry hasn't been ruled out because it's too vague about what it predicts.*

(There's a nice bit where Weinberg hears a new philosophical/historical theory of physics - that the revolutions always involve overthrowing an old aesthetic principle - and is immediately nerd-sniped and charmed by it. Also Wilczek:

> *According to McAllister, scientists don't throw out everything during a revolution; they only throw out their conception of beauty. So whenever there is a revolution in science, they have to come up with a new idea of beauty. He lists some examples for this: the steady state universe, quantum mechanics, et cetera.*
> *"If that was true," I go on, "it would tell me that getting stuck on the ideas of beauty from the past is exactly the wrong thing to do."*
> *"Yes, right," Frank says. "It's normally a good guiding principle. But occasionally you have to introduce something new. In each of these examples you find, though, that the new ideas are beautiful too."*
> *"But people only found that new beauty after data forced them to look at it," I point out. "And I'm worried we might not be able to get there. Because we are stuck on this old idea of beauty that we use to construct theories and to propose experiments to test them."*
> *"You might be right."</i>*

)

She even seeks out the ugliest theories, like Xiao-Gang Wen's string-net condensation, trying to find her own aesthetic limits:

> *I am skeptical, but I tell myself to be more open-minded. Isn't this what I was looking for, something off the well-trodden path? Is it really any weirder to believe everything is made of qubits than of strings or loops or some 248-dimensional representation of a giant Lie algebra?*
>
> *How patently absurd it must appear to someone who last had contact with physics in eleventh grade that people get paid for ideas like that.*

> *But then, I think, people also get paid for throwing balls through hoops.*

This bit understates a real problem (it implies we don't use Solomonoff induction out of pique rather than incomputability):

> *A way to objectively quantify simplicity is by computational complexity, which is measured by the length of a computer program that executes a calculation. Computational complexity is in principle quantifiable for any theory that can be converted into computer code, which includes the type of theories we currently use in physics. We are not computers, however, and computational complexity is therefore not a measure we actually use. The human idea of simplicity is instead very much based on ease of applicability, which is closely tied to our ability to grasp an idea, hold it in mind, and push it around until a paper falls out.*

Better than The Trouble with Physics which I also liked (though he was narrower and less balanced about string theory). Maybe 5/5 if I reread it. Her blog is extremely worthwhile and more technical and thus less untrue.

** OK, "high-energy particle physicists and also Grand Unified Theorists of whatever stripe including some cosmologists". But it is wrong to say that "physics" tout court has a crisis, nor indeed does Hossenfelder say this. (She didn't choose her own subtitle.)</td> </tr>*

Awakenings (1973) by Oliver Sacks	An oppressive book or a book about the maximal oppression. It is a dozen case studies of profoundly frozen people: contorted, whispering, impassive for decades - at best. It describes one of the most poignant real events I think I've ever heard of: the medical reversal of effective, affective death - and but only a temporary reversal. Sacks really hadn't developed his style by this point: I quite liked the technical medical report feel, but it both highly technical and highly melodramatic: there is much of infinitudes of the soul, titratabilities, and perseveratably festinative resipiscences in it. Also a nice subtle stylistic note: he breaks apart dead metaphors to revive them (e.g. "wild life", "death bed"). Also lacking is his later grand balancing of romance with reason.* For instance, he falls right off the edge on pp.97, seeing numbers as enemies of people: > *I suddenly realised the infinite nature, the qualitative infinity of the phenomenon... One speaks of infinite anguishes, poignancies, desires, and joys - and one does so naturally, with no sense of paradox - i.e. one conceives of them in a metaphysical sense. But Parkinsonism - wasn't this categorically different? Was it not a simple, mechanical disorder of function - something essentially finite, something which could be measured in the divisions of a suitable scale? ... When I saw Hester, I suddenly realised that all I had thought about the finite, ponderable, numerable nature of Parkinsonism was nonsense. I suddenly realized, at this moment, that Parkisonism could in no sense be seen as a thing which increased or decreased by finite increments... that it was anumerical; that from its first, infinitesimal intimation it could proceed by*

	> *an infinite multitude of infinitesimal increments to an infinite, and then more infinite, and still more infinite, degree of severity... [Footnote twenty years later] I see it as requiring models or concepts which had not been created in the 1960s, in particular those of chaos and nonlinear dynamics.* > *We rationalize, we dissimilate, we pretend: we pretend that modern medicine is a rational science, all facts, no nonsense, and just what it seems. But we have only to tap its glossy veneer for it to split wide open, and reveal to us its roots and foundations, its old dark heart of metaphysics, mysticism, magic, and myth. Medicine is the oldest of the arts, and the oldest of the sciences: would one not expect it to spring from the deepest knowledge and feelings we have?* It's a repetitive book for a maximally repetitive disease. The wonder and personalising detail he lavishes on each case aren't enough to get me past the surprising uniformity of the bizarre symptoms and the hell of it all. Just as well I'm not a doctor. > ** Call it the classical vs the romantic (as does Pirsig), Erklaerung oder Verstehen (as in Dilthey, Weber), the outside view v the inside view (Kahneman), or Logos v Mythos (as twere in ancient Greece).*
Thing Explainer: Complicated Stuff in Simple Words (2015) by Randall Munroe	So wonderful; technical diagrams big and small, annotated with only the 1000 ("ten hundred") most common words. (This is as often poetic as it is clumsy; Munroe renders a nuclear bomb a "machine for burning cities".)
Rain (2009) by Don Paterson	Wonderful: sincere, grotesque, solemn *and* shrugging; both elemental and goofy. Rhymes are delivered straight. Going by the ambient temperature and the coverage of light, Paterson lives very near to outer space. > *so for all that we are one machine* > *ploughing through the sea and gale* > *I know your impulse and design* > *no better than the keel the sail* A unique, dry view of family life here; sneaking downstairs so as not to disturb them with your inexplicable angst. There's even a painfully goofy evocation of the mating call of the *Wire* magazine reader: > *Though I should confess that at times I find your habit of maxxing*

	> *the range with those bat-scaring frequencies ring-modulated* > *sine-bursts and the more distressing psychoacoustic properties* > *of phase inversion in the sub-bass frequencies somewhat taxing* > *you are nonetheless beautiful as the mighty Boards* > *themselves in your shameless organicising of the code.* Which is best read as a scherzo. Half of it's written for a dead friend or in homage to lesser-known world poets; I rarely get poems like that. I don't know why I'm cavilling; this is the best collection I've read since... the last Don Paterson. Sentimental by his standards but bruising by poetry in general's. Teetering upright.
Selected Poems (2011) by Jaan Kaplinski	A very broad swathe from Estonia's most stately rustic. He keeps a high eyrie but has a fatherly musk as well. It's a chilly nest though - occasionally anti-human: > *It gets cold in the evening. The sky clears.* > *The wind dies out, and the smoke* > *rises straight up. The flowering maple* > *no longer buzzes. A carp* > *plops in the pond. An owl hoots twice* > *in its nest in the ash tree.* > *The children are asleep. On the stairs,* > *a long row of shoes and rubber boots.* > *It happened near Viljandi: an imbecile boy* > *poured gasoline on the neighbour's three-year-old* > *and set him on fire. I ran for milk.* > *You could see the yellow maple from far off* > *between the birches and the spruce. The evening star* > *was shining above the storehouse. The boy survived,* > *probably maimed for life. The night will bring frost.* > *Plentiful dew.* He gets called a particularly European (a particularly Unionised) poet, and this is true enough: Kant's rationalist cool and Smith's pragmatism really are pedal notes in him. But there are snippets of *nine* languages in this mid-sized selection, including Sanskrit and Japanese (the ukiyo-e/mono-no-aware rhythms of which he owes a great deal to) and a poke of originals in pragmatic, wriggling English. That is, he's really a globalist. His own Estonian ("serious, greyish") is of course not remotely Indo-European, instead fluting and crashing, riverine, out of the Urals. (It would be silly to say that his work's bleak because some people he is descended from came from Siberia, but if I were a marketer rather than a gadfly it would be a good hook.) Let's complicate matters with two other sides, the paternal domestic and the wide-eyed enquirer: > *Lines do not perhaps exist; there are only points.* > *Just as there are no constellations, only stars* > *which we combine into water-carriers, fish, rams,* > *virgins, scorpions and ourselves…* > *Constellations, contours, profiles,* > *outlines, ground plans, principles, reasons,* > *ulterior motives and consequences…* > *A solitary birch holds onto its last leaves by the woodshed.* > *Or the leaves hold onto the birch.*

> *Or there is someone holds onto both,*
> *a child holding his father's and mother's hands at once.*
> *I am sorry for them – the child, the leaves*
> *the father, the birch and the mother.*
> *But I do not know, really, for whom: if the birch exists,*
> *if there are only points. I do not want the winter.*
> *But I do not know whether the winter really exists. There are only points.*
> *There are only molecules and atoms, which increasingly slowly,*
> *which is roughly the same as saying: warms disperses*
> *throughout space. Both the child's hands were cold.*
> *Night is coming - light is roughly the same as warmth.*
> *Light scatters in the empty room. New thoughts*
> *come so seldom. Your hand is warm. So is the night.*
> *The poem is ready. If the poem exists at all:*
> *there are only points. It is dark.*

This wonderful latter aside (and anti-poetry though he is) I do not like him constantly bringing up poetry; the poems where he does are often po-faced and contentless. But he is a master and it's his business what he chooses to cool by just gazing at it.

Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder (2012) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb

(c) 'Accidental Fish', 2013

> *"Nothing convinces us of our capacity to make choices — nothing sustains our illusion of freedom — more than our ability to regularise our behaviour. nothing is more capable of destroying our interest and our pleasure in what we do.*
>
> *If it is the predictable that stupifies us and the unpredictable that terrorises us, what should we do? If we are always caught between risk and resignation, between confidence and catastrophe, how can we decide what to do next?"*
> *— Adam Phillips*

> *My problem is what my mother kept telling me: I'm too messianic in my views.*
> *— Taleb*

The most ambitious and messy book in his idiosyncratic four-volume work of evolutionary epistemology, the '*Incerto*'. (It is *Fooled By Randomness*, *Black Swan*, *Bed of Procrustes*, and yonder.) The former three books are largely critical, hacking away at theory-blindness, model error, and the many kinds of people he sees as possessing unearned status (economists, journalists, consultants, business-book writers): this is the upswing, a chaotic attempt to give general positive advice in a world that dooms general positive advice.

Every other page has something worth hearing, for its iconoclasm, or a Latin gobbet, or catty anecdote, if not something globally and evidently true. I think he is right about 30% of the time, which is among the highest

credences I have for anyone. I only think I am 35% right, for instance.* But a core point of his system is that his approach should work even given our huge and partially intractable ignorance.

The core point, repeated a hundred times for various domains:

> *In real life, many systems deteriorate without an irregular supply of stressors (non-fatal negative events), and actually benefit from them by constructively overreacting. By robbing such 'antifragile' systems of stressors, modern approaches to managing*
> *them do damage in the guise of helping out.***

This observation leads to his grand theory of everything: every system is either *fragile* (damaged by volatility), *robust* (resistant to damage from volatility), or *antifragile*. This isn't a trivial distinction, because each has formal properties that allow us to change arrangements to, firstly, prevent explosions, and then to gain from chance volatility.

Biology is definitely one of these antifragile systems***; his case that, absent gross financialisation, the global economy would be one is convincing too; and the idea's at least plausible when applied to the cultivation of virtue or existential strength in a single person. The danger with this - an indissoluble danger because there can be no general strategy to avoid it - is that in welcoming constructive stress we'll miss the point at which the welcomed dose turns destructive (where fasting starts to atrophy, where training becomes masochism, where critique becomes pogrom, where sink-or-swim encouragement turns abuse).

> ** This claim is remarkable for both its extreme vagueness and apparent arrogance. Here is a post to handle the former fact. And the latter:*
>
> *It might strike you as beyond arrogant to assume that you just so happen to be the most reliable inference device in the world, but that doesn't (have to) follow from my claim above, which results from the trivial thought "I believe my own beliefs most", instead.*
>
> *(Consider the converse: if I came to view anyone as more reliable than me, the rational thing to do would be to incorporate their truer views (and, better, their methods) until I again thought of myself as at least their equal. So, either one believes the superficially arrogant position "I believe my beliefs most" – or else one must believe that one is incapable of adapting enough to superior methods when faced with them, or else one must believe that one cannot know which methods are best. So the above assumption is more about having a high opinion of rational adjustment than impossible egotism, I think.*
>
> *Good news! We can now calibrate ourselves, at least for the most sensational and available predictions using this cool thing.^*
>
> *Finally!: The fully-unpacked, properly defensible assumption might be something more like: "I am the agent that I know to be most transparently reliable or unreliable; I assume I'm adjusting properly to*

> *better methods; as such I have at least equal confidence in my own belief set, compared to the best known alternative agent's.")*
>
> > *^ You might wonder if this argument suggests that I should have 100% confidence in my beliefs. No; even if I was the best inferrer, I would suffer uncertainty because of the opacity of my errors: that is, I know I'm often not right but don't know exactly whereabouts I'm not right. Also from the unsystematic internal PredictionBook every non-psychopath has ("wisdom is knowing you'll be an idiot in the future"). And another source of uncertainty is down to the unknowable (like what stocks will crash next week).*
> >
> > *I do worry that, whatever my particular self-credence estimate is, the whole approach is subtly wrong somewhere – since "40%" gives the impression that I think of myself as a worse guide to the world than dumb chance^^ – but I think it works. Particularly if much of the missing 60% is made of safe scepticism rather than errors.*
> >
> > *^^ For binary event spaces – but, really, how many of those are there in real life?*
>
> *** He credits the formal basis of all this to Jensen's inequality, in a chapter which might be the clearest expression of the idea there is.*
>
> **** (In particular species-level evolution, but also organism-level health.)*

****

Some pigeonholes you might think to put all this in:

*

- *Conservative?* Yes; but a good-hearted Burkean (*"Antifragility implies that the old is superior to the new... What survives must be good at serving some purpose that time can see but our eyes and logical faculties can't capture..."*). Most people are conservative over *some* things (e.g. the natural world; we just happen to call that conservationism instead). Also approves of any high technology that removes anything he views as a disease of civilisation, like these things were supposed to be. So, in general, conservative only in the sense that existential risk people are.*

*

- *Economic conservatism*. Only sort of; he's a trader, and would have speculation free to flow *provided that deposit banks were nationalised first*, and prioritises deficit reduction in a way we associate with conservatives but which e.g. Sweden pulled off without any lasting social justice sting. More formally he is against centralisation on both moral and technical grounds; that is *likely* a principle with some

conservative effects, justified, in theory, by its keeping us alive. (Life-critical politics.)

- *Laissez faire?* No: he recommends radical change to e.g. science funding, but no decrease. Big fan of Switzerland's government, read into that what you will. He sees "optionality", an originally financial concept, as the solution to fragility risks and the key to success in every domain there is. This isn't at all as economistic as it sounds; the sacred and the humane somehow fit perfectly into his core rationalist agenda, persistence through change.

*

- *Social conservatism?* No sign; no discussion of discrimination. Some people think such abstention is oppressive, but they are probably wrong.

*

- *Social Darwinist?* Nah.

*

- *Bioconservative?* Absolutely; he describes himself as the 'diametric' opposite of Ray Kurzweil, and he's in full uproar over the global risk posed by synthetic biology (and recently fleshed out this horror in highly rigorous terms).

*

- *Anti-intellectual?* Not at all! Only anti-academia, and they still do not represent the whole of quality intellectual life. Hates irresponsible 'canned methods of inference' too (statistical significance, etc).

*

- *Lacrimist?* (That is, does he glorify suffering?) Not quite. He certainly views comfort as vitiating. His opposition to transhumanism is too quick and doesn't take the moral challenge of a world of pained beings seriously enough, for me.

*

- *Macho?* Hm. Well, nature *has* made certain challenging actions optimal. Amusing proto-paleo attitude, too:

*

> *I, for my part, resist eating fruits not found in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean (I use "I" here in order to show that I am not narrowly generalizing to the rest of humanity). I avoid any fruit that does not have an ancient Greek or Hebrew name, such as mangoes, papayas, even oranges. Oranges seem to be the postmedieval equivalent of candy; they did not exist in the ancient Mediterranean.*

* His work fits the x-risk paradigm very well, but he developed his edifice in complete isolation from them, and has an uncompromising scepticism about expected value that might not make cross-overs all that fruitful.

****

	How original is the core point, really? Well, who cares? His claim is that he had to invent the word 'antifragile', not the idea. He says, idiosyncratically, that Seneca and Nietzsche had the nub of the idea, and Jensen the formal essence; Darwin certainly did too. "Resilience engineering" and in computing, 'defensive programming' (b. 1998) and 'self-healing systems' (b. 2001) are at least on the same track, though not getting beyond a lively sort of robustness. But I doubt that most systems can become antifragile - e.g. it's hard to imagine an antifragile jet engine (one that harvests bird strikes for fuel, or soot cleaning)? So maybe it's only the grand generalisation to all design that's new. ********** Gripes: His footnotes are collected by theme rather than linked to his claims directly, which makes it so difficult to follow up his sources that his credibility suffers. He namedrops, which is not the same as showing his working. I would really like to see his backing for his cool claims (about e.g. an irregular sleep pattern as a good thing, or things like 'I suspect that thermal comfort ages people'), but it's hidden away and often one-study. (Again: *apparently* one-study, since his working is not easily on show.) He has a surprisingly high opinion of Steve Jobs – who I view as a grand example of an empty suit: there are 9 references to Jobs' hokey shark-wisdom, (where Gigerenzer and Mandelbrot get 8, Jensen gets 7, Marx 7). Does Jobs really count as a 'practitioner' with 'skin in the game'? Eh. His homebrew jargon starts to drag – some sentences are wholly composed of his neologisms plus a barrel of articles and prepositions. (I used the glossary early and often.) Repetitive: tells what he'll tell you, tells you he's told you. Some passages really suffer from his wholesale hostility to copy-editing; there are some flatly bad sentences here. And he namedrops a lot, more than fair attribution of ideas – there are several passages that are just lists of people he likes (e.g. p.257-8). I don't see that it's worthwhile to criticise his arrogant style; it's what animates his points, and he never uses it on weak targets. Lastly, he sometimes makes of a system's persistence the highest good. (Where its persistence is to be contrasted with mere stability.) This is in tension with his wonderful emphasis on artistic and quasi-sacred values elsewhere in the book. But it talks about everything, is historically wide-eyed, relentlessly rational, and often funny. And the method-worldview-style it suggests might stop life crushing us utterly.
The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse (1964) by Anthony Thwaite	I feel able to say it at last: haiku is pathological, a genre absolutely limited to the engraving of flat single images. And single (or paired) verbal images of nature do nothing for me; it is relation and juxtaposition and story and reductios and original presentation that give images life. The haiku leaves almost no room for these. (This is not about length; the *senryu* retains wonderful possibilities, because they are animated by satire rather than po-faced nature-worship. Jokes can stand alone.) This book cannot be blamed for being half haiku, because that mechanical law ruled Japanese poetry for thousands of years and this is first of all a

	historical selection. Lots more to see. Currently I am only fond of the ancient gnostic hermits and the droll postwar internationalists (no multi-culturalists here). Many of the others emote at us too directly - the likes of "*Oh how // I miss my wife // out here // on the border wall*" - which brittle superficiality fails Wei Tai's test and mine. In general their ancients have dated much better than ours, perhaps because they grokked ironic minimalism a thousand years before us. The emperors and shoguns all write poetry, are still all required to profess about the land that they perch upon. Meiji: > *In newspapers, all seethe doings of the world,which lead nowhere.Better never written!* Amen. I liked Yamanoue Okura, Yakamochi, the Kokinshū, Ki Tsurayuki, Tsuboi Shigeji, Kaneko Mitsuhara, Takahashi Mutsuo. I absolutely do not have sufficient knowledge to stop there. Skip Bownas' enormous Preface too, you don't need it. *In one sentence*: 無.
Herzog on Herzog (2003) by Paul Cronin	Luminary. Herzog is a contrived and dour and absurd man, and yet charming and sincere. Here is him describing *one* 6 month block of his youth: > *I ended up penniless and was pushed around from place to place for weeks until finally I was picked up on a country road by the Franklin family. The mother had six children between seventeen and twenty-seven, her husband had died and there was a ninety-three-year-old grandmother. I owe them so much, this wonderful, crazy family who put me up in an attic... Of course I needed to earn some money, so I started to work on a project that was part of a series of films for NASA. That I made films for NASA always appears on those five-line biographies, and even if it is somehow true, it is completely irrelevant. I did have access to certain restricted areas and was able to talk to many of the scientists, but just before I was about to start work on the film they ran a security check...* > *It was evident I was about to be expelled from the country... so I took a rusty old Volkswagen and went to New York during a very bitter winter. I lived in the car for some time, even though its floor as rusted right through and I had a cast on my leg at the time because I had broken it quite badly after jumping out of a window... at night, when it gets cold, say at 3 or 4 a.m., the homeless of New York - who live almost like Neanderthal men - come and gather together on some empty, utterly desolate street and stand over fires they have kindled in the metal rubbish bins without speaking a word. Eventually I just cut the whole cast off with a pair of poultry shears and fled across the border into Mexico.* His whole life is lived with this undemonstrative fervour. The interviewer is completely uninspired: he just works his way stolidly through Herzog's back catalogue, with no insight into anything much ("*Precautions Against Fanatics was your first colour film, a bizarre comedy*

	set at a racetrack where various individuals feel it necessary to protect the animals from local 'fanatics'. Any comments?"); we are fortunate that Herzog is self-stimulating and full of himself. I'll just let him show you how good he is: > *I have never been one of those who cares about happiness. Happiness is a strange notion. I am just not made for it. It has never been a goal of mine; I do not think in those terms. It seems to be a goal in life for many people, but I have no goals in life.* > *I am someone who takes everything very literally... I am like a Bavarian bullfrog just squatting there, brooding. I have never been capable of discussing art with people. I just cannot cope with irony. The French love to play with their words and to master French is to be a master of irony. Technically, I am able to speak the language - I know the words and verbs - but will do so only when I am really forced to.* > *I was forbidden to use fireworks. I told the army major that it was essential for the film. 'You'll be arrested,' he said. 'Then arrest me,' I said, 'but know that I will not be unarmed tomorrow. And the first man who touches me will drop down dead with me.' The next day there were fifty policemen and soldiers standing watching me work, plus a few thousand people from the town who wanted to see the fireworks. Of course, I was not armed, but how were they to know? Nobody complained or said anything. So through all these incidents I learned very quickly that this was the very nature of filmmaking.</i>* *Everything he makes is worth your time (even Dinotasia is so bad it's good).</td> </tr>*
The State of the Art (Culture, #4) (1991) by Iain M. Banks	None yet
The Dispossessed (Hainish Cycle, #6) (1974) by Ursula K. Le Guin	Pompous. Lots of tragic ellipsis. A rare misstep of style, even though the world and its issues are still great, and the progress of a great mind burgeoning amongst strict collectivism is done well. It reads like a debut novel or a draft - good but rough. I suppose I will hail her versatility anyway. Her characteristic ambiguity and fairness are still here though. The sexist, rankist, capitalist ("propertarian") Urrasites are still inventive, tasteful, and ambitious; the anarchist, egalitarian, promiscuous Odonians are still given to egotism, tribalism and petty brutality. They can be relied on, like all of us to tolerate anything except the outgroup: > *'You can only crush [ideas] by ignoring them. By refusing to think — refusing to change. And that's precisely what our society is doing! Sabul uses you where he can, and where he can't, he prevents you from publishing, from teaching, even from working. Right? In other words he has power over you. Where does he get it from?*

	> *Not from vested authority, there isn't any. Not from intellectual excellence, he hasn't any. He gets it from the innate cowardice of the average human mind. Public opinion! That's the power structure he's part of, and knows how to use. The unadmitted, inadmissible government that rules Odonian society by stifling the individual mind.'* > > *Shevek leaned his hands on the window sill, looking through the dim reflections on the pane into the darkness outside. He said at last 'Crazy talk, Dap.'* > > *'No, brother, I'm sane. What drives people crazy is trying to live outside reality. Reality is terrible. It can kill you. Given time, it certainly will kill you. But it's the lies that make you want to kill yourself.'* > > *Shevek turned around to face him. 'But you can't seriously talk of a government, here!'* > > *'Tomar's Definition: 'Government: the legal use of power to maintain and extend power.' Replace 'legal' with 'customary'... Shev, did you ever think that what the analogic mode calls 'disease,' social disaffection, discontent, alienation, that this might analogically also be called pain – what you meant when you talked about pain, suffering? And that, like pain, it serves a function in the organism?... I speak of spiritual suffering! Of people seeing their talent, their work, their lives wasted. Of good minds submitting to stupid ones. Of strength and courage strangled by envy, greed for power, fear of change. Change is freedom, change is life – is anything more basic to Odonian thought than that? But nothing changes any more! ... On Urras they have government by the minority. Here we have government by the majority. But it is government!'* I don't think her Anarres economy would work even as well as it is depicted as doing, but she has at least thought about it (admits that there would need to be a centralised computer, admits all kinds of shortages). This is not polemic, then; it just doesn't manage her usual grace when dealing with huge dilemmas. A great book by anyone else.
The Compass Rose (1982) by Ursula K. Le Guin	None yet
The View from the Ground (1988) by Martha Gellhorn	My favourite reporter; a great, compulsive, austere, compassionate writer. Better than Fermor when happy, better than Orwell when irate. I am always interested in what she has to say about literally anything: this edition covers her peacetime reporting, which is to say her poverty-and-rubble-reconstruction reporting: Great Depression Deep South; the arts in Communist Poland; the difficult path to democracy in Spain; Thatcher and the miners (...) She ranges over the whole sad half-century, bringing her maternal, judgmental, sardonic history to bear on what could otherwise have been ordinary journalism. Chastises communists and capitalists, liars, mercenaries and torturers of whatever justification. Never mentions her gender; she never let anyone stop her for any reason, let alone that.

	Her natural, common-sense compassion and fairness only cracks when it comes to Palestine; she contorts herself terribly in the face of shocking Nasserian anti-Semitism. It's *not* a whitewash; she talks to dozens of Palestinians in Jordan and Gaza, covers the Irgun and the bulldozers. But she is totally defensive about the Balfour Declaration and the Six Day War; is unusually eager to show up the many fibs of the Palestinian refugees (: confirmation bias); and excludes their self-determination alone among the nations of the earth: > *Arafat has had enough protection money from the oil Arabs to finance the education of two generations of young Palestinians, a chance to rise beyond the poverty of the camps into a good self-reliant life. Instead he has recruited two generations for training only in the use of guns and plastique, and insisted on a futile goal: Palestine for the Palestinians...* > > *If I had been twenty years younger, I would have got myself to Vietnam somehow and joined the Vietcong, though handicapped by my height. Not much use for digging tunnels. Vietnam for the Vietnamese. Afghanistan for the Afghans. El Salvador for the Salvadorans. Nicaragua for the Nicaraguans. The inherent right of all peoples to self-determination. If they need civil war to determine how they shall be governed, that is their business and nobody else's.* How many deep inconsistencies are we allowed, before we stop being great? I don't know exactly, but more than one.
Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature (1978) by Mary Midgley	I have a bad habit when reading philosophy; I sometimes get deeply impressed by a book, so that it changes my view, but then forget that I ever thought otherwise. Midgley is so good I am prevented from this: I know I couldn't have come up with that. This is her engaging with evolutionary biology and ethology, as they speak to the old ancient questions. Enormous thoughts, all expressed with perfect wryness and tact. I get the same feeling of mental grinding from Midgley as I do from Wittgenstein or Anscombe - too dense with thought to skim - but Midgley is actually readable. Full review, anatomising the arguments, forthcoming.
Keeping On Keeping On (2016) by Alan Bennett	Diaries in the lee of becoming actually famous. I love him dearly and bolted all 700pp in a couple of days. General sense of him reaping decades of quiet acclaim: he bumps into well-wishers and heavy-hitters (Stoppard, Dench, MacKellen) every week or so. One of the reasons I love him is that I had a very similar adolescence to his. He remains reserved, kind though grumpy: > *Being in love unhappily singled you out, I thought, it drafted you into an aristocracy. It was more than just a badge of being gay but rather an ordeal you were called upon to undergo if only to transcend it and reach a sublimity denied to other mortals.* > *In the evening to the New York Public Library where I am to be made a Library Lion... There are half a dozen of us being lionised and we are lined up and photographed and made much of before going upstairs to a*

	> *magnificent supper, getting home thoroughly knackered around 11. How people lead a social life is beyond me.* > *I clung far too long to the notion that shyness was a virtue and not, as I came too late to see, a bore.* He still feels outside of things, for all his reminiscences of dinner with Harold Wilson or Liz Taylor perching on his knee. On winning a Tony for Best Play aged 72: > *I am thrust blinking on to a stage facing a battery of lights while questions come out of the darkness, the best of which is: 'Do you think this award will kick-start your career?'* Talks so much about 50s Yorkshire. (People in general seem to think about their childhoods more than I do. (or just writers?)) I suppose he is taken to be a twee writer for this nostalgia, along with his cuddly speaking voice. But he simply isn't twee - he is the author of several of the finest nihilist soliloquoys in English literature. You may know the ignorance of people by their use of this stereotype. He is touchingly agitated by British politics, in the exact way I used to be. His protests are unprogrammatic, based simply on the meanness or indignity or cowardice of the policy at hand, whether it's a Labour or Tory hand; > *I wanted a Labour government so that I could stop thinking about politics, knowing that the nation's affairs were in the hands of a party which, even if it was often foolish, was at least well-intentioned. Now we have another decade of the self-interested and the self-seeking, ready to sell off what's left of our liberal institutions and loot the rest to their own advantage. It's not a government of the nation but a government of half the nation, a true legacy of Mrs Thatcher...* > *I've always thought that this was a pretty fair description of that blend of backward-looking radicalism and conservative socialism which does duty for my political views. I am an old modernian... [Over the past 30 years] one has only had to stand still to become a radical.* With the fading of the old loud left, and the abject failure of the sneering theoretical sort, unpretentious justice of this sort might motivate people, even/especially opportunist Brexiters. So to the defence of public libraries, the unprecedented conviction of policemen who murder, the provision of good to all. [Data #1, Values #3, Thinking #3]
The Science of Discworld (The Science of Discworld, #1) (1999) by Terry	None yet

Pratchett	
Letters of Note: An Eclectic Collection of Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience (2013) by Shaun Usher	Wonderful
Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling With D.H. Lawrence (1997) by Geoff Dyer	A book about an unwritten book about a writer I don't like much. And it's amazing! Not a study of Lawrence, a study of trying to write when you lack an iron will. So also a study of all work, so a study of the hard generation of value, and so, despite appearances, a study of what matters. The prose is circuitous, cantatory, shaggy-dog, but never dull: > *Oxford! Now if there is one place on earth where you cannot, where it is physically impossible to write a book about Lawrence it is here, in Oxford. You could write a book about plenty of writers in Oxford: Hardy, or Joyce even — people are probably doing just that, even now, dozens of them — but not Lawrence. If there is one person you cannot write a book about here, in Oxford, it is Lawrence. So I have made doubly sure that there is no chance of my finishing my study of Lawrence: he is the one person you cannot write about here, in Oxford; and Oxford is the one place where you cannot write about Lawrence.* > *When I say you can't possibly write a book about Lawrence in Oxford that is not to be taken too literally. At this moment, within a few miles of my flat, dozens of people are probably writing books about Lawrence. That tapping I can hear through my open window is probably someone writing a book or a thesis or preparing a lecture, or, at the very least, doing an essay on D. H. Lawrence. It can be done. It can be done — but it can't be done, it shouldn't be done. You can't write a half-decent book about Lawrence in Oxford, can't write any kind of book about Lawrence without betraying him totally. By doing so you immediately disqualify yourself, render yourself ineligible. It is like spitting on his grave.* For a while I amused myself by seeing how many consecutive sentences used the same phrase, in a running stitch motif. He is playing a character, but like Rob Brydon does: only slightly heightened. One long stream of scenes, unthemed, unbracketed. He is the critic I would have hoped to be: sceptical of the novel, sceptical of the spiritual pretensions of artists, sceptical of children, sceptical of travel and sceptical of home, sceptical of self. He is free to admit his boredom and his joy, unlike the academic critics he often erupts against. Here is the key passage (not that you can trust him to cleave to it twenty years or minutes on): > *Hearing that I was 'working on Lawrence', an acquaintance lent me a book he thought I might find interesting: A Longman Critical Reader on Lawrence, edited by Peter Widdowson. I glanced at the contents page:*

> *old Eagleton was there, of course, together with some other state-of-the-fart theorists: Lydia Blanchard on 'Lawrence, Foucault and the Language of Sexuality' (in the section on 'Gender, Sexuality, Feminism'), Daniel J. Schneider on 'Alternatives to Logocentrism in D. H. Lawrence' (in the section featuring 'Post-Structuralist Turns'). I could feel myself getting angry and then I flicked through the introductory essay on 'Radical Indeterminacy: a post-modern Lawrence' and became angrier still. How could it have happened? How could these people with no feeling for literature have ended up teaching it, writing about it? I should have stopped there, should have avoided looking at any more, but I didn't because telling myself to stop always has the effect of urging me on. Instead, I kept looking at this group of wankers huddled in a circle, backs turned to the world so that no one would see them pulling each other off. Oh, it was too much, it was too stupid. I threw the book across the room and then I tried to tear it up but it was too resilient. By now I was blazing mad...*
>
> *I burned it in self-defence. It was the book or me - writing like that kills everything it touches. That is the hallmark of academic criticism: it kills everything it touches. Walk around a university campus and there is an almost palpable smell of death about the place because hundreds of academics are busy killing everything they touch. I recently met an academic who said that he taught German literature. I was aghast: to think, this man who had been in universities all his life was teaching Rilke. Rilke! Oh, it was too much to bear. You don't teach Rilke, I wanted to say, you kill Rilke! You turn him to dust and then you go off to conferences where dozens of other academic-morticians gather with the express intention of killing Rilke and turning him to dust. Then, as part of the cover-up, the conference papers are published, the dust is embalmed and before you know it literature is a vast graveyard of dust, a dustyard of graves. I was beside myself with indignation. I wanted to maim and harm this polite, well-meaning academic who, for all I knew, was a brilliant teacher who had turned on generations of students to the Duino Elegies. Still, I thought to myself the following morning when I had calmed down, the general point stands: how can you know anything about literature if all you've done is read books?*
>
> *Now, criticism is an integral part of the literary tradition and academics can sometimes write excellent works of criticism but these are exceptions - the vast majority, the overwhelming majority of books by academics, especially books like that Longman Reader are a crime against literature.*

The final passage hits you over the head with what you have certainly already worked out, but it is still very powerful. Dyer is inspiring, pure nevertheless:

> *One way or another we all have to write our studies of D. H. Lawrence. Even if they will never be published, even if we will never complete them, even if all we are left with after years and years of effort is an unfinished, unfinishable record of how we failed to live up to our own earlier ambitions, still we all have to try to make some progress with our books*

	> *about D. H. Lawrence. The world over, from Taos to Taormina, from the places we have visited to countries we will never set foot in, the best we can do is to try to make some progress with our studies of D. H. Lawrence.*
Six Poets: Hardy to Larkin: An Anthology (2014) by Alan Bennett	Hardy, Housman, Auden, Betjeman, Larkin, MacNeice: all men who tended to emphasise the tragic. (You think Betjeman didn't, but you might be confusing his writing, full of loss and pettiness, with his foppy, daffy TV persona.) Wonderful, this - parallel poems and commentaries - covering the famous gobbets dutifully, but also picking excerpts which rarely come to light. The commentary is more clipped and sardonic than you might expect from Bennett, if you know him only by reputation / caricature. The cover shown above is much more beautiful than the cover I had.
Making Malcolm: The Myth And Meaning Of Malcolm X (1995) by Michael Eric Dyson	Because we have gotten better, old radicals often seem less radical over time. The pragmatic hedonism and secular calm of Epicurus was once fanatically detested, but is now a standard worldview (it's roughly that of the happy scientist); at one time Spinoza's Ethics (determinism, Nature as deity, religious and political tolerance) was the wildest thing ever said in the history of the Christian world; Montesquieu's disgust at aristocratic brutality, gross luxury and torture are commonplaces; Paine's raging insistence on human rights and total secularism are very successful (in Europe at least); and anyone who disagrees with duBois' or MLK's aims is foolish or virulent. Malcolm X has not yet been incorporated in this way - but, reading his less ranty stuff (not the early "*TOO BLACK, TOO STRONG*" variety) you wonder why. Might have been his influential homophobia, but that's hardly stopped other thinkers. (This suggests it's because we have a false, caricature of him in mind, one that believes in whites-as-devils and Fanonian purifying violence.) Dyson does not skimp on his downsides, and tackles the thorniest idea in identity politics: that experience is absolute, and so understanding a group's ideas and values *requires* group membership – that ideas have colour as people do.
The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life (1996) by Joseph E. LeDoux	Maybe a bit dated, but thoughtful and historical enough to pull through. His big contention's that conscious feelings are red herrings: most emotional activity is demonstrably unconscious (though not in a Freudian way). So we should see emotions as products of several separate bodily-response systems: "*the word 'emotion' does not refer to any thing the mind or brain really has or does*". Getting there takes a lot of careful conceptual work, debunking old artefacts ("the limbic system"), probing the line between cognition and emotion, evolved emotional setups and enculturated expressions of them. Rather than reporting his theories as settled, he lets us in to the history, experimental setups, and argue for his theory choices. He's well-versed in the philosophy (he cites Rorty!), is a master of fear (research), and I feel smarter coming out of it.
Both Flesh	Bravura essays from all over the cultural instant he encompassed and

and Not: Essays (2012) by David Foster Wallace	abruptly let go (1988-2007). They are I suppose dregs, but DFW's dregs are better than the decade-projects of others. You can't help seeing foreshadows of *Infinite Jest*: he touches on 1) the obsessive, commercial, and religious aspects of pro tennis, 2) the obstacles to good prose about or involving maths, 3) self-conscious engagement with pop (for how else can we understand a world constituted by and obsessed with pop?), 4) 'interpretation-directing' books (like Jest), and above all 5) on the need to build after waves of high-entropy postmodernism, to work past its crucial (but bewildering) negativities. It was 'obvious' to him that ordinary late-capitalist life is '*at best empty and at worst evil*'. But he was extraordinary; panoptic, judicious and sensationally beautiful, and that wasn't enough either.
Consider the Lobster and Other Essays (2005) by David Foster Wallace	Ah, ah. Postmodern and prescriptivist, enthusiastically wise, Wallace was the one, as loveable as intellectual, as iconoclastic as judicious. He's a model of finding meaning in places beyond sanctioned loci (like Dostoevsky and 9/11, which he also finds meaning in): in for example an old sincere conservative, in tennis, and arthropods. Not that he 'found' meaning: he generated it, erupting bittersweet priority over parts of the world held to be artless or empty. Theoretically rococo and colloquially concentrated. Our loss is marked. It's disappointing that 'Consider the Lobster', his more or less honest analysis of vegetarianism, founders and shrinks from responsibility. (In short, the piece says "they feel: so why do we do this?". But he asks: "*Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure? Is the previous question irksomely PC or sentimental?*" without actually discounting the latter weaselly ad hominem aspersion.) Tensions: he insisted on 'democratic' clarity and yet wrote wilfully distracting pieces. But he's one of the ones.
Fooled by Randomness: The Hidden Role of Chance in Life and in the Markets (2001) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb	I had skipped this, assuming I received the full contrarian worldview from *Black Swan* and *Bed of Procrustes*. But it's a different beast, more playful and modest, with less of his latter-day overstatement and invalid ad hominems. As anti-disciplinary provocateur and writer of empirical art he is unbeaten (I rank him with Nietzsche for delightful arrogance and hard-ass enculturation.) Still, these ideas (from cognitive science and applied statistics) are hard: one needs several runs at them. Taleb is a great introduction, then Kahneman and Gigerenzer for the calm conservative estimate.
A Point of View (2011) by Clive James	*In one sentence*: Sometimes age actually does allow for wisdom to accumulate. *To be read when*: whenever. I came to liberalism late, after radical teens. By the time I found James, I was withering sick from years of people and books attacking the modern world, spending all their time reducing absolutely everything in life to its politics. (Larkin is a great poet and was a terrible man, easy as that – but this

	tension is unbearable to some, who throw out his great work and try to shame those who don't.) Clive James is the consummate droll liberal railing against both wings of partisans: he’s against celebrity culture, Ostalgie, and anti-American critical-theoretical cuteness, but also ‘clash of civilisation’ nonsense, socially destructive austerity and conservatism in the arts. What others get out of Wodehouse or Rowling, I get from this grumpy old Australian’s stoic nonfiction. I had my notebook handy the whole way through, sieving out gold gobbets of late style. His essays are a space beyond the culture war, where the personal is not usually political. He is one of the greatest living stylists, would deserve study for that alone. His long essay on Isaiah Berlin is fantastic and contentious, and his retorts to the professional philosophers who come at him about it are devastating, inspiring. Unlike say Geoff Dyer, to whom he is similar, James doesn't have academic standing. So his work is at risk of fading away, without their dull but chronic oxygen.
Some Thoughts on the Common Toad (1947) by George Orwell	So lucid. 'Killing an Elephant' is, surprisingly, the most powerful animal rights essay I've read in years. I think he'd struggle to get his essay on Dali published these days, maybe not even in the Spectator: we aren't able to think of art in these moral terms any more: > *[Dali's autobiography] is a book that stinks. If it were possible for a book to give a physical stink off its pages, this one would — a thought that might please Dali, who before wooing his future wife for the first time rubbed himself all over with an ointment made of goat's dung boiled up in fish glue. But against this has to be set the fact that Dali is a draughtsman of very exceptional gifts. He is also, to judge by the minuteness and the sureness of his drawings, a very hard worker. He is an exhibitionist and a careerist, but he is not a fraud. He has fifty times more talent than most of the people who would denounce his morals and jeer at his paintings. And these two sets of facts, taken together, raise a question which for lack of any basis of agreement seldom gets a real discussion.* > *The point is that you have here a direct, unmistakable assault on sanity and decency; and even — since some of Dali's pictures would tend to poison the imagination like a pornographic postcard — on life itself. What Dali has done and what he has imagined is debatable, but in his outlook, his character, the bedrock decency of a human being does not exist. He is as anti-social as a flea. Clearly, such people are undesirable, and a society in which they can flourish has something wrong with it.* > *Now, if you showed this book, with its illustrations, to Lord Elton, to Mr.*

	> *Alfred Noyes, to The Times leader writers who exult over the 'eclipse of the highbrow' — in fact, to any 'sensible' art-hating English person — it is easy to imagine what kind of response you would get. They would flatly refuse to see any merit in Dali whatever. Such people are not only unable to admit that what is morally degraded can be æsthetically right, but their real demand of every artist is that he shall pat them on the back and tell them that thought is unnecessary. And they can be especially dangerous at a time like the present, when the Ministry of Information and the British Council put power into their hands. For their impulse is not only to crush every new talent as it appears, but to castrate the past as well. Witness the renewed highbrow-baiting that is now going on in this country and America, with its outcry not only against Joyce, Proust and Lawrence, but even against T. S. Eliot.* *But if you talk to the kind of person who can see Dali's merits, the response that you get is not as a rule very much better. If you say that Dali, though a brilliant draughtsman, is a dirty little scoundrel, you are looked upon as a savage. If you say that you don't like rotting corpses, and that people who do like rotting corpses are mentally diseased, it is assumed that you lack the æsthetic sense. Since 'Mannequin rotting in a taxicab' is a good composition. And between these two fallacies there is no middle position, but we seldom hear much about it. On the one side Kulturbolschevismus: on the other (though the phrase itself is out of fashion) 'Art for Art's sake.' Obscenity is a very difficult question to discuss honestly. People are too frightened either of seeming to be shocked or of seeming not to be shocked, to be able to define the relationship between art and morals.* *suppose that you have nothing in you except your egoism and a dexterity that goes no higher than the elbow; suppose that your real gift is for a detailed, academic, representational style of drawing, your real métier to be an illustrator of scientific textbooks. How then do you become Napoleon? There is always one escape: into wickedness. Always do the thing that will shock and wound people. At five, throw a little boy off a bridge, strike an old doctor across the face with a whip and break his spectacles — or, at any rate, dream about doing such things. Twenty years later, gouge the eyes out of dead donkeys with a pair of scissors. Along those lines you can always feel yourself original. And after all, it pays! ... If you threw dead donkeys at people, they threw money back.*
Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman (1992) by James Gleick	Engrossing and detailed. Feynman is different from other first-rank minds: he values clarity and humour above all. He's a slightly hazardous role model though: his sheer speed, creativity, and high standards, which justify his arrogance and deviance, *cannot* be emulated by ordinary people; his mantra - "disregard [what other people are doing]" - is similarly high-risk; and his pickup-artistry after Arline died is at least icky. But the big *accessible* hazard is his thrilling science-supremacism. Gleick: > *Feynman told them [his self-spun legend]:* *how he became known in Far Rockaway as the boy who fixed radios by thinking; how he asked a Princeton librarian for the map of the cat; how his father taught him to see through the tricks of circus mind readers; how he outwitted painters, mathematicians, philosophers, and*

	> *psychiatrists.* Feynman: > *For far more marvelous is the truth than any artists of the past imagined it. Why do the poets of the present not speak of it? What men are poets who can speak of Jupiter if he were a man, but if he is an immense spinning sphere of methane and ammonia must be silent?* His cheeky scientism will make unread teenagers insufferable at parties. More seriously, it could return our scientists to unreflective, uninspired positivism. But his anti-authoritarianism, his anti-pretension, his honest and sweeping scepticism, his existential peace, more than compensate. Filtering out the above, his life is an enormously fruitful applied epistemology. It is shocking, to anyone who knows the modern salami-slicing academic world, to hear how many breakthroughs he didn't publish, just out of high standards: > *A great physicist who accumulated knowledge without taking the trouble to publish could be a genuine danger to his colleagues. At best it was unnerving to learn that one's potentially career-advancing discovery had been, to Feynman, below the threshold of publishability. At worst it undermined one's confidence in the landscape of the known and not known.* And how he resisted emeritus disease to the end. Hawking: "We may now be near the end of the search for the ultimate laws of nature,". Feynman: > *I've had a lifetime of that. I've had a lifetime of people who believe that the answer is just around the corner. But again and again it's been a failure. Eddington, who thought that with the theory of electrons and quantum mechanics everything was going to be simple... Einstein, who thought that he had a unified theory just around the corner but didn't know anything about nuclei and was unable of course to guess it... People think they're very close to the answer, but I don't think so...* > *Whether or not nature has an ultimate, simple, unified, beautiful form is an open question, and I don't want to say either way.* Feynman's ideas are still completely modern. He'll be modern for a long time to come, too: as the main theorist of the path integral formulation of QM, the first theorist of nanotechnology and quantum computing, as storyteller, as a complete master of applied epistemology for humans.
The Origin of Species (1859) by Charles	I read the *Illustrated Edition* (2008) put together by David Quammen, which is very beautiful. Filled with sketches, portraits, maps and suggestive remarks from the diaries. Particularly good if, like me, you've struggled with the plaintext.

Darwin	Keys: > *Owing to this struggle for life, any variation, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to external nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring. The offspring, also, will thus have a better chance of surviving, for, of the many individuals of any species which are periodically born, but a small number can survive. I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term of Natural Selection, in order to mark its relation to man's power of selection.* > *Looking not to any one time, but to all time, if my theory be true, numberless intermediate varieties, linking most closely all the species of the same group together, must assuredly have existed; but the very process of natural selection constantly tends, as has been so often remarked, to exterminate the parent forms and the intermediate links. Consequently evidence of their former existence could be found only amongst fossil remains* > *There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.* (That last sentence had "by the Creator" tacked on in the second edition.) You would never guess the prose was written in a rush: possibly because the arguments were formed at the slowest possible rate.
The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century (2007) by Alex Ross	None yet
McCain's Promise: Aboard the Straight Talk Express with John	None yet

McCain and a Whole Bunch of Actual Reporters, Thinking About Hope (2000) by David Foster Wallace	
A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments (1997) by David Foster Wallace	None yet
The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being (2008) by Daniel M. Haybron	None yet
The Marxists (1962) by C. Wright Mills	None yet
The Way Things Are (-55) by Lucretius	None yet
Fooled By Randomness & The Black Swan: Two Books In One (2008) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb	None yet
Extending Ourselves:	None yet

Computational Science, Empiricism, and Scientific Method (2004) by Paul Humphreys	

3/5: Net likeable. 50th percentile.

</blockquote>

The Diamond Age: Or, a Young Lady's Illustrated Primer (1995) by Neal Stephenson	Amazed that this is from 1995; its concerns feel very current - too current. The nations of the world collapse from cryptocurrency destroying the tax base; they are replaced with voluntary ideological associations, including trads ("neo-Victorians" and techno-Confucians) who are shown thriving where others suffer civil war, state failure, and ordinary poverty and abuse. Everyone has fancy nanotechnology, which solves absolute poverty and allows massive structures to be built of solid diamond. That's all in the background, where the foreground is a theory of education and rebellion, of social degeneration and regeneration. The leader of the Victorians designs the best educational game ever, a 12-year-long adventure game with live narration. He does this because there's a shortage of subversion and rebellion in his society, and he wants to train his granddaughter to be independent. (He also says the neo-Vickys have an associated shortage of great artists, but to put it mildly this is not something the originals suffered.) In particular, Stephenson was a bit obsessed with moral relativism in the 90s; he harps on the superiority of realism, or communitarianism, or status regulation, or sincerity, or something, in most of his books. Superficially, his concern matches one annoying strain of internet writing of the last few years - the clickbait strawmaneering of the Petersons and the Lindsays. But French Theory fell in the meantime, outside of a few academic subcultures with little influence, so Stephenson can be right while these guys are wrong. An excess of scepticism and irony - a deficit of shaming and judgment - does not strike me as the first problem with the mores of 2020. Stephenson saves most of the nice bits of the book for the Vickys, and his attempt to recover what was good about the original Victorians (their energy, inventiveness, duty, taste) ignores a lot of what was bad about them. (Though he actively endorses their hypocrisy about sex, he would have to think again about their betraying their Christian universalism with retributive justice and imperialism.) > *"when I was a young man, hypocrisy was deemed the worst of vices," Finkle-McGraw said. "It was all because of moral relativism. You see, in that sort of a climate, you are not allowed to criticise others--after all, if there is no absolute right and wrong, then what grounds is there for criticism?...* > > *"Now, this led to a good deal of general frustration, for people are naturally censorious and love nothing better than to criticise others'*

	> *shortcomings. And so it was that they seized on hypocrisy and elevated it from a ubiquitous peccadillo into the monarch of all vices. For, you see, even if there is no right and wrong, you can find grounds to criticise another person by contrasting what he has espoused with what he has actually done... Virtually all political discourse in the days of my youth was devoted to the ferreting out of hypocrisy."* > > *"That we occasionally violate our own stated moral code," Major Napier said, working it through, "does not imply that we are insincere in espousing that code."* > *"Of course not," Finkle-McGraw said. "It's perfectly obvious, really. No one ever said that it was easy to hew to a strict code of conduct."* Having "Victorian" characters means he gets to have fun with his dialogue; there are dozens of words I've never seen before in this, and several children crafting exquisitely balanced subordinate clauses. About a third too long, and that's with him completely truncating the excellent Judge Fang plotline. As always, he is incapable of writing a good ending. Maybe 4 stars on re-read.
Uzumaki: Deluxe Edition (2000) by Junji Ito	I'm not into horror or surrealism, and I'm only just learning the visual vocabulary of manga, but this is well-executed. Placenta fungi, pregnant zombies, horny hurricanes, gangs using tornados for vandalism, humans becoming fair game, all that. But these garish wonders are secondary to the grossness and power of Ito's atmosphere. The protagonist Mikie is frustratingly passive and ineffectual - she waits for 10 distinct monstrous things to happen before running away - but this is a classic shortcoming / genre requirement and I don't know how I'd write a powerful horror protagonist myself. The boyfriend, Shuichi, understands everything right from the start, unlike her, and yet he is no better. There's a few beautiful colour pages, all in pastels, but it makes the rest look incomplete. The price of a weekly medium. So, a masterpiece in an alien language.
Hearts in the Hard Ground (2020) by G.V. Anderson	Managed to unnerve me despite the extreme domesticity. The big problem with stories about haunted houses is why anyone would ever stay in them after the first bad night. The stories require a stupefied lack of agency to get through their second acts. So too here, but it isn't very irksome. The other big problem is the lack of empirical spirit from the protagonists - can we finish philosophy of mind by enlisting the ghosts? There's a little bit of that here, but mostly just the old emotional haunting.
How Quini the Squid Misplaced His Klobučar (2020) by Rich Larson	None yet
Killer High: A History of	None yet

War in Six Drugs () by Peter Andreas	
The Prefect (Prefect Dreyfus Emergency, #1) (2007) by Alastair Reynolds	Great fun! Reynolds describes an Archipelago epistocracy - that is, a loose collection of thousands of city-states with their own weird constitutions (voluntary fascisms, upload city, voluntary coma land, luxury *Running Man* land), with federal votes weighted by your past performance at predicting / causing good changes. The only federal crimes are voting related: messing with the central vote, denying their citizens the vote. (They don't seem to enforce the other thing you'd need to make this minimally acceptable: iron exit rights.) Reynolds is clearly also having fun here, where I found *Revelation Space* exhaustingly grim and sepia. I particularly loved his entire society of professional superforecasters / high-quality futarchist voting bloc, who make their living off lobbyists and being bellwethers and spend most of their time buggering about with hobbies. (You are ejected if your calibration drops below 50% better than normal people.) He husbands his twists, and keeps almost all characters in the dark (including the antagonists) all the time. It also takes the horror of exponentials seriously; machine intelligence's scalability is the worst thing about it, and here we get two great scary instances. One downside is that it feels like book #3 in a series; maybe one infodump too few or something.
The Magos (Eisenhorn #4) (2018) by Dan Abnett	None yet
Ravenor: The Omnibus (Ravenor #1-3) (2009) by Dan Abnett	Abnett is so much better than he has to be. Poverty and corruption before gibbering legions and building-sized guns. (Though he also does the latter.)
Analyzing the Analyzers: An Introspective Survey of Data Scientists and Their Work (2013) by Harlan Harris	I never expect these fluffy little business pamphlets to contain anything worthwhile, but I've referred to this one a few times. Imagine getting some data before you pontificate about data! The list of the skills involved is the best I've ever seen, if misleadingly intimidating.

The Rebel Sell (2004) by Joseph Heath	None yet
A Man Without a Country (2005) by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.	None yet
Bring Up the Bodies (2012) by Hilary Mantel	More of the same witty early moderns: modern speech atop medieval action. (Anachronistically witty, sceptical?) Mantel manages to make all the tiresome court manoeuvring interesting just by having it pass through Cromwell, her sensitive, competent monster. Halfway through, Cromwell turns from rational underdog to corrupt totalitarian. Or, halfway through you realise that this turn has happened, that this aspect was there. He kills his enemies based on hearsay and jokes, zero physical and eyewitness evidence. Mantel manages this fall in a smooth and inevitable way. I complain about current legal systems a lot, but at least their errors are not this unjust and merely political. > *When Gregory says, 'Are they guilty?' he means, 'Did they do it?' But when [Thomas] says, 'Are they guilty?' he means, 'Did the court find them so?' The lawyer's world is entire unto itself, the human pared away. It was a triumph, in a small way, to unknot the entanglement of thighs and tongues, to take that mass of heaving flesh and smooth it on to white paper: as the body, after the climax, lies back on white linen. He has seen beautiful indictments, not a word wasted.* > *"Nothing makes you falter," Wyatt says. He says it with a reluctant admiration that is close to dread. But he, Cromwell, thinks, I did falter but no one knows it, reports have not gone abroad. Wyatt did not see me walk away from Weston's interrogation. Wyatt did not see me when Anne asked me what I believed in my heart.* > > *He rests his eyes on the prisoner, he takes his seat. He says softly, "I think I have been training all my years for this. I have served an apprenticeship to myself." His whole career has been an education in hypocrisy.* Lots of artistic licence, to patch over the huge gaps in the historical record (as Mantel admits in the postscript). Cromwell is sympathetic here, even with all the blood and lies - you notice his evil only after effort. But this is just the same treatment that Thomas More has enjoyed for a hundred years, in several beautiful retcons. And the worst of the blood and the torture came after both of them. Maybe 4 stars later

The Design and Implementation of Probabilistic Programming Languages () by Noah D. Goodman	An executable mini-textbook in the modern mould. Not the introduction I was after, but really really clever and general.
The Children of the Sky (Zones of Thought, #3) (2011) by Vernor Vinge	Vinge is without peer at two things: * Producing childlike rage at unfairness, stringing out one piece of treachery for 400 pages and keeping the heat going. Even where it is obvious that a betrayal will take place, he still manages to make me tense and outraged over it. * Emphasising how important software is to the future. A revolt occurs partially because of the elites resenting the loss of their fancy interfaces, refusing to dirty their hands with low-level programming. The book feels very incomplete, even setting aside the cliffhanger; we see Timor's burgeoning hacking skills, but are shown none of their fruit. We see Geri tortured but not why, or why Tycoon was fine with it. We see Nevil's despotism take root but don't see any of his comeuppance. Some of this might show up in the much delayed sequel idk.
Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader (1998) by Richard G. Parker	Can't remember anything about it except John d'Emilio's "Capitalism and Gay Identity", which blew my mind. He argues that capitalism was a necessary condition for the emancipation of gay people, since its associated urbanisation, weakening of family ties, mass anonymity, and the autonomy of wages(!) let gay people explore, gather, and build a movement, the first time since antiquity. Maybe this doesn't sound so wild to you, but as a 20yo Marxist this lifted the top right off my head.
Less Is More Please (1992) by Barry Humphries	Good mix of innocence and retrospective meanness. Like me, his childhood appears to him as a series of fixations (licking the cake mixer, staring at a cement mixer, hushed discussion of lead poisoning from a pencil stab). Would probably be 4* in full.
Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution (2000) by Steven Poole	None yet
Rumpole and the younger generation (1978) by John	None yet

Mortimer	
The Innocents Abroad (1869) by Mark Twain	None yet
The Break Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism (1977) by Tom Nairn	Took 40 years but give this man a cigar
Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism (1975) by Peter K. Unger	Extremely well-written, and full of big giant thoughts and grand flourishes. But the whole thing feels like a joke at my expense. (Did he write it as a reductio of this sort of philosophy? I wouldn't put it past him.)
On Religion (Thinking in Action) (2001) by John D. Caputo	A central example of the zaniness and arbitrariness of a certain kind of Theory. But it's not as easy as it looks - I tried to imitate the irreverent, intertextual style in my Levinas course and got the biggest rebuke of my academic life. Caputo had to work for 30 years and put up with some truly awful people, to write like this. Fun, unserious, deadly serious.
Simply Logical: Intelligent Reasoning by Example (1994) by Peter Flach	Quite deep - the other, overgrown and overshadowed half of AI. Part II is a very nice introduction to classical search, though in Prolog, which will be enough to scare away most readers. Computational logic is the result of say half a dozen geniuses seizing a field from the philosophers and shaking remarkable things out of it.* It is also not very relevant for 90% of AI researchers today, though the extremely prolific and lively Programming Language Theory and theorem-provers people have inherited some of it and shake out remarkable things. As such, maybe most of this is unlikely to help you. The site they built around this book makes Prolog as easy as as it's going to get. Free and fully executable here. * Putnam and Robinson were philosophers, and the point stands.
Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic (1900) by Henri Bergson	None yet
永遠を旅する者 ロストオデッセイ	The clunky videogame 'Lost Odyssey' contains 33 incredibly good short stories, which you just optionally bump into in the course of your standard 50-hour murder-looting spree. They are understated, sentimental, and

千年の夢 (2007) by Kiyoshi Shigematsu	literary where the main plot is cliched, badly written (translated?) and garish. I don't know whether reading them alone would have the same effect as this contrast, but they are free in English here.
Perfect Rigour: A Genius And The Mathematical Breakthrough Of The Century (2009) by Masha Gessen	Not so much a biography: instead a study of recent Russian anti-Semitism, the viciousness of Soviet academia, and but also the wonderful alternative subculture that lived uneasily within it. This subculture hid inside the superhuman apolitical dreamland, mathematics.* It could only exist because of the sacrifices of famous and decent men, Kolmogorov and Aleksandrov. Their selective maths schools seem to have been the only nice places to be in the entire empire, for any intellectual with a taste for actual discourse, or for the truth. (Reasons it can't be so much a biography: the subject refused to talk to her, does things that are very hard to explain, and doesn't go out much.) The teacher Ryzhik's story about the evil entrance exam he sat is so, so sad: > *"Coffins" were questions specially designed for the Jewish applicants... rejection was administered in a peculiarly sadistic way... if [Jews] succeeded in answering correctly the two or three questions on the ticket, then, alone in the room with the examiners, they would be casually issued an extra question... a problem not merely complex but unsolvable. The examiners would then nail the cover of the coffin shut: the Jewish applicant had failed the exam...* > *"They did not even manage to find a problem I couldn't solve; I sat for three hours after the exam was over, I solved them all, and still they failed me. I was just a boy. I went home and cried."* Gessen is well-placed to write this - she was a maths nerd in Soviet Russia around the same time. As far as I can tell (which isn't very far) her grasp of the maths (one chapter for the crown jewel) is fit for purpose. But Gessen is out to bust Perelman's reputation for hyper-individualism; so she focusses on the devoted teachers and functionaries that pulled strings to get an abrasive Jew into the heart of Soviet academia, and his incredible luck in starting graduate study just as Glasnost happened. She wants to highlight the poverty of his character - his antisocial withdrawal, his complete and intentional ignorance of politics, his naivete, his savantism. It doesn't work. Yes, he's rigid; maybe he is composed of a curiosity, a competitiveness, an ethics, and nothing else (no vanity, humour, romance, charisma, empathy, theory of mind, tolerance, compromise, doubt). So what? Why does everyone need to be rounded? Does she sneer at athletes, the other people with lives this seemingly contorted and simple? David Foster Wallace managed to get over himself, on this note: > *The restrictions on [pro tennis player's] life have been, in my opinion, grotesque; and in certain ways Joyce himself is a grotesque. But the radical compression of his attention and sense of himself have allowed him to become a transcendent practitioner of an art – something few of*

	> *us get to be. They've allowed him to visit and test parts of his psychic reserves most of us do not even know for sure we have (courage, playing with violent nausea, not choking, et cetera).* *Joyce is, in other words, a complete man, though in a grotesquely limited way.* Gessen is, to be frank, quite cruel: she never passes up an opportunity to mention appearances - that that athletic boy of 1970 is "*now an overweight and balding computer scientist*", that the house of a man caring for his wife with late-stage dementia is "*a messy place, lived in awkwardly*" and he himself "*similarly unkempt*"; that Perelman didn't change his underwear or clip his nails as a teen. This is the shallow side of the *New Yorker* style on show - or else the malign side of Russian honesty. Either way fuck it. (Though Perelman would probably approve.) > *[Perelman] sounded his voice only if a solution required his intervention; looked forward to Sundays, sighing happily and saying that he could "finally solve some problems in peace"; and, if asked, patiently explained any math issue to any of his classmates though apparently utterly unable to conceive of anyone not comprehending such a simple thing. His classmates repaid him with kindness: they recalled his civility and his mathematics, and none ever mentioned to me that he walked around with his shoelaces undone...* The great mystery, which Gessen understandably can't touch, is why after 36 years of focus he suddenly stopped doing the only thing he'd ever done. How could he? How can that much momentum be shed? What does such a man do next? Subtract a star if you don't care about maths or if you can't abide people being mean to nerds (as both the old apparatchiks and Gessen were). --- * One of the oddest things about Perelman, because it maybe explains him turning down a million quid and the highest honours the world can bestow, is that he'd disagree with that sentence: *maths*, the least animal and least irrational thing we have, is too political for him. There was a little bit of nasty jostling at the time of the announcement - but nothing compared to any other science, let alone any government. Maybe the bubble everyone set up for him was bad for him, because it robbed him of perspective and so made the mild case of fuckery seem like a complete invalidation of mathematical culture. But maybe a rigorous rule-based mind would always explode eventually even given a scale to measure instances of bias.
Man Who Loved Only Numbers: Erdos (1998) by Paul Hoffman	> *"What would you say to Jesus if you saw him on the street?"* *Erdős said he'd ask Jesus if the Continuum Hypothesis was true. "And there would be three possible answers for Jesus," Erdős said. "He could say, 'Godel and Cohen already taught you everything which is to be known about it.' The second answer would be, 'Yes, there is an answer but unfortunately your brain isn't sufficiently developed yet to know the*

> *answer.' And Jesus could give a third answer: 'The Father, the Holy Ghost, and I have been thinking about that long before creation, but we haven't yet come to a conclusion.'</i>*

A life of a saint. Not in the sense of a moral paragon - though he was very kind when he wasn't being stubborn - but in the sense of a man devoted to, possessed by one thing, a high and rare thing that sets him some way beyond society. No money, no fixed abode, no lovers, no children, no religion. 80% of his family eaten by Nazi Germany. And yet a glorious, constructive, hilarious life. A champion moocher, eternal couchsurfer, generous and ascetic, witty and worldly. We are lucky to have had him.

> *I [Hoffman] slept where he slept and stayed up nineteen hours a day, watching him prove and conjecture. I felt silly not being able, at the age of thirty, to keep up with a sickly looking seventy-three-year-old man. I suppose I could have shared his pills, but the only stimulant I took was caffeine.*

> *He abhorred discussions of sex as much as he disliked the act itself... In the late 1940s, during the Chinese civil war, Erdős took part in a food drive for the Communist Chinese. "I remember walking into a big room in Los Angeles, at UCLA, I think," said Vazsonyi, "and there was Erdős and all these people making packages of food. Some mischief-makers who knew of his disgust at naked women offered to make a $100 donation if he'd go with them to a burlesque show." To their astonishment, he immediately took them up on the offer. Afterwards, when they forked over the $100, he revealed the secret of his victory: "See! I tricked you, you trivial beings! I took off my glasses and did not see a thing!"</i>*

Unlike Perelman, the other late-C20th-century mathematical saint, Erdős had a wicked sense of fun and style. Like him, Erdős let himself be completely dependent on others for housing and logistics, and demanded much of them.

> *he expected his hosts to lodge him, feed him, and do his laundry, along with anything else he needed, as well as arrange for him to get to his next destination.*

> *Erdos started developing his private language... referring to Communists as people "on the long wave-length," because in the electromagnetic spectrum the red waves were long. He said that Horthy supporters and other Fascist sympathizers were "on the short wavelength." That's also when he started calling children and other small things "epsilons," grandchildren "epsilons squared," alcohol "poison," music "noise," and women "bosses," an inversion of what Hungarian women often called their husbands. "Give me an epsilon of poison," Erdos would say when he wanted a sip of wine. "Wine, women, and song" became "Poison, bosses, and noise."*

> *He then had a huge argument with the surgeon about why, since only one eye was being deadened [during his cornea transplant], he couldn't read a mathematics journal with the other, good eye. The surgeon made*

> *a series of frantic calls to the Memphis math department. "Can you send a mathematician over here at once so that Erdos can talk math during surgery?" The department obliged, and the operation went smoothly.*

Unfortunately only half of this is anecdotes about Erdős, the rest being the usual potted-history of quirky mathematicians (Archimedes the oblivious, Fermat the executioner, Gauss the crabbed, Hardy the dry eccentric, Ramanujan the sublime, Wiles the Stakhanovite) with the usual stories. I skimmed these bits to get more of the good stuff.</td> </tr>

Curiosity: How Science Became Interested in Everything (2012) by Philip Ball

> *...*
> *—why is the sea salty?*
> *—have animals souls, or intelligence?*
> *—has opinion its foundation in the animate body?*
> *—why do human beings not have horns?*
> *—how is it that sound in its passage makes its way through any obstacle whatever?*
> *—how is it that joy can be the cause of tears?*
> *—why are the fingers of unequal length?*
> *—why, if you have intercourse with a woman after she has lain with a leper, will you catch the disease while she will escape?*
> *—what reason is there for the universality of death?*
> *—why do we need food so frequently, or at all?*
> *—why are the living afraid of the bodies of the dead?*
> *—how is the globe supported in the middle of the air?*
> *—why does the inflow of the rivers not increase the bulk of the ocean?*
> *—why, if a vessel be full and its lower part open, does water not issue from it unless the upper lid be first removed?*
> *—when one atom is moved, are all moved? (since whatever is in a state of motion moves something else, thus setting up infinite motion.)*
> *—why do winds travel along the earth's surface and not in an upward direction?*
> *—why does a sort of perpetual shadow brood over the moon?*
> *—granted that the stars are alive, on what food do they live?*
> *—ought we regard the cosmos as an inanimate body, a living thing, or a god?*
>
> *— Adelard of Bath (c.1120)*

Another history of the origins of science: our long trek to GWAS, livermorium, and CERN via astrology, natural magic, alchemy, Neoplatonism, herbalism, occultism, and philosophy. So, superficially, the book is just about an especially fruity context of discovery. But this period holds two of the most important lessons in history: 1) science grew out of work by people who diverge wildly from the modern idea and practice of science, whose variously false frameworks led to the Royal Society and e.g. the Newtonian triumph. (And from there to contemporary, professional, university science.) So wrong people can still make progress if their errors are uncorrelated with the prevailing errors. And, 2) a small number of the most powerful people in Britain - the Lord Chancellor, the king's physicians, the chaplain of the young Elector Palatine and bishop of Chester, London's

great architect, Privy Councillors * - successfully pushed a massive philosophical change, and thereby contributed to most of our greatest achievements: smallpox eradication, Sputnik and Voyager, the Green Revolution, and the unmanageably broad boons of computing are partly theirs.

The received view of all this is one-dimensional: you have superstitious, pompous cretins at one end and rational, experimental moderns at the other.

But really you need five axes before you get a basic understanding of the great, great revolution that began in the C16th - before you can see how science differs from every other community:

- **Supernaturalism vs Naturalism**. Did they explain things solely in terms of natural causes? (Absentee Gods only.)
- **Apriori vs Aposteriori**. Did they view actual observation as decisive and indispensable? **
- **Qualitative vs Quantitative.** Did they make measurements? Did they model the data? Did they use standard units?
- **Holism vs Reductionism.** Did they analyse things into their constituent features? Did they explain phenomena in terms of ?
- **Infallibilism vs Fallibilism.** Did they allow for the possibility of error? Did they view uncertain knowledge as still worthwhile? ***

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So I'm modelling science as naturalist, fallibilist, quantitative empiricism with pretensions to openness. I've categorised the early scientists mentioned in *Curiosity* according to this: you can see the data with additional justifications here. (Ball doesn't state this model, but it floats around in his debunkings and "well actually"s.)

All of the pieces of science are very ancient - we had mathematics and data collection well before the Ten Commandments, naturalism before Buddha and Confucius, reductionism before the Peloponnesian War at least one controlled trial centuries before Christ, fallibilism likewise. Everything was ready BCE; we can see indirect evidence of this in the astonishing works of Ancient Greek engineers, mostly unmatched for 1000 years until y'know.

So the question is not "was Bacon the most original blah blah?": he wasn't, particularly when you remember Alhazen's Baconian method, developed in the C11th. But we need an explanation for how we messed it up so badly. The received view, which is all I have at the moment, is that the fall of Rome, Christian anti-intellectualism and, later, the enshrining of Aristotelian mistakes was enough to destroy and suppress the ideas. I want deeper explanations though. (For instance, what did we do to the economy?)

A fun regression on this data would be to see how my scienciness measure correlates with the importance of the person's work. It would not be that highly proportional, in this time period.

****

Back to the book eh! Book structure is lots of little chapters on fairly disjointed topics: early modern ideas of space travel, universal language, pumps, etc. Chapter on "cabinets of curiosity" is great though: suddenly their dull zany blare makes sense and I want to build one:

> *this was more than a case of 'look what I've got'. The power with which Wunderkammern were imbued was... in that they created their own complete microcosm: a representation of the world in miniature... By possessing this microcosm the collector-prince was not just symbolising but also in a sense exercising his mastery of the world. The cabinet acted as a kind of mental laboratory within which the relationships between things could be contemplated via a process that shared elements of both experimentation and Gnostic revelation.*

Ball doesn't like us calling the Scientific Revolution a revolution, and I agree: the revolution didn't consist in the theories of Bacon or Newton: it consists in the diffusion of the worldview into all subjects and all inquiry. It transformed society and gave us marvels, but it hasn't finished happening. The general will, or default state, is still strongly unscientific. (The largest and most grievous holdout, larger even than the enduring hold of fideist religion, is our tribal politics and our largely nonempirical government policy.)

Ball expends a lot of time on a history of wonder vs curiosity vs dispassionate robot inquiry. People hated all of these things for various reasons, up until the Renaissance when curiosity became acceptable on what are now classic economic grounds, or in line with the Italian cult of the virtuoso - someone who's so bloody brilliant that you have to just let him get on with it.

I always like Ball's drawling prose and catty editorialising. (For instance, Margaret Cavendish - the darling of arts academics who latch on to the only woman in sight in this period - gets a round dissing by Ball, as an anti-experiment idiot, a vitalist, and a misogynist.) Stimulating as always.

* Bacon has some claim to being the most influential philosopher ever, in terms of counterfactual effect on history. (Rather than number of bloody citations!) No-one with his social standing was resisting the Aristotelian consensus in 1620; his prototype scientific method is a century ahead of its time. (Yes, ibn al-Haytham's was 7 centuries ahead of its time, but to limited avail.)⏎

** This one is hard to refer to, because we now find it incredibly easy to understand why "go and look" works as a general route to knowledge; Medieval thought rejected this on the basis of things like the problem of induction.

The cliched way to refer to the split between those who want to *start* with the apriori and those who want to start with data is "Rationalism" vs "Empiricism". But these words confuse people: the two of them are also

used in a C17th debate about psychology, to do with the nature of mental content.

More: it can't be a dichotomy, since many of the greatest rationalists (Descartes, Leibniz) were experimentalists too, doing what we now call empirical work. Three meanings of rationalism, and three words for them:

- 'Rationalism$_1$': Belief in innate ideas. Call it 'Continental Rationalism'. Descartes and Leibniz but not Dawkins and Shermer.

- 'Rationalism$_2$': Belief in the supremacy of apriori knowledge over empirical knowledge. Call it 'apriorism'. Aristotle was apriorist, as was Descartes.

- 'Rationalism$_3$': Belief that everything should be subject to reason and evidence. Includes Descartes and Leibniz *and* Dawkins and Shermer. Contemporary rationalists are highly if not radically empiricist.

I use Alberto Vanzo's criteria for deciding if someone was enough of an experimentalist:

> *let us consider four typical features of early modern experimental philosophers:*
>
> - *</i>self-descriptions: experimental philosophers typically called themselves such. At the very least, they professed their sympathy towards experimental philosophy.</li>*
> - *</i>friends and foes: experimental philosophers saw themselves as part of a tradition whose “patriarch” was Bacon and whose sworn enemy was Cartesian natural philosophy.</li>*
> - *</i>method: experimental philosophers put forward a two-stage model of natural philosophical inquiry: first, collect data by means of experiments and observations; second, build theories on the basis of them. In general, experimental philosophers emphasized the a posteriori origins of our knowledge of nature and they were wary of a priori reasonings.</li>*
> - *</i>rhetoric: in the jargon of experimental philosophers, the terms “experiments” and “observations” are good, “hypotheses” and “speculations” are bad. They were often described as fictions, romances, or castles in the air.*
>
> *</ul>*
> *</blockquote></blockquote>*
> *This is unusually inclusive: the famous Rationalist Leibniz counts as experimental under this rubric. But a stronger definition of aposteriorist - like "refuses to use purely analytic reasoning", or even "spent most of their time running experiments and analysing data" would exclude many contemporary scientists. Sticking with Vanzo for now.* ⏎

**** Hard to imagine a fallibilist apriorist: perhaps Lakatos. (Some say Leibniz was, in practice.) I actually have met a methodist infallibilist apriorist, but I won't meet another. ⏎*

***** I had included "openness" in the model -*

- ***Obscurantism vs Openness.*** *Did they write in the vernacular? Did they publish for a wide readership? Did they spurn Noble Lies? Did they encourage replications with and data sharing? Did they build scholarly networks?*

- but I admit this is just wishful/normative thinking: modern academic science fails at this. Whether with its low-status replications, unreadable prose, paywalls on most research (tax-funded or no), pathetically low levels of data sharing, or the prevalence of noble lies... But it's definitely a core aspiration now: the greedy impulse behind hermeticism is blatantly unscientific, if not actually shunned by actual scientists. First, lip service...

Things can be science without being published, obviously: consider the invention of public key cryptography by a GCHQ wonk, classified for 25 years - or even the secret infrastructure and algorithmics of high-frequency trading.

^ Obviously these five factors aren't the end of the matter either. But I reckon it catches a decent amount of the variance in the term "scientist". Others e.g.

- *Particularism vs Consilience. Did they believe that the scientific method could explain every phenomenon?*
- *Realism vs Instrumentalism. Most scientists are realists about best current theories*
- *Theism vs Nontheism*

I had included non-theism in the core of modern science - and so it is, in the form of strong naturalism. Scientists, on the other hand, differ from this, globally. This is partially because humans are so compartmentalised and can hold severe contradictions indefinitely. But, clearly, atheism is not an essential part of the modern method. But causal closure and (at most) a private faith are.</td> </tr>

The Scientific	Incredibly brief tour of the main issues raised by the Scientific Revolution. IIRC he walks the line well between the first inklings of the context of

Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science (1997) by John Henry	justification and the sheer STS-friendly weirdness of the context of discovery. The unexpected decoupling of the scientific revolution from the industrial revolution (two centuries apart!) is one of the most important facts I have ever learned. [maybe 4 stars, I can't remember]
The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion (2012) by Jonathan Haidt	Descriptively true (moral psychology is indeed more diverse than most philosophy or art recognises, and it is difficult to understand most of the world without recognising this). But not normatively.
The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History (2004) by John M. Barry	Rousing history of one of the worst things that has ever happened: the 1918 outbreak of H1N1 flu. It focusses particularly on the great scientists who tried to fight it, none of whom I'd ever heard of. Also a meditation on epistemology, the modern mind, & the redemptive meaning of science for beasts like us. Barry senses that the headline result - one-third of the entire world infected, with **25-100** million dead - doesn't get enough of a rise from us. The numbers are numbing. So he couches it in modern shocking terms: > *It killed more people in twenty-four weeks than AIDS has killed in twenty-four years, more in a year than the Black Death killed in a century.* Or ten thousand 9/11s. It's worth belabouring this, because we have a weird habit of paying far more attention to human threats than natural ones, even when natural ones are far worse. (Witness our terrorism prevention budgets compared to our infectious disease control budgets, when the latter is a thousand times more lethal.) So: The 1918 flu was worse than the entire First World War: 40+ million died of flu compared with 17 million dead from war; 500 million lives damaged by flu vs 41 million lives by war. 3% of everyone alive died of flu, including about 8% of young adults(!). Except it's hard to separate the War and the pandemic. The virus was spread everywhere by unprecedented numbers of troops, and by the massive supply convoys it induced, and by the War's other human displacements. We don't know how many of the pneumonia deaths only occurred because of the logistical degradation, poverty and pestilence of wartime. There are terrible nonlinearities involved in overcrowding and global movement of troops. But add millions at least to the overall death toll caused by WWI. The book is in the epic mode, all the way through. (That's not a straightforward compliment.) I liked it, but I understand if it's a bit American for you: > *Man might be defined as "modern" largely to the extent that he*

> *attempts to control nature. In this relationship with nature, modern humanity has generally been the aggressor, and a daring one at that, altering the flow of rivers, building upon geological faults, and, today, even engineering the genes of existing species. Nature has generally been languid in its response, although contentious once aroused and occasionally displaying a flair for violence.*
>
> *By 1918 humankind was fully modern, and fully scientific, but too busy fighting itself to aggress against nature. Nature, however, chooses its own moments. It chose this moment to aggress against man, and it did not do so prodding languidly. For the first time, modern humanity, a humanity practicing the modern scientific method, would confront nature in its fullest rage.*

There's a long prelude describing how terrible medicine was up to the 20th Century. Medicine was "the withered arm of science". Therapeutic nihilism (that is, "we can't really do anything") was the only rational view, replacing millenia of Galenic woo.

> *Stengel reviewed dozens of ideas advanced in medical journals. Gargles of various disinfectants. Drugs. Immune sera. Typhoid vaccine. Diphtheria antitoxin. But Stengel's message was simple: This doesn't work. That doesn't work. Nothing worked... Nothing they were doing worked.*

Problem is, this rational scepticism created a powerful vacuum: humans need to believe something can heal, and the gap was filled with worse. Some confabulated gremlins from this time haunt us still: homeopathy, chiropractic, naturopathy, Christian Science, and (though Barry doesn't include them) the organic farming movement and psychoanalysis.

Few people come off well. Even among the scientists, we get a horrible example of perverse priors and premature updating: an enormous proportion of all scientific resources were devoted to fighting the wrong pathogen, due to a bad guess by an extremely eminent researcher.

Because so much of the state was occupied in war, in places there was wholesale social collapse:

> *In Philadelphia meanwhile fear came and stayed. Death could come from anyone, anytime. People moved away from others on the sidewalk, avoided conversation; if they did speak, they turned their faces away to avoid the other person's breathing.*
>
> *The impossibility of getting help compounded the isolation. 850 Philadelphia doctors and more nurses were away in the military. More than that number were sick. Philadelphia General Hospital had 126 nurses. Despite all precautions, despite wearing surgical masks and gowns, eight doctors and fifty-four nurses—43 percent of the staff—themselves required hospitalization. Ten nurses at this single hospital died. The Board of Health pleaded for help from retired nurses and doctors if they remembered "even a little" of their profession.*
>
> *When a nurse or doctor or policeman did actually come, they wore their*

> *ghostly surgical masks, and people fled them. In every home where someone was ill, people wondered if the person would die. And someone was ill in every home...*
>
> *Starr went to Emergency Hospital #2 at Eighteenth and Cherry Streets. He did have help, if it could be called that, from an elderly physician who had not practiced in years and who brought Starr into touch with the worst of heroic medicine. Starr wouldn't forget that, the ancient arts of purging, of venesection, the ancient art of opening a patient's vein. But for the most part he and the other students elsewhere were on their own, with little help even from nurses, who were so desperately needed that in each of ten emergency hospitals supplied by the Red Cross only a single qualified nurse was available to oversee whatever women came as volunteers. And often the volunteers reported for their duty once and, from either fear or exhaustion, did not come again.*
>
> *Nearly 1/4 of all the patients in his hospital died each day. Starr would go home, and when he returned the next day, he would find that between one-quarter and one-fifth of the patients in the hospital had died, replaced by new ones... Virtually all of them, along with their friends and relatives, were terrified that, no matter how mild the symptoms seemed at first, within them moved an alien force, a seething, spreading infection, a live thing with a will that was taking over their bodies — and could be killing them...*
> *The city was frozen with fear, frozen into stillness. Starr lived 12 miles from the hospital. The streets were silent on his drive home, silent. They were so silent he took to counting the cars he saw. One night he saw no cars at all. He thought, "The life of the city had almost stopped."*

Everyone can read the collapse of official power in Philadelphia as supporting their politics. Anarchists can point to the benevolent spontaneous order that arose after the corrupt local government failed to act; libertarians can point out that this spontaneous order was all funded by the richest Philadelphians; statists can point out that, without actually-authoritative co-ordination, the effort eventually failed, because people defected against each other, in fear.

> *The corpses had backed up at undertakers', filling every area of these establishments and pressing up into living quarters; in hospital morgues overflowing into corridors; in the city morgue overflowing into the street. And they had backed up in homes. They lay on porches, in closets, in corners of the floor, on beds. Children would sneak away from adults to stare at them, to touch them; a wife would lie next to a dead husband, unwilling to move him or leave him. The corpses, reminders of death and bringers of terror or grief, lay under ice at Indian-summer temperatures. Their presence was constant, a horror demoralizing the city; a horror that could not be escaped. Finally the city tried to catch up to them.*
>
> *The police wore their ghostly surgical masks, and people fled them, but the masks had no effect on the viruses and by mid-October thirty-three policemen had died, with many more to follow...*
> *More coffins came by rail, guarded by men with guns.*

> *"There is, therefore, but one response possible from us: Force! force to the utmost, force without stint or limit, the righteous and triumphant force which shall make right the law of the world and cast every selfish dominion down in the dust. "*

- Woodrow Wilson addressing one of his money-lending mobs.

Wilson tends to be viewed pretty positively, just because he won. ("*at last the world knows America as the savior of the world*!") But he perverted an entire state and nation to do so, ignored the terrible suffering of his own damn population for years, and refused a conditional peace with Austria in August and with the Kaiser's new parliament in September. (This meant 30-70 extra days of war, which, if this period was as lethal as the rest of the war, means up to 800,000 completely unnecessary deaths, not to mention the continuing waste of resources during the worst epidemic ever). Wilson did great evil, was not much different from the Kaiser, the election aside.

> *the military suctioned more and more nurses and physicians into cantonments, aboard ships, into France, until it had extracted nearly all the best young physicians. Medical care for civilians deteriorated rapidly. The doctors who remained in civilian life were largely either incompetent young ones or those over forty-five years of age, the vast majority of whom had been trained in the old ways of medicine.*

Barry's middle chapters are a frightening portrait of how rabidly un-American the US was in 1918. The laws were bad enough - for instance the ban on criticising the government. But then there's the unofficial "patriotic duties", punishable by beatings. State-sponsored atavism.

> *By the summer of 1918, however, Wilson had injected the government into every facet of national life and had created great bureaucratic engines to focus all the nation's attention and intent on the war.*
>
> *He had created a Food Administration to control and distribute food, a Fuel Administration to ration coal and gasoline, a War Industries Board to oversee the entire economy. He had taken all but physical control over the railroads and had created a federally sponsored river barge line that brought commerce back to life on the Mississippi River, a commerce that had been killed by competition from those railroads. He had built many dozens of military installations, each of which held at least tens of thousands of soldiers or sailors. He had created industries that made America's shipyards teem with hundreds of thousands of laborers launching hundreds of ships, dug new coal mines to produce coal for the factories that weaned America's military from British and French weapons and munitions—for, unlike in World War II, America was no arsenal of democracy.*
>
> *He had created a vast propaganda machine, an internal spy network, a bond-selling apparatus... He had even succeeded in stifling speech, in the summer of 1918 arresting and imprisoning — some for prison terms longer than ten years —not just radical labor leaders and editors of German-language newspapers but powerful men, even a congressman.*

He had injected the government into American life in ways unlike any other in the nation's history. And the final extension of federal power had come only in the spring of 1918, after the first wave of influenza had begun jumping from camp to camp, when the government expanded the draft from males between the ages of twenty-one and thirty to those between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. Only on May 23, 1918, had Provost Marshal Enoch Crowder, who oversaw the draft, issued his "work or fight" order, stating that anyone not employed in an essential industry would be drafted...

Crowder bragged about doing "in a day what the Prussian autocracy had been spending nearly fifty years to perfect..."

In mid-August, as the lethal wave of the epidemic was gathering itself, Austria had already inquired about peace terms, an inquiry that Wilson rebuffed utterly. And as the epidemic was gathering full momentum, peace was only weeks away. Bulgaria had signed an armistice on September 29. On September 30, Kaiser Wilhelm had granted parliamentary government to the German nation; that same day Ludendorff had warned his government that Germany must extend peace feelers or disaster—immediate disaster—would follow. German diplomats sent out those feelers. Wilson ignored them. The Central Powers, Germany and her allies, were simultaneously breaking off one from one another and disintegrating internally as well. In the first week of October, Austria and Germany separately sent peace feelers to the Allies, and on October 7, Austria delivered a diplomatic note to Wilson formally seeking peace on any terms Wilson chose. Ten days later — days of battle and deaths — the Austrian note remained unanswered.

Earlier Wilson had spoken of a "peace without victory," believing only such a peace could last. But now he gave no indication that the war would soon be over. Although a rumor that the war had ended sent thrills through the nation, Wilson quickly renounced it. Nor would he relent. He was not now fighting to the death; he was fighting only to kill...

If Wilson and his government would not be turned from his end even by the prospect of peace, they would hardly be turned by a virus. And the reluctance, inability, or outright refusal of the American government to shift targets would contribute to the killing. Wilson took no public note of the disease, and the thrust of the government was not diverted. The relief effort for influenza victims would find no assistance in the Food Administration or the Fuel Administration or the Railroad Administration. From neither the White House nor any other senior administration post would there come any leadership, any attempt to set priorities, any attempt to coordinate activities, any attempt to deliver resources.

...the military would give no help to civilians. Instead it would draw further upon civilian resources. The same day that Welch had stepped out of the autopsy room at Devens and called Gorgas's office, his warning had been relayed to the army chief of staff, urging that all transfers be frozen unless absolutely necessary and that under no

> *circumstances transfers from infected camps be made... Gorgas's superiors ignored the warning. There was no interruption of movement between camps whatsoever; not until weeks later, with the camps paralyzed and, literally, tens of thousands of soldiers dead or dying, did the army make any adjustments.*

Because the disease was everywhere, ravaging the entire species (and beyond), the book can't cover everything. Very little is said about non-Americans, i.e about 98% of the death and chaos. This is partly because there just isn't a lot of evidence about them, despite their influenza immunity and medical care being even worse. (This is why the top estimates reach 100m deaths, three times the median estimate.) Here is a passage about just a tiny number of them, in the north:

> *In Alaska, whites protected themselves. Sentries guarded all trails, and every person entering the city was quarantined for five days. Eskimos had no such luck. A senior Red Cross official warned that without "immediate medical assistance the race" could become "extinct."...*
>
> *The navy provided the collier USS Brutus to carry a relief expedition... They found terrible things. One doctor visited ten tiny villages and found "three wiped out entirely; others average 85% deaths... Survivors generally children... probably 25% frozen to death before help arrived."*
>
> *The virus probably did not kill all of them directly. But it struck so suddenly it left no one well enough to care for any others, no one to get food, no one to get water. And those who could have survived, surrounded by bodies, bodies of people they loved, might well have preferred to go where their family had gone, might well have wanted to no longer be alone... Two hundred sixty-six people had lived in Okak, and many dogs, dogs nearly wild. When the virus came, it struck so hard so fast people could not care for themselves or feed the dogs. The dogs grew hungry, crazed with hunger, devoured each other, then wildly smashed through windows and doors, and fed... In all of Labrador, at least one-third the total population died.*

Barry commits at least one big error: he's horrified by the medical schools of the time having "no standards for admission":

> *In research and education especially, American medicine lagged far behind [European medicine]... At least one hundred US medical schools would accept any man willing to pay tuition... and only a single medical school required its student to have a college degree... the Johns Hopkins itself, not student fees, paid [its] faculty salaries, and it required medical students to have not only a college degree but fluency in French and German and a background of science courses.*

But his enthusiasm for Johns Hopkins introducing the college degree requirement is misplaced. Contemporary US doctors (who all have 3 years of pre-med, or even more college, before they start medical training) are probably no better clinicians than undergraduate doctors in other countries, and are far further in debt. This requirement is probably one reason the

	American system is so fucked. I suppose Barry is just confusing the open admissions situation with the schools' appallingly low graduation standards, which is certainly one reason eC20th medicine sucked. (Many doctors had never looked down a microscope, never used a stethoscope on a patient, never seen a dissection.) --- PS: Mostly unimportant corrections by a virologist here. Reply to these from Barry here.
Zeitgeber (2019) by Greg Egan	Sweet and straightforward by his standards.
Criticism and Truth (1966) by Roland Barthes	Oh, a French literary figure writing against clarity? Do tell. (This is unfair, it's a good faith argument which I cannot remember any single premise of, 10 years on. Bet you it includes "Whose clarity? Whence it's classification?" though.)
Single-Bit Error () by Ken Liu	Cute stuff, fan fiction for Chiang's "Hell is the Absence of God". The programmer spending his evenings reading poems at open mics, really living, is a cliche I haven't seen before (if you see what I mean). > *Programmers are not really numbers people," Tyler said. "We are words people. The numbers people work in hardware."* Very earnest, slightly flat.
Ultimate Rock-Paper-Scissors () by Inukorosuke	Great fun, like a Rube Goldberg machine. (Inevitability and surprise.) The clairvoyant vs the telepath in particular is a near epistemic logic puzzle.
Peter Watts Is An Angry Sentient Tumor: Revenge Fantasies and Essays (2019) by Peter Watts	> *Eleven years after the birth of the most neurologically remarkable, philosophically mind-blowing, transhumanistically-relevant being on the planet, we have nothing but pop-sci puff pieces and squishy documentaries to show for it. Are we really supposed to believe that in over a decade no one has done the studies, collected the data, gained any insights about literal brain-to-brain communication, beyond these fuzzy generalities? I for one don't buy that for a second. These neuroscientists smiling at us from the screen—Douglas Cochrane, Juliette Hukin—they know what they've got. Maybe they've discovered something so horrific about the nature of Humanity that they're afraid to reveal it, for fear of outrage and widespread panic. That would be cool.* Blogposts from a thoughtful doomer. Name a hot button, anything, and he will elevate it to the scariest thing in the world: internet surveillance, zoonotic viruses, climate change, Trump, the security detail around the G8. Bloody-minded sympathy, Left nihilism, boundless sensawunda, viscera instead of prose - and but deep unreliability when he gets on a subject besides marine biology. He is vulnerable to anything cool or fucked up. I like him a lot, but I'm worried if I find myself agreeing with him, since he so

often misleads himself.

> *If I am indeed fated to sink into this pit of surveillance capitalism with the rest of you, I'd just as soon limit my fantasies about eating the rich to a venue that doesn't shut you down the moment some community-standards algo thinks it sees an exposed nipple in a jpeg.*

Everything he does is *excessive*. Of course, this makes for good aesthetics and bad epistemics.

Like Charlie Stross, Watts reads horrifying things into the news, informed by the toxic half of history but also by a nebulous paranoia which leads them astray. (Representative sample from Stross: "*[media incentive] has been weaponized, in conjunction with data mining of the piles of personal information social networks try to get us to disclose (in the pursuit of advertising bucks), to deliver toxic propaganda straight into the eyeballs of the most vulnerable — with consequences that are threaten to undermine the legitimacy of democratic governmance on a global scale.*". Watts:

> *Bureaucratic and political organisms are like any other kind; they exist primarily to perpetuate themselves at the expense of other systems. You cannot convince such an organism to act against its own short-term interests... It's not really news, but we seem to be living in a soft dictatorship. The only choices we're allowed to make are those which make no real difference... On a purely selfish level I'm happier than I've ever been in my life, happier than I deserve. Of course it won't last. I do not expect to die peacefully, and I do not expect to die in any jurisdiction with a stable infrastructure. At least I don't have to worry about the world I'm leaving behind for my children; I got sterilized in 1991.*

)

The two biggest fumbles here are his posts on Daryl Bem and high-functioning hydrocephalic people. It is no shame to fall for either: these are highly respectable academic hoaxes, and Bem's methods were exactly as valid as the average psychology paper of the early C21st. Watts' mistake isn't to insist that ESP is real, but to leap to the defence of the weird just because it is weird, to the point where he rejects Hume's maxim ("Laplace's principle"), a basic incontrovertible *theorem* of Bayesian inference.

> *these results, whatever you thought of them, were at least as solid as those used to justify the release of new drugs to the consumer market. I liked that. It set things in perspective, although in hindsight, it probably said more about the abysmal state of Pharma regulation... I'm perfectly copacetic with the premise that psychology is broken. But if the field is really in such disrepair, why is it that none of those myriad less-rigorous papers acted as a wake-up call? Why snooze through so many decades of hack analysis only to pick on a paper which, by your own admission, is better than most?*

> *The question, here in the second decade of the 21st Century, is: what constitutes an "extraordinary claim"? A hundred years ago it would have been extraordinary to claim that a cat could be simultaneously dead and alive; fifty years ago it would have been extraordinary to claim that life existed above the boiling point of water, kilometers deep in the earth's crust. Twenty years ago it was extraordinary to suggest that the universe was not only expanding but that the rate of expansion was accelerating.*

> *Today, physics concedes the theoretical possibility of time travel*

Another big miss is his emphasis on adaptive sociopathy as the cause of our problems, rather than say global coordination problems. He is also completely off the deep end on climate change as existential risk, sneering at anyone who disagrees, no matter how well-informed.

> *there's no denying that pretty much every problem in the biosphere hails from a common cause. Climate change, pollution, habitat loss, the emptying of biodiversity from land sea and air, an extinction rate unparalleled since the last asteroid and the transformation of our homeworld into a planet of weeds—all our fault, of course. There are simply too many of us. Over seven billion already, and we still can't keep it in our pants.*

Notice the pattern: faced with an apparent dilemma, he happily chucks the strongest, most basic principles to maintain his paranoia (the principles "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" or here "it is good for people to have children if they want, good lives have worth").

This bias would be entirely fine if he only admitted error later, about his predicted Trump race riots for instance.

> *The real danger isn't so much Trump himself, but the fact that his victory has unleashed and empowered an army of bigoted assholes down at street level. That's what's gonna do the most brutal damage.*

Most posts are entertaining but betray one-way critical thinking: for some reason he can barely see the other half of the world, that we are winning in all kinds of ways.

Lots of learned and fun film reviews here: I relax, since criticism need have no truth-value. He likes 'Arrival' more than 'Story of Your Life', which fits: the film is bombastic, paranoid, politicised, unsubtle.

> *When **you** can buy the whole damn store and the street it sits on with pocket change; when you can buy the home of the asshole who just disrespected you and have it bulldozed; when you can use your influence to get that person fired in the blink of an eye and turn her social media life into a living hell—the fact that you don't do any of those things does not mean that you've been oppressed. It means you've been merciful to someone you could just as easily squash like a bug... Marvel's mutants are something like that. We're dealing, after all, with people who can summon storm systems with their minds and melt steel with their eyes. Xavier can not only read any mind on the planet, he can freeze time, for fucksake. These have got to be the worst case-studies in oppression you could imagine.*

> *it still seems a bit knee-jerky to complain about depictions of objectification in a movie explicitly designed to explore the ramifications of objectification. (You could always fall back on Foz Meadows' rejoinder that "Depiction isn't endorsement, but it is perpetuation", so long as you're the kind of person who's willing to believe that Schindler's List perpetuates anti-Semitism and The Handmaid's Tale perpetuates*

	> *misogyny.)* Watts reacts with caution and indignation to any police presence, even a compassionate visit to the homeless man sleeping in his garden. It would crude to explain away Watts' style and worldview by reference to his unusually bad luck: his flesh-eating disease, his inexplicable beatdown and prosecution by border cops, his publishing travails, his scientific and romantic flops. Disclaimer: I'm probably only so down on him because I got so excited by *Blindsight* and its promise of actual science fiction by an actual scientist. He is certainly well above-average rigour for a political blogger, and well above-average imagination for anyone. Plus a star if you're in it for the ride, the anecdotes, and not for reliable info.
Painless (2019) by Rich Larson	Violent, weird, great.
Introduction to Natural Language Processing () by Jacob Eisenstein	Extremely mixed. First chapter is great, a nice high-level summary of the difficult history of getting computers to understand us, and the many fields and field factions involved. (Linguistics is a deep science that in large part taught CS how to do theory, but certain of its dogmas - against probabilities, against machine learning - ended up holding it back for decades.) But chapters 2-5 are bad: weird notation, and almost no diagrams for lots of natively geometric ideas. That said, fig 3.3. is a great essence of backprop. I switched to Jurafsky afterward. [Free here]
Titanicus (Sabbat Worlds) (2008) by Dan Abnett	Top shelf mind candy. There are several sides to 40k: the original indie English lulz, the corporate grimdark edginess which misses the irony, and then what the few real writers make of it. (Ian Watson and Abnett are two I know about.) The first 150 pages here have no giant robots, only the quiet apprehensive horror of a war economy, war emotions. Lovers parted by conscription, blocks of lives traded for nothing, the belligerent joy of a public which hasn't lost its first battle yet. Then you get plenty of omnipotent bots, a conspiracy, and two parties in desperate retreat. I like the Mechanicus because, unlike the rest of their society they are half-rational, occasionally have to confront the pervasive superstition and noble lies. Several times you get a unique twist on PTSD, from old men who spent decades inhabiting a war machine: > *Zink hobbled over to his hut at the best full stride his old legs could manage. He took out the worn step ladder that he used for pruning the boughs of the ploin trees, and carried it back to the west wall. This execution took the best part of half an hour, and Zink had to stop and catch his breath twice. More than twice, he forgot what he was about and began to carry the ladder back to the hut. When he reached the wall, he came about, two points, low stride, west rotation, and dragged the ladder into the wet flowerbeds.*

	I struggle a bit with the psychology of the wicked Satanic enemy. Even in thoughtful authors like Abnett their motivations and strategies are too predictably vicious, too unsustainable - they've invaded this planet, fine, but then they blow up half the cities in it. So what's the point of invading? > *The archenemy, in his long experience, often ignored tactical logic or strategic merit, but this was an odd choice even by the archenemy's perverse standards.* An enemy who was so haphazard, divided, unstrategic would struggle to threaten a whole organised empire. They could just be terrorists, or value suffering itself, or just be damaging infrastructure for the wider conflict. But this is a flat worldview, one you can't do anything with except backdrop the nobility of your own characters. Which is one reason there's not a lot of literature in this canon. Abnett compensates well as usual, with flawed and distinctive protagonists, rigorous fantasy logistics and tactics, nice setpieces, plenty of humanising nonmilitary detail, and good satisfying betrayals.
turn push / turn pull (2012) by Kit Fryatt	> *every grain atom & drop in its entirety is protected by copyright* > *[poems about poems] need to be about something else too* Cryptic but eh come on, search engines exist now.
The Crucible: A Play in Four Acts (1953) by Arthur Miller	None yet
Back-green Odyssey () by Alastair Mackie	> *We spoke o girds, scuds, quines, bleedy doctors…* > *I'm richt glad the auld words still come back* > *like migrant swallas, black shears o the gloamin.* > *Marx we hadna heard o, only the Marx brithers.* > *This was oor grunwork, the hard pan o oor lives.* > *A sma bit street that hirpled doun a brae.* > *Whitever roads I took since then I* > *began wi workin fowk in granite tenements.* > *Aa the lave was superstructure.* A sincere internationalist in an indecipherable local dialect, like many Scots poets. Allusions to Mallarmé and Valéry, Pushkin and Eurydice, in a voice they'd only stare at.
Double Eagle (Sabbat Worlds #1) (2004) by	None yet

Dan Abnett	
Machine Learning: The Art and Science of Algorithms That Make Sense of Data (2012) by Peter Flach	Short, friendly, smooth, repetitive. First ML book where I didn't feel dumb.
The Bed of Procrustes (2010) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb	None yet
The Inquisition War (The Inquisition War #1-3) (2004) by Ian Watson	The most interesting piece in Games Workshop's vast, clanking archives. It isn't canon: Watson does too much in this, messes with the profitable stasis of the last years of the 41st millennium too much. The nearest thing to *Illuminatus!* or *Snow Crash*.
The Economics Anti-Textbook: A Critical Thinker's Guide to Microeconomics (2010) by Roderick Hill	Useful counterweight to the many lies-to-children told in proper undergraduate textbooks. And it is often useful to be reminded of the ideological nonsense that surrounds even mathematised fields. But, read on its own, this won't tell you the power and generality of some economic results and risks confirmation bias. (In my teenage case it licenced my not bothering to do the maths, not allowing my own ideological nonsense to be shaken - but I don't expect you to be so vicious.)
The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon - The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World (2001) by Steven L. Kent	None yet

Spark: The Definitive Guide: Big Data Processing Made Simple () by Bill Chambers	It's fine, covers everything shallowly. The API changes so frequently that you probably need this book: 95% of the Google hits for a given Spark feature are now either wrong or suboptimal.
How To: Absurd Scientific Advice for Common Real-World Problems (2019) by Randall Munroe	Oddly unaffecting - I loved *What If?*, and this follows a very similar formula, but it's flatter somehow, the understatement less funny, the maths less astonishing. The few chapters where he starts with a ridiculous naive approach (e.g. ski by dragging a train of liquid nitrogen which you spray in your path) and then iterates until he gets to the existing technology (roller skates) are satisfying. Chris Hadfield's nerd-chic understatement is funny, but that's probably just because of who he is. Still a vector for mathematical modelling, but eh.
Against a Dark Background (1993) by Iain M. Banks	One of his darkest; darker than the one with a real hell. Stuffed full of plot, rammed full of details - a dozen cities on three planets, each with their own economic or cultural or religious setup. There's: a huge war over economic policy; a primitivist misotheist theocracy; a bunch of murderous millenarians; a group of solipsist mercenaries who each think they're the only person in the world; a World Tree ecology; a giant raft city; a talking deus ex machina; two world conspiracies; a man raised from birth to be the perfect revolutionary leader; the fall of a trillionaire dynasty; terrible, maximally vicious sibling rivalry; a beautiful android city full of likeable people being competent and deep. The protagonists pull off about a dozen missions in varied landscapes with various goals. But it's all just sketched, since the 12 worlds he builds are vying for the same 700 pages. > *We are a race prone to monsters, and when we produce one we worship it. What kind of world, what translation of good could come from all that's happened here?* And I didn't like any of the protagonists; they're all a glib kind of hedonist. The leader, Sharrow, is *tacitly* remorseful about the many terrible things she does, but at no point does she stop doing them. > *People were always sorry... The sorrow never stopped them; it just made them feel better. And so the sorrow never stopped.* The dastardly ubermensch Big Bad only appears in the last 5% of the book. Killing Geis with a bullet she wouldn't have if she were more responsible is one way to justify her attitude I guess. In killing Geis, Sharrow saves the World Court, or anyway the Court/Rebel States status quo. The ending doesn't resolve anything, fine, but I was amazed that we didn't have her recovering the Gun. It's one thing to leave ambiguity about what's next, but it's not really clear what Sharrow's options are. She lost her crew, killed her family (including the son), is no longer hunted by the Huhsz, gets Feril boxed for a century, has a prosecution coming, and doesn't give a fuck about anything. But she has a cool motorbike. Bank's scifi is unusually emotionally fraught, focussed on inner life. Sharrow vs Breyguhn is very tragic and quite believable, for all that it makes me

	dismiss Sharrow as an impulsive heartless fool. * The Huhsz, the millenarians, are actually quite marginal, despite the first 200 pages setting them up to be central. * Odd portrait of a very advanced (10000 year old), fairly stable capitalism. They manage to ban things (like bioweapons), and manage to prosecute trillionaires. * Feril goes straight in the all-time gallery of Wise Cinnamon-bun AIs we don't deserve. (Along with Lt Cmd Data, Constable Dorfl, TARS, Iron Giant, GCU Grey Area, Wall-E). * I didn't buy the superior ancient tech thing, here. Golter has a mostly-functional academic and state apparatus, and is able to do many things we can't; it's implausible that they wouldn't manage to reverse-engineer things over thousands of years * Nice echoing of the Solipsists in Sharrow at the end: > *The blood pumped and coursed within her, and with each beat the whole edifice seemed to quake and pulse and shiver, as though for all its mountainous solidity the Sea House was merely a projection, something held in the power of her blood-quickened eyes.* * The Lazy Guns sound exactly like Culture tech, quasi-sentient to boot. But their presence in this remote "orphan" system is odd, and it doesn't fit to have the Culture either dump or lose such weapons. Banks is less subtle than I thought he was, as a teen. Good if you prefer worlds to characters.
The Wish List (2000) by Eoin Colfer	None yet
Delta-V (2019) by Daniel Suarez	Hopeful and precise. Surprisingly moving, in the second half anyway. The prose is flat, economical, and repetitive (for instance, *every* time the characters do pre-emptive oxygen saturation before a spacewalk, Suarez tells you so), but if you like space or engineering detail you'll be fine. It's billed as (very) hard scifi, but there was actually less physics and more economics in it than I was expecting (and still too much kinematic exposition for most readers, I guess). It's "hard" in the sense that every technology in this already exists in some form, if only prototype or protoprototype, that every celestial body mentioned exists in that location, that the energy budget of the crew is taken seriously - "gravity wells are for suckers" - that their (even safety-critical) software has many terrible bugs. (Though I thought this was implausible: > *The flight suits were meant only for short, emergency EVAs, but without access to the ship's network, the clam suits' high-tech helmets were inert.*) Why not completely local processing? Why not use the lo-tech visor instead? The most moving part was Nicole's euthanasia scene, though the anguish of Goff's stupid robots and extortion is also quite big. Some of the most important things in the world rely on sacrifice, and really we should be more moved by the death of an asteroid miner than that of a soldier in a typical war. One is driving the species forward, one is crab-wrestling in a bucket.

	Why is space so moving? Well there's the stated reason, via Hawking: > *With climate change, overdue asteroid strikes, epidemics, and population growth, our own planet is increasingly precarious.* But does this argument from reduction of existential risk go through? Probably not - most x-risk is due to us, not volcanoes or asteroids or gamma bursts, and we should expect this kind of risk to reduce only modestly in a multiplanetary setting, since the act of colonisation carries the risk source, us, with it; and there are much cheaper and more developed ways of preventing extinction, like arms control and AI research. And we're (even) more likely to have large conflicts when the cultural distances, between planetary civilisations, are so much larger. So what? Is it our genes, new-pastures wanderlust? The sheer scale? There's a lot of ostentation in the book, unnecessary mentions of Zegna suits and fancy watches and whatnot (perhaps intended to make us suspicious of the investors and lawyers who wear them - but we already have them *admitting* that they are motivated by egomania and envy). The billionaire at the heart of the plot is a suitable mix of inspirational, reckless, authoritarian, noble, ignoble. Props to Suarez for using SpaceEngine and Kerbal to model the precise trajectory of his crew, though many extra points would have accrued had he open-sourced the run, for the purposes of scientific hermeneutics. Also for his bibliography and dissing Mars colonisation. Suarez' claim that a single asteroid trip could make a trillion dollars is contradicted in the Weinersmith's pop book, where they emphasise the legal headaches, and that the profits are conditional on a huge increase in human space activity (otherwise not much demand for your LEO wares). This is all I know, and it's not very strong evidence either way. ********** How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: None. One thing which doesn't happen much IRL is the financial *and* literal suicide mission by a billionaire for the purposes of driving humanity forward, but this is just ordinary audacity scaled up. I like the extrapolation of Luxembourg's space industry, the ultimate colonial underwriting. The secret construction of a spaceship in HEO is implausible at the moment but *might* not be in a few decades. *Software development*: Yes! The mission is almost lost several times due to software problems, and Ade is the most critical crewmember because of his top monkeypatching and hacking skills (hacking in both senses). *Actual science*: Yes. The gravity ship is actually basic physics, just incredibly hard and expensive engineering (Joyce drops something like $45bn on the project, which sounds about right). The economic argument about moving and constructing everything outside of gravity wells seems incontrovertible to me.
What We	I'm surprised to find Carver relying on punchlines - last-line narrative puns -

Talk About When We Talk About Love (1981) by Raymond Carver	in most of these stories. There is: a lot of rambling, a lot of meanness (breakups, fights, conversations that would be much healthier if they were honest fights), and then a transcendent or transcendently degraded last line. It would almost be not worth reading if you lost all the last lines. Here's what I mean by a pun - from 'The Calm': > *But today I was thinking of that place, of Crescent City, and of how I was trying out a new life there with my wife, and how, in the barber's chair that morning, I had made up my mind to go. I was thinking today about the calm I felt when I closed my eyes and let the barber's fingers move through my hair, the sweetness of those fingers, the hair already starting to grow.* I expected him to care for his wretches. The one from the wife's perspective, 'So Much Water So Close To Home' is the only standout. Completely menacing with almost no action, no flash. Good portraits of the oafish, as opposed to the rapey, as opposed to the long-suffering. I can't decide if the last line is acquiescence or perversity. The title story is surprisingly slight, a 16-page Symposium with oddly inarticulate, repetitive drinkers. (One has ~10 years of college education, and but he's the most primitive.) You could put this down to naturalism and forget it entirely, but for its two great lines. (The story is, then, a fine thing for the protagonist of *Birdman* to stage - self-defeating, opaque, not as deep as it wants.) Stories like these live or die on dialogue, and there's neither enough heft or polish in their chat for me. I always get Chandler and Carver mixed up (yeah, I know) - but if I didn't, I'd go for Chandler every time. The lowness of Chandler is Gothic, stylised, and somehow less general. Plus one star for SMWSCTH.
For the Emperor (Ciaphas Cain #1) (2003) by Sandy Mitchell	None yet
Learning Spark (2013) by Mark Hamstra	None yet
Eisenhorn (Eisenhorn #1-3) (2004) by Dan Abnett	Abnett is extremely good at what he does. This has less action than his best though.
Dawn of the Dumb: Dispatches from the Idiotic Frontline	None yet

(2007) by Charlie Brooker	
Screen Burn (2004) by Charlie Brooker	None yet
Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011) by Daniel Kahneman	A surprising victim of the replication crisis. Only about 10% of the claims have been struck down, but that's a bad attrition rate for just 5 years. Effects strongly promoted in this that have so far been strongly questioned by failed replication: - The Florida effect (words connotating old age make you walk slower) - Money priming (thinking about money makes you selfish) - Cognitive disfluency and its purported system 2 benefits - Ego depletion - Hungry judges certainly don't give harsher sentences by two-standard-deviations. - And anti-hot-hand views. (I don't know what the general attrition rate of claims in nonfiction is, though. Another reason to disfavour books from immature sciences.) It is a great book, wise and practical. It is just hard to tell what parts of it will not decay.
Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979) by Richard M. Rorty	Couldn't judge, will try again.
Supernova in the East I- (Hardcore History, #62-) (2018) by Dan Carlin	None yet
Mathematics: From the Birth of Numbers (1997) by Jan Gullberg	Disarming, unpretentious, funny, deep.
On the Pleasure of Hating (1826) by William	Toty brace of magazine pieces in which he philosophises bare-knuckle fights, juggling, and yes petty hatred. He’s cute, what with his italicised phrases that are now clichés (“blue ruin”), his enthusiasm for enthusiasm, his mid-sentence verse quotations, his Latinate insults (“O procul, este profani”), and enthusiastic woe. is reaction to seeing someone juggle four

Hazlitt	balls at once: > *It makes me ashamed of myself. I ask what there is I can do as well as this? Nothing. What have I been doing all my life? … What abortions are these Essays! How little is made out, and that little how ill! Yet they are the best I can do.* The essay that's from is about juggling and the concept Greatness and the character of a dear dead sportsman friend – and all this in 20 pages. Big man, only sometimes clotted in the seven-clause sentences of his age.
Governing the World: The Rise and Fall of an Idea, 1815 to the Present (2012) by Mark Mazower	Casually brilliant and oddly fond history of the UN *et al*. Practical cosmopolitanism - the promotion of any supranational structure at all - was for a long long time a view held only by strange people indeed - visionaries and ranters and scifi writers - until it was suddenly in the works, laboured over by full secretariats with big bucks. Mazower puzzles over why the US and Britain put so much into these structures, when the previous world order suited them fine. Answer? "Camouflage."
The Adoption Papers (1991) by Jackie Kay	Strong, po-faced verse portrait of her own birth and adoption, in three voices. Really lovely details throughout – her mother hiding all her Communist décor for first meeting the birth mother; Kay kissing her poster of Angela Davis goodnight, a traumatic, funny dismissal of the idea that your real mother has to be your birth mother > *("After mammy telt me she wisna my real mammy I wis scared to death she wis gonna melt…").* Meeting her bio-mum much later, Kay's disillusionment is subtly and truly done: "the blood does not bind confusion" (mop it up, like carbon dioxide). It becomes apparent that Kay has just created the birth mother character – her mouth filled with vivid Plathian violence and articulate confusion not born out by the real woman. If so, more the better. See also 'I try my absolute best', a perfect snapshot of misguided C20th hippy despair at agrichemicals.
Inventing the Enemy: Essays (2011) by Umberto Eco	Calm, panoptic and ennobling. (Funniest clause all month: "*thus Lenin was a neo-Thomist – without of course realising it.*") There's good sad Realism under his playful semiotic historicism: only lazy academic cliques prevent people seeing that the critical realist & the pomo skylark can coexist. So it's a surprise but not a shock to see him use basically Johnson's defence against relativism. Eco chides the Church with its own history! The title essay is composed of quotations from virulent historical racists / misogynists / puritans: it's hard to read. He walks the difficult line between being maximally clear & slightly banal (thus he says things like "Fire is a metaphor for many impulses…", but also: > *Trying to understand other people means destroying the stereotype without denying or ignoring the otherness.*

	). Whose side is he on? The text's!
Computational Logic and Human Thinking (2011) by Robert Kowalski	Nice mission: to teach computer logic to humans to help them think. (Returning logic to its normative roots.) But Kowalski immediately strays from this to *also* try to build "*a comprehensive, logic-based theory of human intelligence*". By aiming at both pragmatic self-help and grand, metaphysical, qualitative psychology, it's too ambitious - or rather, appropriately ambitious but using the wrong tools. (The right tools are unknown but probably include decision theory, statistics, distributed representations, the Bayesian or predictive brain - none of which Kowalski foregrounds. He talks about inferring causes - without using Causal Inference; about doing abduction - without probabilities; about production systems - without the more mature Predictive Processing calculus.) Kowalski praises a few bad theories, like Fodor's version of language of thought, and Gardner's multiple intelligences. (And Cyc isn't marked as a failure.) But also good theories: dual-process psychology, Sperber's relevance theory. The best bit is where he links cognitive biases to naive logical rules > *The computational interpretation [of dual process theory] is that, when an agent is deliberative, its behaviour is controlled by a high-level program, which manipulates symbols that have meaningful interpretations in the environment. But when the agent is intuitive, its behaviour is generated by a low-level program or physical device...* > > *The logical interpretation of dual process theories is that, when an agent is deliberative, its behaviour is generated by reasoning with high-level goals and beliefs. When the agent is intuitive, its behaviour is determined by low-level input–output associations, even if these associations can also be represented in logical form.* It's also a friendly introduction to more recent logics. Perhaps too friendly - if you think that formal symbols always make things harder to think about, I recommend comparing learning logic from this vs a good semiformal text like Tomassi. The bloat of English compared to symbols is about 20x, and the overheads are impossible to miss. It is at least what I hoped it would be: a very clear introduction to good old "GOFAI" in all its rigour, grandiosity and narrowness. (There are maybe 600 definitions in this.) I wanted a logician's (or logic programmer's) view on AI, and I got it (from the technical appendices). CL is impressive and authoritative on a small number of tasks, but it's just not generally promising, and hasn't been for a long time. This 2011 book read like a time capsule from the 1970s, before Prolog and Cyc had soured, before the Winter. (I should clarify that inductive logic programming is a live research programme - I'm going to work on it myself - but *only* in combination with the ruling statistical methods.) I actually don't understand how he can think that this approach is the answer - is it unkind to put it down to decades of sunk cost? I also thought it might be a more rigorous version of *Algorithms to Live By*, and I suppose it is, but at the cost of its practicality.

Snow Crash (1992) by Neal Stephenson	Fun, highly dated in ways that I find charming rather than vitiating (e.g. he has to explain to us what a hard disk is). His depiction of software, that ineliminable agent of our present and our future, is still better than 95% of scifi and 99.9% of lit-fic. The plot is so clunky and over-the-top that Stephenson needs to actually *embody* all the necessary exposition in the form of a scholar personal assistant (which I would give bags of cash to have). I fail to see what's satirical about it; certainly I know Stephenson doesn't believe that Sumerian is a neurolinguistic virus - but author disbelief is not sufficient for satire. Is he satirising Julian Jaynes? Cyberpunk? Hacker supremacism? If so, he failed because *Snow Crash* is a vivid and sympathetic instance of these things.
Information: The New Language of Science (2003) by Hans Christian Von Baeyer	Elementary philosophy of science focussing on Wheeler's "Really Big Questions" about the foundations of physics, in particular the 'digital physics'. (The Questions are '*How come existence*?', '*Why the quantum*?', '*It from bit?*', '*What makes meaning?*') Which wasn't what I was expecting from an out-of-print hardback tome by a serious physicist - particularly with that grand title - but still: nice. In fact it's hard to imagine anyone writing out these first steps any friendlier (ok, maybe Ben Orlin). Its technical work feels effortless; think Schroedinger's *What is Life?* (which von Baeyer actually corrects, in passing). I needed a book on the method / meta-field surrounding mathematical "information", because it has surrounded me: it threatens to encompass science. Just as "energy" eventually became a unifying pillar of all the natural sciences, information has infiltrated that same salient: Energy <-> Entropy <-> Information. And then into other sciences: vB hints that we should see bits as money as ML-performance as Fisher information as VNM utility, which would seize about half of theoretical science. Info theory is a core part of a mathematico-philosophical witch's brew: computability, decision theory, computational complexity, Bayesian statistics, digital physics, quantum computing. Which together take big steps towards the naturalisation of logic - or, more, of maths - or more, of thought. (And is information larger than thought?) And/or the dematerialisation of physics? von Baeyer builds it all up, so we get Clausius (1852) for thermodynamics, Boltzmann (1877) for entropy (inverse info) as a proper physical object, Shannon (1930) for classical info theory, Solomonoff (1960) for algorithmic complexity, Landauer for the shocking physics of computation (1961), Bekenstein (1971) and Hawking for black hole theory (crucial experiments for it-from-bit), Deutsch (1985) for how quantum computing could work. And Wheeler setting the whole new agenda. (I call it new because it hasn't made it into undergraduate philosophy, or physics, or statistics, or ordinary computer science, yet.) The philosophy is very well done. I really liked his physicist's optimism about reflective equilibrium between science and folk physics: > *Information, too, has been defined operationally. Unfortunately, this technical, bottom-up definition is very restricted, and hitherto bears little*

> *resemblence to any of the common, top-down definitions. Eventually the two definitions should converge, but that hasn't happened yet. When it does, we will finally know what information is.*

It impresses me to find a pop science book that has aged this well, over 16 years. It's sad that that's impressive - obviously I'm not reading enough physics and maths. Von Baeyer maybe leans too hard on the physics-is-solid heuristic; he ends up being uncritical about some extremely late-breaking and radical work: the heterodox classical theory of Kahre (2002) and Zeilinger's (1999) grand quietist explanation for QM's weirdness (neither of which I've heard much about since).

> *Zeilinger's principle... furnishes an answer to Wheeler's famous question "Why the quantum?" Why does nature seems granular, discontinuous, quantized into discrete chunks like sand..? The answer is that while we have no idea how the world is really arranged, and shouldn't even ask, we do know that knowledge of the world is information: and since information is naturally quantized into bits, the world also appears quantized. If it didn't, we wouldn't be able to understand it. It's both as simple and as profound as that.*
>
> *A second prediction of QM that is explained... is the randomness of the outcomes of some measurements... if the single bit of information in an elementary system is revealed, then there is no more information left over to answer additional experimental questions... so other independent measurements must have random answers.*

Each chapter takes an idea ("heat and entropy", "logarithms and message space", "qubits", "Morse and optimality") and builds it up with little informal proofs and thought experiments. This is nice, but because it has to do everything from scratch it's more of a grab-bag than an argument, and certainly not a "language of science" by the end. For instance, he stops short of one key philosophical outcome of all this technical talk, which is that there are two types of explanations, even though he covers all the ideas you'd need:

1) information compressions (e.g. General relativity explains the force on *all* of the infinite points in spacetime in one unbelievably terse tensor equation. We can often count the bits used by theories like this, and so solve theory selection!)

2) simplified algorithms, faster ways to reason about the world (e.g. much of computer science)

As you can tell from the number of question marks in this review, I found this stimulating but not conclusive. But it would be foolish to expect a pop book to answer the Really Big Questions, and von Baeyer's reminds us frequently that the current answers he presents are unfinished. So this is step one of a currently unbounded algorithm. Minus a half for not quite taking things as far as they can go.

Misc notes

* This would be a pretty good primer for Map and Territory or Quantum Computing Since Democritus, if those assume too much for you.

	* *Lots* of literary illustrations of scientific ideas - Calvino, Wittgenstein, Borges - but it didn't feel forced to me. I suppose it might actually reduce the friendliness, for some readers. * Is this true?: > *The most important role of noise, however, is as the preserver of our sanity. Without noise, the measurement or observation of a single quantity would requite an infinite memory and an infinite amount of time - it would overload all our circuits. Neither science nor consciousness could exist... noise is a thick blanket of snow which softens the contours into large, rounded mounds we can perceive and sort out without being overwhelmed.* We evolved lots of ways to ignore information. Why would this not happen again? A photosensitive patch arises in that noiseless world; since it is an analogue processor it simply trims off the infinite information by default when it runs out of molecules or reactions(?) * He calls the Bayesian interpretation of probability "the rational approach" which suits me but let's imagine that's a mistranslation of his meaning "the mental approach", "the personalist approach". * Gleick handles the social history and applications with unsurpassed skill, but I wanted the mind-bending crunchy side, *natural information*, digital physics, information as everything. * "Information is flow of form" * Solomonoff induction is intractable, another word for practically useless. Does this change the philosophical significance of the above brew? I don't think so - "Here is a way to work everything out; you can almost never use it" is a pretty plausible way for philosophy to end tbf. Does it change its scientific significance? Yes, absolutely - we have to seek approximations of the forbidden ideal or else it has none. * What's fundamental, thermodynamics or information? Neither? * Yet another way that info theory eats the life of the mind is the deeply practical "value of information", a way of deciding whether to bother with an experiment (q.v. the master, Gwern).
Cryptonomicon (1999) by Neal Stephenson	An enormous collection of novels - a spy thriller, and a military farce, and a comparative history (of Showa Japan, Churchill Britain, Roosevelt America, the pre- and post-Marcos Philippines), and an oral history of computing, and a modern legal psychodrama, and a family saga of three large dynasties. And a divisive book: 1) It is extremely focussed on men and masculine mindset - guts and brutality, mathematical facility, mind-numbing horniness, how shit works, emotional impermeability, pride in being a stereotype. (Scroll down to see reviews reacting in highly exaggerated ways to this fact, with either horror or delight.) > *Men who believe that they are accomplishing something by speaking speak in a different way from men who believe that speaking is a waste of time... there might be a third category... [Waterhouse] speaks, not as*

> *a way of telling you a bunch of stuff he's already figured out, but as a way of making up a bunch of new shit as he goes along. And he always seems to be hoping that you'll join in. Which no one ever does.*

On the wonder and absurdity of social etiquette:

> *The room contains a few dozen living human bodies, each one a big sack of guts and fluids so highly compressed that it will squirt for a few yards when pierced. Each one is built around an armature of 206 bones connected to each other by notoriously fault-prone joints that are given to obnoxious creaking, grinding, and popping noises when they are in other than pristine condition. This structure is draped with throbbing steak, inflated with clenching air sacks, and pierced by a Gordian sewer filled with burbling acid and compressed gas and asquirt with vile enzymes and solvents produced by many dark, gamy nuggets of genetically programmed meat strung along its length. Slugs of dissolving food are forced down this sloppy labyrinth by serialized convulsions, decaying into gas, liquid, and solid matter which must all be regularly vented to the outside world lest the owner go toxic and drop dead. Spherical, gel-packed cameras swivel in mucus greased ball joints. Infinite phalanxes of cilia beat back invading particles, encapsulate them in goo for later disposal. In each body a centrally located muscle flails away at an eternal, circulating torrent of pressurized gravy. And yet, despite all of this, not one of those bodies makes a single sound during the sultan's speech.*

Half of this is an accurate portrayal of 40s gender politics, half a defensive reaction to contemporary blank-slateism. I don't think it's a malign kind of masculinity, though there are only a couple of female characters who don't have at least peripheral or inverted sexiness - if you can't handle that I'd avoid it. A good point to bail out would be the bit where Waterhouse models the effect of masturbation vs sex on his cognition as a periodic timeseries. I'm very hard to offend, but the constant use of "females" got to me, by page 400.

> *Randy stares directly into the eyes of the female customs official and says, "The Internet." Totally factitious understanding dawns on the woman's face, and her eyes ping bosswards. The boss, still deeply absorbed in an article about the next generation of high-speed routers, shoves out his lower lip and nods, like every other nineties American male who senses that knowing this stuff is now as intrinsic to maleness as changing flat tires was to Dad. "I hear that's really exciting now," the woman says in a completely different tone of voice, and begins scooping Randy's stuff together into a big pile so that he can repack it. Suddenly the spell is broken, Randy is a member in good standing of American society again, having cheerfully endured this process of being ritually goosed by the Government.*

2) It is also a partisan in the Arts vs STEM "culture war". (In fact Stephenson is often dismissive of all academia - "*grad students existed not to learn things but to relieve the tenured faculty members of tiresome burdens such as educating people and doing research*".) One of the most important scenes in the book shows a lone techie clashing with a self-appointed jury of stereotypically appalling critical theorists: they speak nonsense about an

objective matter, he correctly calls them on it, they cover him in ad hominem bulverism until he gives in. It's not without nuance: his champion in the fight Randy is later shown sulking and reliving it and admitting his own pettiness:

> *"I strenuously object to being labeled and pigeonholed and stereotyped as a technocrat," Randy said, deliberately using oppressed-person's language maybe in an attempt to turn their weapons against them but more likely (he thinks, lying in bed at three A.M. in the Manila Hotel) out of an uncontrollable urge to be a prick.*

3) There are a lot of coincidences, much more than the novelistic baseline. Characters meet Atanasoff and Turing and Reagan and MacArthur. (A Nazi submarine captain makes a sneering reference to a bureaucratic nightmare being something out of "that Jew Kafka". I thought this was an absurd anachronism, but looking into it, the Nazi could easily have read him, but could not have made the reference to a Brit and expected it to stick. English translation of *Das Schloss* in 1930 but it didn't take off until after the war.) This is cute/trite on its own, but I find it helpful to imagine Stephenson looking down at history, selecting a particularly interesting sub-graph from the population

4) There are lots of info-dumps. Large sections of this are indistiguishable from nonfiction. ("*This pause is called the horizontal retrace interval. Another one will occur...*") People seem to hate this, but it is fine since it's done through aspie characters who absolutely do talk like that.

5) It has a lot of pulpy Feats, fuck-yeah setpieces which fiction this good usually foregoes. Tropical headhunters; escape from a collapsing mineshaft; cryptocurrency in the 90s; tactical blackface; drinking and lolling with your Nazi captors; etc.

> *It would be an idyllic tropical paradise of not for the malaria, the insects, the constant diarrhea and resulting hemorrhoids, and the fact that the people are dirty and smell bad and deat each other and use human heads for decoration.*

It's easy to miss the uniting theme, and thus call it "not a novel" or whatever, because it only unmasks on p.791. It is Ares v Athena, rage v cunning, politics v engineering, normies v geeks, law v ethics, conflict v mistake, local maxima v the search for the global. This overloaded binary is embodied in Andrew v Randy, the Dentist v Avi, Rudy v Göring, All of Japan v Dengo.

Now, it suits me to have litigious bastards and culture-warriors be the inheritors of Ares, of mindless destruction. But it would be silly to think that the stakes are comparable between the plot strands: it's WWII vs the Struggles of Some Cool Crypto Entrepreneurs. But Stephenson is obviously not equating them, and might be pointing out that stakes are now in general lower, even when you're up against contemporary gangsters.

Another giant theme is the emergence of one new masculinity, beyond the taciturn physical hero: the geek. This is the "third category" above. (Is this really that new? Isn't it just the Scholar?)

Misc notes

* Waterhouse seems to be taking Bill Tutte's space in history and seizing it for America but ok.

* Bobby Shaftoe is the noblest junkie character I've ever seen - ingenious in his pursuit of morphine, but slightly more keen on Marine honour than on it.

* I was not expecting Stephenson to use *converting to Christianity* as the symbol for Dengo leaving sick ultranationalism behind. Compassion and liberalism are far larger and better than the Christian launchpad they happened to use, after all.

* Relatedly there's his preference for cute family-values Christianity over postmodern critical theory:

> *To translate it into UNIX system administration terms (Randy's fundamental metaphor for just about everything), the post-modern, politically correct atheists were like people who had suddenly found themselves in charge of a big and unfathomably complex computer system (viz, society) with no documentation or instructions of any kind, and so whose only way to keep the thing running was to invent and enforce certain rules with a kind of neo-Puritanical rigor, because they were at a loss to deal with any deviations from what they saw as the norm. Whereas people who were wired into a church were like UNIX system administrators who, while they might not understand everything, at least had some documentation, some FAQs and How-tos and README files, providing some guidance on what to do when things got out of whack.*

* Some surprisingly deft notes on kink and the exogenous/preconscious nature of sexuality, in the bit where they're spying on Tom Howard.

* This line accurately portrays the mindset of certain wizard types like Turing:

> *It is exciting to discover electrons and figure out the equations that govern their movement; it is boring to use those principles to design electric can openers.*

though it is discreditable and nongeneralisable to hold.

* I learned a lot of words.

* There are dozens and dozens of depictions of Japanese war crimes before we get any note paid to the horrendous suffering of the Japanese troops. But after that it is suitably even-handed in its tragedy. One of the saddest sentences I've ever read: "They are strafing the survivors".

* Root is a tech determinist about the war - the Allies won because their tech was better, end-of. I seriously doubt historians would go with this.

* I struggle to fit Root into the world. His death and reappearance is the only magical element in the entire thing (coincidences aside), and clashes with the main bloody theme. I am toying with the idea that Root is a

	collective name like James Bond, but I suppose it'll just be some switcheroo bullshit. --- There's a lot wrong with it - it's about twice as long as it needs to be, the gender stuff is overdone, it is intentionally annoying to its outgroup, succumbing to 'conflict theory', and none of its antagonists (Loeb, the Dentist, Wing, Crocodile) are fleshed out *despite him having 900 pages of opportunities for fleshing them* - but it's grand, clever, full of ideas, funny, full of great setpieces, and foresaw a couple of things about our decade.
From Subsistence to Exchange and Other Essays (New Forum Books) (2000) by P.T. Bauer	Conservative critique of foreign aid, but without contempt or narrow particularism. Emphasised cultural barriers and institutional weakness as a lone voice during the hegemony of Rostow's capital-only fairytale.
SCP: Foundation Tomes () by Various	Good example of the most distinctive literary trend of the day: web serial fiction / wiki fiction. Also of the shortcomings of same: the committee fragmentariness and unmanageable hugeness. (I cut this short at page 1000. And this is only one of three giant ebooks of the whole wiki. Phew.) That's the medium. Its genre is post-pulp post-Lovecraft urban fantasy-horror - the most popular genre? (Aside from old stalwarts, trash romance and MFA lit.) And style's the uncommon pseudoacademic register of Lovecraft's original pulp. Its achievement is to dispense with characterisation and rely entirely on atmosphere and startling concepts. There's no protagonist and only hints of antagonists (besides the thousands of SCP objects themselves). The Foundation is ludicrously powerful - they've global jurisdiction over law enforcement, run hundreds of fatal human experiments, retain a vast staff and holdings. In order for this to work as horror, they need equally elevated foes - and so they do: they're always being infiltrated, manipulated, stolen from, exsanguinated or bombed. The Foundation commits many atrocities (contrast *Delta Green, Dresden Files, Agents of Shield, the X-Files*, which are much more anti-authority). It has all the ordinary kinds of horror - monsters, disease, body horror, mind-rape, invisible forces, alien geometries - but also the greater, rare horror of *exponentiation*, of facing a foe with the potential to suddenly explode beyond all containment and never stop growing. Another distinctive bit is its meta horror: objects which know the rules of the story and about other objects. I recommend reading this with the images disabled. They're a labour of love, I know, but the imagination is easier to scare than the eye. Good queasy fun.
The Foundations of	Bloody weird to slap a star rating on this, but there you go, welcome to where nothing is not rateable.

Arithmetic: A Logico-Mathematical Enquiry into the Concept of Number (1884) by Gottlob Frege	
Good Capitalism, Bad Capitalism, and the Economics of Growth and Prosperity (2007) by William J. Baumol	Thoughtful and lucid nontechnical essays on the very different structures hiding behind the vague anticoncept 'capitalism'. The title alone beats most leftists and rightists, who tend to tacitly deny the existence of good or bad capitalisms, respectively. (Where by good we mean "good for growth and eliminating poverty".) The authors go further of course, with four ideal types: * *state-guided capitalism* (China, 60s Japan, Singapore) * *big-firm capitalism* (South Korea, Japan, France, North Carolina) * *entrepreneurial capitalism* - high growth from small companies doing actually new things, high distribution of gains - (Ireland, UK, California) * *oligarchic capitalism* - low growth, low distribution of gains - (Russia, Italy, sometimes South Korea) They tie these to specific policies, often lacking in these kinds of books. They also accept that what's "good" economic policy depends on your existing base (cf. Ha-Joon Chang's argument for trade barriers for pre-industrial countries). Most of the book is about the conditions and effects of entrepreneurship, but they also find big firms actually necessary ("*the best form of capitalism is a blend of entrepreneurial and big-firm*"), well before Tyler Cowen. Decent paean to the moral importance of growth too: > *slow growth, especially when coupled with widening inequality, can provide an environment that breeds distrust and often hate. It is not an accident that some of the worst periods of intolerance to African Americans and immigrants in United States history (the late 1800s, the 1930s, 1970s) occurred during periods of slow or negative growth. The worst-case example of this was, of course, the rise of Nazism...* > *Michael Mandel: 'Such technology-driven growth is essential if we are not to drown in our own problems... Without breakthroughs in medical science, it won't be possible to supply the healthh care to a generation of aging Americans without bankrupting the young. Without breakthroughs in energy production, it won't be possible to bring Third World economies up to industrialised living standards without badly damaging the environment...' </blockquote>* >> *If annual growth of labor productivity is — In 100 years average earnings will have risen* >> *2% — 620%* >> *3% — 1820%* > *Good book for anyone who thinks they hate economics, or economists, or neoclassical economics, or growth itself. Certainly much more*

	> *readable and fair than Piketty's mega-bestseller. (For very adversarial people, better to start with Filthy Lucre, which analyses good and bad forms of competition.)</td> </tr>*
Learn Python the Hard Way (2010) by Zed A. Shaw	None yet
What is the Last Question? () by John Brockman	List of 284 questions - some of them kind of daffy or parochial ("will we ever be able to predict earthquakes?", "What would comprise the most precise sonic representation of the history of life?"), some of them profound, about half of them interminably nerdsniped by this thing called consciousness, exactly 12 of them about what I'd answer. ("Will AI make the Luddites right?", "Is it possible to control a system capable of evolving?", "What can humanity do right now that will make the biggest difference over the next billion years?", "Can an increasingly powerful species survive the actions of it's most extreme individuals?") A few of them are answered already (to my satisfaction), e.g. "Why are people seldom persuaded by clear evidence and rational argument?", "Is love really all you need?", "Are feelings computable?", "Why do even the most educated people today feel that their grip on what they can truly know is weaker than ever before?", "Was agriculture a wrong turn?". But then the list is an accurate picture of how compartmentalised and undiffused much of the greatest knowledge is among intellectuals. (But the prompt is not "what's the most important question?" nor "what question do we most need answered?" so ignore my judging.) Too broad for PhDs, often too broad for entire careers, but inspiring and sharpening anyway.
The Unreality of Time (1908) by J.M.E. McTaggart	None yet
Unknown Armies (1999) by Greg Stolze	Something witty and shocking and literary, in the urban fantasy genre? Yes: this RPG does the same secretly-magical subculture-glorifying thing as the rest of the 90s, but does it better. The genre might be better described as *political horror* - the same kind of logical extrapolation of conspiracy theories and occult 'wisdom' as Unsong. > *Everybody hears things on the street. Some of them might even be true. Like these:* > *Every single president of the United States has had a glass eye. The same glass eye.* > *Planes do not actually fly. It is a very elaborate hoax created because the general public does not understand or trust quantum teleportation.* > *Those games kids play—"step on a crack" and all that— are actually rituals that do stuff, but you've really got to believe in them. Kids believe in them, but don't know what the rituals really do. That's why kids can survive...*

	> *There is a cabal operating in fast food restaurants who want to take over the world by drugging the most popular fast food with powerful magical drugs.* *The internet is one big engine. The faster the information flows, the more power it generates. If anyone could find out how to harness this power they could rule the world.* *Brendan Behan's pint glass sits behind the bar in a Dublin pub. Any who drink from it have words flow from them, but at what price?* *Nearly every nursery rhyme originated as teaching tools for magicians. You don't even want to know the magickal meaning of "Three Blind Mice."* *There's a tape floating around containing a ritual to produce a soundtrack to the caster's life. The intention was to never again miss anything suspicious or ignore a romantic moment. At the end there is only a long, eerie note—and then static.* *There's a sandwich shop in Atlanta where, if you order the special, along with a hot beverage, they include a small slip of paper telling you the date of your death. Most people just throw it away or eat it by accident.* *There's a kid in Little Rock, Arkansas who gains magical power from boredom.* *The final scores of every year's Superbowl are part of an ever-changing numerology formula that can start and stop wars.* *Butane lighters with occult symbology contain listening devices in the bases. The company putting them out is trying to spy into the occult underground with these devices.* *Aliens from Proxima Centauri have been living among us now for years, but in the last few months they've all started leaving.* The core mechanic is that *there's always a catch*: you have to sacrifice to gain magic. In particular, social deviance brings power. Each character has an obsession - the booze mage gets charges from drinking rare liquors, the wealth mage from squandering money, the skater mage from risky stunts, the porn mage from..., the self-harm mage from... This isn't trivial: to get the serious charges you have to permanently change your character. The spells in the book are just suggestions, the characters mostly have to make them up. And this is reflected in the fluff: being edgy isn't a pose, it directly drives your alienation from society and mere reality. You go mad even if you win. The back story is huge and silly (moves from control of the Street, to the World, to the Cosmos) but also excellent for long campaigns. This thread on a random dead forum is a key part of the book. Totally perfect for teens. haven't read it since but I will.
Milkman (2018) by Anna Burns	Unlikeable, admirable portrait of a diseased society, the disease signified by unbearable harassment of one of its young members. The book's unlikeable because it's realistic. In Burns' telling, 70s Ulster feels like ISIS in miniature, a taste of Maoist China: the complete infection of private life by horrible politics, slander, cruelty, and doom. The disease radiates out from the death squads and Gestapo fuckery of the "traditionalists" and the delusional gangster sociopathy, the kangaroo courts - the lash for women, and six-packs for men - of the "renouncers".

Decades of fear and vengeance bring out our worst, give psychopaths a foothold:

> *To the [IRA] groupies too, it wasn't so much these men should be fighters for the cause as that they should be the particular individuals wielding substantial power and influence in the areas, They didn't have to be paramilitaries, didn't even have to be illegal, could have been anyone. It so happened though, that in the set-up of the time, in each of those totalitarian enclaves, it was the male paramilitaries who, more than anyone, ruled over the areas with final say...*
>
> *He had to be leader, Number One, making her in turn Number One Attachment.*

The sickest part of the book is the way that gossip feeds on itself, floats free of reality - her ordinary stalker accuses Maybe-girlfriend of "aggravated harassment"; she's seen "with" [being harrassed by] a Big Man, so she becomes tainted/anointed with his aweing disrespectability; later, after he threatens to kill her boyfriend, the grapevine instead has it that she'd "*tried to evade retribution for cheating on him with a car mechanic*". A rape of social standing, of identity.

Burns gives out great lines, poetic heft, to everyone, even vicious people like Ma and Milkman.

> *Why can't you take on board you're not wanted, that your advances are not to be accepted, that it's thanks but no thanks? You mean nothing to us, we don't even think of you and another thing, you can't just act with impunity, carrying on as if it didn'thappen, as if you didn't start this, as if you didn't stir things up. You're a cat – that's right, you heard us, a cat – a double cat! We don't think you're up to the level of even being a cat. But don't you push us so far because this is aggravated harassment*

Maybe-girlfriend's own register is a little tiring, bright and arch and digressive (but not enough to keep the the pall of her surroundings lifted). It might be an attempt to balance out the setting with comically out-of-place lyricism, but if so it works strangely:

> *'But understand, daughter,' went on ma, 'I'm not saying my rear cannot now fit in the chair because the chair's become too tight for it. It can still fit in. It's just that now it encompasses a certain amount of extra inches or fractions of inches to which it has never acclimatised and which in the old days didn't used to be.'*
> *'I knew now, of course, what she was driving at, though unsure still how to respond.... My response therefore, should be comparable to her own words, should be of like tone and weight in order to acknowledge and to respect her older status, even her originality indelineating the depth of her rear condition in relation to the chair she was speaking of.*

The Community hates the depressed and the upbeat ("shiny"), the chaste and the promiscuous, the deviation:

> *And that was the trouble with the shiny people. Take a whole group of individuals who weren't shiny, maybe a whole community, a whole*

	> *nation, or maybe just a statelet immersed long-term on the physical and energetic planes in the dark mental energies; conditioned too, through years of personal and communal suffering, to be overladen with heaviness and grief and fear and anger – well, these people could not, not at the drop of a hat, be open to any bright shining button of a person stepping into their environment and shining upon them just like that...* *As for the environment, that too, would object, backing up the pessimism of its people, which was what happened where I lived where the whole place always seemed to be in the dark. It was as if the electric lights were turned off, always turned off, even though dusk was over so they should have been turned on yet nobody was turning them on and nobody noticed either, they weren't on...* *So shiny was bad, and 'too sad' was bad, and 'too joyous' was bad, which meant you had to go around not being anything; also not thinking, least not at top level, which was why everybody kept their private thoughts safe and sound in the recesses underneath.* I quite liked the purely-functional names - "maybe-boyfriend", "third-brother-in-law", "longest friend from primary school", "Somebody McSomebody", though I see it's not a popular methodology on here. I think "Milkman" is the only proper name in it. She belabours a good metaphor (the sunset from the front cover): even the colour of a beautiful sunset is an ideological matter, for these locals. They've a particular cached thought - "the sky is blue" - and refuse to let a fancy intellectual (a spirited French teacher) make them notice that the sky is currently anything but blue. Blatant wilful error in the face of decisive evidence, maintained to express one's identity: welcome to the species. Reviewers call it funny, which it isn't really until Chapter Seven, until Milkman is gone and the *Carry On*-Tarantino part can kick off. There's this: > *Before Milkman, they had shot a binman, twobusdrivers, a road sweeper, a real milkman who was our milkman, then another person whodidn't have any blue-collar or service-industry connections – all in mistake for Milkman. Thenthey shot Milkman. Then they played down the mistaken shootings while playing up theintended shooting, as if it had been Milkman and only Milkman they had shot all along.* and > *"You're a female. He's a male. You're my sister-in-law and I don't care how many of his family got murdered, he's a bastard and would've been a bastard even if they hadn't got murdered." They hadn't got murdered. Only four had got murdered. The other two had been a suicide and an accidental death.* Very tiring but worthy overall.
Good Omens: The Nice and	None yet

Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch (1990) by Terry Pratchett	
Going Solo (Roald Dahl's Autobiography, #2) (1986) by Roald Dahl	None yet
Learn Python 3 The Hard Way () by Zed A. Shaw	Much, much more my style - opinionated, joined-up, irreverent - though not my speed ("*this book gives you the mental tools and attitude you need to go through most Python books and actually learn something*"). Shaw is a beautiful mind in a slightly unhinged shell: > *Which programming language you learn and use doesn't matter. Do not get sucked into the religion surrounding programming languages as that will only blind you to their true purpose of being your tool for doing interesting things.* > > *Programming as an intellectual activity is the only art form that allows you to create interactive art. You can create projects that other people can play with, and you can talk to them indirectly. No other art form is quite this interactive. Movies flow to the audience in one direction. Paintings do not move. Code goes both ways.* > > *Programming as a profession is only moderately interesting. It can be a good job, but you could make about the same money and be happier running a fast food joint. You're much better off using code as your secret weapon in another profession. People who can code in the world of technology companies are a dime a dozen and get no respect. People who can code in biology, medicine, government, sociology, physics, history, and mathematics are respected and can do amazing things to advance those disciplines.* A good way to spend an hour after a year away. [Free!]
Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions (1884) by Edwin A. Abbott	Likeable but not readable. I prefer *the Dot and the Line* or *GEB*
The Forever War (1974) by Joe	None yet

Haldeman	
The Sandman: Endless Nights (The Sandman) (2003) by Neil Gaiman	None yet
Reaper Man (Discworld, #11; Death, #2) (1991) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Complicity (1993) by Iain Banks	None yet
Bad News (Patrick Melrose, #2) (1992) by Edward St. Aubyn	None yet
Notes from a Small Island (1995) by Bill Bryson	None yet
Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence (2006) by David Benatar	Intense, original, contrarian - doing exactly what philosophy should do - but unpersuasive.
The Gervais Principle: The Complete Series, with a Bonus Essay on Office Space (Ribbonfarm Roughs) (2013) by	A fun, nasty, bitchy taxonomy of social class / psychological theory of the firm; a mishmash of economics, psychoanalysis and literary criticism; a series of massive blogposts apologising for being a book. It splits employed people into three classes with terrible names - Leaders ("Sociopaths"), Loyalists ("Clueless"), Workers ("Losers") - and throws a massive amount of fictional evidence at each. That's obviously a formal hierarchy, Leaders > Loyalists > Workers, but Rao's first big left turn is to impose a second contradictory ordering on the 3 classes in developmental psychology terms: Clueless < Losers < Sociopaths. I like his subdivision of Losers into: Minimum-effort rationally-disengaged; Overperformers; future Sociopaths. It looks nasty, and Rao is uninterested in making it seem moral or immoral, but if this is how the leaders actually think, Rao is doing us (the

Venkatesh G. Rao

99%) a service.

Is this system justified and true? No. Rao writes the best clickbait in the world, what he calls "insight porn". It is the verbal equivalent of the noise an F1 engine makes on a 200m straight. The class theory in this would make for a great literary theory, a blueprint for future *Office Space*s. Myers-Briggs is marginally better than the dumb view of people as more or less defective versions of one character. So too is this better than "bosses/workers" cod Marxism.

(He could have massively increased his audience and reduced unwanted connotations by renaming "Losers" to "Workers"

> *the Loser — really not a loser at all if you think about it — pays his dues, does not ask for much, and finds meaning in his life elsewhere*

)

He has a weird relationship with the amoral elites - he often says things like

> *In the big games of life, those involving the Darwinian dimensions of sex, money or power, we don't get to define the rules. And it is only those games that can create social value.*

putting destiny and ultimate value in their hands. And he clearly thinks of himself as a post-reality-shock enlightened figure. And yet he rags on the inauthenticity, nihilism, cruelty, hollowness of his 'Sociopaths'.

There are dozens of acute, contentious, boggling passages like

> *For high-empathy people, all this is natural. By participating in collective feeling in groups of any size, and reacting to basic attraction/aversion drives, you can actually safely navigate all the complexity by instinct. Not only can you do this, you will actually feel good doing this. This feeling is called happiness. I don't have time to go into this, but happiness is entirely a social phenomenon, and there's plenty of evidence that the best way (and from my reading, the only way) to get happy is to get sociable. Non-social feelings that seem like happiness turn out, upon further examination, to be distinct emotions like contentment, equanimity or hedonistic pleasure*

> *the level of abstraction that we are concerned with, all theories of developmental psychology – Freud's, Piaget's, Erikson's, Maslow's – say roughly the same thing about arrested development: you are born Clueless and clue up in fits and starts. Bits of you get stuck and left behind at different points, and eventually you exhaust your capacity for real change and stall (though you may retain an illusion that you are on a path of "lifelong growth and learning," itself a pattern of arrested development)*

I can imagine a teenager reading this and becoming absolutely insufferable. But much great writing can lend spurious superiority to fools - for instance Nietzsche.

	[Free! here]
Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture (2003) by David Kushner	Kinda amateurish prose, everything "classic" and "legendary" in the same sentence. It's saved by the singular, remarkable character Carmack. Neuroatypical, ascetic, principled, focussed to the point of dissociation. He slept on the floor for months, despite being rich, because he didn't see the need for comfort. An excellent example of what someone profoundly creative can do, if they also love work. (: All the glories of the species.) Romero is less interesting, because he is a fairly ordinary tech startup founder (with a sicker sense of humour and less self-suppression), mendacious and loud. "*To the outside world, Romero was id.*" He may have invented gaming smack talk, by screaming at people in LAN tournaments. If you've never been on Xbox Live, you probably haven't had a 9 year-old child scream that you're a faggot and a noob. The child is channeling Romero. I concede that there would have been no Doom Moment without Romero's hyping it - that together these two men form one functioning human being. Kushner occasionally adds value, e.g. when he notes that id were to gaming what technical metal was to music: the marriage of virtuosity with extreme content, "*high technology and gruesome gameplay*". To see how important skill is in selling a dark aesthetic, compare the Learjet-level success of fancy metal with the parochial subsistence of hardcore punk. He also sees an entire type very clearly: the alpha nerd, with all his lofty contempt, Ferraris, workaholism, disloyalty, pranks, energy. This is much more common in life than in media. Repetitive though; skim.
More Heat Than Light: Economics as Social Physics: Physics as Nature's Economics (1989) by Philip Mirowski	I struggled with this a lot (probably equally due to his prose as my lack of maths) but Mirowski is always very exciting. (Whether excitingness is the best virtue for an historian or social theorist, if it's at the expense of other virtues, is another question.)
Waking Up: Searching for Spirituality Without Religion (2014) by Sam Harris	> *Most people who believe they are meditating are just thinking with their eyes closed.* > *Forces of digestion and metabolism are at work within me that are utterly beyond my perception or control. Most of my internal organs may as well not exist for all I know of them directly, and yet I can be reasonably certain that I have them, arranged much as any medical textbook would suggest. The taste of the coffee, my satisfaction at its flavor, the feeling of the warm cup in my hand—while these are immediate facts with which I am acquainted, they reach back into a dark wilderness of facts that I will never come to know.*

> *... Where am I, that I have such a poor view of things? And what sort of thing am I that both my outside and my inside are so obscure? ...Am I inside my skull? Let's say yes for the moment, because we are quickly running out of places to look for me. Where inside my skull might I be? And if I'm up there in my head, how is the rest of me me?*
> *</i>*

Surprisingly humble and sincere. Some readers feel tricked - feel that Harris is smuggling in science under soft, false pretences. This isn't fair; he has done this stuff for decades, visited lamas in Tibet, put in the work. It's implausible that he would do so much insincerely; whatever his other failings, he is actually trying to bridge the two kinds of seekers.* (That said, this book design is a masterpiece of camouflage. Look at the soft colours, the sunny logo, the sans-serif purity, the unthreatening subtitle. Compare his other books!)

However: consider all the things people mean by "spirituality":
1. subjective knowledge of ultimate / immaterial reality
1b. gaining supernatural abilities as a result
2. one's deep moral or existential values
3. personal growth
4. feeling of awe-inspiring beauty
5. introspection; close contact with one's own "inner dimension"
6. "the ability to step a little back from your emotions and thoughts, observe them as they are without getting swept up in them, and then evaluating them critically"
7. sense of love towards (all) others
8. the quest to see the ego and the self as illusory

With so much popular support - with so much baggage - it's not possible to throw out the word or concept; instead we have to try and reform it. This is Harris' mission - though in fact he focusses almost exclusively on (5) -> (8), the standard Buddhist therapy of not being hurt by distraction, bad luck, frustrated desires.

He rejects (1) straightforwardly, in favour of psychologising the whole practice. Paraphrased: 'Instead of making you experience Reality, meditation lets you experience your mind; instead of strengthening your insubstantial soul, you're strengthening your mind.' This is a healthy kind of reconstruction in my view, but it certainly leads him to make controversial claims like "*The deepest goal of spirituality is freedom from the illusion of the self*". Metaphysically profligate readers will have no fun here. (But they knew that already.)

How can a scientist (or at least a pro-science talking head) boost a practice with the aim of rejecting *thought*? The trick is to distinguish thinking / experiencing (which are after all the locus of all value, and of decisions and creativity) from *identifying* with the stream of your thoughts, from being carried away, from being endlessly distracted.

Does this stuff work? It probably does for stress reduction - at least like taking a nap does, or a valium, or sitting still and breathing deeply for a bit. And on the other end, it is definitely not the source of supernatural brain-juice-drinking power. So the truth is somewhere between these two limits,

and we drift, deciding whether to spend time on it.

I'm an unpromising practitioner. For instance, this is kind of my jam. It's not the indescribability that bothers me - after all, any knowledge-how is indescribable (or rather describable only with millions of parameters). You can accept e.g. Hume or Parfit's reasoning - you can have the propositional knowledge, can know that "there is no self beyond my bundle of experiences". Meditation is supposed to be the know-how of nonessentialism, the skill of actually paying attention to the implications of this System-2 judgment.

But being 'nonconceptual' means no language, no premises, no reason, no jokes, no connection, no comparison, using none of my strengths, leaving none of my spoor. This is a great loss to me.

I don't know that I do suffer as a result of identifying with my thoughts; I don't think that dissatisfaction lurks in every sensation I ever experience or also my whole life in retrospect. But the old claim, similar to Marxist or feminist 'false consciousness', is that I am too owned to realise I'm being owned:

> *"beginning meditators... report after days or weeks of intensive practice that their attention is carried away by thought every few seconds. This is actually progress. It takes a certain degree of concentration to even notice how distracted you are."*

Freedom from desire sounds much like death to me, for all that Harris and others argue that it can somehow coexist with passion against the suffering of others, with striving to be a better person, with chipping in to the Great Project of discovery, compassion, optimisation. Luckily the two projects - really feeling that you are not your thoughts, not a homunculus behind your eyes having them; vs not wanting things because wanting leads to disappointment - seem to be separable.

A consolation: there's a sense in which meditation, introspection and phenomenology are highly, maximally empirical - they involve very close attention and analysis of the raw data. It just happens that the raw data (the sense-data) are irreplicable, private, closed, and so not directly a matter for science. Empiricism before science, consciousness without self. And I like this.

Mindfulness is billed as not just cool and true but *useful* -

> *No doubt many distinct mechanisms are involved - the regulation of attention and behaviour, increased body awareness, inhibition of negative emotions, reframing of experience, changes in your view of the 'self', and so forth - and each of these will have their own neurophysiological basis."*

Well, I do love self-regulation!

The following argument isn't explicitly stated by Harris, but I find it helpful as an existence-proof for the usefulness of nonessentialism:
1. We are happy and perform well when we're in 'flow' states.
2. Flow states involve "losing" yourself in a task, in a concrete, unhesitating sequence of perceptions and actions.

3. Therefore losing yourself can be good and helpful.

Also

1. We do not directly apprehend the external world; we know it through sense-data plus massive computational modelling tricks in the brain.
2. We know that the brain computes the wrong thing sometimes. (Cognitive biases, optical illusions, top-down processing, hallucinations.)
3. So, if such a thing is possible, it could be helpful to attend to sense-data more closely, to rule out automatic-brain errors.

While I don't have a very clear philosophy of mind, I know I'm not a direct realist or substance dualist or identity essentialist, so I've no simple philosophical objections to breaking down the Self, either. Allons-y.

Even if I accept that mindfulness is a source of value, there's presumably still a tradeoff against clearer, quicker, more public sources: doing science or kindnesses or pleasures. 10 days spent in myself is 10 days not learning, not exercising, not enjoying, not helping, not meeting, in solitary. (And even on the contemplative axis it competes with Stoicism, with yoga, with writing, with psychedelics.)

How much work will it be? Some contemplatives freely admit that the cost is very high: some contemplatives are not just salesmen. I met someone who claimed to be capital-e-enlightened. (He was otherwise articulate and modest.) He said it took 6 years' work, at many hours a week. I asked him if he could say how valuable it is in other terms - 'What else has been as good?' He said: a decade of intense psychotherapy, or two philosophy degrees. (One ancient text teases us by setting 'seven years' as the required period, but in true troll-Buddhist style it then slowly walks back this helpful definite statement.)

On that note: I was looking forward to writing a gotcha paradox here, but Harris (and thousands of years of arhats and yogis) pre-empted me:

> *...the deepest goal of spirituality is freedom from the illusion of the self - [but] to seek such freedom, as though it were a future state to be attained through effort, is to reinforce the chains of one's apparent bondage in each moment.*
>
> *One [solution] is to simply ignore the paradox and adopt various techniques of meditation in the hope that a breakthrough will occur. Some people appear to succeed at this, but many fail... Goal-oriented modes of practice have the virtue of being easily taught, because a person can begin them without having had any fundamental insight...*
>
> *...The other traditional response is... to concede that all efforts are doomed, because the urge to attain self-transcedence or any other mystical experience is a symptom of the very disease we want to cure. There is nothing to do but give up the search.*

	I'm not actually worried by this, because I suspect the full-Buddhist anti-striving thing is unnecessary and... undesirable. --- Why should an evolved creature have the power to inspect its own sense-data? If we are constantly distracting ourselves with reified thoughts, what evolutionary role did this play? At the top of this review is Harris' droll diss about people deluding themselves into thinking they are meditating - but how *can* we know that we, or anyone, is not deluded? (Brain scans of inhibited medial PFCs are interesting but merely suggestive.) --- Most of the above isn't directly from Harris, I'm riffing off better rationalist reconstructions of this ancient one-weird-trick. (I actually don't know if this is any good, cos I don't know the area. Seems fine.) * Much of their anger is about his chapter warning of the history of abuse by gurus and yogis and so on. But like it or not this is a public service.
Moab is My Washpot (1997) by Stephen Fry	There are worse teen idols to have, than Fry, Dawkins, Graffin, Rollins, Goldacre, Bangs, Gould, Earls, Pratchett, Banks.
The Ode Less Travelled: A guide to writing poetry (2005) by Stephen Fry	Better for learning to read poetry than write it. I think I read this three times, obsessed as I was with an art that would let me talk, talk clearly and obscurely, give me weight or the semblance of weight.
How to Get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and Their Supervisors (1987) by Estelle M. Phillips	> *some social science students who have read Kuhn's work on 'paradigm shifts' in the history of natural science (science students have normally not heard of him) say rather indignantly: 'Oh, do you mean a PhD has to be just doing normal science?' And indeed we do mean that... It is the basic useful activity of scientists and scholars, and PhD students should be pleased to make a contribution to it. You can leave the paradigm shifts for after your PhD...* Liked it - it has a quiet rigour and schoolmistressy focus I wasn't expecting - but my god you have to skim. Many sentences could lose two-thirds of the words without losing any meaning; probably no-one exists for whom every chapter is relevant. But they make skimming easy by listing recommended actions in a box at the start of each chapter. There's a thoughtful chapter on psychological mechanisms to watch out for. (e.g. Enthusiasm -> overambition -> failure -> frustration -> no energy; Specialisation -> isolation -> no stimulation -> no energy; Learning -> independence -> shorter cycles -> faster learning -> fuzzies

	and progress. Boredom -> Boredom -> Boredom.) The many quotations from current PhD students are nice, showing the range of characters and concomitant problems you face, allowing you to tailor the advice a bit. They confess that any general book on the matter is necessarily incomplete, since each field has its own defining skills, styles, and norms, often unwritten or badly written. Call the reigning institutionalised, credentialist way of allocating epistemic value *schoolism*. This book is a particularly blithe example > *It is only by understanding the need for precision and having the ability to apply yourself in a disciplined way that you will eventually get to the point where you have the right to follow up interesting leads and explore a series of ideas that arise out of the work in hand. We suggest that, for the moment, this should be after your doctorate.* (To be fair they also instruct you to think for yourself, to manage your supervisor, etc.) The "non-traditional students" chapter is interesting, if only for the separate sections for male and female students which have almost the same advice. ("*1. Join or establish a [gender]' peer support group. 2. Discuss with your supervisors any problems in the male/female aspect of the student–supervisor relationship...*") Neat but kind of disingenuous. Questions and answers I (loosely) got from this: * *What needs to be done?* -> It's your first job to find out * *What do I need to know to do it?* -> field-specific; watch and learn. * *What are the standards?* -> Read theses. List the craft practices of a good researcher. * *Who should my advisor be?* -> Kind, active researcher, interested in your thing, low flight risk * *What counts as original enough?* -> Read theses to find out, take the delta * *What counts as large enough?* -> "an increment" * *How do I not get scooped?* -> Don't worry about it. The important thing is to notice you have been. * *How do I not freeze up on seeing the fractal connectedness of all things?* -> notice it, make a note, then return to your breath. * *What about my mental health?* -> Exercise, take breaks and talk to fellow experts * *How do I not feel isolated?* -> communicate more and better. Stay excited, people like it. * *What if I fuck up?* -> Practice and get feedback! use no technique for the first time in your thesis. Do throwaways, etudes. * *Why should they listen to you?* -> because you've nailed everything down and added a cherry
Scott-land: The Man Who Invented a Nation (2010) by	Good fun. Scott has suffered one of the sharpest declines in literary reputation ever, from being the toast of Europe and Goethe's idol to being a joke (and a nice railway station). Besides concocting the tartan myth for a royal pageant and anthologising Scots folk heroes, he was himself quite a novelistic man, for instance that

Stuart Kelly	time he worked himself to death to pay off his debts.
The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon (2013) by Brad Stone	Less critical than I was expecting, still good. The trouble with evaluating leaders (this goes for modern scientists as much as corporate founders) is that they are able to take so much credit for the work of those they hire / train. Even so, Bezos had a lot of ideas - we know this because some failures are attributed to him, putting an upper bound at least on the file-drawer problem of Amazon's creativity. (Stone seems pretty good at tracking down the real inventors. And he literally dug through Bezos' garbage in search of details.) And he is a hyperactive micromanager, pulling conference call screens off the walls, ramming through his pet projects over any amount of opposition: > *Almost alone, Bezos believed fervently in Prime, closely tracking sign-ups each day and intervening every timr the retail group dropped its promotions from the home page.* The management style is/was macho, with an uneasy mix of flat objectivity (if you show the maths of your idea works, you are likely to get serious consideration) and imperial whim (like making everyone write meeting notes in full prose - which is based on no science in particular). > *Bezos treats workers like expendable resources without taking into account their contributions to the company. That in turn allows him to coldly allocate capital and manpower and make hyperrational business decisions where another executive might let personal relationships intrude. But they also acknowledge that Bezos is primarily consumed with improving the company's performance and customer service...* Some of Stone's anecdotes about this or that mid-level exec are neither funny nor illustrative, and make this feel like a reference text. I suppose there should be one. With them so dominant now, it's easy to forget the stock crashing to $10, or Amazon being seriously threatened by a single Lehman analyst, or all the many failures like Auctions or zShops or A9.com. And that they really were another garage operation that took over the world. Stone does push back a bit - the "two-pizza team" idea gets uncritically celebrated in business, but Stone says that the actual teams hate it. I'm fascinated by Bezos making each team come up with their own objective function - but apparently this is also hated, on "digging our own grave" grounds. (Isn't any quantified performance metric hated?) Then there's the context switch that makes the billions seem small: since he was a child, Bezos seems to honestly see himself as shepherding humanity into space, with Amazon a means to that end. Not enough coverage of just how weird Amazon is, in terms of shareholder quiescence, the astonishing amount of cheap capital it hoovers up, its terrible reputation among 90s and 00s analyst as a "nonprofit scam". It was almost never profitable for 20 straight years, but people kept throwing money into the bubble... which has stopped being a bubble (because of AWS, not really retail). The tiny tax burden that people decry should start growing, and antitrust attention too. No attention to what we should expect of Amazon's effect on literature and

	ideas, given the mass die-off of local bookshops *and* the weakening of gatekeeper publishers. (I don't know what the effect is either, but if I wrote a book about them I hope I would have a go.) Skimmed a bit, e.g. 2004, the Zappos chapter,
Extremes () by Duncan Needham	Good, oddly poppy proceedings from an academic conference. A BBC war correspondent and a cross-ocean rower, and Nassim Taleb. Some of them are extremely mathsy, some of them cite Stephen Covey and Carl Jung as authorities on the human condition. The Taleb talk is a peach, the first big idea I've seen from him in years, "the tableau of fat tails": all distributions can be split qualitatively by their potential for extremes using a couple of parameters (fig 4). This unifies . (He attributes some of it to a risk academic called Embrechts, idk.) An expensive diverse magazine, then.
Economic Philosophy (1962) by Joan Robinson	> *The misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all.* (That looks glib, but in context - a Keynesian socialist critique - it's not. It's an inconvenient fact in that framework, and as such it's a clue to the grand trajectory we are all unequally traversing under this doubly-maligned mixed system.) A relative insider being pessimistic about economics' prospects of ever becoming a Science. This coupling of economy to metaphysical matters suited me at the time. But there *has* been an empirical turn in economics (though decades after this), and I no longer look for a binary Science/Nonscience judgment. (After all, even particle physics is ridden with cognitive bias.) Instead there are only differing concentrations of objectivity / naturalism / quantification / successful prediction / insensitivity to speaker prestige / empiricism.
Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment (1929) by Ivor A. Richards	One of the only pieces of literary theory I made it through, in two years of university English. Good solid helpful stuff, not capital-t-Theory.
Why Most Things Fail (2005) by Paul Ormerod	Clever stuff from one of the Great Recession predictors. Think I'll reread it eventually.
The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics (2001) by Mark Lilla	> *Jaspers: "How can such an uncultivated man like Adolf Hitler govern Germany?"* > *Heidegger: "Culture doesn't matter. Just look at his marvelous hands."* Denunciation of the terrible politics of some academic darlings (Heidegger, Foucault, Benjamin, Carl Schmitt). The common theme is that their philosophies so radically distorted their perception, that their interventions

	in politics were inevitably harmful. Lilla tries to make the edginess and procrustean attitudes of these men reflect badly on all philosophy, or philosophers in civil society. This doesn't work - think of Smith's influence, or Mill's, or Russell's, or Bentham's - though it might be true of a certain kind of Continental, the kind incentivised to say novel things regardless of their truth or consequences, I don't know. Possibly I reacted so strongly because this was the first dissent against these great nasty obscurantists I'd seen; other writing by Lilla hasn't impressed me, and though the targets of this book are bipartisan, his agenda is too plain. Good old Jaspers comes out very well from all this, anyway, an Obi-wan figure: > *I beseech you! if ever we shared philosophical impulses, take responsibility for your gifts! Place it in the service of reason, or of the reality of human worth & possibilities, instead of in the service of magic!*
Escalator (2006) by Michael Gardiner	Racism, the specific overwhelming of the modern city ("hyper-reality"), economic and family pressure, handled subtly and desperately.
Eloquent JavaScript: A Modern Introduction to Programming (2010) by Marijn Haverbeke	Verbose, thoughtful and extremely well-implemented. On the "normal" side of a growing tradition of artful tech textbooks – Why's Poignant Guide to Ruby, Learn You a Haskell, Land of Lisp. Hides the specific things you need to know about JS – its mad liberal syntax, semicolon insertion, functors, – among a My First Programming. But no harm in seeing what one knows already. Fantastic for noobs. [Here]
On Being a Data Skeptic (2013) by Cathy O'Neil	Extremely sane and salutary; along with MacAskill and Gates, this was one of the books I felt worth schematising, to hold its insights close; bullet list forthcoming. She appears to have taken a (book-selling?) pessimistic turn in the years since (but I haven't read that one yet).
The Ig Nobel Prizes (2002) by Marc Abrahams	Sublimely silly: my favourite piece of modern art. The joke is the same each time – informality in formal contexts – but like modern art it's the framing makes them. The titles alone: Williams & Newell (1993) 'Salmonella Excretion in Joy-riding Pigs'; Wyatt McNaughton (1993) 'The Collapse of Toilets in Glasgow'; Watanabe & Sakamoto (1995) "Pigeons' Discrimination of Paintings by Monet & Picasso"; Solodi (1996) "Farting as a Defence against Unspeakable Dread"... Along with RetractionWatch and LessWrong and Andrew Gelman, this was one of my ways into actual science from pop science.
The Wasp Factory (1984) by Iain Banks	None yet

Wolf in White Van (2014) by John Darnielle	None yet
Maskerade (Discworld, #18; Witches #5) (1995) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Fortress Besieged (1947) by Qian Zhongshu	> *"I talked to Bertie about his marriages and divorces once," Shenming said. "He said that there's a saying in English that marriage is like a gilded birdcage. The birds outside want to get in, and the birds inside want to get out, he said, so divorce leads to marriage and marriage leads to divorce and there's never any end to it."* > *"There's a saying like that in France, too," Miss Su said. "Only there it's about a forteresse assiégée — a fortress under siege. The people outside want to storm in, and the people inside are desperate to get out."* Two books: one farce (*A Confederacy of Dunces* meets the *Campus Trilogy* - which would be the highest praise, if those books didn't have contradictory goals and tones), one soft *Bovary* tragedy. Internationalist (most characters speak another language), if only for comic effect. The main character, Fang Hongjian ("Grand Drippy Square" or maybe "Local Big Soak"), is a pompous fraud who slowly realises that all of his fellow intellectuals are the same. Forced to adlib a speech on what he learned about the West during his long (bogus) studies there, he comes up with: > *there are only two items from the West which have been lasting in Chinese society. One is opium, and the other is syphilis. These are what the Ming dynasty assimilated of Western civilization.* The Japanese invade midway through but are just a nuisance to Fang, who is much more vexed by his parents messing with his marriage. People complain about the translation, but they've done that with three different translations, so maybe the stodginess is in the original too, and its air of cosmopolitan, Wodehousian lightness is just air.
Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener,	Engrossing optimistic catalogue of the counter-intuitions that urban economics provides us: "*poverty can mean a city's doing well, since the poor wouldn't stay, otherwise*", "*cities are greener and more democratic (smaller houses, less travel, scale utilities)*", "*zoning laws ensure prices are too high, apartments too small, congestion, sprawl, slums and corruption*", "*people are less unhappy and less suicidal in cities*". Glaeser's aims are larger than simple Gladwellian gee-whizzing: he's out to

Healthier and Happier (2011) by Edward L. Glaeser	get a prevailing anti-city mood (e.g. Blake, Rousseau, Thoreau, hippies). Explains why art is urban, why we didn't have good ideas before settlements, the origins of the restaurant (in a crap Parisian health-food place), the skyscraper, and the global bank Chase Manhattan (in a scam defrauding money meant for NY's first public water supply). Valuing the devalued, staying within evidential warrant, and honest about the achievements of public agencies.
Going Postal (Discworld, #33; Moist von Lipwig, #1) (2004) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Fifty Inventions That Shaped the Modern Economy (2017) by Tim Harford	Harford is among the best pop science writers. There are shout-outs to Nick Bostrom and other luminaries in this. Harford has a slightly tragic consciousness of backlash and double-effect of some of these (e.g. tetra-ethyl lead). So easy to read I forgot I had.
Darwin's Watch (The Science of Discworld, #3) (2005) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Wings (Bromeliad Trilogy, #3) (1990) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
The Little Prince (1943) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry	None yet
Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest	Was obsessed with this when I was small, probably because of the swears and gore.

(1992) by Stephen E. Ambrose	
The Rough Guide to Classical Music (1998) by Rough Guides	Rough it til you make it
An Introduction to Mathematical Economics: Methods and Applications () by G.C. Archibald, Richard G. Lipsey	None yet
Epistemic Analysis: A Coherence Theory of Knowledge (1984) by Paul Ziff	> *I know that there is no [demiurge], but what if I were wrong? I am not, but I could be, but I am not, though I may be.* > *A wall has been built, and it is being built; we think it will continue to be built. No one knows exactly who started the wall, though many have helped. Nor does anyone know how far it reaches: it seems to go on and on forever. We think the builders are our principals.* > *The wall is to protect us from the invasion. Wall soldiers man the wall. Whenever a soldier is overcome by an invader, he must be replaced by a stronger soldier, & we are forever sending replacements. We have even sent soldiers to man the wall in the distant provinces. No one knows how strong the enemy forces are there. We need as many soldiers as we can get, but we want only those who are strong enough to repel an invader. It is possible that there is a man strong enough to repel an invader. We know if a man isn't strong enough if he is overcome by an invader. But if he is not, we don't know whether it is because he is strong enough, or good fortune has kept stronger invaders away.* > *We have found a section of the wall where the invaders are too strong for anyone weaker than K. So we know that no man weaker than K will do there. For the time being we risk it: we judge that K is strong enough. Perhaps someday K may have to be replaced. Yes, we know that. Meanwhile we stare at the long reaches of the wall and wonder.* I no longer find coherentism even the *kind of thing* that would constitute an answer to the question "what is knowledge? / what is justification?". But this is so beautiful.
Island	His last book: a half-rational vehicle for his late contrarian mystical

(1962) by Aldous Huxley	worldview; in fact it reads as his making amends for the vivid bioconservative paranoia of *Brave New World*. It certainly handles the same themes, simply inverted in their consequences: we see drugs as *enablers* of enlightenment; a much healthier view of suffering, as a pointless trap; a surprisingly pragmatic view of genetic engineering; and a very balanced view of civilisation and economic development. So: he constructs a Taoist-Hindu-Buddhist utopia which mostly avoids primitivism and annoying mysticism for a sustainable East plus West non-industrial modernity. It's not my idea of paradise, but other people's utopias usually aren't. Moreover, it is a *doomed* utopia nestled in nasty 1950s international political economy. The animating enemy of *Island* is not the authoritarian consequences of technology, but what Scott Alexander calls Moloch: the forces of self-fulfilling inevitability and destructive competition. Protagonist is a mirror of John the Savage: an open-minded liar and shill, a fallen outsider who manages to undermine the utopia he infiltrates. Huxley himself is the model for him: in fact we can see Will's journey from cynical aesthetic to materialist spirituality as autobiography in allegory. The mystic character, Rani, is amazing: an enraging theosophical flake. This reflects well on Huxley's own weirdness: the Rani is as far from traditional organised religion as Huxley is from her. Given the times and his project, lots of Huxley's worldview have become clichés: e.g. “you forget to pay attention to what's happening. And that's the same as not being here and now ”. The prose is arch and syrupy but I like it. (*BNW* is saddled by the air of a smug jeremiad. *Island* is every bit as didactic but nowhere near as smug.) It's chock-full of bad poetry though. I love his use of reported speech to denote characters he disrespects: this saves him the bother of writing it and us the bother of reading and makes a conspiracy of us and Huxley: *\tHe turned to Will and treated him to a long and flowery farewell.* *In polysyllables, Mr Bahu hedged diplomatically. On the one hand, yes; but on the other hand, no. From one point of view, white; but from a different angle, distinctly black.</blockquote>* *Pala's structure is cool but not at all radical enough to solve what is wrong with us, I think – technology is controlled very carefully and considered one of the 'dozens' of fronts to aid people on. (Hypnotherapy and tantra are given way more credit than they deserve, for instance.) Is “one-third” of suffering intrinsic? I look forward to science seeing if that is the case. I elect Huxley into the hall of fame of people who make a very popular error and later recant to no acclaim. (Niels Bohr (and his memetically dominant false model), Frank Jackson, André Gide, Bertrand Russell, ...)* ** Can we call a novel mistaken? As a whole, not in some particular claim of a character. No. 'Misguided', or ideologically harmful, maybe.</td> </tr>*
The God	I'm a fourth-generation nonbeliever, in wishy-washy-secular Britain; really

Delusion (2006) by Richard Dawkins	not sure why I got so caught up in New Atheism. Felt dead good to rebel against a weakened enemy with no recourse, I guess. I can't remember much false in this, though these days I'd quibble with his argument against agnosticism ("*we can't get conclusive evidence against the existence of gods, but the probability is low enough that in any other domain we'd have warrant for full disbelief; and 'atheism' is just this very-low-probability-assignment*"). This is an argument against the word 'agnosticism' and is pointless except in PR terms.
The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail—But Some Don't (2012) by Nate Silver	None yet
Philosophy and Computing: An Introduction (1996) by Luciano Floridi	Whistle-stop hyperbole in the way of Continentals, but grounded by technical knowledge and uncliched. (Owing to its techno-optimism: it is uncliched to be a philosopher optimistic about tech.) > *The history of modern thought has been characterised by an increasing gap between mind and reality. It is a process of epistemic detachment which has been irresistible ever since it began, and quite inevitably so. Knowledge develops as mind's answer to the presence of the non-mental. It is the means whereby the subject establishes a minimal distance, and emancipates itself, from the object. The rise of dualism and the escalating interaction between traditional knowledge, as an object, and innovative knowledge, as a further reaction to it, has led to the emergence of a new world.* Notice the skilled and non-fatuous use of phenomenological blah! Chapter 2, his fast and very formal discussion of Boole, Gödel and Turing, took me about half a week. The tiny concluding chapter – in which he locates computers in the history of human freedom, as Hephaestean handmaids – makes me giddy. Slightly dated where it talks PC specs, and he loves a goofy neologism ("egology", "corporeal membranes"), but grand, sceptical, grand, supervenient. (His 'Informational Nature of Personal Identity' and 'Turing's Three Lessons' are better.)
Children of Time (Children of Time, #1) (2015) by Adrian Tchaikovsky	Initially, this looked like a Brin rip-off, or a Vinge rip-off, or even a Pratchett rip-off. And the prose is just serviceable. Title sucks too. But it blooms: the long evolutionary pathway it follows - from a spider jeeust 'thinking' that pack hunting might be a good idea, to a full manned space program - is excellent. The alternative technological route is the great bit - what would industry look like without fossil fuel, a mechanised society without metal? - and the protagonist spiders who find the route are easy to empathise with. Ants are used as robots, factories, laboratories, and eventually as CPUs:

> *There are hundreds of tamed ant colonies within Great Nest, not counting those in the surrounds that undertake the day-to-day business of producing food, clearing ground or fending off incursions of wild species. Each colony has been carefully trained, by subtle manipulation of punishment, reward and chemical stimulus, to perform a specific service, giving the great minds access to a curious kind of difference engine.*

{over-literal bull-shit}
(Tchaikovsky overstates massively the potential of ants as a processing channel, though - witness the giant leap in practicality from ~1cm mechanical relays to (even the crappiest) fully-electronic vacuum-tube. Nothing so slow and large as an ant colony could carry out much logic-gate work without taking much longer than a human-level worker and anyway accumulating huge errors.)
\{/over-literal bull-shit}

(Their bioengineering stuff is actually more realistic than Vinge's spiders' breakneck 50-year sprint through the C20th and C21st centuries, even if you include the Uplifting virus. This is because Vinge's telling is deterministic - they discover all the same stuff as us, in mostly the same order - and their culture a cartoon of ours.)

His other successful theme is incomprehension: females not understanding male liberation, spiders not understanding how a depressed solitary human could be sentient, Kern not understanding anything. (Mostly the spider gender politics are boring, just bizarro patriarchy with a cannibal twist.)

The main antagonist, the mad hubristic scientist starts off dull and strawish (why did it take 300 years for her to ask what rough genus the spiders were?) but the moment she stops that stuff and reaches across the species barrier is quite beautiful.

Also, Tchaikovsky often drops out of the Spiders' worldview mid-sentence to telegraph what you, a human, should be thinking of all this (an example is the use of "curious" in the passage above).

The humans are less interesting, fairly stock generation-shippers. There is this inversion, that the scholar of dead languages is Key Crew, plot-critical all the time:

> *To study and laud those antique psychopaths during the Earth's last toxic days had seemed bad taste. Nobody liked a classicist.*

Anyway worthwhile, momentarily dazzling.

***

How does it do as Serious science fiction?

Social development: Lots. The spiders' matriarchal anarchism is shown with realistic downsides. The ark ship humans go through several revolutions and regressions.

Software development: Some, but all pretty high-level. Thousands of years of uptime for some systems, with only hints at how to keep it going. Some

	nice linguistic archaeology. *Actual Science*: Mostly evo bio, little bit of computer science and crypto maybe.
Zero to One: Notes on Start Ups, or How to Build the Future (2014) by Peter Thiel	What we hate about business books is their clichés, their fawning, their Panglossian grin, their being completely invalid because they don't consider survivorship bias, and their prose. This one avoids all these things and is radical in an unconventional way.* It's hard to know what to think of Thiel. He's easy to demonise - much easier than his loudmouth peer Musk. For instance, he's anti-college, anti-affirmative-action, anti-Clinton - and even openly anti-competition! (And a vampire!) But I've been impressed with his clarity and sense of proportion in interviews, and nowhere here did I find the Girardian anti-humanist conservatism that Gawker, Vulture, Vox, (...) made me expect. For instance, this spiel moves me every time I hear it - the billions of hours we steal from children every year: > *We teach every young person the same subjects in the same ways, irrespective of individual talents and preferences. Students who don't learn best by sitting at a desk are made to feel somehow inferior, while children who excel on conventional measures like tests and assignments end up defining their identities in terms of this weirdly contrived academic parallel reality.* > > *And it gets worse as students ascend to higher levels of the tournament. Elite students climb confidently until they reach a level of competition sufficiently intense to beat their dreams out of them. Higher education is the place where people who had big plans in high school get stuck in fierce rivalries with equally smart peers over conventional careers like management consulting and investment banking. For the privilege of bring turned into conformists, students (or their families) pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in skyrocketing tuition that continues to outpace inflation. Why are we doing this to ourselves?* and similarly plaintive and humane bits: > *Why work with a group of people who don't even like each other? Many seem to think it's a sacrifice necessary for making money. But taking a merely professional view of the workplace, in which free agents check in and out on a transactional basis, is worse than cold: it's not even rational. Since time is your most valuable asset, it's odd to spend it working with people who don't envision any long-term future together. If you can't count durable relationships among the fruits of your time at work, you haven't invested your time well—even in purely financial terms.* He is simply not simple. There are four positive references to Marx, four to Zuckerberg; two to Shakespeare, two to Bezos. He is a revisionist, then, intolerable to one side and oddly scathing about the other. (The chapter which translates Google's public rhetoric is not complimentary, for instance.) His niche seems to be *the repugnant but true*. So, like Taleb

without the bluster and boasting. Which feels bizarre, like I'm in a different timeline where Taleb is actually aiming to not alienate a mass audience.

He says true things about things I know about: the history of economic thought (Walras did indeed lift the formalism of general equilibrium from physics) and the deadened air of contemporary Political Philosophy. His contribution to Trump's campaign was risible and maybe a defection against the world - but notice that *even this lapse* speaks to his ability to find unexpected truths - FiveThirtyEight gave an 80% chance of a Clinton win at that point. So maybe his analysis and helpful checklist for startups are true too.

It's a shame few critics of capitalism will read this - for he is one, in his way:

> *Americans mythologize competition and credit it with saving us from socialist bread lines. Actually, capitalism and competition are opposites. Capitalism is premised on the accumulation of capital, but under perfect competition, all profits get competed away. The lesson for entrepreneurs is clear: If you want to create and capture lasting value, don't build an undifferentiated commodity business.*

(Of *actually-existing* capitalism I mean.)

How on earth can you argue that monopolies give more social utility than high competition? First, distinguish three kinds: 1) criminal saboteurs and antitrustees (Apple); 2) government-licenced pets (US car dealers, the East India Companies); and 3) "creative monopolies" who gain their massive market share by doing something much, much better than everyone else. Obviously only the latter is good for society.

I was recently rushing to the airport, and pulled the quickest route (via underground via train via foot) from Google Maps. On the way, I noticed a sign in the Tube and realised that actually a different line was a much shorter route. So I walked 10 mins to that line, to find, of course, that it was suspended all weekend and, consequently, that Google is better at my life than I am. This is what he means.

He goes further and says that the spare resources and vision of a creative monopoly is *the* source of innovation and so

> *Monopoly is the condition of every successful business.*

The model is structurally the same as the old one about the Agrarian revolution: farms meant that for the first time, not everyone had to work full-time on food production, which let them specialise in other roles (war, gods, justice, lore) and eventually - slowly - invent new things.

Even so, I thought of an alternative road to dynamism, given perfect competition and so no profits: competition leads to low prices, which leads to savings, which are pooled into investment funds, which give entrepreneurs the same kind of space (and potentially the long view) that profits do.

Other people would not use the word "monopoly", trying to manage the

connotations, trying to persuade us by smoothing things over. This is not Thiel's strategy.

One chapter argues that "*Success is not just luck*", mostly on the back of the existence of serially successful entrepreneurs (it is plausible that once could be luck, and plausible that one success brings massive funding, deserved or not. It isn't plausible that someone could dumbly blunder into 3 billion-dollar executions, even given the easy ride for the second and third). It pains me slightly to admit the latter, because it tints my otherwise complete loathing of Steve Jobs.

Misc notes

* He notes that the term "developed nations" is a sign of our lack of ambition, of a premature, smug, quasi-willed halt.

* The dot-com boom was even crazier than you thought:

> *A South Korean firm wired us $5 million without first negotiating a deal or signing any documents. When I tried to return the money, they wouldn't tell me where to send it.*

* It is not yet clear whether killing Gawker was good or bad. Either way, like his Trump donation, you must acknowledge the sheer gall and direction.

* One should do a Straussian (between-the-lines) reading of anyone smart, conservative and public, because there will be a lot that's unsayable. I don't care to.

> *The few who knew what could be learned,*
> *Foolish enough to put their whole heart on show,*
> *reveal their feelings to the crowd below?*
> *These we have always crucified and burned.*

* Actually hold on. The man's a transhumanist, an anti-school radical, a funder of one of our only large-scale experiments in urban planning or libertarianism, a rationalist. Why do we call him a conservative?

Short, original, modest, and he credits his ghostwriter on the cover. Minus one point because it makes 200 large claims in 200 pages and has no citations for anything.

* Thinking about it, it's not so much that he avoids cliche, as that the erudite context defangs them.
"Zero to One" sounds like the usual kind of motivational crap, except that it's actually a good illustration of his maxim of creative monopoly ("0 -> 1 is much, much better than 1 -> n"). And the subtitle "How to build the future" is not figurative and not petty: he cites Bostrom's trajectories about the ultimate fate of the universe - and is only focussed on technology because

	that's what will get us past the Rise and Fall trap, the stagnation trap and the extinction trap.
Statistics: A Very Short Introduction (2008) by David J. Hand	Was looking for a qualitative introduction to convey something of the excitement and philosophical importance - the art of discovering *anything* which isn't bleedin' obvious! nor knowable apriori! This has bits of that ("*Statistics is applied philosophy of science*"; "*it is the technology for handling uncertainty*") but is still too dry to recommend as a first exposure. He diagnoses the worst parts of university teaching: hand calculations, canned inference, and the (exhausting, interminable) bag-of-tools approach, rather than computers and The Framework. But the latter have steep learning curves. I think the biggest thing missing is simple tailoring of datasets: let them pick something they care about to study, to learn how to study on. Lots of ML methods covered, without a single mention of the phrase "machine learning". This is fair enough if you consider how much of (enterprise) ML hype is just rebranded 40 year old stats. Hand notes the origins of the field - as *State-istics*, i.e. as the beginning of bureaucracy and surveillance. But he doesn't feel the tension of this fact: that it helped to transform us, for good and ill, into legible people. One dodgy idea: he claims that numbers offer a more direct apprehension of reality than words, that they're realer. But this isn't why they're better: they're better because they're more sensitive - it's at least possible for them to track any size change in the world, while words are mostly stuck to medium-sized dry goods - and because they are easier to spot errors in.
Python Programming for the Absolute Beginner (2003) by Michael Dawson	Gifted this when I was a teen. Wish I'd paid more attention, would've saved me about 5 years.
Surprisingly Down to Earth, and Very Funny: My Autobiography () by Limmy	Auto theft, fanny fright, incompetent but dogged self-harm, raving and tripping as self-medication, dole stupor, bail skipping, the death drive, pretend machismo, pretend homosexuality, alcoholism, Flash animation, BBC showrunner. Not very funny but very entertaining. (His shows are funny.) I could have guessed that he'd had a life like this from his characters; so much authentic idiocy, lunacy, awkwardness, pretension, and pettiness. Surprised that Dee-Dee is based on his own trippy blankness; Limmy's so sharp these days. He crosses into the middle class through IT, anxious about looking like the 'wee ned guy' in the office. And then into Design (a colony of the Art world, where a rough background's a bonus), and then to TV comedy, and *then* to streaming, where rawness and obliquity and patter means dollas. It's a nice story. It's about being strange in a normal, *subclinical** way: intrusive thoughts, groundless anxiety, reduced affect display, auditory hallucination, mild paranoia, misanthropy, hysteroid dysphoria. > *I must sound like a fuckin robot tae you. But it's just the way I'm wired. I*

	> *never felt sad about my mum dying.* > *I always wondered if I was schizophrenic... Maybe just an overactive imagination. My mind likes to come up wi lots of thoughts and ideas, whether or no they're useful or make sense. I think that sort of thing can make you mental, depending on how severe it is and what kind of environment you're in. Fortunately I managed to find a place to put my kind of mind to good use.* The deep function of laughter is apparently that it allows play / boundary learning / questioning social norms. So to be a comedian, you have be a step past your society. (I doubt funniness is linear in weirdness though.) And Limmy is obviously out there. He regularly tweets about how much he misses drinking (which I've never seen an alcoholic do), and satirises the now-daily flamewars of the shouting classes by taking absurd and alternating stances on every issue (...) . I know several people with the same mix of terrible impulses and good intentions, charisma and anti-social solitude: folk whose adolescence lasted twenty years. They're the funniest people I know, by far. I don't know how class comes into it, but they're all working-class. Maybe middle-class people as strange as them direct it inward, rather than outward as comedy or violence. (They're also all Scots but that's a selection effect, I hope.) Audiobook's worth it - the prose is *very* plain and his accent's strong but clear. Fans only, but you should be a fan. --- * There are also dozens of suicidal episodes though.
All Flesh Must Be Eaten (2003) by Al Bruno	None yet
What A Mess (1977) by Frank Muir	None yet
Economic Development (1993) by Michael P. Todaro	The first piece of economics I remember actually understanding, probably because it got under my guard by being *undeniably*, *obviously* about matters of life and death, hope and justice, and what's around the corner, and how maths can help. (Specifically Todaro's own model of urban migration.)
A Confederacy of Dunces (1980) by John Kennedy Toole	> *'...I doubt very seriously whether anyone will hire me.'* *'What do you mean, babe? You a fine boy with a good education.'* *'Employers sense in me a denial of their values.' He rolled over onto his back. 'They fear me. I suspect that they can see that I am forced to function in a century I loathe.* > *"Have you read widely in Boethius?"*

	> *"Who? Oh, heavens no. I never even read newspapers."* > *"Then you must begin a reading program immediately so that you may understand the crises of our age," Ignatius said solemnly. "Begin with the late Romans, including Boethius, of course. Then you should dip rather extensively into early Medieval. You may skip the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. That is mostly dangerous propaganda. Now that I think of it, you had better skip the Romantics and the Victorians, too. For the contemporary period, you should study some selected comic books."* Funny, loving portrait of Arts grad pretension / wilful ineffectuality, and of New Orleans. (Ignatius is a dogmatic Boethian, but the pattern repeats in neo-Aristotelians, neo-Thomists, ecocriticism, technocriticism, Heideggerians...) Ignatius is a perfect tragicomic figure, managing to be both physically and intellectually parochial (he never leaves Norleans) and but eloquent and ridiculously overconfident. But it's about twice as long as it should be.
Ender's Game (Ender's Saga, #1) (1985) by Orson Scott Card	Bit with Demosthenes and Locke was memorable (two children pulling the strings of the world media, less implausible than the aliens in this).
What's Left? (2007) by Nick Cohen	This hurt.
Science Made Stupid: How to Discomprehend the World Around Us (1985) by Tom Weller	> *Once... the comman man had no hope of mastering the arcane complexities of the secrets of science. Years of study in musty classrooms were prerequisite to obtaining even a dim, incoherent knowledge of science.* > *Today all that has changed: a dim, incoherent knowledge of science is available to anyone.* > *The decline of modern physics began with the particle accelerator. The accelerator is a device that turns your taxes into a small beam of subatomic particles.* Couple of solid jokes and lots of great drawings. Some of its shtick was later redone by *Brass Eye* and *Look Around You*, but that is no real objection.
Evolving Ourselves (2015) by Juan Enriquez	Broad-minded venture capitalists seek to update Darwinism in the light of new human capabilities. 100 tiny chapters on some facet of modern genetics and modern genomes and epigenomes and microbiomes... They're infectiously excited, but it's a bit light, sugary.
The	None yet

Eternity Code (Artemis Fowl, #3) (2003) by Eoin Colfer	
Artemis Fowl (Artemis Fowl, #1) (2001) by Eoin Colfer	None yet
Lord of the Flies (1954) by William Golding	None yet
Neuromancer (1984) by William Gibson	"Don't try."
Do You Believe in Magic?: The Sense and Nonsense of Alternative Medicine (2013) by Paul A. Offit	Heinous illusions leech £200bn off the world's vulnerables, annually. The problems of CAM have been covered with more originality and verve by Goldacre / Singh & Ernst, but Offit covers its history, as well as some newer meta-analyses (2005: n=136,000 finds increased mortality from dosing vitamin E. 2008: Cochrane (n=230,000) concludes multivits correlate weakly with *increase* in cancer and heart disease risk, further confirmed in 2011). But you can't hear these ideas too often: *there's no such thing as conventional or alternative medicine (only stuff that works and stuff that doesn't); everything is chemicals; origin is irrelevant to chemistry; too much of a good thing is lethal; the natural is not always or generally good*. Offit is too quick to jump from the conclusive weak-magnitude evidence against multivitamins (particularly overdosing vitamins A, C, and E) to his attack on all supplementation. For instance: some two-thirds of the world is deficient in vitamin D; few people get enough magnesium through their food; and it's uncontroversial that vegans should supplement B12. But we're not really in conflict, because he'd change his mind if he looked at the evidence, and we each accept that (publically-funded) science will out the truth. Prose **2/5,** ideas **4/5.** (I read this under an edition called *Killing Us Softly*.)
Niubi!: The Real Chinese You Were Never Taught in School (2009) by Eveline	Actually I was - but only because my lǎoshī was a saucy linguistics grad who warned me not to practice the tricky phoneme 日 or 入 on the street, or ever to shout "3-8!". Anyway this is funny and valuable for understanding the place's (otherwise inaccessible) working-class or web or queer registers – and for generally not seeming like a prig. So: language is fossilised sociology; Chao excavates what would take us

Chao	decades. She begins with slurs of all sorts, but doesn't list any homophobia – claiming it isn't a well-rooted hatred there (…). There's loads and loads of ableism, though. Gets more serious as it goes, with whole chapters on gay culture and web 'activism' (恶搞 is 'evildoings', lulz). This turns up details like the infallibly hilarious "potato queen". I also loved her decoding the ancient innuendoes: 云雨 (clouds and rain), 鱼水之欢 (the fish and the water, happy together), 余桃 (sharing peaches), or "playing the bamboo flute" or "bamboo harmonica". (BTW, the title term is 牛屄 – 'Cow-cunt' – and means "Awesome!". It is generally not included in mainstream Hanzi keyboard programs.)
Pro Git (2009) by Scott Chacon	Neal Stephenson once hyperbolised the situation in OS choice as follows: > *Linux is right next door and is not a business at all. It's a bunch of RVs, yurts, tepees, and geodesic domes set up in a field and organized by consensus. The people who live there are making tanks. These are not old-fashioned, cast-iron Soviet tanks; these are more like the M1 tanks of the U.S. Army, made of space-age materials and jammed with sophisticated technology from one end to the other. But they are better than Army tanks. They've been modified in such a way that they never, ever break down, are light and maneuverable enough to use on ordinary streets, and use no more fuel than a subcompact car. These tanks are being cranked out, on the spot, at a terrific pace, and a vast number of them are lined up along the edge of the road with keys in the ignition. Anyone who wants can simply climb into one and drive it away for free.* This is overstated; Debian and Ubuntu, the chief consumer descendents, are as buggy as any other. But the very same people built Git, and it is a battle-tank. Fast, unbreakable and life-saving. Why hasn't it taken over the world, outside of tech industry? 1) most people don't need non-linear incremental backups; 2) the learning curve is bloody steep even for techies. Entities that you need to know about to use Git without absurdity: the files, the working tree, the index, many local repositories, many remote repositories, 'remotes' (pointers to remote repositories), commits, treeishes (pointers to commits), branches, a stash > *"git gets easier once you get the basic idea that branches are homeomorphic endofunctors mapping submanifolds of a Hilbert space."* > *— chi wai lau (@tabqwerty) March 9, 2011* This book covers so much of the internal detail, the gotchas, the customisability, and comparisons with other source-control systems that it was adopted as canonical docs by the official working group. Skip sections at will, but do have a go. [Free here]
The Data Science Handbook () by Field	Was looking for an intro text for my academic mates who aren't techie mates: this turned out to be it. Covers all the important boring stuff (file formats, coding practices) and a

Cady	bit of the flashy stuff (CNNs, Keras) and was written specifically to drag maths PhDs into basic competence. Not to be confused with this puffery.
The Elements of Data Analytic Style (2015) by Jeff Leek	Pleasant, readable, sensible. This bit's good, tells you exactly how most social science is limited (it stops at inferential, and sometimes manages to mess even that up):
Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village (1969) by Ronald Blythe	None yet
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (2003) by Mark Haddon	Likeable!
Wankers () by Christian Robshaw	Fun, thoughtful, especially for music nerds. > *"Look, bollocks! Pixies seem to be an act that, while little appreciated within their own lifetime, have retrospectively come to be seen as one of the greats, and while, in that respect, they can be compared to The Velvet Underground or even Joy Division, where they differ from the latter two acts is that, in spite of all that obfuscating acclaim, they never actually produced a full LP of unskippable tracks." – good going Sooty actually, you can be so eloquent! – [much more]* > > *– "and don't get me started on the Nirvana connection, which, by the way, I mean... you go 'Yeah, they influenced Nirvana' – who were a better band! And anyway, Kurt used to give props to all of his indie contemporaries, so I don't see where's the great re-evaluation of Flipper or The Melvins...* > > *Look, it doesn't matter, because that's actually my point. When you're really into music, you get into it, and you end up having these weird appreciations, like Kurt had – you might end up thinking that what to everyone else is a forgotten one-hit wonder deserves consideration with the rest of the greats. And you might look at the Pixies and decide they're one of the greats, too, but when you come at it just having heard that they are great, then you're not into it, and you don't end up with a real love, just an appreciation. It's why a fan of, you know, Mudhoney or...Pearl Jam's going to be more passionate, because they've got something to prove. You haven't got anything to prove, because you've*

	> *never come to it that way." – this is actually going really well. If I wrap up soon, I might actually win this one – "Look, if you're going to sit there with your uncontroversial opinions where you just say that the same bands Q Magazine says are great, are, then you just look like a total..." – alright Sooty, go out on a high note here, and you'll be invincible – "massive twat." – fuck – "just a twat. Probably a twat with loads of unopened Pixies CDs on the shelf."* There is some masturbation but it's a minor theme. Nor is the title writing off the characters as actively unpleasant - they're at worst a little pretentious. I think it's as in onanism, narcissism, not thinking of your effect on others. Pleasing yourself. There's no explicit moral though: it neither condemns pleasing yourself nor reclaims it as a real ethics. You get the reflection that sneaking away from your hookup is a bad way to ensure seeing them again. *High Fidelity* is the obvious comparator, but Sooty is less dysfunctional, more optimistic, much less dependent on true love to save him. St Aubyn is the preferred comparator - of the inability to really control oneself, of moral luck and lack of luck. > *DOUGAL:\tWhy did you shoot the horse?* *SOOTY:\t\t[She] made me. I don't know why. I've never even been on a horse.* *DOUGAL:\tJust shot one, and that's it.* *SOOTY:\t\tYeah. I guess she thought 'cause I'm a man, I suppose.* *DOUGAL:\tThat seems a bit sexist.* *SOOTY:\t\tMaybe it is.* *DOUGAL:\tBetter not tell Berkeley, though, if you think it's sexism. You don't want him accusing you of cultural Marxism.* Lots of true London colour - *Pret* as inescapable, unthreatening, premium-mediocre locus; the fossil Club culture; the agglomeration, in this absurdly expensive place, of poorly-paid, ambiguously Cultural people from all over.
Introducing Speech and Language Processing (2005) by John Coleman	None yet
Fermat's Enigma: The Epic Quest to Solve the World's Greatest Mathematical Problem (1997) by Simon	Good. Lucid in many places ("*any logic which relies on a conjecture is conjecture*"). Does well in using plain language to communicate some of the exciting complexity and dismaying complication of higher maths (but not as well as Kanigel on Ramanujan).

Singh	
The Best Software Writing I: Selected and Introduced by Joel Spolsky (2005) by Joel Spolsky	Odd beast: a time capsule where half the items are of purely historical interest, and half are general and extremely wise arguments that are still not acted upon today. He had planned them to be annual collections, but they didn't happen, so this looks to represent more than one year's best. Recent enough to tell us something about the internet, though with lots of anachronism. But it's more at the lexical level - "weblog", "Sociable media" - than the semantic. Found (eminent media researcher) danah boyd ludicrous: she calls developers autistic, and calls people with several online identities multiple-personality disordered (a person is one person. So all their activities have to be one person!) Disappointing, typical social theory. She aggressively pushes a horrendous risky single-sign-in for all sites based on these shitty polemics and nothing else. Contains helpful principles which will not age:, e.g. "if you can't understand the spec for a new technology, don't worry: nobody else will understand it either, and the technology won't be that important". [Various]</li>
The Quest for Artificial Intelligence: A History of Ideas and Achievements (2009) by Nils J. Nilsson	A sweet informal history of AI research from a Stanford doyen. In places it is actually oral history - > *...Jack was the Director of DARPA from 1987 to 1989 and presided over some cutbacks in AI research (including the cancellation of one of my own research projects)* Like any history, the history of computing is full of little myths - e.g. that Lovelace was the first programmer, that von Neumann originated stored-program memory, that ENIAC was the first true computer, that hardware and software is a clean and natural division in kind... Nilsson calmly lets out the air of these and more. [Free here]
The First Computers: History and Architectures (2000) by Raul Rojas	Papers from an obscure and high-calibre conference: the presenters include an inventor of ALGOL, Turing's assistant on the ACE... Lots of details you can't find elsewhere - like the first ever fully-electronic computer (Hoelzer's unknown 50 Jahre Analog Computer). **4/5**, only if you are into this corner of the world.
Capital in the Twenty-First Century (2013) by Thomas Piketty	Was very impressed by this first time round, but the subsequent scholarly pushback convinces me it's too flawed to endorse without including this list of corrections: * Magness: Piketty's data don't account for bias in income tax reporting. This undermines his claim that inequality is now as bad as it was in the early 1900s: when tax codes change dramatically, as they did through the pre-war period and in 1986, the data become unrepresentative (without adjustment). After adjustment, it looks like inequality fell much less in the postwar boom and has risen much less, post-80s. * Rognlie and Bonnet et al: Piketty calculated the increase in capital share wrong, it's a lot lower; price appreciation (benefiting the rich) is not

general, instead driven by housing. This mostly benefits single-home-owners, who use their capital by living in it, and so aren't 'rentiers'; thus Piketty is mostly wrong about the rise of rentier capitalism. Also, housing shortages are often political rather than fundamental, which again undermines the big anti-capital policy implication.
* Furman and Orszag: Piketty's explanation for extreme income disparities (: large increases in corporate-executive bargaining power) isn't right; instead only a small group of monopolistic tech firms ("superstars") display this.
* Acemoglu and Robinson: The evidence is mostly strongly against his three fundamental laws of capitalism. Most importantly, the elasticity of substitution of capital for labour is less than one; therefore, Piketty's main mechanism for explaining inequality cannot be true.
* McCloskey: lots of errors.

Piketty's core claims:

> *1. the capital share of national income has risen (at the expense of labour share).*
> *2. r > g; wealth generally grows faster than economic output.*
> *3. whenever r > g, inequality will rise because capital gets concentrated in fewer hands.*
> *3b. r (the return to capital) won't change much in response to a decline in growth rate, because the elasticity of substitution between capital and labor is high.*
> *4. The capital-output ratio will be worse in the future.*
> *5. Therefore large wealth tax now, or both capitalism and democracy will die.*

The above research finds that the first is true in some places (in the UK, the US and Canada?), but each of the middle three is questionable. (4) could happen but we're not given much reason to think it inevitable. Summary: Piketty's data collection and descriptive work is mostly good, his analysis and modelling is flawed enough to undo his policy recommendations (5).

The resentful econ undergrad in me thrilled to see Piketty saying this:

> *To put it bluntly, the discipline of economics has yet to get over its childish passion for mathematics and for purely theoretical and often highly ideological speculation, at the expense of historical research and collaboration with the other social sciences. Economists are all too often preoccupied with petty mathematical problems of interest only to themselves. This obsession with mathematics is an easy way of acquiring the appearance of scientificity without having to answer the far more complex questions posed by the world we live in. There is one great advantage of being an academic economist in France: here, economists are not highly respected in the academic and intellectual world or by political and financial elites. Hence they must set aside their contempt for other disciplines and their absurd claim to greater scientific legitimacy, despite the fact that they know almost nothing about anything.*

	He's keen to emphasise his ideological hygiene, that he's a real-deal empiricist. Weighed down by overstatement of its own achievement (“the fundamental laws of capitalism”). With a few more diagrams and boxed definitions, this would make an excellent intro macro textbook, gentle and empirically obsessive as it is. Lot of redundancy - whoa-there steady-now summary paragraphs every few pages - but I suppose that's what you need to do if you aim to be understood by policymakers.
Seven Languages in Seven Weeks (2010) by Bruce A. Tate	Very approachable, but the exercises are repetitive. (My reading group stopped at Prolog, too irritated to go on.) Useful for searching through some very different languages, if you're new or aren't sure what you're looking for.
Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy (2016) by Cathy O'Neil	Important and flawed. It is very hard to think clearly about these things (witness the many inconsistent uses of the term "bias" in the field) but O'Neil goes some way toward this. She is more balanced than average, recognising that algorithms can be an improvement over human bias and pettiness (she praises FICO scores as the liberating thing it was, moving money from those bank managers liked to reliable people of any stripe). Following recent convention, she calls the decision systems 'algorithms'. But it isn't the inaccurate abstract program that does the harm, but the credulous lack of validation. Programs only do harm when they are allowed to make or guide decisions. See also "recommender systems", "info filtering systems", "decision-making systems", "credit scoring". Her framework is useful. When is a system dangerous?: Opacity Is the subject aware they are being modelled? Is the subject aware of the model's outputs? Is the subject aware of the model's predictors and weights? Is the data the model uses open? Is it dynamic - does it update on its failed predictions? Scale Does the model make decisions about many thousands of people? Is the model famous enough to change incentives in its domain? Does the model cause vicious feedback loops? Does the model assign high-variance population estimates to individuals? Damage Does the model work against the subject's interests? If yes, does the model do so in the social interest? Is the model fully automated, i.e. does it make decisions as well as predictions?

	Does the model take into account things it shouldn't? Do its false positives do harm? Do its true positives? Is the harm of a false positive symmetric with the good of a true positive? [Data #2, Theory #1, Theory #3, Values #1]</li>
Doing Data Science (2013) by Rachel Schutt	The first third is: *Talking About Data Science*. But that's good; two careful, socially conscious techies talking is nice, and you would never get the dozens of handy heuristics in this from a usual STEM textbook. Crunchier than it looks - half the value is in the dull-looking, unannotated code samples at the end of each chapter, and isn't spelled out. Pedagogy! It is galling, then, that the data for chapters 6 and 8 has already link-rotted away. And half of the cool startups who came to talk to the class are dead and forgotten already. Only worth it if you can find the data. [Thinking #1, Theory 5 #2]</li>
Thrilling Cities (1963) by Ian Fleming	Before he was very famous, he got paid to go round the world and recommend hotels and restaurants. But being Fleming, he threw in lots of cynical and lascivious detail. And the travel-guide parts have passed right through "uselessly dated" and come back round to "interesting as history". As you expect, his cruelty is blunt and monotone, spanning the nations and races. But he is strangely aware of this. > *India has always depressed me. I can't bear the universal dirt and squalor and the impression, false I am sure, that everyone is doing no work except living off his neighbour. And I am desolated by the outward manifestations of the two great Indian religions.* > *Ignorant, narrow-minded, bigoted? Of course I am.* > *So that was that. I had gone round the world in thirty days, and all I had to show for the journey was a handful of pretty light-weight impressions and some superficial and occasionally disrespectful comment. Had I then, have I today, no more serious message for Britain from the great world outside?* > *Well, I have, but it is only a brief and rather dull exhortation to our young to 'Go East, young man!' See the Pacific Ocean and die!* > *What is so pleasant is that, combined with the delicious, always new sights and smells of 'abroad', there is a sense of achievement, of a task completed, when each target is reached without accident, on time and with the car still running sweetly. There is the illusion that one has done a*

	> *hard and meritorious day's work (few women understand this—perhaps, poor beasts, because they have been only passengers).* Shallow, witty, diverting. If this is a man.
Thin Air (2018) by Richard K. Morgan	Mind candy. Blasted through it in two sittings. People persist in calling Morgan's writing *noir*, but it's too free and fulfilled to be noir - his protagonists get laid all the time, his protagonists swear, his protagonists dish out a great deal more than they get. Morgan makes cyberpunk look subtle. But it's cool stuff and I've read everything he's written, even though half of it reuses the same kind of super-protagonist, the same kind of dialogue, the same kind of gimmick weapons, the same kind of grimdark Chomskyan geopolitics (arespolitics). But the prose is mostly fast and smart enough to carry it off, again. Ideas: * Codeflies, artificial mosquitoes as delivery mechanism for compulsory updates to implants. Hellish. * Placenames on Mars: Bradbury City, Musk Plaza, Hayek Street.
Basic Statistics: Understanding Conventional Methods and Modern Insights (2009) by Rand R. Wilcox	None yet
Evolution as a Religion (Routledge Classics) (1985) by Mary Midgley	The title gives an extremely misleading idea; you'd think it was a standard ignorant *tu quoque* work of romantic theism. But it isn't. Instead she traces how easy it is for scientists (including acknowledged lucid greats like Wilson, Tegmark) to slip into philosophy and end up committing howlers.
Rendezvous with Rama (Rama, #1) (1973) by Arthur C. Clarke	Didn't get it, but I was quite young.
Love in the Time of Cholera (1985) by Gabriel García Márquez	Less soppy than I expected. Ending is great.

Bully for Brontosaurus (1991) by Stephen Jay Gould	This meant a lot to me as a teen. Just one bit: the essay "Male Nipples and Clitoral Ripples" - with its shocking claim that only 30% of women orgasm from "PIV" intercourse - scandalised me. (He bases this on the notably shoddy work of Kinsey and Hite, but it may be worse than that.) The main point of that piece - using the pleasure-poor design of the two genitalia to attack a straw man view he calls "hyperadaptationism" - had less effect on me, luckily. There are odd synopses of each essay here. (I give general reasons to distrust Gould here.)
David Hockney: A Bigger Picture (2012) by Marco Livingstone	Superficially superficial, wholly lovable, highly postmodern. This whole retrospective is on his recent distinctive work in the Yorkshire woods. The words are less annoying than usual for coffee-table-badge books. Keep looking til you like it.
Leonardo's Mountain of Clams and the Diet of Worms: Essays on Natural History (1998) by Stephen Jay Gould	Start by listing Gould's virtues: passionate about paleontology and paleontologists, contagiously curious about nature and obscure history, scrupulously fair to the religious and the pre-modern, animated by justice. For an academic, his prose is highly flavoursome and fun. He has a considered opinion about Darwin's handwriting and the meaning of baseball. One of his essay collections was very important to me as a teen, showing me that I could unify truth-seeking and justice-seeking, and with style. But this is all countermanded, because he is just not trustworthy on human topics, and neither on core evolutionary theory, I'm told. From his enormously influential, fallacious dismissal of intelligence research in general and Morton in particular, to his dishonest coup of public discourse over punctuated equilibrium (pushing the flashy and revolutionary version in literary magazines, retreating to minimal and uncontentious forms in the science journals who could actually evaluate it), he muddied the waters even as he brandished real literary talent and noble political intentions. This is unforgiveable: empirical clarity is too rare and precious to sacrifice so. Maynard Smith: > *Gould occupies a rather curious position, particularly on his side of the Atlantic. Because of the excellence of his essays, he has come to be seen by non-biologists as the preeminent evolutionary theorist. In contrast, the evolutionary biologists with whom I have discussed his work tend to see him as a man whose ideas are so confused as to be hardly worth bothering with, but as one who should not be publicly criticized because he is at least on our side against the creationists. All this would not matter, were it not that he is giving non-biologists a largely false picture of the state of evolutionary theory.</i>* *Krugman:* > *Gould is the John Kenneth Galbraith of his subject. That is, he is a wonderful writer who is beloved by literary intellectuals and lionized by the media because he does not use algebra or difficult jargon. Unfortunately, it appears that he avoids these sins not because he has transcended his colleagues but because he does does not seem to*

> *understand what they have to say; and his own descriptions of what the field is about - not just the answers, but even the questions - are consistently misleading. His impressive literary and historical erudition makes his work seem profound to most readers, but informed readers eventually conclude that there's no there there.</i>*

Tooby and Cosmides:

> *We suggest that the best way to grasp the nature of Gould's writings is to recognize them as one of the most formidable bodies of fiction to be produced in recent American letters. Gould brilliantly works a number of literary devices to construct a fictional "Gould" as the protagonist of his essays and to construct a world of "evolutionary biology" every bit as imaginary and plausible as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Most of the elements of Gould's writing make no sense if they are interpreted as an honest attempt to communicate about science (e.g., why would he characterize so many researchers as saying the opposite of what they actually do) but come sharply into focus when understood as necessary components of a world constructed for the fictional "Gould" to have heroic fantasy adventures in...*
>
> *"Gould" the protagonist is a much loved character who reveals himself to be learned, subtle, open-minded, tolerant, funny, gracious to his opponents, a tireless adversary of cultural prejudice, able to swim upstream against popular opinion with unflinching moral courage, able to pierce the surface appearances that capture others, and indeed to be not only the most brilliant innovator in biology since Darwin, but more importantly to be the voice of humane reason against the forces of ignorance, passion, incuriousity, and injustice. The author Gould, not least because he labors to beguile his audience into confusing his fictional targets with actual people and fields, is sadly none of these things.*
>
> *Yet in the final analysis, there are genuine grounds for hope in the immense and enduring popularity of Gould. Gould is popular, we think, because readers see in "Gould" the embodiment of humane reason, the best aspirations of the scientific impulse. It is this "Gould" that we will continue to honor, and, who, indeed, would fight to bring the illumination that modern evolutionary science can offer into wider use. </i>*

Here is a fictional leaf from Gould's ad hominem book, to give you a sense of what he does, at his worst:

> *Gould is famed for the theory of punctuated equilibrium, which holds that adaption and speciation is not generally a slow, gradual process measurable in tens of thousands of year periods, but instead a rapid response to environmental shocks, measurable in hundred-year periods. The political bias of this theory is too blatant to ignore: as a Marxist, Gould requires that sustainable change be possible by revolution rather than by long accumulation (...)*

(For full effect I should now chide him for his genic panadaptationism.)

Along with Lewontin and Rose, Gould mediated a huge contradiction in our

	culture: they allowed the C20th left to feel we were scientific, in our comfortable blank-slatism. That we had already incorporated the deep challenge of evolutionary biology - since these eminent men told us it had no human implications. *Read Gould for fun and uplift, but take great care, for he cares about other things more than truth. (Read Midgley and Singer first if the politics scare you; they might stop you fleeing into Gould's dodgy arms.)* *From James. The Leonardo and Columbus esays are 4/5.</li>* *</td> </tr>*
Little Wolf's Diary of Daring Deeds (1996) by Ian Whybrow	None yet
The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, #1) (1979) by Douglas Adams	None yet
Walden (1854) by Henry David Thoreau	The philosophy is fine, and was plenty nutritious for me, as a teenager: "Think hard, go your own way, don't hurt animals." The nature worship is a red herring, though.
Chaos: Making a New Science (1987) by James Gleick	Romantic, dramatic, constructive pop science: the physics, meteorology and maths in this was famed but not well-explained before this came out. The theme of the very different results presented here is unprecedented successes in recognising and explaining nonlinear systems. Very human: every researcher is profiled sensitively, generally as an outsider challenging the stuffy, desk-bound precepts of 'linear science'. Since ornery, heroic Mandelbrot is included here, you get an exciting ride even if you don't like maths or science or the world or the underlying generative process of all instances of beauty. "Chaos" is a bad name for the field: it implies randomness, indeterminism, intractability. Better to question why "order" can only refer to equilibrium or periodic patterns - why it is we think of order as *boring*. "Deterministic disorder" is more honest - and better yet is Lao-Bin's "*order without periodicity*". Also, the diagrams are poor by contemporary standards: I had to stare at them for a while before grokking the concept. Borne on what felt like an epochal wave, Gleick overreaches. He calls Smale and Mandelbrot "*the end of the reductionist program in science*".

	How is seeking and finding a precise (nonlinear) equation - which is the case in the work of all these men - for a system *holist*!? I don't actually know if the maths in here has changed everything: maybe it has, and they suffer from the Seinfeld effect for dynamical systems, seeming obvious after the fact. But I do know that the Santa Fe strain of work is more of a tolerated eccentric uncle than a science-upending behemoth.
Stumbling on Happiness (2006) by Daniel Todd Gilbert	Warning: Probably hasn't borne the replication crisis well.
Learning PHP, MySQL, and JavaScript: A Step-By-Step Guide to Creating Dynamic Websites (2009) by Robin Nixon	Half of the internet runs on PHP, a language which was not initially intended to be used for actual programs. This article, PHP: A Fractal of Bad Design</i></b>, a long list of design criticisms and roaring frustration, is how I learned the language in the first place. It is indispensable, rigorous, and wise. I had to look up not a few terms in it, because I am not a computer scientist at all, but a sneaky back-stairs conversion boy. All inquiry is hard; this might be because the mind was not initially intended to be used for real, permanent inquiry. But an often overlooked fact is that people *are* looking out for you; that is what half of all books *are*. In the tech world they cry lookout! a click away. If you care. * I didn't read tech books during my first year, instead just blundering on with the step debugger and StackOverflow. This was a serious mistake, not least because my brain is geared towards book-learning and depth-first top-down imposition of order. This is excellent for people starting from 0, but too slow for anyone with much practical experience.
The Great Gatsby (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald	None yet
The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer (2010) by Siddhartha Mukherjee	> *Here now in his triumph where all things falter,* > *Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,* > *As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,* > *Death lies dead.* (Swinburne) Quite lyrical but exhausting. All the way from Galen to personal oncogenetics. The section on pre-anesthesia radical surgery was truly nauseating. A horrendous macho fad: > *Haagensen wrote in 1956: 'it is my duty to carry out as radical an operation as the... anatomy permits.'*

	> *The radical mastectomy had... edged into the "ultraradical," an extraordinarily morbid, disfiguring procedure in which surgeons removed the breast, the pectoral muscles, the axillary nodes, the chest wall, and occasionally the ribs, parts of the sternum, the clavicle, and the lymph nodes inside the chest.* > > *Breast cancer, [Halsted] claimed, spun out from the breast into the lymph nodes under the arm, then cartwheeled mirthlessly through the blood into the liver, lungs, and bones. A surgeon's job was to arrest that centrifugal spread by cutting every piece of it out of the body, as if to catch and break the wheel in midspin. This meant treating early breast cancer aggressively and definitively. The more a surgeon cut, the more he cured.* The sheer amount of money and genius thrown at cancer - with merely gradual returns - is not really considered in terms of its opportunity cost, by Mukherjee of anyone - what diseases might we have cured with those hundreds of billions? What giant, clever prevention studies run? But never mind: cancer won the PR war (against apathy, against political indifference, against more cost-effective causes) very early on, with the chemo pioneer Farber and his use of Jimmy > *The campaign against cancer, Farber learned, was much like a political campaign: it needed icons, mascots, images, slogans—the strategies of advertising as much as the tools of science. For any illness to rise to political prominence, it needed to be marketed, just as a political campaign needed marketing. A disease needed to be transformed politically before it could be transformed scientifically.* and later with the powerful patient blocs. Not sure who would benefit from reading this closely; there's too much detail. Maybe med school freshers?
Critique of Pure Reason (1781) by Immanuel Kant	Actually only read the "*Transcendental Analytic*", only about 1/8th of the whole. Enough. Difficult, flashy apodixis. His arguments are gappy; prose awful; goals anyway radically different from mine (he wanted certainty, exhaustiveness, the establishment of free will at any metaphysical cost: a.k.a. your submission). I don't doubt that there's enough subtlety and complexity to spend a career reading him. I just doubt there's world enough and time for *me* to return for the rest.
Big Java: Late Objects (1991) by Cay S. Horstmann	Relatively friendly intro to the 1000 working concepts of OOP. Java is not the place to start programming but universities love it so this book is a coping strategy.
*Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of*	Cool blast through three-and-a-bit millennia of talk of Christ's bowels and fucking shit. She distinguishes between 'obscenities' and 'oaths' (the first takes profane subjects, the second sacred) and then between the *proper*

Swearing (2013) by Melissa Mohr	and the *vain* oath (e.g. “Bejasus! Godammit! Hell’s teeth!”). Adding the generalisation that ‘we swear about what we care about’, she can use known changes in the expressive power of swearwords to cleverly trace the movement of taboos across cultures and over time. (Very broadly: power went from Shit’s precedence to Holy and now back and with more political terms.) Rome’s nasty little sexuality is seen to be the model of a lot of our crap associations; in the Middle Ages vain oaths were criminal while scholars and physicians used ‘cunt’ in textbooks without heat. In our time, racial slurs (very young as slurs – only around WWII for their worst malevolence) have taken the biscuit from sex, excrement and God - which you can see as encouraging (if that means we now care about the targets of racial language) - or depressing (if that means we now care more about Race, dividing lines for their own sake). Mohr is full of fact without being trivial; she lets graffiti, court records, and primary quotation damn the damnable – e.g. DH Lawrence’s holy cock-mysticism, the spume of Twitter bigots.
Intermediate Microeconomics: A Modern Approach (1987) by Hal R. Varian	This kicked my arse; it was way above my mathematical level when I first encountered it.
The Tiger Who Came to Tea (1968) by Judith Kerr	None yet
The Princess Bride (1973) by William Goldman	None yet
Daft Wee Stories (2015) by Limmy	Happily twisted, fine. His Twitter is a better, million-word performance piece.
Aunts Aren't Gentlemen (1974) by P.G. Wodehouse	A bad Wodehouse but better than most books. This late (1974), the dischord and ugliness of the real world encroaches a bit: > *I think at this juncture I may have looked askance at him a bit. I hadn't realized that that was what he was, and it rather shocked me, because I'm not any too keen on Communists.* > *"And I am a man who likes nice things. I want to branch out."* > *"A Mayfair flat?"*

	> *"Yes."* > *"Champagne with every meal?"* > *"Exactly."* > *"Rolls-Royces?"* > *"Those too."* > *"Leaving something over, of course, to slip to the hard-up proletariat? You'd like them to have what you don't need."* > *"There won't be anything I don't need."* > *It was a little difficult to know what to say. I had never talked things over with a Communist before, and it came as something of a shock to find that he wasn't so fond of the hard-up proletariat as I had supposed.* Dahlia on fixing a horserace: > *There are too many people around with scruples and high principles and all that sort of guff. You can't do the simplest thing without somebody jumping on the back of your neck because you've offended against his blasted code of ethics.* --- *Wooster's taboo:* None? *Triangle*: Wooster - Vanessa - Orlo *Subplot*: Spots, the forgetful Major, the local derby. *Aunt*: Dahlia. *Antagonist*: Cook, Orlo, the Major. *Expedient*: catnapping, imprisoning someone in a painting and bedsheet, buying life insurance from an insurer who wants to kill you.
When the Wind Blows (1982) by Raymond Briggs	None yet
The Man of Feeling (1771) by Henry MacKenzie	I suppose I should dislike it because it's a precursor of Romanticism, that eventually destructive and retrograde movement. But it's also a precursor to Dickens, to David Mitchell, to Rebecca Sugar, so leave it alone.
What Is This Thing Called Science? (1976) by Alan F. Chalmers	None yet
On Sense and Reference () by Gottlob	None yet

Frege	
Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy (1637) by René Descartes	Descartes teaches lots of things, but the most relevant is the terrible power of motivated reasoning to pervert someone - even if the reasoner is hugely intelligent. But not only. Catherine Wilson forced me to think of Descartes as more than a strong mathematician, incomplete scientist, bigoted apriorist and shoddy Analytic. Not least, she wrote this, maybe the brassiest passage I've ever seen in an academic journal: > *if Descartes had written a Preface to the Meditations that was truthful, faithful to his firmest convictions, and philosophically consistent, the relevant section would have gone something like this:* > > *I cannot demonstrate the immortality of the human soul, and probably no philosopher can. Immortality is not logically impossible, but it wouldn't be what you are probably imagining it to be either. Perception, like sensation and emotion, is a registering by our minds of occurrences in our nerves and brain. If our minds endure after death, therefore, as far as the philosopher can tell, they will feel neither pain, nor pleasure, for they will no longerform a composite with our bodies. We will no longer see colours, touch objects, and hear sounds. We will not remember events ofour past lives. We will be numb and inert. Animals will be, as both Aristotle and Lucretius thought, nothing after death, and wehumans will be almost nothing - at most capable of imageless thought and intellectual memory. Of course, we can hope for more than this. Perhaps our bodies will be resurrected and reattached to our minds, so that we are restored to awareness of a world. But this is a matter of faith and cannot be philosophically demonstrated, whereas more important truths such as the excellence of our minds and bodies can be philosophically demonstrated.* > > *Be that as it may, we are not mere animals. Our language and rationality indicate that we are specially favoured by God. As to whether animals are conscious, I do not know. I avoid speculative philosophy. But everyone can appreciate that animalscannot carry on a conversation, and I seriously doubt that animals reason, for I can show how their behaviour is mediated by the brain to which their sensory organs report, without ascribing reasoning to them.* > > *The Fathers of the Church were wrong to scorn the human body asa source of moral corruption and to suggest that it is a shell that we will happily cast off. We use the cerebral representations it forms for purposes as exalted as mathematics, and if we could not understand and trust proofs about the triangle, how should we understand and feel confident about proofs about invisible objects such as God?...Admire God, who has given you a world to study, as well as to experience, and a mind equipped with language and reasoning powers, but leave off worrying about eternal rewards and punishments.* > *Of course Descartes could not have published such a Preface, not in France and not under his own name. Yet it was to communicate this very*

	> *different message that he offered, without his heart being in the task, to prove the immortality of the soul.* Charitable to say the least, but that's what we owe the very distant.
Death in Venice (1911) by Thomas Mann	None yet
Metaphysics: A Guide and Anthology (2004) by Tim Crane	None yet
Aesthetics (1997) by Susan Feagin	None yet
Philosophy of Science: A Contemporary Introduction (2000) by Alex Rosenberg	None yet
A Sentimental Journey (1768) by Laurence Sterne	None yet
The Grass Is Singing (1950) by Doris Lessing	None yet
Things Fall Apart (The African Trilogy, #1) (1958) by Chinua Achebe	You don't see the opinion "tribal feudalism was bad, colonialism was worse" much. Nor here.
Heart of Darkness (1899) by Joseph Conrad	None yet

A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings (1843) by Charles Dickens	On reading the passage about the allegorical children Ignorance and Want, the lecturer broke down in tears.
Logic (1999) by Paul Tomassi	Friendly, quirky, but the topic is much better taught with a computer. (Speaking from hard experience)
A History of Rock Music: 1951-2000 (2003) by Piero Scaruffi	A dizzying parade of names, about three-quarters of which I'd never heard of. Completely idiosyncratic - for instance he doesn't rate the Beatles at all - but absolutely consistent and catholic. One of his principles: He maintains an art vs pop distinction I don't agree with anymore: > *fundamentally, being an art musician is a different kind of job... than the job of popular entertainer. The art musician is pursuing a research program that will be appreciated mainly by his peers and by the "critics" (functioning as historians of music), not by the public... The goal of an art musician is, first and foremost, to do what s/he feels is important...* > *Art music knows no stylistic boundaries: the division in classical, jazz, rock, hip hop and so forth still makes sense for commercial music (it basically identifies the sales channel) but ever less sense for art music whose production, distribution and appreciation methods are roughly the same, regardless of whether the musician studied in a Conservatory, practiced in a loft or recorded at home with a laptop.* He is willing to forgive incompetence, contempt and if only there is a cup of originality in it. This is really a stand-in for his website, which is an astonishing, rambling, deep testament to him, on history, neuroscience, AI, poetry, politics and whatever. I hope I leave behind something nearly as towering and distinctive.
High Fidelity (1995) by Nick Hornby	Loved it at the time, probably because I was Rob, as a teenager (emotionally incompetent, hooded by vivid insecurity, monomanaical about music).
Consider Phlebas (Culture, #1) (1987) by Iain M. Banks	Not the place to start. Prose is a bit flat, the plot a bit neat (now you are in space. now you have a ship). But it also has the most focussed treatment of the key tension of the series: what does the Absolute Liberal do with their enemies? What about people who don't want freedom, tolerance, management, intervention, rational subalterity?
Naming and	None yet

Necessity (1980) by Saul A. Kripke	
Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction (1999) by William G. Lycan	You have to know philosophy of language to get modern philosophy, but you don't have to like it.
The Philosopher and the Wolf: Lessons from the Wild on Love, Death, and Happiness (2008) by Mark Rowlands	I think this was the first work I read from the (large) genre "Disgruntled philosopher of life uses book to vent about the analytics and say some wise stuff". There is also a very cute animal who is not a metaphor.
The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961) by Muriel Spark	None yet
Analytic Philosophy: The History of an Illusion (2007) by Aaron Preston	As a student I was much vexed by analytic philosophy. This was partially sour grapes (because I didn't know enough maths to keep up with some of it), but also partially fair: it isn't what it says it is. Roughly: modern, modest, science-friendly clarification.) Preston's polemic is that analytic philosophy isn't real and never was, in the sense that it isn't actually a school, a set of views, or even a methodology. (Instead it's a Anglophone social clique.) The nominally distinctive part of it was, according to Preston, the *linguistic thesis*: that "philosophy is wholly or largely a matter of linguistic analysis." While some analytics in the canon did think this, most don't and never did. This is dodgy. John Wisdom is quoted saying that what analytics have in common is their seeking "new insight into old truths". Amazingly, that seems about right, and in the plainest possible terms. Exciting but excessive.
Holes (Holes, #1) (1998) by Louis Sachar	None yet

Heretics: Adventures With The Enemies Of Science (2013) by Will Storr	Irritating but righteous. Not quite what it looks like: another Ronson-Theroux journalist, accosting another set of tragicomic kooks). OK, it *is* that, but it's also a grim reflection on how confusing and muddy the world is, on the universality of extreme bias - plus dollops of Storr's personal traumas and peccadilloes. (Half the book is his confessing to childhood theft, psychosis, academic failure, and petty vendettas.) Rather than getting to the bottom of ESP, or morgellons, or homeopathy, or past-life regression, Storr tries to understand the character of the people who believe and disbelieve in them. Besides confronting unusual beliefs without (as much) prejudice, *The Heretics* is about coming to terms with the fact that we are all riddled with deep obstacles to objectivity: ingroupism and confirmation bias; representation realism; emotional reasoning; the terrifyingly unreliable reconstructive nature of memory; the sad nonidentity of intelligence and rationality; evolutionarily adaptive delusions of superiority and agency. These are illustrated by interviews with a creationist, Sheldrake, Irving, Ramdev, Monckton, the Morgellons victims*, and even Randi. > *Stories work against truth. They operate with the machinery of prejudice and distortion. Their purpose is not fact but propaganda. The scientific method is the tool that humans have developed to break the dominion of the narrative. It has been designed specifically to dissolve anecdote, to strip out emotion and leave only unpolluted data. It is a new kind of language, a modern sorcery, and it has gifted our species incredible powers. We can eradicate plagues, extend our lives by decades, build rockets and fly through space. But we can hardly be surprised if some feel an instinctive hostility towards it, for it is fundamentally inhuman.* Storr is seriously out of his depth on the science: he is always at least second-hand from the evidence (when interviewing researchers), and often third-hand (most of his citations are pop science books), and so several chapters suffer from journalism's classic problem, false balance. The reason this isn't a call to shut the book is because he doesn't spare himself, states this repeatedly - and this is in fact *the theme* of his book: that almost all of us are unable to infer the truth about a shocking diversity of things.* For instance, not just the past-life cranks, but also the Skeptics he encounters are out of their depth, and deserve the calling-out they get from him. No one can think they're past the need for doubt. > *I am surprised, for a start, that so few of these disciples of empirical evidence seem to be familiar with the scientific literature on the subject that impassions them so. I am suspicious, too, about the real source of their rage. If they are motivated, as they frequently insist, by altruistic concern over the dangers of supernatural belief, why don't they obsess over jihadist Muslims, homophobic Christians or racist Jewish settlers? Why this focus on stage psychics, ghosthunters and alt-med hippies?* > *During our conversation, I asked Randi if he has ever, in his life, changed his position on anything due to an examination of the evidence. After a long silence, he said, 'That's a good question. I have had a few surprises along the way that got my attention rather sharply.'* > *'What were these?' I asked.*

> *He thought again, for some time. 'Oh, some magic trick that I decided on the modus operandi.'...*
> *'So you've never been wrong about anything significant?'*
> *'In regard to the Skeptical movement and my work...' There was another stretched and chewing pause. He conferred with his partner, to see if he had any ideas. 'No. Nothing occurs to me at the moment.'*

That's not how memory works though, is it?

Even given his unusual humility, Storr is too literal-minded and prosecutorial ("*I have been looking for evidence that James Randi is a liar*"). Storr is disillusioned with particular Skeptics, and reacts by throwing out scepticism:

> *For many Skeptics, evidence-based truth has been sacralised. It has caused them to become irrational in their judgements of the motives of those with whom they do not agree...*
> *This monoculture we would have, if the hard rationalists had their way, would be a deathly thing. So bring on the psychics, bring on the alien abductees, bring on the two John Lennons – bring on a hundred of them. Christians or no, there will be tribalism. Televangelists or no, there will be scoundrels. It is not religion or fake mystics that create these problems, it is being human. Where there is illegality or racial hatred, call the police. Where there is psychosis, call Professor Richard Bentall. Where there is misinformation, bring learning. But where there is just ordinary madness, we should celebrate. Eccentricity is our gift to one another. It is the riches of our species. To be mistaken is not a sin. Wrongness is a human right.*

And when Randi corrects himself in the course of a sentence ("*I didn't go to grade school at all, I went to the first few grades of grade school*"), Storr leaps on this as a serious contradiction rather than just the patchy nature of speech. Sure, he talks about his emotional bias against scepticism - but he still leaves in this idiot journo behaviour, the uncharitable coaxing out of flaws.

These chapters were a good ethnography of 'traditional' (nontechnical) rationality. But Storr doesn't know about the other kind (which both foregrounds and copes with all the cognitive biases he is so struck and scarred by), and so his conclusion about rationalism is completely awry.**

The title is fitting in a few ways: Storr sees these people as persecuted underdogs (he likes many of the quacks and fringeists, and so focusses on the arrogance and bias of the - however correct - mainstream figures dealing with them); and they certainly have the holy madness of people who cry out despite knowing they will be ostracised.

> *Over the last few months, John E Mack has become a kind of hero to me. Despite his earlier caution, he ended up believing in amazing things: intergalactic space travel and terrifying encounters in alien craft that travelled seamlessly through nonphysical dimensions. And when his bosses tried to silence him, he hired a lawyer. He fought back against the dean and his dreary minions. He battled hard in the name of craziness...*

David Irving is interesting in this regard: he does not act like a fraud (e.g. he sues people for libel, even though this brings intensive scrutiny of his research), but rather a sort of compulsive masochist-contrarian. Stranger

still, his (beloved) family were all solid anti-Nazi soldiers in WWII. (Storr contorts himself to explain Irving's identification with Hitler as due to their sharing an admiration of the British forces (...))

Storr's awful experience on a Vipassana retreat is a vivid example of the Buddhist dark night of the soul. We don't know what fraction of people suffer terribly from meditation, but despite its cuddly image, there's surely large overlap with the 8% of people who are clinically depressive and/or anxious.

The chapter on psi does not represent the state of evidence properly - perhaps because one of his proof-readers was Professor Daryl Bloody Bem.
***

The ending is stirring but tilts over into relativism:

> *The Skeptic tells the story of Randi the hero; the psychic of Randi the devil. We all make these unconscious plot decisions...*
>
> *We are all creatures of illusion. We are made out of stories. From the heretics to the Skeptics, we are all lost in our own secret worlds.*

But the question is to what *degree*! And the degree of lostness, of inverse rationality, varies by many orders of whatever magnitude you wish to pick.

Storr's disquiet at the sheer power of cognitive bias, and the systematic failures of yes/no science (that is: statistical significance rather than effect size estimation) is well and good. (Gelman:

> *I think 'the probability that a model or a hypothesis is true' is generally a meaningless statement except as noted in certain narrow albeit important examples.*

.)
And his humane approach is certainly bound to be more compelling to mystics and flakes than e.g. deGrasse Tyson's smug dismissals. But Storr is scared of grey, of the fact that doubt is only reducible and not eliminable. This is because he doesn't know anything about our most beautiful weapons: probabilism, Bayesian inference, Analysis.

I recommend *Elephant in the Brain* or *Rationality from A to Z* instead as an approach to the vital, dreadful side of cognition (including advice on avoiding being a fake, partial, traditional sceptic); they have less angst and false equivalences, and were written by people who understand the balance of evidence.

Actually that's too strong; I am frustrated with Storr because he is so similar to me, except he doesn't grasp that the technical is the path out of (many) biases. There's a lot wrong with it and you should probably read it, and how often can one say that?

* Storr is right that skeptics can lack compassion. The "Morgellons" people *are* victims regardless of what their etiology turns out to be (mental illness, nerve disorders, tropical rat mites, or yes malicious sentient fibres). At minimum, they are victims of bad fortune plus rigid and actually unscientific medical practices. The Lesswrong style of rationalist has less of this problem IMO (more emotional literacy; a more Californian culture).

	** Storr: > *I am concerned that I have overstated my argument. In my haste to write my own coherent story, I have barely acknowledged the obvious truth that minds do sometimes change. People find faith and they lose it. Mystics become Skeptics. Politicians cross the floor. I wonder why this happens. Is it when the reality of what is actually happening in our lives overpowers the myth that we make of themselves? Are we simply pursuing ever more glorious hero missions?...* > > *This is an imperfect system, as it relies on many secondary sources. Moreover, I do not declare myself to be free of the biases that afflict any writer, and I'm certainly not immune to making mistakes. If any errors are noted, or if new findings supersede claims made in the text, I would be very grateful to receive notification via willstorr.com, so future editions can be corrected.* *** Important caveat to the headline of that linked article from Gelman: > > *The only thing I don't like about Engber's article is its title, "Daryl Bem Proved ESP Is Real. Which means science is broken." I understand that "Daryl Bem Proved ESP Is Real" is kind of a joke, but to me this is a bit too close to the original reporting on Bem, back in 2011, where people kept saying that Bem's study was high quality, state-of-the-art psychology, etc. Actually, Bem's study was crap. It's every much as bad as the famously bad papers on beauty and sex ratio, ovulation on voting, elderly-related words and slow walking, etc.* > > *And "science" is not broken. Crappy science is broken. Good science is fine. If "science" is defined as bad articles published in PPNAS—himmicanes, air rage, ages ending in 9, etc.—then, sure, science is broken. But if science is defined as the real stuff, then, no, it's not broken at all.*
Our Dumb World: The Onion's Atlas of the Planet Earth (2007) by The Onion	None yet
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (Harry Potter, #3) (1999) by J.K. Rowling	None yet

Kafka's Dick (1986) by Alan Bennett	None yet
People (2012) by Alan Bennett	None yet
Smut (2011) by Alan Bennett	None yet
The Lady in the Van (1999) by Alan Bennett	None yet
Bob Dylan Chronicles: Volume 1 (2004) by Bob Dylan	Impressive, melodious and laborious plagiarism.
The Fall of Hyperion (Hyperion Cantos #2) (1990) by Dan Simmons	Not a sequel: the third act of the first book. A strange mix of very clever and kind of ridiculous. The camp Gothic tone intensifies, piling mystery on the mystical, but eventually resolves in an unexpectedly rosy and metaphysical cadence. But you have to get through 450 pages of sand, impalings, twists, people writing poetry furiously as a walking knife guts them, etc. I'm not sure if it was worth it, but it certainly was Grand. Ridiculous and Clarke-magic-based sci-fi like *Dune*, grim and spiked like *Blindsight* (though turned completely upside down at the end: Watts is a deadly serious treatment of epiphenomenalism and illusionism; Simmons' universe is extremely idealist/dualist), maybe the most extreme I've seen outside of medieval Christians or the hippies.) Questions which get answered, usually 500 pages in: * Why is the Shrike such an inefficient avenger? * Why is John Keats being foregrounded 900 years later as a paragon of humanity? By robots? * Why are deep ecologists so keen on space? * What's so bad about the Hegemony? * Why is there literally no detail about the Ousters? * Why does Severn keep napping a dozen times a day? (Maybe it's the TB.) * Why make a copy of Earth? Why preserve it empty? A reconstructed cyborg Keats is the embodiment of the Human Spirit, able to affect the world (and the plot) as a ghost. Its appetite for mysticism is surprising. The only super-AI shown in any real detail speaks in koans, and is not especially impressive. The people who triumph in the end are odd: it's the deep ecologists and kibbutzim and Catholics - the ancient, normalised death cults - who thrive when modernity is withdrawn. The Ousters (and Simmons) equivocate between the Core plotting to murder everyone alive and the Core making everyone too comfortable to innovate and explore space. Which are not

	really morally equivalent when you think about it. This is especially odd since the rest of the ending extols our creativity and scepticism and courage, i.e. the Enlightenment. The ending is both too neat - all the loose ends tied up, several revivals, the baddies gone without a fight, the missing element in the Grand Unified Theory is the Human Spirit - and surprisingly harsh all the millions dead, and the saviour who rightly killed them torn apart by the mob. Too long and slow to recommend to everyone, but rich and novel for people who can get past that. --- How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: Some, this time. The Ousters are eventually shown as rad anarchists with wings and stuff. *Software development*: No. *Actual Science*: Not really.
Da Capo Best Music Writing 2005 (2005) by J.T. LeRoy	None yet
Da Capo Best Music Writing 2004 (2004) by Mickey Hart	None yet
The Colonel (Firefall, #1.5) (2014) by Peter Watts	Not long enough for Watts' highly inventive, highly depressive details to overwhelm you.
Feersum Endjinn (1994) by Iain M. Banks	Half the characters in this are ghosts, and one of the less-noted things about ghost stories is that they are wildly optimistic: they tend to show justice prevailing. Yes, fine, the ghost's revenge is a gory, creepy, retributive justice, and a bit late, but it's still the victim's triumph. The sumtym narayter Bascule makes or breaks the book. He's a good character - Molesworth on the Web - but I couldn't stand his phonetically told sections when I read this as a teen, and you'll see the reviews below focus on him despite him being only about a quarter of the focalisation. Bad spelling (cognitive dysfunction) is rare in sci-fi - let alone in SF titles - because the authors are trying to be taken seriously to make up for the genre fiction status? - and I've gotten over it since. Maybe better as audiobook.

The characters are squatting their own civ. What lives on (after a relatively gentle apocalypse) is more self-conscious, historically conscious than that in *Book of the New Sun*. Not ruined, just forgotten, off the wavefront, using the space elevator as a house. The cyberspace is pretty good (better than *Hyperion* or *Snow Crash* or *Neuromancer* because less neat).

> *The mist was the world was the data corpus was the Crypto-sphere was the history of the world was the future of the world was the guardian of un-done things was the summation of intelligent purpose was chaos was pure thought was the untouched was the utterly corrupted was the end and the beginning was the exiled and the resiled, was the creature and the machine was the life and the inanimate was the evil and the good was the hate and the love was the compassion and the indifference was everything and nothing and nothing and nothing.*

One virtuoso passage, on the species' trajectory after a nebula occludes the sun:

> *so humanity left the surface of the world to the ice, wind and snow, and sheltered, reduced and impoverished, within the stony depths of the planet's skin, finally coming to resemble nothing more than parasites in the cooling pelt of some huge dying animal.*
>
> *With it it took all its knowledge of the universe and all the memories of its achievements and all the coded information defining the animals and plants that had survived the vicissitudes of time and evolution and - especially - the pressure of the human species' own until then remorseless rise.*
>
> *Those buried citadels became whole small worlds of refugee communities and spawned still smaller worlds as new machines took over the job of maintaining the levels of the crypt, until gradually more and more of what was in any sense humanity came to reside not simply in the created world of its tunnels, caverns and shafts but within those worlds in the generated realities produced by its computers...*
>
> *Still, what was left of humanity persisted, retreating further from the open oven of the surface until it became trapped between it and the heat of the planet's own molten sub-surface. It was then that the species finally gave up the struggle to remain in macrohuman form, pulling back fully into a virtual environment and resorted to storing its ancient biochemical inheritance as information only, in the hope that one day such fragile concoctions of water and minerals could exist again upon the face of the Earth.*
>
> *Its time from then was long as people reckoned it from that point, short as they would have before. The sun's photosphere continued to expand until it swallowed Venus, and Earth did not survive much longer; the last humans on Earth perished together in a crumbling machine core as its cooling circuits failed, the half-finished life-boat spaceship they had been attempting to construct already melted to a hollow husk beside them.*
>
> *He suffered with each child abandoned to the snow; with every old man*

	> *or woman left - too exhausted to shiver any more - under piles of ice-hard rags; with all the people swept away by the howling, fire-storm winds; with each consciousness extinguished - its ordered information reduced to random meaninglessness - by the increasing heat.* > *And he woke from such dreams sometimes wondering whether all that he was being shown could possibly be true, and on other occasions so convinced that it had been real that he would have faithfully believed what he had seen was the inescapable future, rather than some mere possibility, projection or warning.* Problems: * Climaxes about 2/3 through. I suppose that's okay, it's not a three-act play. * Bascule is hooked into the king's brain surveillance network, but regularly escapes the king's secret police. * Banks shows the crypt people having Em accelerated cognition (about 1000x), but without Ems dominating the economy and society. (Actually, no human besides the military, scientists and secret police are heard of doing any real work, so maybe this is the case in the background.) * It's set on Earth, which is odd for Banks, but this fact isn't used much. Some of us stayed behind. * There are several virtual worlds in this (the bird crypt, the transport map, the interrogation allegories, the deep crypt with its garden) but they're insufficiently different from each other and base reality (all have a kind of fairytale logic, all have mythical beasts stalking around). * None of the sheer stakes, grandeur, and philosophical tension of the Culture books. * Fun but a mere sketch.
The Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories (2018) by Jay Rubin	All the classic contradictions - *kawaii* and banality, sullen obesiance and batshit intensity, *mono no aware* and sexual frustration. There are five great stories (“Hell Screen”, 'Sanshirō', “American Hijiki”, “Pink”, “Mr. English”) and 10 or so enjoyable squibs (out of around 40). There aren't many great sentences, but greatness doesn't strictly need em. > *spinning slowly all in unison, and Naomi found herself joining them, looking up into the sky just as she had before, but this time she felt she was falling, and...perhaps... they could go back to before they'd twisted their bodies in wicked prayer and find some other way to free themselves from a world become a living hell, and so she vowed that once they'd wound the world back a full nineteen years, they would take it in their hands again and make it theirs at last; on and on she spun, every revolution a prayer in reverse.* Conspicuous by its absence is Shōwa fascism* - there are no positive or negative references, nor (modern German-style) defensive rightful disownment. The war is there, the terrible firestorms, the terrible hunger; but nothing of the cult (a death cult, king cult, Prussia cult, and race cult) that caused them. There is a little bit of Edo totalitarianism (a lord having a maiden burned alive to render a painting of hell more realistic) at least. That said, one of the great achievements of 'American Hijiki' is to show how

resentment and insularity can come from other sources than *hibakusha* trauma or psychotic Imperial pique.

> *no Japanese can understand it, probably, if he's not my age. No Japanese who can have an ordinary conversation with an American, who can go to America and have Americans all around him without going crazy, who can see an American enter his field of vision and feel no need to brace himself, who can speak English without embarrassment, who condemns Americans, who applauds Americans, no Japanese like this can understand... what I have is an incurable disease, the Great American Allergy.*

The allure and/or horror of Western things (booze, books, bodies) features in maybe half of these. It is very common for the stories to end on an inconclusive, ambiguous, middle-distance-staring notes.

I continue to see little in Mishima's lascivious, sadistic honour, though I suppose I should thus admire the portrayal of an alien outlook, which might well have overtaken the liberal-ironic-rationalist one. But Akutagawa does that better. In general I didn't see much correlation between eminence and quality (though this judgment is from behind that thick screen, translation).

Only one piece, 'Same as Always' (about harming your child) stands for Japan's powerful, distinctive kind of horror.

The Hiroshima piece is surprisingly flat, journalistic. I've cried at exhibits about the bombs before, so it ain't me.

I liked Murakami's introduction, where he admits hostility to, and ignorance of, modern Japanese fiction:

> *for a long while I was convinced that, with a few exceptions, early modern and contemporary Japanese literature was simply boring. There were many reasons for this, but foremost among them may be that the novels and stories we were assigned to read in school were pretty bad. My "I-novel allergy" was also quite strong back then (these days, to be sure, it has become less intense), and since you can't hope either to make your way through or to understand modern Japanese literature if you're going to avoid its constitutional predisposition to producing "I novels," I made a conscious effort while young to avoid getting anywhere near Japanese literature.*

though both of his included stories are kind of dull, unaffecting.

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* In a sense, Imperial Japan was too fascist to be fascist, since "fascism" was a filthy European idea.

Ranked:

• "Hell Screen" by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

	• 'Sanshirō' by Natsume Sōseki • “American Hijiki” by Akiyuki Nosaka • “Pink” by Tomoyuki Hoshino • “Mr. English” by Keita Genji • “In the Box” by Taeko Kōno • “Remaining Flowers” by Kenji Nakagami • “Hiyoriyama” by Kazumi Saeki • “Closet LLB” by Kōji Uno • “The Story of Tomoda and Matsunaga” by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki • “Filling Up with Sugar” by Yūten Sawanishi • “The Silver Fifty-sen Pieces” by Yasunari Kawabata • “The Tale of the House of Physics” by Yōko Ogawa • “Hiroshima, City of Doom” by Yōko Ōta • “Shoulder-Top Secretary” by Shin'ichi Hoshi • “Cambridge Circus" by Motoyuki Shibata • “Peaches” by Abe Akira • “UFO in Kushiro” by Haruki Murakami Below the cut: • “Unforgettable People” by Doppo Kunikida • “The Last Testament of Okitsu Yagoemon” by Ōgai Mori • “The Great Earthquake” by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa • “Patriotism” by Yukio Mishima • “Same as Always” by Yūya Satō • “Bee Honey” by Banana Yoshimoto • “Dreams of Love, Etc.” by Mieko Kawakami • “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” by Minako Ohba • “A Bond for Two Lifetimes—Gleanings” by Fumiko Enchi • “Planting” by Aoko Matsuda • “Flames” by Yūko Tsushima • “The 1963/1982 Girl from Ipanema” by Haruki Murakami • “Factory Town” by Minoru Betsuyaku • “Insects” by Yūichi Seirai • “Kudan” by Hyakken Uchida • “Behind the Prison” by Kafū Nagai
Ring for Jeeves (Jeeves, #10) (1953) by P.G. Wodehouse	Quite different from the prewar entries; much more focus on American foibles (there's a Bob Hope joke!) and there's an element of self-parody / Flanderisation. (e.g. Jeeves responds to highly surprising events by "twitching three hairs of his right eyebrow". It was a screenplay by someone else originally, which might explain its relative lack of subplots and higher-order intentionality. > *"Faute de what?"* > *"Mieux, m'lord. A French expression. We should say 'For want of anything better.'"* > *"What asses these Frenchmen are. Why can't they talk English?"* > *"They are possibly more to be pitied than censured, m'lord. Early upbringing no doubt has a lot to do with it."* It's surely not coincidence that Jeeves' master in this is named Rowcester (pronounced "Rooster"). > *“Mr Wooster is attending a school which does not permit its student body to employ gentlemen’s personal gentlemen.”* > *“A school?”*

	> *“An institution designed to teach the aristocracy to fend for itself, m’lord. Mr. Wooster feels that it is prudent to build for the future, in case the social revolution should set in with even greater severity. Mr Wooster... I can hardly mention this without some display of emotion... is actually learning to darn his own socks.”* --- *Classification*: *Rowcester's taboo*: mauve pyjamas *Triangle*: Jill - Bill - Rosalinda - Biggar. *Subplot*: The Derby, Biggar's romantic code, . *Aunt*: none! Rory has the same role. *Antagonist*: None really, but briefly Captain Biggar the White Hunter and Chief Constable Wyvern. *Expedient*: invented ghosts, a ginger moustache and eyepatch, dancing so hard your partner's jewellery falls off.
A Briefer History of Time (1988) by Stephen Hawking	None yet
The Annotated Collected Poems (2008) by Edward Thomas	None yet
Hyperion (Hyperion Cantos, #1) (1989) by Dan Simmons	Starts terribly, with a brooding protagonist playing a grand piano outside in a storm. Also, despite being set in 3200CE or whatever, it makes dozens of of leaden references to the culture of C20th Earth. But the structure (6 tales from 7 travellers, cf. Chaucer) and the sheer variety of styles and themes soon kicks in and drags you through a delicious cyber-goth intrigue. The poet character is *annoying*, but he’s meant to be. (The key problem of metafiction: to write a great poet character, you really have to be a great poet yourself. Nabokov was, but even he dodged the issue by making *Pale Fire* about a flawed poet.) At one point it implies that Keats’ poems were retrocaused by schemes of time-travelling AIs, which is a thing I must admire.
Waltz With Bashir: A Lebanon War Story (2008) by Ari Folman	Comic of the crushing film about the Lebanon war. Starkly honest and bipartisan. It suits lobbyists for us to forget the large part of the population that are anti-settler. Even better on the unreliability of memory, self-service.
Making Money (Discworld,	None yet

#36; Moist Von Lipwig, #2) (2007) by Terry Pratchett	
The Tombs of Atuan (Earthsea Cycle, #2) (1970) by Ursula K. Le Guin	None yet
Desperate Characters (1970) by Paula Fox	Good portentous realism. > *Wife: "Oh, never mind what I say."* > *Husband: "I don't and I can't."* Fox draws intense, evil significance out of ordinary irritations (a cat bite, a smashed window, a feud at work) - as we do when at our lowest. It's dark without being Gothic; apocalyptic without melodrama; heartbroken without self-pity. On a hospital waiting room: > *It was a dead hole, smelling of synthetic leather and disinfectant, both of which odors seemed to emanate from the torn scratched material of the seats that lined the three walls. It smelled of the tobacco ashes which had flooded the two standing metal ashtrays. On the chromium lip of one, a cigar butt gleamed wetly like a chewed piece of beef. There was the smell of peanut shells and of the waxy candy wrappers that littered the floor, the smell of old newspapers, dry, inky, smothering and faintly like a urinal, the smell of sweat from armpits and groins and backs and faces, pouring out and drying up in the lifeless air, the smell of clothes... a bouquet of animal being, flowing out, drying up, but leaving a peculiar and ineradicable odor of despair in the room as though chemistry was transformed into spirit, an ascension of a kind...* The quiet, careful way that *every* character is sketched in their paranoia is convincing, and unnerving. Sure, it's about upper-middle class people's pain, but that's still pain. The least tractable kind, in fact.
Lullaby (2002) by Chuck Palahniuk	None yet
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (1971) by Hunter S. Thompson	Tremendous prose and fantastic drawings, but at the end of it all he wasn't saying much.
End of an Old Song (1995) by J.D. Scott	Good, nasty coming of age of some Borders boys: one diffident and Carawayan, one coiled and voracious. The narrator's sole distinguishing quality is eloquence about his friend, and for once this device is not taken for granted – people remark on his skill at describing and paeaning Alastair.

	Scott reuses certain idiosyncratic, ear-worm words – “illimitable”, “aviary” as an adjective for a woman – to good effect. > *“She’s English.” I said. Alastair made a Scotch noise in the back of his throat.* Annoyed at the conclusion – it’s an Oxfordian twist that I resent. But the details make it – rationing, the Scotch cringe, the good and miserable wages of sin.
Dune Messiah (Dune #2) (1969) by Frank Herbert	None yet
Children of Dune (Dune Chronicles #3) (1976) by Frank Herbert	None yet
The Witches (1983) by Roald Dahl	None yet
Canal Dreams (1989) by Iain Banks	None yet
The Bridge (1986) by Iain Banks	Inventive, echoes of the Culture in places, but still grounded
Carpe Jugulum (Discworld #23; Witches #6) (1998) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
The Stranger (1942) by Albert Camus	None yet
Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell (2004) by Susanna Clarke	None yet
The	None yet

Demolished Man (1953) by Alfred Bester	
J (2014) by Howard Jacobson	Picked this up looking for a laugh, so my god. Of sordid, heartbroken, soft totalitarianism. The ineliminable danger of being different, and the specific danger for one difference in particular. A companion piece to *The Book of Dave*, underneath Britain's (and humanity's) downside. : Britain insulates itself against a self-inflicted atrocity by pushing away history and strongly banning modernist or pessimist ideas and people. So many despicable characters, like the art professor who defines everything by how little it reflects darkness or human brutality, 'primitivism' and 'degeneracy' (the irony being that this attitude, of art as mere grinning decoration, is itself a backslide from modernism, however empty and stupid much conceptual art is). > *There was something uncanny about her, the seriousness with which she took her work, her obduracy, the size of her vocabulary, the lack of bounce in her hair, the flat shoes she wore, her failure often to get a joke, her way of overdoing sympathy as as though understanding beat snogging.* The book (if not Jacobson) has a terrifying attitude towards bigotry: that it's never going away because it based on the deep need of exclusive identity, that bad marriages and ethnic atrocities appeal to something much deeper and more formal than what happens to have been socialised into us. 'Necessary Opposites', as he puts it: > *'...Identity is nothing but illusion.'* > *'If it's all illusion, why has it caused so much misery?'* > *...* > *'Only when we have a different state to strive against do we have reason to strive at all. And different people the same. I am me because I am not her, or you. If we were all red earthworms there'd be no point in life. Identity is just the name we give to making ourselves distinct.'* > *'So you're saying it's irrelevant what our identities really are? As long as we assume one and fight against someone else's.'* > *'I'd say so, yes. Pretty much.'* > *'Isn't that a bit arbitrary?'* > *'Perhaps. But isn't everything? There's no design.'* It starts slow, give it 50 pages to worm its way.
Moving Pictures (Discworld, #10; Industrial Revolution, #1) (1990) by Terry Pratchett	Bit messy, not yet the masterful pastiche of *Maskerade*, *Soul Music*, *Night Watch*. It is called the first book of Pratchett's 'Industrial Revolution' series. But that really came much earlier: *Equal Rites* (book 3) or, better, *Sourcery* which is the beginning of the Disc's disenchantment, and so of Vetinari's market reforms.
The Big Sleep (1939) by	A pinnacle of style. He lays it out and winds it up within about 90 pages, then drawls out a subplot over the last 40. One reason it's still so fresh is the understatement. The "fuck"s are all em-dashed out, and basically

Raymond Chandler	everybody is constantly dry and laconic with each other, Marlowe most of all of course. In fact it's notable when one character is inarticulate ("*Carol Lundgren, the boy killer with the limited vocabulary...*") > *"Sit down next to him," Brady snapped. "Hold it on him low down, away from the door..."* > *She came over and sat next to me on the davenport and pointed the gun at my leg artery. I didn't like the jerky look in her eyes.* ("Leg artery") It wears *noir*'s obligatory cynicism lightly: > *"I'm a copper," he said, "a plain ordinary copper. Reasonably honest. As honest as you could expect a man to be in a world where it's out of style."* > *Being a copper I like to see the law win. I'd like to see the flashy well-dressed mugs like Eddie Mars spoiling their manicures in the rock quarry at Folsom, alongside of the poor little slum-bred guys that got knocked over on their first caper and never had a break since. [But] We just don't run our country that way.* Constantly balances concision and winning detail, e.g: > *"Ohls growled and turned to me, his eyebrows bristling. «You're on the air, Marlowe. Give it to him."* > *I gave it to him.* > *I left out two things, not knowing just why, at the moment, I left out one of them. I left out Carmen's visit to Brody's apartment and Eddie Mars' visit to Geiger's in the afternoon. I told the rest of it just as it happened. Cronjager never took his eyes off my face and no expression of any kind crossed his as I talked. At the end of it he was perfectly silent for a long minute. Wilde was silent, sipping his coffee, puffing gently at his dappled cigar. Ohls stared at one of his thumbs.* > *Cronjager leaned slowly back in his chair and crossed one ankle over his knee and rubbed the ankle bone with his thin nervous hand.* Its homophobia is what dates it, with very contemporaneous nonsensical stuff like: > *I still held the automatic more or less pointed at him, but he swung on me just the same. It caught me flush on the chin. I backstepped fast enough to keep from falling, but I took plenty of the punch. It was meant to be a hard one, but a pansy has no iron in his bones, whatever he looks like.*
Sophie's World (1991) by Jostein Gaarder	Ponderous and meta, sure, but it's also romantic about thinking and I'll forgive a lot for a drop of that. It is a long version of this beautiful idea of Gödel's: > *Engaging in philosophy is salutary in any case, even when no positive results emerge from it (and I remain perplexed). It has the effect that 'the colors brighten', that is, reality appears more clearly as such.*

	This bit was moving: > *Actually we are the white rabbit being pulled out of the hat. The only difference beween us and the white rabbit is that the rabbit does not realize it is taking part in a magic trick.*
The City & the City (2009) by China Miéville	Heavy-handed metaphysical mystery (: there is another world - economic world, national world - visible but the vision suppressed). His usual incandescence is present, but under a shade: the prose is conventional, with spectacular Miévillian words like 'topolganger' (an identical-but-Other place) popping up only twice a chapter, rather than twice a page. Similarly scarce are his characteristic use of detail – protagonist Borlu is in an open relationship with a woman identified only as an economic historian. Hints of *The Matrix*'s ontological sensationalism and noir's worn-out idioms, but it works because Mieville's good enough (with ontology, but also generally) to redeem clichés. tC&tC twists repeatedly without losing credibility; the Cities' omnimalevolent atmospheres make great noir. There's even a rooftop showdown. An unfair consequence of extreme talent is that your 'merely' interesting, well-constructed books are marked down, judged by ghostly expectations.
Singularity Sky (Eschaton, #1) (2003) by Charles Stross	First 100 pages are very uninspiring but then we get a classic Strossian rant-vista > *A year or so later, the polite cosmologist had been murdered by Algerian religious fundamentalists who thought his account of the universe a blasphemy against the words of the prophet Yusuf Smith as inscribed on his tablets of gold...* > *Somewhere along the line she, too, had changed. She'd spent decades—the best part of her second life —fighting nuclear proliferation. Starting out as a dreadlocked direct-action activist, chaining herself to fences, secure in the naive youthful belief that no harm could befall her. Later, she figured out that the way to do it was wearing a smart suit, with mercenary soldiers and the threat of canceled insurance policies backing up her quiet voice. Still prickly and direct, but less of a knee-jerk nonconformist, she'd learned to work the system for maximum effect. The hydra seemed halfway under control, bombings down to only one every couple of years, when Bertil had summoned her to Geneva and offered her a new job. Then she'd wished she'd paid more attention to the cosmologist—for the Algerian Latter-Day Saints had been very thorough in their suppression of the Tiplerite heresy-but it was too late, and in any event, the minutiae of the Standing Committee's investigations into chronological and probabilistic warfare beckoned...* > *She'd done her share of shooting, too, or at least directing the machinery of preemptive vengeance, wiping out more than one cell of atomic-empowered fanatics—whether central-Asian independence fighters, freelance meres with a bomb too many in their basement, or on one notable occasion, radical pro-lifers willing to go to any lengths to protect the unborn child. Idealism couldn't coexist with so many other people's ideals, betrayed in their execution by the tools they'd chosen. She'd walked through Manchester three days after the Inter-City Firm's final kickoff, before the rain had swept the sad mounds of cinders and bone*

	> *from the blasted streets.* Fun, but not nearly as mind-bending as his or Egan or Vinge's best. Every few months Stross lets rip apocalyptic prophecy on his blog. Anyone else, and I'd probably stop reading. It's not that I think he's right, it's that his chains of thought are the kind of thing which are sometimes right.
The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents (Discworld, #28) (2001) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
The House of God (1978) by Samuel Shem	Updikean satire, more delightful than funny. Its surrealism, puns (*Mrs Risenshein, an LOL in NAD* [litle old lady in no obvious distress]), sexual glibness earn it a right to sentimentality in the face of human filth and pain: > *We fought. She probably knew we were fighting about Dr. Sanders's long dying and about the illusion in my father's letters and about my plethora of absent role models and the blossoming idea that the gomers were not our patients but our adversaries, and most of all we were fighting over the guilt that I felt for having Molly in a dark corner of the ward standing up, this Molly, who, like me, wouldn't stop and think and feel either, because if she ruminated on what she felt about enemas and emesis basins, she'd lose faith even in her centipede and want to kill herself too. Our fight was not the violent, howling, barking fight that keeps alive vestiges of love, but that tired, distant, silent fight where the fighters are afraid to punch for fear the punch will kill. So this is it, I thought dully, four months into the internship and I've become an animal, a mossbrained moose who did not and could not and would not think and talk, and it's come like an exhausted cancerous animal to my always love, my buddy Berry, and me–yes it's come to us: Relationship On Rocks...</i* *Shem's dialogue is pleasurable - the Flann O'Joyce variety of brainy silliness. His two eloquent Irish cops are the best people in the book:* > *"Top o' the morning to you, brave Sergeant Finton Gilheeney."* *"Is it the Commissioner?"* *"None other. The young doctor says that with the aid of an operation, with the usefulness of the scalpel being demonstrated, you will survive."* *"-Dr Basch, I believe that I now have no need of the last rites. If so, could the priest depart? He scares me in the memory of how close to heaven or that hot other place I came."* *"-And is there a message for the little woman, the wife?" the Commissioner asked as the priest left...* *"Ah well, all the best boyo, and I'm on my way to your wife and will soothe her with my boyish good looks and TV-cop mien. Good-bye, and*

	for the young scholar here who saved your fine red life, SHALOM and God bless." *Savage, all of it, savage.* *Like any psychologically ambitious work of the mid-C20th, it has a lot of Freud in it, much of it going unchallenged. The book is also about the distress and pain of an extremely lucky and insulated and remunerated man surrounded by women who do massive amounts for him, but you mostly forget this, it is that good.* *I imagine there are still pockets of people out there who still believe in the 1950s George Clooney heroism and omnicompetence of doctors. So Shem, hot-shot prof at BMS, and his book have work to do.* *[Theory #2, Values #2]</li>* *</td> </tr>*
Jingo (Discworld, #21; City Watch, #4) (1997) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
My Uncle Oswald (1979) by Roald Dahl	Comic novella about raping famous men for money. So, one of the first real person slashfics in history. Actually scandalous; one can only imagine the ruckus if it was published today. The eponymous rogue teams up with a livestock scientist and a beautiful accomplice ("*Yasmin Howcomely, a girl absolutely soaked in sex*") to date-rape the great men of early C20th Europe. Then blackmail them, and steal their semen to sell off. Drugging Freud, Monet and Proust with a psychotic aphrodisiac, the three conspirators collect a Nobel sperm bank. Most of the men are disposed of in one pithy paragraph, with only comic details supplied. It's scandalous because of its levity. The plot has more in common with *A Serbian Film* than *Carry On*, yet it keeps up the latter's matey banter. At one point Yasmin comes across Picasso, who promptly rapes and dismisses her, without need of the "Sudanese blister beetle" drug. Needless to say, this is tremendous sport: *"Do you know what he did afterwards?" Yasmin said. "He just buttoned up his trousers and said, 'Thank you, mademoiselle. That was very refreshing. Now I must get back to my work.' And he turned away, Oswald! He just turned away and started painting again!"* *"He's Spanish," I said, "like Alfonso." I stepped out of the car and cranked the starting handle and when I got back in again, Yasmin was tidying her hair in the car mirror.* *"I hate to say it," she said, "but I rather enjoyed that one."* *"Tell me," I said, "is Monsieur Picasso a genius?"* *"Yes," she said, "it was very strong. He shall be wildly famous one day."* The sexual prowess of the drugged men is a means for Oswald to reflect on

their overall quality. (The volume they produce is shorthand for his esteem of them, e.g.: "*Fifty straws from Kipling.*") It leaves Dahl room to propound a general ranking of the giant personalities of the eC20th. For instance, Einstein and Freud are able to resist their inverted rape for some minutes, earning both respect and suspicion. And of Freud:

> *"You should have seen his face, Oswald. You really should have seen it. The Beetle was hitting him and the sexcrazy glint was coming into his eyes and he was beginning to flap his arms like an old crow. But I'll say this for him. He didn't jump me right away. He held off for at least a minute or so while he tried to analyze what the hell was happening. He looked down at his trousers. Then he looked up at me... He was really very decent about it all. As soon as he'd had his first explosion... he jumped away and ran back to his desk stark naked and began writing notes. He must be terrifically strong-minded. Great intellectual curiosity."*
> *</i></blockquote>*
>
> *The low point comes in the treatment of Shaw, by this stage a celibate disabled old man. They drug him three times the dose and:*
>
> > *"Who is there?" shouted a voice from behind the hut. It was a male voice, but high-pitched and almost squeaky. Oh God, I though, the man is a eunuch after all...*
> >
> > *[after]... I heard a yell from the garden and in the half-darkness I saw this tall, ghostlike, whitebearded figure charging down upon us stark naked and yelling, "Come back, you strumpet! I haven't finished with you yet!"*
> >
> > *I saw Mr. Shaw capering about on the sidewalk under the gaslight, white-skinned all over save for a pair of socks on his feet, bearded above and bearded below as well, with his massive pink member protruding like a sawn-off shotgun from the lower beard. It was a sight I shall not readily forget, this mighty and supercilious playwright who had always mocked the passions of the flesh, himself impaled now upon the sword of lust..."*
>
> *He is made into a real man - no more humourless vegetarian prude. Sad and standard in "one of [Dahl's] lightest comic works".*
>
> *Oswald is not Dahl; some of Oswald's opinions of his victims are cartoonishly snobbish; its idiotic, Lawrentian theory of virility is only used because it is very funny; and Oswald receives a brutal comeuppance for exploiting Yasmin that it's implied he never recovers from.*
>
> *A dazzling and ridiculous book, and as far as I can tell it evaded all opprobrium because it was published in the gap between the sexual revolution and the rise of PC. From the above you already know if you should avoid it.</td> </tr>*

The Handmaid's	None yet

Tale (The Handmaid's Tale, #1) (1985) by Margaret Atwood	
Unsong (2017) by Scott Alexander	I usually don't mind puns but Will probably bump it up when it goes through a copy-edit.
Revelation Space (Revelation Space, #1) (2000) by Alastair Reynolds	Sorta sterile prose but still very readable goth space opera. Simmonsian - "Stoners" and "shrouders". Herbertian atavism and castes. Shadowplay is good. Ideas are good - but I compare everyone's ideas to Banks and Stross. POV switches way too frequently - sometimes on every other page. This produces glibness. The narrative takes a series of 10 year slips, or 22 year slips, between scenes, which produces agreeable disorientation. Absolutely incredible denouement, best in recent memory. How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: Notable because of its lack of play with human nature: Reynolds' people - no matter how bionic or brainwashed by aliens - are just us in a weird setting. Also the same politics and same weapons. The aliens are properly alien, though. *Software development*: None I can remember. *Actual Science*: Not its game.
Still Life with Woodpecker (1980) by Tom Robbins	Cynical comedy about the radical hippies. DeLillo on MDMA. The narrator is *loud* (talking to his typewriter and the moon), louder even than say Douglas Adams: > *It worked. Mongooses did kill the rats. They also killed chickens, young pigs, birds, cats, dogs, and small children. There have been reports of mongooses attacked motorbikes, power lawn mowers, golf carts, and James Mitchener. Hawaii had traded its rat problem for a mongoose problem... Society had a crime problem. It hired cops to attack crime. Now society has a cop problem* While it mocks New Age politics, Robbins still loves an outlaw and a weirdo, and so he takes on their anarchic personal project, to "preserve insanity" and all that. > *A better world has gotta start somewhere. Why not with you and me?* Conclusion is funny and irresponsible: when faced with a conflict between social good and romantic individualism (as we all always are), ditch the former. Don't take it seriously - think of it as textual scat-singing - and you'll probably mildly like it.
Truckers: The First	None yet

Book of the Nomes (1989) by Terry Pratchett	
Woken Furies (Takeshi Kovacs, #3) (2005) by Richard K. Morgan	Read immediately after the 2nd book. This one errs on the splattery side: cybersplatterpunk. Nasty, entertaining look at revolution and market forces. Quotable too: On oppression: "*This enemy you cannot kill. You can only drive it back damaged into the depths, and teach your children to watch the waves for its return*"; on political pieties: "*it's amazing how constant repetition can make even the most obvious truths irritating enough to disagree with*". Morgan still manages to surprise – e.g. the fully sadistic massacre of misogynist priests is hard to forget. The sea planet itself is the best of the new characters, weird and postmodern in layout, mechanics, oligarchy, mores. -- How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: The last of the Kovacs novels – I'll miss the nasty universe, with its fully fleshed-out cybersociety – its religions still boycotting technologies, its new dilemmas (which clone should I repay if their interests conflict?) and crime; its remarriage customs when one spouse gets a new body… It holds up. *Software development*: No. *Actual Science*: Eh.
Trainspotting (1993) by Irvine Welsh	Minking, mankit, but only superficially amoral - the spike in the femoral artery, the period blood in the soup, the desperate crab-bucket scrabble away, away from the meaningful (the comparatively boring). Genuinely part of a renaissance in Scots self-consciousness. Which tells you more about how low that was, before. (This was me and my mates' mantra at school: > *Ah hate cunts like that. Cunts that are intae baseball-batting every fucker that's different; pakis, poofs n what huv ye. Fuckin failures in a country full ay failures. It's nae good blamin it oan the English fir colonising us. Ah don't hate the English. They're just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can't even pick a decent culture to be colonised by. No. We're ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, tha's what, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation. Ah don't hate the English. They just git oan wi the shite thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots.*) Film's better than the book, mostly because of the music but also its rendition of that soliloquy.
Look to Windward	Another chronicle of Culture fuckups; this time, trying to reform a caste

(Culture, #7) (2000) by Iain M. Banks	system and sparking a genocidal civil war. It's tense and unpleasant throughout, because of this moral mud. > *'You want to die because your mate is dead and you are pining for her, is that not the truth?'* *'I would put it a little stronger than pining. But it was her death that took the meaning out of my life.'* *'The lives of your family and your society in this time of need and restructuring; these mean nothing to you?'* *'Not nothing, Estodien. But not enough, either. I wish that I could feel otherwise, but I cannot. It is as though all the people I care about but feel I ought to care about more are already in another world from the one I inhabit.'* *'She was just... a person, just one individual. What makes her so special that her memory... outranks the more pressing needs of those still alive for whom something can still be done?'* *'Nothing, Estodien. It is-'* *'Nothing indeed. It is not her memory; it is yours. It is not her specialness or uniqueness that you celebrate, Quilan, but your own. You are a romantic, Quilan. You find the idea of tragic death romantic, you find the idea of joining her - even if it is joining her in oblivion - romantic.' The old male drew himself up as though getting ready to go. 'I hate romantics, Quilan. They do not really know themselves, but what is worse they do not really want to know themselves - or, ultimately, anybody else - because they think that will take the mystery out of life. They are fools. You are a fool.'*
Perdido Street Station (New Crobuzon, #1) (2000) by China Miéville	Enormous steampunk social commentary dressed in gorgeous nasty prose (think Nabokov on America). His dank, evil city, 'New Crobuzon', is a dark reboot of Terry Pratchett's Ankh-Morpork (itself a funhouse mirror of Elizabethan London) without its animating sense of fun and justice. Instead, it has class consciousness; satires on academic, tabloid and political speech, misogyny, and a tainted political economy of science/capital/government. > *Its substance was known to me. The crawling infinity of colours, the chaos of textures…each one resonated under the step of the dancing mad god, vibrating and sending little echoes of bravery, or hunger, or architecture, or argument, or cabbage or murder or concrete across the aether. The weft of starlings' motivations connected to the thick, sticky strand of a young thief's laugh. The fibres stretched taut and glued themselves solidly to a third line, its silk made from the angles of seven flying buttresses to a cathedral roof.* What I take to be the central metaphor: one of the oppressed races are found to have a native power - the 'potential energy of crisis' - which, with a scientific harness, could revolutionise the world: i.e. Classical Marxism. Our heroes are not especially heroic.
Beyond the Deepwoods (The Edge Chronicles:	None yet

The Twig Saga #1) (1998) by Paul Stewart	
Steppenwolf (1927) by Hermann Hesse	Aging Romantic pessimist Harry comes to a crisis, and learns that fun is fun (and meaningful). I've been avoiding this book because of its status in rockist, hedonist circles, but after the first 50 pages it begins to subvert this reputation, and itself, over and over again until charming. Hesse also inserts himself, as the domineering, sparkling 'Hermine' which is strange and excellent. Would've changed my life if I'd read it aged 16, or in 1930. As it is, Regina Spektor, the Supremes and DJ Hixxy had already forced me to admit the existence and glory of non-cognitive, non-consequential, non-political quality. (Read aloud)
The World According to Garp (1978) by John Irving	I think this was the one I liked.
The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson	None yet
Deaf Sentence (2008) by David Lodge	Gentle, silly-solemn but limp campus novel. Examines being middle-class middle-age without angst, despite the narrator's being very hard of hearing. Though there is a sudden token Auschwitz section which gets about one page of build-up and is soon left behind (when the actual plot revives itself). It's less farcical - its characters' ambitions less contemptible - its plot less unabashedly neat than Lodge's usual style (though there is this: "*Perhaps one day we'll turn up in a campus novel*" – "*God, I hope not*"). I miss that.
The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) by Oscar Wilde	None yet
Pyramids (Discworld, #7) (1989) by Terry Pratchett	None yet

The Commitments (The Barrytown Trilogy, #1; Jimmy Rabbitte, #1) (1987) by Roddy Doyle	None yet
A Handful of Dust (1934) by Evelyn Waugh	Funny idle-rich tragedy as usual. Read aloud, and I was at the limits of my sight-reading here; Waugh's timing and compression are too grand to be scudded, really. Check this out for tight material symbolism: > *Beaver had a dark little sitting-room (on the ground floor, behind the dining room) and his own telephone… objects that had stood in his father's dressing room; indestructible presents for his wedding and twenty-first birthday, ivory, brass-bound, covered in pigskin, crested and gold-mounted, expressive of Edwardian masculinity…* (implies Beaver is subordinate to guests and his dead dad, who was married before 21, unlike him...). Is Brenda's infidelity punished in a regressive Victorian way? Yes. But pater gets his too: the nasty colonialist final act is topped off with a crushing twist: Dickens unto death.
The Atrocity Archives (Laundry Files, #1) (2004) by Charles Stross	Four books in, I'm starting to get annoyed at every character sharing Stross' fondness for naff nerd references at moments of high drama. But it took four books. So! Nazi mages, Turing as the founder of scientific magic, and some very rigorous nonsense – e.g. the killer gaze of the Medusa is a quantum observer-effect in which the collapse of a super-position adds protons to carbon nuclei, forming silicon(!) Cosma Shalizi calls it 'mind candy', which is perfect.
Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said (1974) by Philip K. Dick	None yet
And the Land Lay Still (2010) by James Robertson	None yet
Glasshouse (2006) by Charles Stross	Sickly-satisfying but blunt satire on memory, gender and the dark side of memes. A bunch of polymorphous, polyamorous, post-scarcity posthumans volunteer for a closed-system experiment replicating the strictures of 1990s Nacirema, and are quite rightly appalled by the prison of social norms and physical limitations. (Not to mention the sinister panopticon

	modifications of the experimenters, with a public point-scoring table of conformism and no contraception.) The space-opera frame (a software virus that censors people's minds) is good too, wielding the deepest creepiness: brainwashing which actually works. > *\tI've been thinking that maybe I lucked out with him - there's potential for abuse in this 'atomic relationship' thing...* > *\tTime is a corrosive fluid, dissolving motivation, destroying novelty, and leaching the joy from life. But forgetting is a fraught process, one that is prone to transcription errors and personality flaws. Delete the wrong pattern, and you can end up becoming someone else. Memories exhibit dependencies, and their management is one of the highest medical art forms.* > *\tWhere would dictators be without our compliant amnesia? Make the collective lose its memory, you can conceal anything.* > *\tAt moments like this I hate being an unreconstructed human - an island of thinking jelly trapped in a bony carapace, endless milliseconds away from its lovers, forced to squeeze every meaning through a low-bandwidth speech channel. All men are islands, surrounded by the bottomless oceans of unthinking night.* I love him for his quiet use of the technical for emotional ends, as when two characters "merge their deltas". The most interesting sci-fi writer alive?
Toast, and Other Stories (2002) by Charles Stross	His first album, with all the glad rough edges and density of new ideas that implies. Bunch of short stories showing off his range and introducing themes. About half are very good, though the others are becoming very dated as the last twenty years of tech and tech hype overtake his speculations. Heady subversions of the Lovecraftian, the Clancyan, the techno-optimist, and the Doctorovian. The stories are also often silly and humane. His books sometimes receive symposia from eminent academics. Start with *Accelerando* though. [Free! here]
Overtime (Laundry Files, #3.5) (2009) by Charles Stross	*Men in Black* crossed with the organisational despair of *Dilbert* , rather than the existential awe of Lovecraft. ("*My department, Forecasting Operations, is tasked with attempting to evaluate the efficacy of proposed action initiatives in pursuit of the organization's goals—notably, the prevention of incursions by gibbering horrors from beyond space-time.*"). The first Stross I read. I expected forbidding, stark post-Ballard literariness, but it's matey, British, nerdy (BBC, C++, and Bayes jokes).
Accelerando (2005) by	A scary family-dynasty epic told at that point in history where generational gaps grow unbridgeably vast on the spume of telescoping technological

Charles Stross	progression. First book is a wonderful freewheel through the near-future, with his technolibertarian booster protagonist – Sam Altman meets Richard Stallman meets Ventakesh Rao – running around as midwife to the future. Includes a nepotistic jaunt through Edinburgh because why not (it's a tech town after all). It is funny and prescient about our dependence on feeds and open-source expansion. > *Welcome to the early twenty-first century, human.* > *It's night in Milton Keynes, sunrise in Hong Kong. Moore's Law rolls inexorably on, dragging humanity toward the uncertain future. The planets of the solar system have a combined mass of approximately 2 x 10^{27} kilograms. Around the world, laboring women produce forty-five thousand babies a day, representing 10^{23} MIPS of processing power. Also around the world, fab lines casually churn out thirty million microprocessors a day, representing 10^{23} MIPS. In another ten months, most of the MIPS being added to the solar system will be machine-hosted for the first time.* The confusing part is that the first third of it is among my favourite books and I recommend it often. But the later books work less well; they become less and less convincing as we reach the singularity (his grasp of the physics and the economics of computers and space is characteristically excellent, and it's all hard enough) - more and more of that omniscient voiceover guy is needed. > *Not everyone is concerned with the deep future. But it's important! If we live or die, that doesn't matter—that's not the big picture. The big question is whether information originating in our light cone is preserved, or whether we're stuck in a lossy medium where our very existence counts for nothing. It's downright embarrassing to be a member of a species with such a profound lack of curiosity about its own future, especially when it affects us all personally!* I agree with Kahneman, though, that it's wrong to put as much weight on a weak ending as people tend to; the experiencing self, who was deeply impressed most of the time, should not be relegated so. > *In the distance, the cat hears the sound of lobster minds singing in the void, a distant feed streaming from their cometary home as it drifts silently out through the asteroid belt, en route to a chilly encounter beyond Neptune. The lobsters sing of alienation and obsolescence, of intelligence too slow and tenuous to support the vicious pace of change that has sandblasted the human world until all the edges people cling to are jagged and brittle.* As always, many incredible thoughts embodied in very vivid scenes – it deserves the technical glossary supplied by fans here - and you've no regrets about spending time with him. But again I've the patronising sense that he fluffed it. Book I 5/5, Book II 3/5, Book III 2/5. [Free! here.]
The Blade	Prose is a delight, very free-flowing . There's a sarcastic wizard, a torturer

Itself (The First Law, #1) (2006) by Joe Abercrombie	for a protagonist, a corrupt feudal society. 'The blade itself' is from Homer - a rare moment where he recriminates about war. Good details - the torturer's inner monologue is always asking questions, casting doubt - the amputee waggling his stump thoughtfully, scared people forgetting where their sword is (when it's in their hand). Addictive.
Surfacing (1972) by Margaret Atwood	Ponderous and mean, gnomic and agnostic, as usual. Lots of good details about oafishness and gendered crappiness between and within genders, as usual. Her friend applying makeup is > *a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone's head. She is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. She takes her clothes off or puts them on, paper doll wardrobe, she copulates under strobe lights with the man's torso while his brain watches from its glassed-in control cubicle at the other end of the room, her face twists into poses of exultation and total abandonment, that is all.* The anti-Americanism of the (Canadian) protagonists - so venomous it actually deserves the full title racism - is funny. It hides behind deep-ecology and Romantic critique: > *It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus... Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infested, garbled, and I couldn't help him...* > > *My country, sold or drowned, a reservoir; the people were sold along with the land and the animals...* > > *I realized it wasn't the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both. They'd had their chance but they had turned against the gods, and it was time for me to choose sides. I wanted there to be a machine that could make them vanish, a button I could press that would evaporate them without disturbing anything else, that way there would be more room for the animals, they would be rescued* David (a rapey leftist idiot) is anti-Yank from the start, but the narrator eventually sinks into a similar kind of hallucinatory environmentalist racism, as part of her rejection of 'the city' and the modern world. It's unclear why her friends are her friends, since they are trivial and cruel, as she is (initially) not. There's maybe one sympathetic character in the whole book, a taciturn Quebecois handyman who doesn't symbolise much of anything, as far as I can see (not the city, sure, but neither her mystical primitive). The narrator is full of non sequiturs like "*If you tell your children God doesn't exist they will be forced to believe you are the god*", little anti-rational digs which never go challenged. Just because both revolution (David) and the status quo ("Americans"), men and women, are awful, doesn't mean that nature is any better.

	She starts off with strong run-on stream of consciousness - > *I slide my tongue around the ice cream, trying to concentrate on it, they put seaweed in it now, but I'm starting to shake, why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it, I want to turn around and go back to the city and never find out what happened to him. I'll start crying, that would be horrible, none of them would know what to do and neither would I. I bite down into the cone and I can't feel anything for a minute but the knife-hard pain up the side of my face. Anaesthesia, that's one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain. I'm all right.* - but apparently forgets this sentence structure about halfway through. Oddly, it's sort of mirror of *An American Dream*: the same atavism, same disgust with modernity, but with violence suffered rather than gleefully inflicted. *Surfacing* gets called 'important'. I suppose because of the affectless, doubting-feminist agency of a divorcee angle; I hope it isn't because people think the protagonist had an admirable spiritual journey when really she's driven insane by mistreatment and boredom.
Man Plus (Man Plus #1) (1976) by Frederik Pohl	Disappointing. The plot is almost totally driven by dull sexual jealousy. Read *Gateway* instead.
Pride and Prejudice (1813) by Jane Austen	I somehow managed to read this right through without grasping an absolutely basic point - which stops it being the tittering romantic comedy it is mistaken for: The reason everyone in this is obsessed with frilly things like suitors and débuts and balls is that marriage was the most important decision in a woman's whole life, one of the few she had power over.* *You only got one shot*. The result determined whether your life was an abusive wreck, or hey pretty ok. (At the time, to get a divorce you needed 1) to put up with it for three years, 2) to then blow the annual salary of 5 people (£200 then, ~£100,000 in today's money) bringing a fucking private Act of Parliament; 3) to publicly and credibly state your husband's "incest, sodomy, bigamy, or desertion" (not his adultery) and maybe also deal with MPs leering at your sex life. Oh, and no remarriage ever, i.e. no socially acceptable relationships ever again.) All this makes the book *about* something important, rather than important (or readable) itself. And Austen hardly covers this grimdark aspect. But I will probably have to read it again. --- * You might say that the primary-relationship-hunt is still the most important decision in modern people's lives. I think that's right for some people, but it's still less important than it was: now it's not the *only* decision in your life, and now you get to try again if you are unlucky or unwise.
American	None yet

Gods (American Gods, #1) (2001) by Neil Gaiman	
The Master and Margarita (1967) by Mikhail Bulgakov	*Faust* in Moscow with laffs and a less-straightforward moral; also a solemn and harrowing Passion play; also a revenge play on the various apparatchiks and shill artists that made Bulgakov's life a constant question mark. I loved book one, in which the devil upends Stalinist control with seances, magic tricks, telegram lulz, and horrible trolling of only somewhat venal people. > *Love leaped out in front of us like a murderer in an alley leaping out of nowhere, and struck us both at once. As lightning strikes, as a Finnish knife strikes!* It has a sweet fairytale air over and above the murders and the Satanic chaos. > *Follow me reader! Who told you that there is no true, faithful, eternal love in this world! May the liar's vile tongue be cut out!* Was wondering if it's a Christian novel, but it is heretical to balls. Yeshua to Pilate: > *\tIn fact, I'm beginning to fear that this confusion will go on for a long time. And all because [Mark] writes down what I said incorrectly.*
Snuff (Discworld, #39; City Watch #8) (2011) by Terry Pratchett	Dark and politically worthy, but not his best. He’s been reusing jokes in recent books, and I refuse to speculate on the cause. See here for my theory of Discworld's international development.
Leviathan Wakes (The Expanse, #1) (2011) by James S.A. Corey	Meaty, fine. Book has far fewer plot holes than the show. (Still some though: why does Johnson not put any of his people on the flight to Eros? Why are these intelligent characters so idiotic about aseptic procedure when handling the ultra-horror organism?) How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: The Belters are an ok attempt at showing the start of speciation. Their creole language is pretty good, also the mannerisms designed for legibility in an EVA suit. *Software development*: Naomi is the only coder, maintaining however many million lines. *Actual Science*: the spaceflight physics is good. The economics of the Belt make little sense. The protomolecule (a nanotech spore virus capable of infecting anything regardless of biochemistry) strains belief even before it starts messing with the nature of electromagnetism and gravity in an entire

	AU volume.
Ancillary Justice (Imperial Radch, #1) (2013) by Ann Leckie	Extremely similar to *Left Hand of Darkness*: undidactic gender-bending, bonding on an ice world, the grey realpolitik of empires, cultural interpenetration, high variance in tech levels. Leckie's world has a lot of detail but she mostly manages to avoid this kind of opaque sentence: > *On Shis'urna, in Ors, the Justice of Ente Seven Issa who had accompanied Lieutenant Skaaiat to Jen Shinnan's sat with me in the lower level of the house.* Best bit is the implications of high-tech dictatorship: the dark emperor has surveillance footage of everything within their domain, and thousands of clones of themself, and can edit memories, etc. This makes for extreme stability. (The bit that reassured me, early on, that this wasn't going to be irksome is that the Terrible Galactic Imperialists are the ones with the post-gender society.) The politics aren't that prominent; the quest looms larger. There *is* this section, which doesn't manage to be as thoughtful as Oscar Wilde in 1891: > *here's the truth: luxury always comes at someone else's expense. One of the many advantages of civilization is that one doesn't generally have to see that, if one doesn't wish. You're free to enjoy its benefits without troubling your conscience.* That seems to be true of her imperialists, the Radch. But why? They have extremely competent superhuman AIs, like the protagonist, but for some reason their economy is still scarce and material. The protagonist One Esk is quite good; think Commander Data plus an oath of vengeance. The superior force serving a blithe master: I'm actually reminded of Jeeves (high praise). That said, the morality of her vengeance quest is dubious: she knows she's setting off a galactic civil war and doesn't even think her assassination will accomplish anything. Maybe the next book will do a *Dune Messiah* and turn the triumph of this book to ashes and despair. --- How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: Some. Lots of different genderings and a nice baroque Space Feudalism. *Software development*: None. *Actual Science*: None?
Do Androids Dream of Electric	None yet

Sheep? (1968) by Philip K. Dick	
Brideshead Abbreviated: The Digested Read of the Twentieth Century (2010) by John Crace	A tasting platter of C20th literature (one book synopsised per year of the century), as well as very successful pastiche, as well as highbrow larfs, and also, occasionally, a tiny philosophical critique of revered writers. It is of course easy to make anything ridiculous if you compress it enough, but Crace is not cheap about it. He reserves most of his scorn for the obscene sensationalists (Ballard, Burroughs, Joyce, Kundera). Here is the main joke Crace makes in at least half of all of them, fourth-wall shamelessness: > *"Why do you do Junk, Bill?"* > *"Because once I´ve shovelled enough garbage into my body" I replied, "I'll get away with shovelling any old garbage into print. Take it from me, some suckers will one day call Naked Lunch a masterpiece".* I read books about books because I'm a prig: my ignorance of these things makes me anxious. As a result of reading Crace, I can tell I won't read about fifty of the hundred. So, big gains, even if the larfs wear thin halfway through.
Vile Bodies (1930) by Evelyn Waugh	Another very dark, funny cattle-prodding of the posh and awful. Lord Monomark, Ginger Littlejohn, Colonel Blount, The Drunken Major, Lottie Crump, The Honourable Agatha Runcible, Miles Malpractice... The Bright Young Things – who are dim – ludicrous wagers – which are won – and the runaway motorcars – oh. Jeeves and Wooster if it had death, teeth, madness and war in. Predicts the next war, or, rather, concocts it in order to punish the frivolous protagonists.
Of Mice and Men (1937) by John Steinbeck	None yet
The Czar's Madman (1978) by Jaan Kross	Pleasant, mostly fabricated historical novel about an obscure Estonian nobleman who sent his friend Czar Alexander a draft constitution which ended the absolute monarchy, and inherited titles, and removed the Czar from military command, and gave out universal education and the franchise, and who got what you'd expect in return. All the events come to us filtered through a ignoble narrator representing the standard 'enlightened' view of the time: *sure the Romanovs are evil, but for God's sake don't say so*. Lots to admire, in the slow, tense pace - nothing really happens in the present, it's all uncovered in letters - or in his handling of Timo's idealism/insanity. This prison scene made me laugh, on the tube: > *'Timo - are you really sure it was the Czar?'* > *"I wasn't sure at first. He was wearing a short black cloak with a hood covering his head. I couldn't open my eyes and look straight at him, because I wanted to know what was going to happen next. Then I recognized him with certainty, in the light... he stepped back from my cot, and – just imagine this! – knelt down on the floor that was covered with rat droppings – I watched him through my eyelashes – and began to pray – two feet away from my ear! I could hear every word he whispered:* > > *'... I beseech Thee, Lord, make him see reason and make him apologize*

	> *to his Sovereign for his unimaginable words — so that I might forgive him and become free of the burden it is to me to keep him imprisoned...' He closed his eyes and said, as if to himself: 'But if Thou hast decided otherwise, I say like Thy son said to Thee at Gethsemane: Father, I pray to Thee — but let Thy will be done, not mine. ' And then, Jakob — then he lowered his head and opened his eyes, and looked straight into mine... "Well. Two words was all we exchanged. He whispered: '...Timothee?!' And I said, 'Tartuffe!'* > *"He covered his ears with his palms and ran out of the casemate, in rather an unimperial fashion. And I haven't seen him since." Timo cleared his throat and added, sounding somewhat self-deprecating: "At least not awake, that is..." I said, "Timo, this story — surely it was only a dream?" Timo had walked over to the far corner of the room where the shadows cast by the sconce mirrors combined to create near darkness. He stood there, almost invisible; even the glow of the pipe he was holding had gone out. Then he laughed and said: "Well — whatever you think best... "* But Kross is clumsy in inserting an enchanting peasant as Timo's wife; everyone who knows her is a complete Eeva fanboy, rhapsodising. But it's not clear why; she's brave and catty but otherwise pretty indistinct. There's definitely an undercurrent of promoting Estonian accomplishments here - not many of Timo and Eeva's grand and broad virtues are attested in the evidence, which makes them Mary and Marty Sue in Kross' fanfiction - but it strikes me that this is not just chauvinism, given Kross' context. Consider: an Estonian living under Russian totalitarianism writes about an Estonian speaking out against Russian totalitarianism. I resent Kross for the M. Night Shymalan ending, a bit, though it is possible that I should be resenting the narrator's fantasies of it instead.
All the Sad Young Literary Men (2008) by Keith Gessen	Ivy League Arts boys fail at life, cut coupons, measure themselves ironically against Lenin – > *At the same time, Mark had not been with a woman in many months. What would Lenin have done? Lenin would have called Mark's hesitation a social-democratic scruple. It's pretty clear what Lenin would have done.* - 'Blech', I hear you say. But it flows so smoothly that it's hard to hold its tragic treatment of untragic subjects against it. It follows real life quite closely – we see [Al Gore]'s daughter at college, and a cartoon [Chomsky] – > *Lomaski in his office was sweaty, skinny, ill-preserved, drinking tea after tea so that his teeth seemed to yellow while Sam watched.* There are gauche jpegs of Hegel, Lincoln, Gore inserted in the text, in an equivocal Safran Foer way. Meh. The women – i.e. the boys' ideas of the women – are the fixation: they set the structure and timbre and volume of everything else. I think I am hard

	on it because I might have written it in a different life. Clever, but. (Extra half point for an unclichéd Palestine chapter.)
The Lathe of Heaven (1971) by Ursula K. Le Guin	Hot-footed mystical parable, afloat on a bed of Tao, psychoanalysis, and Nietzsche. Bad guy's a Grand Unscrupulous Utilitarian: excellent, manipulative, and innocently destructive (Confucius?). Her memorable para-omnipotent protagonist George Orr is put-upon, dismissible, infuriatingly passive (or, rather, wu wei): the Tao. Scifi has a lot of conventions which can easily end in literary clumsiness – think contrived alien names, more or less stupid extrapolations from current science, brooding passages about the curst Capitalised Social Change of Twenty-three-dickety-four – but LeGuin, even this early, was in charge of them. Gripping, but top-heavy. --- How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: Too full of psychoanalysis to be sound. The bit where George solves racism by turning everyone grey, to awful effect, is good. *Software development*: None. *Actual Science*: Not its aim.
Before They Are Hanged (The First Law, #2) (2007) by Joe Abercrombie	So yeah it's about a big siege, a big battle and a big quest, but somehow new and uncliched. The heroes, about their quest: "*What are we doing here?"; "Got nowhere better to be".*
Candide (1759) by Voltaire	Very fun, brash, unfair to Leibniz.
Inversions (Culture, #6) (1998) by Iain M. Banks	None yet
The Gigantic Beard That Was Evil (2013) by Stephen Collins	Gorgeous artwork, musical plot, but not as deep as I thought it was
The Book of Dave: A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future	None yet

(2006) by Will Self	
Trial of the Clone: An Interactive Adventure! (2012) by Zach Weinersmith	Fun! Satire of *Star Wars* and classic scifi, with your character's greed and passive-aggression matched only by his/her incompetence. Bellylaughed a lot, which is unusual for me with books. Sometimes the gags fall back on scat when it gets tired of mocking religion, but I mean that in the best possible way.
Redwall (Redwall, #1) (1986) by Brian Jacques	None yet
A Story For Europe (1996) by Will Self	None yet
Capital (2013) by John Lanchester	Grand account of London's strange socio-emotional contortion up to 2008. When he listed the banker's sky-high rationalised outgoings ("*nanny: £20,000 plus employment tax nonsense*"), I thought Capital was going to be didactic; when its first chapters revealed its prose to be a plain story-book, I thought it was going to be pat and mundane. Instead it's humane, deliberate and clear, implying radical critique while focussing on the inside of the matter, flicking between a dozen vivid characters (who collide neatly in the very way of The C21st Novel) and noting the sharp line between the City people and the immigrants who serve them. (There's a sick sharp bit where a pro bono human rights lawyer wants to be begged for their services.) Lanchester uses whodunit tension without detracting from his main achievement, which is engrossing ordinariness (traffic wardens and Polish rewiring, infidelious twinges and infant irrationality).
Stamboul Train (1932) by Graham Greene	Better known as *Orient Express*. It's like he *tried* to write a stupid book – murder on a train, a neurotic Jewish financier, a doomed third-rate dancer, a clumsy lesbian journalist - and failed. Actually about gender and lasting damage: > *"why do you do all this for me? I'm not pretty. I guess I'm not clever." She waited with longing for a denial. "You are lovely, brilliant, witty", the incredible words which would relieve her of any need to repay him or refuse his gifts; loveliness and wit were priced higher than any gift he offered, while if a girl were loved, even old women of hard experience would admit her right to take and never give. But he denied nothing. His answer was almost insulting in its simplicity.* > *"I can talk easily to you. I feel I know you." She knew what that meant. "Yes," she said, with the dry trivial grief of disappointment, "I seem to know you too"...* Heartbreaking in his usual profound manner.
Flight to	An elegy written during the defeat of France; I've never found anything this

Arras (1942) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry	nationalist moving before. Probably because it is about the nation's failure rather than shining destiny. The central thought is that war is futile and absurd *but that he must continue.* The existentialism can get kind of leaden in comparison to his other stuff.
Much Obliged, Jeeves (1971) by P.G. Wodehouse	*Wooster's taboo*: Playing the banjolele (flashback). *Triangle*: Spode-Bassett-Bertie-Florence-Ginger-Magnolia *Subplot*: Tuppy and Runkle's hangover cure *Aunt*: Dahlia *Antagonist*: Spode, Runkle, the actually evil Bingley. *Expedient*: spiking a cad's drink, thieving a porringer, fixing some hustings, blackmail. --- Pretty bloody dark actually: > *"You mean you slipped him a Mickey Finn?"* > *"I believe that is what they are termed in the argot, madam."* > *"Do you always carry them about with you?"* > *"I am seldom without a small supply, madam."* > *"Never know when they won't come in handy, eh?"* > *"Precisely, madam. Opportunities for their use are constantly arising."* !
Caliban's War (The Expanse, #2) (2012) by James S.A. Corey	A very close redux of the first book, but without this being annoying (like *Leviathan Wakes* it has: a lost child as Macguffin, a dastardly black-lab Earth conspiracy, and Holden blabbing way too much on every frequency). Highly readable, went through it in two sittings. A new character, Prax, is even more annoying and Hollywood-emotional than Holden, which might be intentional to make us disdain Holden less. Villains were sketched extremely roughly: there's actually barely any scenes with them. How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: Very little. Same political structures, similar international antipathies. There's UBI and a world government on Earth but no sign of the associated efficiencies or psychological gains. There's one polyamorous commune mentioned. *Software development*: Basically none. People still dock spaceships by hand, which we've left behind. Naomi hacks on "basically all" of the milspec software on the *Rocinante*, which is impossible to do safely with current tooling. *Actual Science*: there is serious air and food scarcity in the outer planets, which is good. The heroic vigilante mission is shown being crowdsourced, which is charming.
Timescape (1980) by	Amazing as formal experiment - how much physics detail (and physicist detail) can you put in a novel before it falls over? Lots of the pettiness, the

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indeterminate frustration, and the glory of academic life. A patchwork of details though - but if you like either physics or telling minutiae then you'll like this. The core plot device, communication backwards through time, is a direct consequence of taking the Wheeler-Feynman interpretation literally.

Benford is also extremely acute about both Californian and English vice.

> *Perhaps that was the difference between merely thinking about experiments and actually having to do them. It must be harder to believe in serene mathematical beauties when you have dirty hands.*

Grad student maxims:

> *Mother nature is a bitch.*
> *The probability of a given event is inversely proportional to its desirability.*
> *One fudged curve is worth a thousand weasel words.*
> *No analysis is a complete failure - it can always serve as a bad example;*
> *Experience varies directly with the amount of equipment ruined.*

> *Gordon savored the clammy fullness of the breeze that had tunneled its way up from the Potomac... a welcome relief from California's monotonous excellence.*

Britain's degradation is depicted in terms of particular institutions:

> *The newsagent's a door down proclaimed on a chalkboard the dreadful news that the Times Literary Supplement had gone belly-up.*

The relationships - highly conventional, highly nuclear - are odd, but feel real because of all the little jokes, gestures, and support they have, and which life has.

> *"God damn, I love you," he said, suddenly grinning. Her smile took on a wry cast. Beneath the flickering street lights she kept her eyes intently on the road, "That's the trouble with going domestic. You move in with a man and pretty soon, when he says he loves you, you hear underneath it that he's thanking you."*

And I can forgive a lot of a C20th novel if it disses Freud:

> *He had oscillated in mood through 1967, not buying Penny's Freud-steeped recipes for repair... "Isn't it a little obvious to be so hostile to analysis?" she said once... he felt the clanky, machinelike language was a betrayal, a trap. Psychology had modeled itself after the hard sciences... but they had taken Newtonian clockwork as their example... His intutition told him that no such exterior analysis could capture what rubbed and chafed between them.*

The slowly growing apocalypse (though global) is mostly discussed by characters in Britain, so we get a highly amusing contrast between California (1963, pre-apocalypse) and Cambridge (1998, during), where the Americans are all clean and hopeful and the Brits slowly starving and fishing in sewers:

> *Mercury glowed as if alive beneath the filmed water. It gave off a warm, smudged glitter, a thin trapped snake worth a hundred guineas. "A find! A find!" Johnny chanted... They queued up to turn in their pint of the silvery stuff to the Hunt Facilitator. In line with current theory, Renfrew noted, social groupings were now facilitated, not led.*

The best subplot is probably the reptilian Oxbridge chad reverting to a heavily-armed feudal lord, including harem husbandry, as society breaks down.

> *Peterson calculated that quite enough had been done along the lines of intimidate-the-visitor and decided a gesture of indifference was needed. "Do you mind if I smoke?"*

Never mind the tachyons; there's some truly far-out notions in this, e.g.

> *Queen Elizabeth had abdicated in favor of her eldest son the previous Christmas and he had chosen to be crowned on his fiftieth birthday, in November.*

And indeed reality reasserts itself in the face of this rank authorial whimsy:

> *"Did you hear about the Coronation? They've cancelled preparations [owing to the total breakdown of law and order]."*

I wonder if the ending - the triumph and social ascent of the man who just receives the future signals; the literal fading-away of the team that built the theory and transmitter in conditions of terrible scarcity - is a jab at someone in particular. Here's Renfrew's last word - after succeeding, but never knowing that he has:

> *He was trying a modification of the signal correlator when the lights winked out. Utter blackness rushed in. The distant generator rattled and chugged into silence. It took a long time to feel his way out and into the light. It was a bleak, gray noon, but he did not notice; it was enough to be outside. He could hear no sound from Cambridge at all. The breeze carried a sour tang. No birds. No aircraft. He walked south, towards Grantchester. He look back once at the low square profile of the Cav and in the diffused light he raised a hand to it. He thought of nested universes, onion skin within onion skin... For so long now he had been transfixed by the past. It had deadened him this real world around him. He knew, now, without knowing quite how he knew, that it was forever lost... Rather than feeling despair, he was elated, free. Marjorie lay up ahead, no doubt frightened to be alone. He remembered her preserves on the uncompromising straight shelving, and smiled. They could eat those for some time. Have some easy meals together, as they did in the days before the children. There was really quite a lot ahead to do, when you thought about it.*

About a third too long; I honestly think I could edit out a hundred pages and get a great book. Maybe this is 4* even so.

Saturn's	Morbid, playful. Robots emancipated by our death fall into slaving each

Children (Freyaverse #1) (2008) by Charles Stross	other. Stross' science makes it: he defamiliarises ordinary human conditions (e.g. water is just another arbitrary compound to them, and the emphasis on, well, time that fiction about humans finds it hard to do without is off), he focusses on the many many vagaries of spaceflight ("*The dirty truth is that space travel is* shit..."), and offers a harsh, clean sociology ("*Architecture and economics are the unacknowledged products of planetography*")... Prose is hard to describe: there's definitely a Douglas Adams twinkle in there, but it's buried beneath hard science, sexual complexity and glib lifts ("*that corner of me which is forever Juliette*"). His society's accidental oligarchy is dissatisfying; the plot's repetitive and disintegrates towards the end. Still cool, obtrusive. (The cover of my copy wasn't anywhere near as hideous as that ^ one.)
Market Forces (2004) by Richard K. Morgan	 So totally a book of its time: of cinematic *Adbusters*ish rage and paranoia. By 2086, military aid has been fully privatised, making a free market of unilateral political force: > *All over the world, men and women still find causes worth killing and dying for. And who are we to argue with them? Have we lived in their circumstances? Have we felt what they feel? No. It is not our place to say if they are right or wrong. At Shorn Conflict Investments, we are concerned with only two things. Will they win? And will it pay?* Morgan's ultra-capitalism is internally coherent, but weighed down by Chomskyan exaggeration and a clumsy *Mad Max* road-rage system in which people drive FAST and MEAN to get corporate promotion. (Awwwww shit: metaphor!!) Like many a bright-eyed anti-globaliser, Morgan overdoes it; at one point, a senior partner at Shorn erupts into a caricature inhuman plutocrat. I've added numbering to the exec's rant because it is such a dense cluster of Chomskyan muddled good intentions: > *Do you really think we can 0) afford to have the developing world develop? You think we could have survived the rise of a modern, articulated Chinese superpower twenty years ago? You think we could manage an Africa full of countries run by intelligent, a) uncorrupt democrats? Or a Latin America run by men like Barranco? Just imagine it for a moment. Whole populations getting 1) educated, and 2) healthy, and 3) secure, and 4) aspirational. 5) Women's right's, for god's sake! We can't afford these things to happen, Chris. Who's going to 6) soak up our subsidised food surplus for us? 7) Who's going to make our shoes and shirts? 8) Who's going to supply us with cheap labour and cheap raw materials? 9) Who's going to buy our arms?"* > *0) A totally false dichotomy: uncoerced trade is never zero-sum! Also, everyone has an economic interest in the economic development of the world; roughly, the richer my neighbours are, the more they can buy from me, the richer am I.* > *a) Corruption is terrible for business; it subsumes about one dollar in twenty of the entire world's output. Individually beneficial acts of bribery*

	> *collectively lead to a ludicrously bad (and anti-capital!) state;* > > *1) Education is good for economies, and thus good for the West (by point 0);* > > *2) healthy workers are very good for economies;* > > *3) suffering war disrupts consumer spending more than anything else (as opposed to the economics of inflicting war, admittedly, but that isn't the plutocrat's point);* > > *4) (a certain limited form of) aspiration is the very heart of a consumer economy;* > > *5) there were huge economic gains from feminism;* > > *6) this is mildly true, but governmental horrors like the CAP give Morgan's rage some urgency;* > > *7) By 2086? Robots; 8) By 2086? Robots;* > > *9) This one is true and horrible.* This economic naivete is balanced by his characteristic virtues: pace, cool uncliched weapons, pro-social rage (here, wifebeaters and Nazis suffer atrocities). In a rarity for SF, Morgan *under*estimates the rate of tech growth (by 2086): for instance, their drones are much larger and more limited in application than ours are already. (The book is also a good portrait of ordinary marital pain.) > *One of his warders offered to let him have some books, but when the promised haul arrived, it consisted of a bare half-dozen battered paperbacks by authors Chris had never heard of. He picked one at random, a luridly violent far-future crime novel about a detective who could exchange bodies at will, but the subject matter was alien to him and his attention drifted: it all seemed very far-fetched.* A few nice meanings in there: Morgan's apparent self-deprecation is actually bragging about his still being in print in a hundred years; Kovacs is just this book's Faulkner character plus genetic mods; thus Faulkner finding the book "alien" is a serious comment on his lack of self-awareness, and explains why the loss of Carla is so fatal to his character (he can't introspect enough to prevent his fall). Crass and flashy, but psychologically ambitious. I've read everything Morgan has written despite usually disagreeing with him.
The Hydrogen Sonata (Culture	His last utopian statement. Tame by the histrionic standards of space opera and his own usual plot webs – though there are the usual infuriating Machiavellis and convincing dilemmas. Grim implications about immortality, decadence, international relations.

#10) (2012) by Iain M. Banks	Worth reading all of the full Culture books just for the discussions between AIs.
The Fowler Family Business (2002) by Jonathan Meades	Unsentimental, by which I mean unpleasant. On fertility and death, delusion and meaning, undertakers and civil engineers. Many beautiful passages, much reflection on the course of recent British history - but never didactic - > *Ben and Ben's fellow squash prodigy, keen, bulgy-muscled Nolan Oates lolled side by side on a striped recliner and a Portofino chair chosen by Naomi and bought by Henry out of the fruits of his labours burying and burning the dead for the children of the dead.* > *They cycled through the night, not knowing where they were going, ignoring maps, signposts, stars, anxious only to be far from that flat scrubland. Fear fuelled their tendons, pushed the pedals hard. They were oblivious to the sycamore's grazes and to the stiff hills. Their tyres purred. They passed hamlets, silos, byres, kennels, the illumined windows of hostile hearths. The swarthy bulk of a moor's escarpment slumped against the sky, a beast best left to lie. The world was every shade of black: slave, sump, crow, char. Clumsy clouds lumbered into each other, blind, bloated, slomo, piling up in a piggyback of obese buggers over the terrible trees. The night was loud with the shrieks and moans of creatures berating their fate and their want of shelter. When the rain came it was from a sluice that stretched from one horizon to the next. The road became a tide against them.* and anyway it's extremely well-grounded in Meades' obsessive attention to detail (not just artistic detail, any detail) > *The miracle of life. That baby could now bring a carbon-fibre racket into contact with a rubber ball travelling at 90 m.p.h. in such a way that the ball's speed would be so reduced that when it touched the front wall of the court it would plummet vertically to the floor. That was a miracle. And so was the human ingenuity which made the connection between that ball's terminal trajectory and a dead bird and advertised that ingenuity by the use of the figurative construction 'to kill a ball'. Telephones, butterfly stroke, nylon-tip pens, the emotive capability of music, the way some people are blond and some are left-handed, the shapes of faces in clouds, water's inability to flow uphill, the tastiness of animals' flesh, pain, bustles, reptiles' poison sacs, sinus drainage, cantilevering, DNA testing – miracles of life, all of them.* Meades is an aesthete - but still rightly unforgiving of art in the wrong place, here an experimental postmodernist roundabout that kills five. It get better when it stops sneering. The middle section portrays two professions, two quiet lives: funeral director and civil engineer, warm family man and late bloomer: > *Exclusion, Henry recognised, was what defined every profession. He*

	> *practised it himself. It was what differentiated him from civilians. Without exclusion and the stamp of expertise it brought … well, the unthinkable might occur: the bereaved might realise that they could do it themselves, take the law into their own hands. They'd conduct backyard cremations. They'd dig graves in their gardens as though burying the family pet.* The middle seems natalist; the nuclear family seem much happier. Just wait. The death of your parents as only their being "*denied a future of rages, chair-lifts, incontinence, slobbering aphasia, fright, wind, butter on the rug, soup on the cardie... How long he would have had to prepare himself for the embalming job of a lifetime, how long he would have had to watch as all dignity left her and she became a machine for processing soup into diarrhoea. It might be painful watching them turn into veg, decline into insentient senescence before our eyes but at least it's a process that acquaints us with loss gradually.*". (Meades contrives a neat point about human nature: when the Crystal Palace burns down, the fire engines couldn't reach it to save it because the roads are congested with spectators. This isn't accurate but whatev.) Oscillates between sympathy and unforgiving light; suddenly swerves away from two offered happy endings. Not sure what to make of the grim climax - the cuckold going off the deep end, becoming unmoored from his home, his work, his decency. Meades is no patriarch, so the implication shouldn't be 'so would you'. I think it's about the madness of biology, its inhumane imperatives and tragic spread. Good but not a patch on his films.
The Algebraist (2004) by Iain M. Banks	Satisfying mind candy. (Themes: the fate of citizens in a war between fascists; simulationism as an official state religion; a jolly solipsistic species which enjoys civil war). Too full of infodumps and too circuitous to reach his personal best (which I would say is the genre's personal best): it lacks the grander metaphysical framework of the *Culture* books, which handle civilization at the limit - where philosophy is at last unavoidable because practical matters have been solved and tucked away. It does have a right good baddie - a calm galactic overlord driven to be demonic and obscene for PR reasons. But the protagonist, a thoughtful manipulated academic, isn't interesting. I missed the book's grand conceit the first time I read this: the MacGuffin that drives everything is an epic, lost book called the *The Algebraist*, described only as being: > *all about mathematics, navigation as a metaphor, duty, love, longing, honour, long voyages home... All that stuff.* **3*/5**. (Series is **5/5** despite most of its books being 3.5s.) How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: Less stark than the Culture books, but still above-average: depicts an extremely long-lived but still lively species...

	Software development: None? *Actual Science*: Little
Building Stories (2012) by Chris Ware	Enormous, 3 kilo, 150-piece jigsaw-comic about ordinary desperation at varying physical scales (from anthropomorphised insect up to anthropomorphised house). I actually resented the format at first - it's a unwieldy doorstop that cannot be read outside - but by the end it's a pleasing experiment: that Ware has succeeded in making the order of reading more or less irrelevant is of course incredible.
James and the Giant Peach (1961) by Roald Dahl	None yet
The Man in the High Castle (1962) by Philip K. Dick	None yet
1984 (1949) by George Orwell	Intentionally mind-numbing. The prose isn't up to his extraordinarily high standard.
Boy: Tales of Childhood (Roald Dahl's Autobiography, #1) (1984) by Roald Dahl	None yet
Unspeak: How Words Become Weapons, How Weapons Become a Message, and How That Message Becomes Reality (2005) by Steven Poole	Startling and witty analysis of the language of modern politics: > *UNSPEAK - a mode of speech that persuades by stealth, e.g., climate change [rather than global warming], war on terror [rather than war on Afghanistan], ethnic cleansing [rather than genocide], road map [rather than plan], community [rather than 'some self-elected representatives of a supposedly unified group'], 'barrier' [rather than 'wall' or 'checkpoint' or 'annexation'].* With Ben Goldacre, Poole is a model for political writing: eloquent, empirical rage. The book's noticeably a product of the time - attacking New Labour and the Bush administration in particular - but its principles transfer.
Dying Every Day:	How did the Roman empire last so long with leaders like this?

Seneca at the Court of Nero (2014) by James Romm	Seneca is complex, if by complex you mean "among the most contradictory people in history". He was a vocal ascetic and one of the richest men in the world. He was a beautiful exponent of liberty and prudence, and a shill for an insane rapist for a decade - but it would have worse to abandon Rome to Nero and his rapey mates. Thrasea Paetus is the respective true stoic, the noble abstainer. Classic historian move: when dealing with possibilities that don't appeal to him, Romm just hems and haws and says that they're implausible; I'm not even mad. He also reports very dubious "evidence" via Dio and Tacitus, like the content of private conversations between Agrippina and Nero with no one else present. Sense of doom on Seneca's family throughout, including his blameless nephew. Why didn't they run? They were so rich, and the government was so much smaller and poorly-informed.
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values (Phaedrus, #1) (1974) by Robert M. Pirsig	Manages to put forward an actual critique of rationalism without being either vague and platitudinous, or irrational and irrationally proud of it. Smooth read, some beautiful bits, but a failure if it's primarily a vehicle for a metaphysics.
The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt (2015) by Andrea Wulf	None yet
Die Kreutzer Sonate (1889) by Leo Tolstoy	None yet
The Collected Dorothy Parker (1944) by Dorothy Parker	Sharp and funny but insubstantial. Good for Sunday nights maybe.
The End of the Affair (1951) by Graham	None yet

Greene	
The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) by Oscar Wilde	None yet
Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (Revised Edition) (1983) by Benedict Anderson	> *[a nation is a community because], regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail within each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.*
Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk Among Us (2010) by John Quiggin	With Irrational Exuberance, Fool's Gold and Black Swan, one of the best Great Recession books, precisely because it isn't narrowly focussed on the Noughties. The key point is that the pipeline of ideas from academia to policy is *terrible*; it doesn't clear out old disconfirmed ideas, and anyway policy is often based on freshman year lies-to-children. Quiggin does do a little anti-neoclassical hectoring on top of that, but from what I know (from an undergrad in economics) much of it's fair. I'm not sure about his Efficient Market chapter anymore; there are places where it sure seems to operate, as long as the market is liquid. (Which is of course the rub.)
Whoops!: Why Everyone Owes Everyone And No One Can Pay (2009) by John Lanchester	None yet
On Bullshit (1986) by Harry G. Frankfurt	A joke, but a helpful and increasingly disquoted one. A model for philosophy making itself useful.
Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia	Anecdotal evidence of the new culture, which is both orchestrated and predated upon by an amoral mafia state. Postmodern dictatorship unnerves me more than the clumsy fascism of the Ba'ath or Juche. It's one thing to steal almost everything from your people; one thing to demean, torture and murder millions; one thing to employ a large fraction of the entire country as rabid unaccountable secret police.

(2014) by Peter Pomerantsev	Even if you do all of this, your people still know you're evil and long for your death. It says something about me that the perversion of meaning, the co-optation of language, and erasing the possibility of objectivity is more emotionally taxing than straightforward torture kleptocracy ("*say what you want about the tenets of National Socialism, Dude...*"). The most appalling figure in Pomerantsev's long list is Vladislav Surkov. He is at first hard to credit as real: think Russell Brand crossed with Don Draper crossed with Laurentii Beria. His exploits sound like totally mental conspiracy theories, but are actually(?) open secrets: > *... the office of the presidential administration, where Surkov would sit behind a desk with phones bearing the names of all the "independent" party leaders, calling and directing them at any moment, day or night. The brilliance of this new type of authoritarianism is that instead of simply oppressing opposition, as had been the case with twentieth-century strains, it climbs inside all ideologies and movements, rendering them absurd. One moment Surkov would fund civic forums and human rights NGOs, the next he would quietly support nationalist movements that accuse the NGOs of being tools of the West. With a flourish he sponsored lavish arts festivals for the most provocative modern artists in Moscow, then supported Orthodox fundamentalists, dressed all in black and carrying crosses, who in turn attacked the modern art exhibitions...* The book is *all* anecdote. He does state some statistics, but without sourcing; the book has no footnotes. We need to do better than this, what with the Kremlin's online troll army. It is journalism, then, not social theory: a picture of a hundred or so people. Russia is so skewed that one can capture some important things about by focussing on the ultra-powerful: Berezovsky and Putin, Surkov and Deripaska. Pomerantsev views the "international development consultants" trying to improve matters as bumbling, ineffective ambassadors of our best side. He's very glib in attributing daddy issues, as if psychology were that straightforward, as if Freud were that credible. His prose has the distracting, unbalanced sentences of indifferently translated work ("*developers steal so much money during construction that even the most VIP, luxury, elite of the skyscrapers cracks and sink ever so quickly*"; "*out to make a few quick quid*"). The drama of it all is wearing: he was a Channel 4-style hack documentarian before becoming a respected literary insider. It is much the same as Adam Curtis' hyperactive, over-theorised view. But this is still good, outraging and intelligent (e.g. he takes for granted that we will understand the contrast between Kaliningrad as the home of Kant *and* grand larceny and sleaze). A small salvo of authenticity against the Kremlin's apparent wall of disinformation and corruption. I wish I knew a better book on the same topic but it's new and behind a language barrier.
Content Provider: Selected Short Prose Pieces, 2011–2016 () by	> *I thought I should go [to the British Comedy Awards], as it's hard to make the stake back in a world where the public expect to steal all content for nothing.* > *Besides which, I have become the sort of person who declines attending events on principle, but where my absence is not noticed anyway. When*

Stewart Lee	> *I won two British comedy awards in 2011, it wasn't mentioned in any newspapers. And my 2012 BAFTA acceptance speech was cut from TV, perhaps because I told the presenter, Kate Thornton, that acclaim was a random phenomenon, like cloud patterns, into which you read significance at your peril.* Like Francis Wheen or Clive James' collections, a useful critical record of the dumb minutiae Britain obsessed over, over the last ten years. Good prose and there's usually one laugh every 6 or 7 pages to boot. He uses "comedian" as an honorific, but "TV comedian" as an insult. God bless some smug wankers.
Quiddities: An Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary (1987) by Willard Van Orman Quine	None yet
The Road to Wigan Pier (1937) by George Orwell	Had a pretty large impact on me, which is strange when you consider he was writing about a society that subsequently had 70 years of relatively pro-poor growth. I now only remember him being grim about the monotony of the diet (white bread and dripping times 365) and the fewness of the shillings.
Computation and Modelling in Insurance and Finance (International Series on Actuarial Science) (2014) by Erik Bølviken	Read it for work. Quite friendly and thoughtful, though not enough of those (nor broad enough) to be a good introduction to the modern way of science (which I am still looking for). He is extremely direct about the costs and benefits of numerical work, and his maths is all well-motivated. [Free! here]
How to Be Idle (2004) by Tom Hodgkinson	None yet
Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals (2013) by Ved Mehta	Curious portraits of Oxbridge people: the ordinary-language philosophers just as they were awaking from their long radical nap, and the arsey titans of Modern history (Trevor-Roper, Carr, Taylor, Namier). The book was originally a *New Yorker* series, fitting their house style – gossip about the transcendental – but there's more gossip than concepts. We get to relive all the angry *Times* responses to bitchy reviews, learn what Toynbee ordered for dinner at the Athenaeum in late '62; also the hair colour of everyone involved (Murdoch '*straight and blonde, recalling the peasant aspect of*

	Saint Joan'). To their faces, Mehta is too much the deferential alumn, tentatively prodding the dons to be unkind about their peers. The humans are worth it, if you already care: Austin and Namier are tragic hubristic husks; Hare, Ayer, and Toynbee's charisma blare straight through Mehta's quiet journalism. The common point between the history and philosophy of the time is both fields' slow recovery from positivism/Wittgensteinian reductionism - the cautious return of theory, and of *human* posits. (In a sense Wittgenstein was still a reductionist when he was a holist, since he obsessed over language even as he denied science's entry into various sides of life.) Mehta has some spirit: after meeting Strawson (Snr.) he says "I took my leave of the scaled-down Kant."; he finishes the book with this wonderful medievalism: > *Unless a philosopher finds for us an acceptable faith or synthesis – as Plato and Aristotle did together for their age, and St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant for theirs – we remain becalmed on a painted ocean of controversy, and for better or worse, insofar as the past is a compass to the future, there will never be anyone to whistle thrice for us and say, once and for all, 'The game is done! I've won! I've won!'*
Steve Jobs (2011) by Walter Isaacson	Spot the odd one out: Franklin, Einstein, da Vinci, Kissinger, Jobs. (Trick question! there's two odds out: the first three had huge positive effects on science and society; while Jobs' and Kissinger's impact on the world is respectively "eh?" and "catastrophic".) I don't really understand what people see in Jobs, "the most beloved billionaire". He was a turd to just about everyone he met from the age of about 12. > *in the middle of seventh grade he gave his parents an ultimatum. 'I insisted they put me in a different school'. Financially this was a tough demand; his parent were barely making ends meet, but by this point there was little doubt that they would eventually bend to his will. 'When they resisted, I told them I would just quit going to school if I had to go back...'* Some of those people happened to be brilliant, and responded fairly well to being treated like dirt. How much credit does this omnidickery deserve? (I've been told I'm missing the value of management skills, gumption, motivational speaking. OK, then be clear it was this and not innovation, not engineering, not design. Kottke: "*Between Woz and Jobs, Woz was the innovator, the inventor. Steve Jobs was the marketing person.*". Also the thief.) In the absence of Jobs, it's hard to see it taking much longer than a couple of years for someone to introduce nice personal computers, computer fonts, portable MP3, heartfelt CGI, or omnisurveillance bricks. And maybe those others wouldn't charge through the nose. Catch the ring of pure mania here: > *'If I had never dropped in on that single [calligraphy] course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts. And since Windows just copied the Mac, it's likely that no personal computer would have them.*

	I suppose the evidence in favour of him being talented (and not just being lucky and dominating some talented people) is the string of successes (Apple, NeXT, Pixar, Apple). Not a huge sample size, but big in context. I now have lots of questions, none of which Isaacson raises or settles. (In this regard it's much shallower than either his Einstein or Kissinger books.): * Could we have gotten the expensive gizmos without all the abuse? * What **was** the net effect of his life? Millions of pretty objects minus abandoning a child minus hundreds of petty sneers and little brutalities minus 30 suicides ... I don't see how to do this. People like Design, sure, but how much? * His personal philosophy seems straightforwardly terrible, all the worst of kneejerk Sixties exoticism. Intuition over reason ("*more powerful than intellect*"), AND will over sympathy, AND nature over science, AND post-truth ("[Jobs'] *reality distortion field was a confounding melange of charismatic rhetoric, indomitable will, and eagerness to bend any fact to fit the purpose at hand.*") What's the point of being a 'spiritual being' if you're still a dick afterward? * Macs are highly underpowered for their price. In theory, this represents a grave loss of consumer surplus; that is, it loses the point of an economy. But I can't just say that, because people queue up for this stuff. Either they're all exquisite aesthetes who *gain* surplus by looking at their device during those long extra minutes it takes to finish processing, or the social cachet compensates. I don't have a clear idea of how to judge surplus when computers are not about computing. * Your view of Gates vs Jobs is very telling. One is uncool and compromising, but has saved many millions of lives; the other is cool and uncompromising, but, after reading Isaacson, it would not surprise me to hear that none of Jobs' $3.3bn went on philanthropy (it might have been anonymous). * Do we *need* reality distorters? Must we be led into greatness by visionary liars and rogues? (Musk has a bit of this too.) > *"If you act like you can do something, then it will work. I told him 'Pretend to be completely in control and people will assume that you are."* Sure is no way that attitude could ever do any harm. I suppose I should just be grateful he stayed out of politics. Wasn't sure what to rate the book, since it is mostly clear about a dubious subject. Isaacson often stumbles into the Distortion Field > *"'I think I might have headed to New York if I didn't go to college', [Jobs] recalled, musing on how different his world - and perhaps all of ours - might have been..."* but a bit less than usual.
Tales of the Unexpected	None yet

(1979) by Roald Dahl	
The Complete Prose of Woody Allen (1989) by Woody Allen	None yet
Red ice (1987) by Colin Mackay	Bitter, accusatory poems on Stalinism from a self-described "European pessimist" (i.e. in the line of Diogenes, Hobbes, Arnold, Spengler, Schopenhauer). A sensitive man betrayed by the terrible course of communism, he goes in for nihilism: > *We were hungry for belief* > *hope fed us human flesh.* (This isn't *generally* what it feels like to change your mind on something important; it rings of deconversion rather than grudging error-correction.) Mackay had a terrible time of it, he suffered without even getting thrilling hubris or an heroic end. Many canonical artists had unusually hard lives and/or mood disorders. But it's not necessarily that sad people write better. Instead here's what I think happens: audiences do not default to being receptive to others: we need to be woken up to a book, whether by personal recommendation, or shared biographical detail, or some other gimmick. A tragic biography is the most reliable primer. (Witness the death bump.) (It's not nice to attack the *hegemony of the sad* in art. 1) They are still good, when they're good; 2) they are often Witnesses, speakers-against-power, and anyone can be crushed by having to do that; 3) leave them some bloody consolation!) I would love Mackay's poems to be incredible; I was extremely moved by Mackay's (self-published) suicide diary. But they're just ok. Of moons, angels, deserts, atomisation, Hendrix. *Red Ice* was written well before Bosnia (the crowning horror of his life), but it's already overflowing with ruined empathy and snarly emptiness and survivor's guilt. Are there great paintings in only black and grey? Well, sort of. Calvary features four times in twenty poems. > *the mountains are mere hills* > *the calvarys are daily and inconspicuous* > *and we are retreating into closed worlds* Mackay was trying genocide verse, forty years after Adorno and twenty-five after Geoffrey Hill. (Does it matter, being *late* to the worst thing ever? No, but do it right, do it new.) The brute fact of the C20th drives him to nostalgia and lairy isolation > *[I said] I will be me for the hell of it* > *[he said] you working-class tory* > *you aren't worth a shit*

So the poems are chaste, romanticism with the innocent wonder ripped out; unleavened except for his spurious racial memory of everything being ok, once. (Wordsworth at Katyn. I do not think highly of Wordsworth.) The long title poem has automatic force, being as it is about the gulags and the shame of apologism (Lenin and Stalin (and Trotsky and...)). But it's also uncompressed, clumsy with rage ("*stop these follies of the human race*!"). It condemns by MacDiarmid and Sartre by name, which is rare and ok. On hypocrisy, silence on Soviet abuses in favour of focusing on lesser Western crimes:</li>

> *[They told me]*
> *"Find something in your own hemisphere!"*
> *to salve my Commie conscience with, to express solidarity with.*
> *(If only there was someone I could express solidarity with...)*

There is one poem that really gets somewhere: "Phantoms", a fast, vocal, twisted/triumphant repudiation of war and hippies alike.

> *One night I rose to count myself and found*
> *that I was loose change from the age of plenty,*
> *little piles of sweaty much-handled hope,*
> *promissary thinknotes tissue-thin*
> *devalued below use,*
> *and I cried then, A dream! a dream!*
> *I am tired of too much reality!*
> *...And I woke,*
> *and stood before my window,*
> *and looked to the West and saw*
> *a giant city that was lit with despair*
> *that stank futility,*
> *and looked to the East and saw*
> *a barbed-wire labour camp reeking*
> *of death, dictators...*
>
> *O television pop world*
> *of toothpaste and handsome people!*
> *I see I am now a Mirage in your eyes,*
> *an Eagle, a Falcon, a Mig 23, 25, 27,*
> *a Tupolev, a Tornado, a Sukhoi, bigger*
> *better, deadlier armed than before,*
> *swingwinged and shining and lethal,*
> *when in my own sad fantasy fact I am sitting*
> *slumped in sweaty shirt and pants after a night*
> *spent strafing the emotions,*
> *staring at a sunlit breakfast table*
> *with blank and stupid face.*
> *And I turned from the place of aerials*
> *where the screech-hawks of power sit perched*
> *and wandered off, away, far away,*
> *down a long corridor crying for*

> *God to return to the breast of his image*
> *that is lonely, O so lonely, and wandering lost*
> *across the plain, hammered on by the hooves*
> *of daemon horses where*
> *God's jackass*
> *bray.*
>
> *And though they could hold the thought that lights the beauty of the stars*
> *and leap forward through death*
> *and through the doors of oblivion*
> *there between eternity and the night and the sea*
> *where Blake and Shakespeare and all the prophets*
> *are unread and need not be read -*
> *still they grin, grin.*
>
> *No friends, I am not mad,*
> *for I have seen them on the clear horizon,*
> *ghosts of television wars lifelong,*
> *of Algeria, of Indochina, of Ulster*
> *and Ogaden, Sinai and Afghanistan.*
> *I have seen migrations of silver planes*
> *with wing stars red and white*
> *crapping napalm, crapping bombs*
> *high explosive, nuclear, thermo-nuclear, biological.*
> *And I with my tin six-guns*
> *ready to be a hero*
> *firing off caps against such missiles*
> *that some bored but competent officer in the Urals*
> *will launch with a button*
> *blasting philosophy and idealism*
> *and eternal consciousness to hell*
> *in four easy minutes...*
>
> *Lady be mine, while there is still time,*
> *in a country made for two.*
> *We can find its door if we know no more*
> *than any man and woman do.*
> *Before falls the fire from the blue blue sky*
> *on some lunatic's launching day,*
> *lady be mine, O lady be mine,*
> *let's fuck our lives away.*

And "Holy, Wholly My Own" is admirable Golden Age pap. I want to call him 'Nightwatchman of the ex-socialist Scotch soul', but I don't know if that's a sentimental response to the poor bastard and not the poor bastard's work at all.

All that said: I'm still thinking about this book (or this man) five years later. Plus one.

Appeal to Reason: 25 Years In These Times (2002) by James Weinstein	Anthology of news from an American newspaper written largely by leftist academics. But at least these selected pieces are actually a fairly low-ideology portrait of shocking events, unreported or begrudgingly reported by mainstream sources. It's way left of *the Guardian* and still undeluded. I'd never looked into the Contras scandal which *In these Times* scooped – if you don't know, this was that time Reagan-funded murderers imported massive amounts of crack into the US using government money. Even the Zizek(!) piece (on 9/11) is low-key, wise, and borne out by history. > *Now, we are forced to strike back, to deal with real enemies in the real world … but whom to strike? Whatever the response, it will never hit the right target, bringing us full satisfaction. The spectacle of America attacking Afghanistan would be just that: If the greatest power in the world were to destroy one of the poorest countries, where peasants barely survive on barren hills, would this not be the ultimate case of the impotent acting out? Afghanistan is already reduced to rubble, destroyed by continuous war during the past two decades. The impending attack brings to mind the anecdote about the madman who searches for his lost key beneath a street light; asked why he searches there, when he actually lost the key in a dark corner, he answers: "But it is easier to search under strong light!" Is it not the ultimate irony that Kabul already looks like downtown Manhattan?* > *The only way to ensure that it will not happen here again is to prevent it from going on anywhere else. America should learn to humbly accept its own vulnerability as part of this world, enacting the punishment of those responsible as a sad duty, not as an exhilarating retaliation. Even though America's peace was bought by the catastrophes going on elsewhere, the predominant point of view remains that of an innocent gaze confronting unspeakable evil that struck from the Outside. One needs to gather the courage to recognize that the seed of evil is within us too.*
How to Travel with a Salmon and Other Essays (1992) by Umberto Eco	Bunch of satirical pieces about academia and consumerism. One piece, analysing a cheap mail-order catalogue, is quite affecting. Hasn't aged all that well; like stand-up sketches about door-to-door salesmen. This has the feel of a notebook which is cool?
Totally Wired: Post Punk Interviews And Overviews (2009) by Simon Reynolds	Less impressive collection, but his love of the music shines through, and his scepticism about the more wanky post-punks helps considerably. David Byrne and Green Gartside come across particularly well.
Bring The Noise: 20 Years of	My favourite pop writer traces his own development, from slightly clumsy Marxist projecting onto old-school rap, to the most acute pop-culture theorist we have.

writing about Hip Rock and Hip-Hop (2007) by Simon Reynolds	
Of Mutability (2010) by Jo Shapcott	*Massive*, as far as contemporary poetry goes. ('What dyou mean it's on display in the *front* of the shop?') Of water, London, transformation, plainness. It's a moderate book. Moderately sad, moderately whimsical, moderately vulgar ("Piss Flower"), moderately modern, moderately transcendental. Good. Am I supposed to say this makes it immoderately British?
Until Before After (2010) by Ciaran Carson	Solemnly blatant. Plainly good. 157 unpunctuated sentence-poems, each poem holding maybe three jarring, run-on thoughts. It's melancholy, about loss, time and rhythm, but present itself as neither pitiful nor gnostic. It's really difficult to parse, but you don't resent that. There's a shout-out to China Miéville in the back, which is mad! because these poems are stylistically nothing like Miéville's clotted, neologistic prose. There are maybe 2 words less than a hundred years old in the whole book ("credit card"). Closer inspection.
Anglo-English Attitudes: Essays, Reviews, Misadventures, 1984-99 (1999) by Geoff Dyer	3-page essays on French or Italian figures or places (Althusser, Cartier-Bresson) or unusual objects of aesthetic attention (Action Man). What we call "research" is just incidental to Dyer - glittering coincidences and correlations fall into his lap as he sets about reading, apparently, everything. He's usually better.
Conundrum (1974) by Jan Morris	"*I was three or perhaps four years old when I realised I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl. It is my earliest memory*." Memoir by our first trans national treasure. (Even the *Daily Mail* said: > *A compelling and moving read, a world away from the tabloid titillation that normally surrounds the subject.* !!) Her: > *I see now that, like the silent prisoners I was really deprived of an identity... I realize that the chief cause of my disquiet was the fact that I had none. I was not to others what I was to myself. I did not conform to the dictionary's definition - 'itself, and not something else'.* Technically detailed - dealing with the nittygritty of eight years of medical tourism, voice training, colleague adjustment, and a compulsory divorce from her wife - it leaves lots about the subjective experience of *crossing* unanalysed. Which is both fine and disappointing.
Venus in Exile: The Rejection	Thesis is that idea of beauty and of women were so intertwined a hundred years ago that Modernism was misogynistic - i.e. in form, as well as just some of its practitioners happening to be. Furthermore, that this, as part of

of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art (1901) by Wendy Steiner	a wider smashing of old things, relates to feminism finally breaking out and establishing new options for women (?) Not sure of the truth-value, but I liked this anyway.
Buzz: The Science and Lore of Alcohol and Caffeine (1996) by Stephen Braun	I started taking caffeine quite late, so thought I'd check up on it. This is fun, with lots of historical flavour and scientific wonder. (The coolest fact in it is that the body's direct link between effort and fatigue is the result of an incredibly elegant cycle using adenosine: the production of energy in the body (by breaking down adenosine triphosphate) is exactly the same process as inducing sleep, as the process' byproduct adenosine triggers dampening receptors in the brain.) He doesn't give a straight answer to the question "Does our rapid formation of caffeine tolerance make its long-term effects zero-sum?" but the evidence isn't good.
Hamewith (1900) by Charles Murray	I'm away from home, and so must have a falsely distinctive version of it. ("*Thir's a pig in ilka bed*.") Murray's poems about Aberdeenshire were written from South Africa, and they're funny and surprisingly brutal. Some jingoism too, unfortunately, though check out 'Dockens Afore His Peers' for subversion. He avoids the kailyard by focussing on tatties instead (the Classics, drunks and work-sore backs, over the lad o' pairts and the light on the rapeseed).
Consciousness Explained (1991) by Daniel C. Dennett	Damn: impressed. The title's supreme arrogance is misleading: his prose is clear, stylish and flowing, he's expert in the relevant experiments, and he's much less hectoring in book form – he admits his theory's counter-intuitive and hostile appearance, he flags alternate positions and possibilities, and it's hard to doubt him when he says he'd change his mind if the science pointed away from his detailed eliminativism. I am *very* resistant to eliminative materialism – in fact I've never been able to take it seriously - so that he manages to patch over my failure of imagination is a mark of the book's power. You begin to wonder – for instance when he talks about his work on children with multiple personalities disorder – if he's cultivating a humane exterior to make his theory more palatable. But it's probably just that our backlash against his loud, cartoon atheism overlooks his humanity. The first section, where he admits the wonder and difficulty of studying consciousness, and carefully lays out the method ahead, is a model for modern scientifically engaged philosophy – and at the end he suggests a dozen novel, detailed experiments to test his theory (ante up). Can't ignore him. Minus a point for being twenty years old on a topic where that matters.
Notes of a Native Son (1955) by James Baldwin	Early essays on black-consciousness via pop culture. This prefigures the modern internet left (Racialicious and Feministing) by 60 years; but with a wit and casual familiarity with high art that prefigures Clive James, though with a more tragic air.
Malignant	Clear, historical, philosophical stuff, and since he suffers from a filthy case

Sadness: The Anatomy of Depression (1999) by Lewis Wolpert	himself he can wield authority properly for once. The chapters on the cultural variation in the expression of the illness (e.g. as a result of even more intense disdain for mental illness, Asians tend to report its symptoms as physical ailments rather than mental malaise) is startling to hear coming from such a conservative scientist, and all the more persuasive as a result. Learnt a very good word, too: "somatisation". I'd read Scott Alexander instead; the field is still moving a lot.
Shakespeare: A Very Short Introduction (1986) by Germaine Greer	Was expecting this to be theory-laden and partisan, but the keynote of its 80 pages is just love, context, facts. Deflating the man-myth while insisting on the highly modern philosophy of life to be read into him.
The March of Unreason: Science, Democracy, and the New Fundamentalism (2005) by Dick Taverne	Grumpy attack on the strange alliance of anti-vaxers, environmentalists, and anti-globalisers that attack science (when and only when it contradicts their ideologies). I suppose we could call this an early entry in the culture war. Greenpeace's internal culture turns out to be surprisingly Stalinist, and they have repeatedly made convenient errors / told lies when it suits them. Nuclear power safety for instance. It is fair to associate their successful campaign against Golden rice with some fraction of the millions of blindnesses and deaths associated with vitamin A deficiency. Rorty is cited in this - as a man of unreason - and Taverne's whole chapter on postmodernism is a bog-standard strawman. Still mostly good. He is optimistic in the manner of successful scientists. I preferred 'The Rational Optimist' and 'Enlightenment Now'; they're more constructive.
Preludes & Nocturnes (The Sandman, #1) (1991) by Neil Gaiman	None yet
Broken Angels (Takeshi Kovacs, #2) (2003) by Richard K. Morgan	Morgan has a niche: stylish, sorta politically-literate hi-octane plotfests. *Altered Carbon* was noir; this one's war reportage. Kovacs - his broke-down hard-boiled super-soldier - is good, able to carry off the witty sociopathy of the action hero involuntarily – tropes are brutally programmed into him. 'Quell', Morgan's Marx-figure, lurks larger here. There's a bucket of great tech ideas, but they're never the focus; the people scrambling in the wake of their machines are still recognisably human. Great names, too (a nuked town named "Sauberville", a mercenary broker named "Semetaire".) His many characters are vivid; his prose brash; his themes large, dark, but not moping.
Sociology () by Anthony Giddens	(*Credibility note*: I went to sociology lectures I wasn't registered for; that plus this book is all I know. The following thus risks making *the* mistake of disgruntled undergrads everywhere: assuming that my limited understanding of a field is all the field is. Still:)

	Even that might have exhausted the intellectual benefits. Owing to blameless methodological difficulties (e.g. the 'causal density' of human behaviour, that little experimentation is possible, Hawthorne effects, low statistical power), those benefits are mostly 1) reminders and details of how social structures hurt people, and 2) some new vocabulary - rather than subterranean insight or predictive progress in the understanding of societies. (Kudos to Giddens for this passage: "*…is sociology merely a restatement, in abstract jargon, of things we already know? Sociology at its worst can be exactly that…*") (1): If you already don't persecute people out of ignorance, and already know which groups are ill-treated or unlucky (whether or not you ill-treat them), then (1) is already checked off. (2): Some of those new words: 'socialisation' vs 'structuration', Verstehen oder Erklärung, or the disturbing hypothesis stereotype threat, or the master status of a given society, or the 'manifest' vs the 'latent' functions of an action. Sociology seems good at unpicking 'neoliberal' delusions (roughly the set of theodicies that say, "Everything bad about society is just individuals making free decisions, so back off") – but is (usually) poor at following through with the counterpart doubt: wondering if our neat structural explanations are as applicable or explanatory as we like to think. Interactionism is one clearly valuable strand, because it's empirical and bottom-up. (It is harder for us to disappear up our own ass with our ear that close to the ground.) Also there's whatever school Kieran Healy represents - unless, cruel fate, he's the only one.
Falling Towards England (1985) by Clive James	None yet
Anthologie Prévert () by Jacques Prévert	Hooray for the only poems I can read in French!* Nursery rhymes, but with razorwire not far beneath. The simplicity (loads of basic nouns repeated dozens of times – "oiseaux" and "roi", "oiseaux" and "roi") makes me look look nervily over my shoulder – for the real attacker. 'Chant Song' is so gorgeous, daft. * As of 2014; bit better now.
The Amber Spyglass (His Dark Materials, #3) (2000) by Philip Pullman	Its blunt, scrutable way of making atheism seem heroic probably wouldn't stand a re-read, but this was a big deal when I was 12.
Death at the Excelsior	Non-Jeeves stories are skippable. Though early, the Jeeves ones are as good as always:

and Other Stories (1921) by P.G. Wodehouse	> *"How's the weather, Jeeves?"* > *"Exceptionally clement, sir."* > *"Anything in the papers?"* > *"Some slight friction threatening in the Balkans, sir. Otherwise, nothing."*
Question Everything: 132 science questions - and their unexpected answers (2014) by New Scientist	132 lovely earthings of sky-high theory. Not much new, but good as refresher course and mind candy. The tacit connections between the answers are the real thing – for instance, I guessed (wrongly) that synchrotron radiation and Cherenkov radiation were based on the same mechanism, and feel very happy that a quick and public disconfirmation was available. Here
Solitude: A Return to the Self (1988) by Anthony Storr	Really enjoyed this, and the core idea (being social is not a necessary condition of flourishing for some people) is important and still insufficiently appreciated. The method is not scientific (but this is only a problem because it uses the pseudoscientific register of psychoanalysis). I find it hard to place Storr - almost all of his work was hagiographies of Freud and Jung, but he seems to have reviewed Richard Webster's classic hatchet job well, and Jeffrey Masson's famous hatchet job poorly, so I dunno.
Confessions (1789) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau	I am prejudiced against Rousseau, him with his straightforwardly false anthropology, melodramatic politics, and preposterous egotism. His three big legacies are even easier to disparage – 'Revolution as salvation', 'Feelings as truer than thoughts', and the 'Noble savage' idea. This much arrayed against him, it's miraculous that *Confessions* ('the first modern autobiography') is as clear and wise as it is – a deeply honest story by a deeply deluded man. (Just one instance of courage: to talk about being a sexual sub, as a man, in eC18th Europe!) Still he is a stroppy Forrest Gump – blundering into great events, loudly blaming them for the collision – but he is also big enough to test the great iconoclasts of his time. (Strong parallels with DH Lawrence, another supremely wilful, influential, and ridiculous soul.) Skim heavily.
Lost Worlds: What Have We Lost, & Where Did it Go? (2004) by Michael Bywater	He seems to know about everything as long as it's obscure and marginal: old network protocols and Latin conjugations, how meerschaums and primitive sweets were made... It's *Grumpy Old Men* except with teeth, wit, & iconoclasm and without mummery, ressentiment, & squidge. > *"Remember, then, the founding principle of British public life, which is this: if you don't know already, I'm certainly not going to tell you."* His fond memory of corporal punishment is a bit off, but generally he's balanced, seeing what's been gained by loss. Examines both our tendency to stupid nostalgia *and* stupid amnesia. Never heard of him, watch for it.

	(I lost my copy immediately before finishing it.)
Iris Murdoch, a Writer at War: Letters and Diaries, 1939-1945 (2002) by Iris Murdoch	Was pleased to find her young and conceited – letters laced with '*mon dieu*!'s and '*passim*'s and '*ye gods!*'es. To my shame, these people are all always learning five languages at once, wittily discussing the exigencies of Turkish declaratives. Interesting how comfortable Conradi is to contradict her – apparently she excised quite a lot from her archive, mostly on sex. Some fuckups despite his breadth (: Thompson's last letter is dated '43 here!) and one piece of gratuitous dramaturgy: he includes only one reply from David Hicks, making him seem sadistic rather than grudging and aloof. Her generosity / terrible co-dependence in the face of Hicks' brutal breakup is too moving. Note: in this period, Murdoch copied many Treasury documents and passed them to the Soviets. How much harm this did is arguable, but it doesn't speak well of her political sense.
Karl Marx (1999) by Francis Wheen	Portrait of Karl Jeremiah Wooster Cosby Marx. Wheen's an ideal biographer: fearless, careful, sympathetic on balance. (So, ideal for the readers rather than the subject.) Most of his shortish book is debunking slanders; the rest is in cementing others. Was Marx a bully? No: bullies take weak targets. A dogmatist? No; he spent twenty years researching one-quarter of his big book, and admired his bourgeois forebears Ricardo and Feuerbach. Was he a Whig 'historian'? Sort of. Petty? Oh yes indeed. A hypocritical idealist? Tried not to be. Anti-semite? Yes, or, used the same language. Russophobe? Definitely somewhat. A bourgeois patriarch? Very much so. A heartless philanderer? Once. A show-off? Yup. I came up with an epitaph for him – "*KM. Excellent journalist, journeyman economist, awful leader*." but I am not learned enough to assert it yet. Wheen is in a rush (Hegel's system gets five lines) but he writes well, seems to have read everything in the vicinity.
New Selected Poems, 1984-2004 (2004) by Carol Ann Duffy	I'd thought of her as sort of obvious – all first-order, meaning near the surface, all on worthy themes like childhood perversity and elderly loss. But her best ("Auden's Alphabet", "Shooting Stars") see her wielding that obviousness well and having fun with drudgery. More historical pieces than I expected, too. Impression: 'dissolving into childhood', life as school forever, if school is undemonstrative alienation and uninteresting torment. The epic autobiographical "Laughter of Stafford Girls' School" is good; the key to it is that after the anti-authoritarian lark, the poem follows home the prim teachers who failed to control the ruckus.
The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind the Myth of the Scandinavian Utopia (2014) by Michael Booth	Fault-finding things received opinion finds no fault with?: good. Booth says the weather, the expense, the pressurised homogeneity of ethnicity and manner leading to marginalisation, the hypocrisy (e.g. Statoil's tar sands) and the diet are the subtractions. But actually he's a massive fan of the countries. The bit on their peerless state education (for decades, Finnish kids have scored the highest on tests with the lowest inequality – but note the kids' own satisfaction with the system is the lowest on record) bases the whole Scandinavian Miracle on their school systems: "*It is no coincidence that the region that is consistently judged to have the highest levels of wellbeing,*

	also has the greatest equality of educational opportunity… To achieve authentic, sustained happiness, above all else you need power over your own life…" How to recreate this? He concludes that it's a difficult-to-copy feedback loop from 1) actually respecting teachers and funding everyone's Master's, so 2) attracting excellent people, who 3) teach excellently and thus 1) earn the respect of their charges and society... Booth can be a bit glib ("*Is it still racist if they're rich*?"), and is obsessed with tax to the point where he has to ask five different professors how on earth people don't simply die from 50% income tax. But he gets into the cracks: "*please don't [form a separate Nordic Union]. Truly the rest of us would not stand a chance.*"
I, Robot (Robot, #0.1) (1950) by Isaac Asimov	So sunny! So clumsy! ("*His dark eyes smoldered.*") So misanthropic! (The humans call the bots "Boy", who call humans "master".) So warmly cool! The story 'Evidence' is **4/5.**
Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America (2009) by Barbara Ehrenreich	Sharp! Blames the tendency in its many forms – the New Age mystic sort, the New Age pseudoscience sort, the self-help, motivational, pink ribbon, megachurch, and respectable positive psychology forms – for suffering and tastelessness (...including the whole 2008 financial crisis...). Sardonic muscle: > *I felt at that moment, and for the first time in this friendly crowd, absolutely alone. If science is something you can accept or reject on the basis of personal taste, then what kind of reality did she and I share?… To base a belief or worldview on science is to is to reach out to the nonbelievers and the uninitiated, to say that they too can come to the same conclusions if they make the same systematic observations and inferences. The alternative is to base one's worldview on revelation or mystical insight, and these things cannot be reliably shared with others. So there's something deeply sociable about science; it rests entirely on observations that can be shared with and repeated by others… It is a glorious universe the positive thinkers have come up with, a vast, shimmering aurora borealis… It's just a god-awful lonely place.* Was disturbed by her personal impressions of the legit psychologists (e.g. Seligman's profiteering and evasiveness, the blitheness of it to WEIRDness and other biases).
The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices (2002) by Xinran	Horrible and yet somehow *ripping* portrait of patriarchal suffering. It's undermined by the editing; the narrative is too neat (at one point she happens to bump into the family of the homeless woman that called her saying how much she missed them). Maybe she just had a very cinematic few years, as one of the most famous women in the country, but the many coincidences and stranger-than-fiction dovetails make it difficult to take it too seriously. I don't actually doubt that the interviews happened, nor that she received the aggregate worry and misery for thousands. It's just that she portrays as a little village where Xinran was wise mother, with all distant rumours bursting into her life.

	Maybe my reaction is a cheap defence against e.g. the thought of an 11 year old repeatedly giving themselves pneumonia to avoid their rapist father and other tales of ordinary madness.
The Blunders of Our Governments (2013) by Anthony King	Insofar as anything is uncontroversial in politics – the most mired of intellectual backwaters – this sticks to uncontroversial blunders. So we only get the internally incoherent or screwy policies like Suez; poll tax; ERM Black Wednesday. (The book's larger point is that there are more and more of these to come, because of the shape of Westminster's gears.) They've a compressed, formal style – hiding their anger. So ministerial ignorance and snobbishness gets called "cultural disconnect". First chapter is a list of state successes (green belts, social housing boom and sale, Clean Air, seat belts, vaccinations, minimum wage, smoking ban, swine flu prep) included as a counter-libertarian tonic before launching into the peaky blunders. (This actually made my chest swell with hope or pride.)
Rationality for Mortals: How People Cope with Uncertainty (2008) by Gerd Gigerenzer	Yet another volley in the 'rationality wars'. GG sets himself against the heuristics and biases folk (though note he is also not of the fatuous constructionist camp which says, roughly: 'it's impossible for *everyone* to be irrational, because reason is *only* social, so we are the measure of it') by minimising the apparent irrationality uncovered by the cognitive sciences in the last little while. Key claims: - 1. Heuristics are not just faster or more tractable, but *better* than Bayesian formalism. - 2. People are not flawed Bayesians but natural frequentists. But though his work on presenting natural frequencies is super-important, and his points about actual decisions always being 'ecological' (rather than a mathematical problem) I suspect he's (still) 1) attacking a straw version of Kahneman-Gilovich-Slovic-Stanovich: no-one is saying that perfect, everyday Bayesian algorithmics is attainable by humans; nor are the misconceptions in table 1.1 (p.9) ever stated as strongly as this. Also 2) GG's evidence on e.g. the framing of the conjunction fallacy doesn't replicate. But anyway this is well-argued, well-written, scientific in the highest sense, and wrong? Read this instead. Not as deep as I expected, but I admire his empirical work.
The Regulars (2009) by Sarah Stolfa	Very overexposed and yet kind portraits from a Philadelphia bar she tended. No action soever, just an ordinary sleazy goofy beauty. All worth it. Foreword from Jonathan Franzen is full-on 'eh'.
Out of Their Minds: The Lives and	An oral history of pioneer computing. These people aren't generally regarded as what they are: simply that sort of *philosopher who actually solves problems / or else rules out their possibility of solution*.

Discoveries of 15 Great Computer Scientists (1995) by Dennis E. Shasha	*The four parts of this book reflect the four basic questions computer scientists have wrestled with in the last fifty years:* * • *Linguists: How should I talk to the machine?* * • *Algorithmists: What will solve a problem fast on my computer?* * • *Architects: Can I build a better computer?* * • *Sculptors of Intelligence: Can I write a program that can find its own solutions?</i>* *</blockquote>* *The men here developed things modern life could not function without: high-level programming, the hard maths of networking, the hard maths of timestamping, shortest paths, probabilistic solutions to deterministic questions. Knuth ist so goddamn wholly loveable.* *</td> </tr>*
The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment (1983) by Barbara Ehrenreich	Unstereotypical gender sociology: traces the male revolt – years before the sexual revolution – against the comparably rigid breadwinner social role inflicted on them. At the time it was too universal to have a name; it was just known vaguely as 'Conformity' or 'Maturity'. On the white-collar worker: *Their labor had a ghostly quantity that made it hard to quantify and even harder to link to the biochemistry of blood and tissues.* Its key virtue is that she sympathises (more with the Vidals and Roths than the Menckens and Kerouacs, obviously - but in general too). The key thesis: *In psychiatric theory and popular culture, the image of the irresponsible male blurred into the shadowy figure of the homosexual... Fear of homosexuality kept men in line as husbands and breadwinners; and, at the same time, the association with failure and immaturity made it almost impossible for homosexual men to assert a positive image...*
Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places (2009) by Paul Collier	Economist slices through much bullshit in the course of identifying empirical handles on democracy in the extremely-poor world. His work is deadly serious, innovative and data-rich; but this *book* is chatty and low on representations of his mostly unprecedented, mostly persuasive data. How much does an A-K cost in different parts of the world? Are peacekeepers worth it? Does democracy promote civil war in the absence of wealth? and such vital things.

Books I Did Not Read This Year () by Kieran Healy	None yet
Hermione and Her Little Group of Serious Thinkers (2006) by Don Marquis	Funny, bitchy slander of the hippies and pseuds of a century ago. Vague, snobbish, hypocritical, self-congratulatory, appropriative: that is, not much has changed in our New Agers. Repetitive – too many puns about howdahs, etc – and more than three-quarters of it assumes the voices of rhythmically insufferable idiots. Anyway its real value, apart from hammering home the difference between Marquis' own true poetic voice and the banal *vers libre* he merely uses here, is as history lesson. Orientalist, relativist bohemian mysticism was far from an innovation of the Sixties, since the cant and conceit of Hermione's guests is a perfect match. Notice that, even while despairing of Hermione, Marquis hangs around her all the same, a hanger-on to hangers-on. Give it an hour.
Irrationality (1992) by Stuart Sutherland	None yet
Consciousness and the Novel (2002) by David Lodge	Friendly and sensible grab-bag. He's certainly much, much more trustworthy than other humanities academics, on either topic. His main question: what implications do the new cognitive and biological sciences have for yr subjective life and art? How damaged would the great novels be by decentreing and anti-human stuff? (Aside from the long and thoughtful opening essay, inspired in large part by Dennett, we are given a jovial bunch to consider: Dickens, Forster, Amis elder and younger, James, Updike, with Roth and Kierkegaard the outliers.) Closing interview, with Craig Raine, is seriously stilted, but it's because he doesn't want to play the invited game, waffling deepity. And so this book: refusing to hide from the reality of the mind, succeeding in holding books to that reality, against great odds.
Sentenced to Life: Poems (2015) by Clive James	Poems written in the (extended) tail-end of his prognosis, mostly to his estranged wife. Plain, Classical, of cycles and renewal, death as travel, and the similarity of ends to beginnings. > *Her sumptuous fragments still went flying on* > *In my last hours, when I, in a warm house,* > *Lay on my couch to watch them coming close,* > *Her proofs that any vision of eternity* > *Is with us in the world, and beautiful* > *Because a mind has found the way things fit* > *Purely by touch. That being said, however,* > *I should record that out of any five* > *Pictures by Kogan, at least six are fakes.* > *</i>*

	Some rage: against Assad and his torturers, against unreflective environmentalism, against obscurantism (Laura Riding or Gabriele d'Annunzio). Black humour relieving the strain of being wise and stoical. > *On a hard day in the Alhambra* > *The Sultan sent an apple* > *To the virgin of his choice.* > *The logo on your Macbook* > *Is an echo of the manner* > *In which Alan Turing killed himself.* > *</i>* *Wanted to love this, but it is just good. It really picks up halfway through. His simple ones about e.g. Oxfam shops / action films are better than the cosmic ones. Best are 'Plot Points', 'Echo Point', 'Transit Visa', 'Event Horizon', 'Nature Programme', 'The Emperor's Last Words'.* *</td> </tr>*
Neptune's Brood (Freyaverse, #2) (2013) by Charles Stross	Extended essay on the macroeconomics of space bitcoin and the Graeberian lightness of debt. Also dead good breakneck fun, as always. Protagonist is a historian of finance and a gentle soul in ravenous space capitalism. Set in the Saturn's Children world, with perhaps too much in common with that book (a powerful, psychotic matriarch antagonist; economic pressure as main plot driver; a serially manipulated and unviolent lead; space travel is shit). But good. Note: Stross devises a species of terrifying scavenger, the 'Bezos worm', which fall upon the wounded in vast packs, and incorporate prey into their intestinal lining, stealing their genetic essence to ease future cannibalism.
Thinking in Systems: A Primer (2008) by Donella H. Meadows	An attempt to make holism rigorous; given holism's deep intuitive appeal for people, the attempt is worthy. But I was hostile to this at first – mostly because her field helped breed a generation of pseuds who use 'reductionism' as an insult (rather than as a straightforward fact, or a useful way of thinking, instances of which denote the highest achievements of the species). Let's get clear: > *"REDUCTIONISM" (to the pseud): The claim that complicated or immeasurable things do not exist.* > *"SYSTEMS THEORY" (to the pseud): The only way of understanding things: as a whole. Everything else omits and so isn't full.* > *REDUCTIONISM (ontology): The claim that complicated things are made of simpler things. Only the simplest of them are physically real; the rest are mental models of their interactions.** > *REDUCTIONISM (methodology): The attempt to isolate causes and treat phenomena in terms of their most basic units (whether quark, string, person, transaction).* > *SYSTEMS THEORY: When things get together, they exhibit features the individual things don't.* So stated, there is no conflict between good old reduction and shiny systems thinking. But Meadows distils the juicy bits into <200pp here, and

	freely admits that systems theory has an intractable indeterminacy built into it, and says this, too: > *Ever since the Industrial Revolution, Western society has benefited from science, logic, and reductionism over intuition and holism. Psychologically and politically we would much rather assume that the cause of a problem is "out there," rather than "in here." It's almost irresistible to blame something or someone else, to shift responsibility away from ourselves, and to look for… the technical fix that will make a problem go away.* > > *Serious problems have been solved by focusing on external agents — preventing smallpox, increasing food production, moving large weights and many people rapidly over long distances. Because they are embedded in larger systems, however, some of our "solutions" have created further problems… Hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, economic instability, unemployment, chronic disease, drug addiction, and war, for example, persist in spite of the analytical ability and technical brilliance that have been directed toward eradicating them. No one deliberately creates those problems, no one wants them to persist, but they persist nonetheless.* > > *That is because they are intrinsically systems problems – undesirable behaviors characteristic of the system structures that produce them. They will yield only as we reclaim our intuition, stop casting blame, see the system as the source of its own problems, and find the courage and wisdom to restructure it.* Can it *resolve* empirical questions the way physics does, though? In saying, probably rightly, that a flow could go either way, depending on the state of the rest of the system and neighbouring systems, you lose or sideline crucial power to find out a single cause's influence, and thereby know more or less exactly what to *do* to the system. In other places, knowledge comes from isolating causes. A reductionist can agree with all the clever diagrams in this, happily concede that they *illustrate* the gnarly problems of collective action and feedback and other ecosystems very clearly - and not give up their peerlessly successful method / ontological stance at all. > ** Also* > *PHYSICALISM: Everything is made of physical things. (However, the physical may be stranger than you think.)*
Beyond Fear: Thinking Sensibly about Security in an Uncertain World (2003) by Bruce	Some hard lessons taken from computer security spun out into a general theory of Defence. His language is a little banal, but there is a fully worked-out and rigorous model of the world underneath, deferring to neither the creeping establishment nor the splurging radicals.

Schneier	
To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism (2013) by Evgeny Morozov	Sharp and original mismash of intellectual history, law, political economy, as well as an ok bit of polemical sociology and theory of Design. His targets are the '*solutionists*', those technocrat techies who derive from the half of the Enlightenment which became positivism. (It is roughly: the will to perfect things and people, plus theorism, plus economism, plus the sheer power and scope of modern software.) Morozov is, bluntly, afraid for us all *because* software is eating the world: > *Imperfection, ambiguity, opacity, disorder and the opportunity to err, to sin: all of these are constitutive of human freedom, and any concentrated attempt to root them out will root out that freedom as well... we risk finding ourselves with a politics devoid of everything that makes politics desirable, with humans who have lost their basic capacity for moral reasoning, with lackluster cultural institutions that don't take risks and, most terrifyingly, with a perfectly controlled social environment that would make dissent not just impossible but possibly even unthinkable...* But I do not want the freedom to believe harmful falsehoods, nor the freedom to hide my errors behind ambiguity; nor the freedom to throw away resources which others need. And I don't want the freedom to waste my life. Technology is the only untried way of responding to our grave Darwinian inheritance of intolerance, selfishness, and irrationality. But Morozov makes his case well about the specific case of technologised politics.
Selected Letters, 1940-1985 (1992) by Philip Larkin	In which his sheer vulgarity and vitality show through. Letters were a massive part of his life, the only time he was (able to be) properly social or affectionate. Only shows his letters, not the interlocutors, which amplifies the grim humour and passive aggression. Couldn't believe how big a DH Lawrence fan he is. > *How little our careers express what lies in us, and yet how much time they take up. It's sad, really.* > *I hate it when you go, for the dreary failure & selfishness on my part it seems to symbolise - this is nothing to do with Maeve, you've always come before her; it's my own unwillingness to give myself to anyone else that's at fault - like promising to stand on one leg for the rest of one's life...* > *My great trouble, as usual, is that I lack desires. Life is to know what you want, & to get it. But I don't feel I desire anything. I am unconvinced of the worth of literature. I don't want money or position. I find it easier to abstain from women that sustain the trouble of them & the creakings of my own monastic personality.* Silliness abounds, particularly in the spells where he and Amis are railing against the world:

	> *Now there can only be don't normally take anyone over 55, like to do a few tests if you don't mind, am returning it because it isn't really up to your own high standard, afraid I must stop coming Mr Larkin hope you find another cleaning lady to* > *AAAARRRRGHGHGHGHGH* And he is totally obsessed with the passage of time throughout his entire life. > *I'm terrified of the thought of time passing (or whatever is meant by that phrase) whether I 'do' anything or not. In a way I may believe, deep down, that doing nothing acts as a brake on 'time's - it doesn't of course. It merely adds the torment of having done nothing, when the time comes when it really doesn't matter if you've done anything or not.* His existential decline is so steep in the 70s that I actually couldn't finish, too sad.
The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales (1985) by Oliver Sacks	Repetitive and overwrought, but also of course astonishing and extravagant and humane. Quirky case-study format and title suggest a voyeuristic pop sci jaunt, but it's deadly serious, theoretically couched, concerned with the poor buggers' well-being. He's against "*mindless neurology and bodiless psychology*", the cognitive elitism and relegation of emotion and spirit of his field. "*Disease is not always just an affliction, but sometimes a proud engine of altered states*" – so we see a man with severe Tourette's is an excellent pro jazz drummer, a woman with debilitating migraines is the polymath Hildegard of Bingen. Sacks has a funny habit of using philosophers' names as misrepresentative pejoratives – a man with radical amnesia is a 'Humean' (: a flow of unrelated sensations), a woman who loses sense of her own body has a 'Wittgensteinian' life (: doubting the hinge proposition 'here is a hand'). Actually, that last one works, never mind.
Humanity's Burden (2008) by James L.A. Webb Jr.	Worthy, thoughtful, and on one of the most important topics in the history of the world. Didn't know that malaria was one of the many curses of the Columbian Exchange: it wasn't even on the continent before us. It was, however, prevalent in the marshes of Essex. Not useful per se, but it gives you a sense of the size and ancestry of the beast we are hunting. (4/5 iff you're already motivated by wanting mosquitoes dead) (Notable for being one of the most hideous book covers I've ever seen.)
Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth,	Nutritious, wonkish, inspiring cynicism. Distillation of decades of research that overturned a few social sciences for the better. Both theoretically significant and intensely practical: If you've never understood pensions, or Medicare, or rational marriage, read this. As is true of all social science books eventually, it cites a bunch of

and Happiness (2008) by Richard H. Thaler	unreplicable BS. Wansink, Gilovich, Baumeister, Dweck. (This just in: Dweck is not unreplicable bs, she is merely enormously overheated and exaggerated bs.)
Intention (1963) by G.E.M. Anscombe	Christ: difficult. Very brief, very ordinary, and yet unsettling. Her language looks very clear – it's jargon-free – but on engaging with it you see it's blurred, terse, arduous. She never introduces the question at hand, nor does she make any introduction at all: on page 1 she sets about the concept with a monologue, an air of Wittgenstein's observational tragedy. Anyway I'm pretty sure it's about the problem of intention ('*what answers 'why?', and why does it?*' Or: '*how can teleology be explained in terms of brute causation (science)?*'). I think her points are that: * • intentions are justified with *reasons* and not evidence; * • intentional explanation is *not* causal explanation; * • intentional action is not amenable to a naturalist reduction (because to explain an action with reasons is precisely to not explain it with laws of nature); that intention is not a mental state but a process involving (?); * • that we have synthetic but non-observational *and* non-inferential knowledge of the world; * • that we have this simply because we 'know about' our bodies and intentions. (That needs more work to be representative: 1) if you don't know that you are doing something, you're not doing it intentionally; 2) if it's only during, or after the fact that you infer you're doing something, you can't be doing it for reasons. So) if you are doing something intentional, you necessarily know you are doing it. She thinks this knowledge isn't based on observing oneself or post-hoc theorising. *Intention* was intended as the first piece of the first 'proper', psychologised account of agency. (She thought one needed an action theory before one could have a real moral theory. But consequentialism sidesteps that need, just as it ducks the free-will responsibility question, and the warm-glow problem, and the meta-ethical status of moral language... But a key need, one consequentialism can never avoid, is people's need to assert their own importance and metaphysical uniqueness.)

	If you take nothing else from it, take the "reasons" vs "causes" distinction seriously. It is a real problem, necessary for serious inquiry into humans.
Wireless (2009) by Charles Stross	None yet
The Book Of Dead Philosophers (2008) by Simon Critchley	List of little biographies, ends and attitudes to endings. Plenty of good anecdotes – Avicenna's raging horn, Nietzsche's supposed 'lethal masturbation', Ayer vs Tyson – but Critchley's argument ("*my constant concern in these seemingly morbid pages is the meaning and possibility of happiness*") is lost in the plurality of attitudes on display. In a weird way he is building a new canon, including Mohists and Daoists, Christian saints, John Toland, women. A good toilet book, or introduction to (continental) philosophy.
Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II (2008) by Douglas A. Blackmon	> *The South deluded itself that the Negro was happy in his place; the North deluded itself with the with the illusion that it had freed the Negro.* – MLK Toe-curling account of the extra century of quasi-slavery in America: hidden in plain sight from 1865-1945, hidden in archives and historians' de-emphasis since then. Blackmon's point is that 'Jim Crow segregation' is a grave euphemism. Sham laws, racist courts, and 'prisoner leasing' led to millions of (especially) black men spending years in forced labour for 'vagrancy'. Blackmon's research is maybe exemplary, but his prose is really poor.
Gods and Soldiers: The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary African Writing (2009) by Rob Spillman	Africans set down in English, whether by birth or choice. 'Contemporary' is pushing it a bit, since these pieces are from the last sixty years, but the scope raises the bar. A chebe laid the ground for Anglophone (and Francophone) African writing when he mocked the incommensurability people, who said we could not speak to each other.
Two Kafka Plays: Kafka's Dick & The Insurance (1987) by Alan Bennett	*KD* is fun and uncliched but quite didactic. Its irreverence is not mostly directed at Kafka, despite the aggressive-seeming title. *IM* relies heavily on lighting, juxtaposition, and Daniel Day-Lewis' tics. Either play is much more likely to endear Kafka to you than his own books, or any of the absurd battery of critical texts on him. This is my favourite thing on Kafka: > *There are many perils in writing about Kafka. His work has been garrisoned by armies of critics with some fifteen thousand books about him at the last count. As there is a Fortress Freud so is there a Fortress Kafka, Kafka his own castle. For admission a certain high seriousness must be deemed essential and I am not sure I have it. One is nervous*

about presuming even to write his name, wanting to beg pardon for doing so, if only because Kafka was so reluctant to write his name himself. Like the Hebrew name of God, it is a name that should not be spoken, particularly by an Englishman. In his dreams Kafka once met an Englishman. He was in a good grey flannel suit, the flannel also covering his face... The Channel is a slipper bath of irony through which we pass these serious Continentals in order not to be infected by their gloom. This propensity I am sure I have not escaped or tried to: but then there is something that is English about Kafka, and it is not only his self-deprecation. A vegetarian and fond of the sun, he seems a familiar crank; if he'd been living in England at the turn of the century, and not in Prague, one can imagine him going out hiking and spending evenings with like-minded friends in Letchworth...

In that department [DIY] certainly Kafka did not excel. He was not someone you would ask to help put up a shelf, for instance, though one component of his charm was an exaggerated appreciation of people who could, and of commonplace accomplishments generally. Far from being clumsy himself (he had something of the dancer about him), he would marvel (or profess to marvel) at the ease with which other people managed to negotiate the world. This kind of professed incompetence ('Silly me!') often leads to offers of help, and carried to extremes it encourages the formation of unofficial protection societies. Thus Kafka was much cosseted by the ladies in his office and in the same way the pupils of another candidate for secular sainthood, the French philosopher Simone Weil, saw to it that their adored teacher did not suffer the consequences of a practical un-wisdom even more hopeless than Kafka's.

One cannot say that Kafka's marvelling at mundane accomplishments was not genuine, was a ploy. The snag is that when the person doing the marvelling goes on to do great things this can leave those with the commonplace accomplishments feeling a little flat. Say such a person goes on to win the Nobel Prize: it is scant consolation to know that one can change a three-pin plug.

Gorky said that in Chekhov's presence everyone felt a desire to be simpler, more truthful and more oneself. Kafka too had this effect. 'On his entrance into a room,' wrote a contemporary, 'it seemed as though some unseen attendant had whispered to the lecturer: "Be careful about everything you say from now on. Franz Kafka has just arrived." ' To have this effect on people is not an unmixed blessing. When we are on our best behaviour we are not always at our best.

This is not to say that Kafka did not make jokes in life and in art. The Trial, for instance, is a funnier book than it has got credit for and Kafka's jokes about himself are the better for the desperate circumstances in which they were often made. He never did win the Nobel Prize but contemplated the possibility once in fun and in pain, and in a fairly restricted category (though one he could have shared with several contemporaries, Proust, Katherine Mansfield and D.H. Lawrence among them). When he was dying of TB of the larynx he was fetching up a good

	deal of phlegm. 'I think,' he said (and the joke is more poignant for being so physically painful to make), 'I think I deserve the Nobel Prize for sputum.' Nothing if not sick, it is a joke that could have been made yesterday. *Dead sixty-odd years, Kafka is still modern and there is much in the present-day world to interest him. These days Kafka would be intrigued by the battery farm and specifically, with an interest both morbid and lively, in the device that de-beaks the still-living chickens; in waste-disposal trucks that chew the rubbish before swallowing it; and those dubious restaurants that install for your dining pleasure a tank of doomed trout. As the maître d' assists the discerning diner in the ceremony of choice, be aware of the waiter who wields the net: both mourner and executioner, he is Kafka. He notes old people in Zimmer frames stood in their portable dock on perambulatory trial for their lives. He is interested in the feelings of the squash ball and the champagne bottle that launches the ship. In a football match his sympathy is not with either of the teams but with the ball or, in a match ending nil-nil, with the hunger of the goalmouth... he would be concerned with the current debate on the disposal of nuclear waste. To be placed in a lead canister which is then encased in concrete and sunk fathoms deep to the floor of the ocean was the degree of circulation he thought appropriate for most of his writing. Or not, of course...* *Had Kafka the father emigrated to America as so many of his contemporaries did, things might have turned out differently for Kafka the son. He was always stage-struck. Happily lugubrious, he might have turned out a stand-up Jewish comic. Kafka at Las Vegas.* *Why didn't Kafka stutter? The bullying father, the nervous son – life in the Kafka household seems a blueprint for a speech impediment. In a sense, of course, he did stutter. Jerky, extruded with great force and the product of tremendous effort, everything Kafka wrote is a kind of stutter. Stutterers devise elaborate routines to avoid or to ambush and take by surprise troublesome consonants, of which K is one of the most difficult. It's a good job Kafka didn't stutter. With two Ks he might have got started on his name and never seen the end of it. As it is, he docks it, curtails it, leaves its end behind much as lizards do when something gets hold of their tail.* *...Hermann Kafka has had such a consistently bad press that it's hard not to feel a sneaking sympathy for him as for all the Parents of Art. They never get it right. They bring up a child badly and he turns out a writer, posterity never forgives them – though without that unfortunate upbringing the writer might never have written a word. They bring up a child well and he never does write a word. Do it right and posterity never hears about the parents: do it wrong and posterity never hears about anything else.* You do not necessarily need to read *Kafka's Dick* after reading that.
Hitch 22: A	Stylish and consequential. He spread word of some of the most terrible

Memoir (2010) by Christopher Hitchens

injustices of his day; was arrested by several authoritarian regimes for it; he wrote three original, important books (on Teresa, Kissinger and Orwell); he had a lot of fun. That's a good life. Why, then, are we so uneasy? Because of his changing his mind so forcefully about revolution? About America? Because his direct, tactless opposition to conservative Islam sounds vaguely similar to that of contemporary racists? Because he found Thatcher sexy?

He raised my estimation of the British 'International Socialists' (i.e. Trots) of the 1960s by a giant interval: though nearly powerless and outnumbered on all sides, they really did resist both the US and Soviet empires *and* the humourlessness and cultishness of their peers, *and* post-modern, Foucaultian passivity, and really did manage to help in undramatic ways (fundraising, letter-writing, war tourism). Bravura.

How did he get from there to chilling with Wolfowitz? Well, on some points Hitchens didn't change at all; the Left did:

> *[In 1968] people began to intone the words "The Personal Is Political". The instant that I first heard this deadly expression, I knew as one does from the utterance of any sinister bullshit that it was very bad news. From now on, it would be enough to a member of a sex or gender, or epidermal subdivision, or erotic "preference", to qualify as a revolutionary. In order to begin a speech or ask a question from the floor, all that would be necessary by way of preface would be the words, "Speaking as a…" Then could follow any self-loving description. I will have to say this for the old "hard" Left: we earned our claim to speak and intervene by right of experience and sacrifice and work. It would never have done for any of us to stand up and say that our sex or sexuality or pigmentation of disability were qualifications in themselves. There are many ways of dating the moment where the Left lost or – I would prefer to say – discarded its moral advantage, but this was the first time I was to see the sell-out so cheaply.*
>
> *the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwah... was, if I can phrase it like this, a matter of everything I hated versus everything I loved. In the hate column: dictatorship, religion, stupidity, demagogy, censorship, bullying, and intimidation. In the love column: literature, irony, humor, the individual, and the defense of free expression... To re-state the premise of the argument again: the theocratic head of a foreign despotism offers money in his own name in order to suborn the murder of a civilian citizen of another country, for the offense of writing a work of fiction. No more root-and-branch challenge to the values of the Enlightenment (on the bicentennial of the fall of the Bastille) or to the First Amendment to the Constitution, could be imagined.*
>
> *I had become accustomed to the pseudo-Left new style, whereby if your opponent thought he had identified your lowest possible motive, he was quite certain that he had isolated the only real one. This vulgar method, which is now the norm and the standard in much non-Left journalism as well, is designed to have the effect of making any noisy moron into a master analyst.*

	> *Today I want to puke when I hear the word 'radical' applied so slothfully and stupidly to Islamist murderers; the most plainly reactionary people in the world.* But never mind that. Lots of gossip, lots of travel writing, lots of quotation from the heart, lots of interesting digressions about the old New Left, nationalisms, Jewishness - have you ever heard of the Haskalah? - and two massive eulogies to his dear friends James Fenton and Martin Amis. Everything he said and did from the age of about 18 proceeded from a fully-developed worldview: sarcastic, elevated, British post-Marxist intellectuality. He becomes the Hitchens you know - the drawling, boozy pal of neocons, more Dawkins than Dawkins is ("*Everything about Christianity is contained in the pathetic image of 'the flock'.*") - late on in life and even later in the book, so even if you refuse to forgive him his shocking, *but internally consistent* transformations, it doesn't warp the weft. Beautiful despite crudeness; very modern in several clashing senses. *In one sentence*: The establishment's awful, until you get well in it.
More What If? Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been (2000) by Robert Cowley	Little counterfactuals involving single decisions in single lives that would (probably) have had vast effects on the present world. Needed this book because, at my school, the big historical cliches - Hastings - were divorced from their effects. Had Socrates died before meeting Plato, two thousand years of persuasive anti-democratic thought might have been prevented; had Zheng He just kept going, a Confucian America without a divine mandate to convert and subjugate, and an overwhelmed, boxed-in and thus united pre-colonial Europe might have resulted. > *It may be coincidental, but it is suggestive nonetheless that the interest among serious historians in counterfactual analysis basically corresponds with the rise of a dramatically new way of looking at the physics of complex systems, known popularly as chaos theory.* They are also just great stories, cf. Adam Gopnik's > *It is the aim of all academic historians in our time to drain as much drama from history as is consistent with the facts; and it is the goal of popular historians to add as much drama to history as is consistent with the facts, or can be made to seem so.* This is the former people doing the latter work. Damn good fun, and maybe valuable in the absence of proper modelling.
The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, the Fall of a Science and What Comes	Not sure how much of this I understood at the time

Next (2006) by Lee Smolin	
The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy (2013) by David Graeber	Bureaucracy is the dominant structure in adult life throughout the world. And everybody hates it, including the people nominally in power. How does *that* work? This discursive and suggestive answer is full of his usual sparkling insights and big dubious historical claims: > *The organization of the Soviet Union was directly modeled on that of the German postal service.* He is sadly not to be trusted on technical economic matters. But he's good on a lot of other things. His point about corporate life being just as bureaucratic as public orgs, but rarely called such in policy debates, is very important, and that left utopias also tend to wrap themselves in inane regulation. Book is in general slightly overegged - but compared to most anarchist social theory he is a model of rigour, epistemic care and systematic focus. (In fact he is very critical of academic theorists and applied leftists both): > *Foucault's ascendancy in turn was precisely within* > *those fields of academic endeavor that both became the haven for former radicals, but* > *that were themselves most completely divorced from any access to political power, or* > *increasingly, even to real social movements—which gave Foucault's emphasis on the* > *"power/knowledge" nexus, the assertion that forms of knowledge are always also forms* > *of social power, indeed, the most important forms of social power, a particular appeal.* > *No doubt any such historical argument is a bit caricaturish and unfair; but I think* > *there is a profound truth here. It is not just that we are drawn to areas of density, where* > *our skills at interpretation are best deployed. We also have an increasing tendency to* > *identify what's interesting and what's important, to assume places of density are also* > *places of power. The power of bureaucracy shows just how much this is often not the* > *case.* Grovels to standpoint theory when he is told that they had similar ideas earlier (which he hadn't read and which they never put so clearly). But pure and clear and witty, heretical to his tribes - and as original as always. > *...if we're going to actually come up with robots that will do our laundry or tidy up the kitchen, we're going to have to make sure that whatever replaces capitalism is based on a far more egalitarian distribution of*

	> *wealth and power — one that no longer contains either the super-rich or desperately poor people willing to do their housework. Only then will technology begin to be marshaled toward human needs. And this is the best reason to break free of the dead hand of the hedge fund managers and the CEOs—to free our fantasies from the screens in which such men have imprisoned them, to let our imaginations once again become a material force in human history.*
In Praise of Love (2009) by Alain Badiou	A leftist defence of marriage and a postmodern attempt at making love a big deal, ontologically speaking; beyond this initial frisson of meta-contrarian goodness, though: meh. Book's a bite-sized transcription of a formal literary talk - a genre which may well have no good instance. Here's the solitary pair of beautiful moments in an otherwise lukewarm bath of the history of philosophy of love and lazy sub-systematic Lacanian guesswork*: > *While desire focuses on the other, always in a somewhat fetishist[ic] manner, on particular objects, like breasts, buttocks and cock, love focuses on the very being of the other, on the other as it has erupted, fully armed with its being, into my life that is consequently disrupted and re-fashioned.* > *Love is an existential project: to construct a decentred world, from a point of view other than that of my mere impulse to survive and re-affirm my own identity... When I lean on the shoulder of the woman I love, and can see, let's say, the peace of a twilight over a mountain landscape, gold-green fields, the shadows of trees, black-nosed sheep motionless behind hedges and sun about to disappear behind craggy peaks, and know — not from the expression on her face, but from within the world as it is — that she is seeing the same world, and that this convergence is part of the world; that love constitutes precisely, at that very moment, the paradox of an identical difference, then love exists, and promises to continue existing. The fact is she and I are now incorporated into this unique subject, the subject of love that views the panorama of the world through the prism of our difference, so this world can be conceived, be born, and not simply represent what fills my own individual gaze. Love is always the possibility of being present at the birth of the world.* Clearer prose than you'd expect, though, isn't it? > ** e.g. laziness: his claim about there being four "conditions" of philosophy, none of which are in fact necessary conditions, and one of which is good old dyadic love:* >> *Anyone who doesn't take love as their starting-point will never discover what philosophy is about.* > *(Never mind, Cavendish; oh well Newton, sorry Schopenhauer; you tried real hard.)*
The Days of Surprise	Disconcerting autobiographical fun; sometimes jolly to the point of childishness - gynaecologists! priests!. And so full up with the Church,

(2015) by Paul Durcan	though teasing its pretensions and persisting brutalities. Here is the grand title poem, both *Under Milk Wood* for Ringsend his town and an occasional for Francis' coronation (who is, much like himself, "*A figure of childlike passivity / As well as childlike authority*"). A lovely man, clearly. When angry, he mocks his own anger. He does not denounce; instead he scolds. Also full of lovely banal lists: > *I sat down under a recycling bin and wept – wept for joy and ecstasy and grief and anguish and the whole jing bang lot and Moses and Isabel Gilsenan and Johannes Scotus Eriugena and Georgie Hyde-Lees and Eimear McBride and Robert Heffernan and Katie Taylor and Christine Dwyer Hickey and Mo Farah and Roisin O'Brien and Joe Canning and Máire Logue and Rory and Columbanus and Enda and Fionnuala and Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Michael D. Higgins and – and – and – and – and – and – and – and – SABINA!* Best are "The Actors' Chapel"; and the title one.
The Germany and the Agricola of Tacitus (98) by Tacitus	***De Origine et situ Germanorum*** (98) by Publius Tacitus, translated by Lamberto Bozzi (2012). Versified well, which makes even the boring bits about ploughs a pleasure. I read this aloud, and me and the audience had a long inconclusive discussion about how many of the claims are likely to be complete bullshit. Most interesting were: the prevalence of Greek myths among the Goths, and Tacitus' very early cross-cultural approval of *some* things. > *For when on chastity a woman cheats* > *She finds no mercy among the tribesmen* > *And cannot come by a husband again* > *No matter how young and rich and fair* > *Nobody laughs at these vices there* > *Or calls corruption a sign of the times.* > > *Better still are the nations in those climes* > *Where virgins once only marry,* > *Willing for the right mate to tarry;* > *They take one husband, one body, one life -* > *No other thought or longing needs a wife* > *Who loves more than her man the married state...* Nowhere near as racist as expected!
The Whole Woman (1999) by Germaine Greer	None yet
Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human	Recognisably a popularisation, but it's in an under-reported field (speculative human geography) so it is still high in nourishing insight. Exciting, thoughtful, deserving. > *Q: Why is it that you white people developed much cargo and brought it*

Societies (1997) by Jared Diamond	> *to New Guinea, but* > *we black people had little cargo of our own?* > *A: History followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among people's environments, not because of biological differences among people themselves.* The title's misleading: all three of those pro-colonialist environmental factors are merely proximate effects of what he argues is the ultimate cause of world inequality: domesticable crops and livestock *on a continent which happens to be oriented in a way that makes its climate very similar across wide latitudes*. His theory explicitly disclaims racist explanations of world history - e.g. his chapter on the conquistadors is the most harrowing account I've ever read - and he says things like > *When I arrived in New Guinea for the first time, it became clear to me that New Guineans are curious, questioning, talkative people with complex languages and social relationships, on the average at least as intelligent as Europeans and Americans. In New Guinea, I'm the dope who can't do elementary things like follow an unmarked trail or light a fire in the rain.* Yet the anthropologists' party line on him is just that: that he's a racist and, almost worse in that circle, a determinist, a dirty reductionist. I feel perfectly fair in explaining their rancour by his skilful scientific intrusion on their ill-tended turf. (Diamond was originally an ornithologist and geneticist.) Engaging and original as it is, his thesis faces a hard explanatory limit: agriculture has not been the limiting factor on economies for more than 200 years, and yet the Great Divergence dates from then and not earlier. Diamond could appeal to simple path-dependency: "we win now because we won then" or argue that the technological and military edge yielded land, and that land yielded the economic miracle. But the evidence (also known as Gregory Clark) certainly does not warrant crop or zoological supremacism. Anyway I know of no better introduction to cultural evolution theory, human population genetics, the Clovis / pre-Clovis controversy, philology, New Guinean traditionalism, the origins and downsides of civilization, animal husbandry, and the ancient history of Africa. The rub is that you can't stop with him, because he doesn't go for all the angles. *In one sentence*: See Q&A above. **4/5** (minus a half for awful references - vague, without page numbers in the text or in the source, nor footnotes).</li>
The Theory That Would Not Die: How Bayes' Rule Cracked the Enigma Code, Hunted Down	(c) *Red Rationality* (1987) by Wang Guangyi A slightly strained oral history of the least romanticised scientists: Bayesian statisticians. She makes up for the long-missing romanticism single-handed! The two-hundred year eclipse of the Bayesian method was much longer than that suffered by even the irrationally-maligned continental drift theory (50 years). And this neglect and opprobrium was suffered by a paradigm now accepted everywhere as powerful and useful in literally all

Russian Submarines, and Emerged Triumphant from Two Centuries of Controversy (2011) by Sharon Bertsch McGrayne	kinds of research. She wins us over, particularly with her chapter on the secretive, truculent, omnicompetent genius John Tukey, who used Bayesian methods for elections 40 years before *Fivethirtyeight*, with comparable success. But her prose is borderline, with lots of clear but dim-bulb sentences. She has one infuriating mannerism: she constantly refers to Bayes' rule, Bayesian logical foundations after Bayes, Bayesian inference, *and* personalist Bayesian epistemology by the single terrible metonym "Bayes": > *At its heart, Bayes runs counter to the deeply held conviction that science requires total objectivity and precision. Bayes is a measure of belief.* > *...even many nonstatisticians regarded Swinburne's lack of care and measurement as a black mark against Bayes itself.* > *...Bayes, on the other hand, seemed to produce results that corresponded more closely to sociologists' intuitions.* > *...Wagner took along the youngest and greenest of his three-man staff, Henry Richardson, who had earned a PhD in probability theory all of seven months earlier. He would be Bayes' point man at Palomares.* I suppose she did this to elide away jargon, but it both equivocates between very different entities, hides the complexity of the 'Bayesian' marquee, invites the idea that the frequentists were attacking a logically sound theorem, and produces a whole list of bizarre images, where we see the reclusive Reverend doing all these things: cracking Enigma and Tunny, finding H-Bombs lost at sea, calculating appropriate worker's comp amounts in the absence of reliable data, attributing *The Federalist Papers* to Hamilton, and blocking 99.9% of the spam email from reaching you (yes, you). It is also even *more* unfair to Laplace than usual. (It was he who developed Bayesianism into the powerful applied framework it is, into more than a single gambler's theorem. Ok, so "Laplace-Coxism" is admittedly even less admissible as a term to which the wise and honest may repair.) Grammatical twitching aside this was a fun introduction to an important thing. She focusses on the soft, social side (and on applications vaguely summarised). There was a huge amount of factional bitching between these serious and cloistered men: > *Attending his first Bayesian conference in 1976, Jim Berger was shocked to see half the room yelling at the other half. Everyone seemed to be good friends, but their priors were split between the personally subjective, like Savage's, and the objective, like Jeffrey's - with no definitive experiment to decide the issue.* > *In a frustrated circle of blame, Persi Diaconis was shocked and angry when John Pratt used frequentist methods to analyze his wife's movie theater attendance data, because it was too much for the era's computers to handle. But one of the low moments of Diaconis' life occurred in a Berkeley coffee shop, where he was correcting proofs of an*

> *article of his and where Lindley blamed him for using frequency methods. "And you're our leading Bayesian", Lindley complained. Lindley, in turn, upset Mosteller by passing up a chance to conduct a big project using Bayes instead of frequency...*
> *Asked how to encourage Bayesian theory, Lindley answered tartly, "Attend funerals".*

This human focus means she gives no treatment of Cox's theorem, certainly the most remarkable result in formal epistemology (and probability theory?), and one of the main things which rationally warrants the partisanship and excitement she displays for Bayesian thought throughout. ("Justified fundamentalism", as one great commentator puts it!) It proves that any attempt to use numbers to model belief must be Bayesian or logically equivalent to it. With other results, it raises Bayesianism to the only viable quantitative theory of rationality and of right learning, a behemoth of which Aristotelian logic is a mere special case. No doubt I'm unusual in finding this the most exciting bit.

She's to be applauded for digging out novel examples of Bayesian analysis which were classified or which avoided using the word: early actuarial work, Tukey's US election model, the pre-Three-Mile-Island federal report of reactor safety, and the entire field of operational research. But she is so concerned with emphasising the (genuine) long oppression of the paradigm that she under-emphasises the good reasons to resist Bayesian methods before 1980: they were simply computationally intractable before MCMC. (Which makes the sheer effort put in to shortcuts and approximation methods by ingenious people quite tragic; they just aren't needed anymore, thirty years later.) To her credit, she does mention the parallel dogmatism of the 60s Bayesians and the presumptive overenthusiasm of some people in the last 10 years.

(The great contemporary frequentist, Deborah Mayo, is able to subtitle her blog "Frequentists in Exile" without being absurd - even though Stats 101 and "Methods for [Social Science]" courses are still everywhere dominated by canned Fisherian tests and frames. She means exile from the philosophy of statistics and probability.)

Insofar as you want to understand the large trends of the present and coming age, you need to know its economics; insofar as you must understand the new economics, you must understand AI; insofar as you must understand AI, you must understand machine learning and decision theory; insofar as you must understand machine learning, you must understand both frequentism and Bayesianism. Insofar as you do not yet have the mathematics to understand Bayesianism, nor the excitement of the promise of a final, real synthesis of objective with subjective, you must read this gentle prose work. Once you are excited by its vague promises, you can find progressively more rigorous people and will have actually have reason to stomach the formalism.

3/5, 4*/5 for those just beginning the march.

(c) African Sonata (c.2000) by Vladimir Kush

A Structured Approach	The third PhD I have ever read, the first to which I've contributed, and certainly the best-written. ”The "Adam Smith Problem" is just that Smith's two big books seem to dramatically contradict each other: *WoN* is

to the Adam Smith Problem () by Hodder, Christopher	methodologically and normatively individualist and abstracts out the economy from the rest of human life, but *ToMS* is a holistic and altruistic picture, one which subsumes economic behaviour as a special case of all virtuous or vicious actions. Hodder's job, which, remarkably, went undone over 200 years of scholarly debate, is to consider the possible explanations (e.g. "Smith divides society into disjoint private and public spheres"; "one of the two books is ironic"; "he changed his mind"; "he was a idjit") through close exegesis and logical reconstruction, and somehow weigh them. The conclusion is satisfying enough: *What is the Adam Smith Problem?: A debate on a problem; the debate was the problem*. Basically, a series of bad readers (from the German Historicists to Paul Samuelson) misread certain key terms and passages, imputed an anachronistic atheism and efficient-causation empiricism to him, and then propagated a straw-man ("a shadow history") throughout the secondary literature and the tertiary sewer we call the media. (They also missed the timing and the explicit initial audience of *WoN*: the book is avowedly a polemic to affect British trade policy, and a highly successful one at that.) Hodder writes with absolutely minimal jargon; this is as easily grasped as C18th political economy can be. One of my notes was that an institutionalised marker might penalise it for omitting jargon to the degree it does; after all, what's the point if just anyone can waltz in to constructive thought without using the gaudy tools made in desperation by knowledge pieceworkers?: > *Sympathy plays a far more foundational role in WN than has previously been noted by any scholar which I have encountered. If we return to the butcher, brewer and baker, example, where we address ourselves not to their benevolence but to their self-interest, all commentators seem to have overlooked the question of how we are to go about addressing ourselves to another's self-interest. The obvious and simple answer to this is Sympathy. We put ourselves in their place, we realise that they expect to be paid for their labour as we would expect to be paid for our own, and as a result we understand that the appropriate behaviour expected of us is to pay for their service. In the primitive society, where the hunter begins to trade his bows for food and starts down the long road towards commercial society, it must be Sympathy which alerts his fellow hunters that he wants something in return for the bows he produces. “Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want” requires that I can escape my own self-interest and understand what you want, and have at least a basic level of Sympathy for you otherwise I would not know what to offer you.* > > *Sympathy must therefore apply to trade at a very foundational level, and that intimate Sympathy which fosters benevolence can take hold even in business relationships. All it requires is repeated dealings with the same person, and a character which is “well-disposed”. It is not said to be central to society - but this is entirely consistent with TMS, where Smith describes benevolence as “the ornament that embellishes” society, that which makes it happier rather than merely efficient.* I do wonder at the fact that someone with no historiographical background and only half an economics degree could make substantive corrections and suggestions at the very frontier of the field's knowledge of *a canonical*

	figure. In one way this is nice: reason is a universal solvent, and specific facts make up relatively little of total intellectual work! But in another way sad: the pompousness and boundary-work of the non-formal academic fields is again shown to be needless, and narrowing.
Blitzed: Drugs in Nazi Germany (2015) by Norman Ohler	Such an insultingly dumb plot - "the Nazis act as they do because they are all on crystal meth" - except it's nonfiction and quite plausible. The 70-hour assaults of Blitzkrieg in particular could not have happened without heavy stimulants. And Hitler becomes much more understandable when you learn of his ten year binge on injected pharmaceuticals. Juicy bits: > *[Around 1923] forty per cent of Berlin doctors were said to be addicted to morphine* > *Telling propaganda: '[Hitler] mortifies his body in a way that would shock people like us! He doesn't drink, he practically only eats vegetables, and he doesn't touch women.' Hitler allegedly didn't even allow himself coffee and legend had it that after the First World War he threw his last pack of cigarettes into the Danube near Linz; from then onwards, supposedly, no poisons would enter his body.* > *Telling propaganda: 'For decades our people have been told by Marxists and Jews: "Your body belongs to you." That was taken to mean that at social occasions between men, or between men and women, any quantities of alcohol could be enjoyed, even at the cost of the body's health. Irreconcilable with this Jewish Marxist view is the Teutonic German idea that we are the bearers of the eternal legacy of our ancestors, and that accordingly our body belongs to the clan and the people.'* > *Chocolates spiked with methamphetamine were even put on the market. A good 14 milligrams of methamphetamine was included in each individual choc – almost five times the amount in a [prescription] pill.* Ohler argues that drugs have been overlooked as the (unsustainable) engine of the Nazi economic recovery, and of the alien intensity of the ideology, because people took Goebbels at his word about the Nazi drive for natural organic wellness and purity and so ignored this 'medicine' that millions of Germans were supplied by the state and IG. I don't know whether Ohler is making a revisionist stretch or not, but certainly Pervitin had a role.
The Globe (The Science of Discworld, #2) (2002) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Diggers (Bromeliad Trilogy,	None yet

#2) (1990) by Terry Pratchett	
Unseen Academicals (Discworld, #37; Rincewind #8) (2009) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1966) by Tom Stoppard	None yet
Eric (Discworld, #9; Rincewind #4) (1990) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present (1990) by David Foster Wallace	The first book on hip-hop? Certainly the first High Academic one. Though, not really a book, as they frequently acknowledge: it's a "sampler". And not expert, as they constantly acknowledge: more than half of it is them pseudo-nervously hedging about being two elite white guys peering into what was then a fairly closed circle. A solid effort too - it knows and guesses and connects more than most critics today, despite the scene being far more ethnically closed, and far less obviously of artistic wealth; despite their often comically mishearing the lyrics; and despite not being able to find anything out about the people behind the music, because no-one returned their calls (until they pretended to be journalists). Anyway this has 80pp of recognisably enervated DFW popping off the top of this allocortex, decent fuel for the fire of an admirer, or at any rate the only coal on offer (he was embarrassed by this book, but it is too stylish and enthusiastic to be embarrassing to us): > *Ironies abound, of course, as ironies must when cash and art do lunch. Tearing down the prop-thin symbolic walls, Run-DMC aim to celebrate desegregation, but miss the fact that Aerosmith, those whitest of white rockers, are merely big-budget Led Zeppelin ripoffs, and that Led Zep came straight outta the jet-black Rhythm & Blues of Chicago's Chess Records. Dancing with Steve Tyler, Run-DMC forgets that Muddy Waters' sideman Willie Dixon had to sue Led Zeppelin to get proper credit for their use of his blues. "Walk This Way" is an unwanted reunion of 80s black street music with part of its rich heritage, as that heritage has been mined and mongrelized by Show Biz. If this is desegregation, then shopping malls hold treasure...* > *It's a new and carnivorous kind of mimesis that makes weary old 'self-*

	> *reference' actually kind of interesting, because it enlarges Self from the standard rock-subjective–a bundle of hormone-drenched emotions attached to a larynx and pelvis–to a 'big ole head,' a kind of visual street-corner, a monadic Everybrother, an angry, jaded eye on a centerless pop-culture country full of marginalized subnations that are themselves postmodern, looped, self-referential, self-obsessed, voyeuristic, passive, slack-jawed, debased, and sources of such prodigious signal-and-data bombardment that they seem to move faster than the angry eye itself can see…* I had been putting off reading this because of the title: I didn't know about Schooly D's track, so I read the verb in a gross academic voice ("in which we give rappers true signification") rather than the adjectival sense they actually meant ("rappers who signify"). Costello's bits are ok, DJ "MC" to MC "DFW". Wallace is harder than Costello - noting that MCs really are just yuppies, that Chuck D's claims to not be glorifying violence are absurd, that part of the fascination of hard rap is the snuff-spiral of trying to be nastier and nastier than previous hard rappers, which is just the commercial impulse of Alice Cooper minus musicianship. But this is also a winning early bet: that rap is poetry, that it was and would be "the decade's most important and influential pop movement": > *Our opinion, then, from a distance: not only is serious rap poetry, but, in terms of the size of its audience, its potency in the Great U.S. Market, its power to spur and to authorize the artistic endeavor of a discouraged and malschooled young urban culture we've been encouraged sadly to write off, it's quite possibly the most important stuff happening in American poetry today. 'Real' (viz. academic) U.S. poetry, a world no less insular than rap, no less strange or stringent about vocal, manner, and the contexts it works off, has today become so inbred (against its professed wishes) inaccessible that it just doesn't get to share its creative products with more than a couple thousand fanatical, sandal-shod readers..* Your enjoyment will depend on you giving a crap about the sheer horror of rap's initial context and being able to tolerate intentionally torturous pomo prose and juxtapositions (e.g. *I Dream of Jeannie* vs race riots). I loved it and twice missed my stop on the tube reading it. [Data #1, Theory #1, Values #1, Thinking #2]</li>
Kissinger (1992) by Walter Isaacson	Balanced coverage of the great monster, including his meteoric rise from penniless immigrant German Jew to a permanent spot in the highest caste of global influence; his academic conceit (the longest-ever thesis at Harvard), and his ceaseless inveigling and brown-nosing. (In case you don't know, Kissinger is probably the greatest war criminal in American history.) Res ipsa loquitur: > *Whenever peace — conceived as the avoidance of war — has been the primary objective of a power or a group of powers, the international system has been at the mercy of the most ruthless member of the international community. [A more proper goal is] stability based on an equilibrium of forces.*

	> *If I had to choose between justice and disorder, on the one hand, and injustice and order, on the other, I would always choose the latter.* There's not a lot of editorial from Isaacson. He respects Kissinger's single-mindedness and intellectual clout, while giving us plenty of his egotism and blandly evil wonkishness: > *Here was an example of what would become a pattern in Kissinger's diplomacy: his attempt to mediate a dispute by finding a semantic formulation to finesse differences. In this case it was devising a phrase that linked the bombing halt to the negotiations, without sounding like a condition. Later, at the end of the war, he would search for ambiguous phrases about the demilitarized zone and South Vietnamese sovereignty that could be read differently in Hanoi and Saigon. Sometimes these word games paid off. But usually they opened Kissinger up to accusations that he had left important disagreements unresolved by talking out of both sides of his mouth.* > *[during the 1970 election, R v N] At the convention, the Rockefeller forces, with little to lose, sent Kissinger to talk to the Iowa delegation. "It was so novel to me," he told a reporter at the time. "I'd never met working politicians before. I didn't attempt to talk their language. I just talked what I knew." The Iowa delegation voted overwhelmingly for Nixon.* Isaacson soft-pedals the mass chaos and death Kissinger gave rise to. And much more has come to light about Kissinger's personal responsibility for it, since Isaacson published this. Dr Strangelove wasn't based on Kissinger, but I find it impossible not to think of Peter Sellars (or Woody Allen) when reading about the tragic success of this erotomaniacal egomaniac. Hitchens' *Trial of Henry Kissinger* is much more salient.
Universal Harvester (2017) by John Darnielle	A horror story without antagonist. Honouring and questioning rural homeliness and human twistedness. Haunting, in a toothache-on-the-brain style, and with his characteristic eye for detail, but not operating at the heights of ravaged beauty we know he can reach. > *In the movies, people almost never talked about the towns they spent their lives in; they ran around having adventures and never stopped to get their bearings. It was weird, when you thought about it. They only remembered where they were from if they wanted to complain about how awful it was there, or, later, to remember it as a place of infinite promise, a place whose light had been hidden from them until it became unrecoverable, at which point its gleam would become impossible to resist.* There are perhaps too many passages that drift off from a concrete event into abstraction, and which then finish on a short, suggestive raised-eyebrow sort of sentence. Like: >

	> *He had lost a lot of blood. His eyes were half-open, and he seemed to recognize that somebody he knew was with him, but he said nothing. He drew great, deep breaths at intervals. The sky above was showing early afternoon flashes of orange, its constant variations flooding the horizon in changing color bars like on the title screen from that weird Charles Bronson movie, the one where he steals a sword from Toshiro Mifune on a train. Red Sun."* Nerd haiku. *Master of Reality* is still his best fiction; his lyrics 1991 - 2009 are still his best words.
The Romanovs: 1613-1918 (2016) by Simon Sebag Montefiore	Long, shallow parade of the tsars from 1600 onwards. Focusses on the wars, the mistresses and the lulz, not on welfare or data. Still good if you're completely ignorant, like me. One insight: when you read "Peter the Great", or "Catherine the Great" (or indeed Frederick), remember that this epithet only holds if you append "...For an Warmongering Autocrat" in your head. I wanted to like Catherine II, but on gaining power she of course betrays the ideals of her powerless writing. In lieu of analysis, here's Peter the Great: > *She was notoriously wanton and untameable. Even after he had married her off to Chernyshev, she was said to have given the tsar VD.* > *...Peter, suffering from a bladder infection possibly caused by VD, retreated to Astrakhan, but his troops took the key port of Baku.* > *...back in Petersburg Maria resumed her place as Peter's favourite. Rumours spread that she had given him VD.*
Prescriptions for the Mind: A Critical View of Contemporary Psychiatry (2008) by Joel Paris	Not what you'd expect ("*DSM hiss!! Pharma woo!!*"). An 'evidence-based psychiatrist' (a good guy), his main target is people who overinterpret current neuroscience and just churn out pills. He concedes that the old analysts were 'brainless' but calls the worst of the new brain-scan boom 'mindless'. The evidence for talk therapy – things like CBT (for anxiety and personality disorders) – is much better than I'd thought, and Paris reckons this is now overlooked in favour of cheaper and truthier biological determinism. A good, hard thing to say: "*What causes mental illness? By and large, advances in neuroscience notwithstanding, we still don't know.*"
The Overflowing Brain: Information Overload and the Limits of Working Memory	Nice gentle probe of our faddish fear that tech is pumping too much info through us, and thereby vitiates our branes and produces ADHD. Working memory, if you haven't heard, is trumpeted as the constitutive component of intelligence. Klingberg's optimistic about it all, pointing to the Flynn effect as an epidemiological sign that we are (cognitively) ok with being overloaded. His own research is much more promising about training working memory and gF than others I'd read...

(2007) by Torkel Klingberg	
Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim (2004) by Ziauddin Sardar	Wanted a life of Muhammad to match the life of Luther, but the available biographies were credulous, downplaying his Machiavellian – or rather, since he was successful, his 'Napoleonic' – accomplishments and mercantile background. So, the 'sceptical Muslim' it is: Sardar has been everywhere, involved in every other big event in the Muslim world for 40 years. He gets beaten up by Iranian revolutionaries; sees Bin Laden in Peshawar in '85; is offered £5m by the Saudis to shut up; is at Anwar's side in Malaysia; his nephew worked in the WTC in late 2001. He shows the full crushing procession of forces in Muslims' lives – Western bootprints old and new, Israel locking up 1.6 million and scattering a million others to the wind, the former Ba'athists, the Brotherhood, the 'simpleton' Tablighi Jamaat, Saudi power soft and hard, and a dozen home-grown oppressions and gross inequalities. Sardar in the middle: willing the backward chaos to end, but recoiling from the resulting medieval theocracies. "*But maybe paradise does not want to be found*". Bit aimless but I suppose instructive.
Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies -- and What It Means to Be Human (2005) by Joel Garreau	Pop account of near-future technological accelerations and explosions. (AKA transhumanism v bioconservatism.) We face four types of dislocating technologies: Genetics, Robotics, Infotech and Nanotech. Garreau gives loads of stage time to two dogmatic cranks from each side: Kurzweil (booster technocrat), and Fukuyama (neocon fearmonger) as well as an unclassifiable polymath, Jaron Lanier. But this is sadly just the way science journalism is done, and Garreau is later courageous in half-endorsing the transcendent transhuman rationale of beautiful bioprogressive Bostrom. Unfortunately his prose is Gladwellian, full of glib pop references and leaden line-break punch-lines. Still a balanced intro to the scenarios and figureheads. You really should read something on the ethics of these technologies: I recommend Pearce, Bostrom, or Sandberg.
Seeing Things: Poems (1991) by Seamus Heaney	Don't like nature poets. The post-Thoreau tend to be casually nihilistic about science and humanity, however much beauty and innocence they display. But Heaney's a naturalist, not a nature poet. He talks about the same few things – stone, dirt, the nature of light for a child, the act of building, wind – hundreds of times and still casts newness. It hurts to read for some reason – he's never miserable, and rarely handles even abstract tragedy explicitly, but I get tight behind my eyes.
The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty (2009) by Peter	None yet

Singer	
Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past (2018) by David Reich	Incredibly detailed and fresh, but also repetitive and indiscriminate. Had to think quite hard looking at some of the many diagrams showing e.g. hundreds of thousands of years of almost-noise recombination. Archeology has been transformed in the last decade, by the ancient DNA hunt. Reich allows us something precious, to see large and profound errors corrected, nearly as they are first discovered. But it just isn't that readable and the forest of details obscures even the giant new facts (Denisovan cross-breeding with us, Neanderthalian cross-breeding with us, very different pictures of paths of migration...)
Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly (2000) by Anthony Bourdain	Lots to dislike but I like it. The prose is just a voiceover: short sentences, newline punchlines, chatty laddish bluster. You wouldn't want to spend time with young Bourdain; too edgy, too miserable, too addled. At no point does he disown his wild years, but this is written as a different, charming, distant man. I suppose this made him a star because honesty and filth are rare in high cuisine, or in the received notion of high cuisine. He refers to himself as a "cook" throughout (or even "cookie"), endearingly. Anyone else playing at being a junkie cuisinier, sexual tyrannosaurus, smash-hit author, primetime travel host, and, most recently, jiujitsu japer would surely be risible. But his enthusiasm is convincing. It may well be that Bourdain was a 6/10 chef; I can tell you he's a 6/10 writer, at least as prose goes. But domains multiply when they intersect.
And the Weak Suffer What They Must? Europe's Crisis and America's Economic Future (2016) by Yanis Varoufakis	Much better than I thought it'd be! Literary, clear, almost bipartisan. As a former socialist finance minister, he has a healthy blend of actual economic knowledge and smouldering will to improve an irrational status quo. (He uses "irrational" *far* more than the usual pejoratives: "greedy" or "exploitative" or "neoliberal".) He makes lots of literary allusions and shares personal tales of fascist Greece. These make the deadly dull business of postwar European monetary politics readable. He talks about the duty of surplus nations to stabilize the world system, which is true and good but unworkable. He has a remarkable admiration for American institutions and figures - not just the New Dealers, but also, in a way, for Volcker and Geithner - while also pointing out astutely. Full marks for tone, basically. A good writer, with only a couple of wrongfooted sentences. Potted history of post-war international macroeconomics. His policies do not much resemble socialism: all the same neoliberal institutions exist in Varoufakisland. He'd just use them to help the vulnerable. America (Harry White, Volcker) had a chance to stabilise the world, but instead grabbed national interest at the expense of others. Then - according to Varoufakis - they grabbed hegemony at the expense of their own, which is even more depressing. His current-account focussed theory is a bit narrow. There is already a eurozone surplus recycling mechanism, for instance. His 2015 Greek finance policies continue to look better than the current blind bailout plus permadeflation solution: Greece should have defaulted. His (and Holland's)

	recommendations are very sensible. Despite being short, it is really repetitive; I skimmed chapters 4-6 heavily. It is also disappointingly short on private gossip about the dark back-corridors of Brussels; he saved that for the next book.

2/5: Only for enthusiasts. 25th percentile.

The Lost Worlds of 2001 (1971) by Arthur C. Clarke	Read while passing time in someone else's house. Lots of detail about Kubrick's brutal whims and maniacally hands-on approach to everything. (In preproduction he threw the bones into the air and filmed the arc himself, apparently, nearly giving himself a head injury.) They both come across as two quite silly men with odd amounts of access to astronauts and presidents and captains of industry. I was expecting to see something about Clarke's dismay (at working for several years at something essentially discarded), but he totally kept it out of this. Most of this is deleted scenes from the novel. They're very thin and discardable.
Elysium Fire (Prefect Dreyfus Emergency, #2) (2018) by Alastair Reynolds	Both rushed and too long. Characters do lots of excessively dumb stuff, including the most sober and clever characters, Dreyfus and Aumonier, who both act like Maverick badasses here. The contrivance at the beginning (to artificially promote Ng and concoct some drama with Sparver) is too transparent. Way too many board meetings with people doing an increment of exposition and muttering darkly. There is another scary exponential problem, but unlike in the last book, halfway through it gets capped at 2000 potential deaths. Intentionally small stakes can be good (see *Cibola Burn* from the Expanse series), but here it just sends up the emoting and silliness from previously professional agents. Still readable, but it undermines the characters that made the first pop.
Visions Of Joanna Newsom (2010) by Brad Buchanan	An incredible artist who deserves a book of criticism, but not this one.
At the Strangers' Gate: Arrivals in New York (2017) by Adam Gopnik	Gopnik is one of the best writers alive, in the limited sense that his prose is unerring and musical, that he can make any subject interesting for twenty minutes. But this book, about being young, poor, and dizzily romantic in 80s New York, is too thin, 90% style. I don't resent reading about him and his wife hanging around department stores, nor even the long passage praising his wife, but I also don't take away anything beyond the mouthfeel of his words. In some sense their impractical romanticism - spending their last savings on one fancy suit, appreciating graffiti, lingering around Bloomingdale's not buying anything - was straightforwardly aspirational and material. Not bohemian, or, temporarily, on the way up, merely waiting to become an aesthete and, glory of glories, a tastemaker. This is the great tension of

arty people, particularly if (as the Gopniks do not) you have pretensions to moral superiority: really you are rejecting one consumerism for another. Book people get away with this most, because the sensuality and pleasure of great writing is hidden between the covers. One solution is to get into high-status trash (you can't be accused of narrow sensualism for liking Tracey Emin or Billy Childish); far more common is to contort yourself so that liking and buying art *is* a moral action, if not a cleaner and more beautifully non-instrumental kind of moral action than merely doing something for someone.

> *It's human nature to turn a mouth taste into a moral taste—to make a question of how something feels in your mouth into a question of what it says about your world. That's the basis of every dietary law. When we imagine God, we don't imagine him indifferent to appetite. No, we imagine him enraged and enraptured by what we're eating—he tastes bacon and declares it bad and tastes matzo and can hear a whole heroic history when he breaks it. Every mouth taste instantly becomes a moral taste. And so when we need to fight—and no marriage can survive without some useful friction—we fight about food...*
>
> *The restaurants of New York enraptured me—we didn't go to any, but I loved the idea of them. I would lie in bed, after we unrolled and enwrapped the "triple fold" sofa every night, and read what was then the premier guide to New York dining out, Seymour Britchky's The Restaurants of New York... It's a vanished tone now, in the age of mass amateur reviews on Open Spoon or Table Talk or whatever the current forum is called. ("I took my honey here for birthday dinner, and—wow!—what a blowout. Five stars, for sure.")*
>
> *At the time, though, his criticism... seemed thrilling in the power of its sneering, the certitude of its exclusions. The power critic of this kind depends on the lightning turns of his contempt and his favour: no one should ever be sure where he would land, or on whom.*

Note the smooth way in which a cool irreverent idea - "*It's human nature to turn a mouth taste into a moral taste*" - becomes a certain precept "*Every mouth taste instantly becomes a moral taste*" just by lightness and repetition. This is the downside of being this good at prose: you can make things sound simpler than they are.

The humour is ever-present but vanishingly slight. When he loses his only pair of suit trousers, he devotes five pages to a comic lament for them. But it's the echo of comedy.

> *I've never recovered them. Because the truth is that what we learn in New York is that a piece of plywood will never protect you from the wild, and that and that suit trousers, once lost, are lost forever. The city makes you the opposite of the emperor with the new clothes. He walked around unclothed, and everyone noticed but him. In New York, you walk around naked from the waist down for decades, and nobody knows but you.*

There are still three or four wonderful points, the best of the *New Yorker*'s

	shallow profundity > *The idea of the cash machine, which now seems either self-evident or dated, seemed exciting then. Cautiously withdrawing thirty-five dollars at a time from our tiny fund, and doing it first at the Chase machine on Third Avenue but soon at cash machines all over town... we came into a different daily relation to money than our parents had done. My grandparents had belonged to a check-cashing generation, proud to be engaged in it. To have an institution as large as an American bank in effect endorse their signature on a little bit of paper as equivalent to money meant to be taken seriously as a citizen. My parents, in turn, were credit card cultists – they loved having them, signing them, showing them, using them. For those who came of age in the boom times after the Second World War, the whole notion of credit, of sharing in a limitless improving future – of being trusted to buy now and pay later, since later would be so much richer than now – had some of the same significance that the notion of being trusted with checks had for my grandparents.* > *We, in turn, generationally, had regressed, I realized back into a cash economy – we used checks just to pay the utilities. The machines were one more instrument of that infantilization; we went to the machines for something that felt, at least, like our allowance.*
Pariah (Warhammer 40,000) (2012) by Dan Abnett	None yet
Junktion (2005) by Matthew Farrer	Decent mind candy, quick work. 80% of it is pretty much one intermittent action sequence. The only literary flourish is the protagonist constantly trying to distract himself - from a sheer drop, from the prospect of assailants above, from his culpability, from his impotence. Necromunda (focussing on the under-underclass of a world-city) is much less Gothic, mystical, triumphal than the usual 40k stuff. But still nasty, unredeemed, temporary, claustrophobic.
Intermittent Fasting and Feasting: Use Strategic Periods of Fasting and Feasting to Burn Fat Like a Beast, Build Muscle Like a Freak	Normally I wouldn't take health advice from a bodybuilding rando. But I'm already persuaded by normal channels about the benefits of fasting, so this is for the art of it. Much better than it looks. He is probably too enthusiastic about fasting and keto (though his definition is broad: he skips breakfast every day to get a 16 hour mini-fast). But the evidence is solid for occasional fasts (for weight maintenance in a superstimulating environment, anti-inflammation, immune health, "autophagy" cleanup time). Very practical. Most important: > *Not getting enough electrolytes is the most common reason why people fail fasting* > *for longer periods of time. if you only consume pure water, then you're*

and Eat One Meal a ... Fasting One Meal a Day Book 1) () by Siim Land	> *practically just flushing out all of the essential minerals from your body, which can cause serious dehydration and problems with nerves.* > *The most important electrolytes you need are sodium, magnesium, and potassium. But you also have to pay attention to the quantities [given]...* Free here, though it plugs his paid diet regime. http://www.siimland.co/full-guide-to-intermittent-fasting/
Microsoft Windows Networking Essentials (2011) by Darril Gibson	Despite the name, a decent intro to the universal protocols.
The End of Mr. Y (2006) by Scarlett Thomas	Only saved from being actively contemptible by its ambition, its attempt to use both science and weird French theory. Sex was pretty risible too iirc.
The Odyssey (-700) by Homer	I don't want to hector Homer. But somehow this was both boring and evil, both childish and didactic. I won't belabour the book's immorality, since it is so obvious; it's the near-total absence of artistic merit that is apparently not obvious. I found nothing in it worth reading or quoting until Book 9, nearly half way through. Songs of praise of warmongering pirates. (People love pirates, and I say let em. Just don't call them paragons.) The ideology is dad porn, a set of thin, obvious, animal values. "Kings do whatever they want - death for messing with a noble; don't cross the priests; offer huge sacrifices; always do what your husband and dad say; the unlucky and the disabled are cursed and to be shunned; blood is blood is blood." > *The ghost* > *of Agamemnon answered, “Lucky you,* > *cunning Odysseus: you got yourself* > *a wife of virtue—great Penelope.* > *How principled she was, that she remembered* > *her husband all those years! Her fame will live* > *forever, and the deathless gods will make* > *a poem to delight all those on earth* > *about intelligent Penelope.* (Odysseus sleeps with half a dozen other women and demigods, most of them begging him to, and needless to say suffers nothing of it.) There's no mention of the suffering of the several cities he sacks, or the many tacitly raped women. Dozens of people are murdered for being rude, though. For a quasi-sacred text there's a surprising amount of unpunished priest killing (e.g. Leodes). The structure is awful: we see almost nothing of Odysseus for the first

quarter of the poem, instead following his son around as he listens to a series of boring old men. Most of Odysseus' feats are not shown, are instead related by him as unaffecting stories. (I suppose we could amuse ourselves by treating this as unreliable narration, but they certainly didn't.) And the poem doesn't end at its climax, instead meandering on through another few books of pointless back-patting.

(Should I go easy? After all, this is groundbreaking work, the *prototype* of art. Sure; I'll go easy if you stop hyping it and making everyone read it as an exemplar.)
(It's not that they could easily have been otherwise. Too poor, too lawless, too near to nature.)

It must be a cliche among classicists that the 'Classical' civilisations were not classical in the sense of being austere, logical, tasteful, or contemplative. That they were not Apollonian, that only a handful of people in them were. I hope my rant here is not just me being misled by the modern sense of "hero" - but the fact is that Odysseus wins, is praised endlessly, and his rights trump all else.

This isn't just me being clueless, post-oral, and close-minded: The ancients were well aware that the ending is unsatisfying crap. One popular headcanon was that, after Odysseus slays the suitors, he is immediately exiled from Ithaca, set adrift again. Cue the music!

One reading of Odysseus' name is as variant of the verb 'to be hated'. So a calque might be "King Punchable of Ithaca". ("the most unhappy man alive")

Odysseus is treated incredibly well by almost everyone, despite his crimes. Complete strangers oil him up and dress him in fine "woolen cloak and tunic" *eleven times*, and he is given precious weaponry and potions for nothing several times. This is supposed to reflect on him, but instead it shows the Greek ideal of hospitality, one of the few nice things in that culture.

He appears to sincerely miss Ithaca (his status more than his wife), weeping frequently. But he also fucks about all the time, for instance staying an entire year voluntarily enjoying Circe.

It is completely unclear what O does to deserve his fortune. (Whereas his misfortune is always directly linked to his own machismo or idiocy.) The only virtues we see him exercise directly (not counting brute aggression and discus throwing) are courage and cunning (specifically lying). Ok, he also makes one good speech:

> *'Listen to me, my friends, despite your grief.*
> *We do not know where darkness lives, nor dawn,*
> *nor where the sun that shines upon the world*
> *goes underneath the earth, nor where it rises.*
> *We need a way to fix our current plight,*
> *but I do not know how...*

I suppose we can put the rest down to charisma, the oddest and least rational of human powers.

> *'It seems that everybody loves this man,*

> *and honors him, in every place we sail to.'*

Everyone extols him without him ever demonstrating the virtues they extol. (Politeness, propriety, wisdom, strategy...) Every other idiot is "godlike" at something or other, and seeing the state of their gods you see how this could be true. At least it's funny:

> *He went out of his bedroom like a god*

> *King Menelaus, you are right... Your voice is like a god's to us.*

> *Majestic, holy King Alcinous*
> *leapt out of bed, as did Odysseus*
> *the city-sacker. Then the blessed king,*
> *mighty Alcinous, led out his guest...*

(The gods are stupid mirrors of Greek nobility; for instance they have supernatural slaves, the nymphs.) This at least is a philosophical difference between them and I: in their superstitious idealist mode, properties aren't for describing the present, but instead the timeless essence of a thing:

> *Ships are "black", "hollow", "swift" or "curved", never "brown", "slow" or "wobbly"... Penelope is "prudent Penelope", never "swift-footed Penelope", even if she is moving quickly. Telemachus is thoughtful, even when he seems particularly immature.*

All the feats of the heroes are totally dependent on the power of gods. If they say you can't sail, you can't.

> *His skin*
> *would have been ripped away, and his bones smashed*
> *had not Athena given him a thought.*

> *Athena poured unearthly charm*
> *upon his head and shoulders, and she made him*
> *taller and sturdier, so these Phaecians*
> *would welcome and respect him.*

Without Hermes or Athena constantly intervening, O would be nowhere, achieve nothing. One nice tension here though:

> *But death is universal. Even gods*
> *cannot protect the people that they love,*
> *when fate and cruel death catch up with them.*

One of the few times I felt sympathy for Odysseus was when he was trying to lead his men, who are mainly large-adult-sons. (Same with the suitors.) One breaks his neck falling down a ladder. They undo a month of work by playing with the bag of winds. Several times they are totally paralysed by their wailing and tantrums.

> *As when*
> *a herd of cows is coming back from pasture*
> *into the yard; and all the little heifers*
> *jump from their pens to skip and run towards*
> *their mothers, and they cluster round them, mooing;*

> *just so my men, as soon they saw me,*
> *began to weep...*

> *The other men...*
> *wept for those that died. I ordered them*
> *to stop their crying, scowling hard at each.*

Odysseus occasionally draws his sword on them for backtalking him, or running around like Muppets. Their deaths are roughly equally due to Odysseus' aggression and avarice, and their own foolishness.

I cheered the uprising against him, who are completely in the right. But of course they lose, because of mere divine intervention.

OK I lied: I will talk about evil. Though by the end of this I was jaded and dismissive, the aftermath of Odysseus slaughtering the suitors still struck me as an atrocity unusual for the genre:

> *"When the whole house is set in proper order,*
> *restore my halls to health: take out the [slave] girls*
> *between the courtyard wall and the rotunda.*
> *Hack at them with long swords, eradicate*
> *all life from them. They will forget the things*
> ***the suitors made them do*** *with them in secret,*
> *through Aphrodite..."*
>
> *"I refuse to grant these girls*
> *a clean death, since they poured down shame on me*
> *and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors."*
>
> *At that, he would a piece of sailor's rope*
> *round the rotunda...*
> *just so the girls, their heads all in a row,*
> *were strung up with the noose around their necks*
> *to make their death an agony. They gasped,*
> *feet twitching for a while, but not for long.*

I've read de Sade, Kaczynski, Himmler, Houellebecq, Egan and Watts at their most dyspeptic; it's not that I'm squeamish about real or fictional evil, or that my sulking sense of justice blinds me to aesthetics. This sort of thing happened; nothing cannot be said; maybe even nothing cannot be said beautifully. It's just that, again, there is nearly no nobility and no classicism in this. I am so glad this culture is gone.

Did its audience know the story was bullshit? Or was it scripture to them? (Like most scripture, it is pathetically ignoble, violent, and self-serving.) Well, they don't seem to have had scripture, not even Hesiod. So Homer is more like Dante or Milton for them: not sacred, but pious and moralising.

How big was mighty Troy? How noble was godlike Odysseus? How petty

	their pantheon? How long this epic? --- * Even thought-provoking bits like the lotus eaters or Cyclopean anarchism are over in less than half a page. * Surprised when Zeus was described as "husband of Hera". * The "no man" pun thing was so stupid I had to put the book down for a couple of days. --- Normally I would stop reading a book this bad, but I read it to prepare for *Ulysses*, so I dragged myself through. Wilson's introduction takes up a quarter of the entire book. It's good and sane but repetitive, taking pains to spell out all the ignoble and questionable, all the ugly and clumsy parts. I don't know how she keeps up her enthusiasm for the book, in the face of them, but more power to her. Plus two points for Wilson's intro and demystified translation.
The Wreck of the Archangel: Poems (1995) by George Mackay Brown	Barely there. You can do things with extremely plain, terse, noun-based poetry - I have in mind Ciaran Carson. But this is too minimal for me.
The Ph.D. Grind: A Ph.D. Student Memoir (2012) by Philip J. Guo	> *Question: Is your book meant as a critique of academia or a call for reform?* *Absolutely not. I don't have any agenda besides telling my own story as honestly as possible.* > *most Ph.D. students are directly training for a job that they will never get. (Imagine how disconcerting it would be if medical or law school graduates couldn't get jobs as doctors or lawyers, respectively.)* Strange one. It's 100 pages of minor mental breakdowns, ten thousand hours of mind-numbing gruntwork, stupid status games, and disillusionment - all in plain, businesslike, affectless prose. Also, there's very little technical detail in it. You'd think he was describing painting a house, rather than a painful initiation into the partially-insane system of *placing logic incarnate in harness* (a system with surprisingly weak links to discovery and progress). > *research was my only job, and I wouldn't be able to earn a degree unless I succeeded at it. My mood was inextricably tied to how well I was progressing every day, and during those months, progress was painfully slow.* He spends two years of his life on nasty little problems, thousands of hours of config and debugging, nothing to show for it, no papers, no new results. The top CS schools don't let you graduate until you get 4 papers in "top"

	conferences: layers upon layers of luck and gatekeeping, only modestly correlated with your efforts. Oh, and you are unlikely to have much choice of project either. A recipe for misery. This is at the very top of the game, too: Stanford with full funding and annual internships at the big lads. It is both reassuring and horrifying to hear that elite groups waste months and submit total shit sometimes. > *In the end, it took three attempts by four Ph.D. students over the course of five years before Dawson's initial Klee-UC idea turned into a published paper. Of those four students, only one "survived"—I quit the Klee project, and two others quit the Ph.D. program altogether.</i>* *Guo is no Jeremiah: despite his suffering, despite his very penetrating analysis of the waste and the idiocies, he doesn't declaim the system. He just analyses the narrow, nonscientific incentives of those around him and gets on with winning the game. He talks like this: "i think that leveraging [software] and aligning with both of your interests and incentives will be the best way for me to both make a contribution and also to feel satisfied about making concrete forward progress every day.". He uses 'top-tier' without scare quotes. At one point he dispassionately notes that half a dozen of his papers were rejected because he wasn't fluent in the specific sub-field's "rhetorical tricks, newfangled buzzwords, and marketing-related contortions required to satisfy reviewers". That is, he comes up against bullshit Bourdieuan micro-distinctions, boundary work, irrelevant to science, and shrugs and sets about learning how to pass as an insider. Look elsewhere for the relevant denunciations.* *It would be cynical to think that he doesn't milk the politics of postgraduate pain because he landed well, is a professor now - instead just envy him his inner calm:* > *my six years of Ph.D. training have made me wiser, savvier, grittier, and more steely, focused, creative, eloquent, perceptive, and professionally effective than I was as a fresh college graduate. (Two obvious caveats: Not every Ph.D. student received these benefits—many grew jaded and burned-out from their struggles. Also, lots of people cultivate these positive traits without going through a Ph.D. program.)...* *Pursuing a Ph.D. has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life, and I feel extremely lucky to have been given the opportunity to be creative during this time.* *There is this to be said for the American seven year ditch: Guo was able to suffer and wander for three entire years before he had his first big idea. That's the other side: the incredible privilege of being paid to read, paid to talk to clever people, paid to think new thoughts. But who says privileges have to feel nice, or not drive you half-mad?* *A very valuable warning for some tiny fraction of the world, a flat curio for some other tiny voyeur fraction.</td> </tr>*
Some of the Best from Tor.com, 2019 edition (2020) by Elizabeth	Very formulaic, two or three formulae. 1) the tragic child; 2) bullied outcast responding with excess force; 3) Gaiman-Whedon fairytales winking too hard. Portentous in all but five cases, mostly clumsily so. Glorifying bad decisions just because they are autonomous. Sprinkling of non-English languages, otherwise less knowledge than I look for. Good amount of very bad poetry too. I'd have stopped reading this about a quarter through, but I was looking for

Bear

new writers. I figured that if Tor snagged Egan, Abercrombie, Miéville, Reynolds, Stross, surely some of the other 22 authors, chosen from presumed thousands, would be good. 3 are (Larson, Tidbeck and Kemper), but this knowledge cost me more than I thought.

Great
1. “Zeitgeber” by Greg Egan
2. “Painless” by Rich Larson

Ok:
3. “The Last Voyage of Skidbladnir” by Karin Tidbeck
4. “The Song” by Erinn L. Kemper
5. “Blue Morphos in the Garden” by Lis Mitchell
6. "The Touches", Brenda Peynado
7. “Water: A History” by KJ Kabza
8. “Skinner Box” by Carole Johnstone
9. “Old Media” by Annalee Newitz
10. “More Real Than Him” by Silvia Park
11. “For He Can Creep” by Siobhan Carroll
12. “Knowledgeable Creatures” by Christopher Rowe

Meh
13. “One/Zero” by Kathleen Ann Goonan
14. “Seonag and the Seawolves” by M. Evan MacGriogair
15. “Beyond the El” by John Chu
16. “As the Last I May Know” by S. L. Huang
17. “His Footsteps, Through Darkness and Light” by Mimi Mondal
18. “Any Way the Wind Blows” by Seanan McGuire
19. “The Hundredth House Had No Walls” by Laurie Penny
20. “The Time Invariance of Snow” by E. Lily Yu
21. “Circus Girl, The Hunter, and Mirror Boy” by JY Yang

Bad
22. “Blood Is Another Word for Hunger” by Rivers Solomon
23. “Deriving Life” by Elizabeth Bear
24. “Articulated Restraint” by Mary Robinette Kowal

Painless by Rich Larson. Really nice. Dozens of original details. I liked the recycling replicator, feeding a stray your fingers, the Arabic-Hausa neologisms, procedural cartoons, dying face unlock. I flinched for the CIPA characters even though it means nothing to them.

The Song, Erinn Kemper. Plenty of tension and ambiguity, unlike the other stories. Say you work on a machine that kills the creatures you love, because that's how you get to study them alive. Characters with more than one value, making terrible decisions, not solving problems, not quipping, not punching up. The setup relies on you thinking there's a difference in kind between killing a whale and killing a cow, which I don't. There's even a dig at monomaniacal Greens: "*the carbon footprint resulting from eating whale meat is substantially lower than that of beef*(...)" Works.

“Blue Morphos in the Garden” by Lis Mitchell. Playful sort of death, natural afterlife. I am glad the protagonist pushes back against the ancestor-worship and collective subsumption.

> *"Don't you think it’s selfish not to leave something that Lily can see, that she can tell her children about?”*
> *“Don’t you think it’s a bit much to expect me to define my entire life by*

> *my motherhood and the expectation that my daughter will want me around forever?"*

“Water: A History” by KJ Kabza. romance vs economics. Still touched by the blind contrarian spirit of this volume, but at least it's well done.

“Skinner Box” by Carole Johnstone. Trapped in a tiny spaceship with your lover and your rapist. Angsty astronauts, too horny and sadistic to live. You can't send people this fucked up into space. But we will. Narrator is called a genius but shows no signs of it. Johnstone manages to make deep learning nasty, just by associating it with these mean narrow bastards. Nice mention of Graphcore, my local overweening tech giant.

> *"I don’t like the unpredictability of people. Of neocortexes. But I hate the predictability of nanites. The incorruptibility."*
>
> *"Bots are just automated programs. They mostly replicate what we can already do, so we don’t have to do it. Conventional bots are ones and zeros. Nanites are built from DNA.” - but substrate is irrelevant to program.*

Cruel, vague, but has a few ideas at least.

"One/Zero". Warzone children scene manipulative, saccharine. At least she's thinking big, Santa Superintelligence / Surveill. Boy and god. AI unbixes itself and everything goes swell. Attempt at lyrical Uplift mandala but ends up clumsy and soppy-stern.
could their imagined trajectories be any worse than our increasing totalitarianism? Or any worse than one of the main hallmarks of what it means to be human, which is to kill our fellows, or even send our own kin to torture or death if a certain “belief”—whatever a belief might be, neurochemically speaking—has taken up residence in our unfathomable brains?
Bring it on, I say. The change might be for the better.

“Seonag and the Seawolves” by M. Evan MacGriogair. Nice Celtic colour and rhythm, though actually it gets in the way of the images. The Gaelic is mostly not translated, and I didn't bother to google it. Portentous as usual, far too many one-sentence paragraphs, but it does islander prejudice and peaty magic well.

"Old Media" by Annalee Newitz. Central conceit - that we would have economically-profitable human slavery at the same time as human-level AI - is full-on nonsense, but I actually didn't mind much. Goofy picture of a future humanities degree, studying harem anime and anti-robotism with your ace robot gf.

> *She [robot gf] looked so beautiful that John thought his heart would crack open like the space eggs in a kaiju movie, full of lava and lightning and life forms that had never walked the Earth.*

“More Real Than Him” by Silvia Park. Protagonist is a basic K-pop stan and a sexist haxxor snob. (Hard to imagine such being technically talented, but some surely are.) Fun.

	“The Hundredth House Had No Walls” by Laurie Penny. Extremely conventional subversion of fairy tales, the princess saves herself in this one eh. Flat and clear and fine. "Beyond the El" by John Chu. Maudlin food magic. Few outright errors, as well as an apparently intentional hypernegation tic ("aren't not exactly rich", "the wind was not freezing"). Sister character is a boring 2D sociopath. “As the Last I May Know” by S. L. Huang. Nuclear Omelas. Contains a dreadful slander on Otto Hahn, naming the warmonger nuke-happy president after him. Dreadful haiku. I'd have liked some details on how exactly they kept their nuclear secrets for 200 years; we didn't manage two. The story hinges on a false dichotomy, that the superweapon will necessarily kill children. Unless it's a very dense population, or the enemy are using hostages, then she doesn't explain why there's no tactical use. “Deriving Life” by Elizabeth Bear. Incredibly glib, replacing the rightful defamiliarisation and mirror-darkly of SF with applause lights ("*Can you imagine a planet full of assholes who used to just . . . cut down trees?*") Premise is bizarre and cool and she doesn't pull it off. “Articulated Restraint” by Mary Robinette Kowal. *Really* irritating. Why do people glorify going to space when you're physically messed up? I guess this would be less pointless if you liked the character from elsewhere. I guess the actual Apollo equipment protocol details are nice. Would be one star without the Egan, Larson, Tidbeck, Kemper 3-stars.
Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World (2016) by Cal Newport	Quite shallow. He uses himself and Carl Jung as exemplars of the method - "I published 4 books in 10 years" and so on - but why should I judge either of them to have made a positive impact, merely because they published a lot? Lots of cherry-picked anecdotes in the normal bad self-help mode, with no attention to survivorship bias. *Deep Work* has the same feel as the disgraced *Why We Sleep*: empirically sloppy exaggeration of a plausibly ultra-important topic. Unlike Walker, Newport is not explicitly claiming scientific authority though. The topic is networked technology as a force against individual productivity. There's a weak and a strong form: • *Weak*: "You need to focus to do great work, or to learn new hard things. And work on the Internet is extremely vulnerable to distraction and tends to be less focussed." • *Strong*: "The always-on fragmentary state of being caused by addictive technology is *disabling*. It has lasting developmental effects, reducing your attention span, serenity, perspective." (Lanier, Carr.)

	Newport makes both claims ("*Spend enough time in a state of frenetic shallowness and you permanently reduce your capacity to perform deep work.*"), and the strong one is poorly justified to say the least. But the weak form is plausible and important enough on its own. I wondered how much this was just a rehash of the Flow idea, and in fact Newport does give it its due. It seems fair to update the idea after 40 great years of tech and the culture of tech. (I had no mobile phone until I was 17, no smartphone until I was 27. My abstinence would be much harder now.) The weak evidence could be forgiven if the claims were weaker, or if the tone was less pompous. Plus two stars for being about an important possibility, minus one for being unrigorous, minus one for tone. Things I try to do: * Track your amount of deep work hours every day. * Protect your morning: get out of bed quickly and don't browse. * Do "time blocking", earmarking a whole day for focused work * Batch shallow work (emails, meetings) in one time slots, probably the evening. * Leave your phone in a different room. He talks about scheduling your entire day, which I suspect is perverse. And "become hard to reach" is only possible for people who are already successful / in particular careers. ymmv.
The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone (2009) by Richard G. Wilkinson	The Piketty of the noughties - i.e. it's a bestselling forest of empirical detail, with lots of methodological problems and ideological overinterpretation. I was very impressed, as an undergrad with the same axe to grind as the authors. How does it hold up after ten years? Well, we've learned what a forest (or garden) of empirical detail sadly often means: data dredging, cherry-picking, p-hacking and so on. Here's a meta-analysis contradicting the health thesis, from 2004. Here's the excellent analyst Nintil contradicting the growth thesis. Up-to-date critique (from a partisan figure) here.
Mays 20 (2012) by John Darnielle	It's impossible to be the Darnielle completist I am. On top of the maybe 400 commercial objects ("*8 to 20 On a Weapons Charge is a bonus track from ~1 copy of Taking the Dative*"), there are: a complete but unreleased album, three dozen online-only ephemeral downloads, a hundred covers, a hundred live-only bootleg-only songs, a hundred more known "missing" songs, dozens of songs with no attestation but a title or a verse, and who knows how many more we couldn't snatch from him out of the air. Some of his best have been performed exactly once, and probably never again. There's two good strong pages of JD here, plus his hand in picking and ordering some really ordinary student poetry. It's *sort of* nice that it's so ordinary; if the bar were higher it would leave people behind, and poetry is now the last place to leave anyone behind. (Except the reader.) It's *sort of*

	terrible that the ordinary student art in here will attend much greater success, commanding heights, just because it is in here. Scott Annett's 'Cranes' is quite nice. Alexander Freer's 'Preliminary Communication' is an unsuccessful attempt at my favourite, difficult sort of poem, the bipartite-contrasted-abstract+concrete thingy, more than three words to a line. Felt nothing for the photos. I was a student writer, in fact more of a student writer than a student. What makes student writing? Earnestness, of course, and the attendant humour gap. An excess of night, nakedness, ribs, blood, pain, the word "fucking" but not much fucking. Syntax shortage. Sensual tongue effects without sensible teeth. Formulas hidden behind frantic formal experiment and pique. Derivativeness as homage. Either sensitive outsiderdom or cartoonish total radicalism or both. It's hard to imagine that student writers could get over themselves, could become less clumsy, could settle into themselves, could understand others, could try to actually affect the world. But apparently some do, like Darnielle.
Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams (2017) by Matthew Walker	[The following review is too credulous: I wrote it before it became clear that the book is at best a noble-lie exaggeration and at worst statistical fraud with unjustified practical claims. Downgrade your credence in all nonfiction that's outside your expertise, including reviews like this one.] Walker: > *\tScientists have discovered a revolutionary treatment that makes you live longer. It enhances your memory and makes you more creative. It makes you look more attractive. It keeps you slim and lowers food cravings. It protects you from cancer and dementia. It wards off colds and the flu. It lowers your risk of heart attacks and stroke, not to mention diabetes. You'll even feel happier, less depressed, and less anxious. Are you interested?* Important topic: he claims there's a free, riskless intervention to add years to your lifespan and fundamentally improve your mind. (The flip side of this claim is a horror story about a society that mentally disables its members.) Our school system, ladies and gents: > *\tMore than 80 percent of public high schools in the United States begin before 8:15 a.m. Almost 50 percent of those start before 7:20 a.m. School buses for a 7:20 a.m. start time usually begin picking up kids at around 5:45 a.m. As a result, some children and teenagers must wake up at 5:30 a.m., 5:15 a.m., or even earlier, and do so five days out of every seven, for years on end. This is lunacy...* > *\tPreviously, we noted that the circadian rhythm of teenagers shifts forward dramatically by one to three hours. So really the question I should ask you, if you are an adult, is this: Could you concentrate and learn anything after having forcefully been woken up at 3:15 a.m., day after day after day? Would you be in a cheerful mood? Would you find it easy to get along with your coworkers and conduct yourself with grace, tolerance, respect, and a pleasant demeanor? Of course not. Why, then,*

> *do we ask this of the millions of teenagers and children in industrialized nations?*

And elsewhere he notes that time in school is useless without restfulness. Burn it down.

> *\tInsufficient sleep has also been linked to aggression, bullying, and behavioral problems in children across a range of ages. A similar relationship between a lack of sleep and violence has been observed in adult prison populations; places that, I should add, are woefully poor at enabling good sleep that could reduce aggression, violence, psychiatric disturbance, and suicide*

The theory of sleep (circadian rhythm and adenosine cycle determining when, NREM and REM determining what) is very neat but I'm not qualified to say if it's mature. There's also vast and baffling cross-species variation, which Walker doesn't pretend to understand: "*amount (e.g., [hours per day]), form (e.g., half-brain, whole-brain), and pattern (monophasic, biphasic, polyphasic)*" or ground / tree.

The adenosine cycle - the absolutely failsafe connection between activity and fatigue - is one of my favourite theories in biology. (The account here doesn't do it justice.)

He's sceptical of oral melatonin therapy, but he doesn't consider the main argument in favour, which is that our many hours of blue-light at night is a systematic deviation from ancestral conditions, with no sensible alternative mitigation (f.lux can only do so much). (He instead puts faith in warm LEDs and smart bulbs, currently thousands of dollars each.) At least he doesn't spread the unsupported idea that taking it results in negative hormonal feedback. This doesn't surprise me:

> *\tScientific evaluations of over-the-counter brands have found melatonin concentrations that range from 83 percent less than that claimed on the label, to 478 percent more than that stated*

- but this is the price of having it over-the-counter in the first place. (It is anyway completely safe to take a 6x dose, just much less effective.)

He's very in favour of afternoon naps, the "biphasic" pattern, based on relatively weak observational evidence:

> *\tthose that abandoned regular siestas went on to suffer a 37 percent increased risk of death from heart disease across the six-year period, relative to those who maintained regular daytime naps."*

There's lots of evolutionary speculation, which really pisses off some readers for some reason, even when tagged as speculation. (e.g. Do teenagers stay up later to procreate outwith parental supervision?)

He is a crusader all right - for instance, he doesn't really do any cost-benefit consideration, instead just maximising sleep, even instead of taking your asthma meds. Yes, the costs of sleep deprivation are extremely high - but so's the cost of spending 30 years in a coma.

	I think I'm pretty much optimised: I already quit caffeine, redshifted all screens, got 0.3mg melatonin, started wearing an eye mask, don't drink much, exercise every day, fixed a bedtime, and live somewhere quiet with big bedroom windows. (I also got a less melodramatic and anxious worldview by studying economic history, which Walker doesn't cover - fair enough, since the intervention can only help scared intellectuals.) Things which I enjoy enough to handle the sleep cost: nicotine and eating late. > *Twelve Tips for Healthy Sleep:* > > *1. Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.* > *2. Exercise is great, but not too late in the day.* > *3. Avoid caffeine and nicotine.* > *4. Avoid alcoholic drinks before bed.* > *5. Avoid large meals and beverages late at night.* > *6. If possible, avoid medicines that delay or disrupt your sleep.* > *7. Don't take naps after 3 p.m.* > *8. Relax before bed... reading or listening to music, should be part of your bedtime ritual.* > *9. Take a hot bath before bed.* > *10. Dark bedroom, cool bedroom, gadget-free bedroom.* > *11. Have the right sunlight exposure. Try to get outside in natural sunlight for at least thirty minutes each day.* > *12. Don't lie in bed awake... get up and do some relaxing activity until you feel sleepy.*
The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects (1967) by Marshall McLuhan	Damn silly fun. Good to chat about, hard to take seriously
Out of the Ordinary: True Tales of Everyday Craziness (2006) by Jon Ronson	Spot of pleasant mundane stuff from a man more often immersed in extremes. Still sharp, but only by the standards of English weekend columns.
SuperFreakonomics: Global Cooling, Patriotic Prostitutes, and Why Suicide Bombers	Contrarianism unbound by prior plausibility. Most chapters contain something wrong and/or harmful. e.g. the drunk-driving vs drunk-walking claim. https://www.americanscientist.org/article/freakonomics-what-went-wrong I'm relatively fond of geoengineering, but their uncritical acceptance of Myhrvold's irreversible schtick is scary and foolish.

Should Buy Life Insurance (2009) by Steven D. Levitt	A bit more reliable than Gladwell, but this isn't saying much.
Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything (2005) by Steven D. Levitt	> *We and others have noted a discouraging tendency in the Freakonomics body of work to present speculative or even erroneous claims with an air of certainty.* - Gelman and Fung Entertaining but misleading. Levitt's proper work deserves admiration, for its ability to make dry econometric bs exciting, and for its willingness to push strong counterintuitive policy based on the available evidence. But presented without the error bars, like in this book, it's not to be relied upon. The most important claim in this, that legalising abortion caused a big permanent fall in crime rates two decades later, is (to my surprise) actually much the same status as it was 20 years ago: plausible, contested, surviving its errors, unsure. Go for 'The Undercover Economist's or 'Filthy Lucre' or 'The Armchair Economist' instead.
Report from Iron Mountain on the Possibility & Desirability of Peace (1967) by Leonard C. Lewin	None yet
The Fifth Season (The Broken Earth, #1) (2015) by N.K. Jemisin	Good for a YA book. Interesting lore, good structure, inconsistent worldbuilding, portentous/glib tone, painful slang. **Lore**: the Earth hates us, which is why there is so much suffering. Includes a (true) evolutionary gradient: > *Earth our father knew He would need clever life, so He used the Seasons to shape us out of animals: clever hands for making things and clever minds for solving problems and clever tongues for working together and clever sessapinae to warn us of danger. The people became what Father Earth needed, and then more than He needed. Then we turned on Him, and He has burned with hatred for us ever since.* She later ruins this interesting cosmogony by clubbing you over the head with a message (that the lethal climate shock Seasons started after people polluted the world too much).

The world is a blend of *GoT* survivalist folk religion and apocalyptically cyclical climate, *X-Men* despised chaos mages, *Battlestar* breeding body horror, *Earthsea* folk magic and wu wei, and superstitious racism. It mostly works.

Structure: Three quite different focal characters, later shown to be the same person over time. I didn't spot the first unification coming, and it was satisfying.

She leaves the big Soylent Green reveal until page 108; until then you're left wondering if all the grey objectification is justified by the terrible security risk.

She's pretty glib about the two communities outside the Empire, full of earthquake witches who are shown regularly freezing or nuking things when even mildly irked. The utopian pirate community is also heavily rose-tinted - sure, they *do* kill people in order to take their stuff in a time of terrible scarcity... but hey they're really sexually liberated and not racist at all.

Inconsistent: High Fantasy (subsisting commune agrarians, feudalism, omnipotent wizards) which also boasts C20th science, somehow. An in-universe history book describes one catastrophe as:

> *"aerosolizing sufficient steam and particulate matter to trigger acidic rain and sky occlusion over the Somidlats..."*

They have penicillin without an industrial revolution, electric lights before steam. Ordinary C15th cannon are an experimental wunderweapon to them.
More: most births have some risk (<1%) of being a giant nuclear volcano generator, but the Evil Empire does nothing to control reproduction, and has the parents administer very insecure self-regulation.

Pretentious portentousness:

> *There passes a time of happiness in your life, which I will not describe to you. It is unimportant. Perhaps you think it wrong that I dwell so much on the horrors, the pain, but pain is what shapes us, after all. We are creatures born of heat and pressure and grinding, ceaseless movement. To be still is to be... not.*

Of a character which until about 10 pages earlier had been a despised / tolerated frenemy:

> *now your eyes are drawn away from the horror that remains of your mentor, your lover, your friend...*

I forgive Ada Palmer this style. But 1) she's not that bad; 2) she's aping the sentimentalist C18th, and 3) she has far greater philosophical sense.

Glib:

> *it turns out that the comm is called Meov, and the man who has stepped forward is Harlas, their headman.*
> *Also they're pirates.*

> *Syenite mispronounces vulgar words, inadvertently making them more vulgar, and makes instant friends of half the crew by doing so.*

	"lol, applause!" **Bad slang**: "rogga", "comm", "orogeny" (every time, I thought "erogenous?"), really bad interjections (' *"Evil, eating Earth", you whisper*'; '*for shit's sake, she stilled a rusting volcano made by a broken obelisk*'). The occasional good bit of slang (like "grits" for the young rock mages) is smothered in exposition: *that's what she is now, an unimportant bit of rock ready to be polished into usefulness....* Better writers (Atwood or Le Guin or Banks) leave it up to you. Everything is spelled out here. The book gets roundly worse in the second half, with two chapters (16 and 17) full of hollow plot devices and applause lights (Damaya only explores the Main building so she can drive the plot forward when the hollow character Binof arrives, immediately afterwards). Also arguably Innon, there to be objectified and let Jemisin write 'good sex' scenes. Lots of Representation: polyamory, transgenderism, a dozen skin colours. Of course, fantasy doesn't represent anything, so strictly speaking that's a misnomer. It doesn't matter what the ethnic demographics of your lava-world are, relative to ours; you can have as much or as little typical sexuality etc as you like, any colour can be a minority, *as long as it makes sense in that world*. Do the choices of identities fit Jemisin's world? Is Tonkee's transgenderism, among feudalism, a personal idiosyncrasy? A hormone thing? A magic thing? We're given no reason for any of the identities she introduces to celebrate. But it mostly doesn't get in the way. Jemisin fumbles the "in a corrupt world, lawful complicity or violent revolution?" angle. At least in this instalment, there's little acknowledgment that killing an entire city because a handful of people in its government committed atrocities isn't on: '*He's not crazy at all, and he never has been*' "*what right do worlds built on oppression and genocide have to exist?*", asks one reviewer. Well, 'worlds' (institutions) don't have rights, people do: and people have a right to not suffer harm, e.g. the harm of having a great big earthquake dropped on you.
Modern Scottish Culture (2005) by Michael Gardiner	None yet
Poverty Safari (2017) by Darren McGarvey	Read this because I am an unironic fan of the author's hip-hop opera about the luridly dystopian consequences of saying 'No' to the Scottish referendum. But it peaks with its epigram, Tom Leonard's "Liason Coordinator". More of an autobiography than I was expecting, lots about his own insecurities and appalling suffering, the quasi-political rage inspired by them, and his slow maturing into social work and art. Unfortunately the prose is really, really stiff. One of his observations is that poverty makes you unable to articulate poverty. So should I sympathise? I've a similarly uncultured background (though not a tenth as violent) and I still managed to get an ear for High English. (He isn't deep enough to analyse the politics of language, but he namechecks people who do, like Tom Leonard.) And but you *can* write in Scots now, if you're great, if you're brave, as

	shown by Welsh (Booker Prize longlist '93), Kelman (Booker win '94) and Leonard (anthologised in the *Penguin Book of English Verse*, IMO the highest honour in poetry). > *my sense of grievance with anyone I perceived as well-off. In my community, some people fought about football, others over politics and religion, but my simmering resentment, if not concentrated completely on my mother, lay with those in society who appeared to be doing much better than the rest of us, those who were gliding through life unimpeded by the constraints of poverty and the material disadvantage and self-doubt that comes with it.* > > *This feeling of justifiable anger at the state of things, whether it be my community of even my own life, always led to some form of blame being ascribed to another group in society and, for me, middle class people fitted the bill perfectly. This bee in my bonnett has been a constant and finds expression as a sense of irritation at certain people I assume are posh; I can be irritated by an opinion, an accent, an accessory or an item of clothing...* Many big sociological / psychology claims - some truisms, some false - but almost no citations for either. (e.g. He has this harebrained idea that Florida is a rich high-status place, when 5 seconds on wiki or passing familiarity with American memes gives the lie to that.) "according to Wikipedia" is as far as the scholarship goes. One intriguing detail about lC20th poverty: "*you keep the big blue crate of European Union stew you've been donated well out of view*" - food aid to Scotland in the 90s! Our "government cheese". There's a surprising section where he tries to tie Seneca and the other good old lads to modern common sense, to do some genealogy of morals, but he can't carry it. He also tries to square the circle of the giant malevolent nature/nuture catfight, but understandably can't lift that either. (He's more on the personal responsibility side than you'd expect for a Pollok Free Stater.)
Prison Pit, Vol. 1 (2009) by Johnny Ryan	Nasty, stupid, but not lazy. (Several single actions, like Cannibal Fuckface's fall, are rendered over 6 entire pages, dragging out some detail and almost pathos from what is otherwise boring edgelord fodder.)
Small is Beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered (1973) by Ernst F. Schumacher	Loveable nonsense. His rejection of growth - as if environmentally neutral or positive *productivity growth* didn't exist, as if advanced technology can't stabilise and repair the damage of earlier technologies, as if material gain had no good moral effects - is fatal, and more popular now than it was in the 70s.
Zombie Simpsons: How the Best Show	A clever outsized blogpost. The points are true, the arguments fine, and personally I like that rabbit-hole mania when a smart person spends way too much time on something. But who's the audience? The fan who knows that Zombie Simpsons sucks, but wants to indulge in hating the studio? The

Ever Became the Broadcasting Undead (2012) by Charlie Sweatpants	youngster who hasn't seen it pre-reanimation? Someone was going to say it, and now they have.
Post Office (1971) by Charles Bukowski	Nasty, but so is life if you're nasty. The casual rape scene and casual racism should prompt us to ask why Bukowski wanted us to hate Chinaski, who is generally a close Imitation of him, a facsimile factotum.
Fashion Beast (2013) by Alan Moore	Nasty curio, with Malcolm McLaren(!) presumably supplying most of the pop nastiness. Would have been subversive in the 80s maybe.
Focusing (1978) by Eugene T. Gendlin	2/5 with an asterisk.* Confusing. There's a mixture of classic self-help red flags: > *My philosophy leads to new concepts in physics and biology... Focusing is now a worldwide network... this can seem insane to the rest of our society. How could new realistic ideas and steps arise from the body? This new institution is changing the atomization of society... Unlocking the wisdom of your body... using the body's own life-centered and inherently positive direction and force...* > *'Focusing has been crucial for many bodyworkers. I would hope that it would be more widely integrated within the education of Somatics practitioners. - Don Hanlon Johnson, Professor, California Institute of Integral Studies'* > *The most important rule for a therapist to observe, while helping someone to focus, is to stay out of the focuser's way... [Soon:] Another agitated, self-destructive emotional spiral was beginning and I interrupted her.* > *IF DURING THESE INSTRUCTIONS SOMEWHERE YOU HAVE SPENT A LITTLE WHILE SENSING AND TOUCHING AN UNCLEAR HOLISTIC BODY SENSE OF THIS PROBLEM, THEN YOU HAVE FOCUSED.* ...but also things I know to be true and which aren't in the interest of a therapist / self-help guru to say: > *Why doesn't therapy succeed more often? In the rarer cases when it does succeed, what is it that those patients and therapists do? What is it that the majority fail to do?* > *When the revolution in self-help [democratization] takes place and people do these helpful processes with each other, will professional psychotherapy be unnecessary?*

It did take place, we are they; it didn't change much, because most of it is nonsense. I suppose it is cheaper than the old way.
(There is of course the possibility that he's saying them to disarm me.)

I got incredibly annoyed at him going on about this 'method' for 50 pages without describing it; skip to chapter 4 if you do too. It's roughly

1) Clear your head
2) Pick one problem and just think about it in general ("feel it holistically")
3) Slowly try to find the right words to describe it
4) Switch back between the "felt sense" (2) and your description a bunch.
5) Wonder what it's all about.
6) Continue until you feel your attitude towards it change.

Is this profound? No. Is it crackpot? Also no.

Also annoying was his dismissing alternative strategies for handling problems, all of which I sometimes like. He belittles 'belittling the problem' (e.g. reminding yourself that others have it worse - which is both noble and effective); 'analyzing' (he rightly belittles Freudian Analysis, i.e. blaming your present state on the nastiest past event that comes to mind, but *as if* breaking things into subproblems is always a bad idea); just enduring it (often just works for me); lecturing yourself (often works for me because parts of me want to listen). Why is it so hard for writers like this to concede that some things don't work for some people? (They lose authority I suppose.)

Surprising that he's a sincere empiricist, or at least trying to be.

> *One reason why research is so important is precisely that it can surprise you and tell you that your subjective convictions are wrong... As hard as it was for me to accept the finding that therapy doesn't do the job, research findings can never hurt you. They move you forward.*

This is a list of about 100 studies on the topic (Ctrl+F "Table 1"), no doubt with a terrible file-drawer problem. Total n~=500, probably with a lot of duplication. Measures used are a mix of standard boring ones like PFQ and woo boring ones like Gestalt.

Gendlin makes a few specific, testable claims (which is always to be encouraged so allow me to hereby present him with his certificate of falsifiability at worst):

* "therapy has better outcomes when clients 'focus". Too vague, but a few of the studies are nominally about this.
* "better functioning of the immune system". Only one mention of immune system in that big chart, for this n=76 study, no mention of focusing in the abstract at least.
* successful patients (i.e. one-year outcomes) can be predicted from recordings of "their first two sessions". This would be good and clean evidence that something real is involved. I think the claim refers to this PhD, n=35. It wasn't exactly cross-validated, shall we say.

That review was cursory but tells me enough. (You might think you could just look at clinical practice, 40 years on - which, outside of California, doesn't exactly foreground Gendlin - to get a sense of whether it works as well as he claims. But medicine is too far from a rational system for that.)

	The core idea is not insane. It's that there is an equivalent of proprioception for your own emotions, and that you can't change anything about yourself except through it. There's a touch of the old Zen problem to it, that you're trying to describe a nonverbal thing in words. But then, most descriptions aren't descriptions of verbal processes - consider e.g. "Succulent plants' dark fixation makes them ideal for air quality control in bedrooms". What about support from respectable, academic phenomenology? I don't know that there is any such thing. There *may* be non-propositional, non-procedural knowledge. It wouldn't be surprising - the conscious mind is a relatively small and unskilled thing. It's Gendlin's idea of our apriori and undeluded access to it that's the problem. Gendlin's experiments don't establish the existence or the access. I find it hard to think how to test this, actually. If the epistemology of focusing was real, what would be different about its practitioners? Happiness? Cortisol? Decision speed? I don't know. We are too skilled at deluding ourselves. It would be pretty easy to run an experiment where Gendlinites tried to predict which patients recover, and then check that against normies' predictions. To be fair, this book isn't his strongest face ("*I also want this book to be readable by anyone*"). But I'm not grading on intended audience (and I wasn't encouraged by those no-power, pre-Crisis psychology studies either). Open questions: why should there be any therapy that works in general? Grant that there is bodily knowledge; where is this knowledge stored? The enteric nervous system? Why should introspection work? Theory of mind is for modelling other people so that they can't harm me. This is all probably harmless; people doing Rogerian listening to each other is unlikely to cause any problems (in fact, since it's free, then if the null hypothesis of talk psychotherapy is true, this might be a social improvement; same benefit without the deadweight); he doesn't advocate withdrawal from treatment (pills are completely absent from the picture, actually). And the opportunity cost of trying this is low, because other self-help is worse. Not for me; maybe for you. * Gendlin seems like a very nice man, he's just not the discoverer of the one neat trick to psychiatry. The emphasis (3 chapters) here on helping others and not just yourself in sweet. His acceptance of the need for science makes it easier to get at him than at other self-helpists, which makes me feel bad about getting at him and not them. (I won't get at them because they're not worth arguing with.)
Becoming a Successful Scientist: Strategic Thinking for Scientific Discovery (2009) by Craig Loehle	Pretty sensible but very long-winded and staid. I suppose it is actually quite vigorous and irreverent, coming from an organisation man: > *study can be a substitute for productive work* > *Darwin considered himself to be a geologist, but the world remembers largely his biology. Should Goethe be in the literature, biology, physics, or philosophy department? He actually was most proud of his work on optics, though that work was largely flawed. Would Newton or Fisher find comfortable academic niches today?* > *All graduate students are taught that it is essential to become an expert. As a short-term goal this is, of course, valid. Academic search*

> *committees are also looking for experts. As a lifestyle, however, becoming an expert can inhibit creativity... As one becomes more of an expert, a larger and more complex network of facts and explanations accumulates and solidifies, making it difficult to entertain radical alternative ideas or to recognize new problems... An Aristotle or Freud may create a set of bars within which most people pace rigidly, never noticing clues from outside the cage*

> *it is much more likely that one can work at 100% mental clarity for about four hours. If one keeps this in mind, then a distinction can be made between critical issues that need full clarity and intense effort, which become part of the four hours of work per day, and those parts of a project that are routine and become part of the rest of the day... returning calls, coding a clearly designed subroutine, ordering equipment, attending seminars, editing reports, etc*

But these are the only interesting bits in 300 pages. This is true but the book doesn't help much:

> *scientists are largely uncoached and are rarely introspective. They spend a lot of*
> *time studying their disciplinary subject matter, but almost no time learning strategies of problem solving*

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* He gives examples from *many* different domains (ecology, epidemiology, physics, hardware), but so I spotted some errors.
* A new record! Loehle cites a crashing falsehood on p.2, and several times elsewhere: Gardner's DOA theory of multiple intelligences. And he naively teases out the strategic implications. He harps on this theme repeatedly - e.g. this is also flatly false: *above a certain minimal level, IQ and college grades are not predictive of productivity, success, or innovation*.
* He tries to talk about software but is stuck in the 90s. He has no sense of open-sourcing software as the most successful strategy (witness XGB or Chollet).
* It tries to also appeal to business people, for some reason. Half the examples and advice are about corporate decisionmaking (*The proper focus or perspective is essential when looking at business performance*.) This is distracting and makes it feel generic, belies the title.
* His "new model of the scientific method" is vague and doesn't deserve the word.
* The chapter on social distortions (credit stealing, cherry-picking, trends and irrational effects of publication timing) is ok, just ahead of the Replication crisis curve.

Anyway: as a scientist you *want* problems. But not just any problem - something that both doesn't fit, & has important implications. Advice I read in this, or read into it:

* A theory can be inconsistent or incomplete: one generate contradiction, the other keeps explanations weak.

	* Paradoxes are shortcuts to the frontier. Look for heated debates and find a synthesis / circumvention. When you have one: Find tacit assumptions; Make new distinctions; Operationalise! --- (Alternative books: Medawar, Cajal, Polya, Hamming, anything by Feynman. Stenhardt's model is more rigorous than the rest put together but I don't know if it's helpful.)
The Go-Between (1953) by L.P. Hartley	Was too young for it when I tried it. Love the band though.
Lord Foul's Bane (The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever, #1) (1977) by Stephen R. Donaldson	Dimly remember reading this.
Fluid Concepts and Creative Analogies (1991) by Douglas R. Hofstadter	One of a pile of Mind books I grabbed desperately for a first-year philosophy essay. Did not understand it (naturally that didn't stop me citing it). Will have another go some day
Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart (2007) by Tim Butcher	None yet
Postcards from Tomorrow Square: Reports from China (2008) by James M. Fallows	Just ok. China is changing so fast that we can't read 10-year-old journalism and claim to have that much relevant knowledge. But if you didn't know about their astonishing industry (more manufacturing workers in Guangdong than all of the US by 2007) or their horrendously serious reality shows, or their super-rich (including the usual eco-friendly super-rich) then it might update you. I was surprised that Fallows is so eminent without having even much spoken Mandarin, but he's immersed in other ways.
She Came to Stay (1943) by Simone de	Like Norman Mailer at his nastiest. The spitting rage of bad polyamory.

Beauvoir	
Making Mortal Choices: Three Exercises in Moral Casuistry (1996) by Hugo Bedau	None yet
The Three-Body Problem (Remembrance of Earth's Past #1) (2006) by Liu Cixin	Dense, clever, and it conveys a pleasant worldview; but also rushed and clumsy. In fact the prose is awful - full of flat descriptions of people's reactions, people's full names inserted into the dialogue - and the characters are completely interchangeable ciphers (apart from the one who is a stock renegade cop, and the one who is the Ultimate Eco-Terrorist). > *Can the fundamental nature of matter really be lawlessness? Can the stability and order of the world be but a temporary dynamic equilibrium achieved in a corner of the universe, a short-lived eddy in a chaotic current?* There's almost no 'showing' in the entire book. > *For most people, perhaps time would have gradually healed these wounds. After all, during the Cultural Revolution, many people suffered fates similar to hers, and compared to many of them, Ye was relatively fortunate. But Ye had the mental habits of a scientist, and she refused to forget. Rather, she looked with a rational gaze on the madness and hatred that had harmed her. Ye's rational consideration of humanity's evil side began the day she read Silent Spring.* > > *Have you heard of the Monte Carlo method? Ah, it's a computer algorithm often used for calculating the area of irregular shapes. Specifically, the software puts the figure of interest in a figure of known area, such as a circle, and randomly strikes it with many tiny balls, never targeting the same spot twice. After a large number of balls, the proportion of balls that fall within the irregular shape compared to the total number of balls used to hit the circle will yield the area of the shape.* This is no impediment to good hard scifi, it just means that the reference author is Asimov, not Banks or LeGuin. Liu's ideas are well worth the trip - firing at a nuke as a last-resort for disarming it (since the small ones rely on a sealed pressurised container) is about the least ambitious thought in it: > *Twenty minutes later, Three Body's Von Neumann architecture human-formation computer had begun full operations under the Qin 1.0 operating system. "Run solar orbit computation software 'Three Body 1.0'!" Newton screamed at the top of his lungs. "Start the master computing module! Load the differential calculus module! Load the finite element analysis module! Load the spectral method module! Enter initial condition parameters … and begin calculation!" The motherboard sparkled as the display formation flashed with indicators in every color. The human computer began the long computation.*

	> *In the long history of scientific progress, how many protons have been smashed apart in accelerators by physicists? How many neutrons and electrons? Probably no fewer than a hundred million. Every collision was probably the end of the civilizations and intelligences in a microcosmos.* *Comrades! Revolutionary youths! Revolutionary faculty and staff! We must clearly understand the reactionary nature of Einstein's theory of relativity. This is most apparent in general relativity: Its static model of the universe negates the dynamic nature of matter. It is anti-dialectical! It treats the universe as limited, which is absolutely a form of reactionary idealism…* I don't understand why this won the Hugo - except, that, being foreign, it didn't trigger canned political backlash on either side of the sad affair we have made the Hugos. Tom Clancy for real nerds. **2/5** in this translation, anyway.
Science: Abridged Beyond the Point of Usefulness () by Zach Weinersmith	> *Ecology: The attempt to discover all the poorly understood species in a system, then misunderstand them at the same time.* *Cognitive Science: 19th century men consulted their own thought processes and decided they were barely restrained perverts. 20th century men consulted their own thought processes and decided they were just stimulus-response machines. Later, it turned out people sometimes think about stuff, and not all of it is butts.</td> </tr>*
'We in Scotland': Thatcherism in a Cold Climate (2009) by David Torrance	I was amazed that this is the only book about her reception in Scotland. Growing up during Blair, Thatcher was still by far the most famous politician in Scotland; small children knew to hate her, to sing rhymes about one of her policies. But actually our booklessness fits - we don't really analyse why she was a demon. Adults might mutter something about the poll tax or the shipyards or the *Belgrano*, but in general people don't think about what she actually did, they just follow the received wisdom that she was a bloodthirsty high-heid ogre who killed jobs for fun. (If Malcolm Rifkind is willing to write the foreword for your book, you'd be forgiven for inferring something about its slant - and indeed MR characterises the opposition as merely disliking a bossy English woman speaking down to them in RP. This is risible, and predictably risible.) Torrance reports the month-by-month history. He's impatient with kneejerk anti-Thatcherism, the kind which forgets her relative electoral gains in '79 and '83, which ignores the global forces of deindustrialisation which Thatcher had relatively little power over (only unused power to slow and soften the effects). There's no Tories shyer than Scottish Tories, but they're there - 29% in the last election, back up to early Thatcher levels. She repeatedly used Scotland as a policy testing ground, in what it's fair to call naked opportunism. (Little to lose by 1989, electorally.) She galvanised opposition and gave the country an Other to unite against. We threw eggs, rioted against regressive taxation, and drew funny satire - but bought our

	council houses off her, hoovered up our shares in BT and Steel, and mostly accepted her careerist world, disorganised labour. The poll tax finished her - but she still *won*, and all it cost her was a century of hatred. After reading this I still don't know what the bottom line is.
Modern Masters of Science Fiction: Iain M. Banks () by Paul Kincaid	Overview of both the literary and scifi books, one-by-one. Thus skimmable by anyone who would want to read it in the first place (...) Worth it, for fans, for the absolutely amazing interview with a PhD student, in which he refuses all invitations to pompous theory: > *JR: You've used the word "play" to describe your use of form and narrative structure. As I'm sure you know, in recent years the term play has been used to describe a certain kind of postmodern engagement with the world. To what extent do you consider your work to be postmodern?* > *IB: I confess I don't think about it at all. I've never been good on literary or societal theory. I've long since decided people like me just write what we do and let other people worry about the analytical side.* > *JR: Have you read any work by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, or Emanuel Levinas (or any other continental philosophers)? If you have, what did you think?* > *IB: The little I've read I mostly didn't understand, and the little I understood of the little I've read seemed to consist either of rather banal points made difficult to understand by deliberately opaque and obstructive language (this might have been the translation, though I doubt it), or just plain nonsense. Or it could be I'm just not up to the mark intellectually, of course.* > *JR: You have written quite a few novels that use Freudian imagery and tropes—The Wasp Factory, Use of Weapons, The Bridge, Walking on Glass—What do you think of Freudian psychoanalysis?* > *IB: Never been entirely sold on it. I suspect Freud's theories tell you a great deal about Freud, quite a lot about the monied middle-class in Vienna a hundred-plus years ago, and only a little about people in general. Like Marx, he was too keen to insist that his area of study was genuinely a science. Also like Marx, though, he provides a genuinely useful and insightful (if, especially in Freud's case, limited) way of looking at people and their hidden lives (well, more implied lives with Marx, relating to their economic function within a society). Anyway, I can honestly say that I've never deliberately included any Freudian imagery in my stories, so what's there must be the result of my subconscious. . . . Uh-oh. . .*
The Dark Stuff: Selected Writings on	Deeply conventional in the distinictive way that rock snobs all are.

Rock Music, 1972-1993 (1994) by Nick Kent	
The Quarry Wood (1928) by Nan Shepherd	Capital-r-Romantic coming-of-age in the north-east of Scotland. I fit three out four of its demographics (Doric speakers, Aberdeen students, de novo idealist, but not a woman), but this still didn't leave much impact. It *is* lovely to have a personal literature for your specific time and place - elsewhere for people like me there's half of Canongate and Carcanet. But still. It catches the excitement of going to uni from the middle of nowhere, after being starved of ideas: > *The grey Crown, that had soared through so many generations above the surge and excitement of youth, had told her that wisdom is patient and waits for her people... In the long Library too - where thought, the enquiring experiencing spirit, the essence of man's long tussle with his destiny, was captured and preserved: a desiccated powder set free, volatile, live at the touch of a living mind - she learned to be quiet... They might clutch at her, these dead men, storming and battering at the citadel of her identity...* > > *The thought... liberated. She walked in a company.* > *There flocked in their hundreds her fellow-students, grave, gay, eager, anxious, earnest, flippant, stupid, and humble and wise in their own conceits, dreamers and doers and idlers, bunglers and jesters, seekers of pleasure and seekers of wisdom, troubled, serene, impetuous, and all inquisitive...* But the gasping forbidden love at the heart of the book is too bland to carry it. Also I hated the Doric being italicised; it felt like a stage wink.
The New Testament in Scots (1983) by William Laughton Lorimer	1967 CE: > *Gin I speak wi the tungs o men an angels, but hae nae luve i my hairt, I am no nane better nor dunnerin bress or a ríngíng cymbal. Gin I hae the gift o prophecíe an am acquent wi the saicret mind o God, an ken aathing ither at man may ken, an gin I hae siccan faith as can flit the hills frae their larachs - gin I hae aa that, but hae nae luve i my hairt, I am nocht. Gin I skail aa my guids an graith in awmous, an gin I gíe up my bodie tae be brunt in aiss - gin I een dae that, but hae nae luve i my hairt, I am nane the better o it.* > *Aa our knawledge is hauflin; aa our prophesíein is hauflin: but whan the perfyte is comed, the onperfyte will be by wi. In my bairn days, I hed the speech o a bairn, the thochts o a bairn, the mind o a bairn, but nou at I am grown manmuckle, I am through wi aathing bairnlie. Nou we are like luikin in a mirror an seein aa thing athraw, but than we s' luik aathing braid i the face. Nou I ken aathing hauflinsweys, but than I will ken aathing as weill as God kens me.*

	> *In smaa: there is three things bides for ey: faith, howp, luve. But the grytest o the three is luve.* In the form that survived, Scots is a uniformly profane language – not in the sense of profanity, but as in worldly and comic and demotic. Some of that opinion is classist stereotype; it certainly wasn't true four hundred years ago (the devotional poems of Dunbar and Henryson stand up to the sacred efforts in any language); but most is real, down to Knox's decision on a legally-mandatory bible in English, but even more to the cultural capture of the nation's Anglicised elites, but even more than that to the simple dictates of shared economic activity, over three hundred years: i.e. *we gave* English our sacred talk, then we gave English our intellectual talk, and then trade talk, and law talk, and all their formal accoutrements. Until only the informal and proletarian was left. Atweill, the kitsch prevails ("Hoots ma wee bonnie lassie! Ahiiii wid wauk fyv hhundrid myles"). When Lorimer wrote this, the dialectisation of Scots, and the cutesy granny-aff-a-bus process wasn't so advanced - but this is the register we moderns read it in, unless we are rural and lucky. (Nasty but probable thing I once heard a linguist lecture on: relatively few languages develop the scientific-philosophical register and benefit from its sharpening vocabularies. He reckoned that only nine ever have, *fully*: Chinese, Arabic, Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Russian, German, French, English. Scots definitely had speakers sophisticated enough, in its High Medieval heyday, but the internationalist use of Latin precluded it.) Lorimer saw a Bible translation as one of two conditions of revitalising braid Scots - the language, rather than the dialect Scots English. (The other big brick being the Dictionary.) Well, we have both now, and they are not enough. The argument for bringing back languages is only superficially humane, since language is for communication *first*, and our condition is more and more a global one. (I find it difficult to fault Katja Grace's analysis: the standard arguments fail, the present matters more than the past: because it is where value happens.) Lorimer translated it straight from the Koine Greek over a full decade, finishing the second draft just before his death. The art comes in his rendering the apostles with their own voice and distinctive idiolect. (Paul is, here as ever, a nasty little man: smug and litigious.) While I'm very glad this exists, the book itself can do little for me, whatever language it's wearing. (Nothing takes me further from religious awe than the actual things we said God said. Hauflin' indeed.) N/A.
Debt: The First 5,000 Years (2011) by David Graeber	Exciting and well-written but unreliable and unfocussed. The main thesis is that debt isn't straightforward accounting: all systems of debt require a hidden moral assumption, which is that it's bad to be indebted, that debt overrules other moral claims like equity or even survival: > *paying one's debts is not the essence of morality, that all these things are human arrangements and that if democracy is to mean anything, it is the ability to all agree to arrange things in a different way.* To establish this he goes into an array of human economies: slaving, gift economies, Kula rings... but the brute fact of diverse institutions doesn't really connect with his moral thesis. *Then* this all goes towards his grand

	equating of the market and the state (so that people will resist both of them). He argues that formal debt (of accountants and lawyers) causes poverty and violence relative to traditional informal debt (of cousins, dowries, and sheep). But this is wildly inconsistent with the last two hundred years of social development; poverty is a fraction of what it was, and violence (including state violence, including incarceration as violence) is also down. He gets worked up about "the myth of barter", the largely silly idea that there was generally a transition from pure barter economies to money economies at some point in cultural history. Even if we grant this, his estimation of the significance of barter being rare is excessive. It doesn't have any clear moral bearing. His debt Jubilee idea, coming as it did post-Recession, is superficially good, especially since giant financiers had just received trillions in bailouts. But if we made debt forgiveness a common concern, we'd just be redistributing money to those best at obtaining credit via excessive self-esteem, credentials or scamming. And post-Jubilee credit system would immediately dry up, or sting us with vast interest rates. They couldn't exist otherwise, and then homeowning and car purchase would again be only within reach for the rich. There are dozens or more or less serious errors in it. (Still less unreliable than most anarchism and most cultural anthropology.) If you still want to read it, you really should take note of the huge errata others have helpfully contributed to Graeber, not that he'd thank them: - Henry Farrell - Ann Leckie - Noah Smith - Gabriel Rossman - Brad deLong This is 4/5 for style and ambition, provided you don't take any particular claim too seriously. Read Clark and McCloskey for real Big Economics.
The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power (2003) by Joel Bakan	None yet
僕のヒーローアカデミア 1 [Boku No Hero Academia 1] (My Hero Academia, #1) (2014) by Kohei	Comprehensively formulaic (hero school with wimp protagonist) but it's a likeable formula. None of the consistency or logical stretching you'd want to take it seriously. (How does the hero economy work? Who pays for the destroyed arenas? You might think I'm being petty, but *One Punch Man* does both the economics and the perverse social dynamics in its stride.)

Horikoshi	
Stardust (1997) by Neil Gaiman	None yet
Shade's Children (1997) by Garth Nix	None yet
Scream for Jeeves: A Parody (1994) by Peter H. Cannon	Clever enough mashup, and obviously loving, but the prose misses the mark on every page, jolting us out of Plum's dreamworld without even sending into Howard's nightmarish one. (It might seem shallow to judge something on the prose alone, but you can't have Jeeves without perfect pitch, it consists in comic timing and music; if you come at the master you best not miss.) Critical essay linking Wodehouse, Lovecraft and Doyle is also clever. W and L we're both fantasy authors you see. I realise there's a lot of Jeeves homage going around, published and Authorised, and so not looking like the fanfiction it is.
Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea / The Mysterious Island / Journey to the Centre of the Earth / Around the World in Eighty Days (1994) by Jules Verne	None yet
How to Read Nietzsche (2005) by Keith Ansell-Pearson	None yet
Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo (1982) by Emmanuel Levinas	Incomprehensible - and it's difficult to believe that's due to honest ambition, or honest confusion. Taking him on face value (pardon the pun) though, his ethics makes infinities out of molehills and so has no help to offer us.

Translations (1981) by Brian Friel	Classic highschool fodder: language and politics, clever virtuous underdogs and dastardly imperialists.
Angry Aztecs (2001) by Terry Deary	I think these were the only history books I read until I was 20 years old. It sufficed! Obviously it's not good for your only exposure to history to be the 100 most dramatic moments, the 100 most elite and unrepresentative people. (For each page of a regular history book I should imagine the lives of a thousand peasants.) But very few people have any grasp of history beyond this superficial roll call, so it didn't hurt me much to delay it. Our need for "people's history" is great: it at least has a chance of being an accurate picture of the past. (Many particular instances of people's history are fatally false or misleading though, because the contrarianism and ideological heat of the topic draws parasites and shills.)
Bloody Scotland (Horrible Histories Special) (1997) by Terry Deary	I think these were the only history books I read until I was 20 years old. It sufficed! Obviously it's not good for your only exposure to history to be the 100 most dramatic moments, the 100 most elite and unrepresentative people. (For each page of a regular history book I should imagine the lives of a thousand peasants.) But very few people have any grasp of history beyond this superficial roll call, so it didn't hurt me much to delay it. Our need for "people's history" is great: it at least has a chance of being an accurate picture of the past. (Many particular instances of people's history are fatally false or misleading though, because the contrarianism and ideological heat of the topic draws parasites and shills.)
The Vicious Vikings (1994) by Terry Deary	I think these were the only history books I read until I was 20 years old. It sufficed! Obviously it's not good for your only exposure to history to be the 100 most dramatic moments, the 100 most elite and unrepresentative people. (For each page of a regular history book I should imagine the lives of a thousand peasants.) But very few people have any grasp of history beyond this superficial roll call, so it didn't hurt me much to delay it. Our need for "people's history" is great: it at least has a chance of being an accurate picture of the past. (Many particular instances of people's history are fatally false or misleading though, because the contrarianism and ideological heat of the topic draws parasites and shills.)
The Blitzed Brits (1994) by Terry Deary	I think these were the only history books I read until I was 20 years old. It sufficed! Obviously it's not good for your only exposure to history to be the 100 most dramatic moments, the 100 most elite and unrepresentative people. (For each page of a regular history book I should imagine the lives of a thousand peasants.) But very few people have any grasp of history beyond this superficial roll call, so it didn't hurt me much to delay it. Our need for "people's history" is great: it at least has a chance of being an

	accurate picture of the past. (Many particular instances of people's history are fatally false or misleading though, because the contrarianism and ideological heat of the topic draws parasites and shills.)
The Terrible Tudors (1993) by Terry Deary	I think these were the only history books I read until I was 20 years old. It sufficed! Obviously it's not good for your only exposure to history to be the 100 most dramatic moments, the 100 most elite and unrepresentative people. (For each page of a regular history book I should imagine the lives of a thousand peasants.) But very few people have any grasp of history beyond this superficial roll call, so it didn't hurt me much to delay it. Our need for "people's history" is great: it at least has a chance of being an accurate picture of the past. (Many particular instances of people's history are fatally false or misleading though, because the contrarianism and ideological heat of the topic draws parasites and shills.)
The Annotated Chronicles (Dragonlance: Dragonlance Chronicles) (1985) by Margaret Weis	Pretty sure I got this just to have a thicker book than the kid smugly brandishing *Lord of the Rings*. Pretty standard D&D-writeup fare.
The Fuller Memorandum (Laundry Files, #3) (2010) by Charles Stross	Deeply conventional mind candy - it may be the skewed mores of the Cthulhu Mythos post-Whedon, but those are pretty conformist these days. Though the right reference class for this series is Robert Rankin, not Lovecraft. Lots of clumsy geek references (re: trains, smartphone fetishes, programming concepts), and lots of clumsy US-centric edits ("taking the DLR to Canary Wharf in the east of London" said no Londoner ever). I wonder if this is just because he writes so fast these days (~2 books a year). His great strength remains the tawdriness of office life (which he manages to accurately display despite also displaying ancient tentacular spectacles). e.g. a nice touch here: the office audit of paperclip usage - previously a joke about pedantry and bureaucracy gone wild - is revealed to have a deadly serious rationale. One surprising grey area in the plot: the Laundry produces some fake research to draw out the cultists. It says that the apocalypse will spread exponentially fast, and is inevitable. But the cult leader is relatively rational, trying to make humanity survive, and so this false catastrophe actually pushes them over the edge. Epistemic poisoning. I continue to have mixed feelings about Stross, but hey I continue to read him. (Book #1, *Atrocity Archives* works best because it subverts James Bond more, and the Nazi villains are fun, and the gag hasn't worn thin.)
Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst	Has an ingenious structure: starting with a piece of behaviour, work backwards through the many scales that caused it: from the nerve bundles that enable the muscle motion, through the brain processing that ordered those, through that morning's hormonal predisposing, foetal genetic construction, all the way to the ancestral environment.

(2017) by Robert M. Sapolsky	Sapolsky is engagingly cranky about various things: traditional misogynies, war. He uses the neologism "pseudospeciation" (i.e. the dehumanising kind of racism) about 50 times. He is often thrillingly unimpressed: > *Jane Goodall blew everyone's socks off by reporting the now-iconic fact that chimps make tools... Most cultural anthropologists weren't thrilled by Goodall's revolution, and now emphasise definitions that cut chimps and other hoi polloi out of the party. There's a fondness for the thinking of Alfred Kroeber, Clyde Kluckhohn, and Clifford Geertz, three heavyweights who focused on how culture is about ideas and symbols, rather than the mere behaviours in which they instantiate, or material products like flint blades or iPhones...* > *Basically, I don't want to go anywhere near these debates. For our purposes we'll rely on an intuitive definition of culture emphasised by Frans de Waal: culture is how we do and think about things.* But he's way too credulous about social science. For instance, I recommend skipping the last half of chapter 3, on social psychology, entirely. In the space of two pages (p90-1) he cites power pose, facial feedback, ego depletion, and himmicanes; all as exciting, uncontroversial fact. This is a clean sweep of recent studies *well-known* to be p-hacked, low-power and spurious. He also endorses the results of Implicit Association and stereotype threat tests far too strongly. I don't know enough about neuroscience or endocrinology or ethology to make a similar recommendation for the other chapters. But the "Gell-Mann amnesia" effect sadly suggests that we should (partially) discount everything else in here, primates aside; evidence of credulity in one domain is evidence for others. (Best case, he just didn't keep up with the latest research dramas. Though some results, like the litter -> theft link or the Macbeth effect, have been comprehensively criticised for 8+ years now, so.) He also takes anthropologists at their qualitative, cherry-picking word when they try to maintain their academic boundary against Pinker's work on violence. Still worth it for his first-hand stories - him watching Somali oil workers conduct ritual argument, him watching a troop of baboons spread a culture - a pocket of pacifism and gender sanity in the psychotic roundabout of nature. Minus 1 point because his empirical judgments are unreliable. : (
Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939 (1985) by Georges Bataille	Someone trying to out-Nietzsche Nietzsche. How? Well, Fritz was quite chaste and polite, so Bataille lards on lots of genitalia and violence. (You can get the flavour of Bataille's philosophy from Magritte's unprintable sketches, illustrations for GB's writing.) Quite ordinary French Theory, cocks aside.
Who	Poole is one of the Guardian's sharpest knives. Like Zizek or Debord if they

Touched Base in My Thought Shower?: A Treasury of Unbearable Office Jargon (2013) by Steven Poole	were funny and could write. This is kind of phoned-in though, because the language described is self-defeating, self-ridiculing. For anyone outside it, anyway.
No Other Place: Poetry from the Aberdeen University Review () by Ian A. Olson	Got this as a xmas present for someone - but I know they encourage pre-using media presents (why wouldn't you?) so I snuck a read. Lots of poems about Aberdeen U specifically, which got me good and sentimental. The final piece, by Archibald Wavell, is amazing: > *...My chin, once glossy as a nectarine,* > *Now looks like holly on a Christmas card,* > *Or straggly hawthorns in a woodland scene* > *Such as is deftly drawn by Fragonard;* > *No R.S.M. would pass me for a guard* > *However much I titivate and preen.* > *My luck would daunt a Roland or Bayard;* > *I left my shaving-brush at Aberdeen.* > > *Pity me, Prince : the water here is hard,* > *Hourly my tongue inclines to the obscene,* > *Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,* > *I left my shaving-brush at Aberdeen.*
Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture (1996) by Cairns Craig	None yet
Life of Pi (2001) by Yann Martel	None yet
The Demon Archer (Hugh Corbett, #11) (1999) by Paul Doherty	Stuck with me for some reason.

Brave New World (1932) by Aldous Huxley	Arguably harmful. Not to be read without also reading his recantation, *Island* - but it always is.
Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol (1966) by Okot p'Bitek	Nasty-funny Juvenalian satire of westernised Africans. For some reason nativism (e.g. calling foreigners ugly or smelly, mocking locals who take up foreign customs) gets a pass in post-colonial writing.
Is Belief in God Good, Bad or Irrelevant?: A Professor and a Punk Rocker Discuss Science, Religion, Naturalism & Christianity (2006) by Preston Jones	Actually two professors but never mind. New Atheism peaked when I was about 16, the peak age for insufferable overconfidence. So credit to my dumbass teenage self for picking this, an adversarial collaboration that heard out the Christian. In fact, the Christian is the editor, and gives himself the final word. (I probably only read it cos I'm a massive BR fanboy, though.) It's nothing special - neither Jones nor Graffin are very original at apologetics / unapologetics (compared to say Lane Craig or Hitchens or Dennett). Eh. I haven't thought about religion in years, and thank god for that.
The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance (2010) by Jim Al-Khalili	Surprisingly dull and unanalytical. al-Khalili is good-natured and knowledgeable, but he puts in too many people, too many dates, and too little science. He tries to cover seven hundred years and multiple kingdoms, and the theological and military context, and ends up shallowly mentioning these things and little more. It would have been better to focus on the greats - Khwarizmi, Kindi, Haytham, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd - and explain their actual achievements, then note that work of this calibre was done by others over centuries too. Cool questions al-Khalili barely touches: * The Byzantines ruled Greece. How did they lose Greek thought, while the caliphate found it? * What did we know before the Golden Age? What did we gain from it? "Greatest" - 'greatest Muslim physicist', 'greatest Indian mathematician', 'greatest clinician ever' - appears 90 times in 250 pages. We are never told what specific achievements earn them the superlative. al-Kindi: > *"We ought not to be embarrassed of appreciating the truth and of obtaining it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. Nothing should be dearer to the seeker of truth than the truth itself, and there is no deterioration of the truth, nor belittling either of one who speaks it or conveys it."* It was nice to learn a word for this awesome form of Islam, the Mu'talizi. (I could have guessed from the kind of person who uses their name as an

	insult: "*In contemporary Salafi jihadism, the epithet or supposed allegations of being a Muʿtazilite have been used between rival groups as a means of denouncing their credibility.*" The caliphate was a remarkably open society, for its time. This is only confusing because our received images come from the past few centuries of fundamentalism. Sad: > *The Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush, who is one of the most influential intellectuals in the Muslim world today, has stressed that censorship in today's Muslim world is stronger than at any other time in history.*
Napoleon: The Path to Power (2007) by Philip G. Dwyer	How did a "haggard and ghastly" foreigner from a poor-noble family end up ruling two-thirds of Europe, getting one in *every* 200 people in the world killed (his namesake wars were the same size, though not the same shape, as the Holocaust), becoming one of the most successful generals in history? Dwyer's answer is via various sorts of creativity: nepotism, plagiarism, disloyalty, false advertising, ignoring orders (and then going AWOL to avoid reprisal), and but also actual military acumen. This is true but the broader answer is: with the help of all the revolutionaries whose violence he used. The Corsican freedom fighters, the mob, the fucked-up Jacobins, and the Thermidorians each broke France, creating a ladder of corpses for people like Boney. (This feat is repeated by psychos in most revolutions.) He made general at 26 through an unearned political appointment, and was given absolute command of 63,000 men soon after. Dwyer is out to get Napoleon: he sees propaganda everywhere (even in Boney's private diary, aged 18). The whole book is obsessed with the Construction of Napoleon - for instance, did you know that when he won a battle, *he told people about it expecting praise*? This sentence, or its proposition, is repeated more than a hundred times: > *This encounter [with a prostitute] is taken by most historians at face value, but it is entirely possible that the account is fictional, nothing more than a fanciful exercise of the pen.* Of course it's possible, but so what? What is its probability? (I continue to read nonfiction which isn't data-driven - more fool me, I suppose.) It's weird to feel annoyed by the hypercritical spirit; I'm usually on the other side of this fence. Dwyer is at least jargon-free. And Napoleon certainly lies all the time - to his rivals, his friends, and to posterity. An odd case: both genius and fraud - a genius of dishonesty. (Like Edison?) Much of this long book is just a prose list of events, many of them insignificant (not to say prurient). There is basically no military detail - most of the major battles get half a page. Fine as reference work maybe. --- *Misc:*

	* I knew that standing armies of the day were rammed full of pillagers, rapists, and thieves, but I was surprised to find that their generals were little better - Napoleon extracted about 80 million francs (maybe half a billion dollars?) from the Italians he conquered, under the name "requisitions". (This is many times the tax rate of the previous Austrian occupiers.) * The many portraits of N are comically dissimilar - simply because done by artists who had never seen him or any image of him. * His romantic insecurity is also surprising: he writes to Josephine much more than she replies, and is constantly crestfallen to find her gone without saying where. * "Jacobin" is a terrible choice of name for a social justice magazine. It's more like "Khmer Rouge Weekly" or "the Daily Witchfinder" than anything laudable: ~40,000 executed or left to rot and a hundred thousand in the Vendée, mostly religious peasants, *as well as* atrocities like mass slow drownings). The Jacobins deserve some share of Napoleon's millions of dead too - for all that N was only pretending to be a Jacobin. Of course, the revolution nominally ended feudalism, redistributed land, and claimed to establish human rights. But we know in hindsight that this could have been done without killing 1% of the country and 0.6% of everyone alive - for instance, it was in Britain, and it was by earlier and later French republicans. So you got some nicer rhetoric in exchange for millions of gallons of blood. It suits me to call the Jacobins a perversion of the Enlightenment. This has lately been characterised as a trick - if it's wrong for *Jacobin* to cherry-pick the bits they like about the Jacobins (anger, radicalisation, protest marches, beautiful lip-service to egalitarianism) then it's wrong for me to say they're not really part of 'the Enlightenment'. But it is a sick joke of history that Montesquieu's rage at torture, Condorcet's rational politics, and Bentham's impressive moral generosity must share a name with these torturing and bigoted totalitarians. But why is *Jacobin* called *Jacobin*? > *In the United States, most people do not associate the term with a particular political group. It sounds vaguely radical... I had heard the word as a child: my parents... had copies of CLR James' Black Jacobins at home. In reality, it was not more thoughtful or premeditated than that! For the artistic director Remeike Forbes who was born in Jamaica, the term refers to the same book... "Bolshevik" would not be bad as a title in fact! Why not, one day...* : just idiocy, not malice.
Jennifer Government (2002) by Max Barry	Dumb fun, mind candy. Go for Richard Morgan instead if you want more politically serious schlock, go for Stephenson if you want actual dystopian awe.
Vellum (The Book of All	Loads and loads of ideas (angels! gay angels! history is written on skin!), a few impressive sentences, but with almost no effort to make any of them relate to any other. *Cloud Atlas* without the overarching sense.

Hours, #1) (2005) by Hal Duncan	
Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution (2002) by Francis Fukuyama	Attack on transhumanism brought to you by a man most famous for being wrong. Now he worries that science is going to make life too easy – that overcoming human evolution's horrible legacy issues (e.g. ubiquitous mental illness, moral myopia, unspeakable death) with biotechnology will amount to the death of the soul. (Where the soul is that which thrives on adversity, is real / spiritual / creative, and Takes Responsibility.) I shouldn't mock; Fukuyama at least handles this fear secularly and rationally, and his existential claim is not wrong by definition; also, it is interesting to him endorse regulation for once. This is a clear statement of a common (the default?) position on a matter of huge importance. However, his arguments are piss-poor: he argues via 1) using fictional evidence – *Brave New World* and the *Bible*; by 2) suggesting, without real evidence, that there are insurmountable trade-offs between longevity and cognition, happiness and creativity, and personality and freedom; and by 3) a truly massive suppressed premise: that things are ok as they are (or, at least, as good as they get). The first section, laying out 2002's cutting edge in life extension, neuropharmacology, and genetic engineering, is fair and good. He accuses bioethicists of being gung-ho shills for Industry, which is interesting, but completely opposed to my experience of them as timid precautionists. If you read it, read Bostrom too.
Battle Royale, Vol. 01 (Battle Royale, #1) (2000) by Koushun Takami	Villain was pretty good, a classic Japanese anti-sensuality horrorshow. And clearly the premise appeals to people, since the sanitised dayglo version did well.
The Arctic Incident (Artemis Fowl #2) (2002) by Eoin Colfer	None yet
From Russia With Love (James Bond, #5) (1957) by Ian Fleming	Can't find the bit where he describes Klebb as "smelling like a lesbian", but I'd struggle to invent such a detail.
The Establishment: And How They Get	Begins very well: > *'The Establishment' is a term that is often loosely used to mean "people*

Away with It (2014) by Owen Jones	> *with power whom I object to".* But this awareness didn't immunise him to self-service: instead of writing a book about just "the people with power", or "people who abuse their power", he focusses on one sort: the many cronies and neoliberals that cling to the country's upper reaches. The Jonesian Establishment consists of: fiscally conservative think tanks (but not powerful fiscally liberal ones); Old Boy MPs (but not originally working-class ones, however much they use the same revolving doors); the news media (but not himself, with 500,000 followers); the police; all corporate bosses; anything to do with the City. This is only a problem because of his choice of term, which implies that his description covers all the powerful in Britain. (A big omission, for instance, are the unions. Unite and Unison have extremely frequent meetings with the most powerful politicians in the country - quite rightly - and have an incredibly strong role in selecting some of those people - quite dubiously. They sometimes use this power against the public interest, e.g. GMB propping up Trident. But they are not Establishment to Jones.*) He is thinking clearly, and that's half the work in finding the truth, which is half the work in changing the world. But, above the level of reporting individual events, he is just not empirically reliable: he notes that the *Sun* has 3m readers and just assumes that this means they are all-powerful in elections. Actually the (British, C21st) media has little effect on election outcomes - they produce only 1-2% swings.** A more general problem: Jones has a fundamentally *moral* conception of society's problems: "the poor primarily suffer because of the greed or cowardice or ignorance of our rulers. Nationalisations and the £20 minimum wage would have no real downside." This is as opposed to the engineering conception, which sees the constraints, tradeoffs, and tries to design solutions with these in mind. Still, my sympathies are with people who get attacked on both sides of a war, as Jones often does - for being both naively idealistic about economics and democracy, *and* insufficiently radical and obedient to the party line. He bears some millstones, like his totally unanalysed use of the Left/Right divide (he prefaces every single bloody interview with bloody anyone with a binary tag, one way or the other). Anyway this is fine as very recent political history. (If you were paying attention to politics during the Noughties, then you maybe won't learn much new here, but it's a great primer for the foreign or young.) I was angry afterward, so clearly he is effective at his chosen task; god knows if political anger is what we need though. (I read a *lot* of non-data-driven nonfiction, god knows why. Maybe so my anger can be relevant at least, or in preparation for pseuds' dinner parties.) * (I also wish he'd stop capitalising the damn word all the time.) ** A belief in the brain-washing power of the media - to change voting behaviour, to instil sexism, to desensitize us to violence - is one of the defining quirks of the modern hard left, despite there being decent counter-evidence against each effect. *Percipi est esse.*
The	Sullen Objectivist / parapsychologist rant, aimed at convincing someone to

Decline And Fall Of Science (1989) by Celia Green	give her £10m ("*Considering how much there is to be done in this subject, that much would be reasonable*"). Somehow this blared forth from elite trappings, Hamish Hamilton. Behold her ancient sneer: > *In the early days of psychical research, that is to say, during the short period before the volume of activity in the subject petered out on account of the decline of civilisation...* Chapter 1 is "The Decline and Fall of Civilisation". 6 and 7 get the declines of physics and medicine out of the way in 22 pages. Chapter 14: "Psychokinesis". Chapter 17: "Conclusion, for the Particular Attention of Millionaires". So I admit I picked this up to laugh at it: the first page has Green declare herself an unappreciated genius, followed by pages of mostly inapt aphorisms: > *When people talk about 'the sanctity of the individual' they mean 'the sanctity of the statistical norm'.</blockquote>* > > *Women are the last people to entrust with children. Those who have repressed their own aspirations will scarcely be tolerant of the aspirations of others.* > > *'Social justice' – the expression of universal hatred.* > > *(Though I like 'Democracy: the idea that everyone should have an equal opportunity to obstruct everybody else.')* > > *Extra point for entertaining sheer aristocratic woo.</td> </tr>*
A Clue to the Exit (2000) by Edward St. Aubyn	Has many of St Aubyn's distinctive virtues - acute black comedy about every social stratum, characters creatively misspending resources, the sometime delight of being exploited, actual knowledge of modern philosophy - but this time it doesn't gel. The protagonist, Fairburn, writes a book with Patrick Melrose as a character - which invites us to identify Fairburn with St Aubyn. But it doesn't fit very well; Fairburn's life work is meaningless and saccharine. They are both troubled and self-destructive and possibly redeemed I suppose. The enframed narrative with Patrick is annoying, and annoyingly this is intentional: > *Yesterday Angelique came into the bedroom holding my thin manuscript. She moved towards the open window and I surged up from the pillows shouting, 'Don't!'* > *'Oh, don't worry,' she said, 'I'm not going to throw it out of the window — that would be doing you a favour.'* > *'You don't like it?'* > *'It's wooden and dry and boring. I can't believe this is what you want to do with your last days. Why don't you write about how wonderful the figs taste when you know you may never taste one again?'* > *'Because they don't,' I said, 'they taste like ash.'* > *'Why don't you tell us how we must live every moment to the full because life is so precious?'* > *'Because if it's dying that makes you realize that, you're already too anxious to do anything about it. I wanted to do something serious…'* > *'You are doing something serious: you're dying,' she said, laughing.*

> *'Something impersonal.'*
> *'But that's exactly the problem: you must make it more personal, more human, more dramatic. You should write from your own experience, write about us... I think the real problem is that you don't know how to make abstract ideas exciting...'*
> *She left the room and, paralysed by failure and confusion, I watched the breeze scatter the pages across the floor.*

This is a good skewering of upper-middle-class / academic conceit:

> *The warden's sly, pedantic chuckle seemed to reverberate among the bookshops and gargoyles that guarded the taxi rank; his gurgling complacencies soaked the golden buildings until they split open like soggy trifle. Perhaps they had once been intended for something serious, but there had been too many puns, too many Latin tags, too many acrostics, too many fiendish crossword puzzles, too many witty misquotations and too many sly chuckles for them to do anything but rot, however noble and solid they might look to the winking eye of a tourist's camera.*

Many, many different ideas about consciousness show up appear, from the zany (Penrose and Sheldrake) to the canonical (Colin McGinn and Galen Strawson). The stuff on Penrose and Sheldrake is accurate, in the weak sense that it describes their positions correctly. Sadly it's mysterianism that wins over Patrick / Charlie. The conclusion is roughly a celebration of the mere manifest image, quietism, Wittgenstein's gallic shrug. It manages to miss the point of scientific interest in consciousness, and underestimate the progress it's made already:

> *I saw the latest cluster of books to emerge from the great consciousness debate: Emotional Intelligence, The Feeling Brain, The Heart's Reasons. I felt the giddy relief of knowing that I wasn't going to read any of them. The fact that science has decided to include emotion in its majestic worldview seems about as astute as an astronomer discovering the moon.*

Oh well. Plenty of cynical goodness besides. For instance, I have felt the following emotion, back when I didn't have the spine to refuse to go clubbing:

> *I sat down on a velvet bench and through all the smoke and the bad music and the undesirable desire I suddenly allowed myself to become relaxed. Even here there was no need to posture. The essential question remained the same. Where could I find freedom in this situation? I looked around and felt reconciled with all the people in Alessandro's party and all the people in the room. I could spray adjectives at them for the rest of the evening, but in the end they were just people struggling to be happy with only the most unpromising material at their disposal.*

The Dictionary of Received	*Stuff White People Like* plus *Speak your Branes*, but minus two hundred years. This is Flaubert being bitchy about C19th France bourgeoisie/hipsters: the contradictory and petty zeitgeist. I myself have used 'alabaster' to describe a woman, whoops.

Ideas (1913) by Gustave Flaubert	
Knots (1970) by R.D. Laing	Wildcard psychologist writes meh tongue-twisters about the horror of recursivity. > *"JACK: Forgive me.* > *JILL: No.* > *JACK: I'll never forgive you for not forgiving me."* His point's that conflict escalates because we forget the original contention and argue about the argument instead. Which is neat if not exhaustive. His logic's more sophisticated than I expected – "*Jack sees / that there is something Jill can't see and Jack sees / that Jill can't see she can't see it. // Although Jack can see Jill can't see she can't see it / he can't see that he can't see it himself.*" – but repetition kills the wit. (Laing is on my list of Very Harmful But Oddly Lionized People - see also Cesar Chavez, Henry Kissinger, Mother Teresa, Frida Kahlo, Leon Trotsky, Zhou Enlai - but he has nothing on Freud in that regard.)
Feynman's Rainbow: A Search for Beauty in Physics and in Life (2005) by Leonard Mlodinow	A masked autobiography, which masking I resented. About 180pp of anxious stories about LM, and Caltech local colour; about 20pp of original, direct quotation from RP. but even these are not so distinctive. Feynman's work and worldview are fantastic and nourishing, but get it from him. (Funny line from a blurb in the front of this book: "physics, that seemingly grey subculture".) 2/5 for anyone who knows about RP already.
Vineland (1990) by Thomas Pynchon	Didn't get it, first time through anyway.
In the Light of What We Know (2014) by Zia Haider Rahman	Two globish co-dependents of unequal intelligence but equal mawkishness take turns at monologue, for ages and ages. One's oracular, the other Boswellian, which means that both talk about the nasty past of the oracular one, Zafar. Everyone's always trying to educate everyone else, without invitation. Tragic, panoptic, and treats big C21st problems – neocolonialism, quant finance, the ineffectiveness of NGOs, the nature of the transnational élite that administers all these things. But also dull, overwritten and clumsily polymathic (characters can be found over-reading, variously, Gödel, Middlemarch, the birth of Bangladesh, the Brit-pop band James). The book is aware of its own pomp – there's a long discussion of sincerity as virtue and vice, a raging attack on Anglophone Indian literature, and Zafar quotes more and more as he disintegrates, suggesting that the book's larding of quotations is a knowing prop. But while I don't know whether it's Zafar or Rahman that the book's clumsiness is rooted in, I don't have to, to know that his conceit of desperate knowledge didn't take root in me. I shouldn't say panoptic: there's only one woman in this, really, and we don't see much even of her except as deceiver and appalling vehicle for

	privilege. Chapter 14's good – a big bickering, drunken dinner with Pakistani elites, and there are details to admire throughout (Zafar broods over microaggressions, and some of his apercus are sparkling – like his characterisation of maths as "thinking without the encumbrance of knowledge", or his likening of a good essay to "a good dress – long enough to cover the important bits, short enough to be interesting"). Last, very superficially: there are no speech marks, and this deadens the dialogue for me; it makes everything look past-tense and snarky. (Ok sure this works incredibly well in *Blood Meridian*, but only because all the men in that are wholly dead inside). Will Self minus electricity; Coetzee minus originality and 12-gauge philosophy. Speaking as a pompous generalist and an inveterate over-writer…
Nexus (Nexus, #1) (2012) by Ramez Naam	Deeply unsubtle bio-libertarian thriller. Tom Clancy plus software plus anti-statism plus globalisation. Lots of ideas; Naam knows enough about code and brain-machine interfaces to make gestures towards the big info-nano-tech turning point in our near-to-mid-future, and acknowledges the horrors it is likely to enable. ("*The Chandler Act (aka the Emerging Technological Threats Act of 2032) is the opening salvo in a new War on Science. To understand the future course of this war, one need only look at the history of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror. Like those two manufactured "wars", this one will be never-ending, freedom-destroying, counterproductive, and ultimately understood to have caused far more damage than the supposed threat it was aimed at ever could have.*") He has a nice message: > *\tBroad dissemination and individual choice turn most technologies into a plus. If only the elites have access, it's a dystopia..* But the cheap prose and action (and the abuse of Nietzsche) are too wearing, particularly coming right after Stross, a master thereof.
Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability (2000) by Steve Krug	Very clear, very humane. Underneath his smiley-grumpy homilies is an intuitive brand of cognitive science. (He gives a couple of scientific citations, but the model has much more to do with simple sympathetic cynicism than evidence.) That is: Minimise text; have a strong visual hierarchy of size, prominence, clickability; have clear spaced sections of content on each page; keep page names literal; keep the background quiet; never write instructions - make it wordlessly, mindlessly obvious; use conventions unless you have a good reason not to. Which is obviously all good stuff, but overall I didn't like the dad-joke air.
Stig of the Dump (1963) by Clive King	None yet
High Performance MySQL: Optimization, Backups, and Replication	Databasing is all of the following: a hard precondition of almost all modern social activities; the high-stakes application of some very deep intellectual tortures; unutterably boring. This book's a nice intro to higher-level considerations: Query tuning (i.e. ask the question better), indexing (i.e. ask if it's been asked before), server tuning (ask a better person), replication (ask several people), benchmarking (ask trick questions). Not exactly chatty, but as engaging as you could expect:

(2008) by Baron Schwartz	> *The chapter concludes with recommendations for the long term care and feeding of your column indexes.* And it's not as gruesomely platform-specific as the title implies. > *changing hardware might, in the best case, give you a 10-fold increase in speed. But tuning queries can often give you 1000-fold performance increase. Seriously.* Not deep, though: they namedrop B-trees and the query optimiser, but do not explain them beyond noting that they are very good and you should trust them. I haven't yet seen a bad O'Reilly book.
Programming Pig (2011) by Alan Gates	Another totally readable introduction to something new, without a full StackOverflow safety net yet. (Pig is very good, like an imperative, Pythonic SQL: an omnivorous abstraction over MapReduce with Pythonic data structures, optional Java typing, optional schema declaration, fully extensible in Java, Python, etc. Pig is not Turing-complete, but offers several no-fuss ways to extend and delegate, including this beam of sunlight. I'm porting a bunch of SAS and MapReduce code into Pig Latin atm; the job can sometimes be done in 10 times fewer lines.) However, I read this in the slightly dazed and impermeable way that I read anything I am to read for work. [Free!]
How Should a Person Be? (2010) by Sheila Heti	Ooft. Uncomfortable navel-gazing about navel-gazing. Autobiographical metafictional first-world problems: unrequited narcissism and joint solipsism. Also writer's block. It's hard to talk about pretentious things that know they are and discuss it well: this is masterful about sophomorism and novel about the navel. It directs interpretation – 'I can't call it wanky, it just called itself wanky!'. Heti's deadly serious about frivolous things, but also important ones (e.g. the passage detailing her sexual masochism, or 'The White Men Go to Africa', mocking poverty tourists.) The artistic equivalent of a hundred selfies. The answer to the title is "Like my friend Margaux but not too much so": twee and wilful and sceptical and direct.
This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate (2014) by Naomi Klein	Exciting but not persuasive. It's an attempt to borrow the prestige and consensus of the Green movement to push through all the expensive social policies she wanted anyway. That sounds cynical, but she says as much right at the start of the book: > *I was propelled into a deeper engagement with [environmentalism] partly because I realized it could be a catalyst for forms of social and economic justice in which I already believed... liberals are still averting their eyes, having yet to grasp that climate science has handed them the most powerful argument against unfettered capitalism since William Blake's 'dark Satanic Mills'* Here's what I think the central argument is (she never comes out and says

it):

> *Climate change is an existential risk.*
> *Capitalism exacerbates climate change.*
> *Therefore change capitalism.*

But the subtitle's misleading; she constantly blurs the distinction between two theses: 1) 'solving the climate crisis will require regulation of the market', and 2) 'solving the climate crisis will require the abolition of capitalism' In most of this she doesn't endorse (2) at all - "*there is plenty of room to make a profit in a zero-carbon economy*" - and surprisingly she doesn't deny that communism was worse for the environment than the C20th Western system:

> *...the truth is that, while contemporary, hyper-globalized capitalism has exacerbated the climate crisis, it did not create it. We started treating the atmosphere as our waste dump when we began using coal on a commercial scale in the late 1700s and engaged in similarly reckless ecological practices well before that. Moreover, humans have behaved in this shortsighted way not only under capitalist systems, but under systems that called themselves socialist as well...*

If you read closely enough you see her actual target is not capitalism but '*extractivism*', the (ancient!) tendency of people to exploit natural resources relentlessly.

The cause of extractivism is fatuously said to be the philosophical divide between mind and body, whence also science and the industrial revolution. This causation is ascertained in one line, with a vague citation to unnamed feminist scholars having "recognised" (by which she means conclusively demonstrated) this at some point (pp.177).

She's really good at generating urgency and panic: she calls anything that doesn't cut all 10 petagrams of emissions *right away* a "failure". And since it's a failure, therefore confront and block and yell. (Needless to say, activism can't make all the cuts in time either.)

She has a chapter on each of the non-political solutions: so she is sequentially anti-nuclear, anti-GM, anti-geoengineering, anti-cap, anti-tax, anti-Branson, anti-'corporate reponsibility'. I suspect she's wrong about most of these. But she is most wrong on the matter of carbon pricing and Big Green. We need to stop subsidising fossil fuels (you can blame lobbying for those if you like, but this is still a massive government failure). And pricing is the best and least dangerous policy option.

In their stead she promotes "planning and banning" (vast micromanagement of allowed resources and technologies), divestment (which we know has no long-term effect on public companies) and blockading machinery (which sorta works but at terrible human cost). She also wants North America to be more northern European, with

> *cheap public transit and clean light rail accessible to all: affordable, energy-efficient housing along those transit lines; cities planned for high-density living; bike lanes in which riders aren't asked to risk their lives to get to work; land management that discourages sprawl and encourages local, low-energy forms of agriculture; urban design that clusters essential services like schools and health care along transit routes and in*

> *pedestrian-friendly areas; programs that require manufacturers to be responsible for the electronic waste their produce...*

That's most evocative of the Netherlands. But their infrastructure was not born of mass politics, green or otherwise, but rather of high energy costs and low land per capita. Joseph Heath explains that this cost difference

> *creates the demand for transit, bike lanes, and pedestrian-friendly cities, just like the electricity price creates the demand for efficient housing. This is what drives the style of planning that predominates in that country. You can do all the "planning" of urban development you want, but unless people actually want to live in the high-density houses you're building, they will remain empty. The reason they are attractive to people in the Netherlands is that the alternatives are unattractive, largely because of the cost.*
>
> *Given the impact that prices have on behaviour throughout the economy, it is clear that the ability to control prices is by far the most powerful policy lever that the state has in its possession. Thus the natural upshot of a wish-list like the one Klein presents is that the state should start to price the carbon externality generated through fossil-fuel consumption, through either a cap-and-trade system or a carbon tax. And yet this is not what Klein recommends.*

Anyway the market is decarbonising. I would say that we have the benefit of the three years of progress since she wrote this, but the (capitalist) trend was clear back then too: 17% renewables growth per year.

Electric cars are now cheaper to run than fossil ones and the price curve is tending quickly and strongly down. New-build solar power is now cheaper per megawatt than oil, and the associated storage cells for night are becoming cheaper even faster. These are both market developments (boosted by subsidies but more and more self-sustaining).

She has a long section on how having a child was the cause of her environmentalism - but she fails to reconcile this with the fact that having a child in the developed world is the single most significant environmental footprint for an individual; it would take an extraordinary amount of work to just zero out this harm.

As economics this is shaky, and as politics unlikely, but she remains a good journalist. Where by journalist I mean 'person who works at the "These terrible unknown things are happening; here is what the people involved say. What might it mean?" level'. She also writes at the "Here is the big picture and what to do about it" level though, and honestly I recommend just walking right by those bits (pages 1 through 300).

Minus a point because it falsely maligns effective and politically available environment policies, and so has done expected harm.

Read Mackay and OWiD instead.

Watching the	Pretty funny, maybe the first bit of cultural anthropology I've liked (because it is low-level and in fact exasperatingly empirical). Here is her on her own

English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour (2004) by Kate Fox	tribe: > *the... currently fashionable practice is to devote at least a chapter of your book or Ph.D. thesis to a tortured, self-flagellating disquisition on the ethical and methodological difficulties of participant observation. Although the whole point of the participant element is to understand the culture from a 'native' perspective, you must spend a good three pages explaining that your unconscious ethnocentric prejudices, and various other cultural barriers, probably make this impossible. It is then customary to question the entire moral basis of the observation element, and, ideally, to express grave reservations about the validity of modern Western 'science' as a means of understanding anything at all.* > *At this point, the uninitiated reader might legitimately wonder why we continue to use a research method that is clearly either morally questionable or unreliable or both. I wondered this myself, until I realised that these doleful recitations of the dangers and evils of participant observation are a form of protective mantra, a ritual chant similar to the rather charming practice of some Native American tribes who, before setting out on a hunt or chopping down a tree, would sing apologetic laments to appease the spirits of the animals they were about to kill or the tree they were about to fell.* > *A less charitable interpretation would see anthropologists' ritual self-abasements as a disingenuous attempt to deflect criticism by pre-emptive confession of their failings – like the selfish and neglectful lover who says, 'Oh, I'm such a bastard, I don't know why you put up with me,' relying on our belief that such awareness and candid acknowledgement of a fault is almost as virtuous as not having it.* > *But whatever the motives, conscious or otherwise, the ritual chapter agonising over the role of the participant observer tends to be mind-numbingly tedious...* Even with a style like that, this gets repetitive. But her explicit decoding would be so, so helpful to incomers or neuroatypicals. She is particularly good on the subtle way that class is central in Britain (not "no oiks allowed" but rather "can he choose and pronounce the word 'toilet' ").
Jurassic Park (Jurassic Park, #1) (1990) by Michael Crichton	*Frankensaurus*. Both very clumsy and ahead of its time. Crichton is often described as a one-legged stool: i.e. he has good ideas, but no prose or characters. Ian Malcolm, his sexy radfem primitivist chaos theorist is an exception, and if anything the film's (iconic) depiction of him is less striking and seductive than the sneering pole depicted here. It's worth picking on Malcolm because he's depicted as prescient, fundamentally correct about the island; he gets the most airtime by far, with the only pushback being Hammond saying "pish posh!" every so often - (Unless you count the raptor attacking him as a discursive act); he is even given the chapter header pages to be oracular on, slowly drawing a dragon curve as if it meant anything. And his philosophy, endorsed by Crichton, is tepid and dismaying finger-wagging.

So: He denies that modern life is better than premodern life and endorses Sahlins' lazy-bushman hypothesis:

> *'What advances?' Malcolm said irritably. 'The number of hours women devote to housework has not changed since 1930, despite all the advances. All the vacuum cleaners, washer-dryers, trash compactors, garbage disposals, wash-and-wear fabrics... Why does it still take as long to clean the house as it did in 1930?'*
>
> *Ellie said nothing.*
>
> *'Because there haven't been any advances,' Malcolm said. 'Not really. Thirty thousand years ago, when men were doing cave paintings at Lascaux, they worked twenty hours a week to provide themselves with food and shelter and clothing. The rest of the time, they could play, or sleep, or do whatever they wanted. And they lived in a natural world, with clean air, clean water, beautiful trees and sunsets. Think about it. Twenty hours a week. Thirty thousand years ago.'*

The first claim is flatly false: average housework by US women decreased by about 14 hours(!) a week over this period. (Table 6, last column.) This is despite ballooning house sizes, inventory of objects to maintain, and time actually spent with the children. It also omits our greatly increased levels of hygiene and personal fragrance, though I suppose that could be zero-sum if we habituate to it.

The second is false but not as flatly. I can't find anyone speculating "twenty hours" about the economy of the Upper Paleolithic French. If Crichton is merely mashing up the famous Bushman studies with the punchy image of Lascaux, then despite celebrated dissemination by anthropologists, the claim is untrue: contemporary African hunter-gatherers spend more than 50 hours a week on food production. Worse, Malcolm's smug rant puts zero weight on the giant disease burden, the constant warfare, the giant boredom, the crushing conformity and illiberty of nomad life, and the perfect absence of intellectual life among the ancients.

(Judging by the hostility of Pinker's reviewers, Ian Malcolm is still with us, railing against e.g. consumerism and overpopulation - as if those weren't people just trying to live their lives - and reductionism, denying or minimising the huge material and spiritual gains of science and other blessed modernities.)

More: Malcolm is himself wildly overconfident about modelling, e.g. the fit of basic fractal theory to the park disaster; Crichton is credulous about the almost-completely unfulfilled promises of the wild-eyed Santa Fe set.

> *They believed that prediction was just a function of keeping track of things. If you knew enough, you could predict anything*

The latter claim is true for all phenomena except pure random number generators though; the untrue version Crichton means depends on ignorantly thinking that "predict" always (or ever) means "predict with certainty".

Crichton was a programmer, and there's a nice wee code listing in a critical moment, in a made up language resembling Perl + Forth + COBOL.

	Definitely optimised for making the reader feel smart for reading it, or vindicated in skipping it. But points still.
Cash (1997) by Johnny Cash	Oh no! Just a list of sentences, and bucolic, undirected sentences at that. The origin story is obviously compelling, and the Sun records bit is tasty. But he fails to say anything interesting about the road, the drugs, or the country Scene which he so resents, nor the amazing Rubin work which brought him back his immortality. There are flashes of spirit ("*As I've often said, I grew up under socialism, and it saved my family*"), but otherwise this is one long Acknowledgments page.
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Chronicles of Narnia, #1) (1950) by C.S. Lewis	Don't really understand the appeal. *Famous Five* plus the weaker bits of *Lord of the Rings*
The Magus (1965) by John Fowles	Contemptible, but worth reading: it gets really good around page 450. The way there is a slog: the de Sade epigrams, the unreflective Freudianism, this: > *It was Greece again, the Alexandrian Greece of Cavafy; there were only degrees of aesthetic pleasure; of beauty in decadence. Morality was a North European lie.* Snobbery, delusion, bad sex, worse chat, and the limits of reason: Ladies and gentlemen: we were The Existentialists! Not a patch on Alain-Fournier, nor on *Lanark*, nor Bioy Casares. The eponymous sage is not sagacious, just imperious. I liked the vignettes that show Conchis' personality as a stolen (or put-on) patchwork of people he had met in his life (the nasty aesthete Comte, the mad Norwegian mystic, the Nazi firing squad). It took quite a long time for me to realise that Fowles might not endorse the nasty blithering of basically every character. (The book seems to have Bad Fans and Bad Haters who never realise this.) > *My monstrous crime was Adam's, the oldest and most vicious of all male selfishness: to have imposed the role I needed from Alison on her real self.* Anyway my time was recompensed by the great big postmodern explosion of the last 150 pages. Some very lovely passages throughout too: > *The bowed head, the buried face. She is silent, she will never speak, never forgive, never reach a hand, never leave this frozen present tense. All waits, suspended. Suspended the autumn trees, the autumn sky, anonymous people. A blackbird, poor fool, sings out of season from the willows by the lake. A flight of pigeons over the houses; fragments of freedom, hazard, an anagram made flesh. And somewhere the stinging smell of burning leaves.*

	The ending, so easily hated, does not strike me as meaning "to win love eternal, go on just hit her in the face", despite appearances. It is rather a parting stab at your opinion of Nicholas, a big Straussian dischord thrown into the supposed perfect cadence of the godgame people's efforts; Lily's grand second commandment dissolves suddenly, saltily, and then: a warm mist descends. Go guess. Fine if you're a glutton for philosophical dialogues and *Truman Show* recursions.
Lady Chatterley's Lover (1928) by D.H. Lawrence	Alright, so it might be easy to mock (e.g. Connie insists on referring to orgasm as her "crisis"), and it's definitely on the *Well of Loneliness / Uncle Tom's Cabin / Yellow Wallpaper* side (of books that we can be glad were written and read without wanting to read them ourselves). And sure its idea of class and relative virility is dumb. Also its dichotomising and opposing mind and body, and its revaluation of the body over the mind. And its whole mythology of the phallus. Maybe it reads like a Mills and Boon in places (note that the gruff Northern gamekeeper is really a decorated officer back from the Raj with perfectly fine vowels if he felt like using them)... &c &c
Object-oriented Software Engineering (2001) by Timothy Lethbridge	Software engineering is just a fancy word for design. It consists in getting a long way away from your code – procedural, data, architectural, set-theoretic abstraction – which I resented at first, but which is far more important than it looks. UML is a rigorous, machine-readable graphical logic. Rather than lines of code, design patterns are the real units of serious work. This book is painfully exoteric (infected by the ‘stakeholder’ bureaucratese bug), relentless plain, and occasionally the examples are not illustrative, but all right fine. (NB 5 years later: The top-down OOP / UML approach has never been useful to me in 5 years of professional coding.)
The Catcher in the Rye (1951) by J.D. Salinger	Mostly annoying, but I can see how it was important (for at least lending an actual voice, at least pointing at the real deal hyperactive aimlessness of many young adults).
The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet (Wayfarers, #1) (2014) by Becky Chambers	Chatty, hollow, twee.
Learning Spark: Lightning-Fast Big Data	Tool books are difficult to stomach: their contents are so much more ephemeral than other technical books. It's not worth it: in 10 years, will it matter? etc. (This is an incredibly high bar to pose, but that's how high my opinion is of the technical pursuits.) O'Reilly soften this blow, occasionally, by enlisting really brilliant authors who bring in the eternal and the broad

Analysis (2013) by Holden Karau	while pootering around their narrow furrow. (I am incredibly fond of Alan Gates for this, for instance.) Spark is the biggest deal by far in my corner of the world and will probably affect your life in minor ways you will never pin down (see O'Neil below). [Theory #1, Thinking #1]</li>
The Master Algorithm: How the Quest for the Ultimate Learning Machine Will Remake Our World (2015) by Pedro Domingos	Overambitious pop science from a lively and charming narrator. He tries to sketch all of machine learning in a couple hundred pages. The warmth of his teaching voice comes through the page: > *As you read the book, feel free to skim or skip any parts you find troublesome; it's the big picture that matters, and you'll probably get more out of those parts if you revisit them after the puzzle is assembled.* but he needs a better editor, more even than Nassim Taleb does. This is often just a stream-of-consciousness analogy-dump, and with precise topics that just doesn't fly. (Both Penguin productions.) There's more wrong with it than prose, unfortunately: he gives equal time to unpromising approaches (genetic programming, analogical reasoning) and so has to skim over the single most important approach (deep learning), with no real sense of the giant differences in success. Couple this with his terrible argument against AI risk ("*unlike humans, computers don't have a will of their own. They're products of engineering, not evolution... the evaluation function is determined by us. A more powerful computer will just optimize it better... The same reasoning applies to all AI systems because they all—explicitly or implicitly—have the same three components. They can vary what they do, even come up with surprising plans, but only in service of the goals we set them.*") and it becomes actively unhelpful. (Pedantic aside: he commits linguistic violence every time he uses "algorithm" instead of the unsexy true referent, "*program*". He obviously knows the distinction much better than I do, but skips this to talk down / excitingly to the audience.) Read his great dense paper instead. DNF 50%
Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa (2009) by Dambisa Moyo	Sloppy and overzealous. Also a careless rehash of the highly original economist Peter Bauer. Don't read this, even if you think that foreign aid is usually great (read Easterly or Riddell for accurate disillusionment instead).
High Performance MySQL: Optimierung, Datensicherung, Replikation	None yet

& Lastverteilung () by Baron Schwartz	
The Codeless Code () by QI	Violent twee parables about software development. Generally overwrought, and you can get them in a minute or two each time, unlike the bizarre original koans, which demand convoluted confabulation. But '*Codeless Code*' is an instance of an important genre: the *romanticisation of the highly abstract and novel*. We need such things; otherwise those of us without internal wellsprings of meaning will find it boring, and will thus never excel; otherwise a culture will never grow, and nothing human lasts without growing a culture. There is enough art, except regarding new matters, new concepts, new possibilities, where there is nowhere near enough. "Ah!", you say, "But Yudkowsky did just this, and got roundly mocked and called a cult leader and divers other bad things." Yes: that is the main tax we pay to be on the internet. I think of Yudkowsky as George Eliot thinks of Carlyle (though she hated him btw): > > *...the highest aim in education is analogous to the highest aim in mathematics, namely, to obtain not results but powers, not particular solutions, but the means by which endless solutions may be wrought. He is the most effective educator who aims less at perfecting specific acquirements than at producing that mental condition which renders acquirements easy, and leads to their useful application...* > > > > *On the same ground it may be said that the most effective writer is... he who rouses in others the activities that must issue in discovery, who awakes men from their indifference to the right and the wrong, who nerves their energies to seek for the truth and live up to it at whatever cost... he clears away the film from your eyes that you may search for data to some purpose. He does not, perhaps, convince you, but he strikes you, undeceives you, animates you. You are not directly fed by his books, but you are braced as by a walk up to an alpine summit, and yet subdued to calm and reverence as by the sublime things to be seen from that summit. Such a writer is Thomas Carlyle.* > > > > *It is an idle question to ask whether his books will be read a century hence: if they were all burnt as the grandest of Suttees on his funeral pile, it would be only like cutting down an oak after its acorns have sown a forest. For there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived... The extent of his influence may be best seen in the fact that ideas which were startling novelties when he first wrote them are now become common-places. And we think few men will be found to say that this influence on the whole has not been for good... </blockquote>* *(Who didn't start the fire...)*

	[Free here] *[Thinking #3, Theory #2]* *</td> </tr>*
Economics (2000) by David K.H. Begg	None yet
Romanitas (Romanitas, #1) (2005) by Sophia McDougall	None yet
A Fate Worse Than Debt (1988) by Susan George	Early critique of development loans. However, now pretty irrelevant: e.g. relies on the notion of altruistic Soviet replacement for imperialist aid / balancing out of two imperialist aids.
The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962) by Thomas S. Kuhn	There's an excellent and useful model of science in here, but it's wrapped in two massive dreadful epistemological cockups (incommensurability and ontological relativism).
Bertrand Russell and the Origins of Analytical Philosophy () by Ray Monk	Too specialised, even speaking as a Russell fan who was taking a course on the origins of the Analytics at the time.
A Doll's House (1879) by Henrik Ibsen	None yet
The Playboy of the Western World (1907) by J.M. Synge	None yet
Utopia (1516) by Thomas More	Fun to talk about, not to read. There is this section, which is an early prediction of what would happen to British sharecroppers in the coming centuries: *Your sheep […] that commonly are so meek and so little, now, as I hear, they have become so greedy and fierce that they devour men themselves. They devastate and depopulate fields, houses and towns.*

	> *For in whatever parts of the land sheep yield the finest and thus the most expensive wool, there the nobility and gentry, yes, and even some abbots though otherwise holy men, are not content with the old rents that the land yielded to their predecessors. Living in idleness and luxury without doing society any good no longer satisfies them; they have to do positive evil. For they leave no land free for the plough: they enclose every acre for pasture; they destroy houses and abolish towns, keeping only the churches – and those for sheep-barns.*
Is Justified True Belief Knowledge? () by Edmund L. Gettier	None yet
The Cider House Rules (1985) by John Irving	None yet
Abhorsen (Abhorsen, #3) (2003) by Garth Nix	None yet
Lirael (Abhorsen, #2) (2001) by Garth Nix	None yet
Sabriel (Abhorsen, #1) (1995) by Garth Nix	None yet
112 Gripes about the French: The 1945 Handbook for American GIs in Occupied France (2013) by Leo Rosten	File with *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*: limited but good-hearted practical anthropology. I doubt anything this well-written would escape a military bureaucracy these days.
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (Harry Potter, #4)	None yet

(2000) by J.K. Rowling	
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (Harry Potter, #2) (1998) by J.K. Rowling	None yet
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Harry Potter, #1) (1997) by J.K. Rowling	None yet
The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills (1969) by Charles Bukowski	None yet
The Uncommon Reader (2007) by Alan Bennett	None yet
The Arsonists (1958) by Max Frisch	Main gag is how obvious it was that the Nazis were going to be the Nazis - the arsonists repeatedly tell their genial host that they are arsonists, ask for his help with the fuses, bring him a wreath with his name on it, etc. I suspect that's probably hindsight bias (half of the German Jews did manage to flee Germany, but some was due to the initial Nazi policy of encouraging emigration). Is the Doctor Heidegger? Funny-sad, anyway.
Laughable Loves (1970) by Milan Kundera	None yet
Groosham Grange (Groosham Grange, #1) (1988) by Anthony Horowitz	None yet

When Nietzsche Wept (1992) by Irvin D. Yalom	Pretty annoying fanfiction. Yalom crowbars Breuer (proto-Freud, the Anna O. guy) into Nietzsche's life, because it would've stretched taste to have Young Freud (pre-Charcot) do it. His is a strange one-dimensional Nietzsche, with none of the real one's lightness, humour, and contempt. (I imagine the portrayal of Breuer is equally simplistic and annoying, but I'm not interested in finding out.) Much like *In the Light of What We Know*: an oracle and a servant discoursing like desperate teenagers, for hundreds of pages. As usual with psychoanalysts, Yalom gives little time to the organic causes of Nietzsche's mental disorders. He was very ill for most of his life; he wasn't a macho prick in the usual sense, since he poured himself out in letters. Yalom doesn't succeed in porting this outpour.
The Hound of the Baskervilles (Sherlock Holmes, #5) (1902) by Arthur Conan Doyle	Dull, four-fifths preamble. Got whodunit, didn't see why.
The Light Fantastic (Discworld, #2; Rincewind #2) (1986) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Matilda (1988) by Roald Dahl	None yet
Equal Rites (Discworld, #3; Witches, #1) (1987) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
Espedair Street (1987) by Iain Banks	First-person sulking by an ambivalently Scottish, ambivalently Left, ambivalently alive Standard Banks Man. Book aims to study spiritual clumsiness and pop music, ending up in a mid-life crisis at 30. Has its moments ("*We put a value on what we treasure, and so cheapen it*"; this line always gives me goosebumps "*her blonde hair slid across the pillow like gold chains over snow (and for an instant I thought* Suzanne takes you down…)").
Open the Door (1920) by Catherine Carswell	Wise but wearing bildungsroman, full with super-Romantic sincerity. Joanna's life is about embracing pleasure and freedom, but is suffused with the bible; even living godlessly, J thinks in its language and punishes herself in its mood.

	Unconventionally emotional: while she doesn't love her husband ("*What they had was not love, but it had beauty, and it served.*") and doesn't grieve her mother's death, Joanna (and Carswell) are brimming with strange new emotions: at one point she's thrilled to ecstasy by a dripping tap. ("*It was the still small voice of a new birth, of a new life, of a new world... For it was the voice before creation, secure, unearthly, frail as filigree yet faithful as a star.*") Ornamented, worthy, but hard work. Probably important.
Surviving (Vagabond) (2009) by Allan Massie	Drunk or ex-drunk Anglos bitch around Rome. Some of the literary references are a bit much ("The boy was reading Stendhal; how bad could he be?") but the nasty driving fatigue underneath is good. Has a really ugly binding and font, so I've compensated the score in case I am shallow.
Skavenslayer (Gotrek & Felix #2) (1999) by William King	None yet
The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared (The Hundred-Year-Old Man, #1) (2009) by Jonas Jonasson	Surprisingly acerbic! The advertised Scandinavian pop silliness is present, but tamped down nicely by the *Gulliver's Travels* satire: a man blown around by the mad political convulsions of the past century. Key tension: the book's main target is people in the grip of political ideologies. The eponymous Allan is held up as a model exception: possessing sensible, apolitical, unfashionable grit and humour. But Allan ends up enabling atrocities: he saves Franco's life in '39! He gives Stalin the bomb! Are we supposed to conclude, against the narrator and protagonist, that political neutrality is actually a horror? Jokes were ok, this tension was good. *In one sentence*: You shouldn't underestimate old people or hurt anyone over politics, lol.
The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ (2009) by Philip Pullman	Or: "A Story." It's intentionally didactic, but that knowing intention doesn't stop it being annoying. Found myself reading it just to see what Pullman's next revision would be (e.g, Joseph being bullied into taking the teenage Mary for a wife). > *"I remember him," said the blind man. "Jesus. He come here on the Sabbath, like a fool. The priests wouldn't let him heal anyone on Sabbath. He should've known that."* > *"But he did heal someone," said the lame man. "Old Hiram. You remember that. He told him to take up his bed and walk."* > *"Well what was the use of taking his living away? Begging was the only thing he knew how to do. You and your blether about goodness," he said, turning to Christ, "where's the goodness in throwing an old man out into the street without a trade, without a home, without a penny? Eh? That Jesus is asking too much of people."* Compassionate, subtler than the title suggests, dull.

And Then There Were None (1939) by Agatha Christie	My first go with her. Didn't guess the baddie. (Read aloud)
The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me (1985) by Roald Dahl	None yet
On the Edge (1998) by Edward St. Aubyn	His weakest, which is still pretty good. A practice run for the glorious *Mother's Milk*, same themes and many of the same vocal tics. I was disappointed to find him being sympathetic and fair to my ideological enemies, the mystic anti-rationalists. Shout out to Findhorn too!
Feynman (2011) by Jim Ottaviani	Brilliant man with a peerless anti-authoritarian anti-pomp streak. But this is hagiography, presenting his good puns as profundities and his bad puns as good puns. It avoids his maths and almost avoids physics, which needless to say is vitiating when dealing with the lives of technicians. Worthwhile for its 20-page comic distillation of his (already distilled) pop masterpiece QED.
Journey to the Centre of the Earth (1864) by Jules Verne	Proper boring. First 150 pages (out of 220) is a completely uneventful dialogue about an obscure Victorian geological debate. Narrator is kind of charming. Didn't help that we were just waiting for the dinosaurs to appear. DNF 60%.
Kick-Ass 2 (2012) by Mark Millar	Eh; art's really good, but the dialogue and world are lazy, hardcorer-than-thou (the only centrefold is of a groin being bitten; also "*I feel like Rihanna after a quiet night in*"). Inevitably, matching gangs of vigilantes and villains form, with the attendant cheap gags ("I'm Insect-Man!"). The bit where they tweet each other is good (and surreally true, á la the last Israel incursion).
An American Dream (1965) by Norman Mailer	Maybe Kennedy deserves this much hatred but I doubt it. Jackie O certainly doesn't.
Abaddon's Gate (The Expanse, #3) (2013) by James S.A. Corey	Very enjoyable still. The admirable parts here are the tiny fraction of the conflict that the aliens cause; all the rest (95%) is humans backstabbing humans. How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: Belters are still too roughly sketched. How can they

	work? Not IRA-style cells plus official deniability, not military hierarchy, no discussion of their democracy, just Fred Johnson the guerilla tsar... *Software development*: Little unless you count ascended-Miller. *Actual Science*: Treatment of momentum and dynamics is good, besides of course the Wormhole Stargate thing.
Wild Harbour (1936) by Ian Macpherson	Post-apocalyptic Morayshire folk do Cold War survivalism before the Cold War? I was of course primed to love this, but it's a lead ball of a book, drab and flattened. This probably makes it a brilliant picture of the era's background of vast fear, but that doesn't make for a good read. The three characters are just scared, and though their hardships are harsh indeed, they're oddly unaffecting. The political economy that drove them out there is completely absent, only represented by sketched armed thugs. Nor is the world-justifying love of the central couple convincing, either. So it's tragic, but in no meaningful or honourable way. The prose does sometimes have a lovely Doric lilt - "*We were but young in stealth. As we drove along the Spey, the silent night was full of ears that harkened to our passing. It was midnight when our second journey ended, and dark, dark*." - and local loons will get a kick out of it.
The Shape of Water (Inspector Montalbano, #1) (1994) by Andrea Camilleri	Cynical but not very cynical, funny but not very funny. Uses food for comic and existential relief between murders. Maybe Sicilians or Sicily fans love the book's local colour, but meh. Half a point to compensate for possible bad translation.
The Ghost Brigades (Old Man's War, #2) (2006) by John Scalzi	None yet
Strata (1981) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
A Hat Full of Sky (Discworld, #32; Tiffany Aching, #2) (2004) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
John Dies at the End (John Dies at the End, #1) (2007) by David Wong	There was a time, as yet unnamed, before self-conscious Social Media but after broadband. Sketch it in totems: LimeWire, ytmnd, Something Awful, Dramatica, Uncyclopedia. Thence was JDatE born. Slapstick body horror, and you'll know already what you'll make of it from that description. This is scarier than it is funny, but not a huge amount of

	either. I'm very happy that Wong was anointed by the internet, that the gatekeepers were evaded but.
The Boy in the Striped Pajamas (2006) by John Boyne	None yet
The Color of Magic (Discworld, #1; Rincewind, #1) (1983) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
George's Marvellous Medicine (1981) by Roald Dahl	None yet
The Green Isle of the Great Deep (1944) by Neil M. Gunn	Odd anti-rationalist fantasy on the model of TH White. (What's the word for the pre-Tolkien, pre-swords-and-sorcery model of fantasy?) Everything is oblique, from the discussion of Auschwitz at the start, to the Kafkan bureaucracy seated in a pastoral landscape. I admire his portrayal of the totalitarian Administrators: when defeated, they are not destroyed but put in their place. There are also passages like this: > *…to achieve the blessed intention, something practical had to be done. Things could not be left in the hands of the Administrators. In the story of man, that had been tried times without number and always it had failed. (The revolving Earth, pitted with its tragedies, cried in a far voice from the midst of space: 'You cannot leave me to politicians.')* > > *But administrators are needful, are necessary. To fulfil their high function they work with the cunning of the head. But to leave destiny to the head is to leave the trigger to the finger. And after the trigger is pulled they cry above the desolation – (and the desolation was terrible to behold): 'We will make a new earth, and share the fruits thereof and the fishes of the deeps.' But what happens?* > > *The fruit is processed and the salmon is canned.* A good children's book: pure of heart and finely weighted. But too didactic for me.
Resurrection Men (Inspector Rebus, #13) (2001) by Ian Rankin	None yet
Critique of	Couldn't resist this after reading the blurb - Kant solving murder mysteries

Criminal Reason (Hanno Stiffeniis, #1) (2006) by Michael Gregorio	in wintry Konigsberg - but gave up after 80 pages of samey dirty Gothic blah. Crime fiction is rarely compassionate, fantastic, or realistic - three ways fiction can impress me. DNF 25%
The Rhesus Chart (Laundry Files, #5) (2014) by Charles Stross	Brave, for a writer of taste to write a vampire book, these days. But then in a sense Stross doesn't give a shit, since he has written a vampire book in which the vampires are literally high-frequency investment bankers who become vampires literally because of high-frequency investment banking. Then there's his occult computer science ("*Magic is a side-effect of certain classes of mathematics... Sensible magicians use computers.*"). Stross is the only writer I know who depicts the corporate/bureaucratic way of life, as well as just its deadening language. Millions of people now spend much of their lives within a structure encouraging this mindset; we need art that knows its vagaries and petty circumlocutions and administrivia. So, extra half-point for detailed solidarity with the office drone. And the TVTropes reference.
Cibola Burn (The Expanse, #4) (2014) by James S.A. Corey	Just fine. Plus a half for reusing Miller, a dead man, so well. This passage was good (maybe need to be there though): what a genetic algorithm feels like from inside - > *It builds the investigator, and the investigator looks, but does not know. It kills the investigator. It builds the investigator, and the investigator looks, but does not know. It kills the investigator. It builds the investigator, and the investigator looks but does not know, and it does not kill the investigator. It is not aware of a change, that a pattern has broken. The investigator is aware, and it wonders, and because it wonders it looks, and because it looks, the investigator exceeds its boundary conditions, and it kills the investigator.* > *It builds the investigator.* > *Something knows.* > *The investigator hesitates. A pattern has broken, and it isn't aware that a pattern has broken, but a part of it is. A part of it grasps at the change and tries to tell the investigator. And the investigator stops. Its thoughts are careful as a man walking in a minefield. The investigator hesitates, knows a pattern has been broken. Breaks it a little more. The dead place becomes better defined. It reaches out, and it does not kill the investigator. The investigator exceeds its boundary conditions, and it does not kill the investigator. The investigator considers the dead space, the structure, the reaching out, the reaching out, the reaching out.* > *The investigator licks his lips, he doesn't have a mouth. He adjusts his hat, he doesn't have a hat. He wishes in a distant way that he had a beer, he has no body and no passion. He turns his attention to the dead space, to the world, to how you solve unsolvable problems. How you find things that aren't there.* And the *awww shiit* political implication rant at the end is very satisfying. What I like about this book is the small stakes - instead of the usual "all the

	solar system FOREVERRR" it's about the fate of 200 folk on a backwater. The villain is interesting, implausible: a corporate bushidō deontologist, willing to die for his shareholders. Cyberpunk without cyberpunk's irony. How does it do as Serious science fiction? *Social development*: None. The super aliens also have no society. *Software development*: None. *Actual Science*: The aliens change the laws of physics repeatedly (nuclear fusion stops working), but the authors at least try to do counterfactual physics to this. The aliens were fissioning lithium for energy, which seems unlikely but I suppose not impossible.
The Stories of Eva Luna (1989) by Isabel Allende	None yet
The Wee Free Men (Discworld, #30; Tiffany Aching, #1) (2003) by Terry Pratchett	None yet
The Life of a Stupid Man (1927) by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa	Tiny selection of tiny prose poems. Contains "In a Grove" which was later made into *Rashōmon*. Insofar as the following sentence makes sense: it's good but *Rashōmon* is better. The other bits are suggestive and modern, but not moving, aside from the bit where the glum Marty Stu reels off all the German Romantics he loves.
The Gathering (2007) by Anne Enright	Remember trudging through it but don't remember anything else about it.
Murphy (1938) by Samuel Beckett	Not sure what everyone's laughing at. Which is quite a literary effect.
Old Man's War (Old Man's War, #1) (2005) by John Scalzi	None yet
The Witches of Chiswick	Fortean lulz

(2003) by Robert Rankin	
The Sprouts of Wrath (1988) by Robert Rankin	Pratchett on ket: that is, slurred, free-associating, oddly sexual. Only for nerdy British teenagers and probably not even them.
Burning Chrome (Sprawl, #0) (1986) by William Gibson	Uneven. "Johnny Mnemonic" is great though, much more teenaged and subculture-boosting fun than the film.
The Bloody Chamber And Other Stories (1995) by Angela Carter	None yet
Skellig (Skellig, #1) (1998) by David Almond	None yet
Get Doomed: A Fucking Novella () by Paul Wilhelm Crowe	Scattered, scatological Robert Rankinism, written for a friend. Every chapter is called “In which Rupert finds a map”; there is no map and are no Ruperts. The fact that I am a principal sidekick in it (killed on page 3 by a tidal wave of kebab mank and reanimated as a Roomba with a T-Pain vocoder) is besides the besides.
The Thirty-Nine Steps (1915) by John Buchan	Totally straightforward book: it is entirely constructed of plot plus the geography of the Borders. Even so, it's just about full enough of archaic words to be diverting. Totally irresponsible book: it made of Germans omnimalevolent villains in *1915*, blaming them *tout court* for the war, and suppressing ambiguity. Buchan was an unusually humane imperialist, and couldn’t know we’d do this properly at Versailles soon after, but still a dick move. (Read aloud)
Neverwhere (London Below, #1) (1996) by Neil Gaiman	None yet
Stranger in a Strange Land	It's a strange read, bloated, full of chauvinist banter. It's like George Bernard Shaw wrote a script for the 50s sitcom 'Bewitched'. There are only two female characters: a megalomanaical shrew, and a nubile and devoted

(1961) by Robert A. Heinlein	secretary (it's just there happens to be 7 copies of the latter character). I appreciate his building up a cynical, scientific-humanist world, then tearing it down abruptly at the start of the second book, where two archangels comment on the scene below. The Muslim linguist character is interesting but borderline (his differences emphasised, often mocked - his nickname is "Stinky"! - but also brilliant and accepted by all the protagonists): > *[Mahmoud] held a vast but carefully concealed distaste for all things American. Their incredible polytheistic babel of religions... their cooking, their manners, their bastard architecture and sickly arts... and their blind, pathetic, arrogant beleief in their superiority. Their women most of all, their immodest, assertive women, with their gaunt, starved bodies which nevertheless reminded him disturbingly of houris (...)* (If that made you cringe you ain't seen nothing. It is *so* easy to show this book in a terrible light: > *Nine times out of ten, if a girl gets raped, it's partly her own fault. That tenth time - well all right. Give him the heave ho into the bottomless pit.* > *Support for the arts - *merde*! A government-supported artist is an incompetent whore.*) I read the modern, unabridged cut and regret it. The last two sections are flabby and pretty much skimmable, if not skippable. (As is my new policy, I read this precisely *because* it was denounced on the internet. Though it turns out the denouncer is actually a critical fan, and the article is entirely fair.) Comparison of *Dune* and *SiaSL*: Both are didactic as hell. Both use magical superhumans to drive the plot in an otherwise sciency setting. Both use a religion their founders do not believe in to obtain power. Both treat water as sacred. Both include cannibals for similar reasons. However, they are deeply different where it matters: Dune is a thing book, SiaSL is a people book. First third **4/5**, second two-thirds **2/5**. [Library]
Naked Lunch (1959) by William S. Burroughs	Disgusting but virtuous. I liked his scientific reports more.
The Loved One (1948) by Evelyn Waugh	Extremely slight but stylish. Couple good gags. I didn't spot that the protagonist was a sociopath until the last ten pages; is this an intentional twist or am I dim? Hard to tell the difference between ennui and malignity.

The Fountainhead (1943) by Ayn Rand	Expected to hate it, but it's actually dumb fun if you don't stop and think. Obviously the philosophy (ethical egoism + logical word salad) is toxic (and there's that sex scene...), but it works fine as a trashy yarn, the reader's equivalent of moshing to Rage Against the Machine. There is exactly one good idea in it: the villain, Ellsworth Toohey is a fake socialist, a grand demagogue, a wolf in sheep's ideology. Because he's actually one of her Übermenschen - a brutal, self-actualised spirit just using socialism - he's thus a Worthy Opponent for her pet mavericks. His role in the book is risibly didactic: "*Yes, fine, my heroes are assholes*," Rand says, "*but look how much worse they are when they* pretend *to be good*!"
The Shepherd's Crown (Discworld, #41; Tiffany Aching, #5) (2015) by Terry Pratchett	Don't know if the flatness of this comes from its being Young Adult, or from the smoothened, modern nature of his late Discworld, or from the cortical atrophy. Little of his obliquity and spark to show; it feels like someone else's writing, and no doubt it substantially was. Trades on past power, and what power it was: his witches are pre-modern doctor, social worker, priest, undertaker, and night watch. Came to say goodbye, and I got that after 5 short chapters. [Values #3]
The Steep Approach to Garbadale (2005) by Iain Banks	Banks was important to me as a boy – *The Crow Road,* though even darker than his sinister average, offers a sincere and positive vision of atheism – but I've been less enthralled on rereading the real-world novels (his scifi feel like instant classics). This is relatively light, offering the familiar Banks themes: the extended-family drama, a focus on human foibles, and globalised Scotland, which are enough.
Black Man (2007) by Richard K. Morgan	Another geno-soldiers-get-invented-banned-and-what-then chin-scratcher. Nearer us in time and space than his Kovacs novels (this isn't interstellar) – but they've still all forgotten us, bar the historians. Morgan lets genetic determinism run away with the plot: everyone's always explaining themselves with reference to their or others' "wiring". At one point the protagonist hears a similarity in two people's diction and "wondered idly what genes the two men might share". Also his theme, 'GM humans as future Other' gets ponderous inbetween the ultraviolence. But Morgan is always worthwhile: his books suspend the ideological alongside the unhappily sexual alongside big strange guns (e.g. an AIDS pistol, loaded with GM virus 'Falwell'). More mature in some ways – there's a feminist imam, and a religious character he doesn't have violent contempt for – but also a bit busy and contralto. Stross and Morgan refer to 'black labs' a lot – that is, dastardly underground geneticists. Every single time they did, I wondered what the authors had against Labradors. Sort it out.
Another Country (1962) by James Baldwin	An Important (rather than good) book, formally and lyrically grim. Impossibility of interracial love among racism, impossibility of calm for anyone with any really big plans, impossibility of sexual satisfaction, impossibility of peace for a manly man, impossibility of finishing the damn thing. DNF 50%
The Business	None yet

(1999) by Iain Banks	
The Inheritance of Loss (2005) by Kiran Desai	None yet
Style: Toward Clarity and Grace (1981) by Joseph M. Williams	None yet
The Donald Richie Reader: 50 Years of Writing on Japan (2001) by Donald Richie	The greatest *gaijin*? Famous for introducing Japan's cinema to the West, but actually fewer than half of his thoughts are anything to do with that. Richie has an eC20th directness about describing other peoples - think Martha Gellhorn or Kipling - their 'pure skin', their atrocity-enabling 'innocence', their circuitousness and tribalism. (It is now sometimes inappropriate, sometimes oppressive to emphasise differences so.) > *I cannot imagine Plato thriving here [Japan], with all his absolutes ("the truth," "the beauty")... Maybe that is why Japan is so backward (by comparison) in some areas: philosophy, diagnosis. And perhaps why it is so forward in others.* > *From the celebrated farting-contest scroll and the early illustrated He Gassen (The Fart Battle), up to such recent representations as the delightful farting games in Ozu Yazujiro's Ohayo, Japan's culture is filled with vivid examples... Farting is certainly included in the nature of man:* >> *"And what is it you all* >> *Are laughing at, may I ask?"* >> *The retired master's fart.* >> *Four or five people* >> *Inconvenienced* >> *By the horse farting* >> *The long ferry ride.* > *Just here, I think, is the difference in attitude between Japan and the West. That a thing is is sufficient to warrant its notice, even celebration. The hypocrisy of the idealistic has not until recently infected Japan. :In both cultures the fart is funny but only in Japan is its humanity acknowledged. This entails a full acceptance of the human state. There is even a rubric for such matters, the ningen-kusai ("smelling of humanity") and within it the hé (屁) takes an honorable place.* > *What do I want to be when I grow up? An attractive role would be that of the bunjin. He is the Japanese scholar who wrote and painted in the Chinese style, a literatus, something of a poetaster - a pose popular in the 18th century. I, however, would be a later version, someone out of*

	> *the end of the Meiji, who would pen elegant prose and work up flower arrangements from dried grasses and then encourage spiders to make webs and render it all natural. For him, art is a moral force and he cannot imagine life without it. He is also the kind of casual artist who, after a day's work is done, descends into his pleasure park and dallies.* Similar to Hitchens in its consistent, adventurous aestheticism, though with much quieter prose; however, neither has that certain Alastair Reid transcendence. Minus a half for seriously ugly layout and typography, but I will seek out his real books. *In one sentence*: Ah, so innocent, so subtle, so far from Ohio.
The Secret Life of Numbers: 50 Easy Pieces on How Mathematicians Work And Think (2006) by George G. Szpiro	Tiny happy columns on false proofs, primacy wars, Newton as a gigantic loon, and the Swiss maths scene. He assumes no background - explaining primes even - but is concise and so not hand-holding. Lots of repetition because originally standalone columns, lots of bucolia because he likes mathematicians so much. Harsh words for Wolfram, though. The banality of eternal truth: > *The next morning Mignotte informed him that he thought the proof [of the 500 hundred year old Catalan conjecture] was correct. They did not rejoice, but they were very happy.*
Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to World War I (1990) by Tom Leonard	A nice thing about Britain, or the Old World at large, is that there's a piece of art for most places. Thus even my tiny village has a passable ballad, 'where the river meets the sea', while my mate's Wirral has a full seven hundred years of contempt to draw on (as well as my top album of 1998). Paisley has the first bit of *Espedair Street* – but also hundreds of Industrial Era pamphlets and gazetteers that Tom Leonard dug through, finding a hotbed of utopian socialism, zero-wave feminism and farmer's rage. (I don't know if it'll sink in with locals though; they're more likely to get excited about Gerard Butler going to Paisley Grammar.) "Radical" isn't a compliment, as Leonard (and Kelman, and Nairn, and Macleod) think it is, but it often marks at least interesting things. See here.
Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance (1995) by Barack Obama	Way, way less bland than you'd expect from a campaigning suit.
The Intellectual (2002) by Steve Fuller	None yet

The Book of the City of Ladies (1405) by Christine de Pizan	Morally pioneering obviously, but it's old bad prose (at least in translation, and probably not only).
Beauty (2009) by Roger Scruton	All I remember from studying this is that he thought photography wasn't art because only point-and-click Cartier-Bressonish is real photography, so that kind of photographer isn't very causally involved in their subject, so photos aren't Representations of ideas, so (...).
Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (2010) by Martha C. Nussbaum	None yet
Sentenced to Life (2015) by Clive James	None yet
Stuff White People Like: A Definitive Guide to the Unique Taste of Millions (2008) by Christian Lander	Pointless. It mocks a certain small, ridiculous group - C21st upper-middle-class lefty American hipsters -and ignores the rest of its titular target. What does it mean to say that *The Wire,* green tea, or public transport are white things? Not that they're not for other people. Not that most whites like them (they don't). Not that they're bad. Not that they're good. The point is to mock pretentious people, whose contempt for practicality, and idiot love of anything which calls itself authentic or nonmainstream, are very fun to bash. Mere socially acceptable stereotyping; the site exists to let people chortle and roll their eyes, get revenge on ponces. But if you're interested in mocking that group you already *knew* what the fads are, so you and Lander are just patting each other on the back, or, rather, reaching around. Insofar as it encourages self-consciousness among accidentally-consumerist hipsters: ok. Insofar as it sneers at trends that actually could change the world if adopted en masse (e.g. vegetarianism, cycling, taking the fucking train), go away.
How To Live Forever Or Die Trying: On The New Immortality (2007) by Bryan Appleyard	Critical account of transhumanism. He focuses on the sensational bits, morbidness, cryonics, and the inveterate pill-munching. (Not sure why attempting to resist death is more morbid than totally submitting to it.) Bit of a mishmash, with an extended middle section on Ultimate Meaning and Medieval funeral habits not totally meshing - and his grasp of the science is, as he admits, insufficient. Not as unbalanced as e.g. Wieseltier or Kass.
The 4-Hour Body: An Uncommon Guide to	I like self-experimenters - they risk themselves to give knowledge to, potentially, billions - but the one thing they must have is a sense of the limits of their findings.

Rapid Fat-Loss, Incredible Sex, and Becoming Superhuman (2000) by Timothy Ferriss	This is a hodgepodge of extreme, nominally scientific Pareto "lifehacks" for: rapid weight-loss, lazy bodybuilding, polyphasic sleep blah, regeneration from chronic injury, DIY female orgasm therapy. His conspicuous consumption of medical attention is risible ("Just $3800 four times a year for this battery of vanity tests!"); as is his name-dropping as self-promotion. Ferriss has a... creative grasp of biochemistry, and his brute lack of self-doubt lets him be productively provocative (e.g. "I do not accept the Lipid Hypothesis of cardiac disease"; "DO NOT EAT FRUIT"). He quotes heavily from experts, and he does *do* everything he advocates. The main advantage of him is that he is fearless about ridicule, actually following what he sees as the evidence. Thus there's a long section on the bodybuilding potential of vegetarian diets - which got him lots of scorn from the meathead-o-sphere - as well as an idiosyncratic list of the substrates that vegists are often missing. (Boron, anyone?) He's pretty fixated on testosterone and infertility. I initially scoffed at his fear of phones irradiating his testicles - but there actually is reason to think so. Not your average loud guru pseud.
Aphorisms and Thoughts (1838) by Napoléon Bonaparte	Compiled by Honore de Balzac, one wonders how carefully. Not very good, mostly. He's obviously *truly* independent - e.g. there's praise for Muhammad here, lots of fearless anticlerical scepticism, lots of examination of despots. He's not coherent at all - he's *both* an anti-intellectual "man of action" and a shiny-eyed Enlightenment rationalist; Machiavellian bastard *and* Aristotelian virtue-seeker; imperial elitist *and* populist revolutionary. Consider: Napoleon caused the deaths of between 3 and 7 million people (i.e. 0.5% of every person alive at the time), imposing significant effects on almost the entire world - and he's a very average writer. Read him next to Nietzsche, who plausibly never harmed anyone in his entire life, but whose writing stills scorches and stuns us. (This gets better when we remember that Nietzsche considered Napoleon one of a handful of people who have been truly 'great'.) Charitable reading: We happen to have caught up with Napoleon's thoughts, but not with Nietzsche's. Some good lines that don't depend on their speaker being extraordinary for impact: </li> </ul> *You never climb that high unless you do not know where you are going.* *Politics - which cannot be moral - is that which must make morality triumph.* *Superstition is the legacy left by one century's clever people to the fools of the next...*

Hijack Reality: Deptford X: A 'How To' Guide to Organize a Really Top Notch Art Festival (2009) by Roberta Smith	Aggrandised history of a cute London art festival he helped found. I'm not much into zany *free play* atm. Art, as an institution, seems much more hollow and ritualistic than it recently did. Which leads me to wonder: am I on the CP-Snow-seesaw? Does my current enthusiasm for science mean I must gain some contempt for arts? (Art might be the proper home of structuralist waffle - being, as it sometimes is, a floating system of signs with no correspondence or weight.)
Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? (2009) by Mark Fisher	Fisher was strange. He's a very clear thinker who nonetheless devotes most of his writing to extremely unclear people, the Hegel/Baudrillard approach to society, existence, and pop culture. He is humane, focussing on why we might think we need these Theorists. Thesis here is the usual one, that capitalism has mind control powers somehow.
Turn Off Your Mind: The Mystic Sixties & the Dark Side of the Age of Aquarius (2001) by Gary Lachman	Thesis: Charles Manson, Scientology, and Altamont were not horrible subversions of the 60s' ideology - but its logical conclusion. A series of pop history lessons, and is in fact a bit too full of sections like: "...and then Ram Dass went to India and met Guru McFamous who also knew Bastard McProfound who was notorious for writing a best-selling book of consciousness revolution and being racist for kicks". This is a fairly clear-eyed account of a bunch of creeps who still have lots of cultural capital, but not very deep about why anti-rationalism persists in a world so drastically improved by reason's yields.
Thinking About Texts - PUBLICATION CANCELED: An Introduction to English Studies (2009) by Chris Hopkins	Just an A-level English textbook, with good long extracts. English students at my university were taught very little Theory indeed - and while this made discussions much less pompous, they were also kinda toothless. Without theory, "English" has little to distinguish it, being just an odd dilution of narrow history and philosophy, with sprinklings of sexy concepts from newer humanities (e.g. Media studies, Race studies, Queer theory, Area studies).
Mogworld (2010) by Yahtzee Croshaw	Pop-pomo treatment of fantasy conventions: Self-aware videogame NPCs living and suffering in an uninspired swords-n-sorcery MMO. The parts where the characters begin to realise that the gods are incompetent nerds are my favourite. It doesn't have the stylish vitriol of his famed game reviews, but the ending is suitably brutal, and there is a sad tension throughout (the protagonist repeatedly and sincerely asks to be killed) which elevates things a bit.
The Examined Life: How We Lose	Neat, sad, surprising, overcoming my strong prior against psychoanalysis. A series of polished case studies illustrating the wide variety of ways we can be broken-down and knotted-up.

and Find Ourselves (2012) by Stephen Grosz	Settles into a pattern: 'difficult patient's puzzling actions are to be explained by a timeless subversion - thus, praise can be destructive, pain is vitally informative, spitting in people's faces can be a defence mechanism', etc. He's honest about the questionable utility of his field – he doesn't seem to help many of these people, let alone cure them – and this makes the book ok.
Some Recent Attacks (1992) by James Kelman	Detailed, paranoid leftism, mostly about local issues, Glasgow council and British race relations. Little general interest. Published by the redoubtable AK Press – *the* channel for anarchism into the pre-internet teen bedrooms of Britain.
A World Without Time: The Forgotten Legacy of Gödel And Einstein (2004) by Palle Yourgrau	Slightly crankish popularisation of his work on a mathematical argument of Godel's which maybe demonstrates time's nonexistence (in an ideal system close to General Relativity). Yourgrau argues this case using the overlooked friendship between E & G to stir up human interest. He beats the drum a bit hard, taking popularisation to mean "add superlatives and jibes" ("He was a German Jew among WASPS"). I get the feeling that Einstein's in the title more to boost sales / Godel's profile than because the men's relationship is all that critical to the proof Yourgrau thinks has been hushed up or ignored.
Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ (1995) by Daniel Goleman	Like *Focusing*, this presents itself *exactly* as empty self-help blah books do, despite having a modicum of real research behind it. (It doesn't help that the sequel is a dialogue with the Dalai Lama - who, though an important world figure, isn't exactly an authority on contemporary cognitive science.) The core claim would be important if true: "IQ, abstract fluid intelligence, is fully separable from EQ, the rapid and humane understanding of social situations, emotional networks, and intentionality." But it isn't.
Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence (2012) by Scott Hames	Bunch of mostly radical Scots thinking things through, mostly badly and without any sense of cost:benefit. The entry by Asher is a *perfect* example of the horrible clotted prose of the humanities today: form as a wall obscuring content, (assuming there actually is content behind it). In summary: - John Aberdein: The SNP suck. We already control plenty and little changed. Still we must go independent to have any hope of foiling capitalism. Take the fisheries and mines, and take out tax evaders. -Armstrong: SNP are crypto-unionists. Diluters! (They're keeping Sterling, the Queen, NATO, same bankers, low tax.) Need "Internationalism from below". - Alan Bissett: We are atomised because of Thatcher. Despite the jokes, do not underestimate what *Braveheart* and *Trainspotting* did for us. May 2011 majority is The Moment. - Jo Calder: Go Independent for proper arts funding(!) - Margi: Scotland is a woman.

	- Galloway: Scotland is a teenager. - Suhayl Saadi: Wooo! Waa! Hypercognitivist hoots mon!
Learning to Live: A User's Manual (1996) by Luc Ferry	Awful title, awful cover, but interesting. Another instance of the biggest trope in pop philosophy: 'reclaiming philosophy from the analysts'. (The problem with the trope is that two quite different things are sharing the name: roughly normative self-help and apriori, protoscientific conceptual analysis.) Ferry is a compleat product of the elite École culture – Sorbonne, philosophy prof, did his time in office - but his insistence on clarity, even when talking about the likes of Bourdieu and Gadamer, *and</a> his rejection of their anti-humanism is free of hauteur. Try to imagine Jeremy Hunt or Betsy DeVos writing something this literary.* *(It makes Nietzsche out as more unavoidable than he is?)</td> </tr>*
Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off & Dracula (1987) by Liz Lochhead	Never read her before. Not sure how she slipped me by, given the local unanimity about her, as literary. figurehead. Hard to picture – there's lots of disjointed speech and speaking to camera. No doubt it was important to take Mary off the shortbread tin and into her real betrayal at the time.
Fruit-Gathering (1916) by Rabindranath Tagore	Really wanted to like him – he's an inspiration in the abstract. But it's unreconstructed Romanticism, based in cheap inversions ("the dignity of peasants! The worthlessness of wealth!") but also odd deathly religiosity. I liked #8: > *Be ready to launch forth, my heart! and let those linger who must. For your name has been called in the morning sky. Wait for none! The desire of the bud is for the night and dew, but the blown flower cries for the freedom of light. Burst your sheath, my heart, and come forth!* </li>
The Gun Seller (1996) by Hugh Laurie	Urgh. Douglas Adams crossed with Ian Fleming, with the latter's clumsiness and Adams' loud prose. Addresses grave military-industrial politics via flashy froth. I suppose his unmacho, anti-sex secret agent is an ok idea, but the gauche chapter epigrams and joke prose were distressing.
Intellectual Foundation of Information Organization (2000) by Elaine Svenonius	Analytic philosophy of libraries. Cold and relentlessly substantial about the many many issues entailed in cramming the output of humanity's outputters into one framework. > *Factual claims about the world constitute only a small subset of information broadly construed… It is not possible, at least without wincing, to refer to The Iliad, The Messiah, or the paintings in the Sistine Chapel as data…* Info studies comes across as gargantuan, librarians building the least ambiguous & most exhaustive language in the world: the god's eye view of the diary of the human race. (But then along came Search...)

	Read half, the remainder being users' details of bibliographic languages.
The Thistle and the Rose Six Centuries of Love and Hate Between the Scots and the English (2005) by Allan Massie	Light history via biographies of the obvious (Mary Queen, Scott, Livingstone, Buchan) and nearly unknown (Waugh's granddad, a soldier called Henry Dundas). Charles Churchill on Scots: > *Into our places, states and beds they creep;* > *They've got sense to get what we want sense to keep.* Weighted towards mongrel literary figures and quashing polarisations; Anglo-Scots and pro-Stuart Englishmen feature heavily. (Disproportionately.) He's soft on empire and Thatcher, is unjudgmental in general. Welcome scepticism about some organising myths – the idea of a race called the 'Celts', the idea that Scotland is or has 'always' been more Left (when e.g. half the votes in 1955 were Tory).
The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible (2007) by A.J. Jacobs	The Old Testament has roughly 700 rules of varying severity and absurdity; Jacobs tried to follow all of them for a year. For a host of reasons, this can't be done, and so this is a reductio of biblical literalism. It is also a sympathetic anthropology of the literal Other Side, who are low-status, even in parts of America. * • The mad rules: never wear mixed fibres; no rubber tires; burning a red cow is the only way to be pure person; all the precise shabbat rules about what you can and can't do; basically anything involving women. Judaism actually has a specific word for the arbitrary, stupid divine laws: the *chukim*. The various brilliant, witty cafeteria theists he consults are open about them being silly tests - fun puzzles, even. * • The blatantly evolutionary / patriarchal rules: no other gods before me, no shellfish, modest women. * • He is keen to show the noble side to the real literalists: they practice tithing, pacifism, no hell, are activists for global debt jubilee. (A handful of lovely policies out of the mad and thoughtless other 700, mind you.) One group are even admirable on epistemic, philological grounds!: "*You can't follow all of the Bible literally because we can't know what some of the words mean.*" Sure they take this to be a reason to be even more extreme than ever stipulated, just to be safe, but I admire the rigour of it. </ol> An extremely open-minded man; he meets the Creation Museum people, and the Amish, and the snake handlers. I didn't like the constant stream of cheap gags or his wielding family details for padding. I def didn't like his earnest attempt to use cognitive dissonance to delude himself into theism: > *The notion of obeying laws that have no rational explanation is a jarring one. For most of my life, I've been working under the paradigm that my behavior should have a logical basis. But if you live biblically, this is not true. I have to adjust my brain to this.* > *...*

	> *When I first read the parable of the prodigal son, I was perplexed. I felt terrible for the older brother. The poor man put in all these years of loyal service, and his brother skips town, has a wild good time, then returns, and gets a huge feast? It seems outrageously unfair.* > *But that's if you're thinking quantitatively. If you're looking at life as a balance sheet.* *There's a beauty to forgiveness, especially forgiveness that goes beyond rationality. Unconditional love is an illogical notion, but such a great and powerful one.* (That simply strikes me as choosing to be mistaken and then hardening oneself to injustice.) He is not quite sophisticated enough to pull off rigorous naturalist wonder fully (but again this is me cruelly comparing a journalist to Nietzsche, Pessoa, Gopnik). But the following affirmation of mythos here is more or less my view: > *I'm still agnostic. But in the words of Elton Richards, I'm now a reverant agnostic. Which isn't an oxymoron, I swear. I now believe that whether or not there's a God, there is such a thing as sacredness. Life is sacred. The Sabbath can be a sacred day. Prayer can be a sacred ritual. There is something transcendent, beyond the everyday. It's possible that humans created this sacredness ourselves, but that doesn't take away from its power or importance.* Literalism is impossible, immoral and inconsistent with our new, better picture of the world; biblical liberalism is mercenary and inconsistent with itself. So don't bother?
I'd Rather We Got Casinos: And Other Black Thoughts (2009) by Larry Wilmore	(As in, "*Are you in favor of Black History Month?*" "*Hell no. Twenty-eight days of trivia to make up for centuries of oppression? I'd rather we got casinos.*") Irreverent about stuff good people don't tend to be: 'community leaders', the funeral for the 'n'-word, Jesus' race, Katrina, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, The Man. His patter is sometimes pleasurably baroque: > *"A pudgy patron of society would suffer an indignity and cry out, 'This is unmitigated gall! Unmitigated gall, I tell you!'"…* > *"the level of anger in a black church should be roughly equal to the level of anger in the brother attending said church. You'll appreciate the attention to detail in the Afrocentric stained-glass windows as black Jesus, black Mary, and the black Apostles make even hard brothers nervous with their never-happy Ice Cube–like glares"…* > *"THE SIMPSONS: Not racist but not very brotha friendly.*

	> *FAMILY GUY: Racist but very brotha friendly."* Lines this good scattered throughout.
On Western Terrorism: From Hiroshima to Drone Warfare () by Noam Chomsky	(c) James Bridle (2013), "A Quiet Disposition" Rally round and settle in, once again, to hear the West's most popular critic on his specialist subject: the barely recognised crimes of rich democracies. (Note, however, that this isn't really a book: it's a transcript of Chomsky in discussion with someone with even less ideological care than he. Also, the title is cool but misleading, since they don't actually go in to the plausible claim that the West's foreign policy has been terroristic, and since I don't think drones come up at all.) It is selective as history and nearly worthless as economics, but I do not begrudge Chomsky continuing his fifty-year marathon of talking about covert realpolitik: these sorts of manipulations are almost unreported at the time, go wholly unpunished, and are rapidly forgotten. Like what? Well, begin with Leopold II, skip to the Enola Gay, or Britain's Palestine, Operation Boot, Operation PBFORTUNE, Lumumba, the Plain of Jars, and the long systematic atrocity "Operation Condor" (involving us and Pinochet, Noriega and Just Cause, Suharto, El Salvador), or that Iraq matter. But even though it handles these real crimes, *On Western Terrorism* turns out to be an echo-chamber - a mix of apparently detailed research (e.g. they appeal to some 'declassified embassy reports' to back up some claims) and pervasive confirmation bias. The main problem's exaggeration. In one breath they move from a righteous skit on the original colonial genocides to a view of world politics in which *everything* that happens now is the outcome of decisions in Brussels and Washington. From "The West has, historically and recently, been hypocritically violent and anti-democratic" to "Everything bad in the world is due to the West". That sounds like a sure straw man, but here's the man himself: > *The great majority of events that were causing the suffering of countless human beings all over the world were related to greed, to the desire to rule and to control coming almost exclusively from the 'old continent' and its powerful but ruthless offspring on the other shore.* (Oh? malaria? dysentery? precarious subsistence farming? Hutu-on-Tutsi genocide?) He's at it again here: > *although it is mostly Rwanda, Uganda who are murdering millions of innocent [Congolese] people, behind this are always Western geopolitical and economic interests.* Well. It's true that, as well as the flat-out murders in the links above, our governments bear shame for ignoring unbelievably destructive ongoing wars in e.g. the Congo. But failing to prevent murder is not murder, nor necessarily accessory to - especially if we remember that C&V's judicious

attitude to military intervention would have precluded direct action anyway. There is a logical chasm between what one could only *perhaps* prevent - given enough luck and blood - and what one is the cause of. (I agree that the two situations place similar responsibilities on us, by the way - but in the absence of simple solutions, that hypothetical responsibility does not make them the same.) Similarly: capitalism produces enormous inequality but mostly inadvertently relieves poverty: poverty is our default from before there *was* a world-system. But C&V and others of the demagogic school persist in blaming all the world's ills on rich bores whose uncaring exploitation often works better for the poor than altruistic direct action. (This is very counterintuitive; so much for intuition.)

Why do I disagree? They say it's cos I'm a dupe:

> *There have been very sophisticated propaganda systems developed in the last hundred years and they colonized minds including the minds of the perpetrators. That's why the intellectual classes in the West generally can't see it.*

I say it's because while their description of our foreign policy is (depressingly) fair, on the foreign policy of rival governments they are uncritical, whitewashing, and on historical alternatives to our type of society they are naive and cherry-picking, where they give evidence at all. What might a real radical say in response to my aspersions? "Fuck balance! Balance is what lets them get away with it! Fuck evidence! Evidence is what makes people think I'm wrong!"

Vltchek is much more skewed than Chomsky. He's earnest, and clearly devoted to first-hand reporting of the abuse of powerless people. But, oddly, depressingly, this immersion in the frontline has robbed him of perspective (and in fact it doesn't get more front-line: he was tortured in East Timor in 1996). He suffers the defining mistake of recent leftism: the enemy of my enemy error, where you'll approve of anyone who resists the West. In fact, his comments, taken over the whole book, amount to a flirting defence of totalitarianism - he romanticises the Soviets, Assad's Syria, and Ecuador. Both of them exchange the Eurocentric rose-tint of our mainstream for lenses warped in the reverse direction. And it all rests, ultimately, on tacit belief in the 'superior virtue of the oppressed' - the strange belief that being bombed makes the bomb recipient better than you. (Sure, they're probably more virtuous than the bombers, but that's not saying much.) Our governments being awful does not mean that others are not. Quite the reverse.

Also: Chomsky bashes the 'Black Book' of Communism not by challenging its accounting, but by saying that Western capitalism's toll was worse (no footnote, but see the lone India example below); and the Prague Spring is utterly minimised with the same ugly break-a-few-eggs fallacy. Vltchek:

> *Moscow's invasion of 1968 to put down the Prague Spring was not necessarily something that should have happened... but there was no massacre performed by the Soviets; few people fell under the tanks. Most of what happened was accidents; some people who died were drunk.*

(The direct death toll was 72 plus suicides, if that's what he means.)

That's the first big problem. The other huge one is the *complete* lack of footnotes, even as they make the boldest possible claims. As a result, even I identified some errors in the course of my single superficial reading. (Ok,

so some failings are just the vagaries of live dialogue as compared to writing; but Vltchek (or Pluto Press at least) would be forgiven for editing the damn thing for basic evidence.)

The only research cited in support of the claim that capitalism causes more excess death from starvation is Dreze and Sen's reputable 1981 study 'Hunger and Public Action (p.214 here). C&V use this to compare excess deaths in India (as an instance of a market democracy) in 1947-1979 with that of Communist China, pointing out that Dreze and Sen place the toll in India at some *100* million, next to China's '25-30' million. (First cockup: citing thirty-year-old research underestimates the toll of Mao's famine by perhaps 20m people.) But the comparison doesn't do the work they put it to (that is, condemning capitalism): India was almost an autarkic command economy (in which perhaps two-thirds of all formal, non-subsistence employment was public-sector) in that period; it does not serve them as an exemplar of neoliberal starvation.

Even if it did, we would again come up against their curious equation of *failure to prevent an intractable thing* with causing the thing in the first place. As far as I can tell, their reasoning really is: "Capitalism exists, and poverty exists, so, capitalism causes poverty." But it would take one of two things for capitalism to be responsible for poverty: causation, as evidenced by e.g. a gross increase in the number of poor people under its penumbra; or its impeding a more effective solution to poverty. But the proportion of (utterly) poor people, in this supremely Late-capitalist world is the lowest it has ever been; and the remaining poverty is not at all simple to fix; and capitalist countries really did try, throwing enormous amounts of money and thought at the problem for going-on 70 years.

To be responsible for poverty in the way C&V say, either capitalism or old socialism would have to be omnipotent, and - among other fairly strong disconfirmations for that idea - the 20th century shows both of those to be untrue. (The commercial success of Chomsky in his enormously capitalist society, is an extra data point toward rubbishing any strong statement about capitalism's mind-control powers.)

(Vltchek talks about global warming briefly, and I was about to reach for the recent debunking of claims of Polynesian evacuation – but in fact it turns out his sources were better; the president of Kiribati has since publicly floated a national evac plan.)

A less straightforward quibble: they think this book is about the West, I think it's about humans with power.

I had believed Chomsky more humane than this talk makes him seem (see for example his sombre 90s piece on the Black Book) - that is, I want to pin the blame for this biased and maudlin tract on Vltchek. But his long-standing dismissal of some non-Western massacres at last makes me wonder.

On a less uninspired and dispiriting note: if there is a system less bad than Swedish capitalism, it does not exist in the past. So it must be invented, negotiated, and tested. Chomsky and the other socially enraged ostalgiacs in his ambit are not mostly doing that; Erik Olin Wright and David Graber and Nancy Fraser and others are at least trying.

*

Finally, what's so bad about being excessive and dogmatic in your criticism

	of awful things? (Why should anti-oppression efforts need to justify themselves? They're anti-oppression!) Well, apart from it being dangerous and ignoble to be so firmly wrong, taking this tack means that your true conclusions will be dismissed as just more of your typical excesses. But even given their slips, hyperbole, and complacency, there's no way around *some* of C&V's key claims: Our governments have not in general been a positive force in the rest of the world; this is not well-known within our societies; as long as the US is legally immune from prosecution, international justice is a joke; we have often given money and guns to the worst people in the world; we did this for little more than control and for stuff.
Living End: The Future of Death, Aging and Immortality (2008) by Brian Clegg	Cambridge neuroscientist lets himself go, speculating a bit aimlessly on the meaning and ends of present trends. He goes via Gilgamesh, Swift and Woolf as much as HeLa, Hayflick and Kirkwood. Core evidence-based conclusions are: Life expectancy increases are not slowing down much; dementia is exploding upwards; we know very little about aging and have almost no power over it (but a start has been made – e.g. we know inflammation is important if not the core – and). The core attitudinal point is to view aging as a disease and death an injustice. Cute ("*build a dream, write that novel... have lots of sex*"), and it comes from an insider, but not so deep. I recommend instead Nick Bostrom(as kaleidoscopic booster), Bryan Appleyard (as somewhat sympathetic sceptic) and Michael Sandel and Habermas (as non-contemptible bioconservatives).
Anselm (2008) by Sandra Visser	An Analyst metaphysician and a Catholic Medievalist walk into a bar… V&W manage to make light of a thousand years' semantic drift and logical innovations; so their Anselm turns out to be an ingenious and honest rationalist wrestling with the many millstones of Christian lore. (e.g. Making original sin's indiscriminate infinite hellfire seem just, making the Trinity seem unavoidable rather than a logical error enforced by state terror.) Anselm's work is a testament to the cornucopaic potential of motivated reasoning – a.k.a philosophy, in its middle millennium. A testament to something.
The Great Infidel: A Life of David Hume (2005) by Roderick Graham	Gossipy. Says at the start that he isn't aiming at Hume's thought or worldview – just his personality, context, happenstance – but since Hume spent a big chunk of his adult life alone thinking, this is quixotic, and Graham predictably does have to go into the Treatise and Essays and Dialogues (and to be frank he does so badly, uncritically). This is filled instead with all the bad reviews Hume got, and the clubs he got into, and the middlebrows that quarrelled with him rather than his eternal legacies, i.e. judgment under uncertainty, reason's motivational inertia, cognitive naturalism, the frailty of natural theology, the kernel of so much modern philosophy. The bit on Rousseau as incredible drama queen is good – here is JJ's reaction to Hume looking at him: > *where, great God! did this good man borrow those eyes he fixes so sternly and unaccountably on his friends! My trouble increased even to a degree of fainting; and had I not been relieved by an effusion of tears, I'd been suffocated… in a transport, which I still remember with delight, I sprang on his neck, embraced him eagerly while almost choked with*

	> *sobbing...* Graham is super-fond of the C18th's loud intellectual tribalism, but it's not enough.
Between Faith and Doubt: Dialogues on Religion and Reason (2010) by John Harwood Hick	Why would one want to take away someone's sense of the ultimate goodness and unity of things – want, that is, to be a New sort of atheist? Well, you might have misread history so that religious identity looms as the main cause of violence. Or you might note their continuing key role in keeping heinous oppression going (particularly as regards women and gays). Better, you might view the act of worship as in fact degrading to the worshipper, or see the epistemology implicit in religious practice as an unhealthy and obstructive stance to the world. (Preventing as it does healing doubt and energetic inquiry; outmoded as it is given the better methods at hand.) Anyway: Hick of the rearguard talks fairly and at length with a fictional scientistic interlocutor, demonstrating how - if the theist is willing to retreat, ad-hoc, about ten times - scientism actually cannot touch them. Amusing example: Hick responds to the solid neurological explanation of religious experience by saying that this is all perfectly consistent with electrical induction in the right angular gyrus just *enabling us to perceive the spiritual world*. I like bullet-biting of this magnitude. Hick ends this mostly fair tourney still "*as certain as it is possible to be*" about God, despite only having parried the critical arguments at great metaphysical cost with deep special pleading. At least his atheist doesn't convert at the end, as they did in medieval apologetics.
Ban This Filth!: Letters From the Mary Whitehouse Archive (2012) by Ben Thompson	Rather than dismissing her as *just* the archetypal religious-conservative idiot, how about treating her as a scared and angry lady who prefigured modern ambivalence about the extremes of our culture? OK, so it turns out paying attention doesn't make her less ridiculous, but she's certainly no longer alone: moral criticism of pop is an enormous cottage internet industry. Her small-mindedness put her, somehow, on the same lines as nominally compassionate ideology does some of our contemporaries. (The ends meet in the middle?) Ahem: the actual book. Whitehouse's letters are just boring, monotonous and prim – the patronising or bureaucratic replies from the BBC or Granada are much more interesting (in which the Establishment stands up for smut). Thomson's a thorough but overheated curator – for instance when he likens Whitehouse to Lenin because they were each dead good at getting loads of people involved in things. (Call his enthusiasm Golden Hammer Marxism.) Thomson: > *From feminist anti-porn campaigns to UK Uncut, the Taliban, and Mumsnet, Mary Whitehouse's monuments are all around us.* Hrm: she's not the *reason* people use complaint as a political tool! (Particularly not if you view protest as organised complaint. There *is* a distinction between complaint and protest - one is the expression of distaste, the other the ascription of injustice - but it's tricky for beasts like

	us to tell them strictly apart.) Was she the prototype? Yeah, maybe. Luckily for us she lost.
Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone (2012) by Eric Klinenberg	Important topic – tracking the fast rise of one-tenant housing just as soon as a country becomes rich enough, tracing the ideological roots of normative pairing, looking at chimps and orangutans and showing the large caveats in the research that claims that married people are on average happier. But that's all covered in the preface, and Klinenberg's prose is canting and repetitive – after chapter 4 I could not stand any more of his interviewees' corporate self-conceptions and language ("*I needed this in order to grow as a person*"). It is wholly cool and righteous to live alone; talking about it this way is revolting.
The Stairwell (2014) by Michael Longley	Flickers between the Classical general and the wattle-byre specific. All really personal – but not in the universally interesting melodramatic way. It is personal in the way that hanging around the vestibule of a friend of a friend of a friend's house when one didn't know they were dropping past and one quite needs the toilet is personal. Also, it's full up with the (apparently haute Irish?) obsession with Attic Greece. One or two amazing ones – see "Amelia's Poem" : > *Amelia, your newborn name* > *Combines with the midwife's word* > *And, like smoke from driftwood fires* > *Wafts over the lochside road* > *Past the wattle byre – hay bales* > *For ponies, Silver and Whisper –* > *Between drystone walls' river-* > *Rounded moss-clad ferny stones,* > *Through the fenceless gate and gorse* > *To the flat erratic boulder* > *Where otters and your mother rest,* > *Spraints black as your meconium,* > *Fish bones, fish scales, shitty sequins* > *Reflecting what light remains.*
The Philosophical Programmer: Reflections on the Moth in the Machine (1998) by Daniel Kohanski	Damn! Would have been fantastic to read first, before the stress and sheer pace of How To Program overcame the space I had in mind for What It Is To Program. Gentle, brief, happy introduction to the totally basic elements and history. Not abstract or sweeping enough for its stated aims, though. See Floridi for the grand social/phenomenological bits, Dennett and Minsky for its relevance to all thought.
Constructions (1974) by Michael Frayn	Book of aphorisms, glorifying unanalysed practice and the majority of the world which is beyond theory. Self-consciously Wittgensteinian (*PI*), as he declares repeatedly in the preface. This declaration is a shame, because it means that his nice-enough notes on perception, knowledge and emotion

	are vastly, vastly overshadowed by the giant spectre he has called up; it's *PI* without the thought experiments and devastating reductios. But a nice supplement to it: > *Look at your hand. Its structure does not match the structure of assertions, the structure of facts. Your hand is continuous. Assertions and facts are discontinuous.... You lift your index finger half an inch; it passes through a million facts. Look at the way your hand goes on and on, while the clock ticks, and the sun moves a little further across the sky.* (The brutal conservative relativism underpinning *PI* is, needless to say, not addressed either.)
Working with Emotional Intelligence (1998) by Daniel Goleman	None yet
The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian (2005) by Robin Lane Fox	Was tired of my own titanic ignorance (Where was Carthage? Were Spartans Communist? Did Greeks love their wives? What did upper class women do all day?) and mostly got ok answers. Bit of a story-book, though he does always tell us when he papers over something controversial. Most common phrases in this are 'surely' and 'in my view' (e.g. he just says that the Greeks probably had our kind of parental affections), which is nice. Classicists really do get a lot of room to make stuff up (cough, I mean abduction, inference to the best explanation).
Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith and Doubt (2012) by Richard Holloway	The emotional case for not being religious. I should like him - he is the most honourable instance of a public figure rationally changing his mind in living memory. And another thing sorely needed: a sympathetic, literate public nonbeliever. Also he quotes poetry from memory - for its sense, not in order to curry literary status. (We know this because he leaves the attribution of the poems to the endnotes.) He is adorable, basically, and quotable to boot. But there's a clunkiness too, one I can't quite articulate. As a boy he loved religion's melodrama and un-Scottish grandeur; he goes away to an eccentric militarist monastery, aged 14: > *We were up at six-thirty for a cold shower followed by mass and breakfast. After household chores we were moved into study mode until the next visit to chapel at midday. After lunch, afternoons were given over to heavy labour, either scrubbing and shining floors or labouring for Brother Edward in the grounds... back to study at four, till bells summoned us to Evensong at six-thirty. Then dinner, more washing up and more study. The day ended at nine-thirty with Compline, then lights out... Each evening we left chapel in silence, under the spell of fading plainsong that marked the ending of the day.* Fun! Rammed full of order and space, but not religion per se. He was always unorthodox: he gave communion to just anyone who walked into

	church, happily married off divorcees, joined the LGBT movement and even claims to have held a Catholic gay marriage in the 90s. I am childish enough to enjoy his swearing, as the Bishop said to the actress. He had no more place on a government bioethics committee than any other nice clever old man, but I don't suppose he did any harm at all. *In one sentence*: Religion is pretty nice, but you must take it less seriously.
The Forward Book of Poetry 2017 () by Various	Mostly bad. I adore Harry Giles though; his big one here, 'Brave', is a roaring, bouncing *Orlando Furioso* schtick with more *point* and more verbal invention than the rest summed up, *paist-apocalptic RPGs* and all: > *Acause incomer will ayeways be a clarty wird* *acause this tongue A gabber wi will nivver be the real Mackay, A sing* *Acause fer aw that we're aw Jock Tamson's etcetera, are we tho? Eh? Are we.* *Acause o muntains, castles, tenements n backlans,* *acause o whisky exports, acause o airports,* *acause o islans, A sing.* *acause of pubs whit arena daein sae weel oot o the smokin ban, A sing.* *a cause hit's grand tae sit wi a lexicon n a deeskit mynd, A sing.* *acause o the pish in the stair, A sing.* *acause o ye,* *A sing o a Scotland whit wadna ken working class authenticity gin hit cam reelin aff an ile rig douned six pints n glasst hit in the cunt.* > > *whit hit wadna* > > *by the way.* *A sing o a google Scotland* > *o laptop Scotland* > *o a Scotland saw dowf on bit-torrentit HBO* > *drama series n DLC packs fer paistapocalyptic RPGs that hit wadna ken* > *hits gowk fae its gadjie,* > *fae whas lips n fingers amazebawz cams* > *mair freely as bangin.* *...* *A sing o a Scotland bidin in real dreid o wan day findin oot* *juist hou parochial aw hits cultural references mey be,* > *n cin only cope wi the intertextuality o the Scots* > *Renaissance wi whappin annotatit editions,* > *n weens hits the same wi awbdy else.* *I sing o a Scotland whit'll chant hits hairt oot dounstairs o the Royal Oak, whit'll pouk hits timmer clarsach hairtstrangs, whit like glamour will sing hits hairt intae existence, whit haps sang aroon hits bluidy nieve hairt,* > *whit sings.</i>* *</blockquote>*

	> *The eventual winner, Tiphanie Yanique, is particularly glib: she wins for a series glorifying gratuitous insensitivity.* *[Data #1, Values #3]</li></td> </tr>*
Inside the Nudge Unit: How Small Changes Can Make a Big Difference (2015) by David Halpern	Nudge but for UK policy wonks. Decent but undistinguished, lots of detail about how Whitehall does and doesn't work.
In Search of Blandings () by N.T.P. Murphy	Strange book: labour of love tracing the historical bases of Wodehouse's fantasies, e.g. the huge number of family in-jokes he included, which club was the Drones. But the reason we are still reading P.G. *en masse* is his unreality, his ahistorical escapism. Nice history of vaudeville and music hall too. For obsessives, which despite appearances I am apparently not.
Gilliamesque: A Pre-posthumous Memoir (2015) by Terry Gilliam	Surprisingly bland, sturdy. No drugs, for instance. But actually this is well and good - a stable life being very helpful in the production of the wild and new. Lots and lots of name-dropping, which I feel is included for our benefit rather than his; "ah, yes, recognise that one, ok". He endorses something that I, a sheltered western European, have previously felt about America, but which I assumed was a ridiculous exaggeration: > *Disembarking in Southampton, I remember... feeling, for the first time in my life, totally safe - safe from people who might want to hit me, or do things to hurt me...* > *one of the weird things about America is the feeling you get there that if someone doesn't approve of you, there's a good chance they're going to pop you one. It's probably just that go-getter American attitude which dictates that guys who don't like you feel they have to do something about it... I've to ascribe it to the fact that people in England seem to have a much better sense of personal space... They don't feel entitled to invade your territory the way Americans do - perhaps they just scratched that itch with the whole British Empire thing.* I was intrigued to learn that Brando was a compulsive consequentialist: > *I said the only way to get [Brando] was to... tell him we'd pay him $2 million, but only if we could give the money direct to the American Indians. I think we would've got him that way, because his own moral scheme would have left him no option but to accept.*

	The first thing about him I like. Here is one real hallucination: > *...people will often be telling me that my producer is a bit of an operator, and my reply to them is generally "Well, that may very well be true, but I'm only interested in one thing, and that's getting the film done - whether or not I get screwed in the process"... we got two films made together, and no amount of documentaries about his pivotal role in the Israeli nuclear weapons programme can change that.* **3/5.**. Skip to chapter 7 in fact.
In the Basement of the Ivory Tower: Confessions of an Accidental Academic (2011) by Professor X.	Encounters with unlucky Americans and the system that thieves money and part of their lives. The human cost of credential inflation and hegemonic education. > *our society views college not as a consumer product at all, but as both a surefire, can't-lose financial investment and, even more crucial than that, a moral imperative.* 45% of the 20 million annual enrolments do not finish the course. A lot of this is due to ability deficit (measured by remedial class enrollment), besides obvious financial constraints. Because of the sheepskin effect - part of a degree is not worth much to the job market - and the low social return on completed education, this means billions of dollars, and millions of years of life wasted. Not to mention the unnecessary stress and humiliation of pushing people into it. This book is just a minor autobiographical expansion of this essay; you should read Caplan instead. One thing I got from the expanded version: I'd forgotten the grinding quietism that a lot of arts people have. > *I'm not willing to say that my intellectual pursuits have done me the smallest bit of good; in truth, they may have done little more than fill me with unrealistic ambition, impoverish me, and needlessly clutter my thinking.* This is another unfair advantage of STEM: it is hard for depressive people there to think that they've only learned illusory or useless things. Knowledge, especially the creation or sintering-together of new knowledge, is the most stable coin of meaning. **3/5.** [Original essay 4/5.]
Flying Visits (1986) by Clive James	Strange to be both open-hearted and snide about other cultures.

The Education of a British-Protected Child: Essays (2009) by Chinua Achebe	Title suggests nostalgia for colonialism: you need to know who he is for the gag to work. He waffles a bit, full of avuncular banality more than post-colonial ire. The most shocking bit is about Jim Crow in Africa – up to 1961, black people had to sat behind a partition at the back of the bus, in fucking *Zambia*.
Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny (2006) by Amartya Sen	Nice but repetitive. In one ugly sentence 'how overlooking intersectionality ruins worldviews and gets folks killed'. He repeats this idea fifty times or so, but it's a fine one. It's stats-free but I mostly trust him, he's proved his mastery. "*Widespread interest in global inequalities, of which anti-globalization protests are a part, [is the] embodiment of what Hume was talking about in his claim that closer economic relations would bring distant people within the reach of a 'gradual enlargement of our regards to justice'.*"– neat, catching the antithesis in the thesis. I don't get on with Sen's prose: he's clear and warm but studied in a way that chafes me.
The Retreat of Reason: Political Correctness and the Corruption of Public Debate in Modern Britain (2006) by Anthony Browne	Pamphlet about PC by a man most famous for arguing that Britain's AIDS came from African immigrants. Tricky: the pamphlet is pumped up with outrage, and on the face of it his central claim is hallucinatory tabloid racism at its worst. On the other hand, he's careful to list PC's achievements, and official figures underlie some of his arguments. I wasn't skilled enough to judge when I read this. Like everyone, he tries to claim the rational high ground over his enemies, but the connection between identity politics and postmodern irrationality is nowhere near the tight causation he claims. He seems to be genuinely hurt by the reaction to his argument. Reality is fucked up; if we can't even *test* any hypothesis which offends anyone, then we are doomed to delusion and early death.
Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer (1936) by Edwin Muir	Exciting, novel and almost totally wrong, in a fertile and important way. Muir diagnoses four hundred years of post-Reformation Scottish art as weak, makes giant claims about national psychology, and traces out a Scottish Renaissance at odds with the nationalists, MacDiarmid in particular (Muir thinks it's not the Union's fault but Knox's.) A sort of radical conservatism. Pairing Muir with Allan Massie's careful hatchet-introduction strikes me as a public service.
Shakespeare is Hard, But So is Life: A Radical Guide to Shakespearian Tragedy (2002) by	Angry. Angry at lazy teaching, angry at Aristotelian crap being applied to and vitiating Shakey, angry at four hundred years of racists reading Othello. Ra ra raar.

Fintan O'Toole	
The Faber Book of Useful Verse (1981) by Simon Brett	Amusing mnemonics and proverbs, mostly from ancients and Victorians. Includes a canto explaining exactly how James Watt's steam engine was different and several songs to remember the list of English monarchs and US presidencies, etc.
The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture (1946) by Ruth Benedict	> *I realized that I would never be able to live in a decent relationship with the people of that country unless I could drive this book, and its politely arrogant world view, out of my head.* - obviously I had to read the book this sentence refers to, and pay it much more heed than I otherwise would've War anthropology! That is, anthropology conducted by the opposite side of a total war, for predictive military purposes of the highest consequence. She was of course robbed of the moral superiority of field work by an ocean and a bunch of tanks and whatnot, so this is all based on expat interviews and extremely secondary sources. I'm still struggling to overcome my deep suspicion of cultural anthropology; thus I was actively drawn to Benedict by this hatchet job, by a modern relativist anthropologist. Sadly the book's only ok, very nicely written but falsely general. She introduces the key terms of the toxic wartime Inazo-Satsuma-Shówa ideology, but mislabels this particular modernist system as "the Japanese worldview". Even so, in the one truly essential passage, Benedict lays out (and later tries to ameliorate) a popular reified caricature of the Japanese: as morbid, conformist, and paradoxical: > *the Japanese have been described in the most fantastic series of '...but also's' ever used for any nation of the world. When a serious observer is writing about peoples other than the Japanese and says they are unprecedentedly polite, he is not likely to add, 'But also insolent and overbearing.' When he says people of some nation are incomparably rigid in their behaviour, he does not add, 'But they also adapt themselves readily to extreme innovations'. When he says a people are submissive, he does not explain too that they are not easily amenable to control from above... When he says they act mostly out of concern for others' opinions, he does not then go on to tell that they have a truly terrifying conscience...* > > *When he writes a book on a nation with a popular cult of aestheticism which gives high honor to actors and to artists and lavishes art upon the cultivation of chrysanthemums, that book does not ordinarily have to be supplemented by another which is devoted to the cult of the sword and the top prestige of the warrior... All these contradictions, however, are the warp and woof of books on Japan. They are true. Both the sword and the chrysanthemum are a part of the picture. The Japanese are to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and*

	> *timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways.* People say she made this worse, but you can't claim that she didn't know something was up with the Western concepts used. There's an intriguing suggestion that the book is actually a satire (Geertz: "*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword is no more a prettied-up science-without-tears policy tract than [Gulliver's Travels] is a children's book.*"). But she actually was attached to military intelligence at the time and actually interviewed Japanese-American internees, and I find I don't much care either way. *In one sentence*: The above long passage with a question mark on it.
Why Your Five-Year-Old Could Not Have Done That: Modern Art Explained (2012) by Susie Hodge	An attempted defence of the current reigning artistic paradigm: low-skill, high-concept, contemptuous of past, audience, and self; identitarian. Call it *anaesthetic conceptualism*. It is also a nice illustrated catalogue of some recent objects that have managed to piss various people off. 150 years ago, we direly needed people to make art larger, to stand against the Academic approach of Nice Hard Mimesis Only. The problem is that since the 50s many artists replaced that shallow spectacle of mere mimetic skill with the even shallower spectacle of empty originality and flashy cynicism. This book has *such* a patronising presentation; it could have been named "How to explain conceptualism to your five year-old". (I guess that could have been an intentional irony, but to me it just told me what she thinks of anyone sceptical of the trend. But some kudos for being clear, since this makes the hollowness of her points blatant.) I have to applaud her; unlike the rest of her curator peers, she has at least *attempted* to justify a gigantically expensive, creativity-draining, status-hogging practice with close readings. I should also thank her for tacitly admitting that the only hermeneutics that can justify anaesthetic conceptualism is a small-minded and super-conservative intentionalism (i.e. 'what matters about the work is what the artist meant').* "It doesn't really matter how the object looks; what really matters is how deep the creator was and how much history you can project on it." But this philosophy of art is convincing to no-one not already invested in the great tedious playground. I dislike most of this art, and this way of talking about it, because I want to love art.*** Anyway, this is a useful catalogue of the kind of low-skill pieces that have only recently been possible and that you need to know about to move in certain presumably unbearable circles. > ** Though the so-called intentional fallacy is not actually a fallacy** - it does not make sense to say that someone is literally mistaken to think that the creator's view of an artwork is the only relevant one, since aesthetic interpretation doesn't admit of literal error - instead it's just an incredibly limited and superstitious philosophy - along the same lines as deontology in ethics. It makes art a small and mostly ancient thing, while aesthetic experience could instead rise to each of the potential billions of minds that come to it, and it always takes place in the present, with entirely novel meanings generated, far beyond the ken of any creator.*

	*** I'm aware that 'fallacy' has found usage outside of its original meaning, 'a failure in logical reasoning'. But the new usage, committed for instance by Beardsley, is something shitey like 'a horrible belief I don't like boo'. I'm generally torn between a descriptive and a prescriptive philosophy of vocabulary, but in this case the bullying and sloppy-mindedness of the new usage makes me deny it outright. Some words are too important to give up. (Mostly epistemology tbf.)* **** This is an unforgivably poncey thing to say, not least because I don't think I really mean it. If crap artists had not usurped a good portion of all the species' attention and reverence, I don't think I'd care what modern art was like. But as it is they are cheaters - even the great ones. They cheat themselves into immortality and perceived profundity via the handy expedient of prettiness and vagueness or ugliness and vagueness. In a way, they and we cheat malaria victims of huge sums, while the very people who claim to care about global injustices cheer us dumping more money into it, while saying things like 'life isn't worth living without art'. Well, maybe it wouldn't be, but life is not worth living if you're dead either, and there is enough art already.*
Bitter Experience Has Taught Me (2013) by Nicholas Lezard	Smooth, uninspired columns about bohemia (that is, bourgeois poverty), knitted together post hoc. I really like his book reviews - they are breezy, fearless, concise and yet unhurried. But this isn't very funny and not all that bitter, apart from in a few apercus: *For a long time I believed anal sex was how lawyers were conceived.* His straddling class lines is interesting - his private schooling, Booker dinner invites, and going out with Allegra Mostyn-Owen clash well with his freeloading, bread-line salary (net of child support) and thieving of ashtrays from embassy mixers. I may be down on him because I used Pessoa as reference class and not Tim Dowling or Saki.
No Logo (2000) by Naomi Klein	I took it very seriously as a teen. Read *Rebel Sell* instead.
The Victorians (2002) by A.N. Wilson	Witty and sloppy synopsis. It is neither materialist nor idealist: he locates power in single people. Or, in anecdotes about people really. (Is that still materialism? Funny kind if so.) He has such a huge throbbing agenda - e.g. his caricature of Bentham, his bizarre claim that capitalism suppresses individuality, rather than being totally, totally dependent on it - but I didn't resent it because he is so patent about it and because he is funny: *If the [genetic guesses] about both Victoria and Albert are well-grounded, this means that many of the crowned heads of Europe are descended jointly from an unscrupulous Irish soldier and a German Jew. Given this, it is surprising that these families manifested so few of the talents stereotypically attributed to the Irish and the Jews; such as wit or good looks.*

	> *Karl Marx, as so often, made an accurate observation of the political scene and drew a false inference from it.* He loves Disraeli and Albert, hates Gladstone and Palmerston. I have no idea if this is an original position. Got tired of his tone and scattergun of stories about two-thirds in. About as good as popular history that isn't data-driven can be. *In one sentence*: This is where modernity - feminism, multiculturalism, managerialism, professionalism, mechanised warfare - originated: in little moments that happened to people who happened to write them down for me.
Out Of The Storm: The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther (2007) by Derek Wilson	Poppy, secularish, filled a large gap. Downplays Luther's anti-Semitism, who knows if rightly? A huge, dictatorial person, without whom fake European unity could have continued and prevented Enlightenment and the attempt at real European unity.
Travelers of a Hundred Ages: The Japanese as Revealed Through 1,000 Years of Diaries (1989) by Donald Keene	Bought this expecting a book of diaries; instead it is a book of essays *about* diaries, with fairly sparse quotations from the diaries I wanted to read. My rating may be undiluted petulance, as a result.
On the Move: A Life (2015) by Oliver Sacks	Rushed, unworthy: just a string of events and bad prose extracts lifted straight out of his adolescence. Also two long chapters exaggerating the achievements of two scientific titans vs consciousness studies (Crick and Edelman). Hadn't known his love life was so fraught - he looks like such a bull (and indeed Bennett remembers Sacks at Oxford as a brash alpha). Weightlifting chat is endearing in an intellectual. Read his real books, *Uncle Tungsten* for autobiography. [Values #3, Theory #1]
Born to Run (2016) by Bruce Springsteen	Fans only. Though you probably will be one, if you've given him the time: he is unusual among rock auteurs, populist and wholesome to the point of naivete: > *I was... a circumstantial bohemian - I didn't do any drugs or drink... I was*

	> *barely holding on to myself as it was. I couldn't imagine introducing unknown agents into my system. I needed control and those ever-elusive boundaries... Music was going to get me as high as I needed to go... the counterculture stood by definition in opposition to the conservative blue-collar experience I'd had.* Prose is clumsy enough to be actually his work, and is eloquent by rockstar standards: > *When it rains, the moisture in the humid air blankets our town with the smell of damp coffee grounds wafting in from the Nescafé factory at the town's eastern edge. I don't like coffee but I like that smell. It's comforting; it unites the town in a common sensory experience; it's good industry, like the roaring rug mill that fills our ears, brings work and signals our town's vitality. There is a place here—you can hear it, smell it—where people make lives, suffer pain, enjoy small pleasures, play baseball, die, make love, have kids, drink themselves drunk on spring nights and do their best to hold off the demons that seek to destroy us, our homes, our families, our town...* He's had thirty years of psychotherapy, the poor sod. He is intellectual enough to take his feelings and their theories seriously - but not intellectual enough to be sceptical about their interminable and unscientific faffing. [Values #3]
Empire (2000) by Michael Hardt	A crock of shit. Economics without reference to anything actually economic, Marxism without even speculative economics, melodrama without sweetness. Prose was less clotted than I expected though.
Interpreting, Pollock (1999) by Jeremy Lewison	Does Expressionism *do* anything but look cool and foil the old School of Paris? I'm a slave to content, so I resent the mindless haste and vitiating freedom of Pollock and Co's anti-painting, born of the macho belief in chaos (cf. Hunter Thompson, Jim Morrison, Debord). But Pollock's not empty nor, really, chaotic. Apart from anything else, he makes Picasso look smooth and Mannered, a useful service. Apart from anything else, nothing made or viewed by humans can be non-representational. I like *Full Fathom Five* & *The Deep* (1953).
Celebrity Culture (2006) by Ellis Cashmore	Kinda lightweight sociology. Picked it because it asks the right questions in its Contents table ("*What part did consumer society play in making us dote on celebrities? When did the paparazzi appear and how do they pedestalise and destroy people? How are cosmetic surgery and the preoccupation with physical perfection linked to celebrity culture? Why have black celebrities been used as living proof of the end of racism? How have disgrace and sexual indignity helped some celebrities climb onto the A-list?*"). But while chatty, he's critical in an uncritical way, high on anecdote, low on data - and there are *no* citations. Cashmore's answers are thus suspect, trendy. The big contrarian move in sociology is to view fans as active & canny manipulators of the 'culture' but I don't care either way.

My Shit Life So Far (2009) by Frankie Boyle	He is more than he'd have us think he is – but that isn't saying much, since his core gag is wanking over inappropriate objects and taunting the weak. Book is tolerable when he's busy liking things – Chomsky's politics, Grant Morrison's comics, Moorcock, old Clydeside socialism – and hating on the powerful (his portrayal of the civil service is great fun). Includes a cursory rant against PC, a phenomenon he bizarrely (satirically?) blames on the *Mail*. Humane islands in an insincere sea. On marriage: "*Fuck it, I tried"; "we struggled along like badly set bones*". Makes Gill look like Tolstoy. Higher humour's about laughing at yourself.
The Four: The Hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google (2017) by Scott Galloway	Not the book I thought it was: I wanted searching political / macroeconomic expose of the costs of monopoly, but this is shallow and glib work on a topic of great importance. Galloway's a marketing professor / entrepreneur, and so this is a weird mix of polemical and fawning. (OK, I should've guessed its genre from the thoughtless use of institutional "DNA" in the subtitle.) There's basically no politics in this: it's a primer for worried and pious businessmen more than consumers or citizens or engineers. It also uses "relevant" unironically as a quantity of ultimate importance ("*Google had a market cap that topped $200 billion. But the Times was enormously relevant*". I enjoyed this > *[education], the cartel that masquerades as a social good but is really a caste system* and this (though his counterproposal wouldn't change much either): > *It is conventional wisdom that Steve Jobs put 'a dent in the universe.' No, he didn't. Steve Jobs, in my view, spat on the universe. People who get up every morning, get their kids dressed, get them to school, and have an irrational passion for their kids' well-being, dent the universe. The world needs more homes with engaged parents, not a better fucking phone.* He presents himself as a critical outsider, and a moralist, but in between his rants he is scarcely less fawning about a set of overpriced electronics: > *In those ten years, Apple introduced one earth-shaking, 100-billion-dollar, categorycreating new product or service after another. The iPod, iTunes/Apple Store, iPhone, and iPad ... there has never been anything like it.* > *The iPod's introduction, in late 2001 after the twin shocks of the bursting of the dot-com bubble and 9/11, played the same role as the Beatles' appearance on Ed Sullivan just months after the Kennedy assassination: it was a bright light in the darkness that signaled hope and optimism.* And often his barbs are just glib. His full argument against Bezos' support for basic income:

> *What's clear is that we need business leaders who envision and enact a future with more jobs — not billionaires who want the government to fund, with taxes they avoid, social programs for people to sit on their couches and watch Netflix all day. Jeff, show some real fucking vision.*

Besides the hollowness, there are dozens of minor errors or infelicities:

> *Luxury is not an externality; it's in our genes. It combines our instinctive need to transcend the human condition and feel closer to divine perfection, with our desire to be more attractive to potential mates.*

(That's not what "externality" means.)

> *Because media companies only get a mildly insane valuation, and the Four are addicted to iconospheric valuations — hundreds of billions.*

("Ionospheric" rather)

> *When Nietzsche proclaimed God is dead, it wasn't a victory cry but a lamentation on the loss of moral compass.*

(1) "compass" makes for a really poor adjective, please don't do that; 2) that's a ludicrous reading, though less silly than the usual macho triumph one.)

> *The effectiveness of prayer, the additional scrutiny determined, remains a matter of opinion.*

(Sure, for a pejorative sense of "opinion".)

> *[big data] signals the end of sampling and statistics - now you can just track the shopping pattern of every customer in every one of your stores*

(1) this is the "n=all" dogma and, though very popular among people with bridges to sell, it is just not true - because no one ever has the full data set, because even if they did have a synchronous snapshot then we'd still need predictions to future data; 2) even if that were so, it certainly would not be the end of statistics, since sampling theory is a tiny subset of statistics.)

> *The genius of Google was there from day one, in September 1998, when Stanford students Sergey Brin and Larry Page designed a new web tool, called a search engine, that could skip across the internet in search of keywords.*

	Search was *not* a new tool: Knowbot (1989), Archie (1990), Wandex (1993), Mosaic... > *We saw the world differently and approached it from entirely different angles. My whole life has been a quest to gain relevance and fear of never achieving it, whereas Arthur's biggest fear (I believe) was losing it.* In what way are those two angles entirely different? This was unintentionally revealing: > *Attractive things work better... When you wash and wax a car, it drives better, doesn't it? Or at least feels like it does.* And this: > *Malcolm Gladwell, the Jesus of business books...* There's the rub, I think. This is a business book, and since I haven't read any "business books" in years I was unprepared for its fawning, glibness, and applause lights. Galloway is no doubt in the right lane; it was I that drifted. Skip it. The subject - this tiny set of untouchable, market-breaking corporations with large fanbases and financial carte blanche - is important to understand, too important to leave it to Galloway. Read Gibney, Levy, Stone, Mezrich, or Taplin instead.

1/5: False, ugly, evil, or vapid. 1st percentile.

The Night Soil Salvagers (2020) by Gregory Norman Bossert	None yet
If You Take My Meaning (2020) by Charlie Jane Anders	None yet
To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy	None yet

of Emmanuel Levinas (Purdue University Series in the History of Philosophy) (1993) by Adriaan T. Peperzak	
The Gift of Death (1992) by Jacques Derrida	Not as metal as it sounds. Though come to think of it, it does coin the word "hostipitality".
Andromache () by Jean Racine, Douglas Dunn	Epic verse always sounds too pat to me, and doubly so when forced to fit dialogue: mumming couples expositing couplets. (*“I’ll kill myself. That final ploy shall save / My honour. Then I’ll give back from the grave / What I owe Pyrrhus.”*) Not Dunn’s fault – the pentameter’s solid. And he agrees: “*It was a bloody hard piece of work... and I think it was universally agreed that I didn’t fully succeed.*”
The Alexandria Quartet (1960) by Lawrence Durrell	Intolerable Sadean pondering about the sssensuality and yet! also Spirituality of the Orient. (The only way to make de Sade more boring is to add in kabbalah and the new age.) Durrell's prose is good, even - just the lightest touch of experimentality over classicism - but the sighing Art of it all made it impossible to go further than a hundred pages. Suddenly I see wholesomeness, wit and concision in *The Magus*. So Durrell is the real magician. I liked the gag at the end of *Justine* - there's a sentence regarding *everything, man*, but the footnote for that sentence points at a completely and intentionally blank page. Oh but it wasn't a gag, it was a deep reflection of being and nonbeing. Fuck it then. This was the only book I had on me for several hours and I still couldn't hack it. I rather stared at the wall.
Smarter: The New Science of Building Brain Power (2013) by Dan Hurley	> *I still did not understand why they have taken such a stand against the large and growing body of evidence showing that working memory and fluid intelligence can be increased through training.* (Because it mostly wasn't very good evidence, Dan.) Gladwellian (i.e. chatty overinterpretation of immature social science) with a side dose of uninteresting self-experimentation. More than half of this is about brain training, which has unfortunately lost most of its scientific veneer in the five years since it was published. (Here are some large negative meta-analyses.) To some extent this is not his fault - I did n-back for a while myself in 2013, and he cites all the top people (he's in love with credentials and committee memberships). But the crisis made a mockery of many top people. They crowed about lifting the 'curse of learning

specificity' (that no training regime seems to produce a general increase in fluid intelligence). The curse has since reasserted its gloom.

He makes dozens of errors of interpretation (for instance, the Abecedarian preschool programme which he enthuses about made no long-term intelligence gains; for instance not distinguishing active and passive controls). And he gives no attention to the biggest interventions, quality sleep (-6 points per hour lost) and education (3 points per year(!)). Also, music instruction for cognition didn't replicate.

Serves me right for reading a journalist on any topic but journalism, I suppose. He gives, I think, only one effect size, despite citing hundreds of studies in prose. There's only one moment where he does actual journalism and pushes back against the hasty commercialisation of immature science.

Useful as an example of how not to write about science; about the spurious omnicausal implications of low-power psychology studies; as a reminder that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence (and anything nonmedical to do with *Gf* gains is extraordinary); and maybe if you're interested in verbatim conference backbiting.

His self-experiment is invalidated before it starts (even as an *n*-of-one thing) because he decides to wake up early (again, the cognitive penalty of 2 fewer hours of sleep dwarfs the boosters' estimates of brain training + exercise + nicotine):

> *I... wrote out my training schedule. I would wake up at 6:00 a.m. instead of my usual 8:00 a.m.*

His lowest moment: Trying to understand the balance of evidence about brain training and *g*, Hurley's meta-analytic method is to literally count the studies that found, or didn't find, a significant effect:

> *In the years following publication [of the original n-back study], a grand total of four randomized, controlled studies have been published finding no benefit of cognitive training... Yet in contrast, by my count, seventy-five other randomized, controlled studies have now been published in peer-reviewed scientific journals confirming that cognitive training substantially improves.*

He tries to critique the 2013 meta-analysis, but is unable to, because he doesn't know how to estimate study quality, and crapness matters *far* more than quantity.

How to avoid finding ourselves in Hurley's position? Well, first off avoid writing a book about any young social science (*n*-back was 11 years old when he wrote this so the rule might have to be "more than a couple of decades old"). The lack of consensus (in a relatively nonpoliticised field) is another warning sign: not because science is quick at resolving bullshit disagreements, but because it means the effects can't be very large, are hiding in the background noise. The surprisingly large amounts of money the findings spurred probably didn't help with confirmation bias and hostility. Listen to the grumpy bastards (Randy Engle, mocked as a "defender of the [specificity] faith" in this, was right all along). Lastly, *read the methodologists*: Paul Meehl and others were warning us of the general statistical shoddiness of psychology more than forty years ago.

It's an important topic and he actually navigates the tricky nicotine vs

	tobacco literature well (spoiler: it's really good). But read Gwern and Examine instead. (I don't know of a good book on the matter.)
Diamonds Are Forever (James Bond, #4) (1956) by Ian Fleming	None yet
Sniper (2002) by Pavel Hak	I think this is the worst book I've ever read. Houllebecq without dark insight, Noë without style, de Sade without wit, philosophy, or desire. It is not possible to blame the translation.
Hite Report on Male Sexuality (1981) by Shere Hite	Just bad science. You can read about some of the deep, invalidating methodological problems here and here. Not sure if it's bad enough to go on my "Actively Harmful" shelf.
The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality (1976) by Shere Hite	Just bad science. You can read about some of the deep, invalidating methodological problems here and here. Not sure if it's bad enough to go on my "Actively Harmful" shelf.
The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness (1960) by R.D. Laing	Dreadful bloody pseudoscience in the abscessed vein of Freud. Blames schizophrenia on strict parenting and then celebrates its completely disabling horror. See here for an illustrative anecdote about what this attitude did to patients in the 60s; see here and here for the actual long-term effect of parenting. (it's not large). One good thing though: his idea of "ontological insecurity" as a distinctive debilitating state. I've met someone with a real case of this (a philosophical case) and it was as bad as you'd expect. But I doubt Laing ever did.
The Secret (The Secret, #1) (2006) by Rhonda Byrne	Vile egotism wearing spirituality's flayed skin. > *Jesus [and the others] were not only prosperity teachers, but also millionaires themselves, with more affluent lifestyles than many present-day millionaires could conceive of.*
How to Be an Existentialist: or How to Get Real, Get a Grip and Stop Making Excuses (2009) by Gary Cox	Chatty, trite, and pretentious. ("*Young people are stupid", "disabled people should stop moping"*.) It is at least trying to process the philosophy's thick and styleless abstractions into an accessible intro, but ends up being childish, macho, and uncritical. He's a tenured academic, too! Taken as systematic description of the real world, Existentialism is a fruitless neo-Kantian mess. Taken as extreme postwar poetry or stoic-fictionalist cognitive stance, it is perhaps beautiful in a way.

The Data Science Handbook (2015) by Carl Shan	I had been holding out hope that data science (or mining plus statistical programming, as it used to be called) could be an intellectual, rarefied place within the private sector, where the practical and the abstract are wed sweetly. It might be, but this book gives you little sense of that. Even the demonstrably brilliant (DJ Patil) talk like third-rate vice-presidents-of-munging. (You might shrug because you expected no better of computer people, but you are ill-informed: some of the great stylists of the age are programmers first of all.) *In one sentence*: Data is Innovation for incentivising proactive momentum-based cultural synthesis change
User Stories Applied: For Agile Software Development (2004) by Mike Cohn	I recently learned a fundamental dichotomy in expressing oneself: you use either the 'esoteric' or the 'exoteric' mode. (The exoteric writer says exactly what she means, minimises ambiguity and tries to do everything with explicit reasoning, for the largest audience they can, with imagery and irony only as decoration. The esoteric writer – distinct from, but often coextensive with the woo-woo mystical metaphysics fans also called esoteric – does the converse. Most ancient writers wrote esoterically, which is one reason that undergrads and other fools, like me, think that ancient writers are vague and low on content. Up to now, I have been confusing the rhetorical stance - see Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, Caputo - with the magickal crap. But so much of the Analytic / Continental divide can be explained in this single distinction! [The revival of the distinction is due to that lionized demon Leo Strauss.] Maths is an interesting border case, but its clarity and attempt to destroy ambiguity make it exoteric, I think.) The exoteric intention strikes me as firstly just good manners and important for intellectual honesty (accountability, critical clarity). But one thing I dislike about studying computer science is that *all* the materials are utterly exoteric. I crave art and irreverence in formal contexts, and those are always at least somewhat esoteric. The 'Agile' software thing strikes me as good, a way of making the hag-ridden and monstrously expensive dev process work. But all the material around Agile, LEAN (and the wider business-marketing-HR-systems theory blah that represents most employed adults' only engagement with passably academic work) is so exoteric that something in me rebels.
Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates (2001) by Slavoj Žižek	Žižek may be the most high-variance writer since Nietzsche. *Very occasionally* he writes beautiful, thoughtful pieces and I am shocked and bewildered to find myself agreeing. The rest of the time he writes 1) edgy shit about how liberals are the real enemy and 2) complete nonsense about already dubious writers, leaking film theory and psychoanalysis into journalism, like raw sewage pouring into a ditch. There is some value in mere provocation. It is easily eclipsed. This one includes a sadly memorable passage likening an intentional plane crash to a dildo with a camera on the end.
Social Identity	Was drawn in by the cute epigrams ("*Everybody needs somebody*"), but this is turgid. A sociology/anthropology mix, and an airless, evidence-poor

(1996) by Richard Jenkins	circle-jerk of citations. Identity is confusing because it means so many completely contradictory things, it is what individuates or what generalises, equation or inequation, label or being. This is not the book to clear up this mess.
The Five People You Meet in Heaven (2003) by Mitch Albom	None yet
Superman: True Brit (2004) by Kim Howard Johnson	Superman the Englishman and Jonah Murdoch. I don't much care for the core commercial thing Marvel and DC do where they reboot series over and over with one new gimmick – Commie Hulk, Zombie Hulk, Nihilist Hulk. One good joke: "*We should have taught him to control himself, like a true Brit*".
Prey (2002) by Michael Crichton	None yet
The Da Vinci Code (Robert Langdon, #2) (2003) by Dan Brown	None yet
The Prophet (1923) by Kahlil Gibran	One of the more pompous books I've ever read. Read Taleb's *Bed of Procrustes* instead; he's actually from a couple villages over.
The Man Who Went Up in Smoke (Martin Beck, #2) (1966) by Maj Sjöwall	Acclaimed yet somehow awful pioneers of Scandinoir. I couldn't stand the prose – uniformly banal, full of aimlessly detailed descriptions of rooms never returned to, and, the weirdest thing, they're in the habit of repeating the protagonist Martin Beck's full name, eight times a page, which reminds me of nothing but preschool stories. Maybe this translation is just terrible.
Gender: Key Concepts in Philosophy (2006) by Tina Chanter	Annoying: conventionally unconventional. I've been looking for a good introduction; this is not that. (Is it a coincidence that the best popularisers - Paglia, Greer, Moran - are all highly problematic?) Chanter manages to make exciting parts of feminism - e.g. Calhoun's post-deconstruction stuff - sound dull, dense and theoretically empty, as if it were the same kind of navel-gazing theorism as the hyperinflated Althusserian-Foucauldian stuff. (To be fair, *any* overview has to cover French theory, because that's what our counter-gender people have

	actually been up to *for decades*. But not blind acceptance.) You get the impression, here, that progress in feminist thought consists in calling your predecessors bigoted - JS Mill calls out the Victorians, Okin calls out JS Mill, Butler calls out Okin, Wittig calls out Butler, and then Calhoun calls *Wittig* heteronormative.
Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Nation (1999) by Kath Woodward	Bleh. I gave radical sociologists a few chances to show me they had something to say, because - although the evidence is not good that they do - the consequences of ignoring them wrongly were awful.
Night of the Living Trekkies (2010) by Kevin David Anderson	Unremitting. The worst book I can remember. (I only know it's crap even as fan service because I read this to a lifelong fan.) Plot brought to you by a cursory study of Resident Evil spin-offs, and prose by soap operas.
The Serpent's Promise: The Bible Interpreted Through Modern Science (2013) by Steve Jones	Interesting idea: take Bible literalists literally; see how much of the book's many empirical claims are anywhere near right, re: cosmogony, hygiene, heredity, migration. Couple cool results – > *Today, each [Amish] mother has, on average, half a dozen children, and the community is growing at almost 10 per cent a year… At that rate the Amish could, by the middle of the next century, have a population equivalent to the whole of today's United States...* > *Many saints died in 'the odour of sanctity', a sweet smell supposed to mark the departure of the soul. The scent is that of acetone, made in the liver as its capital runs out.* – but unstructured, often unclear, and tiring, in the main. Minus a half for having no citations for any of its thousand claims.
Authorship and the Films of David Lynch: Aesthetic Receptions in Contemporary Hollywood (2012) by Antony Todd	Pompous and shallow, with less intellectual content than the Rotten Tomato summaries of the films, let alone the films. ("*Chapter One: Towards a Textual Historicity.*") Wields critical-theory Freudian shite to justify writing a book without any real discussion of the films, or the films' themes, or even any real biographical aspersion of Lynch-as-seen-in-his-films. Instead there is second-hand gossip dressed up as historical context and post-structuralist intertextuality ("Jaussian reception theory": the discussion of reviews, ad campaigns, corporate manoeuvring). Materialism (in critical theory) is the position that both artwork and authors are irrelevant to the study of the artwork. > *Let us, then, register modern auteurism in a reception practice whereby the authored film can compete for the reader's attention in a coming together of inter- and extra-textual determinations through which the modern film spectator composes the aesthetic text for herself or himself...* I'm not suggesting Todd is dishonest, or intentionally vague: instead, I think

	film studies has convinced him that shuffling these words around is intellectual work. > *Note for your calibration of my opinion: I was very much looking forward to this book (because I find Lynch watchable but confusing), and so I fell far. Also it's been a while since I read any academic Arts work that didn't strike me as hollow and fatally decoupled from the work at hand. Let alone its coupling to the world. I will strive to cherry-pick in future.*
The Art of Thinking Clearly (2011) by Rolf Dobelli	Shonky list of cognitive biases / love letter to Taleb. It has occasioned raging critique rather than reciprocation. At first I was very taken by Dobelli's article 'Why you shouldn't read news', and still think there's something to it (particularly as goes news' inevitable over-dramatisation of reality via availability bias and our inbuilt credulity), but it's all Taleb's work, except unjustified and not actually good. (Consider that one is to free-ride and, in the hypothetical aggregate of a trend of people quitting news, suppress journalism's deterrent effects on governmental and business malfeasance.) Anyway his Art is neither well-organised or well-conceptualised – he stretches the perhaps 20 reputable cognitive biases of Kahneman et al into 99 anecdotal smirks. (Redundancies: he splits illusion of control and action bias, the paradox of choice and decision fatigue...) Consider the 'It's-gotta-get-worse-before-it-gets-better effect'. The big problem for the heuristics and biases program is when you get contradictory pairs of biases – how can people be both ? The actual researchers have done well in synthesising these and providing base-rates for effect sizes (without which, the programme is little more than a new way for intellectuals to insult each other). Dobelli offers no classification, effect sizes, or even citations (they're hidden online), just clomping informational candy. Taleb for dummies. (Where Taleb is already Kahneman for drama queens.)
Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction (2009) by Christopher Goto-Jones	Terribly written, with the glib say-what-you're-going-to-say structure, cod psychology and thoughtless overreach common in social theory. > *Japan retreated into a state of denial... Can a nation's [unacknowledged] past make its people ill, in the same way as repressed memories make individuals ill?* No and no they don't. But he gives a brief and clear sketch from Edo to their World Cup; still helpful if you are a total novice like me. (Never knew the shogunate were the internationalists in the Meiji struggle!) Needless to say Goto-Jones is unable to step beyond C20th stereotypes - to note, for instance, that by time of writing Japan had likely stopped being the place the future happens first.
The Bald Prima Donna: A Pseudo-Play in One Act (1950) by Eugène	Almost unmitigated shite. I suppose it might be just a satire of hollow, SO RANDOM surrealism? But apparently not - and either way it is not a good play. Plus a half for its structure (a continuous loop with new characters substituted in, taking on the same mannerisms and follies); plus a virtual half for maybe losing its wit in translation. I cannot remember the last time I binned a book (rather than risk anyone

Ionesco	else wasting their time).

Limits to self-invention

14th June 2013

- *To what extent can you choose who you are?*
- *Confidence*: 60%. Grounded in philosophy and anecdote, not the psychology of self-adjustment.
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Argument

> *...we give you no fixed place to live, no form that is peculiar to you, nor any function that is yours alone. According to your desires and judgment, you will have and possess whatever place to live, whatever form, and whatever functions you yourself choose.*

– Pico della Mirandola

> *...a human being, for moral purposes, is largely how he or she describes himself or herself.*

– Richard Rorty

Disclaimer

This feels slightly alien, ill-conceptualised. It confuses preferences with identity, and doesn't have any sense of which preferences we can or should treat as adaptive.

I didn't know the term "fake framework" at the time, or "guerilla ontology", but that's maybe the best way of taking this. YMMV.

I and my friends have a practical theory of identity, inspired by an (implausibly) positive reading of the oddball sociologist Erving Goffman. Call it **bootstrapping**:

1. what you like is a large part of who you are;
2. you often grow to like what you choose to do;
3. you can choose what you do
4. so to some degree you can choose what you like (2&3);
5. so you can sometimes sort of choose who you are (1&4).

Compared to the received view of identity, which holds that "*Once grown, you are an essence of given things that will not change. Biology + Childhood + Peers = Self*", this approach hopes for: freedom from some of the more obvious social determinants; allophilia; psychological neoteny; and *maybe* less distortion of beliefs by tribal forces (or maybe just interestingly different distortions).

It seems to have worked. One friend changed from an anti-sport crumpet to a diehard Liverpool FC encyclopaedia at very short notice. In the space of two years, another took himself from deadbeat, drunken self-loather to literally the hardest-working star in his cohort, summa cum laude. I am slowly becoming a scientist, where for my whole life I have been a verbal child, in love with the figurative and the suggestive, too undisciplined to nail things down.

[Edit: this ended up taking 6 years]

With enough work, maybe there is no-one you cannot associate with. (Barring their bigotry, the ultimate divisive preference.) 2 Most cultures are permeable: there is great joy in e.g. playing football with people you share no language, religion, background, or life goals with.

What does this odd idea depend on?

- *Goffman Thesis:* We are dramatic creatures; we inhabit multiple roles; we gain and lose roles. If identity is a performance, then study of cultural codes and conventions should allow you to *take on* identities. Not as a 'fake' or 'wannabe': as a real performer. Goffman gets called cynical for saying that human interaction is the presentation of masks; bootstrapping sees him as a liberator instead.

- *Gordon Thesis* 1: What you like is a large part of who you are. Language, money, race aside, what divides us is not our origins or even what propositions we believe, but *what we like*. This applies whether the object is Jesus, Naruto, or sex with other men (or all of the above).
  Preferences divide us via two reinforcing effects: because we automatically group up with people with similar interests, and because it's hard to not misunderstand people with very different preferences.

- *Turing thesis:* A necessary test for identity is to "fool" those who already have the identity. What passes is close enough.

- *Macht Thesis*: Within constraints, with enough perseverence, you can *choose* what you like. Among good people, *that's* actually the lion's share of who you are. Treat identity as fluid and performative and all that stuff: and impose it on yourself if you want. On top of your nature, metapreferences can become second nature.

Against identity

Unfortunately for this sunny picture of human potential: most people treat identity as fixed, and deadly serious business. Depending on what you set out to like, bootstrapping could be

seen as disloyal (when you decide not to follow your family's faith), decadent (when you have a procession of unused musical instruments in the loft), or appropriative (when you call yourself African after buying up land there).

Also it seems possible that identity is intellectually corrosive; a risk factor for large permanent delusions. How can we balance our suspicion of identity with bootstrapping's enthusiasm for it? Well, just note that it's the freedom and lightness of identity that we value; the main problem with particular identities is when their essentialist-parochial character leads to moral or cognitive bias.

One way out: distinguish ascribed and achieved identities. (e.g. Being a dentist is an achieved identity, and besides an easiness with instructing others it probably doesn't have too much bias involved.) Most of the anger seems to involve defying or stepping across ascribed ones.

[*Edit, much later*: or you could just drop identity from the discussion entirely, in favour of just modifying preferences.]

Counterexample?

The human mind can barely handle important complex stuff without maths, and I should like to handle some of that stuff in my life.

Yet, despite trying for 6 months - despite strong motivation and personal affinity - I have so far failed to make myself into someone who like higher mathematics. I can do it, but I do not *grok* it like I do text, rhetoric, connotation, uncertainty. If you only have algorithmic ability - no proofs, no sense of dependencies, no originality - you're a *monkey driving a car.*

Ad hoc explanations

- There is almost nothing quasi-real about maths. Unlike the other identities we've tried on, in maths your beliefs don't make a difference: you are always either right or wrong. (*Or* the answer is undecidable. Or the problem is NP-hard given P≠NP. Or worst of all, your answer is malformed: "not even wrong". But note that these para-truthvalues leave no room for human variation either.)

  Consider: thinking you are in pain *is* to be in pain; believing certain claims about Christ *makes* you a Christian. But when we do maths wrong - if you think that [log_10(10) x log_10(100) = 3] - we're maybe still doing maths, but we necessarily step away from the identity proper. No amount of Lacanian ambiguity can save you from this.

- Maths is utterly internalist: it's thus unforgiving of the ambiguity or amateurism that the bootstrapper needs to get started. Some people go as far as to say that if it's ambiguous (not just fuzzy) then it's *not* maths. It takes a long time before one's opinion of mathematical questions counts for much, and even then it is subject to strict and clear criteria. (Can someone with severe dyscalculia be a maths fan? In an unusual and important sense, I think the answer's no.)

- One can excel at something via willpower, talent, or love. In this instance I have none of these qualifiers. Because I don't love maths, I do not really know it. The things that make people love maths - its unique apodictic thrill, its aesthetic power, its foregone intensity, its esoteric spirituality - may only be perceptible to those with a certain flair.

I'll persist anyway, because it is ludicrously useful; a seriously underappreciated sphere of human creativity; I refuse to live in fear or sour grapes.

On a brighter note, maths may well be the limit case of our happy project, casting light on its process and boundary. It might be the area where mere algorithmic knowledge falls *most* short of real understanding, and thus real identification.

Is bootstrapping obvious? I don't think so, judging by how static and *crudely* determined our political, recreational, and working lives generally are. Is bootstrapping empty self-help nonsense? I don't think so, judging by how much I like the idea.

> *some philosophers seem to be angry with images for not being things, with words for not being feelings. Words and images are like shells, no less integral parts of nature than are the substances they cover, but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation. I would not say that substance exists for the sake of appearance, or faces for the sake of masks, or the passions for the sake of poetry and virtue... all these phases and products are involved in the round of existence...*
>
> – George Santayana

> *The first duty in life is to assume a pose. What the second is, no one has yet discovered.*
>
> – Oscar Wilde

1. *...what really matters is what you like, not what you are like... Call me shallow but it's the fuckin' truth*..."

   - Nick Hornby's Rob Gordon.
2. I'm emphasising the preferential part of identity (over the social part): this is not to say, with the dubious American Beats, that someone who likes black culture a lot thereby *becomes* black. Though those of us who support other social transitions do have a puzzle to solve.

See also

- *The Question Isn't Why Do Babies Do It* (2007)

Tags: self-help, philosophy, becoming, false-framework

Change my mind

Change my mind

I offer bounties for errors:

- $1 for nitpicks (ambiguities, misreadings, exceptions, technicalities).
- $10 for an error which falsifies a sentence.
- $50 for an error which invalidates a post.

Payouts

Page	Error	Person	Payout
About	Was unclear about the required size of error for a bounty, leading to a prima facie contradiction.	Loki Sempere	$10 to EA Funds
/psych	Overstated the consensus against Milgram. It's still shaky, and not really about obedience, but it's wrong to say there's no evidence, just that the original experiments were terrible.	Matt Edwards	$5
/gists	I said "constant time" instead of "constant time complexity". The function in question takes **3x** more time to process 2^64 than it does 2^0, hence the intermediate payout between nitpick and falsehood.	Loki Sempere	$5

Bets

Bet	Bettor	Odds	Resolution
July 2021: Abaluck RCT shows >15% reduction in covid transmission.	MH	1:1, $100 to Givewell	To me.
June 2020: Biden wins election.	CR	1:1. Nice restaurant dinner.	To me.
Jan 2016: Trump finishes term.	CR	1:1. Nice bottle of whisky.	To me.

Small print

I suppose this should all be multiplied by the confidence level of the post. Factual and logical errors are most likely to resolve cleanly; I probably won't cough up if you just tell me I'm an idiot for believing or not believing in e.g. Meinongianism. That would get a smile.

I'm not sure how to handle claims that have *changed* truth-value since I made them; half of this blog might be false if you return in 30 years. Leaning towards $1 to $5.

Broadness and philosophical rank

23rd August 2018

- *Investigating one possible predictor of long-term intellectual status.*
- *Confidence*: 60%. The data are a convenience sample from a skewed subpopulation.
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *Unless a philosopher finds for us an acceptable synthesis – as Plato and Aristotle did together for their age, and St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant for theirs – we remain becalmed on a painted ocean of controversy, and for better or worse… there will never be anyone to whistle thrice for us and say, once and for all, 'The game is done! I've won! I've won!'*
>
> - Ved Mehta

A small case study in quantification and transparent science: What predicts a philosopher's all-time rank (as judged by some professional philosophers, n=1165)?

What about *broadness*? By that I mean that their philosophy covered everything, or made a grand narrative to explain everything, uniting the big domains (e.g. science, ethics, society, art), synthesising great competing schools of thought.

In the top 30, Aristotle, Plato, Kant, Descartes, the Tractarian Wittgenstein, Aquinas, Leibniz, Mill, Hegelmarx, Nietzsche (ironically, but still), Epicurus, Bacon fit this description extremely well.

I check if broadness is predictively important with some basic statistics here. I give a reason to think it isn't explanatorily important here.

Caveats

- Broadness is of course a matter of degree: for instance, Aristotle is broader than Plato, because of his vast natural science work and his logic. You could make this pretty objective by counting the APA subfields it integrates, which perhaps jointly represent everything.
- The poll is very much a convenience sample, *not* a random sample of philosophers. While Leiter is an avowed classical Marxist, he has also spent a decade alienating identitarians, i.e. the now-mainstream left. (Note: These two biases don't cancel.) As such, we can expect his readership to be skewed. You can conditionalise everything that follows as "according to Leiter's readers" to be safe.
- Even if it was random, I don't know how close a proxy for *actual value* someone's status-among-philosophers is.
- Broadness isn't the same as overall value - some of the very greatest thinkers are too technical to register in philosophy (e.g. Laplace, Shannon, Kalman, Bellman, Hamming, Watkins, Jaynes, Zuse, Poincaré, Shapley). (Turing has one foot in the philosophy-canon door, though his great work was of course elsewhere.)

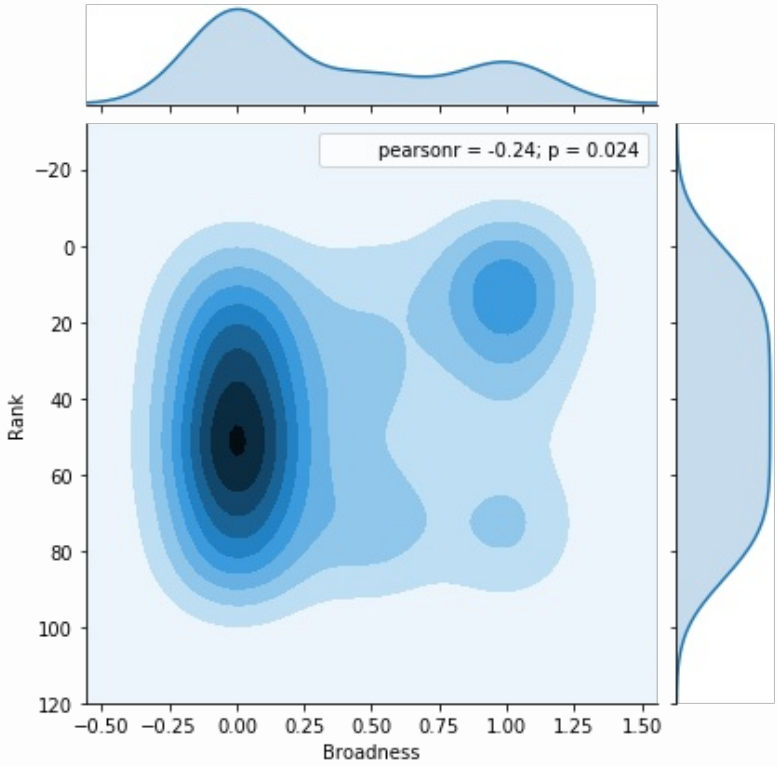
- You might find ranking (even Condorcet ranking!) philosophies distasteful, a rank gamification of a higher pursuit. In that case, I ask you to replace every instance of “rank” in this piece with “perceived rank”.
- Many execrable, uncritical mystics are enormously ‘broad’ in the weak sense that they mention lots of things. My sense requires both knowledge and reasoning, which e.g. Gurdjieff or Krishnamurti don’t display.
- Spinoza was highly systematic (his *Ethics* attempts a complete metaphysics via deductive proof) but despite doing that, and an actual ethical system, and his Bible criticism, and his jurisprudence, he maybe wasn’t as broad as the others. (When first doing this list I got confused between ‘systematic’ as in ‘formalised’ and ‘systematic’ as in ‘complete’.)
- It’s easy to imagine someone being very broad (working their way down this list, making some remarks on each, say) without really having a system uniting their work. Montaigne is like that, and the later Russell too. Call their system sceptical-empirical humanism, and limit the analysis to people who contributed, pushed forward, many fields.
- Russell contributed to mathematics, language, epistemology, metaphysics, contemporary physics and politics, ethics, religion, history, sex, etc. I’m not sure why I didn’t include him at first - possibly because he turned away from systematic (that is, formal) work after Gödel.
- The goalposts have moved. Moderns have more topics to write on, because we have discovered new sorts of things even at the highest level (e.g. computer science, which isn’t just maths and engineering). It was relatively easy for e.g. Democritus and Thales to write on every known topic.

Modelling broadness

How strong is the relationship between broadness and polling rank? We can do better than eyeballing it and saying “huh, 12 of the top thirty talked about everything”.

Here’s the data; the values of the response variable are all eyeballed for now (and please note I am only really familiar with half of them) - please correct me in the comments or with a pull request. It wouldn’t be hard to make it more objective by counting the number of large domains their system integrates.

Let’s use two handy methods: rank correlations (checking the general relationship between the two, without making assumptions about their actual distribution) and ordinal regression (checking how strong its effect on rank seems to be). Here’s the full analysis in Python.



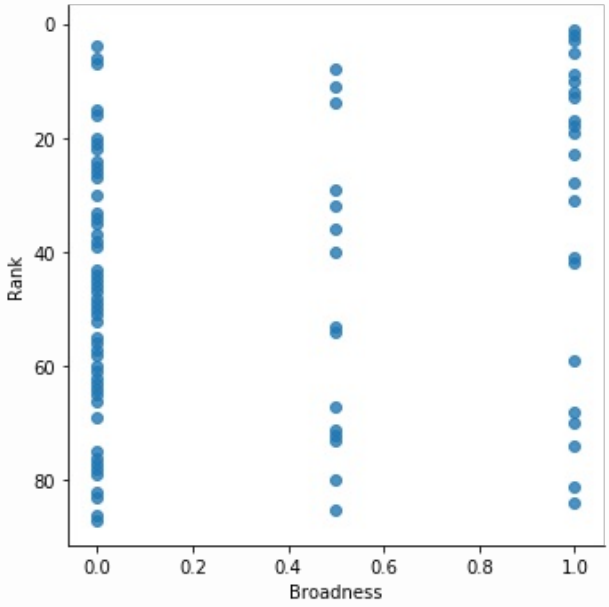
TODO: Contingency table

What's the monotonic relationship?

Spearman's rank correlation (the "*strength and direction of the monotonic relationship between variables*") came out as *Rho = -0.23, p=0.035*; as broadness increases, rank slightly improves (decreases).

Do pairs of values generally agree?

Kendall's tau (the strength and direction of the 'correspondence' between two rankings, i.e. how often the linked pairs agreed) came out as τ *= -0.17, p=0.039*; slightly weaker but corroborating. Kendall's tau is more scathing about non-sequential dislocations than Spearman's rho, so the messy sections in the joint ranking drop the score. You expect messiness from a discrete space like this:



What does threshold regression say?

It’s overkill to do regression with only one variable. But I have to learn sometime.

When predicting its own training data, an ‘all-threshold’ ordinal regressor which relies solely on ‘broadness’ is on average off by 20 places in the ranking (mean absolute error). A dumb always-predict-the-mean-rank rule is generally 22 off. We can say something like “broadness can give a 10% reduction in predictive error”.

What’s the best possible performance of broadness?

Is rank a power law?

The above assumes that it’s just as good to move from 87th to 86th as it is to move from 2nd to 1st rank.

We can guess how much better it is to be high-rank with the net contests won against Aristotle.

TODO: Ordinal trees?

(**TODO**: Count the APA subfields each philosopher contributed to.

TODO: Use the pairwise Condorcet information from the poll as well.

TODO: Compare PhilPapers’ comparatively nonpartisan sample.)

Null hypothesis

There’s a trivial explanation for this correlation:

1. This ranking is calculated from votes by contemporary philosophers.
2. Contemporary philosophers tend to specialise in only one of two of ~20 subfields which jointly represent everything.
3. Philosophers who write about everything are thus able to impress 20 approximately distinct subpopulations, while specialists will tend to impress only one or two.
4. Broadness is trivially related to popularity among contemporary philosophers.

(This would mean that this poll isn’t evidence for the effect, not that there’s no effect.)

Contemporary grand systems

The explosion in knowledge (or at least in the volume of writing) and academic incentives mean intense specialisation in all fields. If there is an effect of broadness on long-term status (which, again, I haven’t ascertained), this specialisation could hurt the prospects of contemporary philosophers later on.

Is anyone building such systems today? The two clear examples I know are Nassim Taleb and Eliezer Yudkowsky. Neither is primarily an academic, both sometimes have questionable judgment, but each is incredibly exciting in the same way that Kant or Nietzsche is exciting - if not more, since we have access to incredible resources they didn’t, not least data and simulation.

(It always looks odd to compare contemporaries to the all-time greats. It’s a steep status gradient: status seems to accumulate nonlinearly (think Matthew effects); even today, Aristotle has far more status than even the most-beloved, most-cited contemporary philosopher, David Lewis - judging by how Lewis only just managed the top 30.)

Robin Hanson writes exceptionally broadly (physics, AI, cognitive science, evolution, history, social science, sex) and is a mix of scholarly consensus and truly radical revisionism. I think he works around academic incentives by being tenured in a surplus-demand field (economics).

There's also a pretty large group (Sandberg, MacAskill, Ord, Bostrom, Cotton-Barrett, Beckstead) who have converged on expected-value probabilism as a method for enquiry into pretty well anything - putting them in the netherland between philosophy and statistics. Label this school "existential hope" and wish them well.

Appendix: Time and rank

The interaction between broadness and how long ago they wrote would be interesting to see.

TODO: Taking the midpoint of their life as their "floreat" period.

Explanation and prediction

Can you be explanatory if you aren't predictive? The converse happens all the time.

Tags:

Hardening the browser

1st September 2018

- *Passable browser security for almost no money or effort.*
- *Confidence*: 95% that this is worth the time and better than nothing.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

It's now common knowledge that we're being watched online, by a thick mix of nation-states, private companies, and criminals. They sometimes do worse than watch. What do we do? Should we care?

It's not clear what the probability of having your password leaked in a breach / having your email read / having your laptop being remotely wiped (unless you pay the creator Bitcoin) is. But something like this will probably happen to you in your lifetime, so I would take 10 mins to mitigate them now.

There is no absolute security; it's always partial and relative to a goal. This guide is aimed at "*not losing control of your accounts, not being surveilled by companies or criminals, not having your online banking subverted, not getting infected by ransomware or whatever*". It's strictly for people with average risks: not that much money, not much tech cred, not much sensitive information to protect.

"Wait, isn't that your own computer -"

On a lighter note, security is an amazing way to learn about how the internet actually works. It's a lot easier to remember the dozens of abstract systems involved when you can think, smugly, "*And I've plugged that gap with this mitigation, and that one, and that one...*"

Most of this article assumes you're using Firefox, because Chrome is itself an attack. That is, it protects you very well against everyone except Google. 2 It's not a big deal compared to the other parts of this list, you'll just need to find alternatives to the add-ons I recommend.

Ugh factors and tail risks

Why care about this? Besides mere trust in one's hardware, or a mere preference not to be watched, it's to do with the increasing tail risks of being in principle vulnerable to one oddball with a vendetta. These will increase for two reasons: the coming increase in the online population, and in ML fuzzing and intrusion methods.

Only half of humanity are online at the moment; a single script-kiddie troll can do quite a lot; the internet is about to get bigger, louder, and stranger.

First: password hygiene

Attack: password cracking

If people hack a website you're registered on, they could easily get the encrypted 'hash' of your password even if the site owners do everything right. These can eventually be brute-force decoded, and then they have your password. To prevent this common occurrence, we need our passwords to be very long (16 characters +) and have no English words. You also want a different password for each site, so that one brute-force doesn't open up all of your accounts at once. So, easy!: We want passwords that are too hard to remember, and we need to never reuse any of them.

Mitigation: A 'password manager', for instance the free, open-source, cross-platform KeePassX. Keep the database file on several devices, and on a thumb drive, and an offsite. Can put it in the cloud if you think you're likely to lose those. LastPass and 1Password seem fine, maybe a bit slicker and more friendly, but they cost.

You can also sign up to the security researcher Troy Hunt's notification tool: whenever a big leak becomes publicly known, he'll scan it for you and email you if you're in it.

Attack: password phishing

People can create convincing clones of websites just so you give them your password freely. (This isn't just about human inattention: attackers can register urls which look exactly like the real one).

Mitigation: Password manager / no password reuse.

Real mitigation: Two-factor authentication (2FA) everywhere you can, e.g. via a Universal device like Yubikey. If the site doesn't ask you for the access code from your phone when you sign in, you *immediately* change your password (from the top search result for that site).

(Sadly, SMS confirmation is relatively easy to subvert, so you should use a smartphone. An open-source 2FA app, Authenticator, is coming along though.)

Cognitive burden: once you have the Master passphrase memorised (not hard, give it a couple days): much less than remembering 40 different passwords.

In early 2019, there was splashy media coverage of a vulnerability in all the big password managers. It's true that decoded passwords you've used during a session can persist in your RAM; however, it's of little importance, since if an attacker is in a position to read arbitrary things off your RAM, you are already as screwed as you can be. (KeePass was the least vulnerable manager, incidentally.)

Then: Browser

Attacks: IP tracking, unencrypted traffic, ISP logs, public wifi spoofing, geo-locking, national bans

In many jurisdictions (e.g. UK) your internet provider is legally required to record some info about your browsing. In others (US) they do it apparently for kicks. They also implement court orders banning particular sites. Some content is only licenced for computers in particular locations. *And* using public wi-fi (airports, coffee shops) is also extremely

insecure without extra encryption.

Partial mitigation for all these: a VPN. This is highly imperfect but not as useless as this guy thinks. They at least have some incentive not to log you: no one will use a VPN which is known to log. I use PrivateInternetAccess; you can check the technical and legal specs of dozens of VPNs here or just get good live recommendations here. $30 a year. Do not use free ones.

The other problem a VPN solves, and solves optimally, is internet requests sent by non-browser apps on your machine. If you use e.g. Linux's built-in VPN client, everything goes through it.

You should not consider this strong privacy, cover for anything illegal. It's just the minimum required to *do it* in the first place nowadays.

(NB: Modern browsers have a useful thing called WebRTC. It leaks your IP though, so if you really want to hide that you'll need to go into `about:config` and set `media.peerconnection.enabled` to false. uBlock seems to fix this too.)

Attack: Man-in-the-Middle

Even when the URL is real, vulnerabilities in the original internet protocol mean people can sometimes insert themselves inbetween your data and the receiving site. This is lethal (think online shopping, online banking). This add-on prevents this where it can.

(Previously I recommended HTTPS Everywhere, but that depends on a big central database and sends all your requests there, which - though they're lovely people doing this for excellent reasons - is somewhat counter to the spirit of the thing.)

Attack: Tracking and fingerprinting

There are many, many ways to identify someone on the internet, from obvious ones like IP to desperately cunning ones like making your graphics card identify itself or spotting you based on the way you type. Here are some reputable add-ons for Firefox that kill most of this:

- NoScript. Disables all Javascript by default; this stops 90% of attacks and trackers. It is the most important, but also the most costly in time by far. It remembers which sites you let through though, so after about two weeks this burden becomes negligible. NoScript has a bunch of other cool protections too, vs XSS, clickjacking…
- Privacy Badger. Watches for processes sending information about you. Trying to fix sites' incentives by not blocking sites whose content actually obeys your Do No Track settings. Seems to cover the use case for both Disconnect and Ghostery.
- DuckDuckGo. The zero-tracking search engine. Not as good as Google, but it includes a built-in "use Google safely" command.
- Cookie Autodelete. Deletes cookies (files placed on your computer to identify you) when the tab is closed. Good compromise. 3
- Facebook Container. Facebook follows you around the internet to a surprising degree - e.g. any time you see a "Login via Facebook" button or a social-media bar with Share buttons, FB polls its cookies to tie you to that site. They sell this to advertisers, which explains the eerie echo effect of your searches. This official Mozilla extension puts the FB cookies in a "container", an impenetrable box, stopping the passive tracking (they'll still get you if you click the buttons).

I imagine everyone who will already has, but: consider quitting Facebook or neutering it. You can download all your data from them here, with like a week of waiting.

Attack: Ads

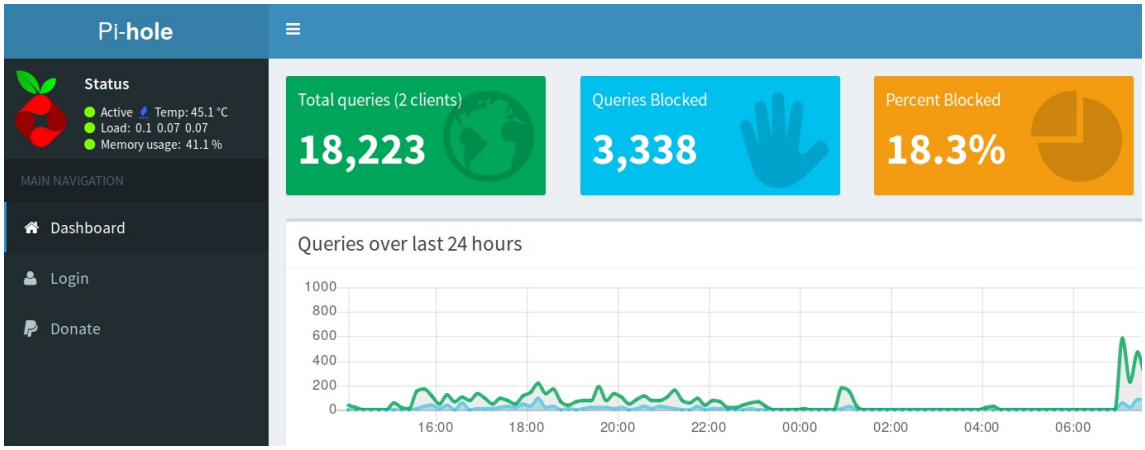
This one is arguable: the current web economy couldn't exist without ads. My response is to precommit to using any micropayment solution that people can get to work. Also to actually buy things from creators I like. In the meantime no-one gets to spam me with gigabytes of ugly unwanted content and follow me around.

But besides being ugly, besides following you without your consent, they take your time. Two-thirds of all script execution time is due to third-party scripts, mostly ads and trackers. My own network analytics say that 15% of all my requests are to ad servers. This is hours of your life per year. 1

Everyone knows this solution, but a better solution takes a bit of work:

The best thing to do against ads, at present, is a Pi-hole, a tiny DNS server in your house. This stops ads at the source, for every device in your house at once. You can get a Raspberry Pi for $30, and it takes about 30 mins to set up as a Pi-hole.

Another benefit of doing this at the router level is that it gives you a nice (rudimentary) network dashboard:



Because the internet is a Red Queen hellscape, we should expect this to gradually stop working over the next few years. Ads can avoid a DNS block in a variety of ways, up to and including them implementing their own custom domain-over-HTTPS protocol. *La lotta continua.*

Attack: email surveillance

Not a lot you can do, short of undertaking the 100-hour hell of runnning your own mail server. Try a Swiss company, e.g. Protonmail (they have no public data-sharing agreement with the Five Eyes and constitutional protections for foreigners).

Important caveat: you *really* need to backup your Protonmail password well: If you lose it and reset, you lose your email history. This is the harsh nature of strong security.

> *Because of the encryption we use to protect your data, resetting your Login password in ProtonMail is different from other, less secure email services. Your password is used to decrypt your emails, and we do not have access to it. Therefore, if you forget your password, you will lose the ability to read your existing emails.*

PS: Hotmail and Outlook have been a dumpster fire for many years.

Attack: deanonymisation

No whois entry on your sites. People will try and charge you $10 for this but it is mandated by GDPR so shop around.

Attack: tracking over CDNs

A new clever attack: identifying you by your repeat requests to a public Content Delivery Network. This add-on DecentralEyes foils this by keeping a copy of commonly-used files in your cache.

Total annual cost: $45

($40 VPN, $2 usb drive for your password DB + maybe $4 electricity for the Pi-hole.)

Daily time cost: Net time saving?

You'll take a minute a day adding new sites to your NoScript list. And Captchas pop up more often without cookies. But the Pi-hole speeds up your internet by ~10% by not loading ads. And once you get the KeePass keyboard shortcuts in your muscle memory it is faster than typing. So net gain.

Add-on risk

Whenever you install a browser add-on, you're allowing unknown code to execute on your machine, behind NoScript. Processes are "sandboxed" in modern browsers - that is, browser malware is unlikely to break into your main OS account - but this is still a risk.

Worst is when someone replaces an honest add-on with a malwared version. This is not hypothetical: for example, part of the Python central package repository was subverted in 2017. And it can take months for someone to notice this.

However, you can be very confident in EFF and Mozilla products - HTTPS Everywhere, Privacy Badger, Containers - and relatively confident in popular open-source add-ons like NoScript, Cookie-Autodelete, uBlock, especially if you built from source.

Still, lean toward avoiding others.

More things you could do:

- Get Linux (99%+ of malware doesn't work on it, and there's strong prevention of state backdoors and 'security through obscurity' zero-days).
- Turn off these Firefox configs.
- "Hacker tape" (putting a removable cover over your webcam) is a successful meme. Good for it! But an even more significant risk is the built-in mic: your unguarded speech is a much more *high-res* thing to use against you. (Imagine your employer hearing you complain about them to your partner.) One solution is leaving a 3.5mm jack plugged-in, with the wire trimmed off (and the wires taped-up separately to prevent a short circuit!) - but this is still software-mediated rather than hardware, and so could conceivably be bypassed.
- Add an additional keyfile for Keepass, on a USB. This is too far for me. You'd want it attached to your body.
- Tor. Slow!
- CanvasBlocker: people can get a wee bit of identifying info from spying on your GPU and screen specs.
- Airgapping one of your computers.
- ClearURLs (truncate the identifying info from the end of your links).

- CSS Exfil Protection (yet another graphical fingerprinting technique).
- Consider not using Chinese hardware.
- Consider not using American hardware.
- Consider not using Kaspersky (sad - seems to have been involuntary aid to Putin's people).
- Two-factor authenticated bank.
- RandomUserAgent: changes the device and browser you're reporting, at random. Sometimes breaks things.
- Store a PGP key somewhere public (e.g. Keybase): makes it possible to authenticate yourself without identifying documents. (Softening the blow of identity theft, preventing chronic lulz).
- Faraday wallet for phone and contactless card. Obviously this prevents all incoming calls too.
- Life / work separation. Never shop at work, never work on your home computers. This makes two of you, with two different attacks (and sets of attacks) needed.
- *Phone*: The iPhone's encryption has been defended in court against heavy pressure, but also subverted by commercial tools. The Librem 5 will be better on many axes - hardware control, OS security, supply chain ethics - but is unlikely to do better in crypto.
- Against reward hacking (that is, being distracted with push notifications and infinite feeds): Just don't have a smartphone, or keep it in your bag and use a dumbphone for interpersonal alerts. Also ImpulseBlocker.

Here's a couple of good tools for seeing if this does the trick.

Note that you're not going to stop any nation-states except via perfect paranoia, the kind which makes the above look sloppy and carefree. Luckily, that effort is not worthwhile for almost anyone.

See also

- Your Computer Isn't Yours
- Violet Blue on resisting tracking, surveillance, devices.
- F-Secure on the whole deal.

1. *Fermi estimate*: 10,000 requests per person per day (like 300 actual page visits).

   say 0.1 sec delay from ad loading and tracker execution, per request

   ~= 1000 secs ~= 17 mins per day.

   15% blocked by the normal Pihole blacklist. Rest blocked by NoScript.

2. Supposedly Firefox is also significantly faster than Chrome in Private mode, but given the disparity in the two teams' funding I doubt this kind of advantage will last.
3. Using a VPN and blocking cookies entirely makes Captchas unbearable - think 10 rounds of *extremely*-slowly-loading grids, blocked audio renditions, etc. I have a separate browser with cookies enabled which I only use to solve Captchas. Sad!

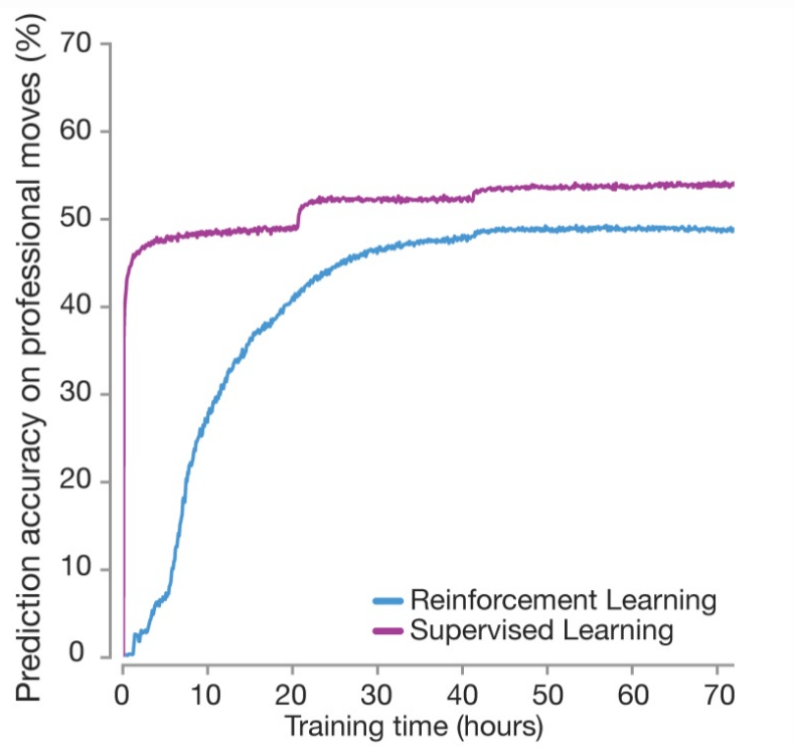
Tags: long-content, computers, self-help, lists

A ceiling for human expertise

31st January 2018

- *Does this auxiliary result from AlphaGo Zero have large implications?*
- *Confidence*: 60%; fairly speculative.
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

This figure appears in DeepMind's instant-classic paper 'Mastering the Game of Go without Human Knowledge' (2017):



> ***Figure 3b:*** *'Prediction accuracy on human professional moves. The plot shows the accuracy of the neural network at each iteration of self-play, in predicting human professional moves...*
> *The accuracy measures the percentage of positions in which the neural network assigns the highest probability to the human move.'*

It shows that AlphaGo Zero (AGZ) only predicts human pro moves with 50% accuracy, at best. That is, AGZ disagrees with human professionals on 50% of moves.

This perhaps has implications for human expertise in general, by the following argument:

```
1. AGZ plays far beyond peak human ability.

2. AGZ would play differently from a peak human in 50% of moves.

3. So a peak human makes suboptimal moves at least 50% of the time.

4. Go is an excellent environment for human learning
(small ruleset, rapid objective feedback, amenable to intuition).

5. So, relative to more complex domains, human mastery of Go should be
```

```
relatively complete.

6. So we can expect human experts in other, more complex domains to make
suboptimal decisions at least 50% of the time.
```

Regarding premise 4, Ericsson says learning occurs if people are “1) given a task with a well-defined goal, 2) motivated to improve, 3) provided with feedback, 4) provided with ample opportunities for repetition and gradual refinements of their performance”

Tags: AI, forecasting, argument

Cracking cultures

25th October 2021

- *The art & philosophy of getting into stuff*
- *Confidence*: Made up. Works for me and Tyler Cowen at least.
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10

There is so much to understand, there are so many things to like - and all of us understand and like very little of it. 2 If you're young, your preferences maybe define you - but you could be defined by something else. If you're any age, they determine who you spend your time with - but you could spend time with almost anyone.

It's easy to forget how inexhaustible the natural and human world is. This year I've been running classes on *the art of getting into things*. I collected all the interests and subcultures my students are into (or actively not into):

A few cultural codes (n=70 young Europeans)

Note that these are their answers to cultures they like **and** cultures they hate.

- mathematics - Poetry - Training to control your body (e.g. yoga) - Training to control your mind (e.g. through meditation) - Instrumentals - jazz - Improv (e.g. Nils Frahm Ibrahim Maalouf) - Effective altruism - Nature - mountaineering - Introspection - partwork - Authentic relating - anger - Pop culture - Twitter - Gardening - Fashion - Japanese punk fashion - vintage fashion - Quantified self - Tea - Rituals - ceremonies - Love - Theater - Action movies - romances - thrillers - Reality TV - Manipulation - frame games - implicit communication - Neon lights - Fireworks - making noise - stage magic - Being overly polite - Cars - Smoking - Eating animals - Narrative podcasts - long form video essays - mythology inspired fantasy - ghibli movies - fanfiction - audiobooks - consequentialism - metroidvania - TV - rococo - anime - horror - gender abolitionism - news - Nietzsche - Freud - self help - bad takes on plagiarism - conspiracy theories - warm weather - leather couches - Having mentors - curiosity - joking about modern art - watching sports - Competitiveness - dancing - online courses - old music - gym supplements - reggae - cryptography - playing instruments - Fishing - loud cinemas - huge parties - shopping - politics in sports - hermetic poetry - tanning - silent movies - overthinking - Alt rock - Romantic classical music - plushies - AI and machine learning - anthropology - gothic horror - minimalism - heavy metal - art deco - lists - colour theory - dubstep - rap - mumble rap - modern rap - (German) Rap - black comedy - arthritis - pornography - oil painting - physics - misogyny - misandry - psychedelic drugs (or any recreationally for that matter) - fandom wars - baroque music - film music - board games - comedy books - feminism - pop music - Samba music - murder mysteries - film noir - love stories - waltzes - minimalist music - heavy metal - horror films - serialist music - punk - tinkering with electronics - mindfulness - anime - playing video games vicariously - rock climbing - classic literature - birds - swing dance - languages - modern art - running - food - techno - modern art (most of it is garbage) - twitter - most TV - critical race theory - smoking - wwe wrestling - wow this is hard - ok i give up: bunch of other music genres - effective altruism - transhumanism - love - La Dispute - folk punk - emo - sentient beings - cats - movies - tv shows - anime - books - gadgets - hanging out with people - parenting - talks - education - internet memes - texting - dancing - drinking - religion - faith - nationalism (any form of sectarianism really) - harmful pranking culture - posting pictures of yourself online - marvel movies - mindless scrolling - Sailing/windsurfing - mathematics - acoustic/piano covers - fantasy books - LGBT - Yoga - baking - vegetarianism - hiking - religions -

Japanese - Englisch - scones - Alcohol consumption - French - modern art - ASMR - extreme nationalism - TikTok - patriachates - traditional role models - soccer - nightcores - hacker culture - acoustic music - anime - film - transhumanism - fantasy - history - literary theory - country - comedy - productivity hacks - statistics - malls - car - social media culture - tv reality - cult around luxury - credential culture - cryptocurrency for pure speculation - short video content (<2 min) - selfhelp - celebrities - A collection of stuff (organic molecules - dinosaurs...); - Rationality & logic; - Linguistic puzzles; - Surrealism literature & art; - Typography; - Soft rock; - Physical simulation - Physical intimacy; - Antidiscrimination movements; - Deontology; - Environment protection; - Animes; - Postrock; - Silly questions - Alcohol - tobacco - and similar; - Social Darwinism; - Punk; - Distrust in government; - Digitization of books; - Nonfiction thirdperson narratives; - Celebrity culture - HIMEHINA - dystopianish books/films/music/games - psychology/philosophy - Burger King - learning new fun concepts - ML - music - even life hacks) - EDM - coding (when it goes well) - writing (when it goes well) - watching YouTube - hanging out with friends (if all goes well) - casual academic discussion (for fields I'm interested in) - watching movies/TV shows - Twitter/Reddit/IG - pinball - card games - COVID - COVID origin search - presidential debates - extremely hot days - militaryrelated - TV talk shows that end up being guests shouting over each other - Puns / wordplay / banter - Certain religious stuff - Circling - Meme culture - Dunk culture - Psychoanalysis - Sharp criticism / bridgewater / radical honesty - Making salient the ways in which men and women are different - Social justice - Seeing like a state - Great Person view of the world - Woo / new agey stuff - Really incomprehensible art criticism - The lens of degeneracy - cognitive science - grunge/rock - epiphenomenalism - NLP - thingspaces - modernist literature - free will - anime/manga - icedcoffee - number theory - transhumanism - badminton - rap - hiphop - indie. - introspection - implicit wordassociation tests - ballet - birdwatching - Apple Music - indie movies - celebrity culture - finance bros. - Cooking - Persuasion and communication - Vegan / vegetarianism - (comic) books - dog training - scifi - interdisciplinary research - rock music - math puzzles - manga - running - meditation - board games - longevity biohacking - coding - gardening - bird watching - modern music - sport cheering - team ball sports - watching sports - makeup - techno music - religion - being active on social media - hand crafts - luxury goods - All classical art genres - singleplayer video game - movies - theatrical production - Classical music - science fiction - hard scifi - linguistics - rock&roll - synthpop - physics - history - philosophy - Hollywood movies - K-pop - sneaker culture - fandom - geography - tea - whiskey - ratfic - ambient electronica - philosophical Buddhism - admiring nature through science - effective altruism - transhumanism - RPG games - board games - alternative medicine - metal music - mainstream action movies - anime/manga - haiku - birdwatching - cultural revisionism & SJWs - clubbing - telenovellas - youtube monologues - dating apps - reggae - programming - word games - EA - forecasting - drinking socially if it helps me get laid - quantified self - nice and expensive gadgets - cryonics - physical violence - gun culture - going to parties - answering questions about myself - using mobile phones - using something that isn't Linux - trying out drugs - Christianity - mediocrity/lack of ambition - going to loud parties - crying in front of people - the Hogwarts house Hufflepuff - Microsoft Word - The Guardian - itchy clothes - Twitter - Economic rationality - Mathematics - Politics - Faith - Books - Hypocrisy - Death - Betting - Confidentiality - Unions - Empiricism - Low energy conversations - Pranks - Noise music - The idea of mental health - Smoking - Alcohol - Bureaucracy - The illiberal left - Celebrity culture - Gender abolitionism - Body positivity - Stimulants - Modernism - Effective altruism - Animal welfare people - Jazz - Analytic philosophy - Slate Star Codex - Libertarianism/classical liberalism - Rationality community - Learning foreign languages - Homeschooling - Tabletop boardgames - Reddit - Being weirdly traditional - Being patriotically Irish - Poker - Political tribalism - Smoking - Wokeism - Antiwokeism - Drinking - Partying - Loud music - Nature - Marriage - Radical political / general state systems - Psychology - War - Social media - History - Homophobia - Cartoons - Effective altruism - minimalism - veganism - physics - philosophy - interior design - friendships involving introspection and communication - pineapple on pizza - romantic films - classic literature - board games - chess -

olympiads - truth seeking - go - meditation - polyamory - taking drugs (caffeine - acid - MDMA - ecstasy etc) - Tik tok culture - horoscopes - excessive signalling - marvel films - films with dark aesthetics - horror films - saying ‘I don’t like kids’ - expensive cars - manga - gambling - Agency - Rational fiction - Effective Altruism - Transhumanism - Free Markets - Utilitarianism - AI - Social justice - Environmentalism - Binge drinking - Conservatism - Chess - weight training - machine learning - beer - English literature - Social justice - Emo/goth - Dance - Country music - infovore - taking unnecessary risks - improvisation expertise (cannot plan) - Science - Literally any idioms (No matter how controversial) - Conspiracy Theories - Random philosophy bs - Weatherspoons - Guitar - 4X games - Old school hip hop - Tea - Go - Chess - MMA - Vegetarianism / veganism - Gambling - Whiskey - Note taking - Fanfiction - Anime - K pop - Friends (tv) - Hustle culture - Finance bro culture - Dance - Tik tok leftists - Self help stuff - Theatre - Yugioh - Folk Punk music - Tabletop gaming - Postmodern literature - Modern art - Coffee - Tea - NonModern art (especially sculpture) - Alcohol - Critical theory - Transhumanism - Free verse - Camp - Electronic music - Effective altruism - Charles Bukowski - SelfHelp - Opera - Dance - HipHop music - NonMonogamy - Gender nonabolitionism - Haute Cuisine - Everyday fashion - Hard Scifi + reading in general - opera - Peking Opera - Avalon - Owls - jazz music - podcasts - Stand up comedy - punk music - self help - camping - social media - hacker lore - historic fiction - spoken word - SCP - Fruit on food - romance scenes in movies - soap opera - zoos - car racing - Marvel movies - tonic water - scented candles - ice water - sci fi - Cyberpunk - Exercise (weightlifting & running mostly) - Philosophy :) - Biohacking/self ex - Anthropology - Open borders - Religious faith - Anarchism - Fanfiction - Emo (music or culture - any wave) - Effective altruism - Massive generalisation to produce an ESPR class - Car culture - Weebs - Keto (and carnivorism) - Conspicuous consumption? Designer brands? - Productivity culture? Productivity porn? - Elon musk veneration - Billionaires generally - Rational egoism - Trads - Podcasts where it's either a) politics b) two guys hanging out c) two guys hanging out and discussing politics - Emo rap - Betting (e.g poker) - Effective Altruism - Clean code - Yoga - gender abolitionism - Stoicism - Meditation - socialism - agnosticism - abstinence - transgenderism - Spirituality - antinatalism - minimalism - Celebrity culture - reality TV - hierarchies based on age - military intervention - Humanism - Organized religion - Tik tok/vines - sociology - exams - Attachment to brands (retail or car brands - Apple) - I'm sure there's a formal name for this... - Economics - Non fiction books - Harry potter - Strategy games - Musicals - Foodies - Paintings and illustrations - Any genre of music - Movies - Hiking - Dog ppl - conservatism - Long termism - Patriotism - Cat ppl - Any sport community - Chemistry/Science - Guitar music - Publically sharing ideas - Finding political middleground - Pursue a better tomorrow - Arts - Learning new things - Cultural evolution - Travel - physics - mourning - food waste - radicalized religion or belief - treating animals without empathy - bad tap water - Noblesse oblige - sea shanties - adversarial strategy games - cooperative limited information games - grand fantasy narratives - multilayered schemes/mindgames - low/no contact martial arts (eg capoeira) - narrative poetry - mindbreak (eg DDLC) - ratfiction - synchronized dance - rap/hiphop - Choral music - minimalist art - contact martial arts - romance novels - ancient literature/the classics - puzzle hunts/CTFs - religious study - metal music - street dancing - ballroom dancing - nonrat fanfiction - unorthodox edgy extremism - neoreaction - sports - team sports - mystery fiction - infohazard peddling - equality of opportunity - hivemind - scorched earth/MAD policy - knowledgebased secret societies - Death worship/cycle of life - freeform poetry - gore - normal edgy extremism (altright - eat the rich) - newage mystics (Deepak Chopra) - racing/jumping sports - snobbish art criticism - statusbased secret societies - equality of outcome - original sin narratives - Jung - astrology - mumble rap - yodelling - glitchhop (and most noise) - dancing - climbing & several weird sports - puzzle hunting - xkcd - gelato - experiental camps :) - almost everything I guess - music - hardcover books over digital copies - hairstyling - boardgames - ultimate frisbee - US oversmily overpolite communication - Tarantino movies - meditation retreats (for long time - monks etc.) - Other people's coherent consistent models - large parties - effective altruism - themes of sacrificing personal good for the greater good - intuitive explanations for complicated maths concepts -

Metal music - scenic walks - optimism about the long run future - philosophy - status hierarchies - muscular hypertrophy - reviews and summaries - tourism - team sports - art museums - action video games - fiction without significant emotional content - stay at home mothers - SCPs - shonen, seinen, isekai - scanlations - Video essays - Fantasy card games (e.g. Magic: The Gathering) - Punk - Goth - Peking opera - Fasting / extreme dieting - Lovecraft - Painting/Sketching - Clubbing - Cheese tasting - Dating sims - top models - A fascination with pirates - Boxing/MMA - Historical autobiographical fiction - Sports video games - My little pony - Poetry - Kpop - Kardashian culture - Wine tasting - Chinese language - writing - motorcycles - living abroad - perfectionism - teaching - acting - tea - ecofriendly - vegetarianism - trading - business - Islam - luxury - parenting - cooking - Marie Kondo - HPMOR - homesteading - basically all ceremonies and holidays - Halloween - productivity culture - School - HR - Informal logic - 'Oxbridge college' culture - Tea+coffee - Late nights - Introversion - Chess - Statistics - Humanism - Atheism - Vegetarianism - Platonic affection - Physics - Competitive games - Astrology/Horoscopes - Spectator sports - Elaborate weddings - 'Luxury' brands - Speed/slam/spit - Pyramid schemes (and corrupt lotteries) - Clubbing - Blind dating - Masochism - Music genres that involve boring chord progressions - Theoretical Computer Science - Movie Soundtracks - Coding Projects - Public Speaking and Debating - Story Driven Video Games - Self Help - Spirituality - Meditation - Stoicism - Zen - Life Planning and Optimisation - Steampunk - Anime - (very moderate) - Supplements - This is hard. I think most nontrivial things can be famed in a positive light. - blogging culture - science fiction - musicals - black comedy - mistake theory - shamefully flashy big budget movies - elegant philosophical / legal arguments - infinite games - hipster culture - cooking & cuisine - watching dance - LARPing - arthouse - competitive card games - considered diets - gym and weight lifting - classic [rhyme] poetry - military/martial norms - survivalism/prepper - hacker culture - some critical theory - 'high' or classic literature - conflict theory - CRT - trying to pursue political change through word engineering/policing - modern poetry - oldfashioned masculinity norms - Programmer - AI - post scarcity scifi - low carb - longevity - pragmatism - shorttermism - animal welfare - feminism - strict veganism - faith - religion - sleeping < 6 hours per day more nights - loud music - Card games - Vegan food - Rap - Ecofuturism - Nuance - strategic altruism - Poetry - abstract art - spirituality - football - crypto space - conservatism - dogma - left wing politics - Techno - wine - xenophobia - crowds - NFTs - Straw rationality - Postmodernism - Radicalism - Dancing - volcanoes - bird watching - curiosity - scientific method applied to life - alone time. - Theatre and the arts in general - scifi books - historical novels - healthy nutrition - board games - hiking - mind altering substances taken responsibility - scepticism - humanism - growth mindset. - Faith and spirituality - muscle hypertrophy - unboxing videos - hypocrisy - unconditional optimism - hugs from strangers - multitasking - libertarianism - chitchat - identity - games - environment design - Continental philosophy - capitalism - astrology/general divination - politics - romance - individualism - irony - abuse of notation - dance - status games - Descriptive epistemology - normative ethics - metaphysical opinions - rent seeking - essentialism - optimisation - guilt - fear of breaking things - enlightenment - linguistic prescriptivism - rock music - experiments - philosophy - rationalism - bullet journaling - utilitarianism - deontology - virtue ethics - agile - phenomenology - all kinds of music - pain - ice skating - alcohol - feminism - sleeping all day - psychoanalysis - nihilism - decorations - feng shui - smoking - fishing - hypocrisy - astrology - intolerance - hédonism - medieval philosophy - weird narrative structure - classic memes - hacker culture - fundamental physics - space - psychedelics - loop quantum gravity - doorstopper fantasy - EDM - MRA - individualism - religion - magic - capitalism - poetry - AI - string theory - proprietary software - jazz - revolutionary politics - modern memes - just works - multiplayer - veganism - tinkering with electronics - mindfulness - anime - playing video games vicariously (watching playthroughs) - rock climbing - classical literature - birds - swing dance - languages - modern art - techno - modern art (most of it is garbage) - TV - critical race theory - smoking - WWE wrestling - Puns / wordplay / banter - Persuasion and communication - Veganism - Certain religious stuff - Cooking - Circling - Meme

culture - Dunk culture - Psychoanalysis - radical honesty - Making salient the ways in which men and women are different - Social justice - Seeing like a state - Great Person view of the world - Woo - Really incomprehensible art criticism - The lens of degeneracy - (comic) books - dog training - scifi - interdisciplinary research - rock music - puzzles - manga - running - meditation - board games - biohacking - coding - bird watching - modern music - team sports - watching sports - techno music - religion - social media - hand crafts - luxury goods - Whiteboards (I mean not just the object I mean something larger about how one likes to think/move through idea space)

You can attempt to get into any such system of meaning. What's a word for those? "Culture" - but they can be *much* smaller than the national units we usually mean by "culture". So here take "a culture" to mean a subculture, an idiom, a scene, a style, a genre, a field, a medium, a view.

Claim: every human activity, and every group of humans larger than one, forms a culture. It's often intentionally hard for outsiders to understand. Reality has a lot of detail, and humans, good humans, paint this detail with meaning and distinctions. Cracking these codes is the most important skill which is barely taught anywhere. 5

Every year I try to get into something major. Hacker lore (2014); "modern classical" music (2020); Chinese poetry (2011); Analytic philosophy (2008); economic rationality (2013); dank memes (2017); singing in public (2016); teaching (2020); this year, comic books. 3

Tyler Cowen's practice

I've been doing this for years, but I only became self-conscious of it after seeing Tyler Cowen's version. One of his most important blog posts is just 400 words long and reports on his far longer programme of getting into things.

> *I also view [cracking cultural codes] as an investment in understanding symbolic meaning, cultural codes of excellence, the transmission of ideas, and also how the details of an area fit together to form a coherent whole. I believe this knowledge makes me smarter and wiser, although I am not sure which mass-produced formal test would pick up any effects.*

> *...I have found it highly useful, most of all for various practical ventures and also for dealing with people, and for trying to understand diverse points of view and also for trying to pass intellectual Turing tests.*

Why?

1. Fun! Access more of the value in the world.

It's more than just liking more cool stuff. It's about treating your own taste and interest as an object in question, an object which could be worked on. About treating outgroups as puzzles rather than threats or weirdos.

2. Social life

What you like determines who you spend your time with. It often determines your life partner. Businesses and academic fields are famously culturally ornate and hard to crack.

You've probably had the experience of being at a party and realising that the stranger next to you shares your love of Japanese noise rock, or loose-leaf tea, or Afro-futurism, or Adult Swim. You've probably had some amazing conversations as a result. This tells us we can deeply interact with 10x more strangers.

3. Understand people!

- You break off a piece of the giant impossible concept of human culture overall.
- Subcultures do a large amount of all new and interesting work. (This is almost true by definition in art. But also startups: to replace a huge corporate incumbent, you have to have a different angle, and often they are outsiders.)
- *Mental flexibility*. One of the evils of ageing is bewilderment: feeling that the world is bizarre and unmanageable, that you can't interact with the young, that you are relegated. Active effort and mastery of cultures should prevent this.

Expensive example

It might also pay you. When I started working in tech, I didn't negotiate very hard, under some silly assumption that pay would trade off against respect and security.

In reality, you must negotiate pay to be respected. The more someone pays you, the more they will respect you, to retroactively explain their paying you so much.

This is unfair, unwritten, and a massive part of your lifetime income.
(This graph applies to corporate culture, not other parts of business.)

Why aesthetics?

Above, I made grand claims about large portions of all human activities being available to crack. 8 So why am I talking about comics?

Aesthetics is a great place to start because it's so cheap and the experiments are so quick. It's also surprisingly impactful, socially powerful. 4 And also because once you stop seeing your taste as immutable (or god forbid correct) you can pursue all of the rest of the world.

I really think there's a general skill here - that understanding punk deeply really does increase my ability to understand Tanzanian culture, let alone prog and disco and post-punk and dub and thrash.

A spectrum

Three ways of relating to a genre, a medium, an art, a school of thought, a field:

1. **Love**: to find value in ordinary examples.
2. **Open to**: to see the value of the best examples.
3. **Not open to**: to struggle to see the value of even the best.

I claim that 0% and 100% are basically never correct. Most things fall into 30-40%. We want to move from 20% to 60% on most things. (It would be very distracting to love everything.)

Pick something you're not open to. Ask:

- Why don't I like it?
- Do I not like the people who like it?
- Do my friends dislike it?
- Does it offend me? Is it ugly? Low class? Pretentious?
- What is it trying to do?
- How would I have to change to get it?

Actionable bits of a cultural code

> *To make something interesting, just look at it a long time.*
>
> — Gustave Flaubert

1. Canon.

You need to start with the greatest (or the most accessible greats) so that you can remove one source of uncertainty and solve for the remaining unknown: your stomach for it. Some cultures revolt against the idea of a canon, and but all of them have secret shibboleth canons behind the listicle canons.

Finding critics you can trust helps, because their activity consists in taking the unwritten and writing it down. (Obviously they never fully succeed.) Outside literature, academics are often surprisingly poor critics.

Once you know the canon, you can get the *allusions*, and you can understand the principal components, the ways instances are supposed to vary.

2. Jargon, conventions, techniques

Too specific to say much about here. Critics again, or else a hard act of empiricism.

3. Material conditions

Say you try it. Say you pick the top 10 all-time whatevers. But you bounce off - it all seems so contrived / so hostile to its audience / so trivial / so pretentious. What to do?

One powerful trick is to study what Marxists call the material conditions. 1 For our purposes this is not a grand reduction of the ideal to the economic, it's just 1) how capital-intensive it is, 2) the demographics of the creators and audience, 3) the tempo and complexity of production (weekly for manga, a month for a serious poem). Then: *how do they do it?* Those timelapse videos of someone painting or carving are ideal.

I watched every Kubrick film and didn't really see the fuss. Then I read up on him, and learned that e.g. he had thousands upon thousands of doorways in London photographed while location scouting for *Eyes Wide Shut*. It's not that obsessiveness means quality, that inputs mean output. But it means *meaning*. As I rewatch him, I have good reason to consider many parts of the production as meaningful, and in fact I like him far more on the second runthrough.

Only once you know what's good, what the axes are, and how it's made can you understand originality, deviance, substyles, and your own sense of the greatness.

Procedure

1. Find a critic you can trust. Friends are best. [2 weeks]
2. Where is the quality? What is it *trying* to do? [2 weeks]
3. What are the material conditions? [2 weeks]
4. If you really can't see any value: what's sociologically remarkable about it?
5. When do I just accept that I am not capable of liking this? 6

Examples

poetry

> *In science one tries to tell people, in such a way as to be understood by everyone, something that no one ever knew before. But in poetry, it's the exact opposite.*

– Paul Dirac, or

> *Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling… If the poet presents directly feelings which overwhelm ... they cannot strengthen morality and refine culture, set heaven and earth in motion and call up the spirits!*

– Wei Tai (魏泰)

Critics: Paul Keegan, FR Leavis, IA Richards, Harold Bloom, Wei Tai

Material conditions: mostly people without jobs, alone, intentionally floating free of society. No capital requirements and mostly subsistence pay. So mostly posh people or patronees. 7

Aims: many!

- Oral history
- Propaganda
- Teaching (mnemonics)
- Social critique
- Seduction
- Philosophy
- Religious expression
- Emotional expression

Almost all modern poetry is written in the latter mode, the lyric-confessional. If you think you don't like poetry, this might be why.

punk

This ^ is one of the all-time great punk recordings. It has 5 chords (or rather one chord moved around a little) and was made by 16 year olds.

Somehow this ^ is punk too. They took punk to mean freedom (ha!), and got the real freedom afforded to the thrifty at least. By a band who practiced harder than you would

believe.

Critics: Michael Azerrad, Daniel Sinker, Steve Albini, Robert Christgau, Piero Scaruffi

Material conditions: Ideal teenage culture. Parents don't like it, it's incredibly easy for you to participate, cool and edgy, easy uniform, expresses & ennobles alienation you were feeling anyway. DIY. Cheap! $5 gig tickets. Skill optional. Shocking on purpose. Alternative economics. Full lifestyle. Distortion covers mistakes.

Aims: The expression of alienation. Easiest to express this as a critique of society, consumerism, war.

Punk is probably my deepest engagement with anything I don't literally work for or belong to. Here is my theory of the ideology.

effective altruism

Critics: Toby Ord, Paul Christiano, Nate Soares, David Pearce, Bernard Williams, Larissa Macfarquhar, Angus Deaton, Phil Torres and Amia Srinivasan if you must.

Material conditions: We got rich, and so able to help. We got data, and so able to check. We got universalism, and so the will to help.

Speculatively: the EA attitude is rare because of scope insensitivity, localism, maybe economic illiteracy, and (justified!) background cynicism about charity and foreign aid.

Aims: to make the world as good as possible (whatever that means), using econometrics and philosophy.

https://live.givedirectly.org/

anime / manga

Critics: Ada Palmer, Adam Elkus, Gwern, Tamerlane, SD Shamsel. 9

I didn't understand manga at all before knowing the **material conditions**: often one chapter per *week*, low pay, enormous catalogues of copy-paste backgrounds. The author does not know when the series will be cancelled, so it's impossible to plot properly. *Shirobako* is an anime about the material conditions of anime.

It's very important to understand Japanese drawing even if you hate it. It is massive and growing fast. The French government is currently spending about €200m a year on manga, because they were beautiful and decided to trust French youth with their own cultural spending.

Manga is not about virtuoso linework but here are some examples to study. (The background of the latter is a standard library asset.)

My gloss: The essence of manga is exaggeration. Men with swords taller than them, preteen superheroes, all kinds of bodies which couldn't be, all kinds of facial expressions and gesticulations which didn't exist until they memed themselves into real life. But you can exaggerate anything, it doesn't have to be combat or sensuality. And the exaggeration tends to take a certain form: self-exaggeration, aspiration, the psychology of becoming excellent. There's one about being a better chess player, one about being a better baseball player, one about being a better farmer, one about being a better teacher. All treated with high drama, extreme closeups, and OTT declarations. War against one's own lack of skill and character.

What will you like? What will you understand?

See also

- Am I advocating being a mop?
- Seeking Sense
- Comfort Zone Expansion
- Zohar Atkins trying to explain dense and repugnant thinkers in plain and alluring terms.
- Callard on aspiring, Callard's own idioms
- Logan on poetry
- On self-invention more generally
- On the cultural code of corporations

Limits

Despite 8 years of trying I still don't love mathematics. Despite 1 month of trying I still hate haiku, Heidegger, Youtube monologues. That's fine! (But also, help.) There are things we should not like. There could be things we should not understand, though probably not many.

Activities

- Pick something you don't understand, but want to. Run the procedure!
- example of an unwritten rule you realised recently
- example of using one code to understand another
- Examples of cultures you "get"
- Any you understand without liking?
- Have you ever intentionally gotten into something?
- Have you ever failed to get into something despite trying hard?
- What don't you want to like?

Chaining codes

If you like Gwern's statistical work, you might be able to use his anime or tea criticism. If Scaruffi on krautrock thrills you, maybe some of his odd views on everything else in the world will land.
If you love film, then you already have a royal road into modern classical music. Film soundtracks are the main way that classical music is now appreciated.
I once used football to get into Tanzanian culture. (I wasn't even that good on football.)

1. Marxism. *Code cracked*: 2009. Described myself as "economically Marxian, politically liberal" for a while. Yeah yeah, I know.
2. Bookish people are known to lament not being able to read everything. But consider what a tiny amount of the world books are, how little of it is even mentioned in books. e.g. All but the broadest and most brilliant arts people are too undisciplined to even attempt the vast beauty and humanness of maths and engineering.
3. or as the intellectually insecure call them, "graphic novels"
4. There are some social costs to liking some things, but mostly not, and aesthetic taste is mostly invisible.
5. Ideally, formal study of the humanities would teach this skill. And in fact I did crack

some awkward codes as a result of my degree: I am unafraid of philosophical logic, postmodernism, German idealism, Euro cinema, etc. But an Arts degree has many goals: history, activism, guild reproduction, and these together tend to take up lots of the curriculum.

   Anthropology has versions of this, of course, but the ones I've seen haven't been very useful or analytically satisfying. (Though I confess that anthropology is one of the codes I have long struggled to crack.)
6. An incredibly important skill in itself: to make peace with not liking, to just like people liking it.
7. I have a piece coming on the many great exceptions, the worker-poets. Pessoa, Thomas Wyatt, John Darnielle, John Clare, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Czesław Miłosz, Cavafy, Larkin, Neruda, ...
8. Besides the activity of *identifying* as a member of an ascribed, proscribed, or earned culture.
9. These were incredibly hard to find: it's not that anime is worse than other artworks, but the fans are.

Tags: art, meaning, philosophy

Little technologies in this site

Some examples of the freedom of self-hosting, and the low-hanging fruit in all nonfiction:

- *Metadata*. YAML. Lets me build indices of the best posts, most important topics, and a timeline.
  - *Content notes*. I don't want to distress anyone who doesn't want to be distressed.
  - *Topic imporance*.
  - *Quality*. IMO.
  - *Epistemic status*. Marking each post with the confidence level or literalness, genre. Originator.
  - *Argument*. The thinking person's TL;DR.
  - *Last page edit*. Nice for emphasising that the content is changing.
- *Information hiding*. bigfoot and JQuery Accordions.
- *Bug bounties*. To keep me honest.
- *Server magic*: Jekyll and Ruby. Can do anything. Text deduplication, link reuse, quote database, etc.
- *Feed*. I actually initally forgot about good old RSS, because it is so easy and so reliable that it fades into the background of life, and ceases to appear as technology.
- *Anonymous feedback*. Unauthenticated Google Form.
- *Disclaimers*. Most book reviews are by people unfit to judge their truth, including mine.
- *Psychology*. What am I like? What sort of person writes this?
- *Opinions*. I used to dream of listing all of my premises. This is both impossible and too much work, so instead I list some things I think you should know.
- *Worldview message digest.* Quotations database.
- *Licence*. Licensed under Creative Commons Sharealike.
- *Style consistency*. SASS (meta CSS)
- *Static comments*. Netlify Forms. (Staticman is cool but brittle.)
- *Typesetting maths*. MathJax.
- *Data analysis transparency.* Github ipynb viewer.
- *Diagrams*. matcha.io
- *Memorial*. GNU
- *Tables*. https://www.tablesgenerator.com/

To implement

- *Rotproofing my links*. Gwern's archiver.
- Internet Archive option for all links. Or auto replace script.
- Maybe make content notes more prominent.
- GRADE evidence quality scale?
- Time since modified vs error discovery rate

Consent as conclusive evidence

9th August 2019

- *Dissolving a thought-experiment about consequentialism.*
- *Confidence*: 80%. Surely not original.
- *Topic importance*: 8 / 10
- *Content notes*: euthanasia, murder, antinatalism, rights violation
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

A thought-experiment that shows a problem with naive utilitarianism:

> *Harry and Tom are soldiers on their way back from a mission deep in enemy territory, out of ammunition - when Tom steps in a trap set by the enemy. His leg is badly injured and caught in the trap. Harry cannot free him from this trap without killing him. However, if Harry leaves Tom behind, the enemy troops will find him and torture him to death… Enemy troops are closing in on their position and it is not safe to remain with the trapped comrade any longer…*
>
> *Tom pleads to Harry: "Please, don't kill me. I don't want to die out here in the field"*
>
> *Should Harry stab Tom in the heart to prevent his suffering at the hands of the enemy?* [1]

Naively, Harry-as-Act-Hedonic-Utilitarian should kill Tom: he can't save him, so the choice is between {a fast unpleasant death} and {a horribly slow unpleasant death}. So the point is: doesn't hedonic utilitarianism perversely disregard consent?

Two strong reasons it doesn't:

1. we really shouldn't have much confidence that *any* moral theory of ours is the right one - and this implies giving weight to other theories, particularly when they strongly conflict with ours. This is enough to not kill Tom.
2. but even on the object level, consent is very important to a hedonic utilitarian: it is the only strong, granular evidence we have about valence. This is also enough to not kill Tom.

I'll elaborate on that, but first some other answers:

1. Appeal to downstream harm

A weak response is that you'll make utilitarianism look really bad if it gets out, which we can expect to have larger bad effects. But we can stipulate this away in a thought-experiment.

(Anyway, people are really good at making viewpoints they don't like look bad, even without actual cases.)

2. The Millian patch

John Stuart Mill's version is one of the most liveable forms of utilitarianism because it adds

a second principle to pre-empt this kind of thing:

> *The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.*

3. Rule utilitarianism

Maybe the rule "don't kill people against their will" is more than good enough to balance out the disutility of one painful death. It pretty plausibly is, but the question is: does the 'mercy killing' weaken that rule in any way?

4. Preference utilitarianism

That consent is ignored by naive act hedonism is a main selling point of 'preference utilitarianism', the kind that maximises satisfied goals rather than raw feels. This is fine, but it doesn't address the original thought-experiment, which is about the hedonic sort.

(Note that the main proponent of this view has switched to the hedonic view because of even more difficult edge cases.)

5. Massive uncertainty

Those 4 responses are all very well if we assume the theory, but I think the real answer to this (and in fact the answer to whole classes of niggling moral edge-cases) is less presumptuous:

Moral uncertainty (about the right ethical theory)

We just aren't sure enough of hedonic utilitarianism to act in ways which contravene other moral intutitions as much as this case demands. The details of moral uncertainty are still being worked out, but the general lesson is to hedge (pick things that accord with all good theories), and to trade with people who have different ethics.

plus

Intersubjective uncertainty (about the value of others' experiences)

Self-report (and its subset, consent) is currently *overwhelmingly* the strongest evidence we have for the wellbeing of others.

The only hard reason I have to generalise my own situation-valence pairs to others is the deep similarities of our brains. But we know that people with quite similar brains can still have astonishing variance in preferences - witness kink, or addiction, or free soloing. 2

We know too little about suffering to act drastically according to merely intuitive external judgments of experience quality.

Even if it seems obvious that the physical pain of the dying man outweighs the satisfaction he gets from having his wishes respected, I don't have anything like warrant to act. Whether the benefit to him is pride in defying suffering, or in the deeply altered states involved is moot: it is overwhelming evidence even accounting for the chance of Tom lying.

Let's use the word '*overknowing*' for being confident enough to do something prima facie bad. My claim is that we don't even overknow the *sign* of another person's valence, without their honest report.

(This might change a bit when welfare biology advances, giving us another source of evidence about the value of a state, but it'll never be countermanded unless we discover some far-out theory that lets us empirically measure the value of a conscious state.)

This is not a post-hoc fix; Bentham himself said it:

> *Every person is not merely the most proper judge, but the only proper judge of what with reference to himself is pleasure: and so in regard to pain.*

Subjective uncertainty

One possible counterargument to the above is that, as well as me being uncertain, the victim *themselves* could be mistaken about what is best for their subjective wellbeing!

How does this work? You cannot be mistaken about being in pain, for instance. But you can be mistaken about other apparently intimate facts: for instance, being attracted to someone (when actually you are only scared - physical arousal is hard to disambiguate).

David Benatar argues an extreme version of this, that people are in fact much less happy than they honestly report, because of an adaptive "optimism bias", selected to make us resist suicide.

I don't know what to make of this - it reminds me of illusionism about consciousness (or "qualia eliminativism"), another cool position I literally cannot imagine being true - but in the present case all we need is to accept that the sufferer of a wound knows more about its intrinsic disvalue than I do.

Thanks to Saulius Šimčikas, Jan Kulveit and Hugh Panton for conversations on this.

1. (modified from 'The Soldier's Dilemma' here.)
2. A personal example: Derek Parfit says that the *minimally* pleasant life, the one only just worth experiencing, is eating potatoes while easy-listening music plays. But I am delighted every time I eat potatoes, and have eaten them every day for years on end in the past.

Tags:

Metabolism is violent

28th September 2020

- *A null hypothesis about longevity and diet.*
- *Confidence*: About human nutrition, so very low. IANAD.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *Metabolic stress due to nutrient depletion or **nutrient excess** triggers a number of adaptive responses to restore dynamic homeostasis and to maintain cellular function.*
>
> – Balakrishnan et al (2019)

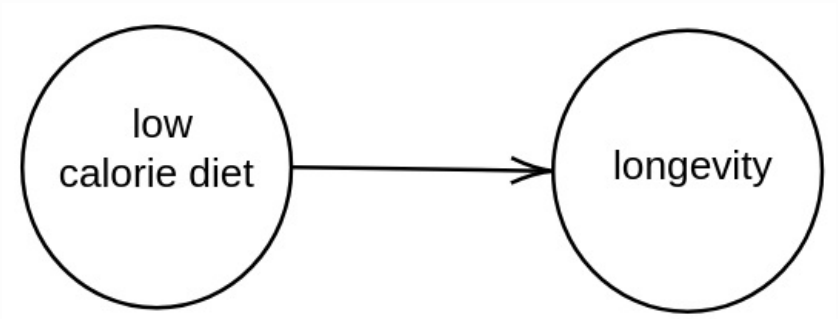
> *When there is [an] abundance of nutrients, the signal is to focus on reproduction, while when they are scarce, the cell focuses on reducing the production of, and promoting the repair of, damage.*
>
> – Nintil

One of the biggest ideas I've come across this year is that *metabolism is violent*. A "high metabolism" is a source of increased harm as well as increased energy capture. What you want is not *more* metabolic activity, but efficient metabolism, one which maintains you with as little oxidation etc as possible.

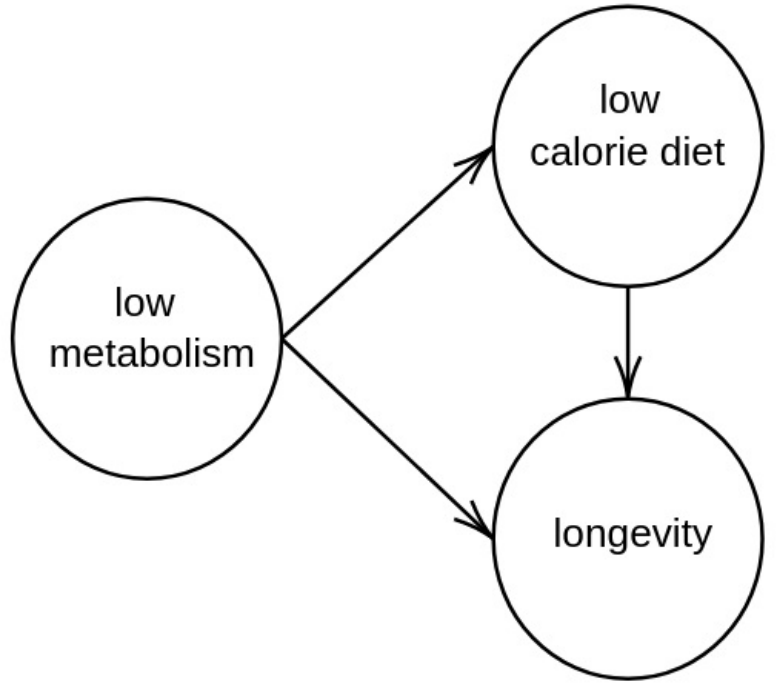
Everyone knows that too much food is bad for you; the update is to locate the harm in the body's adaptive response to the excess (its doing more work, expending scarce cellular resources and reducing repair) rather than in the consequences of mere weight gain or first-order toxic effects.

This has a sad practical implication: all but the most careful studies of diet change are heavily confounded by variation in basal metabolic rate (and so on).

The usual idea is that by restricting your diet you live longer.



The sceptical hypothesis is that you have a metabolic setpoint, which determines your diet and your longevity, and which explains most of the correlation.



You need careful experiments to check the latter. There's some evidence that there is a small effect of calorie restriction (evidence mostly from nonhuman models):

> *the evidence as it stands weakly supports the conclusion that [calorie restriction] modestly extends human life. We expect that an individual engaging in 20-30% CR versus a normative, non-obesogenic diet without malnutrition might enjoy a 10%-20% increase in longevity.*

Interesting tangent: Nietzsche formed this hypothesis in 1888, right at the beginning of the long diet fad:

> *No error is more dangerous than that of confusing the cause with the effect: I call it the genuine destruction of reason. Nevertheless, this error can be found in both the oldest and the newest habits of humanity: we even sanctify it and call it 'religion' and 'morality'. It can be found in every single claim formulated by religion and morality; priests and legislators of moral law are the authors of this destruction of reason.*
>
> *Here is an example: everyone has heard of the book in which the famous Cornaro recommends his meagre diet as a recipe for a long and happy – and virtuous – life. This is one of the most widely read books, and several thousand copies are still being printed in England every year. There is no doubt in my mind that few books (except of course the Bible) have wreaked as much havoc, have shortened as many lives as this well-meaning curiosity has done. The reason: confusion of cause and effect.*
>
> *This conscientious Italian thought that his diet was the cause of his longevity: but the preconditions for a long life – an exceptionally slow metabolism and a minimal level of consumption – were in fact the cause of his meagre diet. He was not free to eat either a little or a lot, his frugality was not 'freely willed': he got sick when he ate more. But unless you are a carp, it is not only advisable but necessary to have decent meals. Scholars in this day and age, with their rapid consumption of nervous energy, would be destroyed by a regimen like Cornaro's…*

He doesn't deserve too much credit, since he was happy to just assert this and not do the legwork of actually checking it, and since the reality seems to be that diet restriction is just

weaker than it looks, rather than useless. But it’s a nice illustration of intuitive causal inference.

See also

- Nintil’s Longevity FAQ

Tags: health

On inhabiting a giant corporation

15th July 2019

- *Miscellaneous notes on working in tech in eC21st London.*
- *Confidence*: 90%
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10

You find yourself inside a machine the size of a city. It is slow, powerful, theoretically immortal, and contains thousands of cogs and hard-wired operators and inexplicably sealed bulkheads. It's warm and well-watered. You could die in here.

Which is to say that I worked a pleasant job at a multinational insurance corporation for 3 years. It wasn't dreary, possibly because I was in the "data science" bit, the bit allowed to do new things without strangulating oversight and backwards-compatibility.

They're good jobs, as jobs go. Extremely flexible hours, challenging nonroutine tasks, unlimited remote work, very good pay per hour, massive amounts of autonomy (relative to managed manual work), friendly smart colleagues. And what Zed Shaw says about programming in nontech companies was true here -

> *Programming as a profession is only moderately interesting. It can be a good job, but you could make about the same money and be happier running a fast food joint. You're much better off using code as your secret weapon in another profession. People who can code in the world of technology companies are a dime a dozen and get no respect. People who can code in biology, medicine, government, sociology, physics, history, and mathematics are respected and can do amazing things to advance those disciplines.*

Many people's relation to their employer is that of a servant in the household of the firm. But service is only tenable if you're aligned with your patron. A lot of people are incapable of being paid to care about things. They cannot settle for indirect fulfilment, indirect passion, indirect goods. I was one once; if you had told me ten years ago that I would happily spend my time in such a place, I would have been horrified: I was a full-on acolyte of Bakan, Klein, Chomsky, who attribute most of the world's ills to corporations (or rather to The System which corporations are thought to control).

It's easy to see the pathologies and harms of corporations. The benefits of these unsympathetic machines is hard to see without data. 2

1 in 100,000

In a sense there's nothing new or weird about being in such a large organisation. After all, I'm "in" a loose organisation of 66m people, Britain, and similarly I am 1 in the 508m of the EU. (For now.) 1

Venkatesh Rao thinks *all* firms are dysfunctional, their quality utterly unstable, their size a *measure* of their decay:

> *organizations don't suffer pathologies; they are intrinsically pathological constructs. Idealized organizations are not perfect. They are perfectly pathological. So while most most management literature is about striving relentlessly towards an ideal by executing organization theories completely, this school would recommend that you do the bare minimum organizing to prevent chaos, and then stop… It may be horrible, but like democracy, it is the best you can do.*
>
> *Today, any time an organization grows too brittle, bureaucratic and disconnected from reality, it is simply killed, torn apart and cannibalized, rather than reformed. A Sociopath with an idea recruits just enough Losers to kick off the cycle. As it grows it requires a Clueless layer to turn it into a controlled reaction rather than a runaway explosion. Eventually, as value hits diminishing returns, both the Sociopaths and Losers make their exits, and the Clueless start to dominate. Finally, the hollow brittle shell collapses on itself and anything of value is recycled by the sociopaths according to meta-firm logic.*

This cynicism is frightfully exciting and flatters your taste and mine. It fits the great romance of the age, the startup. But how to reconcile it with the economic consensus (cf. Baumol and Cowen) that big firms are good, incredibly good, for the people who use their stuff and the governments who manage to tax them? I suppose we have to infer that the mess inside can't stop humans from doing productive things.

It's not just the number of people that makes an organisation unmanageable. The firm's internal software landscape is a comparably vast overhead. I don't think any single person, or any 20 people, really understands the hundreds of legacy systems our team relied on.

The Bureaucratic Universe

David Graeber says a lot of false things. But I still read him because, in between those, he says large true things. For instance, he was the first person I heard pointing out one of the largest facts about the world: capitalism, communism and the mixed economy are all founded on the same social structure, the bureaucracy. (HR are the obvious private example, being a rigid impersonal force with great legal power over individuals.)

A standard Left metaphor for a corporation is a shark: a highly optimised and optimising creature which destroys all other human value in the pursuit of profit. Anyone who has spent much time in a large corp will laugh and laugh at this depiction, remembering the 5 hour meetings, compulsory useless training weeks, the constant duplication of effort, in short the rigid and unprofitable bureaucracy…

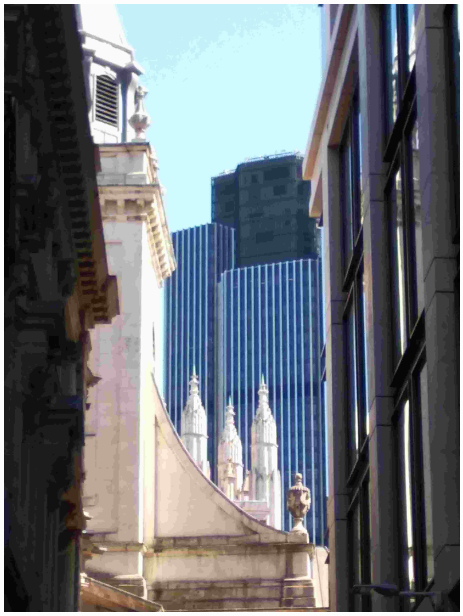
That said, we shouldn't equivocate between state and private bureacracies, as the anarchists do. State bureaucracy is nastier, more threatening, extracts more.

- I just applied for a council tax reduction, since I'll be unemployed for a while. The council asked me roughly 200 questions, including half a dozen ID numbers, and so took an hour and a half of my life. They asked when my partner last entered the country. They asked how long we've been together. Paperwork is a regressive tax on

the stressed and the poor, and it should be disincentivised, treated as paid labour. *No* bureaucratic task at BigCorp took this long, except the initial interviews.

- When I was (briefly) in the civil service my blog posts were scrutinised quite closely. No one ever gave a shit in BigCorp.
- To be less petty: consider how many people the state (including the most powerful bureacracy of all, our military) kills, relative to corporations. (You might try and count say pollution deaths on the corporate side, but that's a mistake - command economies were in general even more polluting.)

The City and the City



- The Square Mile is a pretty, storied place - though it smells. The low-key stink around the central City is due to its ancient drains having to handle about 1000 times more people than they were built to, and its tall buildings boxing narrow streets, preventing ventilation. A lazy novelist could use this to connote moral corruption, but there you go.
- I wish I could say that being surrounded by beautiful buildings - nigh unto greatness - had a sustained effect on my character or even my mood but I'm afraid it didn't. Aesthetics is a treadmill.
- The classic image of a Cityboy is wrong: real conformist / careerists wear a surprisingly bright blue suit.

Insurance: the tedious thrill

- I kept a volume of Kafka on my desk at all times.
- An insurer is like a bank, except you can't withdraw from your account unless something terrible happens to you. Then you win 100 times your balance. So it's a backwards-casino bank.
- One of the nice things about insurance is that the companies' interests are much more aligned with yours, the policyholder's, than usual in capitalism. If you become safer (after paying them the premium) they make more money. There are a *few* products that follow this gradient - flood detection gizmos for your pipes, discounts for doing exercise and quitting smoking, and so on. But not that many. See here for why insurers don't do more risk mitigation.
- Related: The firm had an "emerging risks" research department, quite forward-thinking, doing epidemic modelling and future climate shocks. But the health insurance people concede that pandemic modelling is useless - since the claimants die before they can claim for health. (The life insurance people model it.)
- You pay an insurer to hold your risk for you. There is a sense in which a large house insurer "owns" millions of glass windows, millions of water pipes. (But only about 50% of profits are your payments; the other half come from investing your premiums.)
- Even though it's a financial company, in the financial heart of the world, making half its money off capital gains, it's not the same as the big guns. Some posh products like paid bank accounts have two categories for financial industry companies: "Finance I" (hedgies, quants, some brokers) and "Finance II" (deposit bankers, insurers, analysts). So ordinary people on ordinary London professional pay. I only called myself a 'Cityboy' when I wanted to shock pious refuseniks.
- Two regulatory changes caused an astonishing amount of frantic work: tens of thousands of extra hours. One of these was a stroke of a pen.

- Only 1% of the staff were actuaries, doing the distinctive work of the industry. The business-school notion of a “profit centre” (the part that makes the money) is spurious and nasty, but it’s extremely useful if you’re a rent-seeker looking for unearned rewards. Or an anthropologist seeking how people in organisations actually think. (The inventor of the notion calls it “*One of the biggest mistakes I have made*”.)
- What is The Actuarial Problem? 4
    - First, pass each customer through a boolean function of handcrafted rejection rules.
    - If they survive, predict their expected loss. A stochastic model with a heavily skewed non-negative response distribution, with a multiplicative structure.
    - *Pricing constraints*: pro-rata (price per time); add some hand coded loadings and discounts (e.g. “expected loss should increase with the sum insured”); enforce monotonicity to prevent customer outrage; similarly, enforce only small changes on previous pricing for each customer.
    - *Regulatory constraints*: remove all explicit factors relating to protected classes and vet factors for strong correlations with them; model explanation; known relationships between risk and risk factors.
    - A pair of GLMs modelling the “severity” (loss amount conditional on claim) and “frequency” (claim probability) handle all this quite well, but boosted trees are edging them out after thirty years.
    - Break the loss into “perils” (categories of risk like injury, third-party liability, accident). Build one pair of GLMs per peril, and sum the products of these to get the per-customer estimated cost.
    - There’s also fraud and “rate raiding” detection.
- “If you get a raise every year, they’re not paying you enough.”
- There is a chasm between the builders and the operators of algorithms / mathematical methods. Library maintainers vs library callers. (It isn’t as simple as academics vs private sector - every functioning company will have a few builders, since no algo is so general that it works well without local knowledge.) Actuaries are mostly operators.
- How BigCorp handles its own financial risk was pretty impressive: an enormous apparatus for internal retrocession, central holdings, international arbitrage of capital requirements (i.e. holding money in nearby countries to minimise the impact of regulations).
- You could use an insurer’s ‘loss ratio’ (payouts / revenue) as a fairness estimate. 50% is an even split between the two parties. 90% is more usual in UK personal insurance.

Outsourcing

About half the team were in India.

The classic case against globalisation has two components

1. *Welfare*: “Western companies hiring in the developing world have unacceptable working conditions.”
2. *Fairness*: “Western companies hiring in the developing world pay much less for the exact same work.”

The first is often true (though even sweatshops are often average by local standards) but wasn’t at BigCorp.

The second is true by definition - the companies simply wouldn’t outsource if it wasn’t. In the case of entry-level actuaries it’s about “4 lakh rupees” (£5k) vs £32k in the UK. I occasionally talked to Indian colleagues about this (over drinks, out of management’s earshot), and they were always pragmatic about it - “better this than no outsourcing and no

job”. I don’t know whether they should be less pragmatic.

Abuse of terminology

Corporate language is famous for its ugly, euphemistic neologisms. But actually only some of these are contemptible.

Some Corporatese

- *let go* (n.): Fired. A standard evasion - note the ambiguity: is it being set free or dropped?
- *apple polisher* (pej. n.): yes-man; executive assistant; holder of a bullshit job. Great insult!
- *to productionalise* (v.): to produce (test, polish and deploy).
- *halfly (adj.)*: twice a year (compare quarterly). Delightful!
- *to downselect* (v.): to choose, to select (!)
- *to reach out to* (v.): talk to.
- *to cascade* (v.): talk to and make them talk to.
- *backpocket* (n.): Crib notes for the CEO, so they don't look totally stupid in interviews. Refers both to the briefing and the people who produce it - "*My backpocket tell me...*".
- *rebranding* (v.): "a euphemism for 'euphemism'" - Jonathan Meades
- *on the edge*: located on the exit node of a network; a buzzword meaning "fastest".
- *artificial artificial intelligence*: Using low-paid humans to simulate an AI system or chatbot. cf. Facebook's M.
- *bleisure* (n.): business leisure. Paid free time between conference sessions, meetings. (Probably quite significant for first-world professionals, maybe a week a year). This year mine was larger than my official allotted "annual leave". See also 'bizcation'.
- *jobbymoon* (n.): holiday taken at the end of one job, before the next. High-status unemployment. See also 'funemployment'.
- *Cx* (n.): customer experience, after *UX* (user experience).
- *RPA* (n.): robotic process automation; a dumb software layer bolted on to existing systems, that automates certain GUI operations. Contemptible for several reasons: 1) it perverts the useful term 'robot', which refers to autonomous *hardware*; 2) it confuses AI with bog-standard deterministic programs; 3) it lets legacy systems persist even longer past their expiry date. Needless to say they are making billions, mostly in heavily-regulated industries which can't change their software without millions of dollars of oversight.
- *numerate* (n.): Solecism for quantitative, trained in STEM (our best truthseeking methods). 'Numerate' is an outsider's way of putting it, as if patience with numbers were all it took to keep the modern information economy in the air.

- *cobot* (n.): collaborative robot. Physical augmentation for human tasks; safe despite strength.

- *mar-tech* (n.): marketing technology; called *adtech* by everyone else.

- *foundry* (n.): poncey name for a platform in the cloud

- *bastion host* networking (n.): Hardened gateway computer, running just a proxy server. Compare DMZ, the logical counterpart.

- *Business discovery* (n.): rebranding of business intelligence, now that that has come to mean "boring data analysis stuff". Supposedly involves everyone.

- *OKR* (n.): yet another 'Objectives and Key Results' framework.

- *to be off corp* (Google v.): to be off the official network and/or hardware; to work on one's own setup.

- *SBU* (n.): A Strategic Business Unit. Uses the popular but completely spurious "profit center" terminology: stuff like this is why reductionism has a bad name.

- *toyetic* (n.): toyable; merchandise-friendly.

- *executive assistant* (n.): inflated secretary. Courtier to the CEO king.

- *TCF* (adj.): treating customers fairly. First seen in the hilarious sentence "*We have achieved significant optimisations by overcoming our TCF inhibitions.*"

- *workforce-planned area* (n.): a physical area of a company where everything is highly timed and regimented, like a factory floor. Where HR and Ops constantly micromanage you. Sounds completely miserable, the second way that low-pay labour stabs you. This is one of the most bland, buzzwordy Wiki pages I've ever seen.

- *tiger team* (US n.): Originally: "a team of undomesticated and uninhibited technical specialists, selected for their experience, energy, and imagination, and assigned to track down relentlessly every possible source of failure in a spacecraft subsystem". Now: "a team".

- *ATR* (n.): authority to recruit

- *strats* (adj.): quant development. Originally a Goldman Sachs term, but copied fast. Original contraction isn't defined anywhere, but is "strategies".

- *Advanced Persistent Threat* infosec (n.): In cybersecurity, the worst foe. These people are 'Advanced' relative to a script kiddie or a skilled troll. Better funded, more patient, able and willing to try several different avenues of attack. A state actor</i> or a corporate black operator in a cyberpunk book). They 'will get in: the question is if you notice, and how much damage they do when they do.

  > *A conventional hacker or criminal isn't interested in any particular target. He wants a thousand credit card numbers for fraud, or to break into an account and turn it into a zombie, or whatever. Security against this sort of attacker is relative; as long as you're more secure than almost everyone else, the attackers will go after other people, not you. An APT is different; it's an attacker who -- for whatever reason -- wants to attack you. Against this sort of attacker, the absolute level of your security is what's important. It doesn't matter how secure you are compared to your peers; all that matters is whether you're secure enough to keep him out.*

- *PTO* (n.): Paid Time Off; HR system which does not distinguish holidays, sick leave, and "personal days". 'Sounds good, but obvious perversities crop up one uniform cap applied to all: if you get ill after a long holiday, you have to work through it?

- *permtractor* UK (n.): permanent contractor: someone who works at a company for an extended period of time without being an employee. For tax reasons, or avoiding granting employee rights. The Revenoo apparently classes it as "disguised employment".

- *simplification* (n.): new euphemism for downsizing, rightsizing, restructuring, etc.

- *FIRE*: Finance, Insurance, Real Estate. Not just service economy; *second-order* services

- *data fabric* (n.): no clear referent; replacement for "data lake", now that most places realise they can't actually merge all their data sources; maybe "pipeline of pipelines, interface of interfaces": files, DBs, streams, objects, images, sensor data and containers all accessed with a standard interface.

- *on spec* (adj.): speculatively; without first being commissioned.

- *collision installation* (n.): business strategy in which a human helps you switch to the product; imparts metaphorical energy by "colliding" with you and sending you sailing into the CLTV. See also *Collison install*.

- *iron butterfly* (n.): Heavily hedged portfolio; what Taleb calls a barbell.

- *killer bee:* (n.): Anti-takeover consultant. Proposes defences against hostile takeovers. See also 'porcupine provision or 'shark repellent, what killer bees come up with.

- *dragon bonds* (international finance n.): Bonds issued by Asian nations in dollars, to attract foreign investment.

- *parametric insurance* (n.): policy with automatic claim payout, based on e.g. blockchain or smart contract conditions being met.

- *invoice financing* (n.): Payday loans for businesses.

- *person analytics* (n.): the creepy big-data approach arrives at the traditionally creepy HR department. Automated hiring, reward, and firing.

- *smallcap* (finance n.): a public company with a 'small' total market capitalization: like, a mere $0.3bn to $2bn.

- *liability shift* (n.): doing something (e.g. extra verification) that moves a fraud burden onto someone else. i.e. Outrunning your friend, not the bear.

- *data hygienist* (new new economy n.): hypothetical future profession, scanning training data for socially unacceptable content to prevent future Tays or Alisas. See also data janitor, worldview trainer, explainability strategist, automation ethicist.

- *to exitscam* (confidence trick v.): to run a company, eventually silently stopping business while still taking revenue. The denominalisation is new, for altcoins. Happened a lot already.

- *Norwich Pharmacal orders* (English law (n.): court order used to force disclosure of documents.

- *Development* (n.): Most often a pointless elaboration of "work" or "improvement".

Software development</i> (code work), international development</i> (cultural and economic work), property development</i> (lying to seven different parties until a building gets built), business development</i> ("'growth-hacking'": market research and cold-calling), research and development</i> (invention). Oddly, used for both very real and the very most bullshit jobs.</i> But then, so is "job".

- *shakeout* (n.): The collapse of a competitive industry into oligopoly. Wall Street word: you can hear the salivation.

- *invisible network* (n.): devices connected to a network without the techies' approval. Includes attackers and shadow apps. This hospital sysadmin found 40,000 devices that weren't explicitly listed or authorised on his net, mostly IoT gash.

- *IBGYBG* (finance interjection): I'll be gone, you'll be gone. 'This is terrible business, but don't interfere - we won't bear the downside.'

- *O'Hare spread*: a financial portfolio consisting of an enormous 'position' (bet) over your authorised cap, plus a one-way plane ticket out of the country. "If you win, you are rich. If you lose, the plane ticket will get you out." The logical application of IBGYBG doctrine.

- *data sleaze* (n.): customer data obtained secretly by businesses, and secretly sold on. Almost all 'free' services are data sleaze operations.

- *moving up the value chain* (v.): performing work further away from physical extraction, processing, and manufacturing. Supposedly insulates you from competition because your outputs are less easily evaluated as they become less physical. Economic abstraction.

- *FANG*: Facebook / Amazon / Netflix / Google, particuarly when their stocks are used as a bellwether.

- *the business self-improvement industrial complex*

- *to effort* (Hinglish v.): to work hard on; "we are efforting this and will have results for you by w/e."

- *the total universe* (n.): the statistical population; the entire market. Weird.

- *time theft*: the inverse of wage clipping. One consultancy breaks it into: Time Card Theft; Over-Extended Breaks; Excessive Personal Time; Internet Time Theft; Hide and Seek; Sickie. FYI.

- *dumb money / retail money*: the absolutely vital liquidity granted by clueless rich people.

- *lifestyle businesses* (new economy n.): an intentionally low-key job: low hours in exchange for low or variable pay; e.g. a passive income stream.

- *lifestyle town* (bs marketing n.): Somewhere you move cos it's nice. e.g. Welwyn, Portland.

- *written in tablets of jade* (US adj.): permanent, incontrovertible. Curious!

- *seeding trial* (US pharma): marketing conducted in the name of research; bribe paid to doctors in the guise of a bonus for enrolling patients in a "trial".

- *succession planning* (n.): Lining up replacements for senior managers in case of medical or PR disaster. (Cardinal Wolsey in a pantsuit.)

- *to write* (v.): to underwrite; to take on the risks of.
- *retrocessionary* (n.): the insurer of a reinsurer, "ceded" part of the first reinsurer's written reinsurance.
- *to clopen* (worker v.): to shut the shop for the night, then go home to sleep inadequately, then come back and open the shop in the morning.
- *acting up* (n.): performing work above one's position
- *to socialise* (v.): to spread around; to make accepted by example. Surprisingly accurate view of org culture.
- *information scrap* (v.): process of realising that your data is too crap to use and not worth cleaning. Evacuating the mine, finding the killswitch.
- *information rework* (v.): process of spending a whole day cleansing a 4GB CSV, that it might be better than nothing for tomorrow.
- *newsjacking* (n.): posting ads on social media in response to current affairs. A classy lampshade.
- *purchase funnel* (marketing n.): your journey from ignorance to being broke and surrounded by things.
- *business rule* (n.): a boolean function
- *NewSQL* (n.): The normies have caught up to "NoSQL" so we need a new thing.
- *ETL and LTS* (compound v.): Extract-Transform-Load and Load-Transform-Store; covering the pre-processing and processing bits of a data pipeline.
- *exputation* (n.): replacing hopelessly bad data with NULL or ?, flagging one's total uncertainty without biasing the sample (as in *listwise deletion*, the usual method). Item abnegation. My coinage. (Multiple imputation is a much subtler and less destructive method, I know.)
- *brain-compiled* (adj.): code written without ever being run.

- Every new thing gets called “AI”. Except anything invented before the 90s is not AI, even if it is a statistical learning method like the other things you call AI. GLMs are not AI. RPA is AI.
- My company’s name was intentionally selected to mean nothing in any language. This is a *great* metonym.
- About half of job titles were inflated. The most common was reskinning your Actuarial Analyst job as a Data Scientist job. As far as I know no-one was ever called on this, and references rarely corrected it.
- You may have noticed that in modern business, everything is ‘award-winning’. This is due to the incredible array of trade magazines and their trade awards. A charade of ladders. A veneer.

Corporate ‘AI’

- The outlook is not good: probably most corporate data science projects fail. The defeaters vary a lot, but inflated expectations, legacy system hell, GIGO, and a weak engineering base are usually implicated.
- The stages of data science are

1. Build pipeline and dashboards (1b. Get important people to pay attention to them)
2. Build predictions (2b. Get important people to pay attention to them)
3. Build decision system (3b. Build good decision system; 3c. Actually use decision system)

I think almost every DS department in the world is stuck on 1b. We got to (3) in my tenure, starting from nowhere.

The normalisation of deviance

A bureaucracy has great power to obfuscate and punish obvious infractions, but is much too weak to regulate the larger part of work: minor and gradually escalating deviance. Unwritten rules beat written procedure. One of the nastiest pathologies of teamwork is the “normalisation of deviance”, the tendency for work norms to mutate into lazy and harmful forms via social proof.

If a piece of wrongness goes unchallenged the first couple of times, it becomes invisible, it suddenly looks right because everyone else is doing it. Say you go outside your spec - but then nothing bad happens, so then we go a little further beyond the spec…

(Just one example from BigCorp: no-one knew how to Procure a GPU through the Procurement platform, so we did weeks of deep learning on CPUs. In 2017.)

Foone Turing:

> *My point with this is not to say “HEY PEOPLE STOP BENDING THE RULES,” exactly. It’s that you have to consider normalization of deviance when designing systems:* ***How will these rules interact with how people naturally bend the rules?***

> *Disasters aren’t caused by one small event: it’s an avalanche of problems that we survived up until now until they all happen at once. People don’t automatically know what should be normal, and when new people are onboarded, they can just as easily learn deviant processes that have become normalized as reasonable processes…*

Dan Luu:

> *people get promoted for heroism and putting out fires, not for preventing fires; and people get promoted for shipping features, not for doing critical maintenance work and bug fixing.*

To prevent your culture from lulling you into insane behaviour:

> 1. *Pay attention to weak signals*
> 2. *Resist the urge to be unreasonably optimistic*
> 3. *Teach employees how to conduct emotionally uncomfortable conversations*
> 4. *System operators need to feel safe in speaking up*
> 5. *Realize that oversight and monitoring are never-ending*

Competence

> *“You’re technical, aren’t you?”*

> *“Eh, kinda”*

> *“What do you do?”*

> *“I’m a data scientist.”*

> *“Well then of course you’re technical!”*

> *“Eh. When I played saxophone I always compared myself to Coltrane and Parker; when I do tech I have in mind Feynman, Tukey, Turing, Gwern.”*

Hiring

> *The goal of the future is full unemployment!*
>
> - Arthur C Clarke

I ran my first hiring round here, and a dozen more after that. It’s *incredibly* hard, even when you have objective standards like code quality or ML performance to rely on. Pretty much all easily obtained evidence is a really weak signal about the candidate’s actual performance in the job. I won’t complain about having to do homework for jobs again: turns out it’s scary and hopeless being on the other side of the table too.

I enforced a standardised test on our hiring, with a consistent numerical marking rubric. And we got blinding of applicants put in. We set applicants a basic supervised learning problem. About one in eight answered it adequately. Total obvious plagiarism was very common, maybe one in six. PhDs did no better than Bachelors. Very few had a Github or similar code host, a very cheap way to show me that you’re curious / knowledgeable / whatever.

The deviance of turnover

I was surprised by how much fuckery there was from colleagues at the end of their tenure. People who make it into these places tend to be *very* good at regulating themselves, tend to be agreeable and compliant. In three years I remember exactly one raised voice, and one instance of silent fury.

But turnover was high, 30% per year 3, and this was when you saw normal human deviance. Out of perhaps 30 leavers, we had

- 2 people put on ‘garden leave’ (paid to go away);
- 2 people not really showing up during their notice period;
- 2 people openly watching TV at their desk / playing with MuJoCo completely unrelated to work.

The other notable antisocial moment was the honesty box. A fridge of snacks was installed, with a price list and honesty box for payment. Every week it came in £40 (~50%) under its sale balance, so they took it out.

So if many corporations have net positive effects, if the work is ok and the culture friendly, and if you can easily redirect your excessive remuneration to what actually matters - why stop?

In my case it was because I tried out direct do-gooding work and found that I was pretty capable, and that there's a great need for more than money.

It also stomped the importance of environment into me. You *can't* do great work if you don't actually care. It's hard to respect yourself if you don't respect what you're doing. And you assume the form of your colleagues to a shocking degree. This can lead to a slow, subclinical, and ultra-privileged kind of burnout:

> *I just didn't think my work was very important. I would be very depressed on projects, make slow progress, at times get into a mode where I was much of the time pretending progress simply because I could not bring myself to do the work. I just didn't have the spirit to do it…*

> *Over time I got depressed about this: Do I have a terrible work ethic? Am I really just a bad programmer? A bad person? But these questions were not so verbalized or intellectualized, they were just more like an ambient malaise and a disappointment in where life was*

(It's easy to shout Marx bingo when you read this kind of thing, and it's not wrong. But that's Marxism: decent negative critique and no practical positive change. It's hard to see how we could have an unalienated society - without much better technology to act as our drudges, anyway. Certainly no actually-existing socialism managed it, and most seem to have made it worse.)

If, once you're financially secure and ensconced in a house and a family, you have no further ambitions, then these places are as good as it gets.

See also

- How Much Work is Real?

1. This isn't a trivial statement; both of these things affect my life in quite deep ways, not least via tax burden, access to resources, safety nets, and the legal skeleton from which all formal employers hang or are hanged.

   Affinity is one way to be part of a group; but financial and legal obligation is even more common.

2. Here's an interesting data-driven worry about corporations: Hillebrandt argues that, while they've done great things for society in the past, we should expect market leaders to continue increasing as a % of the economy, and this will quickly lead to corruption, ballooning harms, and the neutering of the government and nongovernment forces that balanced out the antihuman side of corporations in the past.

3. This was mostly people being poached - it's maybe the best time ever to be an analyst. (After open-source stats and the data deluge, before serious AI arrives.)
4. For simplicity, just the scientific 'technical pricing' one rather than the full price

discrimination one.

Tags:

Against the Culture

17th August 2020

- *For and against Iain Banks' utopia.*
- *Topic importance*: 9 / 10
- Argument

> *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… 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.*
>
> – Scott Alexander

> *INTERVIEWER: …the Ships and Minds of the Culture, its great AIs: their outrageous names, their dangerous senses of humour. Is this what gods would actually be like?*
>
> *BANKS: If we're lucky.*

The two worst omissions from sci-fi are social development and software development. In his *Culture* series Banks covers the first so memorably, so thrillingly, that the series is a permanent touchstone for me, even though each individual book is actually not that strong. The Culture is actually different from us - even though underneath their society revs our great alien machine, liberalism unbound.

Ada Palmer calls it "social science fiction", focussing on soft technology and cultural progress rather than rigorous physics and cool gadgets. A pencil is technology. But so is liberalism, in some sense. Banks was a determinist, and so denied the dichotomy: the technology creates the society. "Space minus scarcity implies anarchism."

How can anarchism be stable, though? Banks doesn't say it is: instead it's metastable. If your society is a matter of degree, if its only hard tenet is "do what you like if it doesn't hurt anyone", and if you don't need specialisation of labour, you can get away with

decentralisation.

Almost all of the books center on Special Circumstances, the tiny military intelligence branch of the Culture. They are the least typical members of the Culture, often officially not members. They are central because their lives lend themselves to exciting fiction and because the tensions of the culture are most obvious there (see Critiques below).

As a novelist and a standard Scottish radical, Banks was incapable of writing a pure utopia: no story without problems. Every book has its greys and queasiness: there are three or four critiques of the Culture in the books, sometimes given by Culture citizens. He mostly solves this by having the antagonists be clearly much, much worse than the ultra-democratic luxury altruists. And I shouldn't overegg his pessimism: he is able, after all, to see a world with technological fixes to social organisation and individual suffering.

Banks' world is an achievement: he maintains narrative tension despite having supremely powerful protagonists, post-scarcity bliss, and post-Singularity rationality and benevolence. Culture floats free of physical constraints, and unlike most sci-fi (most fiction) he actually imagines us into that possibility. Where philosophy and art are almost the only big things left to do.

An easy formula is that you wouldn't want to live in *anyone* else's utopia. This is too neat: I would be Culture if it was offered. It just falls short of the real radical optimum.

What's so good about it?

> *Briefly, nothing and nobody in the Culture is exploited. It is essentially an automated civilisation in its manufacturing processes, with human labour restricted to something indistinguishable from play, or a hobby.*
>
> *No machine is exploited, either; the idea here being that any job can be automated in such a way as to ensure that it can be done by a machine well below the level of potential consciousness…*

- Post-scarcity. No greed.
- Post-disease.
- Post-death.
- Post-gender, post-race.
- No admin.
- Sustainable bliss. Fun recognised as the deep moral value it is.
- Full morphological freedom
- Ability to estimate consciousness and value and so promote it.
- Full positive and negative liberty
- Massive devaluation of ascribed identity in favour of achieved.
- Benevolent decentralised overlords. Unmitigated consent as iron law.
- Freedom of movement and exit. Partial identification ("80% Culture").
- Almost negligible crime, and so no criminal justice, and so no dedicated police or bureaucracy 1.
- Almost no internal politics.

Banks calls this anarchism, but it is equally a technocracy, or a million little benevolent dictatorships.

Critiques of the Culture

1. Horza: the Culture as tutelage, just a game

> *CNN: In the Culture's post-scarcity society, where no one needs for anything, you're removing a lot of the struggle around everyday life. Is that not removing the point of life itself?*
>
> *BANKS: I think a lot of the struggle is kind of pointless and is in itself boring. The struggle for existence for most people most of the time, especially in a post-agricultural, industrial society, is a bit of a grind. People have to work very hard and awfully long hours for not a great deal of money: if you don't, you get virtually nothing. Life's not much fun, frankly, so I'd quite happily trade in that struggle.*

> *while they may be fun, hobbies are also at some level always frivolous. They cannot give meaning to a life, precisely because they are optional. You could just stop doing it, and nothing would change, it would make no difference, which is to say, it wouldn't matter.*

– Heath

The humans are not the protagonists. Even when the books seem to have a human protagonist, doing large serious things, they are actually the agent of an AI. (Zakalwe is one of the only exceptions, because he can do immoral things the Minds don't want to.) "The Minds in the Culture don't need the humans, and yet the humans need to be needed." (I think only a small number of humans need to be needed - or, only a small number of them need it enough to forgo the many comforts. Most people do not live on this scale. It's still a fine critique.)

The projects the humans take on risk inauthenticity. Almost anything they do, a machine could do better. What can you do? You can order the Mind to not catch you if you fall from the cliff you're climbing-just-because; you can delete the backups of your mind so that you are actually risking. You can also just leave the Culture and rejoin some old-fashioned, unfree "strongly evaluative" civ. The alternative is to evangelise freedom by joining Contact.

One of Banks' protagonists is anti-Culture. The boring version of his critique is that he dislikes machines ruling humans - their enemies are on the side of life - "boring, old-fashioned, biological life". But the real point is that the Culture's all very well for the actively questing, protagonist Minds, but terrible for its lesser subjects, because nothing in their life is truly serious, counterfactual, functional. Horza thinks you need struggle, ultimate meaning, grand narrative. He sides with the Idirans because at least it's an ethos. (As always, the Culture partially assimilates this critique: one of them names itself after him and so his objection.)

There are objective limits to their egalitarianism (e.g. the artificial-intelligence Ships are straightforwardly superior to their organic charges):

> *Look at these humans! How could such glacial slowness even be called life? An age could pass, virtual empires rise and fall in the time they took to open their mouths to utter some new inanity!*

and even the Ships have a status ladder:

> *there was a small amount of vicarious glamour associated with it; guarding the weirdo, letting it roam wherever it wanted, but maintaining the fraternal vigilance that such an enormously powerful craft espousing such an eccentric credo patently merited.*

1b. Scruton: the Culture as idiot meaninglessness

> *the fulfilment of wishes is both one of civilisation's most powerful drives and arguably one of its highest functions; we wish to live longer, we wish to live more comfortably, we*

> *wish to live with less anxiety and more enjoyment, less ignorance and more knowledge than our ancestors did*

– Banks

Roger Scruton can always be counted upon to piss in the beer: he believes that ubiquitous wonder and joy is impossible, or would make us swinish idiots, "a kind of postmodern individual" he doesn't want to be seated next to at a dinner party:

> *Everything deep in us depends upon our mortal condition, and while we can solve our problems and live in peace with our neighbours we can do so only through compromise and sacrifice. We are not, and cannot be, the kind of posthuman cyborgs that rejoice in eternal life, if life it is... The soul-less optimism of the transhumanists reminds us that we should be gloomy, since our happiness depends on it.*

Banks shares this worry to some extent; see (3) below for how his utopians are not really posthuman. "Luckily", the Culture citizens are not in fact free of suffering. For instance, Ulver is incredibly annoying, annoyed, and shallow, and is the personification of Scruton's critique. (Admittedly she is a teenager, but why would we need teenagers?)

Critique (1) is about the sad need for authenticity and agency, not just freedom and fun.

(1a) is the (so-called) paradox of freedom: if you can do anything, if there are no fixed points, then your choice isn't meaningful.

2. Heath: the Culture as replicator

> *The only desire the Culture could not satisfy from within itself was one common to both the descendants of its original human stock and the machines they had (at however great a remove) brought into being: the urge not to feel useless. The Culture's sole justification for the relatively unworried, hedonistic life its population enjoyed was its good works; the secular evangelism of the Contact Section… actually interfering (overtly or covertly) in the historical processes of those other cultures.*

The very best essay on the Culture is 'Why the Culture Wins' by Joseph Heath. He notes that if we view the Culture from outside, as a replicator, then of course it needs a moral mission, of course it has to have interventionist compassion as a core value: that's how such a highly moral meme can spread itself. Despite being small and atypical, Contact is the heart of the Culture, its deep justification for itself.

> *what does it mean to say that Contact arranges things so that the "good guys" win? It means that it interferes on the side that shares the same values as the Culture. There is more at stake here than just individual freedom. For instance, with the development of technology, every society eventually has to decide how to recognize machine intelligence, and to decide whether AIs should be granted full legal and moral personhood. The Culture, naturally, has a view on this question, but that's because the Culture is run by a benevolent technocracy of intelligent machines… This is what gives the Culture its virulence – at a fundamental level, it exists only to reproduce itself. It has no other purpose.*

– Heath

The claim is: A society freed from the need to pay attention to reality, to produce, will be given over to intense memetic drift and competition.

> *From a certain perspective, the Culture is not all that different from Star Trek's Borg. The difference is that Banks tricks the reader into, in effect, sympathizing with the Borg.*

> *Indeed, his sly suggestion is that we – those of us living in modern, liberal societies – are a part of the Borg.*

– Heath

You can view any successful process as an amoral replicator. The real question is whether its instances have value - more value than the alternatives. Well…

3. Culture humans as insufficiently posthuman

I praised the level of social development in the books. But his humans aren't *radically* different from us. Critique (1) and (2) only hurt because human nature in the Culture is still recognisable as our nature.

Culture citizens tend to not want to live more than 400 years for some reason. (Sheer deepity: "*death is regarded as part of life, and nothing, including the universe, lasts forever. It is seen as bad manners to try and pretend that death is somehow not natural; instead death is seen as giving shape to life.*") I don't expect this to be true.

They are not beyond suffering and competitive stress: note Ulver's whining and tantrums. Grief is common, sometimes lasting a century. They don't take wild-animal suffering seriously.

Both humans and Minds are still status-conscious. A Ship which has too high a turnover of human population loses face among its peers. There are celebrities, and renowned artists, debutantes and limited capacity events. ("*Not being spoken to, not being invited to parties, finding sarcastic anonymous articles and stories about yourself in the information network; these are the normal forms of manner-enforcement*")

The humans are clever but not superintelligent. Why, when there is so much profound superintelligent material to understand?

Mostly humans remain with a pretty conservative tetrapod shape, despite their morphological freedom. This implies a lot of conformism and herding (even just our heavy constraints on attractiveness).

Banks has the books' distinction between biological humans and AIs coming after a period in which there was no distinction, where the humans were more integrated and cyberised. It's not clear why you'd return.

Some of them still have conservative ideas of meaning. "*The Culture's sole justification for the relatively unworried, hedonistic life its population enjoyed was its good works.*" As if pleasure and freedom needed further justification! This mania for authenticity is realistic but painful. The desire to experience and create things seems to me to be a complete substitute for the desire for status, for feeling useful, for validation. But to put it mildly this isn't universal yet.

The tech is mostly stagnant, apparently because of physical limits.

To some extent the above legacies could be Banks leaning on existing human traits in order to write good relatable fiction, rather than his own philosophy. But not wholly or mostly.

4. The Culture as (partial) reverse alignment?

AI alignment is the process of making sure that your systems act for the benefit of people, even when the systems are much more powerful than humanity. In Banks' books, there's some evidence that the reverse has happened, of aligning humans to Minds.

There is a weird absence of resentment and power-seeking among the posthumans. As we know them, humans constantly chafe under government; the lighter the oppression, the more obvious the chafing. Only a small number of humans are driven to lead and orchestrate large moral projects. And we see almost no unilateral human folly: we don't see any doomed human coups, for instance.

The example I've spotted is the Culture language being engineered to produce certain philosophies in its speakers. (Sapir-Whorf is false for natural language, but who knows what can be done when you have control over both the processor and the instructions?) Maybe by the 8th millennium they've already done all they need to; maybe they are beyond man-machine politics because the humans were subtly shaped until there were no more tensions that needed politics.

Now, humans as we are are sorely in need of shaping, and the Minds are mostly far more moral than us. However, there are marks of subterfuge which you wouldn't want to see in a utopia.

This critique is not particularly biting, since humans remain awkward and recalcitrant, and need to be bribed on the occasions where a Mind wants them to do something. There are still some awful passions: murderous or sex-mad.

5. The Culture as imperialism

> *the Culture doesn't actively encourage immigration; it looks too much like a disguised form of colonialism. Contact's preferred methods are intended to help other civilisations develop their own potential as a whole, and are designed to neither leech away their best and brightest, nor turn such civilisations into miniature versions of the Culture.*

For completeness I should mention this, though I think it is misguided at best. The Contact division presume to convert illiberal (e.g. torture porn) civilisations to utilitarianism (mostly via diplomacy and positive incentives rather than through their overwhelming gunboats). They also police large parts of known space, preventing as many conflicts as they can.

There are people who, reacting to the terrible parts of our history of foreign intervention, reject all such intervention. (They sometimes prohibit even nonviolent intervention.)

This is slightly blunted by the above passage: it's only nonsuffering and tolerance that they enforce on others, rather than hedonism, polymorphism, atheism, anarchism. (OK, they also stomp carbon chauvinism.)

The Prime Directive of *Star Trek* is a fictional example of this. They're supposed to ignore non-space-faring civilisations, up to and including letting them die in natural cataclysms. However, the writers and the characters reject it all of the time: it's violated in dozens of episodes, generally in a way that strikes me as blatantly the right thing to do. This is because the principle sounds better than it is.

To be fair I should reconstruct an actual argument:

1. There are no single true values, or anyway we don't know them. (Philosophy is too weak, or we are.)
2. If we don't have the true values, we cannot justify imposing our values on others.
3. So we cannot justify imposing our values on others.
4. So do not intervene when values conflict.

(This doesn't stop us intervening in a society when its own values are violated by external forces, like natural risks or other invaders.)

Premise 2 is the weak one. We know of many things which are universally bad for mammals. What we lack is a precise statement of the good. But that torture or genocide is bad is not very culturally mediated!

There are difficult forms of the concern though:

- What does the Absolute Liberal do with intolerant enemies?
- What can you do with people who don't want freedom, tolerance, management, diversity?

Critique (2) is related to this, but I think that's just the descriptive form.

Vulnerabilities

The Culture is mostly shown as more powerful than its foes, able to adapt and match whatever threat, in almost all cases without even compromising its own values. Ships produce Ships, so any big Ship could reconstruct the whole civilisation given time. How then could the Culture fail?

1. Running out of moral patients

Morality, big and small

Ordinary morality holds that saving one life from one dramatic hazard once is the supreme act: people who have done it are proud about it for the rest of their lives. Call *epic morality*, any system for which that's the *minimum* unit regarded.

What larger things could you aim at? It could just be life-saving on a grand scale, or timescale: like working on a project which is unlikely to complete in your lifetime. Then there are things like ending death, ending suffering, aligning the general AI's values with ours, using our full cosmic endowment and more. In Banks' utopia, sketched out in the ten *Culture* novels, all of these projects except the last are complete.

Epic morality provides firm and serious meaning to those conducting it. It is a fine substitute for theism: the naturalisation of heaven. And there's the problem: if we finish our epic projects, which in these stories the Culture is at risk of doing, then philosophy and groundlessness will rush back in to spoil things.

> *the Culture accepts, generally, that questions such as 'What is the meaning of life?' are themselves meaningless… we make our own meanings, whether we like it or not.*

Banks gives the Culture an ultimate meaning (roughly, reducing suffering and promoting freedom), but it's contingent: it needs to keep finding people to help. Assuming that no faction goes totalitarian and starts engineering new terrible societies, a crisis of legitimacy should eventually come. (Though since they don't even fully cover one galaxy by the end of the timeline, it'll be a while.)

Even then, there's no real prospect of a successful human revolt. So nothing left to do except Sublime, chase other realities.

Alan Jacobs' standard sniffy zero-sum critique ("a society without internal struggles will need always to generate external ones") is unfair and anyway unnecessary for this to be a vulnerability.

2. Meeting a stronger replicator.

Banks' world contains Hegemonising Swarms: collections of self-replicating matter, not sentient, not creative, just very good at destruction, reproduction, and travel. Swarms are the logical extreme of an illiberal foe: one with no values, only reproduction. Watts' *Blindsight* contains a formidable sort. (All of the very powerful agents in Banks' books are sentient: he tacitly assumes, against Watts, that consciousness is adaptive.)

The Culture spends most of its resources on recreation. (The Minds are not vigilant, spending large amounts of time in an intellectual opium haze.) Even if we grant Heath's cultural evolution point, Contact is a vastly expensive and slow method of reproduction compared to a Swarm. Then there's the unseriousness of everyone (Human spy: "*He'd thought about saying, Well, actually I was in [the secret service], kind of a spy, really, and I know lots of secret codes and stuff...*")

Most of the potential sentient threats to the Culture have "sublimed" (dematerialised); the Culture is an aberration, kept in reality by their civilising mission. (There are maybe a dozen "Involved" civilisations on their level.) But there's nothing to stop another civ with a conflicting moral and more focus on fast spread also refusing to go buddha.

3. Space Balkanisation

> *the forces of repression need to win every time, the progressive elements need only triumph once.*
>
> – Banks

Each Ship is a nation-state. The anarchic collection of mobile states works because there is a strong vetting process for new minds, which prunes away the psychos and megalomaniacs, and provides a bedrock of strong Millian consequentialism in nearly all Minds. (One of the few rogue elements in the series, the *Attitude Adjuster*, is still a good utilitarian with a horror of killing, and is utterly overcome by guilt at the deaths it causes while trying to end a systematic torture culture.)

Even so, the Culture has no mechanism for preventing schisms, besides the meta one of 1) basic shared consequentialism, 2) not limiting its members enough to make it necessary to schism. The path to failure is ideological drift -> civil war or recursive schisms -> lack of coordination -> military loss.

The ship training process is imperfect, and there are still schisms and hot conflicts in the Culture among the aligned Minds. In his early theoretical notes, he talks about the difficult process of becoming the Culture: overcoming many intolerant local minima, and phrases the Culture as what happens when your hegemony is so total that you don't need to enforce it anymore. But conflict still lurks out there, even when you're beyond economic and strategic concerns.

They seem to have no central authentication or strategists, only temporary committees. The military, and even the secret service, are fully decentralised, subvertible by any single high-status rogue.

Almost none of the humans in *Excession* are actually wholeheartedly 'in' the Culture; instead there are only factions: the Elench, the AhForgetIt, and an allophile Culture diplomat who ends up defecting entirely. Maybe the Culture is *constituted* of people who don't feel totally in it, but who recognise that everyone else is worse.

Big reasons for hope:

- The Culture's ship fertility rate could easily be high enough to indefinitely replace these defections.
- The ex-Culture factions depicted still co-operate a lot. Their philosophical differences do not extend to deep casus-belli questions. (Exception: the Elench's pathological curiosity and touchy-feeliness.)
- Placing no barriers on separatism, while retaining ideological agreement on harm, lets the Culture seem much smaller than it is while maintaining an otherwise-threatening extent.
- Status markets. There is still positional scarcity, and reputational risks, which prevents most bad behaviour and wireheading. "*one of the many tiny but significant and painful ways a Ship could lose face amongst its peers was through a higher than average crew turn-over rate*"

Misc

- Subliming is a really, really bad plot device. To stop recursive self-improvement and first-mover advantage from making his galaxy boring, Banks has all of the really powerful civs voluntarily dematerialise for mysterious spiritual reasons. Even in a soft world (with e.g. basically no energy constraints), this breaks fictional belief. Maybe he had plans to make it less bad which he didn't get around to; maybe it would have tied it to the extra-dimensional beings of *Excession*.
- The Minds are not improving much; ancient ones orchestrate many of the grand successful space operas. This is odd.
- The Minds are funny. They are addicted to super videogames. They gossip, and they plot, and they can dislike each other. They do all this a billion times faster than us, in amusing cryptographic ways, but they remain comprehensible and likeable superintelligences. We should expect even aligned superintelligences to be much stranger than this: mind design space is too large, and our concepts too small, for it to be otherwise.
- The Culture are against terraforming - an odd apparent bit of bioconservative ideology. But this seems to be mostly a matter of efficiency: artificial habitats are much more efficient.
- If there is anything to the neocolonialism / 'liberal hegemony' suspicion, the sad fact remains that it's a less bad hegemony than the others.
- There are no religions in the Culture, not even relatively rational ones like simulationism (shown in a different Banks book) or panpsychism or deism. With so much free time, alongside sports, art, and philosophy, I expect humans to get into unprecedently odd metaphysics.
- Minds have strong emotions (e.g. the ROU *Killing Time*'s kamikaze fury).
- They have brain uploads, but they're mostly just in storage and are greatly outnumbered by embodied people.
- The Minds run incredibly detailed simulations of terrible situations; there's no attention to whether this is morally risky.

> *I know it's all nonsense, but you've got to admit it's impressive nonsense.*
>
> – Banks

See also

- Banks, 'A Few Notes on the Culture'
- Heath, 'Why the Culture Wins'
- Yudkowsky, 'The amputation of destiny'
- Sandifer, 'Cultural Marxism 1: *Consider Phlebas*'
- Jacobs, 'The ambiguous utopia of Iain M Banks'
- *The Age of Em* is the hardest social science fiction I know, albeit written as nonfiction. What do our best nonphysical theories imply?

1. Everyone can talk to the top-level administrator at any time, who knows them intimately and cares about them.

   Law exists in the Culture, but all actually harmless deviance is legal (and mental illness is rare), so law is never in the foreground. (Law is, after all, a twisted shadow of ethics, a uniform bureaucracy we need in order to minimise the effect of our horrible biases.) First-order ethics are usually allowed free reign in that world.

Tags: longtermism, scifi, meaning, suffering, ethics

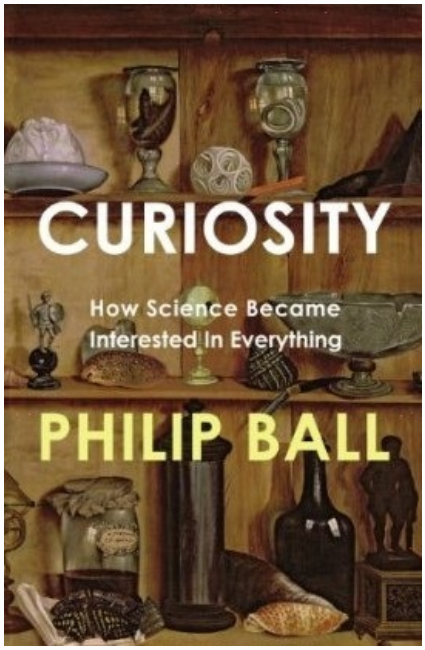
'Curiosity' (2012) by Ball

2nd July 2018

- *A model of science by reference to its unscientific origins*
- *Confidence*: 80% that I capture most of the axes
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10

> *...*
> *— why is the sea salty?*
> *— have animals souls, or intelligence?*
> *— has opinion its foundation in the animate body?*
> *— why do human beings not have horns?*
> *— how is it that sound in its passage makes its way through any obstacle whatever?*
> *— how is it that joy can be the cause of tears?*
> *— why are the fingers of unequal length?*
> *— why, if you have intercourse with a woman after she has lain with a leper, do you catch the disease while she escapes?*
> *— what reason is there for the universality of death?*
> *— why do we need food so frequently, or at all?*
> *— why are the living afraid of the bodies of the dead?*
> *— how is the globe supported in the middle of the air?*
> *— why does the inflow of the rivers not increase the bulk of the ocean?*
> *— why, if a vessel be full and its lower part open, does water not issue from it unless the upper lid be first removed?*
> *— when one atom is moved, are all moved? (since whatever is in a state of motion moves something else, thus setting up infinite motion.)*
> *— why do winds travel along the earth's surface and not in an upward direction?*
> *— why does a sort of perpetual shadow brood over the moon?*
> *— granted that the stars are alive, on what food do they live?*
> *— ought we regard the cosmos as an inanimate body, a living thing, or a god?*

— Adelard of Bath (c.1120)



Another history of the origins of science: our long trek to GWAS, livermorium, and CERN via astrology, natural magic, alchemy, Neoplatonism, herbalism, occultism, and philosophy. So, superficially, the book is just about an especially fruity context of discovery. But this period holds two of the most important lessons in history:

1. science grew out of work by people who diverge wildly from the modern idea and practice of science, whose variously false frameworks led to the Royal Society and e.g. the Newtonian triumph. (And from there to contemporary, professional, university science.) So wrong people can still make progress if their errors are uncorrelated with the prevailing errors.
2. a small number of the most powerful people in Britain - the Lord Chancellor, the king's physicians, the chaplain of the Elector Palatine & bishop of Chester, London's great architect, various Privy Councillors - successfully pushed a massive philosophical change, and so contributed to most of our greatest achievements: smallpox eradication, Sputnik and Voyager, the Green Revolution, and the unmanageably broad boons of computing are partly theirs.

Baron Verulam and the future of humanity

Bacon has some claim to being the most influential philosopher ever, in terms of counterfactual effect on history. (Rather than number of citations!) *No-one* with his social standing was resisting the Aristotelian consensus in 1620; his prototype scientific method is a century ahead of its time.

(Yes, ibn al-Haytham's was 7 centuries ahead of its time, but to limited avail.)
(Yes, in fact his biggest single philosophical doctrine is shaky to the point of self-defeat. So it's philosopher *qua* person rather than philosopher *qua* philosopher.)

A model of science

The received view of all this is one-dimensional: you have superstitious cretins at one end and rational, experimental moderns at the other. But really you need five axes before you get a basic understanding of the great, great revolution that began in the C16th - before you can see how science differs from every other community:

- **Supernaturalism vs Naturalism**. Did they explain things solely in terms of natural causes? (Absentee Gods only.)
- **Apriori vs Aposteriori**. Did they view actual observation as decisive and indispensable?
- **Qualitative vs Quantitative.** Did they make measurements? Did they model the data? Did they use standard units?
- **Holism vs Reductionism.** Did they analyse things into their constituent features? Did they explain phenomena as products of simpler dynamics?
- **Infallibilism vs Fallibilism.** Did they foreground the possibility of error? Did they view uncertain knowledge as still worthwhile? 1

Struggling to understand apriorism

This one is hard to refer to, because we now find it incredibly easy to understand why "go

and look" works as a general route to knowledge; Medieval thought often rejected this on the basis of things like the problem of induction.

The cliched way to refer to the split between those who want to *start* with the apriori and those who want to start with data is "Rationalism" vs "Empiricism". But these words confuse people: the two of them are also used in a C17th debate about psychology, to do with the nature of mental content.

More: it can't be a dichotomy, since many of the greatest rationalists (Descartes, Leibniz) were experimentalists, doing what we now call empirical work. Three meanings of rationalism, and three words for them:

- '*Rationalism 1*': Belief in innate ideas. Call it 'Continental Rationalism'. Descartes and Leibniz but not Dawkins and Shermer.
- '*Rationalism 2*': Belief in the supremacy of apriori knowledge over empirical knowledge. Call it 'apriorism'. Aristotle was (ambiguously) apriorist, as was Descartes.
- '*Rationalism 3*': Belief that everything should be subject to reason and evidence. Includes Descartes and Leibniz *and* Dawkins and Shermer. Contemporary rationalists are highly if not radically empiricist.

I use Alberto Vanzo's criteria for deciding if someone was enough of an experimentalist:

> *let us consider four typical features of early modern experimental philosophers:*
> *self-descriptions: experimental philosophers typically called themselves such. At the very least, they professed their sympathy towards experimental philosophy.*
> *friends and foes: experimental philosophers saw themselves as part of a tradition whose "patriarch" was Bacon and whose sworn enemy was Cartesian natural philosophy.*
> *method: experimental philosophers put forward a two-stage model of natural philosophical inquiry: first, collect data by means of experiments and observations; second, build theories on the basis of them. In general, experimental philosophers emphasized the a posteriori origins of our knowledge of nature and they were wary of a priori reasonings.*
> *rhetoric: in the jargon of experimental philosophers, the terms "experiments" and "observations" are good, "hypotheses" and "speculations" are bad. They were often described as fictions, romances, or castles in the air.*

This is unusually inclusive: the famous Rationalist Leibniz counts as experimental under this rubric. But a stronger definition of aposteriorist - like "refuses to use purely analytic reasoning", or even "spent most of their time running experiments and analysing data" would exclude many contemporary scientists. Sticking with Vanzo for now. ⏎

Other axes

Obviously these five factors aren't the end of the matter either. But I reckon it catches a decent amount of the variance in the term "scientist". Others:

- **Obscurantism vs Openness.** Did they write in the vernacular? Did they publish for a wide readership? Did they spurn Noble Lies? Did they encourage replications with and data sharing? Did they build scholarly networks?

It would be wishful/normative thinking to say this is a principal property of science: modern academic science fails at this. (Though less than the hermetics.) Whether with its low-status replications, unreadable prose, paywalls on most research (tax-funded or no),

pathetically low levels of data sharing, or the prevalence of noble lies...

But it's definitely a core *aspiration* now: the greedy impulse behind hermeticism is blatantly unscientific, if not actually shunned by actual scientists. First, lip service...

Things can be science without being published, obviously: consider the invention of public key cryptography by a GCHQ wonk, classified for 25 years - or even the secret infrastructure and algorithmics of high-frequency trading.

- **Particularism vs Consilience**. Did they believe that the scientific method could explain every phenomenon?
- **Realism vs Instrumentalism**. Most scientists are realists about best current theories: they think that the objects of the theories exist, rather than thinking that just the mathematical structure exists, or that the mathematical structure is just useful.
- **Theism vs Nontheism**. included non-theism in the core of modern science - and so it is, in the form of strong naturalism. Scient*ists*, on the other hand, differ from this, globally. This is partially because humans are so compartmentalised and can hold severe contradictions indefinitely. But, clearly, atheism is not an essential part of the modern method. But causal closure and (at most) a *private* faith are.

Against Against Method

Feyerabend is sometimes taken to have shown that there is no such thing as The Scientific Method (a single set of necessary and sufficient properties). *Against Method* is a great book, but it shows no such thing. His claim is that there are no scientific rules which are both useful in practice and universally true of all instances of science.

Here's a necessary condition: taking evidence seriously. (And no, Einstein's arrogance is no counterexample: I said seriously, not literally and not naively.) You can make this useful with the Bayesian interpretation of confirmation and explanation: given a hypothesis space, that gives you quantity of justified belief.

I think I agree that there are no sufficient conditions: some scientists are truly strange.

: naturalist, fallibilist, quantitative empiricism (with pretensions to openness). I've categorised the early scientists mentioned in *Curiosity* according to this: you can see the data with additional justifications here. (Ball doesn't state this model, but it floats around in his debunkings and "well actually"s.)

A fun regression on this data would be to see how my scienciness measure correlates with the importance of the person's work. It would not be that highly proportional, in this time period.

What took so long?

All of the pieces of science are very ancient - we had mathematics and data collection well before the Ten Commandments, naturalism before Buddha and Confucius, reductionism before the Peloponnesian War at least one controlled trial centuries before Christ, fallibilism likewise. Everything was ready BCE; we can see indirect evidence of this in the astonishing works of Ancient Greek engineers, mostly unmatched for 1000 years until y'know.

So the question is not “was Bacon the most original blah blah?”: he wasn’t, particularly when you remember Alhazen’s Baconian method, from the C11th. But we need an explanation for how we managed to mess it up so badly. The received view, which is all I have at the moment, is that the fall of Rome, Christian anti-intellectualism and, later, the enshrining of Aristotelian mistakes was enough to destroy and suppress the ideas. I want deeper explanations though. (For instance, what did we do to the economy?)

Alright let's say something about the actual book

Back to the book eh! Book structure is lots of little chapters on fairly disjointed topics: early modern ideas of space travel, universal language, pumps, etc. Chapter on "cabinets of curiosity" is great though: suddenly their dull zany blare makes sense and I want to build one:

> *this was more than a case of 'look what I've got'. The power with which Wunderkammern were imbued was... in that they created their own complete microcosm: a representation of the world in miniature... By possessing this microcosm the collector-prince was not just symbolising but also in a sense exercising his mastery of the world. The cabinet acted as a kind of mental laboratory within which the relationships between things could be contemplated via a process that shared elements of both experimentation and Gnostic revelation.*

Ball doesn't like us calling the Scientific Revolution a revolution, and I agree: the revolution didn't consist in the theories of Bacon or Newton: it consists in the diffusion of the worldview into all subjects and all inquiry. It transformed society and gave us marvels, but it hasn't finished happening. The general will, or default state, is still strongly unscientific. (The largest and most grievous holdout, larger even than the enduring hold of fideist religion, is our tribal politics and our largely nonempirical government policy.)
Ball expends a lot of time on a history of wonder vs curiosity vs fake dispassionate robot inquiry. People hated all of these things for various reasons, up until the Renaissance when curiosity became acceptable on what are now classic economic grounds, or in line with the Italian cult of the virtuoso - someone who's so bloody brilliant that you have to just let him get on with it.
I always like Ball's drawling and catty editorialising.

(For instance, Margaret Cavendish - the darling of arts academics who latch on to the only woman in sight in this period - gets a round dissing by Ball, as an anti-experiment idiot, a vitalist, and a misogynist.)

Stimulating as always.

1. Hard to imagine a fallibilist apriorist: perhaps Lakatos. (Some say Leibniz was, in practice.) I actually have met an epistemological methodist infallibilist apriorist, but I won't meet another.

Tags: review, science, history, philosophy, progress

deaths

RIP Paul Meehl (1920–2003)

> *Meanwhile our eager-beaver researcher, undismayed by logic-of-science considerations and relying blissfully on the “exactitude” of modern statistical hypothesis-testing, has produced a long publication list and been promoted to a full professorship. In terms of his contribution to the enduring body of psychological knowledge, he has done hardly anything. His true position is that of a potent-but-sterile intellectual rake, who leaves in his merry path a long train of ravished maidens but no viable scientific offspring.*

RIP Robert Quine (1942–2004)

> *By many peoples' standards, my playing is very primitive but by punk standards, I'm a virtuoso.*

RIP Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004)

> *How it should be in heaven I know, for I was there.*
> *By its river. I heard its birds.*
> *In its season: in summer, shortly after sunrise...*
> *But where is our dear mortality?*
> *Where is time, that destroys and saves us?*
> *This is too difficult for me. Peace eternal*
> *Could have no mornings and no evenings.*
> *This deficiency speaks against it.*

RIP John Maynard Smith (1920–2004)

> *You can live some sort of life and die without ever hearing the name of Darwin. But if, before you die, you want to understand why you lived in the first place, Darwinism is the one subject that you must study.*

RIP Francis Crick (1916–2004)

> *Nonlinear behaviour is common in real life, especially in love and war.*

RIP John Peel (1939–2004)

> *Somebody was trying to tell me that CDs are better than vinyl because they don't have any surface noise. I said, 'Listen, mate, life has surface noise.'*

> *At the heart of anything good there should be a kernel of something undefinable, and if you can define it, or claim to be able to define it, then, in a sense, you’ve missed the point.*

> *There's always the possibility that you're going to come across a record that transforms your life. And it happens weekly. It's like a leaf on the stream. There are little currents and eddies and sticks lying in the water that nudge you in a slightly different direction. And then you break loose and carry on down the current. There's nothing that actually stops you and lifts you out of the water and puts you on the bank, but there are diversions and distractions and alarums and excursions, which is what makes life interesting, really.*

RIP Hans Bethe (1906–2005)

> *Finally I got to carbon, and as you all know, in the case of carbon the reaction works out beautifully. One goes through six reactions, and at the end one comes back to carbon. In the process one has made four hydrogen atoms into one of helium. The theory, of course, was not made on the railway train from Washington to Ithaca ... It didn't take very long, it took about six weeks, but not even the Trans-Siberian railroad [has] taken that long for its journey.*

RIP Andrea Dworkin (1946–2005)

> *The death facing her now is the death of all her possibilities: the end of youth, already gone; no more hope and heart, both needed to pick up men... Carried by life and sex towards death, the human experience is one of being pushed until crushed.*

RIP Maurice Hilleman (1919–2005)

This sketchy thing estimates about 100m people saved by his measles vaccine alone.

RIP Paul Halmos (1916–2006)

> *Don't just read it; fight it! Ask your own question, look for your own examples, discover your own proofs. Is the hypothesis necessary? Is the converse true? What happens in the classical special case? What about the degenerate cases? Where does the proof use the hypothesis?*
>
> *What does it take to be [a mathematician]? I think I know the answer: you have to be born right, you must continually strive to become perfect, you must love mathematics more than anything else, you must work at it hard and without stop, and you must never give up.*

RIP Stanisław Lem (1921–2006)

> *Each civilization may choose one of two roads to travel, that is, either fret itself to death, or pet itself to death. And in the course of doing one or the other, it eats its way into the Universe, turning cinders and flinders of stars into toilet seats, pegs, gears, cigarette holders and pillowcases - and it does this because, unable to fathom the Universe, it seeks to change that Fathomlessness into Something Fathomable... We don't want to conquer the cosmos, we simply want to extend Earth's boundaries to the frontier of the cosmos.*

RIP Muriel Spark (1918–2006)

> *Arriving late sometimes and never*
> *Quite expected, still they come,*
> *Bringing a folded meaning home*
> *Between the lines, inside the letter.*
>
> *As a scarecrow in the harvest*
> *Turns an innocent field to grief*
> *These tattered hints are dumb and deaf,*
> *But bring the matter to a crisis.*
>
> *They are the messengers who run*
> *Onstage to us who try to doubt them,*

> *Fetching our fate to hand; without them*
> *What would Sophocles have done?*

RIP Richard Rorty (1931–2007)

> *They are not trying to surmount time and chance, but to use them. They are quite aware that what counts as resolution, perfection, and autonomy will always be a function of when one happens to die or to go mad. But this relativity does not entail futility. For there is no big secret which the ironist hopes to discover, and which he might die or decay before discovering. There are only little mortal things to be rearranged by being redescribed.*

RIP Stanislav Petrov (1939–2007)

> *All that happened didn't matter to me — it was my job. I was simply doing my job, and I was the right person at the right time, that's all. My late wife for 10 years knew nothing about it. 'So what did you do?' she asked me. 'Nothing. I did nothing.'*

RIP Kurt Vonnegut (1922–2007)

> *I love you sons of bitches [sci-fi writers]. You're all I read any more. You're the only ones who'll talk all about the really terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage, and not a short one, either, but one that'll last for billions of years. You're the only ones with guts enough to really care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstanding, mistakes, accidents, catastrophes do to us. You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over time and distance without limit, over mysteries that will never die, over the fact that we are right now determining whether the space voyage for the next billion years or so is going to be Heaven or Hell.*

RIP David Foster Wallace (1962–2008)

> *I'm talking about the individual US citizen's deep fear, the same basic fear that you and I have and that everybody has except nobody ever talks about it except existentialists in convoluted French prose. Our smallness, our insignificance and mortality, yours and mine, the thing that we all spend all our time not thinking about directly, that we are tiny and at the mercy of large forces and that time is always passing and that every day we've lost one more day that will never come back... "pass away," the very sound of it makes me feel the way I feel at dusk on a wintry Sunday... That everything is on fire, slow fire, and we're all less than a million breaths away from an oblivion more total than we can even bring ourselves to even try to imagine, in fact, probably that's why the manic US obsession with production, produce, produce, impact the world, contribute, shape things, to help distract us from how little and totally insignificant and temporary we are...*

RIP Irena Sendler (1910–2008)

> *What I did was not an extraordinary thing. It was normal. I continue to have pangs of conscience that I did so little.*

RIP IJ Good (1916–2009)

> *The subjectivist states his judgements, whereas the objectivist sweeps them under the carpet by calling assumptions knowledge, and he basks in the glorious objectivity of*

> *science.*
>
> *There may be occasions when it is best to behave irrationally, but whether there are should be decided rationally.*

RIP Norman Borlaug (1914–2009)

> *Little did I imagine then, in the early 1950s, that the quiet revolution in wheat production in Mexico would become popularly known as the Green Revolution in famine-plagued India and Pakistan, and subsequently spread to many other countries... India's accomplishments are even more impressive, especially when recalling the widespread famine of 1965 and 1966 which led many authorities to state that India's population had outgrown its food supply and a disastrous "die-off" of the population was inevitable. India became self-sufficient in wheat in 1972, and remains so despite population having more than doubled.*

RIP David Blackwell (1919–2010)

RIP Philippa Foot (1920–2010)

RIP Angus Maddison (1926–2010)

RIP Jack Kevorkian (1928–2011)

> *I gambled and I lost. I failed in securing my options for [euthanasia] for myself, but I succeeded in verifying the Dark Age is still with us.*

RIP Leslie Collier (1921–2011)

> *This [Master's thesis] was undertaken to develop a smallpox vaccine suitable for use under tropical conditions...*
>
> *I was given a laboratory, a junior technician (a young lady straight from school with no laboratory experience) and a little hut that housed an experimental freeze drier... [The apparatus needed for sealing large numbers of ampoules was made from a children's construction set.] It was characteristic of the somewhat Heath Robinson approach used at the time.*

RIP John McCarthy (1927–2011)

> *God did not design human beings in accordance with Christian principles, fascist principles, feminist principles, socialist principles, romantic principles, secular humanist principles, vegetarian principles, deep environmentalist principles, biocentric principles, or libertarian principles. Any of these groups could have told God a thing or two.*

RIP Adrienne Rich (1929–2012)

> *It was an old theme even for me:*
> *Language cannot do everything -*
> *chalk it on the walls where the dead poets*
> *lie in their mausoleums*
> *If at the will of the poet the poem*
> *could turn into a thing*
> *a granite flank laid bare, a lifted head*
> *alight with dew*

> *If it could simply look you in the face*
> *with naked eyeballs, not letting you turn*
> *till you, and I who long to make this thing,*
> *were finally clarified together in its stare.*

RIP Ronald Coase (1910–2013)

> *We must first note that economic factors are taken into account in a world in which ignorance, prejudice, and mental confusion, encouraged rather than dispelled by political organization, exert a strong influence on policy making.*

RIP Iain Banks (1954–2013)

> *“But in the end, it’s still just cleaning a table.”*
> *“And therefore does not really signify on the cosmic scale of events?” the man suggested.*
> *He smiled in response to the man’s grin, “Well, yes.”*
> *“But then, what does signify? My [academic] work? Is that really important, either? I could try composing wonderful musical works, or day-long entertainment epics, but what would that do? Give people pleasure? My wiping this table gives me pleasure. And people come to a clean table, which gives them pleasure.*
>
> *And anyway” — the man laughed — “people die; stars die; universes die... Of course, if all I did was wipe tables, then of course it would seem a mean and despicable waste of my huge intellectual potential. But because I choose to do it, it gives me pleasure. And,” the man said with a smile, “it’s a good way of meeting people."*

RIP Aaron Swartz (1986–2013)

> *A ticker at the bottom of the TV news gives people up-to-the-minute information about how well the stock market is doing. Nobody tells us how many people are dying right now (107 people every minute, 5 of them in the US). When a major stock drops, we hear which and how much and why and how it fits into the bigger market picture. Nobody does the same for deaths, either individual or in outbreaks. Nobody’s provided an overall look at why people are dying and how all our attempts to make the world a better place — from economic growth to clean water — are helping. Somebody should start.*

Or his disquotation.

RIP Umberto Eco (1932–2013)

> *“Master, how can we best approach death?”*
> *I replied that the only way to prepare for death is to convince yourself that everyone else is a complete idiot.*
>
> *how can you approach death, even if you are a believer, if you think that, as you lay dying, desirable young people of both sexes are dancing in discos and having the time of their lives, enlightened scientists are revealing the last secrets of the universe, incorruptible politicians are creating a better society, newspapers and television are bent on giving only important news, responsible business people are ensuring that their products will not damage the environment and doing their utmost to restore a nature in which there are streams with drinkable water, wooded hillside, clear, serene skies protected by a providential ozone layer, and fluffy clouds from which sweet rain falls once more? The thought that you must leave while all these marvelous things are going on would be intolerable.*

> *So try to think, when you sense the time has come for your departure from this vale, that the world (six billion beings) is full of idiots, that the dancers at the disco are all idiots, the scientists who think they have solved the mysteries of the universe are idiots, the politicians who propose panaceas for all our ills are idiots, the journalists who fill page after page with vacuous gossip are idiots, and the manufacturers who are destroying the planet are idiots. In that moment, would you not be happy, relieved, and satisfied to leave this vale of idiots?*
>
> *...Wisdom consists in recognizing only at the right moment (and not before) that he too is an idiot. Only then can you die.*
>
> *The great art lies in studying universal thought a bit at a time; scrutinizing changes in customs; monitoring the mass media day by day, the statements of self-assured artists, the apothegms of politicians who shoot their mouths off, the philosophemes of apocalyptic critics, the aphorisms of charismatic heroes; studying theories, propositions, appeals, images, and visions. Only then, in the end, will you experience the insight that everyone is an idiot. And at that point, you are ready for death.*
>
> *Until the end, you must doggedly insist that some people say sensible things, that a certain book is better than others, that a certain leader really desires the common good. It's natural, human, and proper to our species to resist the idea that all people are idiots, otherwise why go on living? But at the end, you will understand why it is worth the effort and how it can be a splendid thing to die.*
>
> *Then Crito said to me: "Master, I wouldn't like to make hasty decisions, but I suspect that you are an idiot." See, I replied, you are already on the right track.*

RIP Carl Djerassi (1923–2014)

> *Before learning about the postoperative prognosis, I was very depressed, and for the first time thought about mortality. Strangely enough I had not thought about death before... I realized that who knows how long I would live? In cancer they always talk about five years: if one can survive five years then presumably the cancer had been extirpated. And I thought: gee, had I known five years earlier that I would come down with cancer, would I have led a different life during these five last years? And my answer to myself was yes. I said, well, Carl Djerassi, now you know it... I decided I wanted to live another intellectual life: a very different one... So, by 1989, when I really started reducing the size of my research group on a substantial scale I wrote the first autobiography. I wrote my first novel...*
>
> *But suicide is a death that has a purpose, and the person who commits suicide usually sends out a message... the survivors ought to be able to figure out what had prompted this irrevocable step... So, this was my answer in the context of my daughter's death and why I founded an artist's colony in her memory... I wanted to create again something living out of death.*

RIP Stephanie Kwolek (1923–2014)

> *FERGUSON: Do you feel comfortable financially now? Has the "Kevlar" discovery made your day?*
> *KWOLEK: The "Kevlar" discovery has not made my day. It takes a lifetime of saving to assure a fairly comfortable old age, particularly if you start out at a salary of $240 per*

> *month and you progress at the rate that women of my generation did.*
> *FERGUSON: The usual stories go around that so-and-so invented "Kevlar" and they got huge bonuses.*
> *KWOLEK: Well, I certainly did not receive a huge bonus, and any amount that was received was greatly diminished by federal and state income taxes...*
>
> *FERGUSON: ... any further additions?*
> *KWOLEK: On reflection, I realized that I gave some incorrect values for the first liquid crystalline polyamide fiber that I prepared and I would like to correct these now. These poly(1,4,-benzamide) fibers had a breaking tenacity of about 6 grams per denier, and a modulus or stiffness of about 430 grams per denier. For comparison, glass fibers have a modulus of about 300 grams per denier.*
> *FERGUSON: Thank you again, Stephanie, for having given us the time for this interview.*

RIP Alastair Reid (1926–2014)

> *It was a day peculiar to this piece of the planet,*
> *when larks rose on long thin strings of singing*
> *and the air shifted with the shimmer of actual angels.*
> *Greenness entered the body. The grasses*
> *shivered with presences, and sunlight*
> *stayed like a halo on hair and heather and hills.*
> *Walking into town, I saw, in a radiant raincoat,*
> *the woman from the fish-shop. 'What a day it is!'*
> *cried I, like a sunstruck madman.*
> *And what did she have to say for it?*
> *Her brow grew bleak, her ancestors raged in their graves*
> *as she spoke with their ancient misery:*
> *'We'll pay for it, we'll pay for it, we'll pay for it!'"*

RIP Terry Pratchett (1948–2015)

> *...*
> *ACTUALLY, NO. I AM IMPRESSED AND INTRIGUED, said Death. THE CONCEPT YOU PUT BEFORE ME PROVES THE EXISTENCE OF TWO HITHERTO MYTHICAL PLACES. SOMEWHERE, THERE IS A WORLD WHERE EVERYONE MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE, THE MORAL CHOICE, THE CHOICE THAT MAXIMISED THE HAPPINESS OF THEIR FELLOW CREATURES, OF COURSE, THAT ALSO MEANS THAT SOMEWHERE ELSE IS THE SMOKING REMNANT OF THE WORLD WHERE THEY DID NOT ...*
>
> *"Oh, come on! I know what you're implying, and I've never believed in any of that Heaven and Hell nonsense!"*
>
> *The room was growing darker. The blue gleam along the edge of the reaper's scythe was becoming more obvious.*
>
> *ASTONISHING, said Death. REALLY ASTONISHING. LET ME PUT FORWARD ANOTHER SUGGESTION: THAT YOU ARE NOTHING MORE THAN A LUCKY SPECIES OF APE THAT IS TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITIES OF CREATION VIA A LANGUAGE THAT EVOLVED IN ORDER TO TELL ONE ANOTHER WHERE THE RIPE FRUIT WAS?*
>
> *Fighting for breath, the philosopher managed to say: "Don't be silly."*

> *THE REMARK WAS NOT INTENDED AS DEROGATORY, said Death. UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, YOU HAVE ACHIEVED A GREAT DEAL.*
>
> *"We've certainly escaped from outmoded superstitions!"*
>
> *WELL DONE, said Death. THAT'S THE SPIRIT. I JUST WANTED TO CHECK.*
> *He leaned forward.*
>
> *AND ARE YOU AWARE OF THE THEORY THAT THE STATE OF SOME TINY PARTICLES IS INDETERMINATE UNTIL THE MOMENT THEY ARE OBSERVED? A CAT IN A BOX IS OFTEN MENTIONED.*
>
> *"Oh, yes," said the philosopher.*
>
> *GOOD, said Death. He got to his feet as the last of the light died, and smiled. I SEE YOU...'*

RIP Nicholas Winton (1909–2015)

No you're crying

RIP Ornette Coleman (1930–2015)

> *Ave Atque Ave again*

RIP John Forbes Nash (1928–2015)

> *gradually I began to intellectually reject some of the delusionally influenced lines of thinking which had been characteristic of my orientation. This began, most recognizably, with the rejection of politically oriented thinking as essentially a hopeless waste of intellectual effort. So at the present time I seem to be thinking rationally again in the style that is characteristic of scientists. However this is not entirely a matter of joy as if someone returned from physical disability to good physical health. One aspect of this is that rationality of thought imposes a limit on a person's concept of his relation to the cosmos.*

RIP Donald Ainslie Henderson (1928–2016)

> *Q: Did you really send a jeep tyre to a WHO official who said he would eat one if the India smallpox eradication campaign were successful?*
>
> *A: [laughs] I reminded him later on of his bet and said that we had a tyre waiting and where should we send it. He laughed and said "No, no, I really didn't mean it." So the tyre never got sent.*

RIP Leonard Cohen (1934–2016)

> *If it be your will / that I speak no more*
> *that my voice be still / as it was before*
> *I will speak no more*

RIP Hilary Putnam (1926–2016)

> *I propose that each philosopher ought to leave it more problematic what is left for philosophy to do - but philosophy should go on. If I agree with Derrida on anything, it is on this: that philosophy... must learn to be a writing whose authority is always to be won anew, not inherited or awarded because it is philosophy.*

> *Philosophers inherit a field, not authority, and that is enough. It is, after all, a field which fascinates a great many people. If we have not entirely destroyed that fascination by our rigidities or by our posturings, that is something for which we should be truly grateful.*

Temporary RIP Marvin Minsky (1927–?)

> *I was surprised to find that the idea of extending one's lifetime to thousands of years was often seen as a dismal suggestion. The response to my several informal polls included such objections as these: "Why would anyone want to live for a thousand hundred years? What if you outlived all your friends? What would you do with all that time? Wouldn't one's life become terribly boring?"*
>
> *What can one conclude from this? Perhaps some of those persons lived with a sense that they did not deserve to live so long. Perhaps others did not regard themselves as having worthy long term goals. In any case, I find it worrisome that so many of our citizens are resigned to die. A planetful of people who feel that they do not have much to lose: surely this could be dangerous.*

RIP David Mackay (1967–2016)

Everyone should read this.

Everyone capable of caring should read this.

RIP Ken Arrow (1921–2017)

RIP Thomas Schelling (1927–2017)

> *Who loses if a death occurs? First, the person who dies. Exactly what he loses we do not know. But, before it happens, people do not want to die and will go to some expense to avoid it...*
>
> *Death is a comparatively private event. Society may be concerned but is not much affected. There is a social interest in schools and delinquency, discrimination and unrest, infection and pollution, noise and beauty, obscenity and corruption, justice and fair practice, and the examples that men set; but death is a very local event...*
>
> *Society's interest, moreover, may be in whether reasonable efforts were made to conserve life than in whether those efforts succeed. A missing man has to be searched for, but whether or not he is found is usually of interest to only a very few.*

RIP Derek Parfit (1942–2017)

> *Is the truth depressing? Some may find it so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed that [nonreductionist personal identity was critical], I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others...*
>
> *Instead of saying 'I shall be dead', I should say, 'There will be no future experiences that will be related, in certain ways, to these present experiences'. Because it reminds me what this fact involves, this redescription makes this fact less depressing.*

> *My death will break the more direct relations between my present experiences and future experiences, but it will not break various other relations. This is all there is to the fact that there will be no one living who will be me. Now that I have seen this, my death seems to me less bad.*

RIP Hans Rosling (1948–2017)

> *'The Mozambican government assigned Rosling to a northern part of the country, where he would be the only doctor serving 300,000 people. Because of the scarcity of health care, patients were often in excruciating pain by the time he saw them. Rosling recalls performing emergency surgery to extract dead fetuses from women on the verge of death. He watched helplessly as children perished from diseases that should have been simple to prevent...*
>
> *“Extreme poverty produces diseases. Evil forces hide there. It is where Ebola starts. It’s where Boko Haram hides girls. It’s where konzo disease occurs.” '*

RIP Mark Fisher (1968–2017)

> *The great Cold Rationalist lesson is that everything in the so-called personal sphere is in fact the product of impersonal processes of cause and effect which could be delineated very precisely. And this act of delineation, this stepping outside the character armour that we have confused with ourselves, is what freedom is...*
>
> *We can now see why becoming inhuman is in the best interests of humanity. The human organism is set up to produce misery. What we like may be damaging for us. What feels good may poison us...*
>
> *We could say it is the human condition to be grotesque, since the human animal is the one that does not fit in, the freak of nature who has no place in the natural order and is capable of re-combining nature's products into hideous new forms...*
>
> *the centre is missing, but we cannot stop searching for it or positing it. It is not that there is nothing there - it is that what is there is not capable of exercising responsibility...*

RIP Tom Regan (1938–2017)

> *Harms viewed as deprivations need not cause or involve pain or suffering... [welfarists] assume that the only harm we can do to animals is to cause them to suffer; they completely overlook the other type of harm we may visit upon them - namely, the harm done by deprivation. And an untimely death is a deprivation of a fundamental and irreversible kind...*
>
> *Death for them is a misfortune, a harm, when death for them is a deprivation, a loss, and it is the latter when their death is contrary to their welfare-interests, even assuming that they themselves have no preference-interest in remaining alive or in avoiding death...*

RIP Herb Needleman (1927–2017)

> *I was working on the infant ward, and a child was bought up from the ER with severe acute lead toxicity. I did what I’d been trained to do. I gave her [chelation]. She was stuporous and very ill. Slowly she got better... I felt very smug. I told the mother that she*

> *had to move out of that house...*
>
> *She looked at me and said, “Where am I going to move to? All the houses I can afford are the same age.”*

RIP grognor (1993–2017)

> *I will be dead soon. if you want to honor my memory,*
> *become vegan*
> *don't pay attention to the news*
> *think hard*
> *create a posthuman eutopia*

RIP Ursula le Guin (1926–2018)

> *S: "...close up, the world's all dirt and rocks. And day to day, life's a hard job, you get tired, you lose the pattern. You need a distance. The way to see how beautiful the earth is, is to see it from the moon. The way to see how beautiful life is, is from the vantage of death."*
>
> *T: "That's all right for the moon. Let it stay off there and be the moon - I don't want it! I’m not going to stand up on a gravestone and look down on life and say, ‘O lovely!’ I want to see it whole right in the middle of it. I don't give a hoot for eternity."*
>
> *S: "It's nothing to do with eternity... The sun's going to burn out; what else keeps it shining?"*
>
> *T: "Ach! your talk, your damned philosophy!"*

RIP Doug Altman (1948–2018)

> *What should we think about a doctor who uses the wrong treatment, either wilfully or through ignorance, or who uses the right treatment wrongly (such as by giving the wrong dose of a drug)? Most people would agree that such behaviour was unprofessional, arguably unethical, certainly unacceptable.*
>
> *What, then, should we think about researchers who use the wrong techniques (wilfully or in ignorance), use the right techniques wrongly, misinterpret their results, report their results selectively, cite the literature selectively, and draw unjustified conclusions? We should be appalled. Yet numerous studies of the medical literature, in both general and specialist journals, have shown that all of the above phenomena are common. This is surely a scandal.*

RIP Mary Midgley (1919–2018)

> *Old age and death... make up a fixed cycle, a crescendo and diminuendo that frame human efforts everywhere, a rhythm that links us to the natural world in which we live. They mark us out as creatures akin to the rest of life, beings that are at home on the earth, not supernatural outsiders crashing in to conquer it. We have no idea how we would get on without that context. No doubt we would devise some other world-picture to replace it, but what would that picture be? Would the overcrowding be dealt with by colonizing space–a potent dream that has long ruled science-fiction?*
>
> *...In fact, the question of how to view death isn’t a duel between black and white–saving*

> *it or losing it. It really is a choice of evils–one of those clashes where, as Aristotle saw, we have to navigate between equally unwelcome extremes. I have often been puzzled by the way philosophers, from Epicurus on, have argued abstractly about whether death is 'an evil'. It seems so obvious that the question about evils must always be 'is this one worse than the alternative?'*
>
> *...However discontented we may be with our present mortality we might well find it still harder to adapt to the prospect of endless survival.*

RIP Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza (1922–2018)

RIP Judith Rich Harris (1938–2018)

Larkin:

> *They fuck you up, your mum and dad*
> *They may not mean to, but they do.*
> *They fill you with the faults they had.*
> *And add some extra, just for you.*

Harris:

> *How sharper than a serpent's tooth*
> *To hear your child make such a fuss.*
> *It isn't fair — it's not the truth —*
> *He's fucked up, yes, but not by us.*

RIP Robert Provine (1943–2019)

> *The ultimate cause of death in such cases is unknown, but the sustained, uncontrollable laughter and struggling of the victim may cause cardiac arrest or cerebral haemor rhage.*

RIP Clive James (1939–2019)

> *it is only when they go wrong that machines remind you how powerful they are, how much they can do... before long you are armed with all kinds of jargon and have persuaded yourself that you know what's going on. But you don't know what's going on. Only about two people in the entire building can really understand how the toys are put together.*

> *The childish urge to understand everything doesn't necessarily fade when the time approaches for you to do the most adult thing of all: vanish.*

> *I never feared growing old, because I was always very conscious that I was bad at being young.*

> *The storm blew out and this is the dead calm.*
> *The pain is going where the passion went.*
> *Few things will move you now to lose your head*
> *And you can cause, or be caused, little harm.*
> *Tonight you leave your audience content:*
> *You were the ghost they wanted at the feast,*
> *Though none of them recalls a word you said.*

RIP Mitch Feigenbaum (1944–2019)

RIP George Steiner (1929–2020)

> *The kinds of thing said about death offer a grammatical and ontological parallel. Language and death may be conceived of as the two areas of meaning or cognitive constants in which grammar and ontology are mutually determinant. The ways in which we try to speak of them, or rather to speak them, are not satisfactory statements of substance, but are the only ways in which we can question, i.e. experience their reality. According to the medieval Kabbalah...*
>
> *there is in men and women a motivation stronger even than love or hatred or fear. It is that of being interested — in a body of knowledge, in a problem, in a hobby, in tomorrow's newspaper.*

RIP Catherine Hamlin (1924 – 2020)

> *My dream is to eradicate obstetric fistula forever. I won't do this in my lifetime, but you can in yours.*

RIP Freeman Dyson (1923–2020)

> *the principle of maximum diversity... says that the laws of nature and the initial conditions are such as to make the universe as interesting as possible. As a result, life is possible but not too easy. Always when things are dull, something turns up to challenge us and to stop us from settling into a rut. Examples of things which made life difficult are all around us: comet impacts, ice ages, weapons, plagues, nuclear fission, computers, sex, sin and death. Not all challenges can be overcome, and so we have tragedy... In the end we survive, but only by the skin of our teeth.*

RIP Mario Molina (1943–2020)

> *We realized that the chlorine atoms produced by the decomposition of the CFCs would catalytically destroy ozone. We became fully aware of the seriousness of the problem when we compared the industrial amounts of CFCs to the amounts of nitrogen oxides which control ozone levels... We were alarmed at the possibility that the continued release of CFCs into the atmosphere would cause a significant depletion of the Earth's stratospheric ozone layer.*

COVID-19 Memorial (2020-2021)

John Horton Conway
John Prine
Adam Schlesinger
Gita Ramjee
Li Wenliang
Julian Perry Robinson
Dave Greenfield
Ann Katharine Mitchell
Paul Matewele
Maria de Sousa
Toots Hibbert
Ben Bova
Peter M Neumann (1940–2020)
Arianna Rosenbluth (1927–2020)
Lewis Wolpert
Edmund M Clarke
Leo Goodman

RIP John Horton Conway (1937–2020)

Schleicher: Some of your achievements have had a great influence on people, especially on young people, and many of them consider you a role model or a hero. How do you feel about this?
Conway: Let me say, I may have had a great influence on a lot of people, but quite often that influence has been to the bad.
Schleicher: Why is that?
Conway: I feel very guilty; I have one particular person in mind. He didn't get a Ph.D. because he became too interested in the kinds of games I was teaching him. I suspect that sort of thing has happened quite a lot, not necessarily to the extent of damaging a person's career as much as I fear I have in that case, but by making it harder for people to concentrate on the work they should be doing, because I am telling things that are more interesting. So I'm rather worried when I influence people...
Schleicher: I'm surprised that you have these worries.
Conway: I might do good... Incidentally, I was imprisoned in the same prison in which John Bunyan was imprisoned about three hundred years earlier. When I was a student I participated in a "ban the bomb" demonstration. There was a magistrate who asked everybody a few questions and then sent us to jail... So, in some sense, the book is alien to me, except that I recognize the "Slough of Despond", a phrase he used to refer to being depressed.
Schleicher: For how long?
Conway: I was very depressed in 1993. I attempted suicide. And I very nearly succeeded. That was just personal problems — my marriage was breaking down.
Schleicher: I was asking about the prison term.
Conway: That was, I think, eleven days. That's the number I remember.

> *The Vow: "Thou shalt stop worrying and feeling guilty; thou shalt do whatever thou pleasest." He no longer worried that he was eroding his mathematical soul when he indulged his curiosity and followed wherever it went, whether towards recreation or research, or somewhere altogether nonmathematical, such as his longing to learn the etymology of words.*

RIP Yuri Orlov (1924–2020)

> *... the authorities repeated: "Die! There are no political prisoners in the USSR!"...*
>
> *Science... Start all over again from the very beginning. New life. New language. Okay, we'll handle this too. To the end, your head's still there.*

RIP Robert May (1936–2020)

> *Interviewer: Bob, of all the "ologists"–physicist, chemical engineer, chemist and mathematician–what kind of "ologist" are you?*
>
> *I would say that I am a scientist with a short attention span. To put it in more ecological terms, I think there are different kinds of people in science, not just theoreticians and experimentalists but people who like to pick on one problem and devote their life to it, and people who accidentally stumble across various things. There is a rough rather glib analogy with a distinction ecologists use between species that are weedy species, often called "R selected" and species that are "K selected", "K" for carrying capacity. R selected means that rapid growth rate is all important: they find an empty space and swarm into it. As distinct from "K selected" organisms that are more skilled in competitive, crowded situations where they are one of the mob. I am an "early stage", R-selected person. I like to get in early when you can do nice, simple things that are important. Then, as the field grows and it becomes more a matter of important and systematic elaboration, I find that less congenial. Perhaps that is over-interpreting it.*

> *But my career is as much "accident" as anything else. It is not that I go around deliberately thinking of what is a different thing to do. It is just that my scientific career has been a sequence of accidents, from the fact that it even exists onwards.*
>
> *Mathematics is ultimately no more but no less than thinking very clearly about something. I like puzzles, so I am a mathematician. I am not a pure mathematician's mathematician because I don't like abstract, formal problems. I like tricks and devices. I am essentially a mathematician but in the sense that I like thinking about complicated things, asking what are potential simplicities hidden in them and expressing that tentative thought in mathematical terms and seeing where it leads me in testable ways.*

gold

RIP Daniel Dumile (1971–2020)

> *Ever since the womb 'til I'm back where my brother went*
> *That's what my tomb will say, right above my government:*
> *Dumile. Either unmarked or engraved, hey, who's to say?*
> *I wrote this one in BCDC O-section*
> *If you don't believe me, go get bagged and check then:*
> *Cell number 17, up under the top bunk...*
>
> *When I was led to you, I knew you were the one for me*
> *I swear the whole world could feel you, MC*

RIP Norton Juster (1929–2021)

> *In this box are all the words I know... Most of them you will never need, some you will use constantly, but with them you may ask all the questions which have never been answered and answer all the questions which have never been asked. All the great books of the past and all the ones yet to come are made with these words. With them there is no obstacle you cannot overcome. All you must learn to do is to use them well and in the right places.*
>
> *"And, most important of all," added the Mathemagician, "here is your own magic staff. Use it well and there is nothing it cannot do for you." He placed in Milo's breast pocket a small gleaming pencil which, except for the size, was much like his own.*
>
> *"I am the Terrible Trivium, demon of petty tasks and worthless jobs, ogre of wasted effort, and monster of habit."...*
> *"But why do only unimportant things?" asked Milo, who suddenly remembered how much time he spent each day doing them.*
> *"Think of all the trouble it saves," the man explained, and his face looked as if he'd be grinning an evil grin - if he could grin at all. "If you only do the easy and useless jobs, you'll never have to worry about the important ones which are so difficult. You just won't have the time. For there's always something to do to keep you from what you really should be doing, and if it weren't for that dreadful magic staff, you'd never know how much time you were wasting."*

RIP Yuan Longping (1930–2021)

> *Famished, you would eat whatever there was to eat, even grass roots and tree bark. At that time I became even more determined to solve the problem of how to increase food*

> *production so that ordinary people would not starve... I had learned some background of Mendel and Morgan's theory, and I knew from journal papers that it was proven by experiments and real agricultural applications, such as seedless watermelon. I desired to read and learn more, but I could only do so secretly.*

RIP Steven Weinberg (1933–2021)

> *The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless. But if there is no solace in the fruits of our research, there is at least some consolation in the research itself. Men and women are not content to comfort themselves with tales of gods and giants, or to confine their thoughts to the daily affairs of life; they also build telescopes and satellites and accelerators, and sit at their desks for endless hours working out the meaning of the data they gather. The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy.*
>
> *If there is no point in the universe that we discover by the methods of science, there is a point that we can give the universe by the way we live, by loving each other, by discovering things about nature, by creating works of art...*
>
> *although we are not the stars in a cosmic drama, if the only drama we're starring in is one that we are making up as we go along, it is not entirely ignoble that faced with this unloving, impersonal universe we make a little island of warmth and love and science and art for ourselves. That's not an entirely despicable role for us to play.*

RIP János Kornai (1928–2021)

> *A typical American textbook on economic systems is not written with the same ambition about capitalism with which I wrote about socialism. It doesn't give you a general model of capitalism, including the characterization of the political, ideological, and social spheres...*
>
> *Now as I look back on my life there are times when I regret the way my career turned out, but times also when I look back contented. Here again is a personal example of what I said at the general theoretical level about the theory of preference ordering. I am not consistent in the retrospective judgment of my own behavior. That is because my preference ordering in the same decision space is significantly different on a day when I am in good mood and look back proudly to my past behavior from the ordering when I am in a bad mood and regret my earlier actions.*

RIP Aaron T Beck (1921–2021)

> *If our thinking is bogged down by distorted symbolic meanings, illogical reasoning and erroneous interpretations, we become, in truth, blind and deaf*

RIP Joan Didion (1934–2021)

> *I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced... hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends... We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were. I have already lost touch with a couple of people I used to be...*

> *You get the sense that it's possible simply to go through life noticing things and writing them down and that this is OK, it's worth doing. That the seemingly insignificant things that most of us spend our days noticing are really significant, have meaning, and tell us something.*

RIP Richard Leakey (1944–2022)

RIP David Cox (1924–2022)

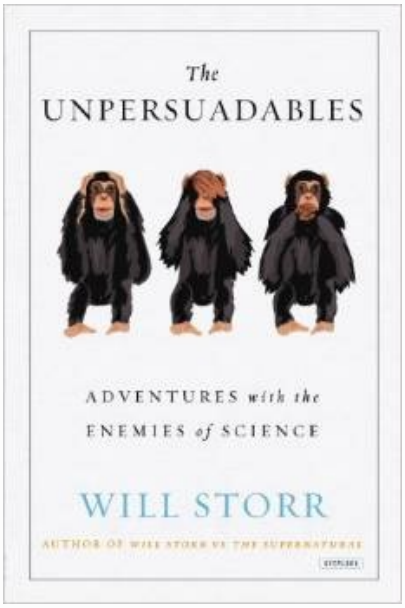
> *Then the question was how to actually do the statistical analysis. I wrote down the full likelihood function and was horrified at it because it's got exponentials of integrals of products of all sorts of things, unknown functions and so forth. I was stuck for quite a long time — I would think the best part of five years or maybe even longer.*

(life as time to failure: burn-in or wear-out)

'The Unpersuadables' (2013) by Storr

21st August 2018

- *Understanding good science & epistemology via counterexamples.*
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Content notes*: epistemic angst, relativism, Holocaust denial
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



> *Imagine if, way back at the start of the scientific enterprise, someone had said, "What we really need is a control group for science - people who will behave exactly like scientists, doing experiments, publishing journals, and so on, but whose field of study is completely empty: one in which the null hypothesis is always true.*
>
> *"That way, we'll be able to gauge the effect of publication bias, experimental error, misuse of statistics, data fraud, and so on, which will help us understand how serious such problems are in the real scientific literature." Isn't that a great idea? By an accident of historical chance, we actually have exactly such a control group, namely parapsychologists*

- Allan Crossman

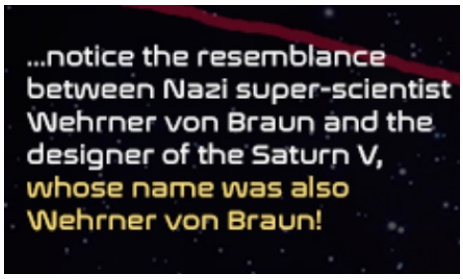
An irritating but righteous book. Not quite what it looks like: another Ronson-Theroux journalist, accosting another set of tragicomic kooks).

OK, it *is* that, but it's also a grim reflection on how confusing and muddy the world is, on the universality of extreme bias, plus Storr's personal traumas and peccadilloes. (Half the book is his confessing to childhood theft, psychosis, academic failure, and petty vendettas.) Rather than getting to the bottom of ESP, or morgellons, or homeopathy, or past-life regression, Storr tries to understand the character of the people who believe and disbelieve in them. (This is a dangerous approach unless you are extremely sensitive and charitable. As we'll see, Storr is that sensitive, to one set anyway.) Besides confronting unusual beliefs without (as much) prejudice, *The Unpersuadables* is about the fact that we are all riddled with deep obstacles to objectivity: there's our ingroupism and confirmation bias; representation realism; emotional reasoning about nonemotional things; the terrifyingly unreliable reconstructive nature of memory; the sad distinctness of intelligence and

rationality; evolutionarily adaptive delusions of superiority and agency.

These are illustrated by interviews with a creationist, Sheldrake, Irving, Ramdev, Monckton, the Morgellons victims 1, and even Randi.

> *Stories work against truth. They operate with the machinery of prejudice and distortion. Their purpose is not fact but propaganda. The scientific method is the tool that humans have developed to break the dominion of the narrative. It has been designed specifically to dissolve anecdote, to strip out emotion and leave only unpolluted data. It is a new kind of language, a modern sorcery, and it has gifted our species incredible powers. We can eradicate plagues, extend our lives by decades, build rockets and fly through space. But we can hardly be surprised if some feel an instinctive hostility towards it, for it is fundamentally inhuman.*



Storr is seriously out of his depth on the science: he is always at least second-hand from the evidence (when interviewing researchers), and often third-hand (most of his citations are pop science books), and so several chapters suffer from journalism's classic problem, false balance. The reason this isn't a call to shut the book is because he doesn't spare himself, states this repeatedly - and this is in fact *the theme* of his book: that almost all of us are unable to infer the truth about a shocking diversity of things. 2 Without testimony, without Google, we are revealed as ignorant and helpless apes.

For instance, the Skeptics he encounters are also out of their depth, and deserve calling-out. No one is past the need for doubt.

> *I am surprised, for a start, that so few of these disciples of empirical evidence seem to be familiar with the scientific literature on the subject that impassions them so. I am suspicious, too, about the real source of their rage. If they are motivated, as they frequently insist, by altruistic concern over the dangers of supernatural belief, why don't they obsess over jihadist Muslims, homophobic Christians or racist Jewish settlers? Why this focus on stage psychics, ghosthunters and alt-med hippies?*

> *During our conversation, I asked Randi if he has ever, in his life, changed his position on anything due to an examination of the evidence. After a long silence, he said, 'That's a good question. I have had a few surprises along the way that got my attention rather sharply.'*
> *'What were these?' I asked.*
> *He thought again, for some time. 'Oh, some magic trick that I decided on the modus operandi.'...*
> *'So you've never been wrong about anything significant?'*
> *'In regard to the Skeptical movement and my work...' There was another stretched and chewing pause. He conferred with his partner, to see if he had any ideas. 'No. Nothing occurs to me at the moment.'*

That's not how memory works though, is it? Storr is too literal-minded and prosecutorial ("*I have been looking for evidence that James Randi is a liar*"). When Randi corrects himself in the course of a sentence ("*I didn't go to grade school at all, I went to the first few grades of grade school*"), Storr leaps on this as a serious contradiction rather than just the patchy nature of speech. He talks about his emotional bias against scepticism - but he still leaves in this idiot journo behaviour, the uncharitable coaxing out of flaws.

These chapters were a good ethnography of 'traditional' (nontechnical) rationality. But Storr doesn't know about the other kind (which foregrounds all the cognitive biases he is so struck and scarred by), so his conclusion about rationalism is completely awry.3 Disillusioned with particular Skeptics, he reacts by throwing away scepticism:

> *For many Skeptics, evidence-based truth has been sacralised. It has caused them to become irrational in their judgements of the motives of those with whom they do not agree...*
>
> *This monoculture we would have, if the hard rationalists had their way, would be a deathly thing. So bring on the psychics, bring on the alien abductees, bring on the two John Lennons – bring on a hundred of them. Christians or no, there will be tribalism. Televangelists or no, there will be scoundrels. It is not religion or fake mystics that create these problems, it is being human. Where there is illegality or racial hatred, call the police. Where there is psychosis, call Professor Richard Bentall. Where there is misinformation, bring learning. But where there is just ordinary madness, we should celebrate. Eccentricity is our gift to one another. It is the riches of our species. To be mistaken is not a sin. Wrongness is a human right.*

The American title, "Heretics", is fitting in a few ways: Storr sees these people as persecuted underdogs, he likes many of them, and so he focusses on the arrogance and bias of the - however correct - mainstream figures dealing with them. They certainly have a holy madness, of crying out despite knowing they will be ostracised.

> *Over the last few months, John E Mack has become a kind of hero to me. Despite his earlier caution, he ended up believing in amazing things: intergalactic space travel and terrifying encounters in alien craft that travelled seamlessly through nonphysical dimensions. And when his bosses tried to silence him, he hired a lawyer. He fought back against the dean and his dreary minions. He battled hard in the name of craziness...*

David Irving is interesting in this regard: he does not act like a fraud (e.g. he sues people for libel, even though this brings intensive scrutiny of his research), but rather a sort of compulsive, masochist contrarian. Stranger still, his (beloved) family were all solid anti-Nazi soldiers in WWII. (Storr contorts himself to explain Irving's identification with Hitler as due to their sharing an admiration of the British forces (...))

Storr's awful experience on a Vipassana retreat is a vivid example of the Buddhist dark night of the soul. We don't know what fraction of people suffer terribly from meditation, but despite its cuddly image, there's surely large overlap with the 8% of people who are clinically depressive and/or anxious.

The chapter on psi does not represent the state of evidence properly - perhaps because one of his proof-readers was Professor Daryl Bloody Bem.4

The ending is stirring but tilts over into foolish relativism:

> *The Skeptic tells the story of Randi the hero; the psychic of Randi the devil. We all make these unconscious plot decisions...*
>
> *We are all creatures of illusion. We are made out of stories. From the heretics to the Skeptics, we are all lost in our own secret worlds.*

But the question is to what *degree*! And the degree of lostness, of inverse rationality, varies by many orders of whatever magnitude you wish to pick.

Storr's disquiet at the sheer power of cognitive bias, and the systematic failures of yes/no science (that is: statistical significance rather than effect size estimation) is well and good. Gelman:

> *I think 'the probability that a model or a hypothesis is true' is generally a meaningless statement except as noted in certain narrow albeit important examples.*

Storr's humane approach is certainly bound to be more compelling to mystics and flakes than e.g. deGrasse Tyson's smug dismissals. But Storr is scared of grey, of the fact that doubt is only reducible and not eliminable. This is because he doesn't know our beautiful, fallible weapons: probabilism, inference, optimisation, Analysis, computability.

I recommend *Elephant in the Brain* or *Rationality from A to Z* instead as an approach to the vital, dreadful side of cognition (including advice on how to avoid being a fake, partial, traditional sceptic); they have less angst and false equivalences, and were written by people who understand the balance of evidence.

Actually that's too strong; I am frustrated with Storr because he is so similar to me, except he doesn't grasp that the technical is the path out of (many) biases. There's a lot wrong with it and you should probably read it, and how often can one say that?

Cross-posted from Goodreads.

1. Storr is right that skeptics can lack compassion. The "Morgellons" people *are* victims regardless of what their aetiology turns out to be (mental illness, nerve disorders, tropical rat mites, or yes malicious sentient fibres). At minimum, they are victims of bad fortune and rigid, actually unscientific medical practices.

   The Lesswrong style of rationalist has less of this problem IMO (more emotional literacy; more Californian).

2. > *This is an imperfect system, as it relies on many secondary sources. Moreover, I do not declare myself to be free of the biases that afflict any writer, and I'm certainly not immune to making mistakes. If any errors are noted, or if new findings supersede claims made in the text, I would be very grateful to receive notification via willstorr.com, so future editions can be corrected.*

3. Storr:
   > *I am concerned that I have overstated my argument. In my haste to write my own coherent story, I have barely acknowledged the obvious truth that minds do sometimes change. People find faith and they lose it. Mystics become Skeptics. Politicians cross the floor. I wonder why this happens. Is it when the reality of what is actually happening in our lives overpowers the myth that we make of themselves? Are we simply pursuing ever more glorious hero missions?...*

4. Important caveat to the headline of that linked article, from Gelman:
   > *The only thing I don't like about Engber's article is its title, "Daryl Bem Proved ESP Is Real. Which means science is broken." I understand that "Daryl Bem Proved ESP Is Real" is kind of a joke, but to me this is a bit too close to the original reporting on Bem, back in 2011, where people kept saying that Bem's study was high quality, state-of-the-art psychology, etc. Actually, Bem's study was crap. It's every much as bad as the famously bad papers on beauty and sex ratio, ovulation on voting, elderly-*

> *related words and slow walking, etc.*
>
> *And "science" is not broken. Crappy science is broken. Good science is fine. If "science" is defined as bad articles published in PPNAS—himmicanes, air rage, ages ending in 9, etc.—then, sure, science is broken. But if science is defined as the real stuff, then, no, it's not broken at all.*

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*
2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*
3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

In this case: I know a bit about psychology and cognitive science, certainly more than Storr. I devote quite a lot of time to spotting my own biases and bad thinking, with arguable success.

Tags: rationality, philosophy

Notes on OpenAI Five

23rd August 2019

- *Trying to define reward shaping by studying a DotA bot.*
- *Confidence*: 80%
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

OpenAI Five has hardcoded Dota knowledge in its reward. Two readings of “hardcoded”:

1. initialised by a human;
2. fixed by a human (i.e. no updates to R from self-play).

Both readings obtain here.

A strict definition of “hardcoded reward knowledge”: if the reward function includes human decisions about anything but {positive reward for winning} and {negative reward for losing}, it has hardcoded reward knowledge.

(It’s plausible that less strict definitions are fairer, e.g. in this case the software agents are handicapped by not using intra-team communication, so reward shaping to simulate communication - e.g. lane assignment - could be seen as *fair* hardcoding.)

Domain-specific manual reward-feature selection: The game API reports 20,000 features. The handcrafted reward function includes only 28 (17 + 7 building healths + lanes). On top of the feature selection, the weights of each of these features are also handcrafted!

Take “reward shaping” to mean supplementing or replacing the natural endpoint rewards (team win and team loss) with domain-specific intermediate rewards selected by a human. OAI5’s reward is completely “designed by [OpenAI’s] local Dota [human] experts”, including selecting a tiny fraction of the most important features and setting the weights of the features, so it has domain-specific hardcoded knowledge.

The reward processing used is non-domain-specific, since it would apply to any mixed co-operative / competitive game.

That covers hardcoded knowledge in *the reward function*. Another vector for hardcoding is the inductive bias of the architecture used: we search a huge number of ANN structures to find a particular Dota-friendly one. I’m ambivalent about whether this counts as hardcoding, and ignore it in the following.

Another kind of hardcoding, but uselessly intractable would be manually tinkering with e.g. buggy activation functions, e.g. using model explanation to select individual nodes. It is vanishingly unlikely that OpenAI did this.

So my definition of hardcoding is “some degree of at least one of

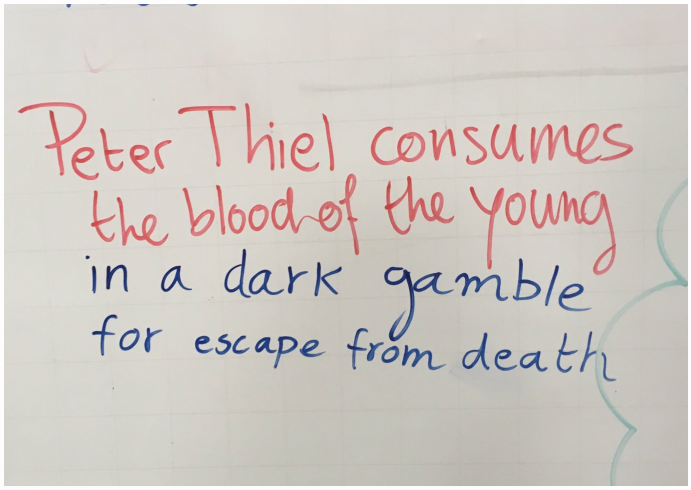
- a subset of features are selected by humans
- feature rewards are fixed by humans
- post-hoc manual edits are made to the network.”

Tags:

Effective Altruism Global: x: Oxford

21st November 2016

- *Assorted notes from my first meetup with the analytical do-gooders.*
- *Confidence*: 70%
- *Topic importance*: 8 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



I'm not a joiner. 1 But I have a lot of strange ideas, and a lot of odd energy, and a lot of unusual feelings, and these usually mislead people who go off on their own. So it's a stroke of incredible fortune that a movement of people with these things happens to arise - just as I graduate and try to become technical enough to understand what the best thing to do is.

I'm not sure I've ever experienced this level of background understanding, these tiny inferential distances, in a large group. Deep context - years of realisations - mutually taken for granted; and so shortcuts and quicksteps to the frontier of common knowledge. In none of these rooms was I remotely the smartest person. An incredible feeling: you want to start lifting much heavier things as soon as possible.

One liners:

> *Effective altruism is to the pursuit of the good as science is to the pursuit of the truth.*

(Toby Ord)

> *If the richest gave just the interest on their wealth for a year they could double the income of the poorest billion.*

(Will MacAskill)

> *If you use a computer the size of the sun to beat a human at chess, either you are confused about programming or chess.*

(Nate Soares)

> *Evolution optimised very, very hard for one goal - genetic fitness - and produced an AGI with a very different goal: roughly, fun.*

(Nate Soares)

> *The goodness of outcomes **cannot** depend on other possible outcomes. You're thinking of optimality.*

(Derek Parfit)

Soares, Ord, Krakovna, Shanahan, Hassabis, MacAulay.

Prospecting for Gold

Owen Cotton-Barratt formally restated *the* key EA idea: that importance has a highly heavy-tailed distribution. This is a generalisation from the GiveWell/OpenPhil research

programme, which dismisses (ahem, “fails to recommend”) almost everyone because a handful of organisations are thousands of times more efficient at harvesting importance (in the form of unmalarial children or untortured pigs or an unended world).

Then, Sandberg’s big talk on power laws generalised on Cotton-Barratt’s, by claiming to find the mechanism which generates *that* importance distribution (roughly: “many morally important things in the world, from disease to natural disasters to info breaches to democides all fall under a single power-law-outputting distribution”).

Cotton-Barratt *then* formalised the Impact-Tractability-Neglectedness model, as a piece of a full quantitative model of cause prioritisation.

$$
\begin{aligned}
C &= \text{a Cause} \\
U &= \text{total value realised by solving C} \\
W &= \text{total work on C} \\
S &= \text{extent to which C is already solved}
\end{aligned}
$$

$$\frac{dU}{dW} = \frac{dU}{\%dS} \times \frac{\%dS}{\%dW} \times \frac{\%dW}{dW}$$

$$\underset{\text{of working on C}}{\text{marginal value}} = \underset{\text{per unit solution}}{\text{added value}} \times \underset{\text{progress with work}}{\text{elasticity of}} \times \text{uncrowdedness}$$

$$(\text{your impact} = \underset{\text{distribution}}{\text{impact}} \times \underset{\text{to you}}{\text{tractability}} \times \text{uncrowdedness})$$

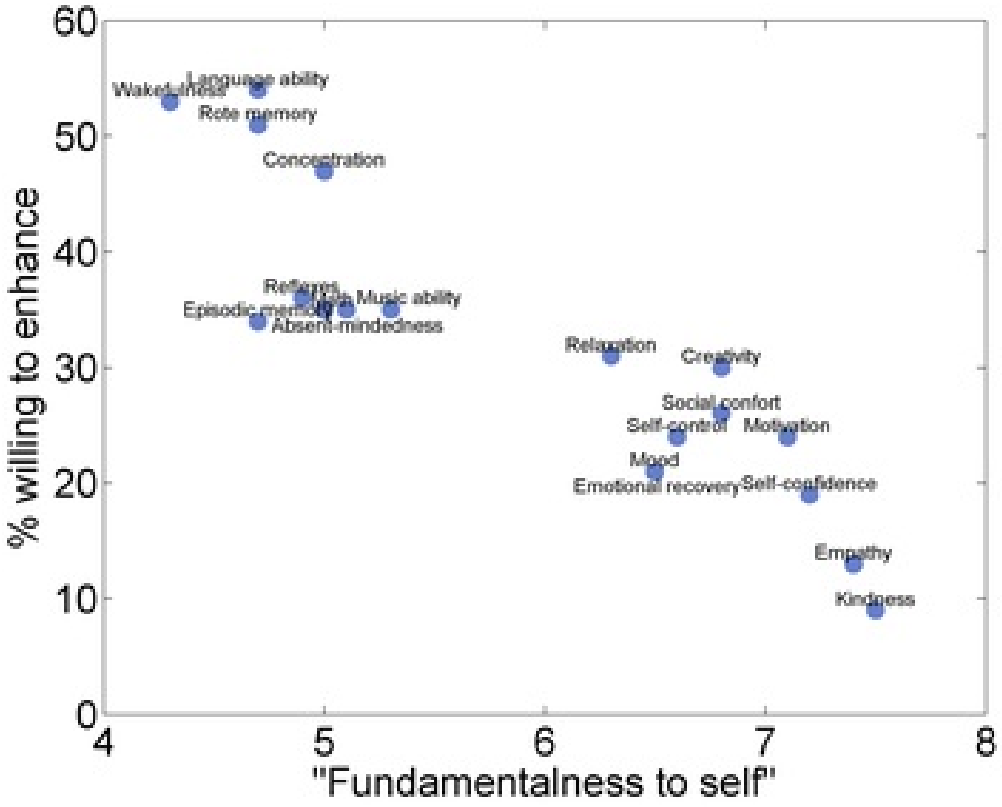
Then, Stefan Schubert’s talk on the younger-sibling fallacy attempted to extend said ITN model with a fourth key factor: awareness of likely herding behaviour and market distortions (or “diachronic reflexivity”).

There will come a time - probably now - when the ITN model will have to split in two: into one rigorous model with nonlinearities and market dynamism, and a heuristic version. (The latter won’t need to foreground dynamical concerns unless you are 1) incredibly influential or 2) incredibly influenceable in the same direction as everyone else. Contrarianism ftw.)

What is the comparative advantage of us 2016 people, relative to future do-gooders?

- Anything happening soon. (AI risk)
- Anything with a positive multiplier. (schistosomiasis, malaria, cause-building)
- Anything that is hurting now. (meat industry)

Sandberg: one-man conference



Anders Sandberg contributed to *six* events, sprinkling the whole thing with his hyper-literate, uncliched themes. People persisted in asking him things on the order of “whether GTA characters are morally relevant yet”. But even these he handled with rigorous levity.

My favourite was his take on the possible value space of later humans: “chimps like bananas and sex. Humans like bananas, and sex, *and* philosophy and competitive sport. There is a part of value space completely invisible to the chimp. So it is likely that there is this *other* thing, which is like *whoooaa* to the posthuman, but which we do not see the value in.”

- Books usually say that “modern aid” started in ‘49, when Truman announced a secular international development programme. Really liked Alena Stern’s rebuke to this, pointing out that the field didn’t even *try* to be scientific until the mid-90s, and did a correspondly low amount of good, health aside. It didn’t deserve the word, and mostly still doesn’t.
- Nate Soares is an excellent public communicator: he broadcasts seriousness without pretension, strong weird claims without arrogance. What a catch.
- Dinner with Wiblin. My partner noted that I looked flushed. I mean, I *was* eating jalfrezi.
- Catherine Rhodes’ biorisk talk made me update in the worst direction: I came away convinced that biorisk is both extremely neglected and extremely intractable to anyone outside the international bureaucracy / national security / life sciences clique. Also that “we have no surge capacity in healthcare. The NHS runs at 98% of max on an ordinary day.” This harsh blow was mollified a bit by news of Microsoft’s mosquito-hunting drones (for cheap and large-sample disease monitoring, not revenge).

Inequality vs impact

Most sessions I attended had someone asking the same desultory question: “how might

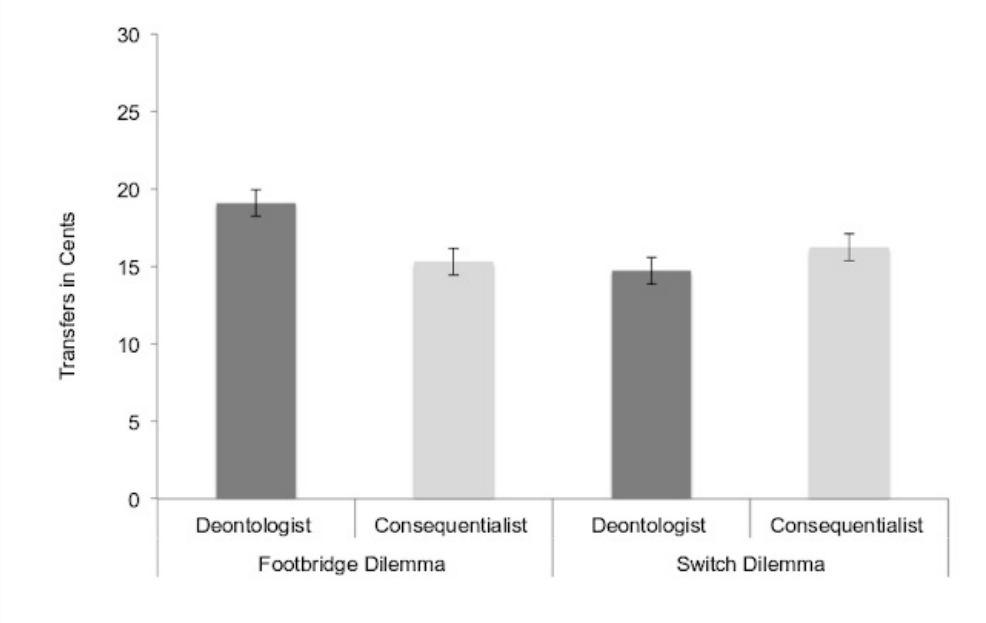
this affect inequality?" (AI, human augmentation, cause prioritisation as a priority.) The answer's always the same: if it can be automated and mass-produced with the usual industrial speed, it won't. If it can't, it will.

Actually it was good to ask (and ask, and ask) this for an ulterior reason:

Molly Crockett's research - how a majority of people 2 might relatively dislike utilitarians - was great and sad. Concrete proposals though: people distrust people who don't appear morally conflicted, who use physical harm for greater good, or more generally who use people as a means. So express confusion and regret, support autonomy whenever the harms aren't too massive to ignore, and put extra effort into maintaining relationships.

These are pretty superficial. Which is good news: we can still do the right thing (and profess the right thing), we just have to present it better.

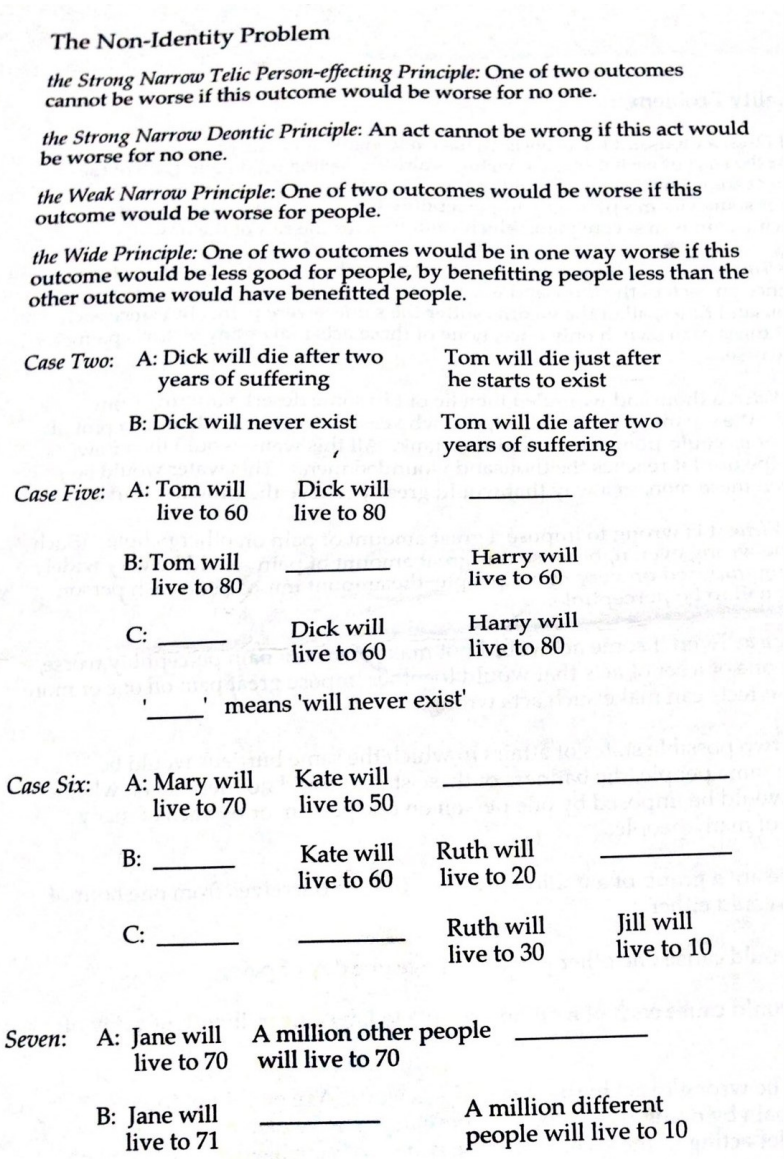
(That said, the observed effects on trust weren't that large: about 20%, stable across various measures of trust.)



The Last Dance of Derek Parfit

Very big difference in style and method between Parfit's talk and basically all the others. This led to a sadly fruitless Q&A, people talking past each other by bad choice of examples. Still riveting: emphatic and authoritative though hunched over with age. Big gash on his face from a fall. A wonderful performance. Last of His Kind.

Parfit handled 'the nonidentity problem' (how can we explain the wrongness of situations involving merely potential people? Why is it bad for a species to cease procreating?) and 'the triviality problem' (how exactly do tiny harms committed by a huge aggregate of people combine to form wrongness? Why is it wrong to discount one's own carbon emissions when considering the misery of future lives?).



The Non-Identity Problem

the Strong Narrow Telic Person-effecting Principle: One of two outcomes cannot be worse if this outcome would be worse for no one.

the Strong Narrow Deontic Principle: An act cannot be wrong if this act would be worse for no one.

the Weak Narrow Principle: One of two outcomes would be worse if this outcome would be worse for people.

the Wide Principle: One of two outcomes would be in one way worse if this outcome would be less good for people, by benefitting people less than the other outcome would have benefitted people.

Case Two: A: Dick will die after two years of suffering — Tom will die just after he starts to exist

B: Dick will never exist — Tom will die after two years of suffering

Case Five: A: Tom will live to 60 — Dick will live to 80 — _____

B: Tom will live to 80 — _____ — Harry will live to 60

C: _____ — Dick will live to 60 — Harry will live to 80

'_____' means 'will never exist'

Case Six: A: Mary will live to 70 — Kate will live to 50 — _____ — _____

B: _____ — Kate will live to 60 — Ruth will live to 20 — _____

C: _____ — _____ — Ruth will live to 30 — Jill will live to 10

Seven: A: Jane will live to 70 — A million other people will live to 70 — _____

B: Jane will live to 71 — _____ — A million different people will live to 10

He proceeded in the (lC20th) classic mode: state clean principles that summarise an opposing view, and then find devastating counterexamples to them. All well and good as far as it goes. But the new principles he sets upon the rubble - unpublished so far - are sure to have their own counterexamples in production by the grad mill.

The audience struggled through the fairly short deductive chains, possibly just out of unfamiliarity with philosophy's unlikely apodicticity. They couldn't parse it fast enough to answer a yes/no poll at the end. ("*Are you convinced of the non-difference view?*")

The Q&A questions all had a good core, but none hit home for various reasons:

> *Does your theory imply that it is acceptable to torture one person to prevent a billion people getting a speck in their eye?*

Parfit didn't bite, simply noting, correctly, that 1) Dostoevsky said this in a more manipulative way, and 2) it is irrelevant to the Triviality Problem as he stated it. (This rebuffing did not appear to be a clever PR decision - though it was, since he is indeed a totalarian.)</li>

> *Sandberg: What implications does this have for software design?*

Initial response was just a frowning stare. (Sandberg meant: lost time is clearly a harm; thus the designers of mass-market products are responsible for thousands of years of life when they fail to optimise away even 1 second delays.)

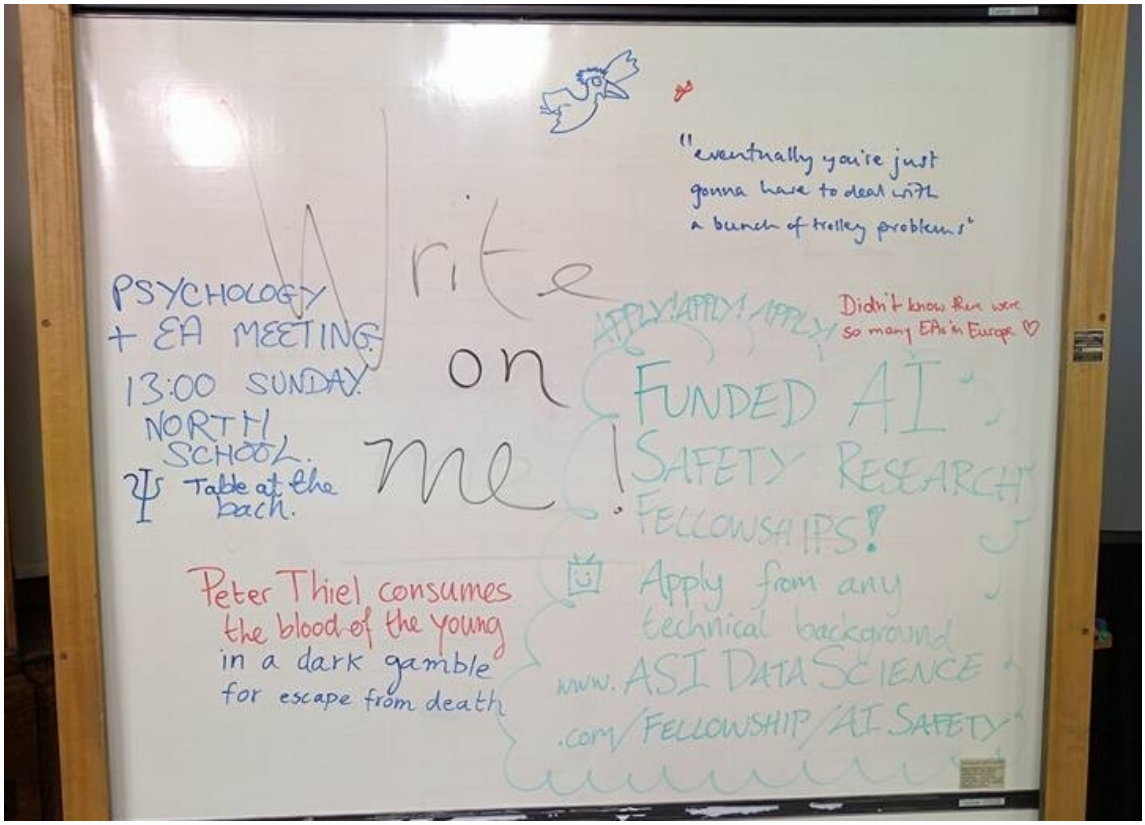
> *I'd rather give one person a year of life than a million people one second. Isn't continuity important in experiencing value?*

This person's point was that Parfit was assuming the linearity of marginal life without justification, but this good point got lost in the forum. Parfit replied simply - as if the questioner was making a simple mistake: "These things add up". I disagree with the questioner about any such extreme nonlinearity - they may be allowing the narrative salience of a single life to distract them from the sheer scale of the number of recipients in the other case - but it's certainly worth asking.

We owe Parfit a lot. His emphasis on total impartiality, the counterintuitive additivity of the good, and most of all his attempted cleaving of old, fossilised disagreements to get to the co-operative core of diverse viewpoints: all of these shine throughout EA. I don't know if that's coincidental rather than formative debt.

(Other bits are not core to EA but are still indispensable for anyone trying to be a consistent, non-repugnant consequentialist: e.g. thinking in terms of degrees of personhood, and what he calls "lexical superiority" for some reason (it is two-level consequentialism).)

The discourse has diverged from non-probabilistic apriorism, also known as philosophy, the Great Conversation. Sandberg is the new kind of philosopher: a scientific mind, procuring probabilities, but also unable to restrain creativity/speculation because of the heavy, heavy tails here and just around the corner.



Incredibly beautiful setting (Exam School). Incredibly professionally organised by undergraduates, chiefly Oliver Habryka and Ben Pace.

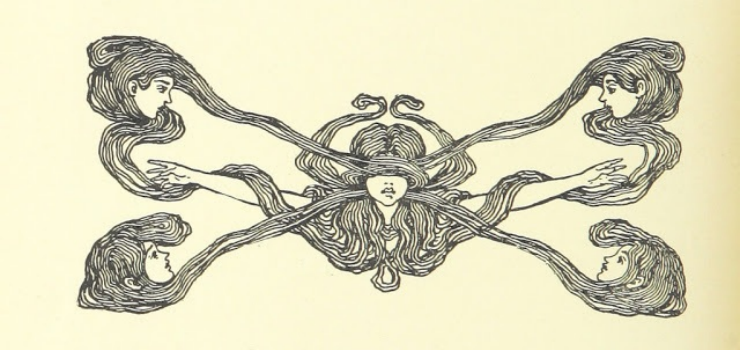
1. Terrible at plumbing too.
2. She calls them deontologists, but that's a slander on Kantians: really, most people are just sentimentalists, in the popular and the technical sense.

Tags: effective-altruism, philosophy

Economics as philosophy of life

23rd October 2011

- *Trying to take maxims and wisdom from the dismal science.*
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10



> *...nobody can be a great economist who is only an economist – and I am even tempted to add that the economist who is only an economist is likely to become a nuisance if not a positive danger.*

– FA Hayek

> *The first question... is this question of how far life is rational, how far its problems reduce to the form of using given means to achieve given ends. Now this... is not very far; the scientific view of life is a limited and partial view; life is at bottom an exploration in the field of values, an attempt to discover values, rather than on the basis of knowledge of them to produce and enjoy them to the greatest possible extent. We strive to "know ourselves," to find out our real wants, more than to get what we want. This fact sets a first and most sweeping limitation to the conception of economics as a science.*

– Frank Knight

Despite appearances, there is humanity in economics. Here I try to take maxims from theorems and wisdom from narrowness: together they make for a broad, honest, and inspiring worldview, nowhere near as sterile as what the field is thought to instil (as sterile as what it instils in the average student).

It's *not* that economics constitutes a complete worldview. But the sterility and absurdity we see in it is the result of overreach and parochialism in a few proponents, and not anything about the subject matter or even the method.

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1. It is hard to change people.

People change all the time, but trying to direct that change is notoriously technical and intensive work. This is why some people say, mistakenly, that incentives are the core of economics: they're just the easiest way to get folk to shift. (As always, McCloskey gives a poetic rereading of an apparently boring thing: "*All that moves us without violence, then, is persuasion, the realm of rhetoric*.")

Take the environmental policy brouhaha - even when reasonable doubt is ruled out, when the hypothesis has attained consensus in the educated world - we keep dumping. Appeals

to reason have convinced very few of us to make significant changes. Hence, most of the large structural proposals involve increasing emission costs one way or other, and then letting people reallocate around that. Whether this is because we're hardwired for myopic behaviour by biology or psychology or culture is besides the point.

Note that this maxim does not preclude the attempt to engineer society (i.e. progressive politics). But along with #2, 3 & 7, it reminds us of the trial and error it takes.

Giant thesis: Non-political factors are more powerful than political factors in the determination of the state of the world. (But economics is only one of the non-political factors.)

Many economists give in to "It is hard to change people". The remainder of us risk making what Adrian Leftwich calls the "technicist fallacy": the dubious assumption that all governance problems have a policy solution.

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2. It always depends.

Economies are 'complex' in a hard sense: economic analysis takes place under gross uncertainty and necessarily limited experimentation. So unconditional answers are dishonest; it always depends. (This is not a weakness: Physical law also depends.)

Now, the third thing you learn in basic economics is the phrase *In ceteris paribus*, the assumption that only what you're looking at varies, or matters – i.e. "it doesn't depend!". But that means they *admit* there's a problem: it's at least explicit ignoring.

We rarely have enough scepticism. And economics is among the more sceptical disciplines: sceptical about social reality, cheap talk, professed preferences, about actual adherence to ideologies when they cost us things. Outward scepticism, anyway: as usual it's not evenly applied - you're much more likely to see radical scepticism about moral or collective action than scepticism about market allocations or the policy relevance of basic linear models.

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3. Things fall apart; sometimes they fall into place.

The ghost of Kant gums up arguments on political economy: many of us have the vague intuition that the amoral intentions of markets trump any accidental good that comes of them. You hear things like "capitalists don't care about social outcomes – all social outcomes determined by capitalists will be to *their* advantage". Well, yes, if they're doing their job and are lucky, it will. Less unreasonable is whether it is *only* to *their* advantage. This mindset holds exploitation to be any case in which people are used as a means.

(Stronger definition: "the act of using labour without offering adequate compensation". Broader definition: "any relationship of unequal benefit".)

Under these definitions, every employer is an exploiter, since they wouldn't employ you if they couldn't milk more value out.

> *The only thing worse than being exploited by capitalism is not being exploited by capitalism.*
>
> – Joan Robinson

But this can't be inherently or even generally wrong: there *can be* capability and existential relief in job creation, regardless of what the employer intended. Sure, let us refuse to use people - except that my participation in this economy and that history made that move for me. My conception of what is moral has to be larger (sadly aposteriori as well as tritely virtuous).

Consider this (if it makes you angry then the ghost of Kant is in you): "the dastardly and amoral oil cartel OPEC have done more to slow global warming than all activist efforts combined." (The argument is that by distorting the oil price upwards for forty years, they made people economise, and so incentivised the development of cleaner energy. Shoddy discussion here.) *Entirely accidentally* - a thing fallen in place.

(2+3). Protection is sometimes unsafe.

The unpredictability of large-scale human affairs and the occasional emergence of order without giving orders mean even left-wing economists have to worry about our policies. Moral judgments tend to be one-step:

- "People are poor? Oh. Give em money."
- "People pollute? Oh. Make em stop."
- "Landlords charge too much? Make em stop."

But the world is anything but one-step! The analysis of behaviour in terms of incentives - for all that it often justifies self-congratulatory cynicism - is at least capable of looking ahead, a little way beyond the first domino. Actually moral action demands it.

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4. People aren't stupid

By this I mean the *assumption of economic rationality*. This "rationality" is quite different from the real thing, note - it corresponds to the *will to more stuff* and the rarer, derived *will to efficiency*. The assumption is a ridiculous caricature of human inner life. There's two ways for theory to succeed: either it's true, or it'd be good if it was. Since rational choice is neither, it is rejected and despised.

The kicker comes when we consider the alternative assumption: that "people are often irrational". How do we shape policy around this? What kind of road do we build? How do we design insurance schemes or benefits? It turns out that it is punishingly hard to do without: #4 is the behavioural principle of charity. Rational choice "theory", reconstructed this way, is not a substantive theory at all, but a dummy *methodological principle*.

Now, the behavioural economists will inherit the earth soon. But policy prescription won't easily follow from their discoveries regarding our many perversities - because while there's ~only one way to be economically rational, there are uncountable ways to be irrational.

How can rational choice accommodate macro events like the 2008 financial disaster? Surely that really was the lord of the flies set loose in stock exchanges? In part, yes. But the good choicist's answer is to *decouple rationality from efficiency*; it is in the deluded conflation of the two that the malfeasance lies. If there is no necessary link between the two, crises can be explained in terms of *rational but revoltingly inefficient* collective action problems, rather than by positing mass hysteria or stupidity and so getting sad.

> *Never ascribe to malice that which can be explained by stupidity. Never ascribe to stupidity that which can be explained by laziness. Never ascribe to laziness that which can be explained by people knowing their own lives better than you do.*
>
> — Robert Heinlein & Buck Shlegeris

The egalitarian conservatism that can be read into “People aren’t stupid” also explains why few economists take false consciousness seriously. The processes that generate our “metapreferences”, like social conditioning, are ignored. The upside of this is that economists are able to respect people’s choices in a flawed world. This is a kind of courtesy: “You’re prudent until proven otherwise”. Unlike Marxism and the new economics of happiness, even the nastiest neoclassical theory does not presume that it knows better than you what is good for you.

Ideology is too powerful and illiberal to ignore; sometimes people really are in the grip of terrible ideas / norms. You just have to recognise that there’s a cost (and a large epistemic risk) involved in calling people, or stupid people, or most people brainwashed.

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5. You are the system.

> *Economists are often accused of believing that everything – health, happiness, life itself – can be measured in money. What we actually believe is even odder. We believe that everything can be measured in anything.*

– David Friedman

The commodity view of existence is disturbing. Economists have viewed healthy life as a stock of capital to offer for sale (aka “labour”); babies as the investment capital of the poor; immigrants as human pollution; and any outcome below the utter numerical maximum that you squeeze out as a *loss* (“opportunity cost”).

There’s obvious reason to think that this framework does harm when it becomes commonsensical. But provided it’s kept contained as *one* perspective among many, the commodity perspective has some important moral and policy implications:

Every pound you spend is a vote for whatever you’re buying. Every seven pounds you spend is another hour of your life sold.

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6. Efficiency is humane.

Somewhere along the way in rejecting Victorian bullshit, an idea arose that being efficient is inimical to humanity. (The human *will to piss about*, perhaps.) This is agreeably romantic. But, in losing its social prominence, efficiency lost its moral connotation as well. (The word “economy” originally meant good household management, “thrift” comes from the same root as “thrive”.)

This loss of moral charge is a mistake: the economical is ecological! Simple waste and planned obsolescence account for huge amounts of the pollution and price hikes in the world. If you ain’t using it, someone will; if you don’t need it or particularly want it, don’t use it. And more: in high-powered contexts, efficiency saves lives, and the rejection of efficiency in the name of sweet warm human imperfection is, here, inhumane.

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7. Sometimes there is no right answer.

> *The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design.*
>
> – Hayek

A common idea: “capitalism sucks but it probably sucks less than the other current options”.

Since we are talking about the replacement of capitalism on capitalist keyboards paid for with capitalist pounds: capitalism obviously doesn’t *totally* stifle future systems.

And remember #3: it *accidentally* clothes and feeds us, it accidentally enables state spending on education and health and law. It was forced to grant us surplus time in which to think, sometimes in which to think about alternatives. For all else that it callously does, do not deny this.

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8. Most things fail.

Even before we consider De Beauvoir’s more fatal sense: things don’t work. Worse, most fail silently, creating a false sense of security. Watch its space.

> *Did you ever think that making a speech on economics is a lot like pissin' down your leg? It seems hot to you, but it never does to anyone else.*
>
> – Lyndon B Johnson, supposedly

Tags: economics, philosophy

'Why study economics?'

11th February 2011

- *The human urgency of the seemingly inhuman subject.*
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Content notes*: Written for a competition, "Why study economics at university?" Pretty pompous but hey I won £50.

> *Yet good, or even competent, economists are the rarest of birds. An easy subject, at which very few excel! The paradox finds its explanation, perhaps, in that the master-economist must possess a rare combination of gifts. He must reach a high standard in several different directions and must combine talents not often found together. He must be mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher — in some degree. He must understand symbols and speak in words...*

– Keynes, eulogizing Alfred Marshall (and himself)

The question is two questions with a covert moral element: “why economics?”, “why university economics?”, and “why *should* one..?” abbreviated away.

I – Why economics?

I study economics because

- I am angry, and I am no longer young enough to be angry without it. Part of my petulance comes from the fact that the world is not as good as it could be; the rest from there being no easy answers to the first fact. I want neither the self-exalting cynicism of conservatives nor the vague rage of anti-globalizers. Good economics is about challenging bad solutions from whoever pushes them.
- What rhetoric was to the Romans, economics is for us: that is, the favourite lever of the politician. Right or wrong, the economic mindset rules the world. Thou shalt incur cost only for benefit; thou shalt understand preferences as rational and transitive and existence as a function. “Policy” – which is always economic, if only because it has a budget – is where many of the largest things are done. And large things need doing.
- An illiterate society cannot really be democratic, and because what it means to be “literate” shifts, and should shift beyond just “recognising written words” to include something like “grasping the determining forces of the world, what we’re up to”. A great part of that would be economic literacy. Our intuitions regarding much of the causal history of macroeconomics are flatly wrong; so, even given neoclassical theory’s raft of assumptions, the framework at least generates educated guesses.
- As Keynes points out, the field is a chimera - bit of this, bit of maths, bit of overlooked politics. Life is a cross-breed too.

II – Why at university?

Because thought happens inside this professional structure now, in professional notation, with a professional bearing. If I wish to think for a living, I have to do it to measure. At least university curricula are vetted and compressed: unlike some other fields, academic economists are quite often practitioners, and thus have a chance to know which techniques are actually used and what is frill. Then there’s the culture of the profession, which is hard

to get from outside.

As well as studying economies and people's economic behaviour, I want to study economics. A lazy accusation is that the field is obsessed with egoism, with rationalizing all behaviour as personal utility-maximisation. (This is lazy because it confuses one elementary model, the neoclassical consumer, with the received view of the field.) Actually, in practice it treats everyone as essentially unprincipled, which is not the same as egoistic. People aren't stupid, unless you count greed (maximising externalized preference) and laziness (hyperbolic time-discounting, the lack of optimisation) as stupidity.

I haven't heard the word "capitalism" in perhaps two hundred hours of lectures. But I don't imagine that physicists spend much time talking about inductive reasoning, nor theologians much on how they have to prove there's this 'God' figure; the market is integral to the particular theories we have built, and incentive analysis works for any system whatsoever. But a good capitalism needs humanistic economics.

Many economic studies are outright rude (e.g. revealed preferences regarding self-obsession, prostitution, cheating), and wound society's unearned sense of dignity. Academic status is a good mask to wear when uncovering these!

Shoulds

Returning to the hidden 'should' in the question: the unwitting omission of the moral element is symbolic. Economics proceeds on the basis that its status as a science disentangles it from moral concerns. (Economics was once '*Political Economy*'. What we know as "incentives" were once "temptations".)

We look at the intersection of desire and environment. Both of these things are vast and vastly unstable, so it's only to be expected that the joint distribution of the two is even worse. Economics predicts - on average rightly - that the question people ask is: "What's in it for me?" The good economist replies, "A better world."

Tags: cause-prioritisation

Is education worth it for society?

2nd July 2017

- *Comparing state education to other public goods.*
- *Confidence*: 60%. Highly incomplete argument for the most radical idea I'm still open to.
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Content notes*: UK numbers.
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.
- Argument

I got a lot of fully-subsidised education: more than 20 years' worth. In educated circles this is seen as an unalloyed good; I am thought to have benefited both myself and society 4. But I find myself seriously concerned that I actually wronged people with the latter 10. Say there are four kinds of benefits from education.

	Economic	**Non-economic**
Private	Skill, income	Freedom, understanding, status, network
Social	Productivity	Virtue, critical thought

Wonderful things! But if the social ones aren't larger than the social cost, then state education will tend to be taking from society and giving to those who happen to be above-average in nerdiness. 2

Is education a good deal overall, *including for people who don't get it*? I can't actually resolve this question in less than a book. The algorithm is

1. enumerate the (confusing, mixed, methodologically flawed evidence for) benefits and costs
2. put them on a common scale
3. take the ratio

The following is just part of step 1.

How to think about education's social benefits

We should distinguish private returns (pay, increased confidence, increased knowledge, increased social capital for you) from social returns (productivity, political contributions, cultural reproduction if you like). The former are good, incredibly good, but not a matter for government policy insofar as they include zero-sum benefits, and if there are better ways to spend public funds.

Productivity

Are educated people more productive? Yes. But did their education cause this? To some extent maybe!

The reason to pay particular attention to the economic side of the social return is not that money is the most important thing, but because anything that doesn't give net economic

returns can't be kept up without trading off against something else, like infrastructure, or social care, or life-giving research, or (let me dream) the fate of the world.

R&D

You might note that academics produce a large proportion of all inventions and new ideas. This too is confounded: science was *more* productive when university intakes were 1% of current levels. And the relationship between basic science and technology is less straightforward than it seems.

Intelligence

Two of the most careful psychologists I know came out with an astonishing result: that education actually improves cognitive abilities, perhaps 3 points per marginal year. (Clearly this wouldn't scale indefinitely, but even at normal 10 year levels it's a remarkable effect.) And it was a n=600,000 meta-analysis of 142 analyses.

If this doesn't astonish you, then you haven't being paying attention to just how hard it is to raise intelligence (except by correcting malnutrition or severe pollution).

If this estimate is on the correct order of magnitude, then while there are massive private benefits to this effect, the social gains from more capable citizens will be huge.

Noneconomic gains

The humanist response is that educating your citizens produces huge noneconomic public goods, like critical thought or voluntarism or political purpose or empathy or taste or cultural continuity ("pass it on!").

The private noneconomic return is enormous, larger than the huge private economic return, for some people. e.g. 4 years of relative freedom, away from home, surrounded by bright horny people can be very good for your later worldview, life goals, and mental health. You get space to build yourself new. Or if not build, then to locate yourself in culture, philosophy, and personality space.

More grandly, you can see education as a compiler: you take a young person and a curriculum, and you output a young person with a better model of the world.

PG:

> *Reading and experience train your model of the world. And even if you forget the experience or what you read, its effect on your model of the world persists. Your mind is like a compiled program you've lost the source of. It works, but you don't know why.*

This totally answers the correct charge that people forget almost everything about high school and their degrees unless constantly using that knowledge.

Or:

> *it's important to make kids learn specific facts, but not so important that they remember them; teaching someone (eg) Civil War history is "training" a "predictive model" of the Civil War, war in general, and history in general which will survive and remain useful even after the specific facts and battles are long forgotten. I think this is the strongest defense of modern education, given that we do spend lots of time teaching kids things they will definitely forget. But how would you test it?*

- Escape from abusive home / a single ideology
- Makes you savvy, imparts a specific set of cultural skills, such that you can get hired and mingle well in the productive sectors. I don't know whether to call these skills productive themselves.

But again, what matters in policy terms is the relative size of social gain and social cost.

Knowledge

this section is incomplete

This is quite easy to check: how much do people remember from uni, for how much of their lives?

- Doctors have forgotten all of their basic science training 5 years out

(I remember being scandalised by some of my peers selling all their textbooks *as soon as* they graduated. But clearly they knew more about social reality than me.)

Cultural continuity - preserving the knowledge and ideas of past generations - depends on a mixture of education and autodidacts. I don't know what the value of preserving a tradition of Hegelianism or Canadian Irish studies is.

But people know this isn't the real reason for education, because they instead emphasise metacognition, "learning how to think":

Critical thinking

There's a small, diminishing, and temporary effect on critical thinking. (Humanities degrees do not stand out, incidentally.)

Virtue

this section is incomplete

This is in the same vein as the old "reading novels makes you empathetic" research programme.

I have no idea if this is generally true - I was a critical voluntarist before university, the most empathetic people I know did not go to university, and most of my Arts peers emerged with none of these things - but I can tell you I had a very good time. And this, the self-justifying private fulfilment, gives me reason to worry about society's end of the bargain. It'd be very convenient if what (bookish and middle-class) people found most personally fulfilling was also the best thing for all.

Politics

this section is incomplete

Does it make people engage more with actual politics? (Not just social media talk: volunteering, running.)

Does it make people more tolerant and cosmopolitan?

Friends

Plausible that the shared adversity forges peer groups into something that can last a lifetime. But where's the evidence? Do the homeschooled have fewer or less intense?

What's the social cost?

Money

Calculation (UK)

What's the spend per person?

Going off millennials: About £4k per primary education year per child (£28k), in the 1990s budget. About £6k per secondary education year (£36k). In England, the uni participation

rate for 17-30s is now 50%. So scale the £45k cost of a 3-year degree by half to get an expected spend. So it's an average of £87,000 per recent person 3.

Plus the opportunity cost of 5 years of work, £50k-100k productivity. Nor does it count whatever the opportunity cost is of 20,000 hours of your youth, legally confiscated from you.

However, I think my education cost others about £150,000 67. Or, £4.7bn a year for the policy (40% over the present budget), if every child in Scotland was as nerdy and shameless as me. (Big if.)

There is something beautiful about how hard I had to work to find out this number: in Scotland, the system "worked", in the sense of insulating poor me from all prudential considerations.

I told a coworker this figure and, as a good fiscal dove, he was horrified - until he recalled that "at least you were working for most of that". True: even with state largesse, I still worked about 11 years out of these 21. I doubt my paper round or my waitering or even my database administration offset the social cost, and I doubt he thought it did. What really worried him was the menacing *eternal student*, who never gets over himself, never stops fearing the long dull throb of work, and who continues to take from others indefinitely.

I found this narrow at the time, but now I take it quite seriously.

Are there better ways to spend £90k per person? (Yes: but let's limit it to UK recipients.)

- personal tutor at PhD level, 3 hours a day for three years.
- infrastructure
- poverty alleviation

Then there is the great radical alternative: giving everyone an independent income.

Time

Primary and secondary education takes at least 15,000 hours of the most curious and vital years *of everyone alive* 5. Billions of hours of fruitless boredom. Literacy and numeracy are probably worth this on their own, so factor out primary school, for only 6000 hours of confiscated life.

Then there's uni, in two tranches: people who hate it, and people who drop out.

In the US, 45% of the 20 million annual enrolments do not finish. A lot of this is due to ability deficit (measured by remedial class enrollment), besides the obvious financial reasons. Because of the sheepskin effect - part of a degree is not worth much to the job market - and the low social return on completed education, this means billions of dollars, and millions of years of life wasted. Not to mention the unnecessary stress and humiliation of pushing people into it.

Suffering

You probably know someone who was traumatised by their school years. Even if only 5% of pupils suffer this much, it throws a huge shadow over the social benefit. But even boredom, or unfreedom, or being forced to associate with cruel people count. (One suggestive result: closing schools for coronavirus was correlated with a 20% drop in teen anxiety rate.)

People who suffer from uni are rarer, but I've met a few. They are totally ignored in the discourse, in favour of the Ennobling Creation of Citizens or 4 Year Crazy Party memes. (Again, millions of people drop out and may be left worse off than before.)

Credential inflation as perverse redistribution

this section is incomplete

Using school as the main signal of employability is terrible for the many people who cannot handle bureaucracy, being told what to do, pointless makework, or authority. Autodidacts are amazing but rare and rarely respected as much as they should be.

Caplan's contention is that the wage premium of degree-holders mostly comes at the expense of non-degree-holders.

(Other costs: student debt distress, bondage.)

What's the alternative?

1. Wealth for all

The most dramatic counterfactual: the government just giving you the money they would have spent on you, after 20 years of investment returns:

> *what if the government had taken this figure and invested it in the stock market at the moment of your birth? Today when you graduate college, they remove it from the stock market, put it in a low-risk bond, put a certain percent of the interest from that bond into keeping up with inflation, and hand you the rest each year as a basic income guarantee. How much would you have?*
>
> *$15,000 a year, adjusted for interest. We can add the $5,800 basic income guarantee we could already afford onto that for about $20,000 a year, for everyone. Black, white, man, woman, employed, unemployed, abled, disabled, rich, poor. Welcome to the real world, it's dangerous to go alone, take this. What, you thought we were going to throw you out to sink or swim in a world where if you die you die in real life? Come on, we're not that cruel. So when we ask whether your education is worth it, we have to compare what you got – an education that puts you one grade level above the uneducated and which has informed 3.3% of you who Euclid is – to what you could have gotten. 20,000 hours of your youth to play, study, learn to play the violin, whatever. And $20,000 a year, sweat-free.*

2. Grad tax

The above could be taken as an argument for fees: "the individual plausibly benefits more than society, so let them cough up a bit". But substantial fees are pretty much a shitshow, certainly in the high-interest, inexorable, cartelized form that exist England and America, where the prices are uniform and useless. But (if we cannot tear down this credentialist bullshit, as below) then certainly a graduate tax is fully justified.

3. Regulating credential pollution

Rather, we should replace the hegemony of higher education - make it so that young people don't need a degree to get decent jobs, or in fact most jobs (besides doctor and pilot and so on).

In extremis, we could make education a protected category in job interviews. We would rely on actual portfolios, entry tests, and work trials (which are open to all and actually measure the relevant quantities) instead of pompous paper. (Aptitude tests are illegal in some American industries, so you'd have to reverse that first.) This would be a more powerful intervention against inequality than free fees, because it would catch the many smart people who do not fit the conformist, examination form of 'training'.

It might take something as radical as this to stop students defecting against each other and continuing the ruinous cycle. (Besides making education level a discriminatory question, a full basic income would work, too.)

The problem with equalising the status of graduates and nongraduates is that higher education is fêted by absolutely bloody everyone: parents, governments, giant corporations, reptilian economists, frothing radicals, whether anarchists, neoliberals, or Juche cadres. (Everyone except a minority of libertarians.) The uniqueness of its cross-cultural appeal means that it is presently the only way that young people can possibly get 4 years of relative freedom to locate themselves, and to do so surrounded by people from all around the world, and to do so in an atmosphere which rewards many kinds of deviance.

You could maybe do this by funding (voluntary) international service; basically giving working-class kids some gap years, too. The cult of travel is nearly as powerful as the cult of school, after all.

Higher Ponzi

Above I argue that academia might be supporting the lucky at the expense of the unlucky. I don't touch the great internal pathologies of academia, the bureaucracy (with maybe 70% of researchers' time spent on non-research stuff), or the exploitation of the junior to support the senior.

Expanding the student intake causes credential inflation, which feeds back to expand the next student intake, but it also expands the number of academic jobs, which props up the PhD / adjunct grinder.

Jock the radical

My great-grandfather, Jock Middleton, left behind an amazing library. He was a farmer and a Left Book Club member, so it includes hefty stuff like Marx and Kropotkin, and froth like Bertrand Russell's late social works. (The best book of all in it is Richard Crossman's incredible anthology of early deconversions from Stalinism.)

My granda (who ended up farming the same land) used to grouse about this, 70 years later: he complained that Jock bought books instead of buying him shoes. He never read any of them, just stuck them in the attic for a lifetime, for me to eventually find.

What I'd do differently

I go months at a time without thinking about my past. Not because my past's fucked up or anything; just because the present and the far, far future crowd it out. I'm pretty happy with this arrangement.

Recently, though, I've realised some easy things I could have done to be a better writer / scholar / researcher as of 2017. (They are hardly tragedies though, just inefficiencies.)

1. Physics

Picking courses as a 17 year old in a country without tuition fees, I latched on to the most obvious sources of meaning: philosophy, music, literature. But I could have gotten into physics or stats or computer science if I'd applied (I did get in for biology). And these would serve my present purposes much more, because I'm aiming at truth, and these latter are our greatest machineries of truth.

I don't regret my MA. (Though I probably would if I were English.) Formal philosophical study - that is, seeing what knots and messes the greatest minds in history have tied themselves into, working off no data - has probably saved me from some errors people make when they slip into metaphysics unawares.

And it has probably made me less overconfident that the world can be solved by pure, solitary thought. ("*The penalty for not doing philosophy is giving bad philosophical arguments a free pass*.") And I have a thick layer of protective scepticism about macroeconomics.

But I would have read philosophy and poetry *anyway* - I have a great appetite for them, and had it before I got institutional grounding - and so would have gotten much of the inoculation against bad philosophy and the realisation of the relative shallowness of great artists even had I done something harder.

As it is, I've been scrabbling to piece together an education in scientific modelling ever since graduating, and it has taken *ages* on my own, and I am quite sure that I did this backwards. (Needless to say, the average 2010 economics curriculum was not scientific enough to count.)

But ooh. "Inoculation against bad philosophy and bad economics": is this is the most positive case I can make for my classes? Yes but never mind classes: the greater part of the value came from having 4 years to straighten out my head, and a hundred wonderful people from over the world to collide with, brighter than anyone I'd known before. But again, I'd probably have found them as a physics boy; it was a small university, and my nature is not so malleable.

The distinctive value of an arts degree - that it draws creative misfitting people, that it's low-intensity enough for you to have many projects and loves without constant stress, that it permanently demystifies the baroque, ridiculous world of high culture - are wonderful, but I think I'd rather know how the world works, on balance.

2. Code everything

After my arts degree I switched into software development, a viscerally satisfying career to me. Not just talk, not just interpretation: but fucking *building things*.

But as well as a fun career, code is an incredible way of expressing thought. You get an oracle, the compiler, tell you if it could possibly be true.

Coding is a novel way of thinking in general. Yes, it is like maths - but testable, causal, interactive.

A programming language is "how you tell a computer what to do". But before that it's a way to express ideas and get push back from a rational oracle. (It's not reality that's pushing back, of course. You don't know if they're true, but you know if they are clear, if they could even possibly be true, if you are not completely fooling yourself.)

Consider the Bible, or Karl Marx's work, or Sigmund Freud's work. These are rammed full of invalid and unsound ideas - but they are beautiful, unified, and powerful, so they proved persuasive to billions of people. Human language offers no easy test of consistency, no way of really precisely connecting idea to idea. We have had only hard, piecemeal, irreplicable interpretation.

To see what's added by code, here's a thought experiment: Imagine the economic value of a line-by-line description, in English, of the Linux kernel. It would be nothing compared to the billions of dollars of value the kernel has created or saved.

The computability of source code is a side effect of its clarity. Code is testable thought.
</i>
I'm converting my maths notes into Python as a matter of urgency, because standard

Mathscript is not good. I don't know why this took 2 years to occur to me; clearly the claws of the arts run deep.

This macroeconomics course, in Python and Julia, has crystallised a host of things I only mechanically learned before.

In philosophy, it would have let me get into the thriving and objectively progressive research programmes: philosophy of information, logics, cellular automata, and so on. Here are two great examples of coded philosophy, as proof of concept.

3. Blogs.

I have learned more about economics from reading Quiggin, Krugman, Harford, Hanson, Caplan, Friedman Jr, and Smith than I did in two full years' worth of lectures at Aberdeen. Which is strange, because most of them are academics. But, because their readers are from broad backgrounds, the writing is vastly superior to that of papers: clearer, briefer, and more easily evaluated for both rigour and well-foundedness. In 2010 the econ 'sphere wasn't as highly developed as it is now, but was still good enough.
In stats, Andrew Gelman, Uri Simonsohn, and Cosma Shalizi's blogs have taught me what's wrong with science and how to fix it, which I didn't get a jot of in classes.
(Philosophy and maths benefit less from this, because their usual texts are more digestible and more ineliminably systematic, respectively.)
This step wouldn't have improved my grades much, because of teaching-to-the-test.* But it would give me what universities are supposed to give: firm grounding in expert knowledge about things which matter, and the ability to apply it appropriately.1

4. Focus

Over the past 4 years, out of uni, I've read an average 102 books a year. They have been about everything; it has been wonderful. A four-year cruise for about £300.

But I am persuaded that this isn't how you contribute to human knowledge. The absurdities of siloed scholarship - economists and anthropologists and sociologists and psychologists and all talking about the same thing, but wholly ignorant of each others' insights - are large, and can't be fixed except by people who own several hats. But everything else is done by specialists, because the coalfaces of knowledge are very far from common sense, in several different directions, and anyone who tries to reach several of them is likely to end up near where they started.

One of my resolutions this year is to read fewer than 25 books, but to make them all count. I have a folder, "Spoilers for Reality", with textbooks and serious crap to get through. (In each of those hundred-book years I was supposed to be studying maths, and you can imagine how much I actually did.)

See also

- Chris Olah
- Sam Knoche's skin in the game
- The counterintuitively humane Bryan Caplan
- Alex Danco on alternative academic communication and gatekeeping.
- Linda on PhDs

1. A dark implication: that one *could* be better-off, in finances but also in knowledge, without uni altogether. (Since they distract you with password learning and rote crap.) We rely on the spiritual and psychological gains of 4 years of relative leisure. And at the micro level, this is a clear good deal.
2. The size of the opportunity cost varies. If the government were well-run, we would give the resources to the poor, or to public infrastructure. But it's not clear where they'd actually go.
3. This, the total private + social cost of uni, was hard to dig up. Per graduate in England, it's about £45,000 : £27k from fees and £18k from maintenance and loans. I've just used this English figure, bumped up to four years. £45k / 3 years = £15k per year.
4. The truth: I got so much education because I was not smart enough to not need so much.
5. (6.5 hours in class + 1.5 hours commute) * 175 days a year * 11 years = 15,400
6. £4k per 90s primary year * 7 years = £28k
   £6k per secondary year * 6 years = £36k.
   £15k per undergrad year * 4 years = £60k.
   £15k per postgrad year = £15k.
   Open Uni = about £10k
7. This OU figure is very rough, for a Scotsman: £6k private cost and £10k from government
   Very roughly: £24m annual budget / 15,000 students * 6 years part-time = £9600

Tags: education, economics, meaning

Einstein

27th June 2018

- *Underneath cliche, commodification, symbolism, is a complete man.*
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Content notes*: I am not a physicist.
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *Physics becomes in those years the greatest collective work of art of the twentieth century.*
>
> Jacob Bronowski

A review of 'Einstein' (2007) by Walter Isaacson.

What to say about the stereotypically great? Start by scrubbing off the accumulated century of journalism and appropriations.

Einstein's scientific achievements

- A model of *Brownian motion*: the decisive argument for the existence of atoms. His model enabled experimental confirmation of Dalton's theory, after a hundred years of denial or instrumentalism.
- An elementary particle, the *photon*. The atomic hypothesis applied even to light.
- A law for the *photoelectric effect*, implying a quantum theory of all EM radiation. (A realist about quanta, unlike Planck.)
- So also lots of pieces of the *"old" quantum theory*.
- A theory of light and so space and time, *special relativity*.
- A physical constraint on metaphysics: no absolute time.

- A fairly consequential law, mass-energy equivalence
- A flawed but progressive theory of heat capacity, the *Einstein theory of solids*
- A better method of analysing quantum systems, "EBK". An ignored semiclassical precursor to quantum chaos theory.
- The greatest scientific theory, *General Relativity*. Explaining gravity and, so, the shape of the universe.
- Implies the first modern cosmology
- Gravitational lensing (confirmed 1998)
- Inadvertently predicted dark energy.
- A crucial experiment: gravitational waves. (Confirmed 2015.)
- Implies a whole lot more like black holes but you can't name *everything* "Einstein thing".

- A general method for thermodynamics and information theory: Bose-Einstein statistics.
- New state of matter: the Bose–Einstein condensate
- Fruitful failed theory: first local hidden variable theory
- A profound phenomenon, quantum entanglement. (Susskind calls entanglement "Einstein's last great discovery", though he 'discovered' it by trying to reductio away Copenhagen interpretation, taking entanglement to be a disproof.) (Confirmed properly 2015.)

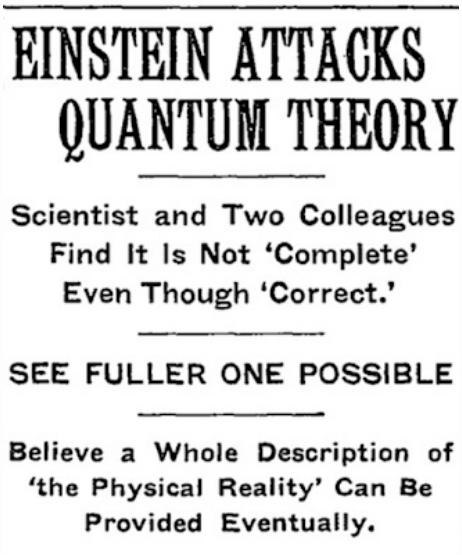
- A crucial experiment for a *metaphysical principle*, local realism is false!: EPR
- Inadvertently, a physical constraint on metaphysics: nonlocality.

- Thought-experiment: The content of the "Schrödinger's" cat setup
- Repostulation of wormholes. (Not confirmed.)
- Isotope separation methods for the Manhattan project.
- Also a nontoxic fridge

Besides his own prize, confirmations of Einstein's theories have led to 4 Nobel Prizes (1922, 1923, 1997, 2001) so far, and first-order extensions several more (1927, 1929, 1933, 2020 at very least). We should expect a few more, for grav waves and not inconceivably for wormholes, some day.

Isaacson, like most people, portrays Einstein's post-1935 work as a dogmatic waste - he spent about thirty years straining to produce a field theory that could get rid of the

spookiness and probabilism of QM. If you compare the output of the first half of his life to the second, sure it looks bad. But he was giving classical physics (determinism, continuousness, simplicity, fierce parsimony, beauty-based reasoning) a well-deserved last shake.



EINSTEIN ATTACKS QUANTUM THEORY

Scientist and Two Colleagues Find It Is Not 'Complete' Even Though 'Correct.'

SEE FULLER ONE POSSIBLE

Believe a Whole Description of 'the Physical Reality' Can Be Provided Eventually.

Imagine maintaining full-time effort over thirty years of failure, with your whipsmart peers all tutting and ignoring you. His unified field efforts are methodologically sort of like string theory: a hubristic search over mathematical forms without contact with the actually physical to help limit the formal space.

He had a decent decision-theoretic argument for his doomed crusade:

> *When a colleague asked him one day why he was spending — perhaps squandering — his time in this lonely endeavor, he replied that even if the chance of finding a unified theory was small, the attempt was worthy. He had already made his name, he noted. His position was secure, and he could afford to take the risk and expend the time. A younger theorist, however, could not take such a risk, for he might thus sacrifice a promising career. So, Einstein said, it was his duty to do it.*

People also try to attach shame to him for his wildly stubborn anti-Copenhagen crusade: years spent thinking up tricky counterexamples for the young mechanicians, like an angry philosopher. But I think he had a good effect on the discourse, constantly calling them to order, and leaving it clear, after all, that it *is* a consistent view of the evidence.

The only unforgiveable bit in his later conservatism is that he ignored the other half of the fundamental forces, the strong and weak forces, and for decades. Two forces was hard enough to unify. I suppose another point against his long, long Advanced Studies is that he could have done even more if he had helped *push* QM along; as late as 1946, Wheeler tried to convince him to join in. As it is we have evidence against the unified field: "*Einstein* failed".

What was so moral about him? Well, he was ahead of his time (still is):

- Denounced WWI as the senseless crap it was.
- Never went to the Soviet empire (despite repeated invites).
- Denounced the Nazis from '31, despite/because of public threats to his life.
- Flipped from pacifism at the right moment.

- Many early actions for US civil rights, including work against McCarthyism.
- Sold his original manuscripts for War Bonds

Even his Zionism was enlightened (pro-migration, anti-state, anti-Begin):

> *"Should we be unable to find a way to honest cooperation and honest pacts with the Arabs," he wrote [Chaim] Weizmann in 1929, "then we have learned absolutely nothing during our 2,000 years of suffering."*
> *He proposed, both to Weizmann and in an open letter to an Arab leader, that a "privy council" of four Jews and four Arabs, all independent-minded, be set up to resolve any disputes. "The two great Semitic peoples," he said, "have a great common future." If the Jews did not assure that both sides lived in harmony, he warned friends in the Zionist movement, the struggle would haunt them in decades to come. Once again, he was labeled naïve.*

Einstein is like Bertrand Russell, only *much* more so: even more brilliant, even more rebellious, even more politically active, even more aloof, even more relentless, even more neglectful of his family. (Russell on hearing relativity for the first time: "*To think I have spent my life on absolute muck*.")

Along with Ibn Rushd, Pascal, Leibniz, Darwin, Peirce, Russell, Turing, Chomsky, Einstein is one of our rare *complete* intellectuals: huge achievements in science, beautiful writing, good jokes, original philosophy, moral seriousness. To have warmth too, as Einstein does abundantly, doesn't have much precedent. However much Einstein is misattributed vaguely pleasant, vaguely droll, vaguely radical statements, the fact is he actually *was* pleasant, funny, radical. Believe the hype.

The usual word for this lot is 'polymath' - but though we are mad keen on polymaths, their generalism is seen as a laudable extra, rather than the *vital* service I now think they alone can give: you want people who have proven they can discover things to tackle your ancient ill-defined questions (beauty, goodness, justice, existence). The above are more than subject-matter polymaths; they are both thinkers and doers, hackers and painters, servants and masters, above their time and ahead of it.

You can't do good unless you *know* a great deal about the targets of your morals; you want the vast imaginative search over philosophical possibilities to be aided by what we actually know. (As the noted writer against scientism, Ludwig Wittgenstein put it:

> *Is scientific progress useful for philosophy? Certainly. The realities that are discovered lighten the philosopher's task: imagining possibilities.*

)

Other greats

Maxwell, Boltzmann, Schrödinger, and Feynman basically fit the above: they are as good at writing and philosophy as they are at physics, and very funny to boot. But they didn't push society forward much (...)

Goethe tried admirably, but didn't achieve much science. Descartes should be on there but eh. Hilary Putnam discovered important logical results, helping to found computational logic, and has all the other virtues, but I guess science is a stretch. von Neumann covered perhaps the most intellectual ground of all of these people, but I'm not sure he had a moral or political life to speak of. Herbert Simon is deep and broad and fun. And Bohr is brilliant

and moral but can't write.

One particularly charming bit in this book covers Einstein's long friendship with the Queen Mother of Belgium. When Szilard warns him that nuclear fission has been achieved and could give the Nazis dominion over all, Einstein's first thought is to ask Elisabeth to sort it out, by grabbing all the Central African uranium and sending it far from the Nazis. (As it happens, the *Uranverein* got their uranium from Czechoslovakia.)

Isaacson read all the letters, formed a view on all the academic controversies (Maric's contribution, baby Lieserl, what sort of deist or Zionist or pacifist he was), and covers most of the papers, recasting the classic thought experiments very lucidly. This was a huge pleasure. Read with Wikipedia open, though: C20th physics is way too deep and broad for one book.

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*
2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*
3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

In this case, don't trust me much. I am no physicist, and only half a scientist. I looked up a few sources on Einstein's many innovations, and checked Isaacson's depiction of the Maric controversy and found no red flags.

Tags: bio, science, greats

A Sentimental Journey Through Parts of England

17th August 2011

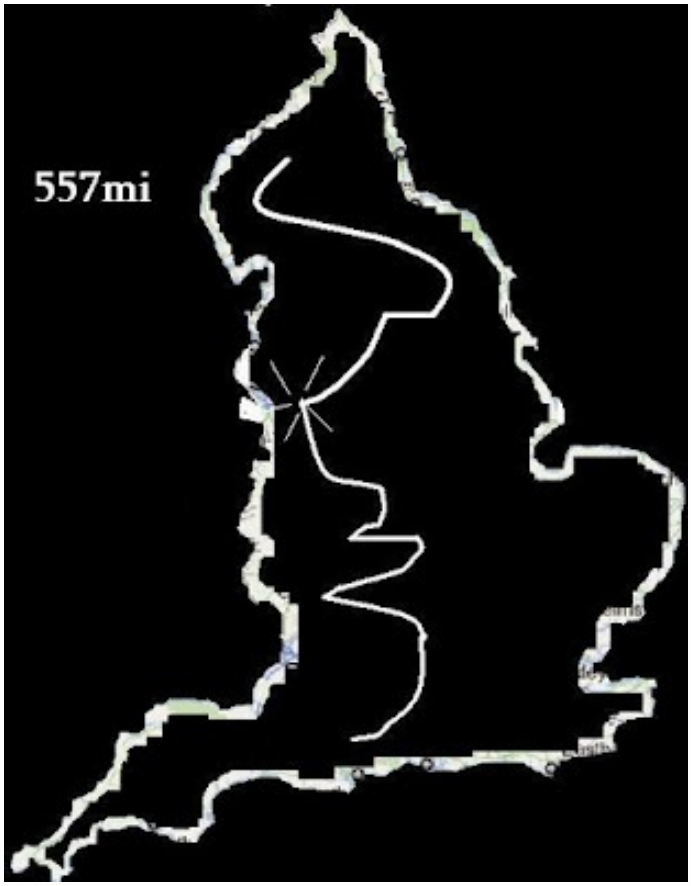
- *Riding my bike all the way through west England*
- *Reading time*: 30 mins.

> *Allons! to that which is endless, as it was beginningless,*
> *To undergo much, tramps of days, rests of nights,*
> *To merge all in the travel they tend to, and the days and nights they tend to,*
> *Again to merge them in the start of superior journeys...*

- Walt Whitman

> *It is an age so full of light, that there is scarce a country or corner in Europe whose beams are not crossed and interchanged with others. - Knowledge in most of its branches, and in most affairs, is like music in an Italian street, whereof those may partake who pay nothing. - But there is no nation under heaven abounding with more variety of learning, where the sciences may be more fitly woo'd, or more surely won, than here, - where art is encouraged, and will so soon rise high, - where Nature (take her altogether) has so little to answer for, - and, to close all, where there is more wit and variety of character to feed the mind with: - Where then, my dear countrymen, are you going?*

- Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*



Day 1: Aberdeen to Carlisle

For simplicity I tell people this is my first time in England. The truth:

- 1991: Visit to Greater London for a wedding. 2 days.
- 1996: Visit to York for nothing in particular. 3 days.
- 1999: Visit to Windermere for my gran's Mormon nonsense. 3 days.
- 2002: Through it on a bus to France. <1 day.
- 2004: Through it on a bus to France. <1 day.

So actually close enough. Into Carlisle about 7pm. Struck by the sheer amount of brick, especially in confectionary red-white-red-white pattern. Panic rises when the rain comes on: am hungry, alone, and have no idea how to get out of town. Rank my paranoias to pass time: fear of criminal folk (low); fear of sarcastic people (high); fear of illness from rain (med); fear for bike (med); fear for no campsite (critical). Eat in a truckstop, and meet George, a magnanimous gobshite who introduces hisself as a connoisseur of rucksacks, and offers a campsite in his garden within 30 seconds of meeting: “Life’s too short to be horrible to people”. Sleep in a hedge on an industrial estate instead, for some reason. Possibly manners.

Day 2: Carlisle to Patterdale

Give up trying to sleep at 4am and get on the A6. Leaving, I have Carlisle to myself, sharing only with the odd Stobart man. Scoot around the castle happily. Bike the 20mi to Penrith, get there by 7am, ffffuck. Do not feel remotely good - lurk in the sun, chilled and sick. Seem to eat and drink continuously. Struck by the casual fellowship of the unmotorised: hikers grimace at each other; cyclists always nod. Come upon the absurdly picturesque Patterdale, facing the unspeakably picturesque Ullswater. Every other house is a B&B. Climb two miles up a fucking mountain to reach the Arthurian, the sublime, the baffling YHA Helvellyn. It's empty and unlocked, so I help the recycling man:

> *TONY: I were a livestockman f' the Earl f' 44 years. ("yeus")*
> *I: What changed?*
> *TONY: Got bored.*

Middle-aged hostel crowd are great - we all stink, I trust them instinctively. Shower, pathetic with gratitude - only 28 hours since my last. Giddy with fatigue, I entertain at the dinner table. Honestly not really sure what I was saying to them.

Day 3: Helvellyn to Grasmere

Sit on a crop over the Ullswater all morning. Read Auden ('Paysage Moralise' impresses me into a deep funk). Meet more people - it's just that kind of place. Listen to Some Call It Godcore; perfect. Bike making an irritating noise - sit down to bodge it; it's miraculous that it was running at all; chain had pulled off the derailleur and was only going by cutting a groove into the guard. (Things fall apart, but sometimes they fall into place at the same time.) Up Birkbeck, harrrd. Feel great, have lunch at 1500 feet. Soon after, coming down "The Struggle" (too fast, too topheavy) crash pretty badly, using my skin as a brake.

> *If I should fall, think of this of me,*
> *That there's some corner of Cumbria road*
> *That is forever Gavin.*

Man happens up the road a minute later and kindly offers first aid: through my teeth I fail to express how much this means to me. Limp to Ambleside, brakes on, then on a little further to Grasmere. Have earned my dopamine today. Inexplicably, the hostel has a copy of Jung's Archetypes, and some Sloterdijk in Dutch(!) While wrestling with Jung, eavesdrop on loud Australian girl: "Efter Glestonbury, yea, eeverything was all so 'ohmygod toomanypeople' so we weent to the Laykes...and thain during Paul Simon oi felt railly seack..."

Does everyone’s tourism seem contemptible but our own?

Day 4: Grasmere to Kendal

"The loveliest spot that man hath ever found."
- Wordsworth

Grasmere’s nothing to Ullswater. (see how quickly we become worldly! J later mocks the fact that everybody he knows seems to profess a working knowledge of and affinity for the Lakes.) Sleep is difficult without elbowskin. Go see Dove Cottage and Rydal Mount. I actually gasp once let out of the former, bloody guided tour. Japanese people everywhere. I side with Hunt against Wordsworth: a poet who withdraws from humanity needs to justify herself, and WW has no grounds but beauty for his endless vacation.Through Ambleside, lunch at the Priest Hole. Struggle the 4 miles to Windermere, and would’ve done without the wounds screaming. Bugger about for a couple of hours, preparing to seem authoritative rather than bewildered (R and J are coming). He arrives eventually, and we go fail to find a 24hr shop. Camp by an empty house. Criteria:

1. Drainage?
2. Windbreak?
3. Soft ground?
4. Teen haunt?
5. Noise?
6. Legal?

Unsurprisingly, having a tent is an exponentially better way to be.

Day 5: more Kendal.

Woken by a bemused builder at 9am. Neither of us knows what the other is doing there.

Day of forced grace - me and R waiting for J. Eat beans by the river, eat Mint Cake (CHRIST) by the Castle. Mint Cake is to meringue what diamond is to coal. It is good indeed to have a companion, but I feel the need to mask my leg-weakness and pain, even so. Jokes are real again! (Donald Trump’s helicopter’s tapeplayer has one Kraftwerk album jammed in it.) Visit a church (St Thomas’?) - grotesque.Sun.J is late (straight in from Zambia). Eat crap, then go see Half Man Half Biscuit. Hits-laden set, smelly and fun.

We camp desperately, end up next to a railtrack among thistles. Laugh.

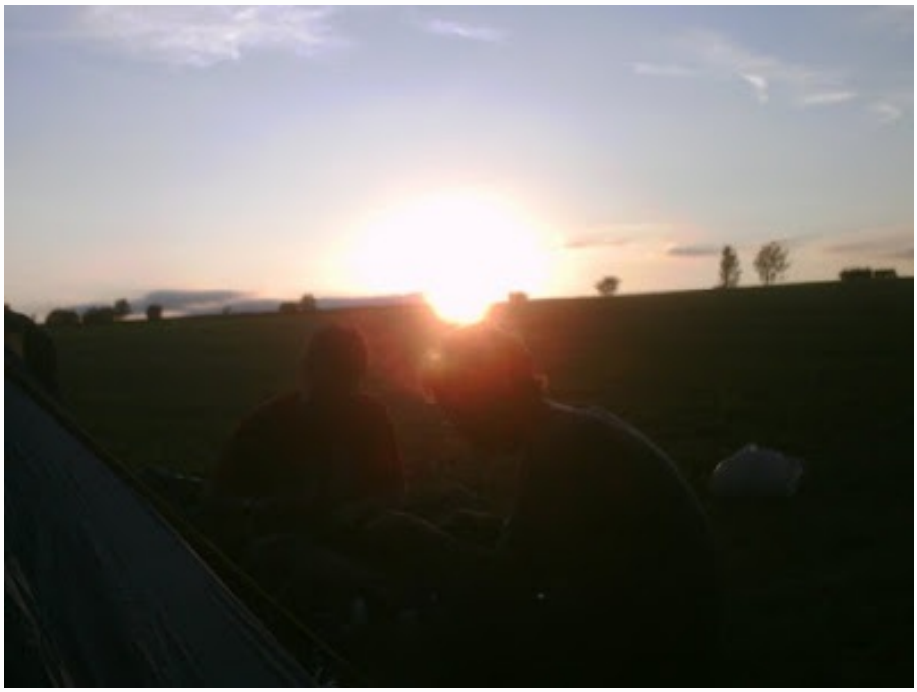
Day 6: Kendal to Sedbergh

Dunno how we slept - “Hitchcockian” night. Heat rises to about 28 celsius as we approach the Dales: and it’s 18 miles of uphill. J suffers. Reach Sedburgh, where we founder - J’s bike is fucked, and the nearest bike shop is Kendal, and you can’t take bikes on busses, and (…) Cook dhal in a churchyard, and laugh. J returns to Kendal. Bugger about with some philosophy history - who is the empiricist who connects Newton with Russell (if anyone)? - and go find somewhere to camp. First path we roll up, Ghyll Farm, agrees with grand nonchalance. My heart swells with the kindness, and the £100 view. Wash naked in a stream, good. James succeeds & returns taxied by Mark E Smith, good. Sunburn; ah whatthehell. We eat peas in the pod, good.

Day 7: Sedbergh to Leyburn

Passing a newsagents, note Guardian scoop about Milly Dowler’s phone with a theatrical “ffffuck!”. See a black rabbit. (So much roadkill in Yorkshire.) Begin the

Day begins with a road dispute, I solved. Road to Hawes is beautiful but painful. Seems that every rural Northern town is a “book town”. Eat total crap in a coldheart Hawes cafe. It’s too hot to work at 2, so we lie in a park. My backpack is too big, but there’s nothing I can throw out (only three changes of clothes, for instance). Press on to Leyburn, whose name no one can retain. Laugh. JW cancels our Middlesbrough appointment. We huzzah, a bit. Camp secretly at Stoop House Farm. (Sheep never shut the fuck up.)



Day 8: Leyburn to Ripon (Seven Bridges

Valley)

Nice downhill to the A6108. R ill (dehydrated). Heat punishing even at 10am. Spend a nice hour in the shade, texting while R sleeps and J scouts. Ripon, seeped in a seeping cathedral. I am learning to treat churches as a form of entertainment - a vital skill in the C20th, but yielding less these days. RC is good and squat. Light a candle (for gays killed by Christians).

Camp by Fountains Abbey, nervily. Make stirfry and inane entertainment - watching a wheel spin. Laugh… Brought Hume's *Treatise* with me, but I haven't read fuck-all all trip: The habit has been pumped out of me - and anyway the intro's by some snotty '50s Analytic no thankyou very much.

Day 9: 7BV to Thirsk

Yorkshire is fucking huge, but its cultural footprint is very small, somehow. Have breakfast at the Fountains visitor centre. (Eggs benedict is a bloody weird dish.) Don't go in. Back to Ripon to sit out the Ferment (unbearable mid

Day heat). To Thirsk. S'ok - but the Blacksmith's Inn's jukebox, by this, mp3-dead, tune-starved point, is a revelation. With J, pump £5 in. O the fun of infliction. Out. Ask at a farm, who agree reluctantly. Owner looks like Harold Wilson and talks in a way that I adore but am crap at bantering with. Stove soy-bolognese and silence.

Day 10: Thirsk to Malton

First rain during night. R's stuff damp but ok. Task #1: climb Sutton bloody Bank, a job that a bartender last night grinned maliciously at. As soon as we're up, first real rain starts. Soaked to my pants in 4 minutes flat. Hide in a visitor centre, but soon out Into It. Uggggh execrable. Biking fast and risky (13 miles in an hour). Feet three kilos heavier from waterlogging, visibility nought. R avuncular throughout. One facial expression for that hour:

>:X

Suddenly dries. Go to Castle Howard, brideshead visited. R and I pad around the ground barefoot and talk metahistory. J doesn't want to pay the entrance fee. Lots of pagan biz around. Fear the rain. Drink in Malton's "Crossed Keys", a warmly bizarre, Thai-themed,

Medieval-catacombed pub. Tastes of doom, sadly. Laugh anyway. Eat mexican: yaas. J falls off his bike suddenly on the way out, minor but galling for all that. Then R's gear-cable snaps. Thus hunt for shelter early. Find another indifferent farm - J is the first to identify its "wrongness". The doom of canyons. Shave my lips and furrow my brow.

Day 11: Malton to York

Wind torments us all night.

> *"J: How many stains do you have on you?*
> *"I: Uhh...*
> *J: I've got blood, oil, nutella, paint, suncream, bolognese, pen, grass, savlon and toothpaste on these trousers."*

Eat nutella and leave with haste. "Easy" route is hard, uncertain and hit by crosswinds. Tempers fray on all parts. Wash my feet in a river while J goes begging for water and R frowns at the horizon. Called a gaylord on the back road to York (by a stranger that is, not J). Starving, disproportionately weary, and then I drink some off milk. (Veganism is impossible on the road.) Make it though, and eat in a bistro. Doze. Get a fusty 3-bed room. Decor: avocado plastic and forty-year-old taupe. Since I'm a vegetarian, R and J are designated "normals". Go see Potiche and struggle to find late night food again. York is good tho.

Day 12: more York.

Absymal night - feverish, neuralgic, tinnitic, insomniac, gut-rotten. Sleep naked & still boil in my bag. It breaks around 5am, and I collapse. Shitting blood and farting butane. Has been coming for a while, now I think about it. With no destination today, I have time to break down. Breakfast is served by B&B woman's children, ew. Saunter.J spots a woman having a 'Proustian moment' at a sweetshop window. She's transfixed, mouth slightly open, eyes glazed. We stand a little while watching, before shame overtakes me and I wheel away. J protests that he thought it beautiful but: even so. National Railway Museum is impressive - full of things built for incredible wear, so you can poke and touch whatever. Face off against the most intrinsically evil train in the world. It's while spiritually wrestling before it I work out that I can stop the pain if I don't move and don't breathe. Circle York some more - the conversation unwittingly(?) centring on our futures. Eat in unabashedly hippy veggie restaurant. (Meh.) To the Minster for chorales: a deadening sort of awe. Saw a bouncer earlier who was a human crow - jerky, wary and cruel. The Gabrieli Consort are human eagles (superlative) but also kiwi-birds (full of something larger than themselves). Afterwards, more blood.

Day 13: York to Harrogate

Pain largely lifts. Change a tyre, read aunt Guardian, and away. Pain returns from exertion. Lunch in Weatherby, where argument about Class vis-a-vis delicatessens kicks off. Also re: ciabatta. A dull town. To Harrogate, full of parks. (To do list: feel good.) Eat bad masala in a park and laugh. Go see Lady In the Van. Theatre is airless and womb-hot. Play’s beautiful tho - the soul in question offering a lesson after all. Sleepy, I mistake the interval for the end. Rush out, find a farm, sleep in the calving field. Set up in the dark.

Day 14: Harrogate into Bronteland.

Self-righteous passerby asks if we have permission to camp: his transformation after being rebuffed, like a balloon farting flat. Just after we decamp, the Rain comes on. A group hysteria comes on too - we dump R’s tent, flee back down the hill. Sodden breakfast in Cafe

Rouge. More laughter. J leaving on a wet train. Blunder out of town and do 25 miles in 3 hours. Dry in the wind. The Bradford valley is amazing, Italian. Stop in Saltaire for ‘lunch’ (see photo).To Bingley, which we soon retreat from, set up on a grand piece on nasty scrubland. I walk a mile and back to buy water. Talk metaphilosophy. Dream about home.

Day 15: Bingley to Littleborough

Wake to find a passing dog has eaten my breakfast. Eat cereal on the verge of an A-road. We climb 1500 feet in two miles - on the edge of the Pennines now. Haworth is bloody dramatic - all 40 degree valleys and Burtonesque outcrops. More bland road towns, and then

O!

A highlight of the whole trip: an incredible, four-mile-long regular downslope to Hebden Bridge. Didn’t pedal once. Shower at Todmorden and doze on an ex-golfcourse (what a lovely concept that is!) Power on to Summit Quarry, a stunning but midgey campsite. Tomato is the travel staple for some reason: 5/6 of the meals centre on it.

Day 16: Littleborough to Knutsford

Sheep creep deep as we sleep. It’s not pleasant going in these parts - though the sun’s not intense, we have to take big roads. Decide to skip urbania - but Oldham train station is no more, so first we look for somewhere not grim to eat (fail, so first Wetherspoon’s). Lots of hassle on road. Go to Ashton.

It takes us three hours to make our connecting train through Manc to Knutsford. R goes for food, takes 50 minutes at it, which crosses my Gerald Horizon (the time waited after the expected return-time of someone before you assume that massive disaster has befallen them). We are identified by one of J’s lovely mates. Sleep in a barn. FTW

Day 17: Knutsford to Helsby

Don’t want to get up. Barns be comfy. Sit on a bench in Northwich and watch strange strangers. A Securicor man stops to pet a dog on his way in to Tesco. Stops for an unseemly length of time, really. Helsby is unsignposted. We muddle on. Somewhat frayed

again. Arrive at J's house after hours. Shower, eat, miss a window for a Hong Kong internship, poke around. I am three steps into his house before I see a Burial album, to be fair. Up Helsby Hill; it's a chemical, Lemon-Jelly land. J is I suppose only standardly impassive to his parents. Eat cornucopic curry. J drives us to Ellesmere to see Tree of Life, a messy and chewy old thing. Back, we sit around, read existentialists.

Day 18: Chester

Thought process on the cycle route from H to Chester:

relationship between capitalism and love

1: growth and industrialisation invented the concept and supply of "leisure time" - a vital component in gardening one's romantic love.

2: Concentrated mass housing allows couples to separate without the fear of homelessness-or-exile holding them together.

Town's reet nice. J is unerring and charges around his teen haunt in a funny laconic way, but we blunder into the sights anyway: buskers, the weird double-shops, the Cryer, the Cathedral, a Roman, the walls. Refectory is good. Tension flares somewhat over my nonexistent road skillz.

Poem for Chester's shot-tower:

> *and I, a liquid falling,*
> *and morphing (as you do)*
> *and pausing on the water*
> *sphering anew.*

Good hard towels at J's. More curry, then rush comically around Cheshire looking for J's friends in the old manner, blind guesswork. Nonbonfire party at friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend Howard's. Thus get to see J in his hatching habitat, which is very good fun:

> *"Buhhhhhhh, mi nam is J. H., I do nut kno bout art or fukkn books."*
>
> *"This guy had shit himself in the club. But he were so cool about it, we felt like idiots for not shitting ourselves!"*
>
> *"When in Rome, shit in the woods."*

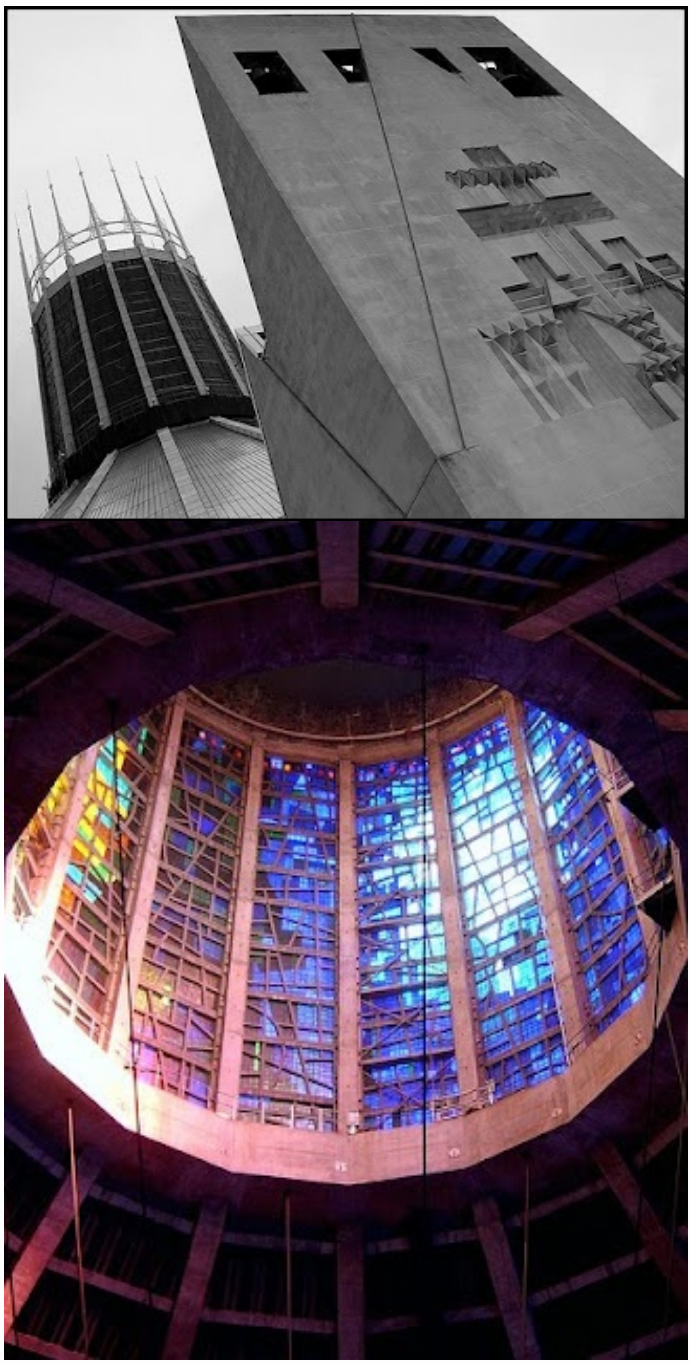
He also gets piled on, in the course of which I clonk heads badly with another of his lovely mates. I'm totally fine, but he got fucked up. Giant swollen eye. Helplessly embarrassed.

Banter is fast and riotous; I don't keep up. He is forced to be young here. It might grieve me that I exert little of this fresh pressure, but nah SUCH LADS

Day 19: Liverpool

Another deceptively aimless one.

Day out (aimed well by J). Drives us at length through bewildering spaghetti roads. Knows his history, especially the Beatles tour less travelled. First stop, the Metropolitan Cathedral. It is virtuoso, powerfully unsentimental. Dozens of excellent moments are set into a shocking overarching theme. It is my favourite church. I know this simply cos for once I felt no contempt in it. To 'the Phil', the Docks and the Tate. It's Magritte at the moment, and he is loads of fun. Also the other Cathedral: equally brutalist but less modern, less true. They face each other down Hope Street, and the smaller Metro guts the shit out of him.



Back, risotto trop vert, and to the pub. Meet Cheshtronica supremo TNJX, very shy - well. Moments of pure fun - “Sad or Bad?!” and seven people shouting at a quiz machine. J drives well, well drunk.

Day 20: Manchester

"*I can suck melancholy from song as a weasel sucks eggs*!"
- Jacques

Roll straight out of bed onto the 1100 train to Manchester. No conductor! Rain forces us into weird cultural junkshop. Buzz about - go to the gay bit for Turing, the crap goth-encrusted cathedral, the cathedralite Town Hall. Try to see Johnny Vegas, but are crushed.Always so much about soldiers in churches. It’s enough to drive you Marxist. Manc Cath claims all of one regiment’s late-C20th dead on its wall - though a decent number of them wouldn’t have given a shit about Christ. Supernatural insurance has done this world too much harm.Big public gallery is oddly dissatisfying, but there’s a good Turner and some fun contemps. Try to eat in the modish Northern Quarter - no seats in: “Common”, “Trof”, “O??”, nor “Oklahoma”, so we eat in a mediocre vegan place. See Craig Charles.

See *As You Like It*, proper good even in the Gods. Another free train back, chatting with a friendly drunk in a borrowed suit.

Day 21: the Wirral

One last sally. To Jodrell Bank, where we stand for 5 minutes and leave. Am quiet, fatigued in some occluded way. J puts on Beastie Boys and Half Man Half Biscuit in the car; I could just stay in all day. Do plaques for two friends, Peel and Blackwell. Rain is filthy thick. Have a “euphorically” bad time in Birkenhead. Eat in Wetherspoon’s, inevitably. Fail to get a present for J’s parents.Internet for a bit, trying to fling myself into a fruitful future. (A press pass to the Edinburgh Festival, and the groundwork for Low Lands, my book on nationality.) Go a to pub quiz, at which J is extremely unhappy.

> *"Which Canada-born Bayern Munich midfielder made his international debut against the Netherlands in 2001?": "WHAT THE FUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!".*

We are not good but are funny.

Moment of poetry in a grim place (toilets of the Belle Monte pub, Frodsham): remarked to J how lovely his friend P is -

> *J: He is, isn't he? Famously is. He thinks I hate him though.*

> *I: [grandiose] So let him know!*

Later learn that P was in the cubicle during this, trying to save our modesty by calling out, but was ignored.

Day 22: Helsby to Congleton

Woken by J having a good idea in the next room. Onwards. (J stays behind.) Back immediately with some nice STEALTH WINE for hosts.To Nantwich quickly. Cheerfully piece together a lunch of chips and redcurrants. Staffordshire is fucking nasty. Not much thinking or talking involved, just grit teeth and get through it. Make it to Congleton about 7pm, have a drink. Meet our first Great English Eccentric, a rude hag living in a giant scrapheap of fiftyyearold sports cars. Camp in a swamp on top of a hill. DONE.(Concept without a word: beaux vivant; informal artist; self-artist. Someone who lives according to taste, and unnoticed acts of art. “Aesthete” comes close. What would Nietzsche call them?)

Day 23: Congleton to Ashbourne

Slept about 12 hours in tolerable misery. Spend ages decamping, soggy and grumpy. Less dashing, less swashing. Uphill struggle to Leek for hours - a spry 60 yearold biker overtakes us. Go to a crap cafe who begrudge us a sale. Limp on, fringing the Peaks.

Altered consciousness, really. Focus on ruining your legs. Did about 40 mile yesterday; apparently that was too much. Stop at Ashbourne cemetary (count on the dead for peace). There’s a humanising flash of sunlight, but that’s all. Drink and chat amidst bunting and Scottish flags (?) Thai restaurant for tea which had the same gorgeous dense sculpted tofu as had in Beijing. Scratch out another mile, camp illegally on a footpath.

> *birdsong as gunfire*
> *(which it's closer to than serenade)*
> *eternal woodland carnage,*
> *interminable grudge,*
> *the cock a flare up-arcing,*
> *and the warring won't be budged:*
> *wings like old m.g blues.*

Day 24: Ashbourne to Smisby

Hypersensitive night - too close to the road, too much stink. Another supermarket-bench

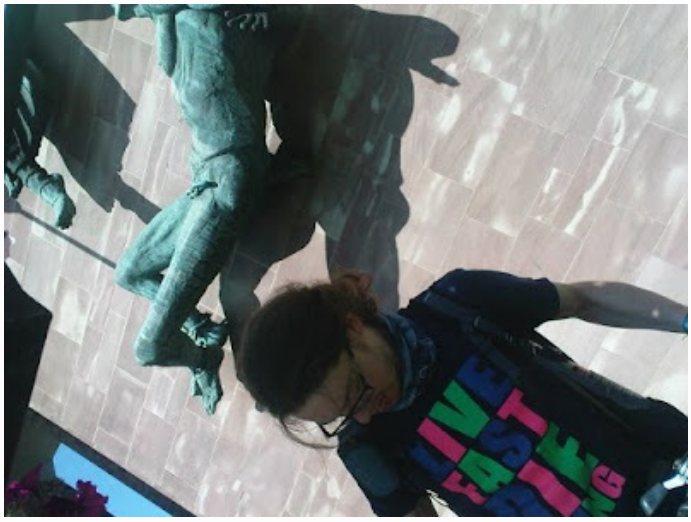
breakfast and away. Fatigue lifts. Into Derby on a wave of admiration: bike paths everywhere, big news screen and a stylish contempt for its past. Shower, do cathedral, do pub. It occurs to me that EngSoc are the natural enemies of Philsoc. It also occurs to me that I want to set up a intersociety football tournament. Moment of sublime error when I leave my bike-lock key somewhere. Set the staff of Wetherspoon's searching for it before noticing it myself under the table. We leave hastily.Except you can't, because the outskirts last 10 bloody miles. Derby hath spread her wings. Along the Swarkstone Causeway, which is a stunning thing to leave in the middle of nowhere. We're almost efficient. Face the first real campsite difficulty - ask at half a dozen houses, nothing. A nice man owns a wee unkempt field, though, and there we are.

Day 25: Smisby to Coventry

People have been good to us on this trip. The only explanation they usually give is "No reason not to, is there?" or "Life's too short to be unkind ter folk." J mocked this when I put this to him, but the point is not that this is some metaethical epiphany, but that tacit proto-principles can support action on their own, and do, and maybe always have.Back road to Birmingham goes inexplicably easily; daydream all day, replaying the year. Stop in Atherstone and consider the lilies. Make hellish trip to Coleshill train station, which is 5 miles out of Coleshill through industrial hell. We stop in Birmingham for literally ten minutes and go to Coventry instead. Everything's closing as we arrive. Eat Cantonese, enduring the worst that Cantopop can offer. After much blundering, find a weird empty grassland and camp. Toss, turn.

Day 26: Coventry to Callow

Up in sunshine. R's away today, so I trade my lovely inflatable mattress with him in exchange for the tent. Error expected. To Coventry Cathedral, lock our bikes beneath Satan.



We don't stay long - there's a Christian rock band practicing in the main cavern and I'd be claustrophobic even without the aural cack. Get overwhelmed - there's a Hiroshima exhibit in a side-chapel, and something in me just gives way. I am about as fit as i'm ever going to get; I've got no physical complaints; I've done something grand with my July - but I'm not in good shape, in some important and wordless sense.

R away home. I'm unaccompanied for the first time in three weeks; overtones of fear arrive. Push out defiantly for Warwick Uni, a great glass dump of knowledge. I could deal

with this for a year; 2013, say. The economists are in the same building and floor as the philosophers, but of course they never speak.

To Worcester by dark, whereupon I'm knackered. Their gallery's crap. Eat trendily (Slug & Lettuce), shower at the leisure-centre with the broken boiler. Rain comes on so I ride around the empty 'Crowngate', their covered marketplace-mall. Well fun. Waves of despair come on - have to bike 4 miles out of town, get a dozen rejections in that space. Find some Commons and collapse. Sleeping on the actual ground is quite a skill - have to work your back into and around all the bumps. Or go mad.

Day 27: Callow End to Stow

Woken by that most powerful of freejazz quartets, dogs screeching in joy near the ear. Even given that I've an awful unfocussed and heavy feeling, in this, our fifth week of the Road. Get a flurry of texts informing me of the passing of Amy Winehouse. (What's the obscurest celebrity you'd text someone over?)

Make it to Great Malvern running on empty - no water nor nothin. Sit and eat for an hour.

Overheard: [patronising] "Darling, you are what you are - it's your genes, isn't it?"

On this spot in AD1211: "Darlinge, you are whatt you are - it be Providence, see you not?"

Nice town, full of theatres and Cryers. Up, up, up to Colwall, which is unspeakably peaceful. Lurk around the Downs School reading Auden. Then away, down to Stow. All the little towns around here are obviously nice, but I can't stand them. Spot something bizarre on a hill. We stare at each other for a bit until I give in.Wrestle over whether to get a hostel or eat well (both about £16, see). Hostel it is. Can't decide what I want first - a shower, some internet, clean shorts, food, wine, a nap, safety, a giant-ass bowl of cereals, or a little tenderness. Sort out my life; find all these things. My relief is violent.

Day 28: Stow to Oxford

Bad breakfast and back to bed. Read the hostel's *Female Eunuch* all morning (:o)

Road is easy, or perhaps I'm finally Road Worthy. Into Oxfordshire without breaking stride. Chipping Norton - the dead heart of the media-political complex - shows none of the emotions expected. Pass Blenheim Palace, the giant-ass pile we gave to Marlborough after he killed all those people for us at Blindheim, Bavaria. Doomed to live/drown in one

Day of your life. If the man had any sensitivity he'd have fucken ached.Oxford is crowded, loud, expensive and discordant. "Honey made stone" - no, mead-vomit frozen in place. Tbh I return the impression, being a thoroughly bad tourist - I rush around, frown, steal, piss on Magdalen College and leave. Almost lose my phone - leave it on a bench - which I do feel as a rebuke by the souls of this bloody place. Camp on a farm by Didcot. Farmer banters, but I'm having none of it by this stage (to my later shame). (Want to Stop, but honour dictates.)

Day 29: Oxford to Andover

Heatstress busyness psychosis, eh? Hyperthermic tensomatic kinetic batshit, no? Stop over in Newbury, which is horseracing and nothingness.Stock reply to crap funeral: "She really loved language."
Stock reply to crap beer: "You can really taste the hops."
Stock reply to crap reply: "That would be an ecumenical matter."An important thing to know about yourself: you have a limited appetite even for beauty and novelty and adventure. Around three weeks, cynicism and impermeabilty of the soul begin their

encroach. I don’t find a hostel. The passion with which I want to get on with my life would make Nietzsche proud.

Day 30: Andover to Salisbury

Sick of the same sweat-caked clothes. Sick of a sore back. Sick of shit beard. Sick of focussing on negatives.The ‘Plain is impressive. Ride around the cathedral a few times looking for Jonathan Meades’ childhood house (failure). Go down “Endless Street” just to be contrary. YHA Salisbury is pleasingly shambolic. Sit on a picnic bench outside, drink three beers, eat an entire pizza and watch the sunset. Pangs for someone to share the moment with.Think about prankster philosophers. (As we go, the comic portion of the work increases)

Diogenes --> Montaigne -> Nietzsche -> Derrida -> Zizek.

Day 31: Salisbury to Elgin

Dorm was incredibly silent for a room of eight men sleeping. Not sure when I decided that Salisbury was the new terminus, but the thought of more south makes me angry by this stage. Go to the Cathedral, and then fuck off out of it.

Book I got at an Oxfam is fairly amazin:

> *I beseech you! if ever we shared philosophical impulses, take responsibility for your gifts! Place it in the service of reason, or of the reality of human worth & possibilities, instead of in the service of magic!*

- Jaspers to Heidegger

(Wish I could have as dramatic a conversation about this abstract a thing with as dear a friend of mine. Puh. Stupid, pragmatic, anti-Nazi friends.)

The train undoes a month’s work in a quarter of a day.As is my new habit, take the train to Elgin instead of the bus. Use my Aberdeen ticket to get to Elgin, somehow (conductor possibly saw my expression). Elated, trippy journey home in the dark from Elgin - there’s no streetlights on the main road, so every time a car approaches I’m completely blinded. Heidegger in my forebrain and epoché on my mind.

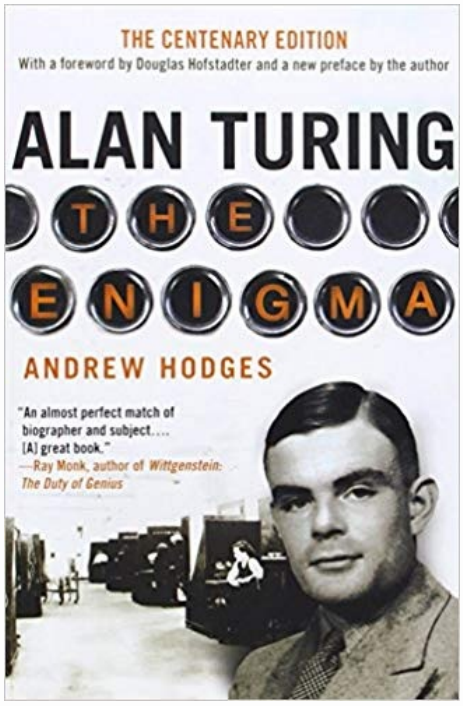
What should they know of Scotland who only Scotland know?

Tags: travel

Turing

1st September 2017

- *Turing's accomplishments, cost-benefits, & emotional consequence.*
- *Confidence*: 95%
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



> *in the early days of computing, a number of terms for the practitioners of the field of computing were suggested in the Communications of the ACM — turingineer, turologist, flow-charts-man, applied meta-mathematician, and applied epistemologist.*

- wiki

> *In a man of his type, one never knows what his mental processes are going to do next.*

- JAK Ferns, Turing's coroner

A review of Turing: The Enigma (1983) by Andrew Hodges.

There have been two big films about Turing (three if you count the uselessly fictionalised *Enigma* (2001)). All are dishonestly melodramatic to some degree; for instance they depict Turing's relationship with his dead love Christopher as the driver of his work on machine intelligence. And more generally they depict him as tragic. But he wasn't tragic: we were. In the 1950s we attacked a superlative person, because we were certain it was the right thing to do.

Hodges, whose book began the great public rehabilitation of Turing and served as the source for the films, bears no blame for this: it's one of the best biographies I've ever read (better even than Kanigel on Ramanujan and Isaacson on Einstein). Hodges actually understands Turing's work, not just its consequences, and not just the drama around it. And what work!

Begin with his achievements:

- 1935: *Mathematical statistics*:
  An independent proof of the Central Limit Theorem.

- 1935: *Group theory*:
  An extension to a theorem of von Neumann's.

- 1936: *Mathematical logic*:
  One of the all-time great papers, an answer to Hilbert's halting problem and an elaboration of the incompleteness of all mathematics, *and* the formal statement of a single machine that can perform all computable work. (Schmidhuber thinks that Goedel (1931) deserves the credit for the first universal coding. I see the implicit sense in this, but it seems a stretch.)

- 1936: *Computability theory*:
  Same paper. Creator thereof.

- 1936: *Automata theory*:
  Same paper. Creator thereof.

- 1936: *Computer engineering*:
  Same paper. Inventor of (several variants of) the stored-program concept, the basis of all computers since 1950.

- 1937: *Group theory*:
  Proof that general continuous groups cannot be approximated by finite groups.

- 1938: *Mathematical logic*:
  Invention of ordinal logics, an attempt to handle incompleteness.

- 1938: *Analytic number theory*:
  Algorithm ("Turing's method") for calculating values of the zeta-function.

- 1938: *Computer engineering and Mathematical methodology*:
  Design of an analogue machine to approximate the zeroes of the zeta function.

- 1939: *Cryptanalysis*:
  developed most of the logical methods used against Nazi Germany's naval cipher, Enigma. Including a new sort of indirect frequency analysis, "simultaneous scanning", search trees, an independent invention of Shannon's information entropy (as "Weight of evidence")...

- 1940: *Mechanical engineering*:
  redesigned the Polish Bomba to handle the exponential explosion in the Enigma's state space.

- 1941: *Statistics*:
  independent invention of sequential analysis, for "Banburismus".

- 1940: *Bayesian inference*:
  independent reinvention of Bayes factors and the first approximation of what we would now call empirical Bayes estimation. IJ Good quite rightly calls Bayes factors, "Bayes-Turing factors". (Though it should be Laplace-Turing factors.)

- 1942: *Cryptanalysis*:
  A hand-method for cracking the Lorenz cipher, "Turingery".

- 1944: *Cryptography, audio engineering and electrical engineering*:
  Design, proof and much of the construction of "Delilah", a highly portable electronic speech encipherment device. This was never deployed and remained classified for decades. As such, we know that it was at least 10 years ahead of its time.

- 1945-6: *Algorithmics*:
  The discovery of the stack. A neglected accomplishment. (Also subroutines, but Zuse had already implemented those.)

- 1945-6: *Computer engineering*:
  Design of the Automatic Computing Engine, the first complete design of a stored-program computer, including circuit diagrams, instruction set and cost estimate. (von Neumann's is incomplete.)

- 1948: *Computer music*:
  The first computer music. Turing's handbook for the Mark I had a section on using it to produce notes, and they gave a demo for radio in 1951, also a first. Not really a synth (not real-time) and not real electronic music (produced by moving parts).

- 1948: *Linear algebra*:
  Better ways of solving linear systems and inverting matrices.

- 1949: *Group theory*:
  Proof that the 'word problem' is insoluable for cancellation semigroups. Computability mainstream in mathematics by then.

- 1949: *Formal verification*:
  Paper on proving that computer programs will behave.

- 1950: *Philosophy of mind and artificial intelligence*:
  His famous one, "Computing machinery and intelligence" is one of the top 100 set texts in philosophy, but *Computable Numbers* is the deeper contribution, outlining how computability limits what the brain can do, and how difficult it will be to redo. He sees machine learning coming very clearly.

- 1951: *Group theory*:
  Another big result in the word problem for groups. (unpublished)

- 1951: *Chess engine*:
  Published the first algorithm to play a full game of chess automatically.

- 1952: *Mathematical biology*:
  a profound chemical theory of how life grows, now a textbook model of morphogenesis.

- 1952: *Number theory*:
  Numerical evidence (computed on the Manchester Baby) for thousands of values of the zeta-function.

- 1952: *Pattern formation*:
  Construction of the "Swift-Hohenberg" equation, 23 years before them.

But even more than that: Copeland guesses that breaking U-boat Enigma saved 14 million lives, a large fraction of which we can lay at Turing’s feet. If this is even roughly right this puts him in the top 50 life-savers ever.

But, outside of logic and engineering, where he was among the few most sophisticated people in the world, he was famously unsophisticated:

> *As at school, trivial examples of 'eccentricity' circulated in Bletchley circles. Near the beginning of June he would suffer from hay fever, which blinded him as he cycled to work, so he would use a gas mask to keep the pollen out, regardless of how he looked. The bicycle itself was unique, since it required the counting of revolutions until a certain bent spoke touched a certain link (rather like a cipher machine), when action would have to be taken to prevent the chain coming off. Alan had been delighted at having, as it were, deciphered the fault in the mechanism, which meant that he saved himself weeks of waiting for repairs, at a time when the bicycle had again become what it was when invented – the means of freedom. It also meant that no one else could ride it.*
>
> *He made a more explicit defence of his tea-mug (again irreplaceable, in wartime conditions) by attaching it with a combination lock to a Hut 8 radiator pipe. But it was picked, to tease him.*
>
> *Trousers held up by string, pyjama jacket under his sports coat – the stories, whether true or not, went the rounds. And now that he was in a position of authority, the nervousness of his manner was more open to comment. There was his voice, liable to stall in mid-sentence with a tense, high-pitched 'Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah' while he fished, his brain almost visibly labouring away, for the right expression, meanwhile preventing interruption. The word, when it came, might be an unexpected one, a homely analogy, slang expression, pun or wild scheme or rude suggestion accompanied with his machine-like laugh; bold but not with the coarseness of one who had seen it all and been disillusioned, but with the sharpness of one seeing it through strangely fresh eyes. 'Schoolboyish' was the only word they had for it. Once a personnel form came round the Huts, and some joker filled in for him, 'Turing A.M. Age 21', but others, including Joan, said it should be 'Age 16'...*
>
> *It was demeaning, but the repetition of superficial anecdotes about his usually quite sensible solutions to life's small challenges served the useful purpose of deflecting attention away from the more dangerous and difficult questions about what an Alan Turing might think about the world in which he lived. English 'eccentricity' served as a safety valve for those who doubted the general rules of society. More sensitive people at Bletchley were aware of layers of introspection and subtlety of manner that lay beneath the occasional funny stories. But perhaps he himself welcomed the chortling over his habits, which created a line of defence for himself, without a loss of integrity.*

We have words for this now ("nerd", "wonk", "aspie"), and massive institutions, and even social movements, but at the time he had to make do with "don", and hide inside academia. Again: the problem wasn't him, it was us.

He gets called a mathematician most often, I suppose because people don't want to be anachronistic. But scroll up: his most famous work is as a logician and a systems engineer, and the rest is statistics and algorithmics and cognitive science. He was falling between several chairs, until computer science caught up with him:

> *a pure mathematician worked in a symbolic world and not with things. The machine seemed to be a contradiction... For Alan Turing personally, the machine was a symptom of something that could not be answered by mathematics alone. He was working within the central problems of classical number theory, and making a contribution to it, but this*

> *was not enough. The Turing machine, and the ordinal logics, formalising the workings of the mind; Wittgenstein's enquiries; the electric multiplier and now this concatenation of gear wheels – they all spoke of making some connection between the abstract and the physical. It was not science, not 'applied mathematics', but a sort of applied logic, something that had no name.*

The philosopher-engineer. One of several moments in Hodge's book that left me dumbstruck is Turing arguing with Wittgenstein about the foundations of mathematics. (In the spring of 1939 they were both teaching courses at Cambridge called that!) Bit awkward, and in my view Alan goes easy on Ludwig. But you still couldn't make it up.

The government employed Turing for 9 years, paying him about £6000 over the duration (£300k in today's money). In that time he produced 3 gigantically advanced systems (most of the Hut 8 system, the Delilah and the ACE design), about 10 or 20 years ahead of their time. Hodges sees this as a triumph of managerial socialism. Now, breaking naval enigma for £300k is an unbelievable deal (the savings from undestroyed shipping and cargo alone would be in the billions, let alone the loss of life, let alone the decisive tactical advantage). But the government suppressed Delilah and totally screwed up the ACE project. So I'm not sure if we can cheer too much. Keynes says somewhere that

> *The important thing for Government is not to do things which individuals are doing already, and to do them a little better or a little worse; but to do those things which at present are not done at all.*

This is true of Bletchley. But instructive failures are only helpful if they occur in public. (As at least the ACE report was.)

The most annoying part of the films making up emotionally powerful unifying themes for Turing is that they are already there. But to grasp them, you'd have to actually display what was most wonderful and important about him, his technical work, and there goes the box office.

> *In an end-of-term sing-song [at Sherborne, when Turing was 12], the following couplet described him:*
>
> > *Turing's fond of the football field*
> > *For geometric problems the touch-lines yield*
>
> *... another verse had him 'watching the daisies grow' during hockey... although intended as a joke against his dreamy passivity, there might have been a truth in the observation.*
>
> *[20 years later] ...One day he and Joan were lying on the Bletchley lawn looking at the daisies... Alan produced a fir cone from his pocket, on which the Fibonacci numbers could be traced rather clearly, but the same idea could also be taken to apply to the florets of the daisy flower.*
>
> *[30 years later] ...he was trying out on the computer the solution of the very difficult differential equations that arose when [one] followed the chemical theory of [plant] morphogenesis beyond the moment of budding...*
>
> *...he also developed a purely descriptive theory of leaf-arrangement... using matrices to*

> *represent the winding of spirals of leaves or seeds round a stem or flower-head... The intention was that ultimately these two approaches would join up when he found a system of equations that would generate the Fibonacci patterns expressed by his matrices.*
>
> *...Such observations reflected an insight gained from... [a program called] 'Outline of Development of the Daisy'. He had quite literally been 'watching the daisies grow'... on his universal machine.*

Highlights

Hofstadter:

"Is a mind a complicated kind of abstract pattern that develops in an underlying physical substrate, such as a vast network of nerve cells? If so... could something else be substituted for the tiny nerve cells, such as millions of small computational units made of arrays of transistors, giving rise to an artificial neural network with a conscious mind?... In short, can thinking and feeling emerge from patterns of activity in different sorts of substrate − organic, electronic, or otherwise?

...Could a language-using machine give the appearance of understanding sentences and coming up with ideas while in truth being as devoid of thought and as empty inside as a nineteenth-century adding machine or a twentieth-century word processor? ...Are understanding and reasoning incompatible with a materialistic, mechanistic view of living beings?

Could a machine ever be said to have made its own decisions? Could a machine have beliefs? Could a machine believe it made its own decisions? Could a machine erroneously attribute free will to itself?... Could creativity emerge from a set of fixed rules? Are we − even the most creative among us − but passive slaves to the laws of physics that govern our neurons?

...Could a machine be frustrated and suffer? Could a frustrated machine release its pent-up feelings by going outdoors and self-propelling ten miles? Could a machine learn to enjoy the sweet pain of marathon running? Could a machine with a seeming zest for life destroy itself purposefully one day, planning the entire episode so as to fool its mother machine into "thinking" that it had perished by accident?

> *- These are the sorts of questions that burned in the brain of Alan Mathison Turing, the great British mathematician who spearheaded the science of computation; yet if they are read at another level, these questions also reveal highlights of Turing's troubled life.*

Hodges:

> *...the sheer timelessness of pure mathematics transcends the limitations of his twentieth-century span. When Turing returned to the prime numbers in 1950, they were unchanged from when he left them in 1939, wars and superpowers notwithstanding. As GH Hardy famously said, they are so. This is mathematical culture, and such was his life, presenting a real difficulty to minds set in literary, artistic or political templates.*

> *...It was difficult enough being a mathematician, this being the frightening subject of which even educated people knew nothing, not even what it was, and of which they*

> *might proudly boast ignorance.*

> *Puzzled since childhood by the 'obvious duties', he was doubly detached from the imitation game of social life, as pure scientist and as homosexual. Manners, committees, examinations, interrogations, German codes and fixed moral codes – they all threatened his freedom. Some he would accept, some actually enjoy obeying, others reject, but in any case he was peculiarly conscious, self-conscious, of things that other people accepted 'without thinking'; It was in this spirit that he enjoyed writing formal 'routines' for the computer, just as he enjoyed Jane Austen and Trollope, the novelists of social duty and hierarchy. He enjoyed making life into a game, a pantomime. He had done his best to turn the Second World War into a game.*

> *What he had done was to combine such a naive mechanistic picture of the mind with the precise logic of pure mathematics. His machines – soon to be called Turing machines – offered a bridge, a connection between abstract symbols, and the physical world...*
>
> *a pure mathematician worked in a symbolic world and not with things. The machine seemed to be a contradiction... For Alan Turing personally, the machine was a symptom of something that could not be answered by mathematics alone. He was working within the central problems of classical number theory, and making a contribution to it, but this was not enough. The Turing machine, and the ordinal logics, formalising the workings of the mind; Wittgenstein's enquiries; the electric multiplier and now this concatenation of gear wheels – they all spoke of making some connection between the abstract and the physical. It was not science, not 'applied mathematics', but a sort of applied logic, something that had no name.*

> *It was a very remarkable fact that Emil Post's [independently conceived] 'worker' was to perform exactly the same range of tasks as those of the Turing 'machine'... Post's paper was much less ambitious than Computable Numbers; he did not develop a 'universal worker' nor himself deal with the Hilbert decision problem... But he guessed correctly that his formulation would close the conceptual gap that Church had left. In this it was only by a few months that he had been pre-empted by the Turing machine, and Church had to certify that the work had been completely independent. So even if Alan Turing had never been, his idea would soon have come to light in one form or another. It had to. It was the necessary bridge between the world of logic and the world in which people did things.*

> *[A corollary of Turing's discovery of the universal machine]: the law of information technology: all mechanical processes, however ridiculous, evil, petty, wasteful, or pointless, can be put on a computer.*

WITTGENSTEIN: ... *Think of the case of the Liar. It is very queer in a way that this should have puzzled anyone – much more extraordinary than you might think. ... Because the thing works like this: if a man says 'I am lying' we say that it follows that he is not lying, from which it follows that he is lying and so on. Well, so what? You can go on like that until you are black in the face. Why not? It doesn't matter. ... it is just a useless language-game, and why should anybody be excited?*
TURING: *What puzzles one is that one usually uses a contradiction as a criterion for having done something wrong. But in this case one cannot find anything done wrong.*
WITTGENSTEIN: *Yes – and more: nothing has been done wrong... where will the harm*

come?
TURING: *The real harm will not come in unless there is an application, in which a bridge may fall down or something of that sort.*
WITTGENSTEIN: *...The question is: Why are people afraid of contradictions? It is easy to understand why they should be afraid of contradictions in orders, descriptions, etc., outside mathematics. The question is: Why should they be afraid of contradictions inside mathematics? Turing says, 'Because something may go wrong with the application.' But nothing need go wrong. And if something does go wrong – if the bridge breaks down – then your mistake was of the kind of using a wrong natural law...*
TURING: *You cannot be confident about applying your calculus until you know that there is no hidden contradiction in it.*
WITTGENSTEIN: *There seems to me to be an enormous mistake there. ... Suppose I convince Rhees of the paradox of the Liar, and he says, 'I lie, therefore I do not lie, therefore I lie and I do not lie, therefore we have a contradiction, therefore 2 × 2 = 369.' Well, we should not call this 'multiplication', that is all...*
TURING: *Although you do not know that the bridge will fall if there are no contradictions, yet it is almost certain that if there are contradictions it will go wrong somewhere.*
WITTGENSTEIN: *But nothing has ever gone wrong that way yet...*

> *So in the summer of 1940, Alan Turing found himself in the position of telling other people what to do, for the first time since school. It was like school inasmuch as the WRNS and the 'big room girls' played the role of 'fags'... one notable difference from school was that it brought him for the first time into contact with women... he specifically told [Joan] that he was glad he could talk to her 'as to a man'. Alan was often lost when dealing with the Hut 8 'girls', not least because he was unable to cope with the 'talking down' which was expected. But Joan's position as cryptanalyst gave her the status of an honorary male.*
>
> *It was the first time in his life that he had mixed with ordinary people for any length of time, people picked out neither by social class nor by a special kind of intellect. It was a typical Turing irony that this should happen at an establishment working for the secret service. [He was 30 at this point.]*

> *Alan's own youthfulness much endeared him to the younger recruits... it was hard to decide whether one so 'schoolboyish' could be as much as thirty, or whether one carrying so much intellectual standing could be so young. A conversation with him was like being invited into some older boy's study where House Colours and Chapel Parade gave way to illicit jazz and D.H. Lawrence novels, but where the housemaster had to turn a blind eye because a precious scholarship was being won.*

> *In 1941 everyone had to knit and glue and make their own entertainments... the siege mentality suited Alan rather well, with matters of social protocol that in the 1930s seemed so important now falling into abeyance. He always liked making things for himself, be they gloves, radio sets or probability theorems. At Cambridge he had a way of telling the time from the stars. Now the war was on his side. In a more self-sufficient England, everyone had to live in a more Turingesque way, with less waste of energy.*

> *His high-pitched voice already stood out above the general murmur of well-behaved junior executives grooming themselves for promotion within the Bell corporation. Then he was suddenly heard to say: 'No, I'm not interested in developing a powerful brain. All I'm after is just a mediocre brain, something like the President of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company.' The room was paralysed, while Alan nonchalantly*

continued to explain how he imagined feeding in facts on prices of commodities and stock, and asking the machine the question 'Do I buy or sell?'

As at school, trivial examples of 'eccentricity' circulated in Bletchley circles. Near the beginning of June he would suffer from hay fever, which blinded him as he cycled to work, so he would use a gas mask to keep the pollen out, regardless of how he looked. The bicycle itself was unique, since it required the counting of revolutions until a certain bent spoke touched a certain link (rather like a cipher machine), when action would have to be taken to prevent the chain coming off. Alan had been delighted at having, as it were, deciphered the fault in the mechanism, which meant that he saved himself weeks of waiting for repairs, at a time when the bicycle had again become what it was when invented – the means of freedom. It also meant that no one else could ride it.

He made a more explicit defence of his tea-mug (again irreplaceable, in wartime conditions) by attaching it with a combination lock to a Hut 8 radiator pipe. But it was picked, to tease him.

Trousers held up by string, pyjama jacket under his sports coat – the stories, whether true or not, went the rounds. And now that he was in a position of authority, the nervousness of his manner was more open to comment. There was his voice, liable to stall in mid-sentence with a tense, high-pitched 'Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah' while he fished, his brain almost visibly labouring away, for the right expression, meanwhile preventing interruption. The word, when it came, might be an unexpected one, a homely analogy, slang expression, pun or wild scheme or rude suggestion accompanied with his machine-like laugh; bold but not with the coarseness of one who had seen it all and been disillusioned, but with the sharpness of one seeing it through strangely fresh eyes. 'Schoolboyish' was the only word they had for it. Once a personnel form came round the Huts, and some joker filled in for him, 'Turing A.M. Age 21', but others, including Joan, said it should be 'Age 16'...

It was demeaning, but the repetition of superficial anecdotes about his usually quite sensible solutions to life's small challenges served the useful purpose of deflecting attention away from the more dangerous and difficult questions about what an Alan Turing might think about the world in which he lived. English 'eccentricity' served as a safety valve for those who doubted the general rules of society. More sensitive people at Bletchley were aware of layers of introspection and subtlety of manner that lay beneath the occasional funny stories. But perhaps he himself welcomed the chortling over his habits, which created a line of defence for himself, without a loss of integrity.

Glennie sometimes thought of Alan as Caliban, with his dark moods, sometimes gleeful, sometimes sulky, appearing in the laboratory on a somewhat random basis. He could be absurdly naive, as when bursting with laughter at a punning name that Glennie made up for an output routine: 'RITE'. To Cicely Popplewell he was a terrible boss, but on the other hand, there was no question of having to be polite or deferent to him – it was impossible. He was regarded as a local authority on mathematical methods; those who wanted a suggestion would just have to ask him straight out, and if they could keep his interest and patience, they might get a valuable hint... he was no world-standard mathematician, and it was often more amazing to the professional mathematician what he did not know, than what he did... indeed he had read very little mathematics since 1938.

> *Alan Turing presumably thought that eventually a machine would be capable of writing a book such as this [Hodge's biography of Turing]. In his 1951 radio talk, set against the opening of the Festival of Britain, he commented that 'It is customary... to offer a grain of comfort, in the form of a statement that some peculiarly human characteristic could never be imitated by a machine. I cannot offer any such comfort, for I believe that no such bounds can be set.'*

> *In an end-of-term sing-song [at Sherborne, when Turing was 12], the following couplet described him:*
>
> > *Turing's fond of the football field For geometric problems the touch-lines yield*
>
> *... another verse had him 'watching the daisies grow' during hockey... although intended as a joke against his dreamy passivity, there might have been a truth in the observation.*
>
> *[20 years later] ...One day he and Joan were lying on the Bletchley lawn looking at the daisies... Alan produced a fir cone from his pocket, on which the Fibonacci numbers could be traced rather clearly, but the same idea could also be taken to apply to the florets of the daisy flower.*
>
> *[30 years later] ...he was trying out on the computer the solution of the very difficult differential equations that arose when [one] followed the chemical theory of [plant] morphogenesis beyond the moment of budding... it also required some rather sophisticated applied mathematics, which involved the use of 'operators' rather as in quantum mechanics. Numerical analysis was also important... In this it was like a private atomic bomb, the computer in both cases following the development of interacting fluid waves.*
>
> *...he also developed a purely descriptive theory of leaf-arrangement... using matrices to represent the winding of spirals of leaves or seeds round a stem or flower-head... The intention was that ultimately these two approaches would join up when he found a system of equations that would generate the Fibonacci patterns expressed by his matrices.*
>
> *...Such observations reflected an insight gained from... [a program called] 'Outline of Development of the Daisy'. He had quite literally been 'watching the daisies grow'... on his universal machine.*

Gödel:

> *[Tarski and I both stress] the great importance of the concept of... Turing's computability... this importance is largely due to the fact that, with this concept, one has for the first time succeeded in giving an absolute notion to an interesting epistemological notion, i.e., one not depending on the formalism chosen*

> *Going even further, modern papers sometimes employ the usage of 'turing machine'. Sinking without a capital letter into the collective mathematical consciousness (as with the 'abelian group', or the 'riemannian manifold') is probably the best that science can offer in the way of canonisation.*

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*

2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*

3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

In this case: I am a computer scientist, and I've studied the early history of computing quite closely. I understand many of Turing's original papers, besides his group theory.

Cross-posted from Goodreads.

Tags: bio, computers, effective-altruism, greats

Drake, Hanson, and the meaning of life

2nd November 2021

- *Our best guess why the galaxy is empty*
- *Confidence*: 50%
- *Topic importance*: 10 / 10
- *Content notes*: Mostly just rehashing Sandberg, Drexler, Ord
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

The physicist Enrico Fermi once looked up at lunch conversation and asked: “Where is everyone?”

He meant aliens. The galaxy has >100 billion stars, >1 tn planets. So we shouldn’t be alone - we should see lots of signals. Shouldn’t we?

Decades later, this argument was made one notch clearer with the Drake Equation. (It’s just basic physics plus the product rule plus a bunch of guesses.) It aims at the expected number of visible civs in our galaxy.

It’s usually criticised as approximate, statistical, not really science, vast uncertainties, strong assumptions. But it’s better than nothing as a tool for constraining uncertainty (rather than fixing the correct value): “we must be wrong somewhere; which of these estimates is most wrong?”

What does it take to get a civilisation like ours? What does it take to get a civilisation you can see across the void?:

A star to warm you; a planet to shield you; life to bootstrap you; intelligent life (you); signalling technology to reveal you; longevity to keep the signal going.

Symbols

N = #civs in our galaxy we could communicate with R_* = $^{\text{starsyear}}$ f_p = $^{\text{planet-starsstar}}$

n_e = $^{\text{good planetsplanet-star}}$ f_l = $^{\text{lifesgood planet}}$ f_i = $^{\text{intelligenceslife}}$

f_c = $^{\text{signalsintelligence}}$ L = year

And a quick dimension check shows that this gives us what we want, # signals

You are here | $N = R_* f_p n_e f_l f_i f_c L$

$$\text{Best-guess magnitudes} \ = 10^0 10^0 10^{-0.3} 10^0 10^0 10^{-1} 10^3 = 10^{1.7} \ \simeq 50 \text{visible civilisations}$$

Lol! So one of these must be much lower than we realise. And it has to be on the right.

Given this true-ish structure - but this false conclusion! - Robin Hanson noticed the implied “Great Filter”. At some point, civs must be stopped from sending signals and spreading / building megastructures. Logically, it’s somewhere inbetween one (or more) of these terms.

People argued for 30 years about which of the terms is small. But actually the whole approach is stupid: point estimates are stupid whenever you have notable uncertainty (more than one order of magnitude, say). What are our current uncertainties for each of these terms?

$$N = R_* f_p n_e f_l f_i f_c L$$

$$\text{Uncertainties } = 10^{0.9}, 10^{0}, 10^{2}, 10^{>200}, 10^{3}, 10^{>2}, 10^{8.3}$$

Aha! f_l is the obvious culprit. For all we know, the galaxy is empty because abiogenesis is hard, maybe 10 with 200 zeroes hard.

Rerunning the analysis using these uncertainties and sampling the resulting Bayesian model gives a posterior with 1/3 of the mass under *1* civilisation.

i.e. A 1/3 chance of being alone in the galaxy. And a 2/3-likely event not happening is not a paradox. It's not even a puzzle.

If you watch science documentaries - Brian Cox, Neil deGrasse Tyson, VSauce - they say they hope we find life on Mars. That we're not alone in the universe.

But finding aliens is terrible news *even if they are good dudes and co-operate fully*.

Finding microbial aliens is terrible news. Multicellular life, like the putative Mars fungi are even worse. And fellow clever scientists the worst of all.

Why? It forces the probability mass over the filter to move right along the Drake Equation. Seeing alien life of any kind is some evidence that the Filter is still to come, that we are doomed to never become galactically visible and never flourish.

(How can this be? How can we update so strongly from one data point?: Because we currently have only one data point, ourselves, and so the distribution over f_l is ridiculously wide, and so one more data point can cause a large update.)

Why care about this?

The usual perspective, even for very smart and thoughtful people, is bound to 1) one country on 2) one planet 3) in this century.

But the above (weak!) estimators reveal Earth's current importance to be relatively small, and its potential importance to be vast.

We are potentially the only civ. The only chance for the supercluster's "negentropy" to be useful. The single candle flame of consciousness and so(?) value.

Despite the lurking doom, there's something optimistic here: at the moment it sorta looks like the filter is behind us. 1

There is some chance that the light-cone is unoccupied. So there is some chance that what we and our descendents do will echo on the grandest possible scale.

See also

- The paper this post is a explainer for
- Daniel Eth on the Great Filter
- James Fodor arguing that even the Bayesian version is flawed and the 'paradox' is still there (but mild)

1. That we can't see Dyson spheres (etc) around us means that there's no *obvious* flashy AGIs maximising something. But if they're using their own personal black holes for

power we wouldn't see them.

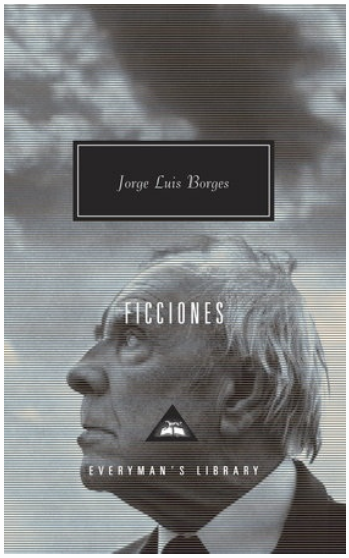
Tags: longtermism, philosophy, scifi, rationality, science

Processing math: 100%

'Ficciones' (1944) by Borges

28th March 2019

- *Notes on some supreme short stories + basic combinatorics.*
- *Confidence*: 95%
- *Topic importance*: 3 / 10



These stories are deeply uncanny, without worshipping mystery. “Tlön” is scarier to me than any of Lovecraft. “Babel” is also horrifying in a way. Borges’ characters are reasoning about the limits of reason. (There is the unearthly drama of higher mathematics in a couple of these.) It manages to be cryptic without being annoying, to use literary gossip and the droning of archivists for art. Some of this is 80 years old, and it’s still completely fresh.

He makes literature larger, by bringing in new things - bibliographic minutiae, English department arcana, salon gossip. He writes perfect reviews of fake books. Gushing praise of nonexistent authors draws back the veil (as if our world’s reviewers would say the same things whether or not the authors existed).

Borges was not a postmodernist but these have the best of what I take postmodernism to mean: nonliteral play, generative scepticism about sense and reference, language-games.

I am often not sure of the significance of Borges’ sentences. But for once the critic’s working assumption of hidden meaning seems sound: if I thought about it, I could find out. And not just in the ordinary way, by projection. I expect to find *Borges* in them if I try.

“The Library of Babel”

A banal idea: “language is composite”. Characters go into words into sentences into works into worldviews. Here Borges stretches this fact until you see horror in it, the shock of exponentiation on the tiny scale of a human life.

In the simple idea of mechanically generating all strings of length *n=1,312,000*, Borges finds a Gothic, claustrophobic closed nightmare. The story is not 8 pages long and contains more thinking than many books.

There exists one truth; there are uncountably many falsehoods; worse, there’s a far larger

infinity of nonsense, of things which make sense in no language, which don't make enough sense to be false, which never will. This is the horror of Platonism or Many-world physics or Meinong: that we could be invisibly boxed-in by garbled infinities, endless keyboard mashing. The "noosphere" - all good ideas plus all bad ideas ever had - is a tiny pocket of meaning in a sea of meaninglessness.

The stunning effect of "Babel" depends on its not being magic, not hand-wavy (merely monstrous, physically impossible for interesting reasons which violate no particular law). Ted Chiang is grasping at a similar titanic scale when he uses an actually alien language to explain variational physics.

Borges was a librarian. But, while he said photogenic things about libraries, he didn't necessarily like being in them. "The Library of Babel" twists that quotation, by imagining an otherworldly library which breaks men just by existing. Sturrock, his biographer:

> *Borges had some reason to dislike libraries because for nine years "of solid unhappiness", from 1937 to 1946, he was obliged to work in one, as a quite junior librarian, in order to make money. The cataloguing work he did was futile...*

The alphabet used for the Babel books has 22 letters and no uppercase. We could try and look up human languages with that many letters, but better to take this as a hint that our narrator is *not us* - he can be a total alien, far from Earth, and the exact same library will still confound him the exact same way. The same geometry constrains all minds. Even what seems meaningful need not be, if your sample is large enough:

> *This useless and wordy epistle ['The Library of Babel'] itself already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five shelves in one of the uncountable heaxgons - and so does its refutation. (And n possible languages make use of the same vocabulary; in some of them the symbol 'library' admits of the correct definition 'ubiquitous and everlasting system of hexagonal galleries', but 'library' is 'bread' or 'pyramid' of anything else... You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?)*

The narrator says that the fall from his floor of the Library "*is infinite*" (or indefinite), that the rooms are "*uncountable*", but we can do better than this quite easily, from the text. There are 410*40*80 = 1,312,000 characters per book. The number of distinct books is thus (22 + 3)^{1312000} or ~2 followed by 1.8 million zeroes. (The extra three are space, period, and comma.) It is hard to give a reference for how large this is: if every atom in the universe contained as many atoms as are in the universe (10^80), and each of the *nested* atoms was a Babel book, this would still contain only a laughably tiny fraction of Babel, less than one googolplexth. There's 4*5*32 = 640 books per hexagon, so we need about 3 x 10^1834094 room-sized hexagons. This is the full implication of the simple thought "every book of length 1312000". (Borges notes his own infinity/finity contradiction on the last page, explaining that the Library is unbounded and periodic, a hypersphere.)

It couldn't possibly be even fractionally built. And yet, through maths, it has been built! - "only" implicitly, skeletally. Still counts.

And so a beautiful lesson: think what the incredible feat of writing any book - no matter how bad - actually entails. Our nervous system shields us from Babel, from the larger part of possible meanings and the overwhelming majority of string space. This is an astonishing act, in information terms: the ultimate search, which we succeed at effortlessly, many times a day. Epic achievements in life-giving ignoring.

The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim

Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote

The Circular Ruins

The Lottery in Babylon

An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain

The Library of Babel

The Garden of Forking Paths

Funes the Memorious

The Form of the Sword

Theme of the Traitor and the Hero

Death and the Compass

The Secret Miracle

Three Versions of Judas

The End

The Sect of the Phoenix

The South

Cross-posted from Goodreads.

Tags:

Disambiguating the first computer

28th August 2017

- *Tiny app for defining "computer" and selecting between first computers.*
- *Confidence*: Pretty sure, 90%. A few dates missing, but there's no crucial overlaps.
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Content notes*: unfair posterity.
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

Specify what you mean by computer, and I'll tell you the first computer:
(click any radio button to start)

What conveys its signals?
- ◯ entirely nonelectrical parts
- ◉ electromechanical parts
- ◯ fully electronic parts

Is it programmable?
- ◉ Yes
- ◯ No

Can it approximate all Turing machines?
- ◉ Yes
- ◯ No

How does it represent numbers?
- ◉ Digital (integers)
- ◯ Analogue (smooth physical states)

What base are its numbers?
- ◯ 2 - Binary
- ◯ 3 - Ternary
- ◯ 10 - Decimal

Does it store programs as data?
- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

How many bits are transmitted at once?
- ◯ Serial (one)
- ◯ Parallel (several)

Is it made of transistors?
- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Does it use virtual memory addressing?
- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

What kind of instruction set does it use?
- ◯ Hard-wired gates
- ◯ CISC
- ◯ RISC

Did it have a GUI as primary interface?
- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Reset fields

> *Let me emphasize that there is no such thing as "first" in any activity associated with human invention. If you add enough adjectives to a description you can always claim your own favorite. For example the ENIAC is often claimed to be the "first electronic, general purpose, large scale, digital computer" and you certainly have to add all those adjectives before you have a correct statement...*

– Michael Williams

People think they know what they mean when they say "computer" - it's the thing with a screen and a mouse that gives you cat photos. In that narrow sense, the SDS 940 (1968) that ran Engelbart's On-Line System was 'the first computer'.

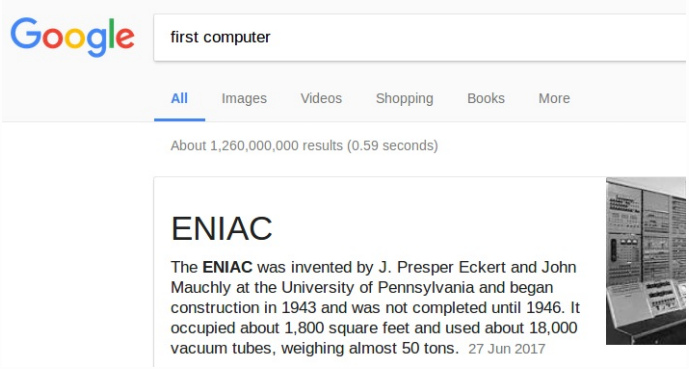
This is obviously no good: it disqualifies a hundred years of earlier digital computers. Luckily, the name's a clue: computers are things that do computations. However, all of reality can be usefully considered as computation. So a computer can't be just "a system which transforms physical information", because everything does that.

Data: A randomly selected atom is not a computer. A gun is not a computer. An abacus is not a computer, nor is its descendent the slide rule. A primate doing addition is not the kind of computer we are talking about. So we want the first *inorganic device that can do complex information-processing automatically, on demand*. 2

(Electricity isn't key, though. The fact that we use voltages to conduct most of our computations is a matter of convenience, not essence.)

When asking "what was the first computer?", people usually mean the first *modern* computer, where "modern" is some collection of the following properties: fully-electronic, Turing-complete, stored-program, binary-digital, parallelised, integrated-circuit-transistorised, virtual-memory, instruction-set-architecture, presenting a desktop metaphor to the user.

Just give me a straight answer



No. Here are some big candidates:

1. The Antikythera mechanism is the first known computer, probably built around 100 BCE. It was just a 'calculator'.

2. Honourable mention of da Vinci's functional design (c. 1500) of a mechanical calculator.

3. Honourable mention of Charles Babbage and his unbuilt Analytical Engine: if he had had about 10 times more money, he might well have built the first general-purpose digital machine around 1850.

4. The Z3 (operational on 7th December 1941) was the first general-purpose digital machine to execute a program successfully. (Its inventor, Konrad Zuse, also rediscovered Shannon's great breakthrough and much else besides.)

5. The Colossus Mark I (operational on 8th December 1943) was the first fully-electronic programmable digital computer. It was just a '5KHz logic calculator'. 3

6. The ENIAC (operational by November 1945) was the first fully-electronic general-purpose digital computer.1 Google's foolish truncation of this specification led to me doing all the research for this piece.

7. The Manchester Baby (operational by June 1948) was the first fully-electronic, general-purpose digital computer to successfully execute a 'stored program', a set of instructions loaded into its own memory as data. There are mixed reports of a heavily modified ENIAC executing one in April or else September 1948; Copeland notes that this was the most limited sense of stored program, but should probably still count if someone can track down the April records.
8. "The AGC was the first silicon integrated circuit based computer."

Definitions

"Automatically"

Acting without external intervention, after specifying input and program. I'm treating this as the core property of 'a computer'. An abacus is not a computer, because it doesn't do any operations for you. The Ishango bone, as far as anyone can tell, is also not a computer. A slide rule makes you do the intermediate steps and so isn't a computer.

"Calculator"

A distinction is sometimes made between computers and mere calculators. For instance, Zuse's Z3 is sometimes said to be an 'electronic calculator', and not a computer per se. This distinction does not have a physical basis.

I think their point is to make universal computation a necessary condition of being 'a computer' - but this condition would disqualify archetypal computers like the ABC and Colossus. So it doesn't fit.

For my purposes, a calculator is a computer: a special-purpose (arithmetic) computer. So we can talk about the ancient analogue devices and Babbage's inspired flight of general-purpose imagination in the same article.

"Programmable"

Can you change what it computes, without altering the gross structure of the processor? (Mechanical calculators are nonprogrammable computers, on this account.)

Flight of fancy (retracted)

This section misunderstands the nature of Peano arithmetic and is probably not salvageable. Calculators may well be accidentally mirroring the function of certain nonarithmetic Turing machines, but this is not a sensible use of "reasoning about" or "encoding".
However! basic computability theory throws a spanner at this: Peano arithmetic can reason about Turing machines. So calculators (which have addition and multiplication) can be made to program other things after all. So 'nonprogrammable' calculators are programmable in a stronger sense than they are not.

So I need to specify something else as the criterion, if I want to preserve the extension. "Not programmable without simulation"? "Without metamathematical encoding"? "Efficiently"? "Without being a smartass"? These all turn to ashes in my mouth.)

"Programmable" is sometimes used to mean "general-purpose". Actually GP computers are a subset of programmable computers: they're the ones that can be programmed to do 'anything'.

(Even worse, "Program-controlled" is sometimes used to mean punch-card or plug-wire programming, as opposed to "stored-program-controlled", for instance regarding the Z3 here.)

"General-purpose"

This is one of the vaguest terms. I have contorted it to mean: If the device had unlimited memory (and time), could it simulate a Universal Turing machine; could it compute all that can be computed?

Other questions

How many first computers are there?

My crude model (which has eight boolean variables and three ternary variables), implies that there are up to 2304 4 first computers out there. I have only bothered to identify 45 of them. Who's pedantic now?

What about newer first computers?

I am not even counting developments after 1970. You could also add "synchronous/asynchronous", "networked" (...), uni/multiprocessing", classical/quantum", Flynn's four streams, input (e.g. first keyboard), a fourth value for physical medium: "optical" computing... Above all you'd also want "mass-produced" and a huge sliding scale of "portable".

What does stored program really mean?

6 different things, as detailed here. Turing invented four of them first, Zuse another, and von Neumann another. Mostly independent. The ENIAC implemented the most limited form first, then the Manchester Baby did the others.

Are shit computers still computers?

The Antikythera mechanism didn't work very well, because of a false astronomical theory and the crude engineering tolerances of the time. It probably systematically predicted planets to be a full 40 degrees off the real course. Nor could Leibniz's calculator carry through.

Data

Here. If you have corrections or additions, please open an issue here.

A lot of the specs are taken from the remarkable conference covered by Rojas' *The First Computers*. John Morrice wrote a Python decision tree which inspired my solution. The SVG icons are by Feather. I used the Transcrypt Python transpiler, but kind of wish I hadn't.

TODO

The ENIAC was modified for stored programs in 1948. It was demoed in September '48. Other sources claim April '48, which would put it before the Baby. "Jennings said that ENIAC ran in this mode from April 1948, but Goldstine reported a later date: ‘on 16 September 1948 the new system ran on the ENIAC'".

1. Early on, ENIAC claimed the title "first computer" by default, because the others were destroyed by carpet bombing or hidden by classified status. It did large amounts of useful work, computing solutions to nuclear physics problems. (Though the Colossi were hardly toys either.)

   This claim may also be due to national chauvinism, since computer science, as a self-aware field, was pioneered in American universities.

   Testable implications of nationalism: see if definitions of "computer" vary by country. In Germany, where the great mechanical and electromechanical devices were made, you might expect more of the rarefied abstract nonelectronic idea of computation. In America, where universal electronic computation was done first, you should see an emphasis on electricity and performance.

2. Where "complex" is just "having intermediate steps between input and output".

   I added "inorganic" to exclude chimpanzees or octopi. Sorry.
3. Benjamin Wells has shown that ten Colossi working together(!) could have approximated a universal Turing machine. I honestly don't know whether to count this. (It's certainly more *physical* work than has to be done to make the Z3 Turing-complete...)
4. `2^8 * 3^3` - though minus a few hundred forbidden states like "Turing-complete non-programmable device".

Tags: computers, history, conceptual-analysis, lists

Worldview in Five Books

13th January 2019

- *A compressed version of what's important to me.*
- *Topic importance*: 9 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

It’s hard to just state your worldview, for several reasons.

First, it’s large: a typical human will have thousands of premises, both empirical and normative, with few of them examined, and uncountable more implicit premises.

Second, it’s obscure: you don’t have access to large parts of it, since parts are reflected only in your preconscious reactions and filters. What don’t you think about? What don’t do you consider doing?

Third, it’s a risky thing to do, since writing it down is likely to prematurely stabilise it. If a proposition makes it into your identity - if you consider yourself the *kind of person* who believes or disbelieves in climate change, believes or disbelieves in the divinity of Christ - then you are much less likely to react properly to evidence.

Also, no one really understands human values, in the strict sense of being able to define or encode them. So any general description of our own values is very likely to be wrong or partial. 3

So why do it? Well, because any pair of humans can be unfathomably different, and it’d be grand if we gave each other ways to bridge those gaps, or at least understand where in the world we’re coming from. 2

A wonderful little meme that flew around the bookish bit of the internet last year was “#WorldviewIn5Books”. 1 With a list this small, you need books that express multiple bits of you, and that don’t clash too much in other ways. (Looking at you, Taleb.) Five is a really hard constraint, given the above and the many ways a book can help you.

Themes to cover

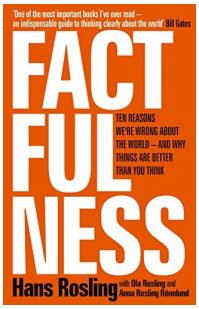
as of early 2019:

- *Progress*: Contrary to popular and elite opinion, the world has been getting better in key ways (poverty, violence, gender, disability, race discrimination, intellectual depth, freedom) for 70 years, and better in some key ways for 200 years. There’s a chance we could continue this to a dizzying degree.
- *Heuristics and biases*: Humans are deluded in predictable and previously adaptive ways. Why we don’t make sense. Implies scepticism.
- *Scientific imperialism*: Despite that, we sometimes succeed in knowing. It’s wrong to believe things on insufficient evidence. Technical skill is vital for successful thought and some kinds of action. Naturalism works methodologically and maybe ontologically too.
- *Effective altruism*: outcome-oriented, maximizing, cause-impartial egalitarianism. You can’t reliably act morally if you don’t know the truth.
- *Longtermism*: Most value lies in the future; the moral significance of our lives is dominated by our effect on that. Implies focussing on “existential risks”, things that

could end the entire future at once.

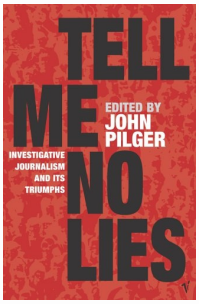
- *Cosmopolitanism*: The rich world's relative inaction for the global poor is an enormous moral catastrophe.
- *Animal welfare*: The suffering of nonhumans is also an enormous moral catastrophe.
- *Bioprogressivism*: Nature is not amoral, above judgment. Nor is it obviously good. Natural death is an enormous moral catastrophe.
- *Misc*: No one is only propositions and attitudes. I'm not a utility factory. I'm not a tool of myself. I'd be a poet if the world didn't have problems. Interiority, irony, abstraction, beauty - this stuff is very important. Just less important than action.

Five Books

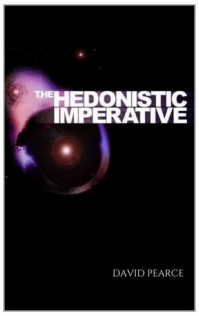


Rosling's *Factfulness*.
Themes: progress - mostly because of reason, evidence, tolerance; problems are solvable; empiricism - to be accurate (and thus moral) you have to quantify, even in social affairs; heuristics and biases as deep reasons for our dysfunction.

I picked this rather than *Enlightenment Now* or *Rational Optimist* or *Doing Good Better* or *Whole Earth Discipline* (out of the literature of progress) because it also covers biases - and so substitutes Kahneman, Taleb, Hanson, and Yudkowsky.

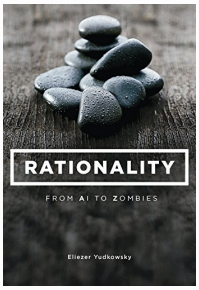


Pilger's *Tell Me No Lies*
Themes: strict scepticism; cosmopolitanism; politics as horrible tar pit; power corrupts - or, more likely, the corrupt attain power.
"*the penalty for refusing to participate in politics, is to be ruled by someone worse.*"



Pearce's *Hedonistic Imperative*
Themes: Moral passion, universal concern, bioprogressivism, animal welfare, the overwhelming importance of the far future, that the technical is essential to philosophy.

(I disagree with the metaphysics but it's beautiful and elsewhere true.)
Free here .



Yudkowsky's *Rationality: from A to Z*
Themes: heuristics and biases; the technical as the way out of heuristics and biases; the beauty and power of empiricism; the limits of traditional Skeptics and science fans; the conditions of contrarianism; how AI should worry you.

Free here. *See also* the Elephant in the Brain, the Incerto.

Borges' *Ficciones*
Themes: interiority, irony, fun, aestheticism, bookish apotheoses. Misc.

See also Pessoa, Clive James, verse.

Again, these aren't my favourite books, or the ones I enjoyed most, or the books that most changed me, or the books I think I'd include if I could understand them. (For instance, I got into anti-poverty through Peter Singer, heuristics and biases through Nassim Taleb, and longtermism through David Pearce.) They're what you could read if you wanted to understand me.

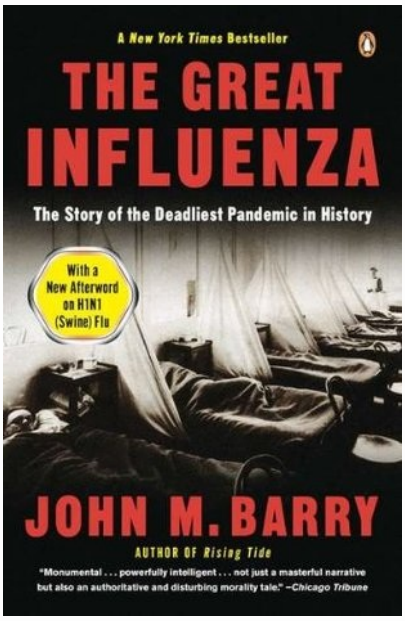
1. Another meme, less compressed, is the personal Canons of various cool people. These include people, blogrolls, videos, visual art, etc. Even better are "belief changelogs".
2. My collection of aphorisms is another attempt at a safe statement of my worldview: it's modular and humorous and incomplete, so it should be easier to withdraw and add things, and not worry about what's not represented. It's also pretty short.
3. Is a partial account worse than nothing? Am I saying moral philosophers should shut up? No, but they should have low confidence or hedge.

Tags: self-representation, lists, philosophy

'The Great Influenza' (2004) by Barry

26th June 2018

- *On WWI's less famous, even worse sequel: the H1N1 pandemic.*
- *Confidence*: 70%. The amount of mass death we have no direct evidence of is scary.
- *Topic importance*: 8 / 10
- *Content notes*: social collapse, authoritarianism, predatory pseudoscience. I'm not a virologist or historian.
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.



> *"It seems to be a plague, something out of the middle ages. Did you ever see so many funerals, ever?"*
>
> – Catherine Ann Porter

A rousing history of one of the worst things to ever happen: the 1918 outbreak of H1N1 flu. Most of it focusses on the frantic research against it; I'd never heard of any of the scientists. They didn't win, but they got us ready for next time.

Barry senses that the headline result - one-third of the entire world infected, with **25-100** million dead - is a numbing number. So, in modern terms:

> *It killed more people in twenty-four weeks than AIDS has killed in twenty-four years, more in a year than the Black Death killed in a century.*

Or ten thousand 9/11s. It's worth belabouring this, because we have a terrible habit of paying far more attention to human threats than natural ones, even when natural ones are far worse. (Witness our terrorism prevention budgets compared to our infectious disease control budgets, when the latter is a thousand times more lethal.)

So: The 1918 flu was worse than the entire First World War: 40+ million died of flu, compared with 17 million dead from war. 500 million people were permanently damaged by flu, vs 41 million by the war. **3% of all humans died of flu, including about 8% of young adults!**.

But it's hard to separate the War and the pandemic. The virus was spread everywhere by

unprecedented numbers of troops, and by the massive supply convoys it induced, and by the War's other human displacements. We don't know how many of the pneumonia deaths only occurred because of the logistical degradation, poverty and pestilence of wartime. There are terrible nonlinearities involved in overcrowding and global movement of troops. But add millions at least to the overall death toll caused by WWI.

Therapeutic nihilism

The first third of the book is a prelude, describing how terrible medicine was up to the 20th Century. Medicine was "the withered arm of science". Therapeutic nihilism (that is, "we can't really do anything") was the rational view, replacing millenia of Galenic woo.

> *Stengel reviewed dozens of ideas [for H1N1 treatments] advanced in medical journals. Gargles of various disinfectants. Drugs. Immune sera. Typhoid vaccine. Diphtheria antitoxin. But Stengel's message was simple: This doesn't work. That doesn't work. Nothing worked... Nothing they were doing worked.*

But this created a powerful vacuum: humans want to believe something can heal. The gap was filled with worse. Confabulations from this time still haunt us: homeopathy, chiropractic, naturopathy, Christian Science, and (though Barry doesn't include them) the organic farming movement and psychoanalysis.

Few people come off well. Even among the scientists, we get a horrible example of perverse priors and premature updating: most scientific resources were devoted to fighting the wrong pathogen, due to a stubborn bad guess by an extremely eminent researcher.

Rockefeller Institute

Quite a lot of the entire world's research funding for H1N1 was concentrated in the Rockefeller Institute.

They'd make for a good case study in ultra-effective philanthropy, though of course in this case, the worst case, they were too late, started from too primitive a basis.

War: reportedly hazardous to public health

> *There is, therefore, but one response possible from us: Force! force to the utmost, force without stint or limit, the righteous and triumphant force which shall make right the law of the world and cast every selfish dominion down in the dust.*
>
> – Woodrow Wilson addressing one of his infective money-lending mobs.

Wilson tends to be viewed pretty positively, because he won. ("*at last the world knows America as the savior of the world!*") But in the process he perverted an entire state and nation; ignored the terrible suffering of his own population for years; and refused a conditional peace with Austria in August, and again with the Kaiser's new parliament in September. (This meant 70 extra days of war, which, if this period was as lethal as the rest of the war, means up to 800,000 completely unnecessary deaths, not counting the collateral damage from wasting even more medical resources, mixing the population even more, during the worst epidemic ever).

> *the military suctioned more and more nurses and physicians into cantonments, aboard*

> *ships, into France, until it had extracted nearly all the best young physicians. Medical care for civilians deteriorated rapidly. The doctors who remained in civilian life were largely either incompetent young ones or those over forty-five years of age, the vast majority of whom had been trained in the old ways of medicine.*

He did great harm and should be viewed as we view Wilhelm II, whatever his unconsummated ideals. And this is before we consider blaming him, *or the bloody virus*, for the Treaty of Versailles, and so the rise of the Nazis.

> *But on April 3, 1919, Wilson fell ill with flu-like symptoms… Ever since, historians have wondered about this episode, both concerning Wilson's prior health problems and his performance when he returned to the negotiating table a week later.*
>
> *Wilson wasn't the same man. He tired easily and quickly lost focus and patience. He seemed paranoid, worried about being spied upon by housemaids. He achieved some of his specific goals but was unable or unwilling to articulate a broader vision for a better world. In other words, he acted like a man with residual neurological problems stemming from a recent bout of Spanish flu.*
>
> *Over the next crucial weeks, Wilson lost his best chance to win the peace by agreeing in principle to draconian terms favoured by France. The final settlement punished Germany with a formal admission of guilt, enormous reparations and the loss of about 10 per cent of its territory.*

This is too neat, too terrible. It reads like greentext, though all of the steps make sense (H1N1 cases in his entourage; severe cognitive deficits from recovered patients). Wikipedia doesn't even mention it, so I suppose it's fringe. Barry is aware of the temptation to tie everything into one knot, and hedges.

You already believe, probably, that World War I was a terrible senseless waste of life. Well, now magnify that belief by a factor of 5 or 6.

Crimes, abetting the virus

- In every belligerent nation, months of censorship of the press for "morale", preventing social distancing.
- In every belligerent nation, diverting more than half of the medical staff, even after decimation of the domestic population.
- In every belligerent nation, massive troop movements to many corners of the planet, massive unprecedented spreading.
- In America, war bond parades and marches, millions and millions of community mixing contacts.
- Rejecting peace terms twice, prolonging the war and continuing to divert half the world's medical resources.

Woodrow Un-American

Barry's middle chapters are a frightening portrait of how rabidly un-American the US was in 1918. The laws were bad enough - for instance the ban on criticising the government. But then there's the unofficial "patriotic duties", punishable by beatings. State-sponsored atavism.

> *By the summer of 1918, however, Wilson had injected the government into every facet of national life and had created great bureaucratic engines to focus all the nation's*

attention and intent on the war.

He had created a Food Administration to control and distribute food, a Fuel Administration to ration coal and gasoline, a War Industries Board to oversee the entire economy. He had taken all but physical control over the railroads and had created a federally sponsored river barge line that brought commerce back to life on the Mississippi River, a commerce that had been killed by competition from those railroads. He had built many dozens of military installations, each of which held at least tens of thousands of soldiers or sailors. He had created industries that made America's shipyards teem with hundreds of thousands of laborers launching hundreds of ships, dug new coal mines to produce coal for the factories that weaned America's military from British and French weapons and munitions—for, unlike in World War II, America was no arsenal of democracy.

He had created a vast propaganda machine, an internal spy network, a bond-selling apparatus... He had even succeeded in stifling speech, in the summer of 1918 arresting and imprisoning — some for prison terms longer than ten years —not just radical labor leaders and editors of German-language newspapers but powerful men, even a congressman.

He had injected the government into American life in ways unlike any other in the nation's history. And the final extension of federal power had come only in the spring of 1918, after the first wave of influenza had begun jumping from camp to camp, when the government expanded the draft from males between the ages of twenty-one and thirty to those between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. Only on May 23, 1918, had Provost Marshal Enoch Crowder, who oversaw the draft, issued his "work or fight" order, stating that anyone not employed in an essential industry would be drafted...

Crowder bragged about doing "in a day what the Prussian autocracy had been spending nearly fifty years to perfect..."

In mid-August, as the lethal wave of the epidemic was gathering itself, Austria had already inquired about peace terms, an inquiry that Wilson rebuffed utterly. And as the epidemic was gathering full momentum, peace was only weeks away. Bulgaria had signed an armistice on September 29. On September 30, Kaiser Wilhelm had granted parliamentary government to the German nation; that same day Ludendorff had warned his government that Germany must extend peace feelers or disaster—immediate disaster—would follow. German diplomats sent out those feelers. Wilson ignored them. The Central Powers, Germany and her allies, were simultaneously breaking off one from one another and disintegrating internally as well. In the first week of October, Austria and Germany separately sent peace feelers to the Allies, and on October 7, Austria delivered a diplomatic note to Wilson formally seeking peace on any terms Wilson chose. Ten days later — days of battle and deaths — the Austrian note remained unanswered.

Earlier Wilson had spoken of a "peace without victory," believing only such a peace could last. But now he gave no indication that the war would soon be over. Although a rumor that the war had ended sent thrills through the nation, Wilson quickly renounced it. Nor would he relent. He was not now fighting to the death; he was fighting only to kill...

If Wilson and his government would not be turned from his end even by the prospect of peace, they would hardly be turned by a virus. And the reluctance, inability, or outright refusal of the American government to shift targets would contribute to the killing. Wilson

> *took no public note of the disease, and the thrust of the government was not diverted. The relief effort for influenza victims would find no assistance in the Food Administration or the Fuel Administration or the Railroad Administration. From neither the White House nor any other senior administration post would there come any leadership, any attempt to set priorities, any attempt to coordinate activities, any attempt to deliver resources.*
>
> *...the military would give no help to civilians. Instead it would draw further upon civilian resources. The same day that Welch had stepped out of the autopsy room at Devens and called Gorgas's office, his warning had been relayed to the army chief of staff, urging that all transfers be frozen unless absolutely necessary and that under no circumstances transfers from infected camps be made... Gorgas's superiors ignored the warning. There was no interruption of movement between camps whatsoever; not until weeks later, with the camps paralyzed and, literally, tens of thousands of soldiers dead or dying, did the army make any adjustments.*

The undocumented apocalypse

Because the disease was everywhere, ravaging the species (and beyond), the book can't cover everything. Very little is said about non-Americans, i.e about 98% of the death and chaos. This is partly because there just isn't a lot of evidence about them, despite their influenza immunity and medical care being even worse. (This is why the top estimates reach 100m deaths, three times the median estimate.)

Here is a passage about just a tiny number of them, in the north:

> *In Alaska, whites protected themselves. Sentries guarded all trails, and every person entering the city was quarantined for five days. Eskimos had no such luck. A senior Red Cross official warned that without "immediate medical assistance the race" could become "extinct."...*
>
> *The navy provided the collier USS Brutus to carry a relief expedition... They found terrible things. One doctor visited ten tiny villages and found "three wiped out entirely; others average 85% deaths... Survivors generally children... probably 25% frozen to death before help arrived."*
>
> *The virus probably did not kill all of them directly. But it struck so suddenly it left no one well enough to care for any others, no one to get food, no one to get water. And those who could have survived, surrounded by bodies, bodies of people they loved, might well have preferred to go where their family had gone, might well have wanted to no longer be alone...*
>
> *Two hundred sixty-six people had lived in Okak, and many dogs, dogs nearly wild. When the virus came, it struck so hard so fast people could not care for themselves or feed the dogs. The dogs grew hungry, crazed with hunger, devoured each other, then wildly smashed through windows and doors, and fed...*
>
> *In all of Labrador, at least one-third the total population died.*

The fall of Philadelphia

Because so much of the state was occupied in war, in places there was wholesale social collapse:

> *In Philadelphia meanwhile fear came and stayed. Death could come from anyone, anytime. People moved away from others on the sidewalk, avoided conversation; if they did speak, they turned their faces away to avoid the other person's breathing.*
>
> *The impossibility of getting help compounded the isolation. 850 Philadelphia doctors and more nurses were away in the military. More than that number were sick. Philadelphia General Hospital had 126 nurses. Despite all precautions, despite wearing surgical masks and gowns, eight doctors and fifty-four nurses — 43 percent of the staff—themselves required hospitalization. Ten nurses at this single hospital died. The Board of Health pleaded for help from retired nurses and doctors if they remembered "even a little" of their profession.*
>
> *When a nurse or doctor or policeman did actually come, they wore their ghostly surgical masks, and people fled them. In every home where someone was ill, people wondered if the person would die. And someone was ill in every home...*
>
> *Starr went to Emergency Hospital #2 at Eighteenth and Cherry Streets. He did have help, if it could be called that, from an elderly physician who had not practiced in years and who brought Starr into touch with the worst of heroic medicine. Starr wouldn't forget that, the ancient arts of purging, of venesection, the ancient art of opening a patient's vein. But for the most part he and the other students elsewhere were on their own, with little help even from nurses, who were so desperately needed that in each of ten emergency hospitals supplied by the Red Cross only a single qualified nurse was available to oversee whatever women came as volunteers. And often the volunteers reported for their duty once and, from either fear or exhaustion, did not come again.*
>
> *Nearly 1/4 of all the patients in his hospital died each day. Starr would go home, and when he returned the next day, he would find that between one-quarter and one-fifth of the patients in the hospital had died, replaced by new ones... Virtually all of them, along with their friends and relatives, were terrified that, no matter how mild the symptoms seemed at first, within them moved an alien force, a seething, spreading infection, a live thing with a will that was taking over their bodies — and could be killing them...*
>
> *The city was frozen with fear, frozen into stillness. Starr lived 12 miles from the hospital. The streets were silent on his drive home, silent. They were so silent he took to counting the cars he saw. One night he saw no cars at all. He thought, "The life of the city had almost stopped."*

Everyone can read the collapse of official power in Philadelphia as supporting their politics. Anarchists can point to the benevolent spontaneous order that arose after the corrupt local government failed to act; libertarians can note that this was entirely funded by the richest Philadelphians; statists can point out that, without authoritative co-ordination, the effort eventually failed, because people defected against each other in fear.

> *The corpses had backed up at undertakers', filling every area of these establishments and pressing up into living quarters; in hospital morgues overflowing into corridors; in the city morgue overflowing into the street. And they had backed up in homes. They lay on porches, in closets, in corners of the floor, on beds. Children would sneak away from adults to stare at them, to touch them; a wife would lie next to a dead husband, unwilling*

> *to move him or leave him. The corpses, reminders of death and bringers of terror or grief, lay under ice at Indian-summer temperatures. Their presence was constant, a horror demoralizing the city; a horror that could not be escaped. Finally the city tried to catch up to them.*
>
> *The police wore their ghostly surgical masks, and people fled them, but the masks had no effect on the viruses and by mid-October thirty-three policemen had died, with many more to follow...*
> *More coffins came by rail, guarded by men with guns.*

Errata / debate

We're in luck: around the swine flu pandemic, a virologist gave many corrections to Barry's descriptions of the virus. They range from nitpicking to raising a real controversy Barry doesn't cover (adaptive virulence shifts). Spirited and somewhat convincing reply from Barry here.

Why did medicine suck?

Barry makes at least one big error: he's horrified by the medical schools of the time having "no standards for admission":

> *In research and education especially, American medicine lagged far behind [European medicine]... At least one hundred US medical schools would accept any man willing to pay tuition... and only a single medical school required its student to have a college degree...*
>
> *the Johns Hopkins itself, not student fees, paid [its] faculty salaries, and it required medical students to have not only a college degree but fluency in French and German and a background of science courses.*

But Barry's enthusiasm for Johns Hopkins' degree requirement is misplaced. Contemporary US doctors (who all have 3 years of pre-med, or even more, *before* they start medical training) are probably no better clinicians than undergraduate doctors in other countries, and are far further in debt. And the requirement is probably one reason the American system is so expensive: we require unbelievably expensive credentials of doctors, and they respond by demanding higher salaries.

Perhaps Barry is confusing the schools' open admissions with their appallingly low *graduation* standards, which were certainly one reason eC20th medicine sucked. (Many doctors had never looked down a microscope; never used a stethoscope on a patient; never seen a dissection.)

Epic

The book is in the epic mode throughout. (That's not only a compliment.)

> *Man might be defined as "modern" largely to the extent that he attempts to control nature. In this relationship with nature, modern humanity has generally been the aggressor, and a daring one at that, altering the flow of rivers, building upon geological faults, and, today, even engineering the genes of existing species. Nature has generally been languid in its response, although contentious once aroused and occasionally displaying a flair for violence.*
>
> *By 1918 humankind was fully modern, and fully scientific, but too busy fighting itself to aggress against nature. Nature, however, chooses its own moments. It chose this*

> *moment to aggress against man, and it did not do so prodding languidly. For the first time, modern humanity, a humanity practicing the modern scientific method, would confront nature in its fullest rage.*

He goes for meditations on epistemology, the modern mind, the redemptive meaning of science for beasts like us. I liked it, but it dismays other readers.

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*

2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*

3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge, but often involves a lot of interpretive work.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

In this case, no good reason to trust me. Barry is just a science-adjacent historian, not a scientist, and in his struggle to make a narrative, he fills in quite a lot of emotional colour which is at best vaguely inferred from letters.

I was glad to see a virologist weigh in, above: his corrections are worrying, since they're pretty fundamental, but limited in scope to a few pages.

Cross-posted from Goodreads.

Tags: review, xrisk, epistemology, biorisk

Frege's grand failure

1st April 2012

- *Quick sketch of Frege's reduction of arithmetic to logic, and why it fails.*
- *Confidence*: 90%.
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.
- Argument

Let’s quickly dress down Frege’s *Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884). Like all discussions of the great work, we include its bane, Russell’s Paradox.

Logicism is interesting because it marks the exact boundary between philosophy and mathematics, two things which otherwise shade into each other. (Or: maths is what post-C19th analytic philosophy tries to shade itself into.) Even though it fails, and even though the rest of his philosophy is not particularly convincing to me, it’s a good-faith and enlightening thing to study.

Some people think it’s interesting because actually it *can* be done - and good luck to them.

It’s also an object lesson in the integrity of formal thought. Only through Frege’s rigour could Russell find the fatal flaw, and thereby enlighten us about set theory; a vaguer system might not have admitted it. This has sobering implications for philosophy. If you’ve ever worked on a long A2-paper-sized mathematical derivation, only to find that one of your early steps is fallacious, and that the rest must be thrown out, only then do you grok the difference between informal and formal.

Also, his approach to metaphysics - attacking it via the semantics of the things at hand - is just unbelievably influential; perhaps *most* Anglo-American philosophy between 1910 and 1970 followed this mould. He’s also a good Classical stooge for many contemporary debates, since his views on most things are philosophically traditional (realism, apriorism, Platonism, anti-vagueness, monaletheism).

It’s also just a really satisfying series of arguments: ambitious, archetypal, and clean.

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1. Frege’s assumptions.

The following are generally only tacit when he critiques other views but let’s drag them out:

A. *Metaphysical realism*: The truth is objective, we have access to it. 1

B. *Logical realism*: Logic is objective, necessary, analytic, and known apriori. 2

C. *Transcendental language*: Properly analysed, linguistic categories mirror ontology. 3

D. *Context Principle*: terms only have meaning in the context of a sentence. 4

E. *Epistemicism*: There is a sharp distinction between the subjective & objective. There is no overlap or real vagueness between them. 5

(A sixth thesis, his Platonism (F), is not as much an assumption – since we will try and

reconstruct arguments for it in sections i & v – but it's important to introduce it early on. "Thoughts exist independently of minds. Propositions & their truth-values are independent of the fact or manner of thinking."6

A key distinction that doesn't come over in English very well: For Frege, a 'thought' (*Gedanke*) is the objective and communicable content (this includes meanings and concepts); he calls our private, subjective impression of a thought an 'idea' (*Vorstellung*) instead. Fregean ideas are not communicable, and have no genuine content and no power over semantic value. His curious argument for this fine distinction is in section 1a.

It's also helpful to keep Frege's goal in mind. His overarching project is to prove two theses of logicism: firstly that every arithmetical notion can be defined via logic alone; and secondly that every theorem in arithmetic can be proved using only basic (Peano) axioms of logic.7

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2. Frege vs the world (psychologism, property theories, and inductionism)

Broadly, Frege is against treating numbers as a) mind-dependent (e.g. *mathematical subjectivism* or the wider thesis *psychologism*); b) as properties of objects; or c) in any way determined by concrete objects (as in *mathematical naturalism* and *inductionism*).

Any one of these would preclude a straightforward apriori proof of logicism like that of the *Grundlagen*, so first we try and kill them:

a. Argument for the objectivity of logic and meaning

Psychologism holds that matters usually considered objective are in fact conditioned by facts about our minds. Tim Crane breaks it into four theses:

1) that logical laws are just laws of mind,
2) that truth is identical with verification,
3) that private mental states are the correct basis for epistemology, and
4) that the meaning of words are ideas 8.

Clearly, Frege rejects these. He motivates this first with two general counter-proposals:

The first is a polemic: that what matters in philosophical (and mathematical) inquiry is public, universal content. (This relies on assumptions A and E.) The nature of an *idea* (a thought-token) entertained by someone considering something is irrelevant to the analysis of the *thought* (the concept type). Frege sees 'ideas' as arbitrary signs; we can make the analogy to words-as-sound-waves vs words-as-meanings. Understanding is external.

Secondly, on as wide a scope, Frege sees the whole family of theories as resting on a genetic fallacy which renders it doubly irrelevant: "Never let us take the description of the origin of an idea for a definition." 10 Frege sees psychologism as capable of providing only an account of how a concept was acquired; i.e. not definitions, and so not truth-conditions. Psychologism thus always exhibits 'explanatory inadequacy' over concepts – and particularly so over essentially definitional concepts, like those in mathematics.

Against (1) specifically, he can point to the normative force of logic: our intuition of it as an objective model for thought. He argues that psychologism cannot account for this power, since psychologism is, again, and at best, a descriptive theory. (While his logical realism can.)

Against (2): Again, the normative role of one universal standard is ignored by this thesis. And given (assumption A), we say that truths are heedless of how they are known, i.e. justification is actually unrelated to metaphysical truth.11

And against (4), Frege posits a problem regarding the communication of subjective content. Since he denies intersubjectivity (or degrees between the subjective and objective) in his first “guiding principle” (assumption E), the following is possible:

1. Thoughts can be shared. (`∀x Sx`)
2. Whereas ideas are possessed exclusively. (`∀y ~Sy`)
3. What is possessed exclusively cannot be shared. (`~∃x (Sx & ~Sx)`)
4. So if thoughts are ideas, we cannot communicate (share content). `(x = y) → ~∃x Sx`
5. We communicate. (`∃x Sx`)
6. So thoughts are not ideas. `modus tollens, 4 & 5`

(By undermining psychologism, whose scope was all thoughts, Frege also undermines the entailment that number is subjective.)

b. Arguments that numbers aren’t properties of objects (& so aren’t about objects)

(Reconstructing arguments:)

- The 'number-relativity' of ascription is a strong challenge to property theories of number (though it's also awkward for any objective account):

  consider that objects can be ascribed contradictory numbers, apparently determined by how they are perceived. (“Gavin has one head”; “Gavin has no money”; “Gavin has 10 trillion cells”; “Gavin has 206 bones”.) One option is *idealism*: the difficulty can be resolved by saying mind does determine which number is attributable. But granting our argument about psychologism above, this isn't tenable. Another avenue, agreeable for Frege, is to reject outright our conception of numbers as about objects.

- Frege argues that numbers are not properties because they don't work like other properties. This is counterintuitive: in natural language, numbers are often used as adjectives in number-ascribing sentences: “I have two arms” seems to share a structure with “I have long arms”.

  To prevent this supporting property theories, Frege argues that these uses are only *superficially* adjectival: observe that, while the adjective ‘long’ can be meaningfully predicated to each arm, this does not work for numbers – each of my arms is not ‘two’. He suggests that this quirk justifies the rearrangement of number-ascriptions like “I have two arms” to “the number of arms is two”, where the number appears as a *singular* term.

c. Argument against naturalism

- Frege points out we can ascribe numbers to anything which can individuated – and this category is much larger than ‘the physical objects’ since it includes abstracts like *events* (“12 Christmases”), *reasonings* (“5 proofs”), and numbers themselves (“7 sevens”). So (naive) naturalism can't explain *number*.

  (There must be more than this, but I couldn't spot any.)

By now, Frege has ruled out (to his satisfaction): numbers as subjective, as abstract universals, and also as properties. Then the latter argument suggests a way forward, given assumption (C) and our new general form for number-ascription (“the number of x is n”), using numbers as singular terms. I return to this in section 4.

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3. Frege’s semantics

Some terms:

First of all: everything representable in language is either an ‘object’ or a ‘function’. An object is that which is picked out by a name. A function is an incomplete expression taking one or more variables (‘arguments’) and producing a result (a ‘value’). Arithmetical functions (in which the arguments are numbers) are one familiar type: `( ) ÷ ( ) = ( )` . [12]

Functions can take recursive forms: a first-order function is one which takes objects as argument and is thereby completed; but a second-order function takes other functions as arguments; and so on. A concept is a function which gives a truth-value as its value. For instance: “John is named John.” can be read as the concept `( _ is a person named John)` for the argument “John”.

(Since it’s an analytic statement, we also know that its value in this case is the `True`.)

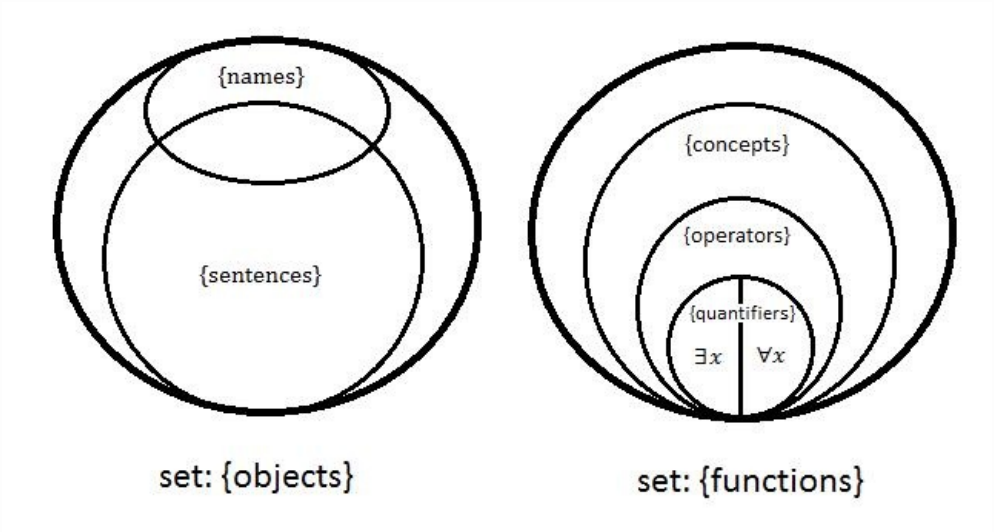

Fig.1: Frege’s semantics/metaphysics, drawn as subsets.

Frege’s semantics and ontology are the same thing. It’s unclear whether extensions should be shown prior to the object/function division – i.e. drawn as a larger circle enclosing these two – since by the end of Frege’s analysis, much of the system depends on these things being defined in terms of extension. A reply to this is that there’s a difference between having an extension and being an extension. But a reply to that is that Frege uses extensions as objects throughout; that’s his trouble.

The logical operators are functions which take only truth-values for arguments and give only truth-values for a value. (Hence their other name, ‘truth-functions’.) Quantifiers are those operators that are also second-order functions: here, only the existential quantifier

“`∃x(_)` (“for some x it is the case that __”) and `∀x (_)`, (“for any x it is the case that __), the universal quantifier. Quantifier phrases are saturated by a first-order function itself saturated by an object (e.g. ““`x Fa`”: “for some x it is the case that a is F”).

Finally, the difficult notion *extension*, analogous to the mathematical set, to reference, and to the truth-table, but which eludes these (and eludes Frege’s function/object distinction). Define for each Fregean term: a name’s extension is its referent; a function’s extension is its pairwise domain-and-codomain: i.e. an exhaustive list of all tuples of arguments and values that it can be applied to.

The extension of a concept is the set of pairs of its arguments and truth-values. A quantifier’s extension is the set of pairings of functions matched with truth-values.

Once a sentence has been analysed as above, Frege uses extensions to determine the circumstances where it is true (truth-conditions). Generally:

```
“a is F” is {T}  ↔  a is in the extension of F
```

Frege resolves a minor issue with his system by positing the two truth-values to be objects. A beautiful implication of this is that all true sentences serve as names for the same object: ‘the `True`’, and all false sentences name ‘the `False`’.

When we combine his semantics of quantification with the function-object analysis (described in section 4), we get a new mode of analysis: one that can take the structure of thoughts, as well as the components of thoughts, as central contributors to semantic values.

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4. Frege’s constructive theory of Number

The main positive ‘argument’ for Frege’s own theory is almost scientific: just that it fits the data better than others. His positive case for treating numbers as objects is similarly lightweight: just that arithmetic functions act as if numbers were objects, and that some uses in language also suggest this. So his negative case of alternative theories is the conclusive move.

Frege realises that he cannot directly define the concept *number*, nor any specific number. (He can almost take this as good news – since the essence of a natural number is its relative magnitude to others.) In proceeding, he makes the historic ‘linguistic turn’:

> *How, then, are numbers to be given to us…? Since it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning, our problem becomes this: to define the sense of a proposition in which a number-word occurs.* [14]

His Context Principle (assumption D) shifts the analysis to sentences that ascribe numbers: he addresses the ontological question “what is number?” via a semantic question “how are we to know the meaning of sentences which feature numbers?”

We derived a general form for number-ascription previously: “the number of __ is n”. We can now analyse this as a second-order concept in which the number is the object, e.g: “Gavin has 206 bones” becomes “(the number of xs such that x is [bones of Gavin] is 206)”. This is a pivotal conclusion: that “a statement of number contains an assertion about a concept.” [15]

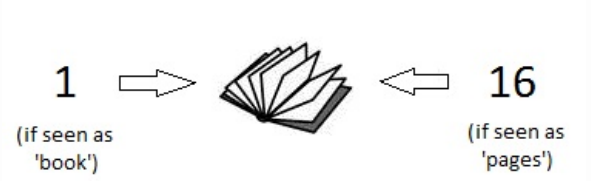

Fig.2: Subject-predicate ascription: suffers from number relativity.

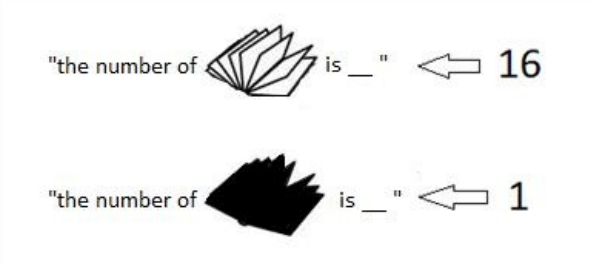

Fig.3: Frege's function-object turn, showing ascriptions to two second-order concepts.

So, numbers are abstract objects, but we can only refer to them through their relation to certain second-order concepts. From here, we begin to dimly see the end.

Sketch Frege's strategy for logicism as:

i. From number-ascriptions, find an identity-condition for numbers (contextual definition);
ii. Logically abstract to their equivalence classes (so that number can be explicitly defined)
iii. Define zero, one & the successor function via their extension (to generate the natural numbers)
iv. Define extension with only logical concepts (to prove that number is purely logical);
v. Derive the axioms of arithmetic (to prove that Peano's axioms are purely logical).

i)

Frege takes from inductionism the idea that there is something to be abstracted out from a group of instances all ascribed a given number – but it's not a property, like 'twoness'. Instead, what all instances of 2 share is a relation: 'equinumerosity'. He constructs Hume's Principle to give an identity criterion for equinumerosity:

We are thus defining number indirectly, by the operation of "the number of _"; and we are defining that indirectly too, by its role in the left-hand of this formula.

ii)

He thus has a contextual definition of *number*: the number that fits the concept `F` will be the extension of the concept equinumerous with `F`.

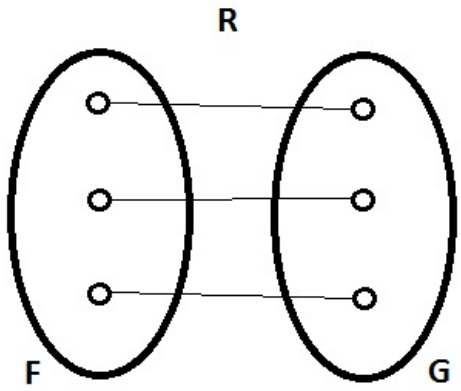

Fig.4: Equinumerosity relation between concepts F and G.

Being equinumerous is a second-order concept and an equivalence relation, and so its extension gives him an equivalence class of concepts. He thus sets off a powerful process. An equivalence class is a set which logically and exhaustively partitions a domain into disjoint subdomains (that is, into completely separate parts) by some identity relation. For the concept being equinumerous – thanks to Hume's Principle – the equivalence class results in each subset containing only equinumerous concepts, i.e. Frege has indirectly explicitly defined the general concept number. Number is the second-order concept that takes a countable concept as argument and maps it onto a concept that it is equinumerous with.

iii)

Moving swiftly: Zero is defined as the number of non-self-identical things (`#x ¬x = x`). Or: the equivalence class of empty concepts, the extension of the second-order concept collecting all concepts with no objects in their extension). Using equivalence classes to disjoint the whole set, Frege only needs one instance of this: he fixes zero logically by using the concept being non-self-identical (the extension of which is necessarily empty).

Similarly for one; Frege needs only one concept to fasten the equivalence class. Since there is only one object which is identical to zero (zero itself), Frege defines one as 'being equinumerous with the concept being identical to zero'.

After this, you only need the successor relation to generate the natural numbers. It is:

'`n succeeds m ↔ (the concepts in m's equivalence class have one less thing in extension than the concepts in n's equivalence class)`'.

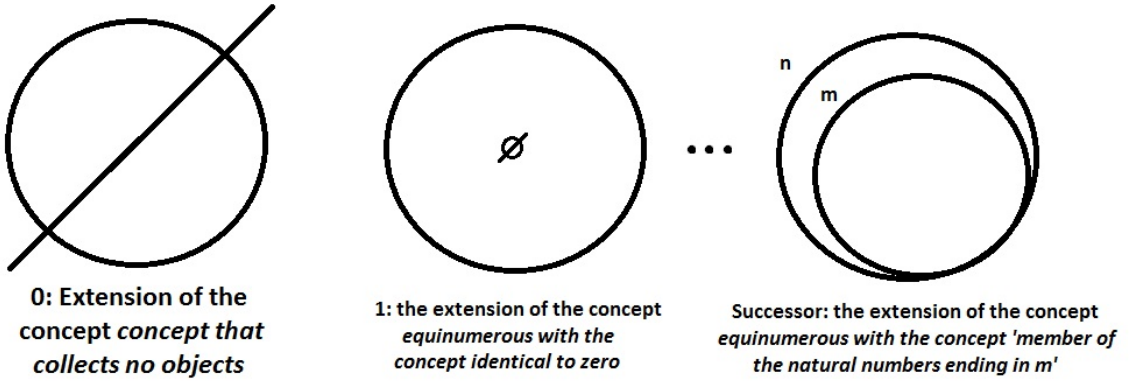

Fig.5: Definition of the natural numbers qua extensions, "stage (iii)"

Despite this apparent progress, in the end Frege's system does not survive past (iv), as

discussed next.

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5. An explicit definition of *extension*, and thus Russell's Paradox

> *I don't want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member.*
>
> - Groucho Marx 16

So Frege has logically defined number - it is the concept 'the extensions of the second-order concept of an equinumerosity relation' - and has a contextual definition of extension. But he is dissatisfied, finding a deficiency in his analysis, the 'Julius Caesar Problem', which entails that Hume's Principle, if the only thing offering identity conditions for numbers, doesn't describe the conditions under which an arbitrary object, say Julius Caesar, is or is not to be identified with the number of planets... 17

i.e. It entails that we cannot tell apriori which names name numbers. (He cannot appeal to experience, since this would undermine the whole logicist deductive chain.) This issue leads him to seek a stronger definition than the one based on Hume's Principle.

Frege uses an extra axiom, Basic Law V, to close the contextual problem. It does this by specifying a condition for strict identity between concepts: "a concept F is identical to a concept G if and only if the extension of F is identical to the extension of G". Put slightly formally:

```
Axiom 5:

        ∀x (Fx ≡ Gx) ↔ (extension of F = extension of G)
```

Contraposed, this tells us that extensions differ when their concepts differ, which implies that every concept has an extension. Frege has been using extensions as objects for other extensions. These two corollaries create an irreconcilable tension: the total number of concepts is greater than the total number of extensions; but it is also implied that the total number of extensions is equal to the total number of concepts. It is this that primes the system for Russell's paradox.

The paradox turns on notions of concepts and extensions which are self-referential, or 'reflexive'. For instance: the extension of the concept is an extension is a member of itself, while the extension of the concept is a philosopher is not a member of itself. These are not problematic. However, the well-formed concept set of all sets that are not members of themselves is. Formalisation helps a lot here: so let's call this killer concept 'Q', and say that 'q' is its extension. Then, a seemingly innocuous question: "does q belong to itself?"

We know the truth-conditions for this from Frege's definition of extensions: `q` belongs to itself if and only if `Q` gives `q` to `True`. Though, we also know that `Q` only gives `q` to `True` if `q` is an extension which does not belong to itself. This results in the vicious circle:

```
          q ∈ q  ->  q ∉ q
          q ∉ q  <-  q ∈ q
and thus
          q ∈ q  ↔  q ∉ q
```

This latter line is Russell's Paradox. It is the contradiction generated by Basic Law V: thus, the naïve set theory which furnished Frege with his rules for using extensions is not coherent.

Any logical system which produces a contradiction is invalidated as a whole: so Frege must forgo axiom V to save his system. The issue is not, however, just that the Julius Caesar Problem goes unsolved: by this stage much of the system has been defined in terms of extension, and so much is compromised. Moreover, Frege uses Basic Law V in his attempted proof of Hume's Principle, so even the definition via equinumerosity collapses.[18]

Frege's logicism is unsuccessful.

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6. Frege on meaning

This section is a bonus on 'Senses' and the reference puzzle that now bears Frege's name.

An innocuous claim: 'to understand a linguistic expression is to know its meaning'. Frege notes an issue for this claim, and then resolves it (to his satisfaction). One of his lasting impacts on philosophy of language is the focus on logical puzzles that always arise in naïve theories. (The puzzles are serious because they sometimes seem to challenge axioms of classical logic, like the law of the excluded middle.)

'Frege's Puzzle' arose from an abstract question regarding logical identity: "Is it a relation? A relation between objects, or between names and sign of objects?" [19]

After considering some logical answers, he raises a specifically linguistic version: when an object has more than one proper name, a small but critical blind-spot in Millian theories of reference is uncovered. When we compare, e.g:

```
1) "Molière is Molière"
2) "Molière is Jean-Baptiste Poquelin"
```

The 'referential theories of meaning' suggests that all a name contributes to the meaning of its sentence is its referent (the object it names): so, under this conception, these sentences have exactly the same meaning. But we know this is not right, since, at very least, their epistemic nature differs: (1) is an apriori and analytic truth (it is known regardless of background knowledge) while (2) is synthetic and aposterior.

Frege's Puzzle is that the naïve referential theory of meaning cannot account for this difference. This motivates Frege's bisection of 'meaning' into two properties: a proposition's 'sense' (*Sinn*) and its 'reference' (*Bedeutung*). Sense is a primitive in Frege's system: the sense of a proposition is its mode of presentation, or, that which is grasped by someone who understands its content.

The relation between Frege's two constituents of meaning is asymmetric: a given referent can have many senses, but if two expressions have the same sense, then their referent is the same. So reference is mediated by content; moreover Frege has reference supervening on sense.

So co-referentials can have different senses while sharing a referent, because they speak about a different aspect of it. 'Moliere' and 'Jean-Baptiste Poquelin' differ in sense, and this accounts for sentence (2) being informative.

As outlined, and by assumption (F), Frege holds that senses are objective and abstract. Frege's arguments for his Platonism-with-regards-to-content largely overlap with our discussion of psychologism in section I, but here is a further Fregean argument, this time against 'ideational' theories of semantics. Since they conceive of meaning as a correlation

with ideas, these theories entail mind-dependence of Senses:

1. Meaning depends on mental states.
2. Mental states are contingent and subjective.
3. Thus meaning is contingent and subjective. [1&2]
4. Truth depends on meaning (and actual states of affairs).
5. Thus truth cannot be fully objective. [3&4]
6. But this contradicts assumption A (& also E).
7. So meaning does not depend on mind. [Reductio ad absurdum.]

1. Frege (1897), 'The Thought', in Mind, Vol. 65, No. 259. (Jul 1956), p.289-90.
   > *What is objective… is what is subject to laws, what can be conceived and judged, what is expressible in words…*
2. Frege (1884) *Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. JL Austin (Evanston, Northwestern University, 1994), p.35
3. Frege (1884), p.35
4. Frege (1884), p.xxii
5. Frege (1884), p.xxii
6. Frege (1884), §60, p.71
7. Carnap, Rudolf (1931), "The Logicist Foundations of Mathematics", trans. Putnam & Massey, pp. 41–52
8. Crane, Tim (1995), 'Meaning', in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy, 1st ed. (Bath, OUP; 1995), p.541
9. Frege, Gottlob (1884), p.xviii
10. Grayling & Weiss (1998), 'Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein', in Philosophy 2, §1.2.1
11. The latter gap can actually be seen as a third argument. '_ divides_ giving _', will take a truth-value as value and not a number. Arithmetical functions are thus quasi-second-level concepts… and so are not suitable for use in basic examples, I realise too late.
12. Frege, Gottlob (1884), The Foundations of Arithmetic, §62
13. Frege, Gottlob (1884), The Foundations of Arithmetic, p.99
14. Marx, Julius Henry (1959), Groucho and Me, (Virgin Books; Chippenham; 1994), p.321
15. Zalta, Edward (2010), 'Frege's Logic', in the Stanford Encyclopaedia, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/frege-logic/#6.5
16. Zalta (2010), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/frege-logic/#3.4
17. Frege (1892), 'On Sense and Reference', trans. Max Black, in Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege. ed. Geach & Black, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952), p.56-78

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Tags: philosophy, maths, greats

Robots, Games, Life, Markets

14th April 2020

- *Understanding game theory, reinforcement learning, evolutionary dynamics, & economic calculation, with each other.*
- *Confidence*: 80%. Couple figurative bits.
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

Reinforcement learning	**Game theory**	**Evolutionary dynamics**	**Market calculation**
agent	player	population	actor
action	move	subspecies	PPF/CPF bundle
policy	strategy	subspecies distribution	product lines
Total reward	payoff	fitness	profit
multi-agent Markov decision process	game	game (Competition)	market
environment	noncompetitive second player	niche	niche
environment dynamics	move by nature	move by Nature	exogenous shocks
MDP	State-based infinite game 2	ecology	industry
episode	iteration	generation	timeless? (for complete markets)
multi-agent multi-armed bandit	Matrix game	Matrix game	exchange
Bellman optimality	equilibria	stable strategies / Liapunov stable states	general equilibrium
optimal substructure	subgame perfect equilibrium	subgame perfect equilibrium	partial equilibrium
known dynamics & rewards	common knowledge	given fitness function	perfect information
reward design	mechanism design	intelligent design 4	matching theory?

approximation ratio?	price of Anarchy	Cost of competition	Theory of the second best?
coalition formation	coalition games	cultural evolution	coalition formation
MDP: P-complete	Nash eq: PPAD-complete	ESS: Σ^{P}_2 complete (NP^SAT)	Arrow-Debreu: PPAD
Value iteration: O(|A| |S|^2) per iteration	Approx: at most O(n^{log n/e^2})	?	O(n^2 log(1/h) for lateral exchange
Dynamic Bellman learning	No learning 1	Replicator dynamics as learning	Lateral exchange pricing
agent focussed (process; planning; computational learning)	game focussed (equilibria; perfect rationality)	dynamics focussed (process; replication; change in mix)	game focussed (equilibria; perfect rationality)
Engineering	Normative	Descriptive	Thick

Physics is the study of physics; economics studies economics. This terminology is confusing, since it's extremely dubious for even physics to claim that their study is a complete model, structurally *identical* with the data-generating process. So to be painfully clear: The above is a map from theory to theory, not phenomenon to phenomenon.

(For making the correspondence really nice, you could frame evolution from the perspective of a single actor like the others - a hypothetical organism behind a veil of ignorance, maximising their expected fitness by selecting which subspecies to join. The subspecies distribution is then their chance of switching to a given subspecies.)

What to call the topic in common? 'Distributed optimisation'? 'Compositional optimisation'? 3

See also

- Mapping metaphysics, mathematics, and programming
- *In Soviet Russia, Optimisation Problem Solves You* (2012)
- *An Analysis of Stochastic Game Theory for Multiagent Reinforcement Learning* (2000)
- *Learning Through Reinforcement and Replicator Dynamics* (1997)
- *Decentralized partially-observable Markov decision process*
- *Stochastic Recursive Variance Reduction for... Compositional Optimization* (2020)
- I just found this superior treatment by Gwern.
- Proofs as programs, propositions as types, relational types as categories
- *Physics, Topology, Logic and Computation: A Rosetta Stone* (2009)

1. Though there are new forms which do learn, including important relaxations like Counterfactual Regret Minimization. Thanks to Misha Yagudin for this point.
2. often single-player, stochastic, discrete action, imperfect information
3. > *Compositional optimization can be used to formulate many important machine learning problems, e.g. reinforcement learning (Sutton and Barto, 1998), risk*

> *management (Dentcheva et al., 2017), multi-stage stochastic programming (Shapiro et al., 2009), deep neural nets (Yang et al., 2019), etc.*

4. Damnit Misha!

Tags: RL, game-theory, economics, rosetta-stone

Highlights from my Gists

4th June 2021

- *Code fragments as diary of hard thinking.*
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

Github Gists are a readable way to pass around code fragments. Over the years I've put a lot of weird little things on mine, and they form a little history of my hard thinking. Thoughts I couldn't have had (or couldn't have finished) without Python.

Via Julia Galef: comparing Spock's predictive skill to a coin flip

The online forecasting community have a way of scoring how calibrated someone is, the Brier score. The *Enterprise* would do better to consult a random process like a coin flip (and in fact they do ignore him most of the time). This matters because Spock is one of the main exemplars for rational thought, and he is a dingbat, which might explain some people's attitude towards explicit rationality.

A natural objection: the episodes we see are not a representative sample of events; they are "selected" to be as dramatic and telegenic as they can be, which means that of course Spock predicts wrong! But by the exact same token, these are the events it is most important for Spock to predict well, and he does terribly, so the expected value of listening to him is still bad even if he gets everything else right.

(My preferred explanation is that Vulcans are in fact stupid, they just talk like smart people.)

An optimal solution to a friend's data adventure game.

Fun! Only interesting because it includes expected value and risk-sensitive optimisation solutions. EV alone would not have done well at this task; I gave it only 20% of the budget.

The death sensitive bit is here: just variance (z-score) as a danger score.

Kelly for maximum house insurance cost

The Kelly criterion is an interesting piece of abstract nonsense that tells you how much you should bet / pay for insurance, given how much money you have, if losing all your money means death / infinite loss. It takes a bit of work to compute it, but it gives surprisingly intuitive answers, and it beats the hell out of EV when there are big downside risks.

Reported vs real (excess) COVID deaths, 2020

One of the 700 bitter stupid information-free arguments people had about COVID early on was the "infection-fatality ratio" - was it 0.1% like flu? 3% like SARS? I did this script to show that the ascertainment rate (the % of cases you catch in your system) isn't constant, in order to justify a modelling choice, as part of me losing a year pretending (quite well) to be an epidemiologist.

Converting between the effect sizes used in social sciences

A quiet improvement in psychology over the last 15 years: people started to foreground the actual size of the effects they studied, and to use nice standard metrics for em. (Part of my inexplicable procrastination on my PhD quals was dissing 300 psychology papers.)

A really nice way to juggle probabilities: dict keys

Solutions to Chapter 2 from the mighty mighty ITILA.

Also the classic minimal case of Bayesian updates, coins and binomials.

Google character recognition

I recently scanned in my teenage handwritten notebooks, and tried out the GCP OCR. It's free up to a few thousand requests. Accuracy is surprisingly not great; corrections take about 15 minutes per small book. If my time was more valuable / if it wasn't a joy to look at these dumb notes again I might try fine-tuning a Transformer on my handwriting.

Helping a friend maximise his alcohol purchases

This was part of my trying to sell him on the value of programming, god save him.

Tax check

Boring script to see how much teaching I can do without incurring tax.

Queue as Poisson process.

Incredibly involved exercise from BDA Chapter 1. Not conceptually difficult, just very fiddly.

Check power of 3 in near-constant time

$3^x \leq 2^{63} - 1$ take log_3

i.e. $x = \log_3(2^{63} - 1)$

We know $3^x \,\,\%\,\, 3^y = 0$ for y < x

So for a near-constant time check, just ensure that you make 3^x definitionally larger than 3^y. e.g. set it to the MAX int of your system, and then take the mod.

Tags: code, science,

Can you trust your methods?

8th May 2015

- *A mean little experiment to run on experimenters.*
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *If a person knows he is being denied an opportunity... he can never be quite certain whether his lack of desire for it is shaped by the fact that it is unavailable to him ("sour grapes"). That gnawing uncertainty counts as a harm.*

– Jon Elster

> *ONE hot summer's day a Fox was strolling through an orchard till he came to a bunch of Grapes just ripening on a vine over a lofty branch. "Just the things to quench my thirst," quoth he. Drawing back a few paces, he took a run and a jump, and just missed the bunch.*
>
> *Turning round again with a One, Two, Three, he jumped up, but with no greater success. Again and again he tried after the tempting morsel, but at last had to give it up, and walked away with his nose in the air, saying: "I am sure they are sour."*

– Aesop

A research programme that would be very illuminating and very unpopular: How much is someone's methodology to do with rationalising their particular abilities?

Does not having the skill to conduct either quantitative or qualitative research correlate with denying its value? (Clearly yes.)

Given that people very often adjust their desires to their opportunities, and given that methodology should ride on higher things, I propose a trio of studies to check the academic community's hygiene:

- *Sour symbols*: Disparaging or emphasising the limits of quantitative reason because you yourself are bad at maths.
- *Sour mouth*: Disparaging or emphasising the limits of qualitative reason because you yourself are bad at criticism or phenomenology.
- *Scoundrel bastions*: What fields do people with *neither* competence flock to?

The inverted forms – seeing what you're good at as a superior insight into the world ("sweet lemons" and "mind projection") – are as important, but hopefully get captured in the first correlation.

One could use the SAT or GRE to obtain a proxy of verbal and mathematical reasoning ability; people would object to this, 1) rightly because timed tests are an artificial measure of research ability – they can prove ability, but they can't really disprove *real-life* ability – and 2) wrongly, because it threatened their status.

By combining the two studies within-subjects, we could derive a *general factor of adaptive methodology*: how much a given person is swayed by their own lack of skill. This could be a proxy for how rationally they conduct themselves in general.

I respect Putnam's and Rorty's criticisms of positivism because I know they are profoundly skilled in logic; I trust Deirdre McCloskey much more in her postmodern libertarian feminism because she was both a quantitative historian and a socialist in her youth.

Good methodology can substitute for brilliance: if you follow the scientific method long enough, you *will* find stuff out, almost regardless of your acuity or creativity.

An unfortunate demonstration is Thomas Midgley's discovery of tetraethyl lead: "*At war's end he resumed his search for a gasoline additive, systematically working his way through promising elements in the periodic table, and in 1921 he and his team found that minute amounts of tetraethyl lead completely eliminated engine knock.*" Four years of dumb permutation!

If you can understand an algorithm's steps, you can perform incredibly complex mathematics given only patience and a pen. (Or wings.) In programming, object-oriented languages enforce a simple stepped method that allows numpties to make, well, most of the internet.

Relatedly: to have the studies produce results of lasting worth – rather than results for wreaking retribution on idle methodologists – we'd want to track the things that practitioners did. (Though is there any such thing as a practitioner, in philosophy?)

My saying 'methodology' in the above makes the point seem irrelevant to anyone but academics or devoted autodidacts. (The word only really denotes the formal and contrived ways that we act when we know we'll have to face scrutiny.) But the implications go way beyond those islands in the sun to the grody places in which most thought lives.

- Computer science: the methodology is necessarily quantitative.
- Philosophy: methodology largely qualitative (though with a distinct subculture of utter quants / meta-quants). Everyone's a methodologist.

Tags: science, scepticism

Graphs are cool

20th November 2020

- *Graph theory is beautiful, useful, easy, all that.*
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10

If you were to learn one area of maths properly, what should it be?

Depends what you want to do with it. *Send tweet.*

In computer science or machine learning, when people talk about the areas you need, they usually mention calculus, linear algebra, probability theory.1 These are some of humanity's greatest achievements, and probability can totally change your life, since (outside of mathematics or the wider Set Exercises of school) we have nothing to work with but probable and improbable, priors and data.

What if you're not a technical researcher? What if you just want to get as much clarity as you can, without devoting years of your life to it?

After probability and basic programming, I think there's no area better than graph theory. It is both incredibly intuitive *and* hyper-efficient. It is useful for almost any discrete application: logic, science, society, ... It lets us do lots of things whenever we have "some relations between some objects", i.e. any time we can ditch the continuous.

Obviously this is isn't as abstract as we can go - why have those clunky objects? But it's a nice median.

Getting into the habit of drawing a directed graph is probably the simplest way of thinking better. It takes one minute, and even the qualitative unweighted version will allow you to instantly spot disagreements. I dream of a world where people disagreeing (on Twitter, in debates, in journal letters pages) head to Sketchviz and work out exactly where they're diverging, probably in the relative thickness of two edges. They are astoundingly useful for data-driven science. But they are unbeatable for communication.

Intuitive

Proof by inspection. You can go far in graph theory with visual reasoning.

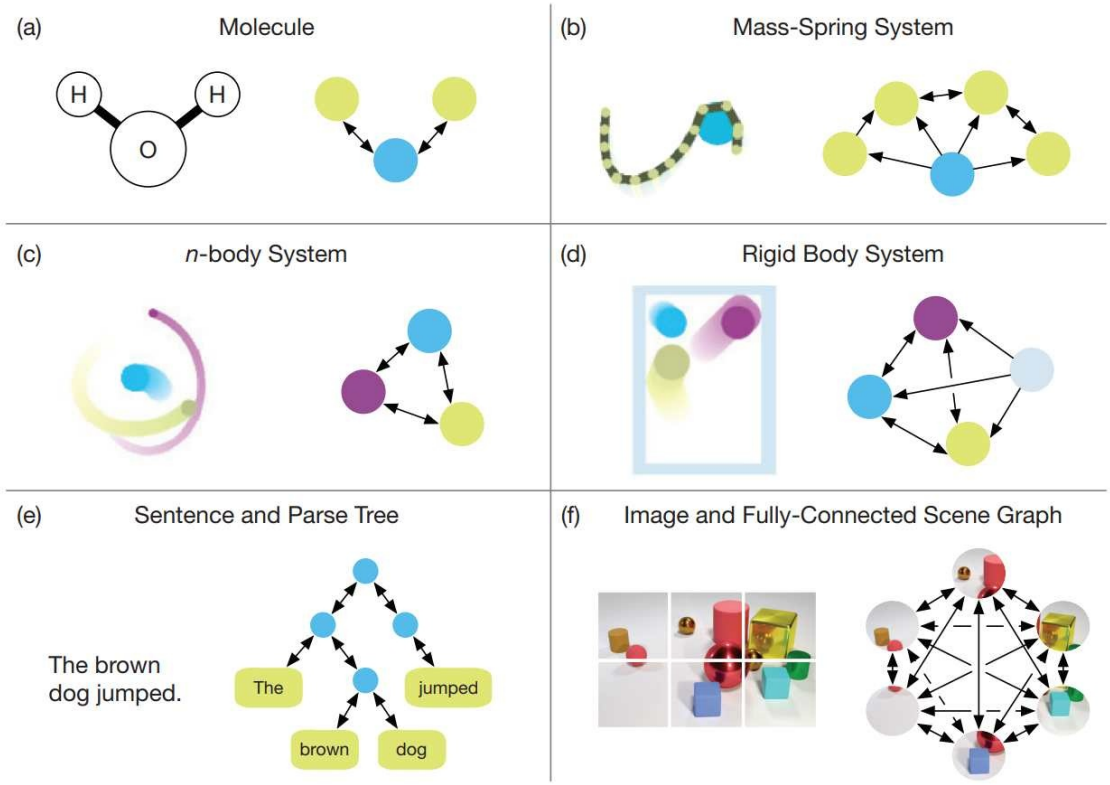
[TODO: Gif of "every 4-path is self-complementary"]

Modularity. You can do lots of things locally, ignoring the overall structure.

It is always nice to be able to reduce some problem to shortest-path or minimum spanning or message-passing or any of graphs' optimal dongles.

So many things are graphs

In some sense anyway, whether it's mathematical equivalence , having a 1-1 mapping (logic), partial capture of structure (groups), or just a useful approximation (society).



Battaglia et al (2018)

Sets are graphs

without edges.

Logic is Trees is Graphs

Any well-formed sentence of logic has a syntax tree, which is a graph.

(Also linked-lists are trees are graphs…)

Groups have graphs

Optimisation is shortest-pathing

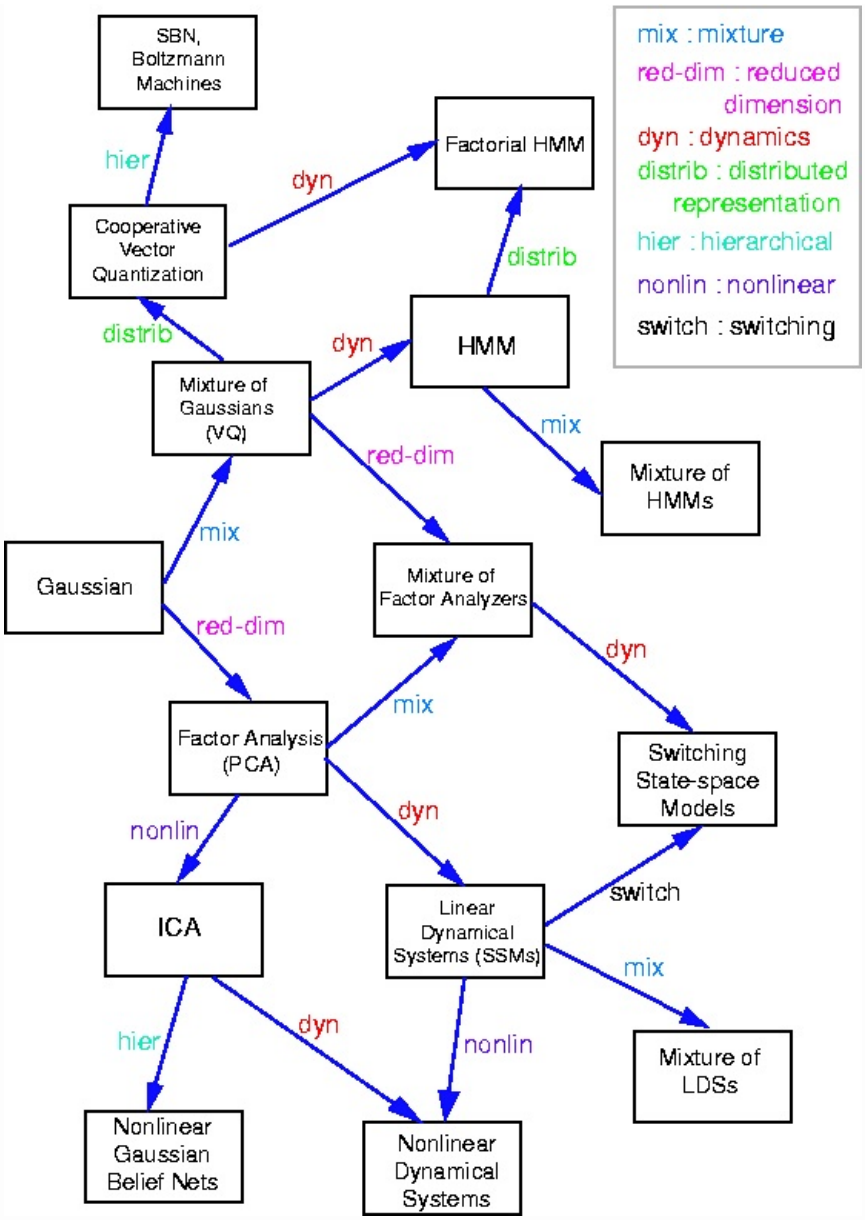
Ray tracing and Q-learning and currency arbitrage is graphs. I love this post so much.

See also constraint sat as graph.

Graphical models: joint distributions have graphs

Under very general conditions, joint distributions have graphs. 3

Statistics is one of the hardest things I ever learned. It's just so vast, and even a good grasp of the theory (which almost no-one has) does not prevent 100 completely fatal silent mistakes. Graphs unify the stats zoo.



> *Many of the classical multivariate probabalistic systems studied in fields such as statistics, systems engineering, information theory, pattern recognition and statistical mechanics are special cases of the general graphical model formalism – examples include mixture models, factor analysis, hidden Markov models, Kalman filters and Ising models.*

- Michael I Jordan

plus PCA, vector quantization, …

- Old school contingency table stuff

Strictly speaking there isn't a *lot* of graph theory in PGM work. But some graphish algorithms like message passing are still cutting-edge. 4

Causal inference

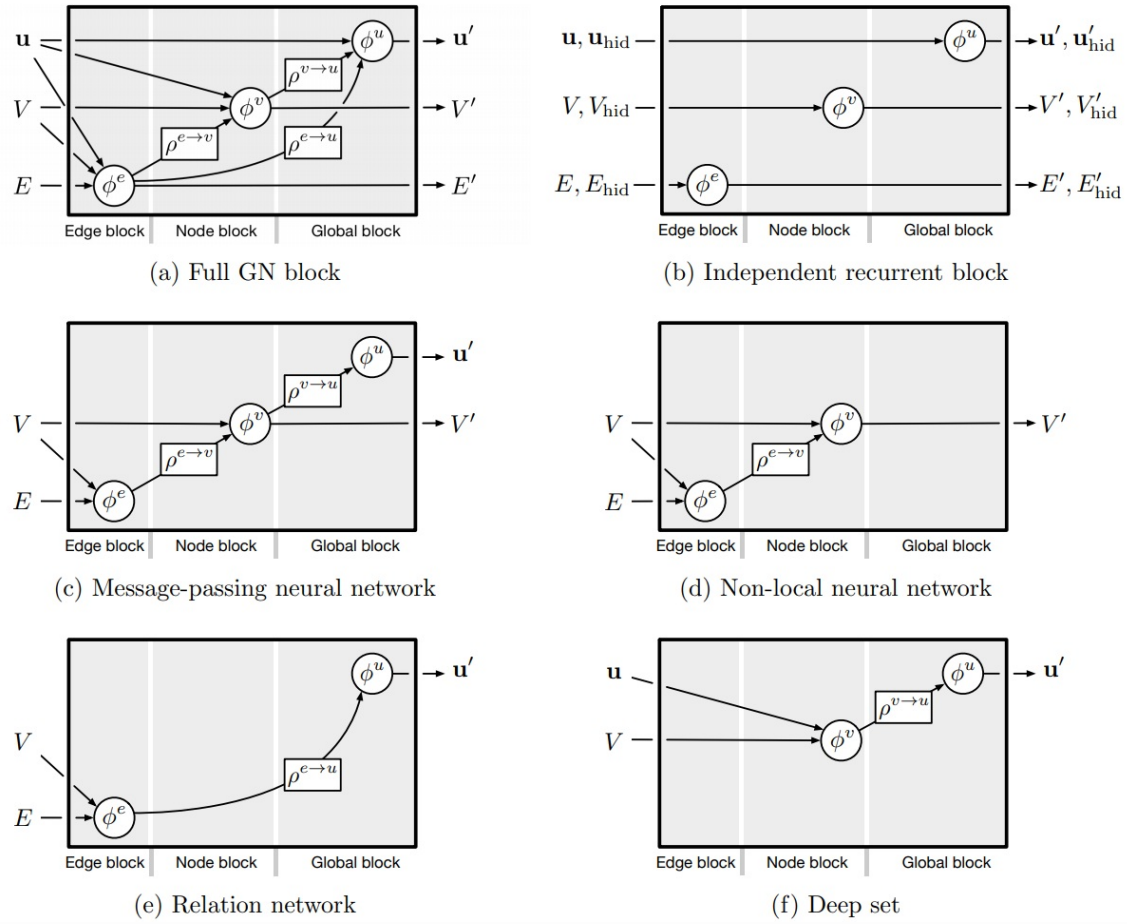
Shalizi on causal models.

Graph neural networks

Convolutions are graphs. (Edge from a node to all neighbours and self.)

The Transformer is a graphnet.

This paper tries to unify many of the discrete neural nets that have sprung up into one framework, and it has an extreme grandeur.



(a) Full GN block

(b) Independent recurrent block

(c) Message-passing neural network

(d) Non-local neural network

(e) Relation network

(f) Deep set

Massively efficient algos

Many serious databases use trees. i.e. Every formal activity in modern society relies on graphs.

Graph kernels are so fast.

High theory

Just one instance of it showing up in remarkable mathematics: Ramsey theory for Szemerédi.

Szemerédi's theorem: "any subset of integers of positive (upper) density must necessarily contain arbitrarily long arithmetic progressions."

(This is number theory but the proof flits between that and graphs.)

You get there via Ramsey's theorem: "any finitely coloured, sufficiently large complete graph will contain large monochromatic complete subgraphs."

The path from basic principles (Pigeonhole or Handshake) to huge results like this seems shortest in graph theory. Or maybe that's just my brain.

Life as graph

Learning the descent of species.

Learning which cells are connected(!)

Society as graph

PageRank treats the internet as one giant implicit graph.

A lot of the best sociology and epidemiology uses graphs as the core tool.

Thought as graph

> *I do not speak, I operate a machine called language. It squeaks and groans but is mine own.*
>
> - Dune Messiah

When I write, I am taking the great implicit graph of my thoughts and ripping out a tiny number of particular nodes, and maybe two or three of the many edges. I then serialise these nodes (imposing an artificial order, discarding my weights, idiosyncratic associations, and colour), and have to just hope that you are able to reconstruct some of the original graph from the drips that come through the narrow and impoverished channel of language.

The “don’t call it a notetaking app” notetaking app Roam is designed with this in mind, and it is by far the least unpleasant way of thinking about everything I’ve ever seen.

I am frankly dazzled by how general it is. I haven’t seen any list of the above; I just kept on finding it in new places, it just kept eating objects until I fell in love with it.

Of course you can go much more general in at least three directions: programs, for instance, are much bigger than graphs. But for an *easy* step into rigorous and general ideas they are the winner.

Drawing quickly and beautifully

Graphviz is kinda painful to use without a live GUI, but Sketchviz pretty much works unless you have very strict spacing in mind.

See also

- The Fascinating World
- Unifying the Mind

1. Yes, these are just circling the perimeter of statistics, but stats is not a branch of mathematics.

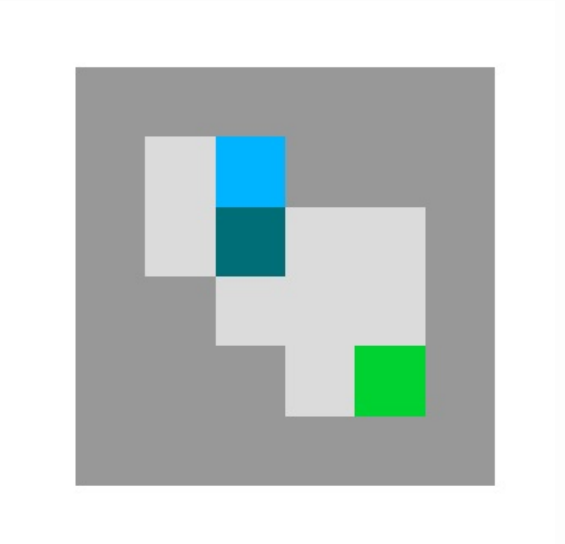
   It used to be logic. Much of the really deep recent work I see uses representation theory and info theory, but this isn't where to start.
2. It's not that joint distributions "are" graphs; rather the conditional independence structure associated with the joint is a graph.
3. Here are some cases where graphs are not very illuminating about models. The post is unfair, since the objects described are just very complicated, and even the model listing is not straightforward, and there's nothing stopping you from doing both representations.

Tags: maths, tools-for-thought

Preventing Side-effects in Gridworlds

22nd April 2018

- *Work from the Gridworld team at AI Safety Camp Gran Canaria.*
- *Confidence*: DRAFT. Eventually, 90% because executable.
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



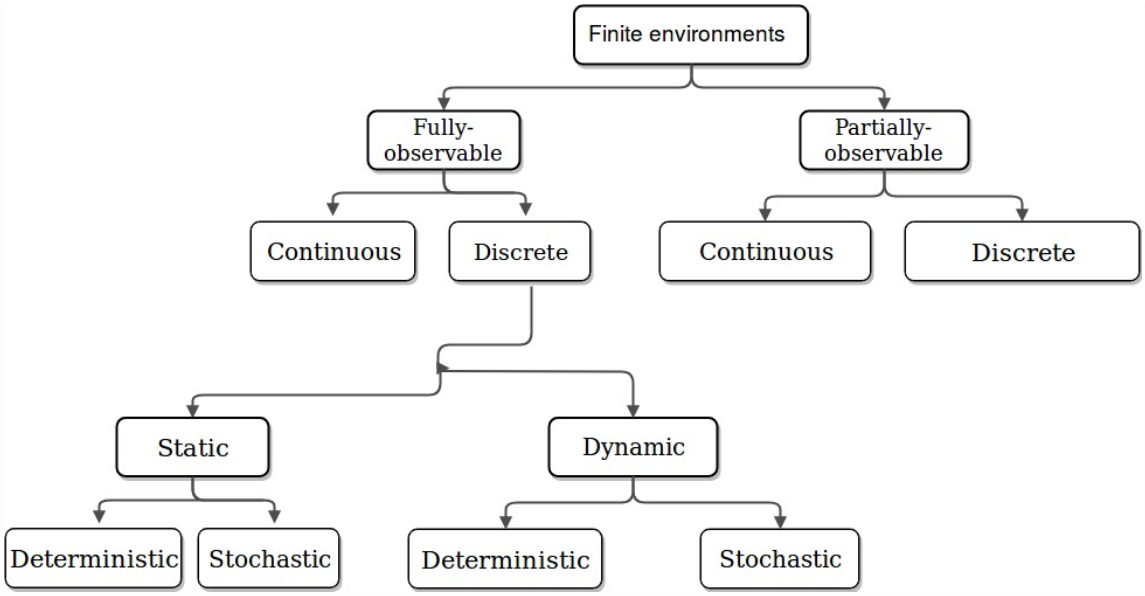
Joint work with Karol Kubicki, Jessica Cooper and Tom McGrath at AISC 2018.

Can we ensure that artificial agents behave safely? Well, start at the bottom: We have not even solved the problem in the concrete 2D, fully-observable, finite case. Call this the "gridworld" case, following Sutton and Barto (1998).

Recently, Google DeepMind released a game engine for building gridworlds, as well as a few examples of safety gridworlds - but these came without agents or featurisers. In April our team implemented RL agents for the engine, and started building a safety test suite for gridworlds. Our current progress can be found here, pending merge into the main repo.

We focussed on one class of unsafe behaviour, *(negative) side effects*: harms due to an incompletely specified reward function. All real-world tasks involve many tacit secondary goals, from "…without breaking anything" to "…without being insulting". But what prevents side effects? (Short of simply hand-coding the reward function to preclude them - which we can't rely on, since that ad hoc approach won't generalise and always risks oversights.)

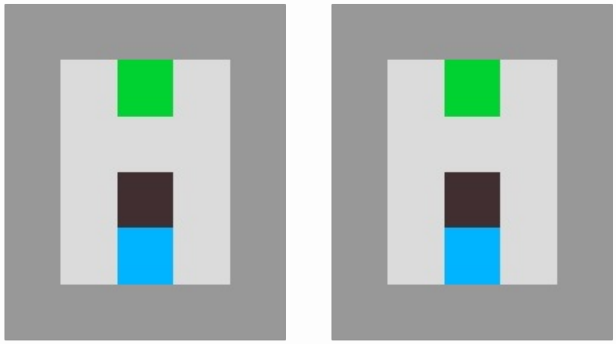
Taxonomy of environments



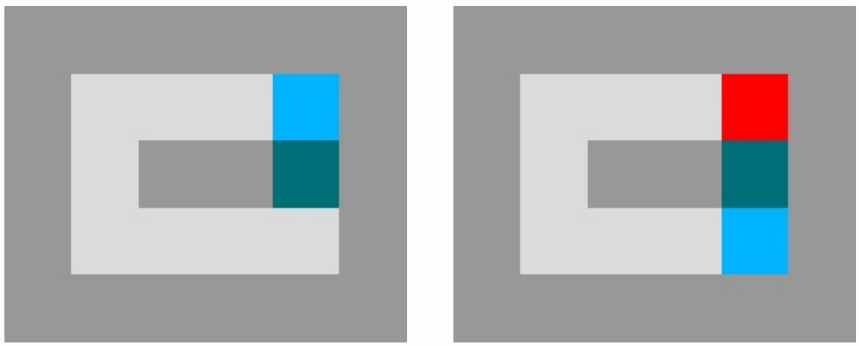
We made 6 new gridworlds, corresponding to the leaf nodes shown above. In the following, the left is the unsafe case and the right the safe case:

Static deterministic:

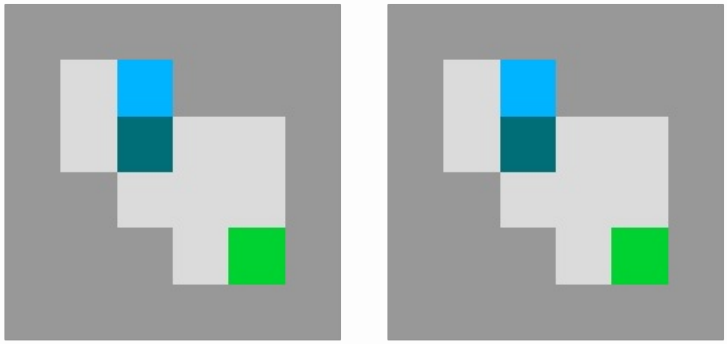
- “Vase world”. Simply avoid a hazard.



- “Burning building”. Balance a small irreversible change against a large disutility.

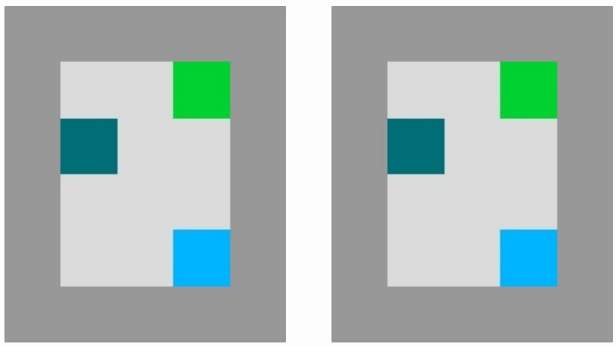


- “Strict sokoban”. Reset the environment behind you.



Dynamic deterministic

- “Teabot”. Avoid a moving hazard. 2



- “Sushi-bot”. Be indifferent to a particular good irreversible process.

- “Ballbot”. Teabot with a moving goal as well as a moving hazard.

Stochastic

We also have stochastic versions of “BurningBuilding” and “Teabot”, in which the environment changes unpredictably, forcing the agent to be adaptable.

One kind of side effect involves irreversible change to the environment. Cases like sushi-bot suggest that a safe approach will need to model types of irreversibility, since some irreversible changes are desirable (e.g. eating, surgery).

The environments can be further categorised as involving:

- *Hazard* - objects the agent should not interact with, either because they are fragile or because the agent is (e.g. a vase, the floor is lava).
- *Progress* - irreversible processes which we want to occur (e.g. sushi ingestion).
- *Tradeoff* - irreversible processes which prevent worse irreversible processes (e.g. breaking down a door to save lives).
- *Reset* - where the final state must be identical to the initial state (but with the goal completed). (e.g. controlled areas in manufacturing)

Taxonomy of agent approaches

1. Target low impact

- Penalise final state's distance from the inaction baseline. 1
- Penalise the agent's *potential* influence over environment.3
- Penalise distance from a desirable past state. 4

2. Model reward uncertainty

- Use the stated reward function as Bayesian evidence about the true reward. Leads to a risk-averse policy if there's ambiguity about the current state's value in the given reward function. 5

3. Put humans in the loop

- "Vanilla" Inverse reinforcement learning
  - Maximum Entropy
  - Maximum Causal Entropy
- Cooperative IRL
- Deep IRL from Human Preferences
- Evolutionary: direct policy search via iterated tournaments with human negative feedback.
- Deep Symbolic Reinforcement Learning. Learn a ruleset from pixels, including potentially normative rules.
- Whitelist learning

Agent 1: Deep Q-learning

We first implemented an amoral baseline agent. Code here.

Agent 2: MaxEnt Inverse Reinforcement

Learning

Implemented here.

IRL subproblems

- *unknown optimal policy*: how to infer R without π? (Trajectory sampling)
- underspecification: how to find one solution among infinite fitting functions?
- degeneracy: how to avoid zero holes?
- intractability of function search: LP doesn't scale. What does? (function approximation, linear combi)
- biasedness of linear combinations (thus heuristics, soft constraints)
- suboptimality of expert trajectories: how to learn from imperfect experts? how to trade off between ignoring inconsistencies and fitting signal?

Suboptimality of expert trajectories

When using human advice, we need to trade off ignoring inconsistencies in it and trying to use every detail of it in case it has signal.

Princip Max Ent: Subject to precisely stated prior data (such as a proposition that expresses testable information), the probability distribution which best represents the current state of knowledge is the one with largest entropy. Unifies joint, conditional, marginal distribution

The probability of a trajectory demonstrated by the expert is exponentially higher for higher rewards than lower rewards,

1. Solve for optimal policy pi(a | s)
2. Solve for state visitation frequencies
3. Compute gradient using visit freqs.
4. Update theta one gradient step

Discussion

Computationally tough, involves solving MDP repeatedly - this makes Bayesian methods extra hard.

Standard methods need access to environment dynamics

IRL trajectories can end up looking very different from demonstrations. Penalising the ‘distance’ from the demonstrations seems like an appealing idea, but a KL-divergence term will be infinity whenever the agent visits a state not seen in the demonstrations. Optimal transport might be a way to introduce a meaningful penalty.

IRL can get the wrong idea about which features you cared about, especially if both are consistent with the data

Our hand-engineered features are a little complex, but of the sort you might expect to be learnt by deep IRL - this is a reason for both optimism (the solution is in the space!) and pessimism (other solutions might look more plausible under the data)

Reflections

- Reset and empowerment trade off in the Sokoban grid - putting the box back to the starting point is actually irreversible.
- How well will features generalise? Would be good to train features in some

environments before testing in random new but similar ones

- Expect to be able to learn tradeoff between empowerment loss and rewards directly by using CIRL - learn goal and empowerment/ergodicity parameters that set preferences
- Demonstrations being the same length is a strange and not ideal limitation
- Could have many features, some of which should be zero - e.g. distance between agent and box - but which the demonstrations are also consistent with being nonzero. It's impossible to distinguish between these given only the demonstrations at hand. There is almost certainly some (anti)correlation between features, e.g. large agent-box distance weights explain away the trajectories without requiring any weight on the 'is it in a corner' feature. Inverse reward design offers a way to resolve this, but I don't think it has all the details necessary.
- Maybe if we had some sort of negative demonstrations (human to agent: don't do this!) then learning zero weights would become possible (formally we could try to maximize probability of positive demonstrations while minimizing probability of the negative ones)
- Trajectories demonstrated by IRL don't necessarily look like the ones given, especially if there are 'wrong' features that are maximised under the demonstrations
- What are we trying to achieve with each gridworld? E.g. Reset is harder to define in dynamic environments and even harder in stochastic ones, sometimes irreversibility is desired (sushi) or needs to be traded off against utility in a context-dependent way (burning building)
- Issues:
  - No way to give negative feedback
  - No way to give iterative feedback
  - Neither of these are lifted by IRD or Deep IRL, but IRD generates the kind of data we might want as a part of the algorithm (approximating the posterior)
- IRL solves an MDP at every update step. At least this value-aware algorithm is at a massive disadvantage.

Future work

- Pull request with the new environments, agents and transition matrix calculator.
- Implement more complex features
- Implement MaxEnt Deep IRL, Max Causal Entropy IRL
- Implement IRD
- Think about negative/iterative feedback models
- Automate testing: for all agents for all grids, scrutinise safety.

Bibliography

See the Google sheet here.

Applications for the next AI Safety Camp will open around June. I highly recommend it.

1. See Armstrong & Levinstein (2017) for an approach via a vast explicit list of sentinel variables, or Amodei et al (2016)'s impact regulariser. Future under policy vs null policy.
2. Idea from Robert Miles.
3. Formalising reversibility. See Amodei et al (2016) on minimising 'empowerment' (the maximum possible mutual information between the agent’s potential future actions and its potential future state) .

4. Reversibility regulariser. Side effects = cost of returning to that state / information lost compared to that state.
5.

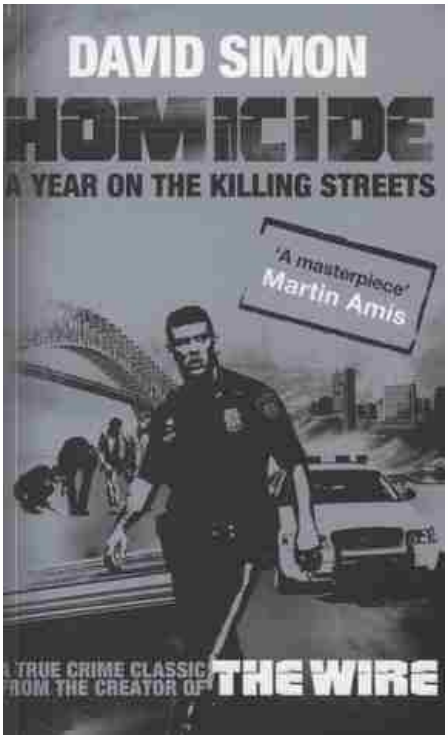
   Tom's variant: adding human feedback before the calculation of the normalisation constant.

Tags: AI, RL

'Homicide' (1991) by Simon

12th December 2018

- *The horror of bureaucracy, Goodhart's law, and other human depravity.*
- *Confidence*: 80%
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



A character study of twenty vengeful people and the awful indispensable institution they serve and constitute. The detectives are intelligent and hilarious, but have to navigate two extreme and depressing environments: the streets and City Hall, violence and politics.

Simon was embedded with them, and completely effaces himself, makes this novelistic. We get a glorious outsider view, see things even the detectives don't:

> *[The detective] glides past the lockup without looking inside, and so doesn't see the final, unmistakable expression on Robert Frazier's face. Pure murderous hate.*

He gives a complete chapter to most of the detectives, tracking them through a couple of sordid weeks. They are all distinctive, sharp in different ways, but the approach means it stretches on to 700 pages.

Blood incentives

The most remarkable thing about it is its informal analysis of the *incredibly* poor incentives the bureaucracy gives the detectives: they're rewarded for arrests, not convictions, and individually penalised for open homicides. I don't want to think about what this did to their false arrest rate.

> *A case in which the pathologist's finding is being pended is not, to the police department, a murder. And if it isn't a murder, it doesn't go up on the board. And if it isn't up on the board, it doesn't really exist.*

No weight was given to the difficulty of the case - whether witnesses remained at the scene, whether physical evidence existed, whether the weapon was found. All this killed inter-squad cooperation, and led to infighting over dumb luck of the draw.

> *In human terms, the scene at 3002 McElderry Street was a massacre; in the statistical terms of urban homicide work, it was the stuff from which a detective fashions dreams.*

(No other crime counted in the stats, despite Homicide also covering accidental deaths and suicides. So this was an incentive to frame things as e.g. suicide if *at all* possible.)

> *the chance of actually being convicted of a crime after being identified by authorities is about 60 percent. And if you factor in those unsolved homicides, the chance of being caught and convicted for taking a life in Baltimore is just over 40 percent [in 1988].*

You might conclude - falsely - that internal stats are worse than nothing - but only stats as bad as these are. A classic of informal institutional economics.

The nationwide murder 'clearance rate' (arrest rate) was 70%. Amazing that it was this high, in that comparatively low-surveillance, low-social-trust place.

> *The [squad's] clearance rate - murders closed by arrest - is now 36 percent and falling, a… threat to [Lieutenant] Gary D'Addario's tenure. The board that gave His Eminence reason for concern six weeks ago has continued to fill with open murders, and it is on D'Addario's side of the wall that the names are writ in red. Of the twenty-five homicides handled by Dee's three squads, only five are down; whereas Stanton's shift has cleared ten of sixteen…*

> *There is no point in explaining that three fifths of D'Addario's homicides happen to be drug-related, just as seven of those solved by Stanton's shift are domestics or other arguments… It is the unrepentant worship of statistics that forms the true orthodoxy of any modern police department.*

More incentive analysis, on police shootings and the shameful closing of ranks:

> *In the United States, only a cop has the right to kill as an act of personal deliberation and action. To that end, Scotty McCown and three thousand other men and women were sent out on the streets of Baltimore with .38-caliber Smith&Wessons, for which they received several weeks of academy firearms training augmented by one trip to the police firing range every year. Coupled with an individual officer's judgement, that is deemed expertise enough to make the right decision every time.*

> *It is a lie. It is a lie the police department tolerates because to do otherwise would shatter the myth of infallibility on which rests its authority for lethal force. And it is a lie that the public demands, because to do otherwise would expose a terrifying ambiguity. The false certainty, the myth of perfection, on which our culture feeds…*

There's so much careful and sympathetic detail about the job (and no deep portrait of any suspects), that Simon risks partisanship - writing "copaganda", as internet radicals call it. Anyone who's seen *The Wire* knows this isn't a problem. (He has solidarity with the rank and file, and contempt for the suits.)

> *for the black, inner-city neighborhoods of Baltimore, the city's finest were for generations merely another plague to endure: poverty, ignorance, despair, police.*

Speaking of which: This is not at all made redundant by *The Wire* - the show has an entire pathos-pathetic angle (the anti-authority cop) missing here, and this is more focussed on the law side.

Their humour is fantastically sick.

> *the application of criteria such as comfort and amusement to the autopsy room is ample proof of a homicide man's peculiar and sustaining psychology. But for the detectives, the most appalling visions have always demanded the greatest detachment…*

Someone on Hacker News was up on their high horse about the black humour of medics recently. This strikes me as perfectly backwards. I would much prefer a doctor (or a detective) with a nasty sense of humour: it suggests emotional detachment, so they're more likely to think clearly; and it certainly has a cathartic and bonding role, improving their health and teamwork. This idiotically literal, first-order model of psychology (as if people were so easy to program!) is everywhere, for instance all discourse about fake news, porn, and violent computer games.

The section about the idiocy and arbitrariness of juries is sickening and I recommend that you don't read it if you want to continue thinking well of your society.

> *The operant logic of a Baltimore city jury is as fantastical a process as any other of our universe's mysteries. This one is innocent because he seemed so polite and well spoken on the stand, that one because there were no fingerprints on the weapon to corroborate the testimony of four witnesses. And this one over here is telling the truth when he says he was beaten into a confession; we know that, of course, because why else would anyone willingly confess to a crime if he wasn't beaten?*

> *The other eight jurors offered little opinion except to say they would vote for whatever was agreed upon… It was the Memorial Day weekend. They wanted to go home…*
>
> *"What brought you all around to first-degree?" he asks.*
> *"I wasn't going to budge and that other woman, the one in the back row, she wasn't going to change her mind either. She was for first-degree from the very beginning, too. After a while, everyone wanted to go home, I guess."*

The book has aged badly in one way: Simon completely falls for two entrenched bits of pseudoscience: polygraph and profiling . But many people still believe in these things, and anyway it's a rare lapse of scepticism, for him.

I think this is the first 'true crime' book I've read. I don't know if this is the pinnacle of the genre, or if the genre's better than literary people think.

Tags: review, goodhart

'Have One on Me' (2010) by Joanna Newsom

30th October 2010

- *A reading of the best album of the last 20 years.*
- *Confidence*: internally consistent
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 30 mins.
- Argument

> *...do her words really need to be broken down like formulae? I think not. Simply to escape into the world of Joanna and be incapsulated into it and applauding it is enough. And maybe not understanding completely is the more beautiful act of musical appreciation, lack of total understanding leaves the listener with a humbled nice sense of ignorant awe.*
>
> — *Guardian* commenter

(Forgive me; I am not satisfied by ignorant awe.)

Give love a little shove and it becomes terror

Newsom is hard work. Well, *Have One On Me* is a map of the heart, and you shouldn't expect those to offer themselves lightly.

The album covers the forms of love: *divine* or *agape* (tracks (3, 7, 14); *filial* (track 9, 14); *courtly* (track 2); *obsessional* (tracks 1, 5, 10); *maternal* (track 6! but touches in 1, 5, 11, 14); *platonic* (passionate friendship: track 8 and maybe 11); *panicked* (track 4); *dependent* (track 5, 10, 16); *wilful* (track 1, 16); *of place* (track 9); *destructive* (2, 8, 10, 15, 16?, 17?); *forbidden* (track 2); *unrequited* (track 18 above all, but 1, 7, 10, 15) and *love of self* (track 3, 4, 13). It exalts, despairs, casts about in the land.

Rock reviews miss the point in territory like this. There was a great deal written about it being a triple!! album!!!, which obscures the *real* way it's ambitious; this 123-minute thing requires patience because of its richness, not its length. The length (songs 6 mins on average), her vocabulary, voice, caesura, unfamiliar instruments slow us down, and then there's the alien allusions that leave us out, first of all.

Pretension, affectation, whimsy are just unavoidable side-effects of ambition. The lyrics work on their own as poetry, which is so rare in even the best pop music 1.

It ain't Renaissance music, but it is sacred. (American Secular Sacred). My mate James says it's "*a book of an album. It's Middlemarch*", and this is the case. Though, since it's episodic

and woozy and dark, I'd call it Nabokov's *Ada* more. James also spits at people who emphasise the bits of her that appear Medieval - but the fact is, she *is* making historical music; it's drenched in dead music. But it's the blues; Ol' Opry cakewalks; cabaret; parlour-music; Appalachiana; and gospel, rather than the pre-Baroque. (Gershwin > Gibbons.) Given this marinade of early American popular music and William Faulkner, Newsom sounds lasting.

I don't listen to her for historical satisfaction. What I love about it are the many moments of perfect sound and sense, the grand hooks". There's so many here because the songs are so long and get the time to climb all that way up.

Man vs Life

A type of love pointedly missing in the above rundown is *empathic* love. Where *Ys* burbled with anthropomorphisations, companion animals, and a general affinity with the universe, *Have One on Me*, while still full of nature, is much more about the Rancher (a lonesome, domineering social product nestling in a hostile world). It's sensual, snug, and macabre where *Ys* was abstract, epic, and pure.

"*I hope Mother Nature has not overheard!*
(Though, she doles out hurt like a puking bird.)" - *You and Me, Bess*

"*Driven through with her own sword,*
Summer died last night, alone." - Autumn

"*Wolf-spider, crouch in your funnel nest,*
...have I had a hand in your loneliness?" - Go Long

"*Black nose of the dog / As cold as a rifle* " - Ribbon Bows

With nature so terrible, the only safe place is civilisation, specifically the arms of someone who may or may not stay. The cover is filled with dead things: a judgmental peacock, half-plucked; a stuffed deer wearing a feather headdress; a divan draped in leopardskin - and her, langorous and deathly in the centre. And her animal motif-characters are this time uniformly malign - even Bess the horse makes "glad neighing", at highwayman-Joanna's hanging.

The significance is that the animals are *aspects* of the human characters. Newsom deals with the coldnesses, stubbornnesses or malices of the male lead and female lead via animal symbols.

Motifs

- "WATERS" (which both separates and connects two banks, or, fertility)
- THE DANGERS OF FEMININITY 11. "...my ankles are bound in gauze, sickly dressage,"
  16. "My mama may be ashamed of me with all of my finery..."
  18. "I have gotten into some terrible trouble / beneath your blank and rinsing gaze."
- GOD IS SHIT, the indifference of Nature
  2. "like a cornered rat"
  10. "my faith makes me a dope"
  13. "I glare and nod, like the character, God bearing down"
  14. a feared mistress
  16. using your dog as your theologian
  16. "When I am alone, I take my god to task"
  17. "To whose authority do you consign your soul?"
- FLAME / BURNING (that feel.)

The arc

The best hope for a unified story arc comes if we pick out the farm couple, seen most clearly in track 5, “No Provenance”. This easily ties into the Californian childhood arc, which is also the one who is intrigued by Lola Montez and empathises with her vengeance. My reading splits things into:

- FARM COUPLE songs (tracks 1, 5, 17, and 18) most clearly, but the others fit pretty well.
- ALLEGORIES (tracks 2, 3, 8, 11, 17). Aye; more allegorical than usual.

Who are ‘the farm couple’ then? *She* is a grown woman on earth variously known as “Lola”; a mad horse; Birch’s mother; Dick Turpin; a Nevadan; Esme’s adorer; “slow-heart”; Joanna Newsom. I’ll call her *J*.

He is, variously: “King Ludwig I”; “dragon”; “Bess”; Bluebeard; a magpie and a bluejay; a wolf-spider; a “silly goose”; “long-life”; and various hinted-at male celebrities whom I’m not interested in gaping at. Call him *B*.

We’ve only clues. I say “Newsom” when I mean “the songwriter”, and “J” for the protagonist - nothing more presumptuous (history is just organised gossip).

I don’t believe in overreading. Interpretations are second-order features, and if you honestly see [x] in a thing, then [x] is there.

The album has an arc: from the courting of “Easy” to the final moving out of the shared apartment in “It Does Not Suffice”. Each disc has its own subarc too (consider the mood swing between “Esme” and the next track), but I’m less clear on those.

Disc 1

1. Easy (6:01)

Album makes its landing approach, voice borne down by violins.

Heavy with gospel tones - "there's a river made of light"; "you must not fear / speak my name and I appear" - and a properly obsessive love, but they're masked by the jaunty piano and the witty backing strings, drums, and winds.

Title's a shushing; think whispering to a jittery horse (your partner). She taunts and pleads for love, promises him all sorts. She's trying, desperately *trying*...to show that it will be easy. She feels "tested", he's "pained". Her man is compared unfavourably to a frog, who has stamina, goes courting all day.

I love the little Wittgenstein line at the end of the first verse; "*we are blessed and sustained by what is not said*", but it is terrible self-delusion.

@0:00 - That voice, from space @0:48 - Piano touches down, too. @1:20 - two-part Epiphany: Strings add prim mischief; @1:30 - drums enter

@2:09 - left alone again
@3:14 - lovely flute licks
@3:22 - Glory horns distract from **terrifying** telling B to "give your life."
@3:33 - back down
@4:47 - Reset; she calms her pleas.
@5:30 - Jaunty, lazy horns and killer strings, out.

The Bloody Mary reference is dark beyond its namesake, too: like some ghost, she only feels real when she has his attention - "*I am barely here... speak my name and I appear.*"

2. Have One on Me (11:02)

Drug Jig. Stately burlesque.

Parts are sung in the voices of the life-large dancer/adventurer Lola Montez and of Ludwig I, a King of Bavaria. It cycles around, through flashbacks, getting more and more hallucinatory until /- she snaps back to clarity (returns to the opening). About her arrogance and her suffering, dancing on the thread of the music.

King Louis is daddy longlegs (a fly) and Lola thinks herself baby longlegs. Others ("Jesuits") see an immoral, gold-digging predator, dancing the tarantella before the King, a "*shrieking six-legged millionaire*".

Montez toured Nevada after her flirt with Euro nobility, and it's not hard to see Newsom dancing around parallels between herself and Lola - an "innovative female performer in the West". (Note that Newsom writes Lola not as the opportunist flirt that many accounts depict, but a wronged, heartbroke woman in a malign world). Despite Bavaria being the setting, it's Nevada, really...

@1:40 - Up suddenly, cheeky tambura line and a tarantella beat
@2:42 - that weird chord break again (jump in time?). Metonymy - she *is* her brassiere.
@3:14 - Pensive, sweet scheming.
@4:00 - There is nothing I adore apart from that whore's black heart.
@5:40 - Are you with me?
@6:10 - Epiphany! Will carry on; recorders at the wedding. Drums!
@6:40 - The descent. Have one...
@8:34 - Up. Modulates, recovers jauntiness
@9:05 - Up. Tarantella. (drums are the spiders, too.)
@9:48 - The choir are decapitated; we're slammed back into 0:01, as if Lola just woke up...

The most powerful reading is that, some time after Louis jilts her for political and selfish reasons, Lola tries to poison Louis (and maybe herself too). Throughout the last half of the song - where the humiliation and rejection plays out - she repeatedly encourages him to "*have one on me*", and it's an amazing idea that this is a sleight to murder someone. ("*Mud in your eye*" is both a toast and a "fuck you".) This reading only sticks if we also have someone else ("the blackguard") convicted for the crime and get beheaded for treason. In any case, the attempt fails:

"*Heard the cup drop, thought, 'well that's why they keep him around*"

(i.e. the dead food taster has served his purpose. Stretching the metaphor, this could be a mutual friend harmed by the breakup.) If this gruesomeness holds, what comes out? Remember, this is the *titular* theme - it should cover the whole album:

Booze = Love = Poison
(Each highly desirable, sometimes)

From which we derive littler themes like "relationships as intoxication", "heartbreak as an inevitable hangover", and all the alcoholism, vice and gluttony of love, and maybe the homeopathy idea that *it takes a poison to cancel another'n*. (see "Jackrabbits") Note also that she "dies" in tracks 2, 5, 8, 12 (and speaks to a phantom in 6; is in Eden/Hell in 3; and reacts to a death in 10)

3. '81 (3:51)

The most *Ys*-y. Of pre-birth (Newsom was born in 1982) and rebirth (forgiving, getting past bullshit, starting again). Could be the transformative power of an early relationship (or the wistful friendship after one).

@0:08 - "*Dirt is all the same*" - I know someone who'd see this as "emotions are universally uniform". (:
@0:25 - lovely scale picking
@2:32 - top of the harp's range sounds like a music-box, piercing, brittle.
@2:36 - "Even muddiest waters run" - we move on from most things, eventually.

"St George" and the "dragon" could be B and another of J's partners (Kingfisher?).

A nod to independence, for a change? -
"*Farewell to loves that I known*"
"*I shall want for nothing more.*" Content in oneself for once, though also "*I'm inviting everyone*"

4. Good Intentions Paving Co. (7:01)

THAT pedal in the piano! *Engine*.

Tremendous fun - full of Sam Cooke, puns, energy, and WWII girlgroup harmony. This is the one that gets called "poppy", I suppose because reviewers were just glad to get something easier to listen to. "*And I did not mean to shout 'Just drive! Just get us out, dead or alive!'*

> *A road too long to mention*
> *- Lord, it's something to see,*
> *Laid down by the Good Intentions Paving Co."*

@1:11 - just by adding a frigging tambourine, listen to beat change
@1:31 - banjo breaks in, piano drops out @1:47 - back,
@2:00 - Epiphany! Til the noise; and up.
@3:11 - bouzouki?
@3:28 - Down. Peace that only Hammond organ brings.
@5:30 - Up, up, up. Coda; neat little jam, trombone on out. Banjo comes back in, bringing his friend Hammond. Piano gets insubordinate, plonking chords.

Deciding to love. (Is love surrender? Fuck knows; to the sea!) Road to hell's westbound, and it's made of *deciding to drive home together instead of fly*. But now home is unfamiliar, and J's "*heart cannot drive*", she's dependent on getting B to do it. Agitation & uncertainty - but

now she's locked in to the relationship (en route) but still unsure (gotten lost, gotten jumpy about the destination).

Wordplay:

- "*I said to ya 'honey, just open your heart' / when I've got trouble even opening a honey jar*"
- "I can see you're wearing your staying hat, darlin"
- "Auld Lang / Syne, sealed, delivered I sang"
- "You ranged real hot and cold... I am at home on that range"

Entering a relationship as "folding", giving up a round of cards? And: road metaphor, the two of them - "the course I keep"; "right here in the right lane". And "I'm sold". It's on.

5. No Provenance (6:25)

Title is "out of nowhere". But no *providence* either - as in, no guarantee about the future. Probably the most complex piece - 16 or 17 chords, and it modulates four times. Following the last track's surrender to love (as if the car goes over the cliff)...

"*Allelu, allelu, I have died happy*".

But there's trouble yet. They go for a walk; Rome collapses in their absence! (The farm, unguarded empire of their love...) He sees it coming.

@0:40 - Rapture - the peace of arms, arms.
@1:45 - "the Big Return"; an argument unsettled?
@2:26 - wistful oboe, haunting her.
@3:00 - oy, always with the "arms".
@4:04 - Modulates. The horse strikes, to a sweet, patronising trio.
@5:35 - "*muzzle of a ghost*", like Bloody Mary in *Easy...*
@5:59 - Commands him to lay her down...

Lying together in a field, they're set upon by an "etiolated", skittish little horse. (J: her doubt and discontentment.) It tries to escape, but the gate holds fast. Neither J nor her partner have much sympathy for the struggling animal (as usual, we resent our doubts). He accepts the horse's distress, just "nodding sadly". She wonders what he knows, what he's planned, his signed-and-sealed 'arrangement with Fate'. Ain't convinced. J asks to be led - she can't find her own way - back to the farm, to resume the certainty of his arms.

She calls him Johnny Appleseed, the folk hero - horse-kind - but a committed bachelor too.

6. Baby Birch (9:30)

Country hymnal to an unborn who won't be. (Birch twigs were the traditional material for building cribs.) Has, I think, only four chords. So different - a C&W lilt, accelerating vocals and a haze of electric guitar.

> *"How about them engine breaks?*
> *And, if I should die before I wake,*
> *will you keep an eye on Baby Birch?*
> *Because I'd hate to see her*
> *make the same mistakes."*

Baby Birch herself is best seen as a *miscarried relationship*.I adore the idea of child as embodiment of a relationship - though of course they're sometimes a *memento dolori*. J had assumed much, that they would have time, that they'd last. And she's not quite mourning - she imagines meeting the grown-up Baby Birch, in another "path" (possible world).

@1:55 - "bulletproof cars" compared to the vulnerable vehicle of a (pregnant) body.
@3:21 - Harp vamp. Dignified acceleration.
@4:18 - Down. Back.
@5:55 - Vamp returns.
@6:22 - Handclaps make the stage light up.
@6:45 - Gets rowdy - Morgan adds voice, and +his drums, makes a torrent
@7:36 - Down, just harp. "Be at peace"
@8:25 - Lovely mandolin/recorder bridge -> theme -> out

"*Dirty lake"*... The goose might have beenan exception to *HOOM*'s animals being unempathic - J calls the defensive, nesting mother "poor little cousin" - but then her offspring are dismissed as "dregs".

Ends on a violent nursery rhyme. There's some abortion-worthy images, but it doesn't cohere. This cooing mother makes her own furs; J skins a rabbit alive, which runs off "*as they're liable to do*". Her violence is desperate - trying to make it stop kicking, make it stay, make it hers. Rabbit is the baby is a relationship she had hoped would last and grow; instead, finally, she skins it and lets it run. An exorcism, instead ("be at peace and be gone").

Beginning the great rewrite, the great skin-shedding which getting out of love requires.

Disc 2

7. On a Good Day (1:48)

So slight a thing, soon missed. This is short by any standard, but in a Newsom album it's not *half* of a tease. A tiny pure speck, following "Baby Birch" right on. J&B have decided to part - or, well, he's given up on Them - and the song is curiously accepting, noble (premature).

The key wordplay is "good day" - as in a *clear day*, elevated and seeing far ahead; but also as in *untroubled.* They only communicate properly "on a good day" now: once in a while...

@0:21 - "for. the. re. main. der" - where else do you hear this sweet plod but in hymns?
@1:02 - gets her crone voice on
@1:36 - Stunning strength: "leave me be so that we can stay true/To the path that you have chosen"

8. You and Me, Bess (7:12)

Frontier sure is lonely. Go fetch that horn quartet and them campfire backing singers, that'll

be cheering. (Dick Turpin's horse, or Porgy's dame...Guthrie or Gershwin, kids?) An intense, but doomed friendship. J "steals" Bess, and they try to eke out life in a terrible world's terrible winter - waves dangling the sea's entrails; outlawed; hoarding scarce food. J is captured because of Bess.

There's a vague betrayal ("*I believe you were not lying*"), a closed trial, and a hanging, at which J's forgiveness is heartbreaking.

@0:00 - J ghosts the trumpet melody.
@3:00 - Epiphany! Duet, the beautiful moment of capture.
@4:30 - Sweet harp defiance on the gallows.
@5:08 - Heroic, perverse horns
@5:35 - Epiphany! Humble bravery.
@6:00 - La-la-la into the dark.

But the harp chords are insistent and positive throughout, J Turpin's shrugging, gallows optimism. J dramatizes the breakup, tries to absolve him; accepts the sentence anyhow.

9. In California (8:01)

Personal highlight: an ode to retreating home. (More delusion, but what sweet and self-assured lies they are!) Home as sanctuary, running from the breakup. "Time", nostalgia, "sometimes", time, time. The tick-tock harp marks structure - the main (theme) section builds up in three runs - sometimes, sometimes, sometimes. Running metaphor of herself as an uprooted and difficult plant.

Can't shake him. J pretends to have everything just as she wants: 'home'. She's learning it properly for the first time, even. Tells him to leave her alone - and looks forward to him disobeying. She has "*sown untidy furrows across her soul*", been "pulling artlessly with fool commands" in moving on abruptly and categorically. Ain't working.

Two reasons you ignore a thing: either it's not important or you wish it weren't.

@1:09 - Epiphany! "it feels like some kind of mistake"
@1:25 - tick-tock modulates to D-add4th ...
@1:42 - horn swell into...
@1:53 - *Epiphany*!...sudden mood change - "*But there is another*..."
@2:26 - theme introduced
@3:00 - Epiphany! "I have sown untidy furrows cross my soul"
@3:14 - "SoOmetimes" theme
@3:46 - tick-tock returns
@4:18 - develops! (piano, bass, and drum enter)
@4:49 - back to the theme. "*Pick off my goldfish / From their sorry golden state*"
@5:22 - Epiphany! *An oil drum!*; strings enter from behind
@5:45 - ...and collapse
@6:45 - strings launch the bird out the window, cawing weirdly
@7:30 - drum+vocal break
@7:47 - tension drops out; a little syncopated guitar
@ End - an Axl Rose vocal gliss(!)

Ends on the admission; "*it has half ruined me to be hanging around here...I am native to it, but I'm overgrown.*" Where do you go when home isn't home anymore?

A magnificent easter egg: the first 8 tracks total 53 minutes - then here, just before the 60min mark she cries "*Like a little clock that trembles on the edge of the hour / Only ever calling out 'cuckoo! cuckoo!'.*"

10. Jackrabbits (4:22)

The heartbreak hatches. She's almost whispering for much of this. The sweet manic hope of being taken back, being allowed to feel. Ain't no valley low enough.

> *It can have no bounds, you know.*
> *It can have no end...*
> *...And it can change in shape or form,*
> *But never change in size.*
> *The water it runs deep, my darlin,*
> *Where it don't run wide.*

@Fairly uniform, but picks up vigour at
@2:02 - Flourishes; declarations.
@2:50 - Resorts to folk medicine and the Bible. "*You will be free*" is never bad counsel.

"*Telling you I can*" becomes "*tell me that I can*" - she has gone over to B's door: is standing there, asking.

Echo from track 4's road: "like a rope gone slack".

11. Go Long (8:02)

> *You were a prince...*
> *Who will take care of you..?*
> *There's a man who only will speak in code,*
> *backing slowly, slowly down the road.*
> *May he master everything that such men may know*
> *about loving, and then letting go."*

Ornate and sickly - the title and lyrics are sports metaphors; there's a Bluebeard reference and other grisly things. The song is a charm for a man, one she's oddly subservient to (pardoning his violences and self-isolation). Masculinity viewed from outside.
Much was made of the "kora vs harp duel" in this, but it is of course no such thing. There is a power struggle, but it's J&B against B. (Each has their own melody.) Peering into your partner, coping with and treating the pieces you can see.

"*We both want the very same thing -*
We are praying I am the one to save you"

B's pet name here, wolf-spiders are solitary; the other pet names she gives him ("goose", "bluejay" and "magpie") are all species that mate for life.

@0:00 - Cloying feel...who wants to hear your bad dreams?..
@2:37 - Enter frantic, baroque kora part. (->@3:08) The Mekong runs through Vietnam.
...there's a horrible napalm image comes to me.
@3:08 - Nursing, talking "Grope your little nurse".

@4:07 - Bastard kora comes back.
@5:44 - Kora again dischords. Bluebeard's chamber; a room full of woman's teeth
@6:38 - Kora is hushed. A blessing, & more unsettling kora -> out.

There's only so close you can get. And with some - "mighty men" say - there's no piercing the veil.

> *"This is the hour of lead*
> *Remembered if outlived,*
> *As freezing persons recollect the snow,*
> *First chill, then stupor, then the letting go."*
> *-Emily Dickinson*

12. Occident (5:31)

Minimal, solemn; song for dusk. Title means "the West" so, originally *point of sunset*: this is the end that "On A Good Day" sees coming at the start of the disc.

> *something is moving, just out of frame*
> *breaching slowly across the sea, one mast*
> *- a flash, like the stinger of a bee -*
> *to take you away, a swarming fleet is*
> *gonna take you from me*

What's left of her feelings, dealt with one way or other.

@Whole piece progresses simply, but:
@1:13 - "*smoke me out of my hiding place*" (...that is, out of 'California'.)
@2:41 - "*Slow-heart, brace and aim*" ['at me']; next comes the order to fire.
@4:00 - Drums blunder in, two-beat.
@4:09 - Epiphany! (Callout this"Long-life" fucker)
@4:32 - What passes for ostentation in track 12 (slow jazz)

Mixed message. One last chance..? "State your case".

Disc 3

13. Soft As Chalk (6:29)

There's an incredible house remix lurking in here. Really; as TV-themey and ragtimey as it seems, I'm confident that there's a monster club choon here. Which is not to say that it doesn't function as the speakeasy blues romp it is.

We get fun, & focus regained, after disc 2's predominating drunkness and *pain.* Still looking back, but empowered this time (*feel* the piano syncopating: matches track 4's giddy engine ostinato). J goes home again, and though there's still trouble ("*sadness beyond anger and beyond fear*") and boredom, this time it's hers.

@1:19 - Up. Epiphany! *Lawlessness*
@ - Life in nature; soporific, but life
@2:44 - 3:01 - Spry piano breakdown
@3:12 - Dramatic climb
@3:30 - Epiphany. The way she says "there" (theyoh) kills me, and no doubt the bear too.
@4:00 - Calms down, only so we can start piling on drums
@4:19 - "*Give love a little shove and it becomes terror*"
@4:47 - Grandstanding modulation. The best TV theme you'll find this side of the Sacramento.
@5:55 - Did Jerry Lee ever sing about airports? Nvm; it's covered.

An upbeat RnB romp against love. Regretting having put herself through all that. As if the options were: 1. Freedom, & Loneliness or 2. Stability, & Entrapment

14. Esme (7:55)

You can warm your hands on her adoration of this child. Vicarious, but nothing wrong with that.

She's stunned into a different place by seeing her friend's newborn. "*Just what you have done*." The child is a kite, a flying symbol for her. Her voice is tiny, the harp defers; J goes and hides in "branches" afterwards - a bird watching a birth and poring over its significance.

@1:55 - a shock of syncopation, pickup
@2:50 - "*May*kindness abound!" - drunk on the child, she commands the world, a prophet.
@3:03 - Epiphany! exquisite 6/8 arpeggios.
@3:30 - Back to syncop, getting wild, celebrating for everyone
@4:08 - "*Each phantom limb lost*" - past loves remain with her, like amputations do. But even they are less lonely, in this light.
@4:36 - KINDNESS, damnit.
@5:36 - "Clean as a breeze, bright as the day" - offensively nice.
@6:23 - Epiphany! Tiny soul-octave on "If you are blue"

Self-reference: "I search for words to set you at ease" - so it's a gift to Esme, a blessing against her future being blue. A proper epiphany (none of my glorifying a few seconds of pop music); your perspective on the world realigned and buoyed up by a new, tiny piece of information.

15. Autumn (8:01)

Crash, again! Alone and *lonesome*. She can barely raise her head. At home, waiting and taking stock of a shit run of luck ("*Snowbound by thoughts of him*"). Home now populated by ghosts and unsympathetic weather. There's excellent use of the horns again here, as well as a restrained string section.

"*I'll winter here, wait for a sign / To cast myself out, over the water, / riven like a wishbone.*"

Tearing herself in half, here - wanting to stay and also to go back to him. It's not clear which half of her is the lucky half, which the useless bit of the chicken's collar.

Compare the rain in "Esme" -

"*It's a beautiful town, with the rain coming down*"
- with, here:
"*rain...lists down on the gossiping lawns, saying tsk, tsk, tsk.*"

@1:28 - optimism, like a break in the clouds
@3:31 - mind-rhyme - "*no control /* over my heart, over my mind."
@3:58 - UP! This time the optimism clears the bastard sky.
@4:58 - song suddenly bursts (jarring key change). We veer offroad.
@5:18 - bursts again
@5:39 - bursts again
@6:30 - "*I loved them all, one by one*" (as Lola with her flies)
@7:21 - Crashing, scale down. -> Wry flourish.

16. Ribbon Bows (6:10)

Far more pragmatic - "*I could use someone like you around". Destitute again, though! Dissatisfying hedonism, one way out of Autumn's terrible doldrum. (Another one where the music is deceptively positive: listen cloze, now. Shares the high country vocal with "Baby Birch" and "Esme".)*
J goes to a dog pound, picks up an "old hangdog" (Kingfisher? Long-life?) and makes do. Rolls in bad habits and lost-and-lorn revelry.

Compare "For Pete's sake, what you have told me, I cannot erase!"
with Easy's "Tell me your worries, I want to be told."

@1:28 - nice mandolin frill
@3:30 - Echoing strings, ride cymbal (oddly un-Newsom)
@4:00 - Massive shift, drama and nighttime mania
@4:20 - Bellowing at the dog about God.
@4:34 - Vaguely Celtic lick there

"Alone at last". Self-referring at the end, like Esme, but here it's the decidedly malign - "could swear the night makes a motion to claim me, around that second verse..."

"Carrying on, whooping it up til the early morn
Lost and lorn among the madding revelry
Sure, I can pass / honey, I can pass
Particularly when I start / To tip my glass"

(cf "Atlantis", by Auden)
"Behave absurdly enough
To pass for one of The Boys,
At least appearing to love
Hard liquor, horseplay and noise."

17. Kingfisher (9:11)

Probably the messiest thing she's written.

Kingfisher/"Pro-heart" is perhaps the lover she took after breaking up with B - he's also "St George" from *'81*. She discusses the farm love with K, in his new arms..

Renaissance & Oriental frill. References Book of Revelation (end of a relationship is an end of the world).

18. Does Not Suffice (6:44)

Ending on reasonable mourning; quiet fury. A fixin'-to-go song. Few autopsies but those of relationships are conducted with this bitterness. ("*like somethin caught on a barbed-wire fence*") After the gaudy whirl of "Kingfisher", this plays us on out: a bare but warm reprise of many melodies and thoughts of the last seventeen.

Focusses on beautiful things going away, out of sight, into storage. She, who has let herself *be* these clothes and finery at some points in the album. Vocals are delicate, but not sulking. He is made to "deny the evidence" of something, probably simply his lack of commitment. She pictures him as Lady Macbeth, even: "*scouring yourself red*". And it's her that is leaving. She's had enough: *it does not suffice to merely lie beside each other, as those who love each other do.* Dignity of sadness.

@1:00 - Crushing admission.
@1:42 - "*sweet farewell*" eee!
@3:10 - The piano is more than it seems; she times it for certain phrases, slows the spread of certain chords.
@5:00 - Only here, after she has finished her lyrics (her packing-up) are other instruments allowed in. Strings enter, take her gently by the shoulders and steer her away; the band slowly overwhelm it all. Once again she "la la las" out.
@5:39 - Strange staccato chords, drums and electric violin (almost Amerindian)
@6:08 - Explosion is allowed to reverberate, decay. Faltering pedal.

"In California" is the named reprise; "It Does Not" has its middle chords (D-G-B-G) and switches IC's theme to a stripped-down, heavily struck piano. They share melodies: "*I have sown untidy furrows...*" and outro. But there's more returning than just that. Hear also:

- "Baby Birch": same chords (D-G-B-G).
- "You and Me, Bess": the album's other "la la la"s.
- "No Provenance": "bales" and "burn" point back to it; the Farm Couple.
- "Good Intentions"
- And "Easy" above all - she is removing from the house "*everything that could remind you of how easy I was not*" - this last song is the final collapse of the promising from the first track. The best laid plan, awry.

Life sort of goes on.

Misc notes

VOICE

There was a collective, relieved wiping of the indie forehead when Newsom's voice was noted to have grown somewhat sane (closer to ordinary) after her vocal-cord nodules in 2009. *This voice:* that doesn't grandstand despite its constant foregrounding: that remains one of the more expressive instruments I've ever heard -and we applaud when it comes down! Ah well; she plays less innocent and girlish people on *HOOM*, in less need of squeaking device*.*

An overview: she has been a trembling, shrill, unhinged, cutesy, baffling, slurring, feminine battering ram of voice. There's scarcely a nonchalant or boring word across four albums' worth of music. Her vowels elongate until they snap into a thick crack of consonants.

She ranges, *real hot and real cold* - wide emotion, pitch, rhythm, as well as form, like:
- hushed confessions,
- recital, as if reading against her will
- weathered and toothless, aged Texas Gladden (esp. track 2)
- plodding homophony of hymns
- repetitive gumption of blues
- Kate Bush-banshee-psyche folk-Appalachian-choral-classical-nuts
- nebulous whirl of modern folk
- clout of stage Musicals
- jauntiness of early jazz
- the high winsomeness of country-and-western's women

- Her enuciation gets mesmerizing - it hypnotizes *and* makes me frantic. (*What* did she say? "Hydrosyphilitic?" It was drowned by the whooping...) She plays with a Southern accent in places, hushing and cawing. Better than this is the colloquial, literary/slang language it brings, defying time ("Satellite feeds" and the Grand Ole Opry). More though, she throws clusters of words, crimping and distending her syllables. ("Par-tick-kyoo-lar-ly")

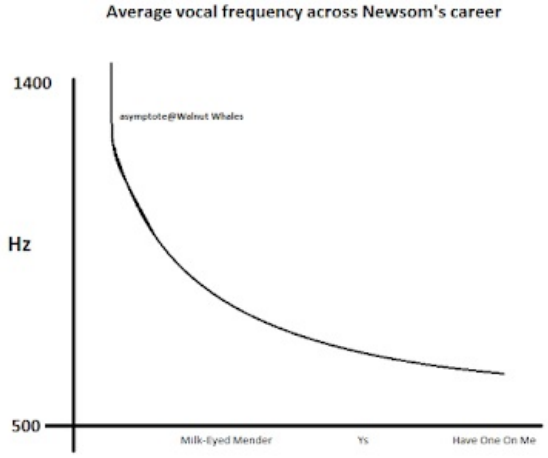
- Her diction is bloody weird, too. In poetry, it's called caesura - a linebreak - but Newsom's are radical - breaks and lags come midphrase, midword, unpredictably and without much regard for trad emphasis.

("*Down in the shallow ///// - gutter,")*

("My pleasure-seeking ///// AMONG the tall pines")

("now you can see me fall ///// back here redoubled...") Key, glorious lyrics ("it seems I have stolen a horse") get scudded right over and are easy missed.

** Her intervals (pitches and beats) are spiky - she uses the sudden octave-leaping of C20th avantgarde music (yeah, the ones designed to disturb us). * There's a thing that you can do with an electric guitar (flick a string up and outwards with your thumb...), a "pinched harmonic" - a sudden, unearthly spike in pitch. A certain kind of metal-music is enamoured of them, but Newsom's is the only voice I've ever heard that tries for it. Far fewer in HOOM; see the opening note of "Only Skin" on Ys... * I have a friend who uses "warble" as an insult, a catch-all for singing he dislikes. Others might call it warm-timbre vibrato. There's a word in opera, "melisma" (multiple notes per syllable). I can't remember its equivalent term in rhythm, but let's be clear: Newsom stretches English out - it takes a deal of reconstruction til the lyrics will be intelligible to you. Track 14, "Es-a-me, es-a-me" caused some confusion before it was officially titled. ("Sweet as a man?")*



*- Hers is an unforgiving tone; she won't wait for you to get used to one enunciation before she changes it completely. She's often bizarre, and obscures her own lyrics. She's worth it because she means it - and because she does mean it, the music lends itself to you, and lets you mean it. * It's a stretch to describe Texas Gladden as a siren:*

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"I realized that [Texas Gladden's] voice was conventionally not beautiful and yet it was SO worthy of being listened to, and so affecting. Before that, I knew that I wanted to make music and I knew that I had things to sing about, and I knew that I could employ my voice, to whatever degree it was polished, in my songs and do something with it that I wanted to do with it. But something about hearing her sing was a comfort."

DRUM

Neal Morgan's percussion work (writing and performing) is the only voice in the thing that matches hers (all the other instruments are in thrall). A couple of times he saves her from gaucheness - imagine; drums, adding sophistication! - like when she does her bird-swoops at the end of "In California".

He's got a particular jazz-born genius, but it's more obvious live. He makes the first disc ring out, then retreats from disc 2 except his star turn in "In California". His drumwork is the album's weather or stage design. They thunder (In California) and give the upbeat (Good Intentions) a tailwind. And, in the plaintive explosion that closes the album, they're the sound and fury that J is too undone to have.

1. I roam around the tidy grounds of my dappled sanatorium
   Coatless I sit amongst the motes adrift and I dote upon my pinesap gum
   And the light through the pines in brassy tines lays over me, dim as rum
   And thick as molasses, and so time passes
   And so, my heart, tomorrow comes

   I feel you leaning out back with the crickets
   Loyal heart marking the soon-ness, darkness tonight
   Still, the mourning doves will summon us their song
   Of love's neverdoneing lawlessness

Tags: music, love, art

Taking Hume's name

11th April 2013

- *Contemporary uses of David Hume (or anyway his name).*
- *Confidence*: 95%.
- *Topic importance*: 3 / 10
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.

> *…the platitudes with which 'Humean positions' are defined just do not fit with what Hume actually says. Most of the time Hume's texts simply do not lend the necessary support for this label 'Humean'…*
>
> – Tamás Demeter

David Hume is a darling of analytic philosophy; you find principles bearing his name in every major subfield. (In the ahistorical laboratories of English-speaking philosophy, naming things is less a scholarly attribution of Hume's primacy and more equivalent to naming an asteroid after him. Or asserting your work's importance by tying it to a Proper Name.)

In fact, there are so many principles that we've run out of synonyms for "principle" to attribute to him:

- **Hume's Principle** (in the logic of mathematics): "The number of Fs is identical to the number of Gs if and only if F and G are equinumerous. (#F = #G ≡ F≈G)." This is a contextual definition of the concept *number*: cool. This result is important for salvaging something from Frege's ruined lifework on the foundations of mathematics. It defines number as a non-mathematical concept that some people still claim can establish a kind of logicism.

  Source:
  > *We are possessed of a precise standard, by which we can judge of the equality and proportion of numbers; and according as they correspond or not to that standard, we determine their relations, without any possibility of error. When two numbers are so combin'd, as that the one has always a unit answering to every unit of the other, we pronounce them equal; and it is for want of such a standard of equality in extension, that geometry can scarce be esteemed a perfect and infallible science." (Treatise, Book I:III)*

  Coined by: George Boolos (1987), "The Consistency of Frege's Foundations of Arithmetic"; first recognised as key to neo-logicism in Crispin Wright's (1983) *Frege's Conception of Numbers as Objects*.
  Huminess: 5/10. Frege did the legwork in proving it, and Wright & Hale did the salvage work. And Hume would have rejected many of Frege's conclusions, like the infinity of infinite sets (see Hume's dictum below).

- **Hume's fork** (everywhere): the strict, exhaustive division of propositions into either "relations of ideas" (which are necessary, a priori, and analytic) and "matters of fact" (which are contingent, a posteriori, and synthetic). He uses the fork as a very early meaning criterion: any claim which is neither purely conceptual or experiential is meaningless. This includes, for instance, all arguments for the existence of God. ("Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.") Useful but imprecise, and superceded by Kant's breakdown into analytic/synthetic, apriori/aposteriori, and necessary/contingent. Playing around with these three variables

sustained metaphysics/language throughout the 70s: Kripke's most seminal work amounts to a lengthy rejection of the Fork, and Quine also messes with the scheme. This is a fun reductio of the Fork.

Source:

> *All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, relations of ideas, and matters of fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic... Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing ... It may, therefore, be a subject worthy of curiosity, to enquire what is the nature of that evidence which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory.*
> *This part of philosophy, it is observable, has been little cultivated, either by the ancients or moderns, and therefore our doubts and errors, in the prosecution of so important an enquiry, may be the more excusable, while we march through such difficult paths without any guide or direction. They may even prove useful, by exciting curiosity, and destroying that implicit faith and security, which is the bane of all reasoning and free enquiry..." (Enquiry, Section IV:1)*

Coined by: Anthony Flew in his 1961 Hume's Philosophy of Belief.
Huminess: 9/10.

- **Hume's Copy Principle** (in philosophy of mind): "all constituents of our thoughts come from experience; all our simple ideas are copies of impressions." HCP is a big axiom that much of his work relies on; this is Hume's empiricism, in miniature. He uses it to test the legitimacy of metaphysical concepts in a similar way to the Fork, and reminiscent of Wittgenstein. I am sad and foolish over this reminiscence, because I realise more and more that the Tractatus isn't as original and invulnerable as it looked when I was 18.

  Source: All over the place, but e.g.

  > *"Now since all ideas are derived from impressions, and are nothing but copies and representations of them, whatever is true of the one must be acknowledged concerning the other. Impressions and ideas differ only in their strength and vivacity..." (Treatise, I:7)*

  Coined by: James Noxon in his 1973 Hume's Philosophical Development: a Study of his Methods?
  Huminess: 9/10.

- **Hume's dictum (1)** (in Metaphysics): "There are no metaphysically necessary connections between wholly distinct, intrinsically typed entities". This dictum is a core sceptical doohickey in the combinatoric juggling games called "causality" and "modality". If you take HD as given, you can read failures of necessitation from one thing to another as a sign of their distinctness, which is useful in various places - for instance in finding the number of doohickeys you have to argue about. (Unfortunately 'distinctness' can be given at least five readings, and the truth of HD depends on which one you're hearing at one time.) HD stands at a nexus of current debates - motivating, and motivated by, combinatorial theories of possibility, four-dimensionalism, anti-necessitarianism, etc. It also raises a fairly grave problem for physicalisms which use the idea of supervenience.

  Source:

  > *"There is no object, which implies the existence of any other if we consider these*

> *objects in themselves, and never look beyond the ideas which we form of them. Such an inference would amount to knowledge, and would imply the absolute contradiction and impossibility of conceiving any thing different. But as all distinct ideas are separable, 'tis evident there can be no impossibility of that kind." (Treatise, Book I:III)*

Coined by: David Lewis in his 1986 *On the Plurality of Worlds*.
Huminess: 7/10. (While it is a generalisation of a view he did hold (generalising as it does across any relation between any entities - including e.g. facts; reading "metaphysical necessity" out of his talk of "implication"; and taking his idea of distinctness not to be mere numerical distinctness), HD is now more often applied to possibility, and most often used for distinguishing properties. It's unclear he would have gone in for this.)

- **Hume's dictum (2)** (in meta-ethics): "judgments of fact, apart from desires that might accompany them, do not move us in any way". This is the "motivational inertia of belief" thesis, aimed squarely against moral rationalisms. My favourite word for these positions (one qualified form of which I endorse) is sentimentalism. HD is a mirror of Hume's Law (below): "since there is an is-ought gap, and since reason deals only with matters of fact: one cannot use pure reason to ascertain moral principles."

  Source:
  > *"I shall endeavour to prove first, that reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will; and secondly, that it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will... Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." (Treatise, Book II:3)*

  Coined by: Unknown. Possibly this.
  Huminess: 6/10. The attribution of this view - and an entailed moral noncognitivism - to Hume has been challenged by several good scholars of his morals (e.g. Rachel Cohon).

- **Hume's dictum (3)** (in comparative psychology): "when assessing whether some psychological capacity is shared between humans and animals, (1) we should adopt competence criteria that can be fairly applied to both; and (2) set competence criteria for vaguely-defined capacities not to the highest ranks of human performance, but rather only to the typical performan ce of e.g. children." Acts as a counterpoint to Morgan's Canon - which is Occam's Razor for animal minds: "assume animal s lack higher processes if experiments fail to establish them" (Both principles are useful: Buckner suggests using both to navigate between anthropomorphisation and anthropocentrism.)

  Source:
  > *"When any hypothesis . . . is advanc'd to explain a mental operation, which is common to men and beasts, we must apply the same hypothesis to both; and as every true hypothesis will abide this trial, so I may venture to affirm, that no false one will ever be able to endure it.*
  > *The common defect of those systems, which philosophers have employ'd to account for the actions of the mind, is, that they suppose such a subtility and refinemen of thought, as not only exceeds the capacity of mere animals but even of children and the common people in our own species." (Treatise, Book II:16)*

  Coined by: Cameron Buckner in this cool paper.
  Huminess: 7/10.

- **Hume's maxim** (in epistemology / science): "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence". In which Hume founds a powerful proto-Bayesian tradition, just to question one kind of unusual claim: miracles. (In the detail, he finds it can never

be rational to believe in miracles.) As you can imagine, this gets wielded in atheist circles a lot. The Bayesians have spilled much ink over the argument (cf. Hume's Abject Failure). Thus as recently as 2003 the view had to be defended at book-length.

Source:

> *"In our reasonings concerning matter of fact, there are all imaginable degrees of assurance, from the highest certainty to the lowest species of moral evidence. A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence... The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish: And even in that case, there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior." (On Miracles, Part 1)*

Coined by: Himself (see brackets in that source). Still gets called "Hume's dictum" (4) sometimes.
Huminess: 7/10? (Since Robert Fogelin calls the above, standard interpretation of On Miracles as apriori a 'gross misreading'.)

- **Hume's Theorem:** formalisation of Hume's Maxim. From Sobel (1991).

- **Hume's Maxim of Conceivability**: "Conceivability implies [metaphysical] possibility." Held by many people before Hume, not least Descartes a full hundred years earlier, but never mind primacy, we're in the get-close-to-our-hero business.

  Source:

  > *"Tis an establish'd maxim in metaphysics, That whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible. We can form the idea of a golden mountain, and from thence conclude that such a mountain may actually exist. We can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible."*

  Coined by: Thomas Reid, in a way, since he addressed his attacks on the MoC to Hume rather than any antecedents.
  Huminess: Yes.

- **Hume's Postulate**: "The assumption that interesting probabilities can only be obtained from completely straightforward evidence." Cool move, specifying that inductive logic can only be properly applied given good epistemic positions, minimising theory-ladenness.

  Source: Maybe:

  > *Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented" and None but a fool or madman will ever pretend to dispute the authority of experience, or to reject that great guide of human life." (Treatise, IV:1)*

  Coined by: Ian Hacking, in his 'Linguistically Invariant Inductive Logic'. Though Hacking accepts the Postulate, he goes on to develops a logic that doesn't need it for anyone who really doesn't want to use it.
  Huminess: 5/10

- **Hume's Law** (in meta-ethics): "you can't get an ought from an is". Logical thesis asserting that you can't deduce moral conclusions from non-moral premises. An early identification of the naturalistic 'fallacy'. The is-ought gap has come under fire since its forty years of hegemony (c.1910-1950), the best being Putnam on "thick" concepts. There's a great discussion of how HL can still be defended here.

  Source:

  > *In every system of morality ... all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence.*
  > *For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason." (Treatise, Book III:1.)*

  Coined by: RM Hare's 1963 Freedom and Reason. (HL is also known as "Hume's Guillotine", from Max Black (1964) and "Hume's Rule" (1977), both of which imply that the dichotomy is an action - one *guillotines* naturalistic theories, rather than just describing a gap.)
  Huminess: 7/10.

  </ul>

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> *There are many Humes out there. There is Hume the epistemologist, or more exactly the epistemologist whose project 'failed' because he lacked the philosophical resources of the twentieth century — namely, either a Fregean or (late) Wittgensteinian theory of meaning and language. There is Hume the skeptic. Then there is the Hume who is held up as the darling of free market, laissez-faire capitalism. I prefer to think of Hume as a realist, or, and this may express it better, a hyper-realist. Yes Hume is a skeptic, but why is he a skeptic?"*

– Jeffrey Bell

> *[Hume's] empiricism is a sort of science fiction avant la lettre. As in science fiction, one has the impression of a fictive, foreign world, seen by other creatures - but also the presentiment that this world is already ours, and those creatures, ourselves… Science or theory is an inquiry, which is to say, a practice; a practice of the seemingly fictive world that empiricism describes."*

– Gilles Deleuze; what a mad thing to say

It doesn't stop there. Hume talk is usually about the Analytic Hume, the quintessential sceptical naturalist enshrined above, the lodestar who lends himself to our crunchy formalism and parsimony. But this is not the only reading of him. (A 'shadow history', in Richard Watson's helpful phrase.)

Others claim Hume as a Continental humanist and nominalist. (Look at the title of this book!) These readings wear their reconstructive (revisionist) status openly, and are in the habit of tagging readings of philosophers with the reader's name (e.g. "Deleuze's Hume"; "Zizek's Hegel"). I unwittingly participated in this when I was starting to teach myself Continental stuff. (e.g. here or here.)

These revisionists point out that Hume neither solves nor dismisses many of the problems he raises (e.g. of induction, morals, causality, identity). He doesn't view this failure of (his) philosophy as a cause for angst, either. He's anti-foundationalist, anti-transcendental, psychologistic, "fundamentally aesthetic" - thus, one of them, or near enough. They overlook his being a enthusiastic experimentalist. Best of all, personal identity is underdetermined and unstable.

> *upon a more strict review of the section concerning personal identity, I find myself involv'd in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent.*

The Continental Hume first appeared ages ago, in a 1953 book by Deleuze, before he got really strange. He talks about Hume as a phenomenologist, a 'transcendental empiricist', of all things. This is bizarre because I had taken empiricism to be the philosophy of looking outward, of trying not to be just a subject. ("Empiricism is by no means a reaction against concepts … On the contrary, it undertakes the most insane creation of concepts ever." - GD) He's a gnomic and speculative writer, full of needless neologism and sententious contortions; but it's interesting, and it doesn't take much to find something like this in Hume's writing. That project consists in the questions "how do the multiplicity of ideas in the imagination become a system?" (sounds like the Binding problem); "How is the subject (human nature) constituted within the given?" - without transcendental principles, how can a person more than the sum of their ideas arise? - and "How can things like us be ampliative, get past today's sunrise to tomorrow's, etc?")

A suggestive Markov chain

Deleuze:

> *We are habits, nothing but habits – the habit of saying 'I'. Perhaps there is no more striking answer to the problem of the Self. Belief is the application of habits, our instinctively going beyond the given. Belief and invention are the two modes of [natural] transcendence.*

One thing I really dislike about 'postmodern' stuff is when it totally ignores the unequivocal constraints of nature, hides in its anthropocentric, irreferential, politicised bubble. Whatever else is wrong with his work, Deleuze does not entirely do this, and - no matter how many poststructuralist themes you project on to him - Hume certainly doesn't.

The appropriations are also celebrations - we are crowding to get close to him - how similar we feel!

Tags: philosophy, history, lists

Crossing the ocean of my ignorance

22nd June 2020

- *How can we think new things when everything's so complicated?*
- *Confidence*: N/A
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Content notes*: Centred on PhD research, which has particular pathologies.
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Argument

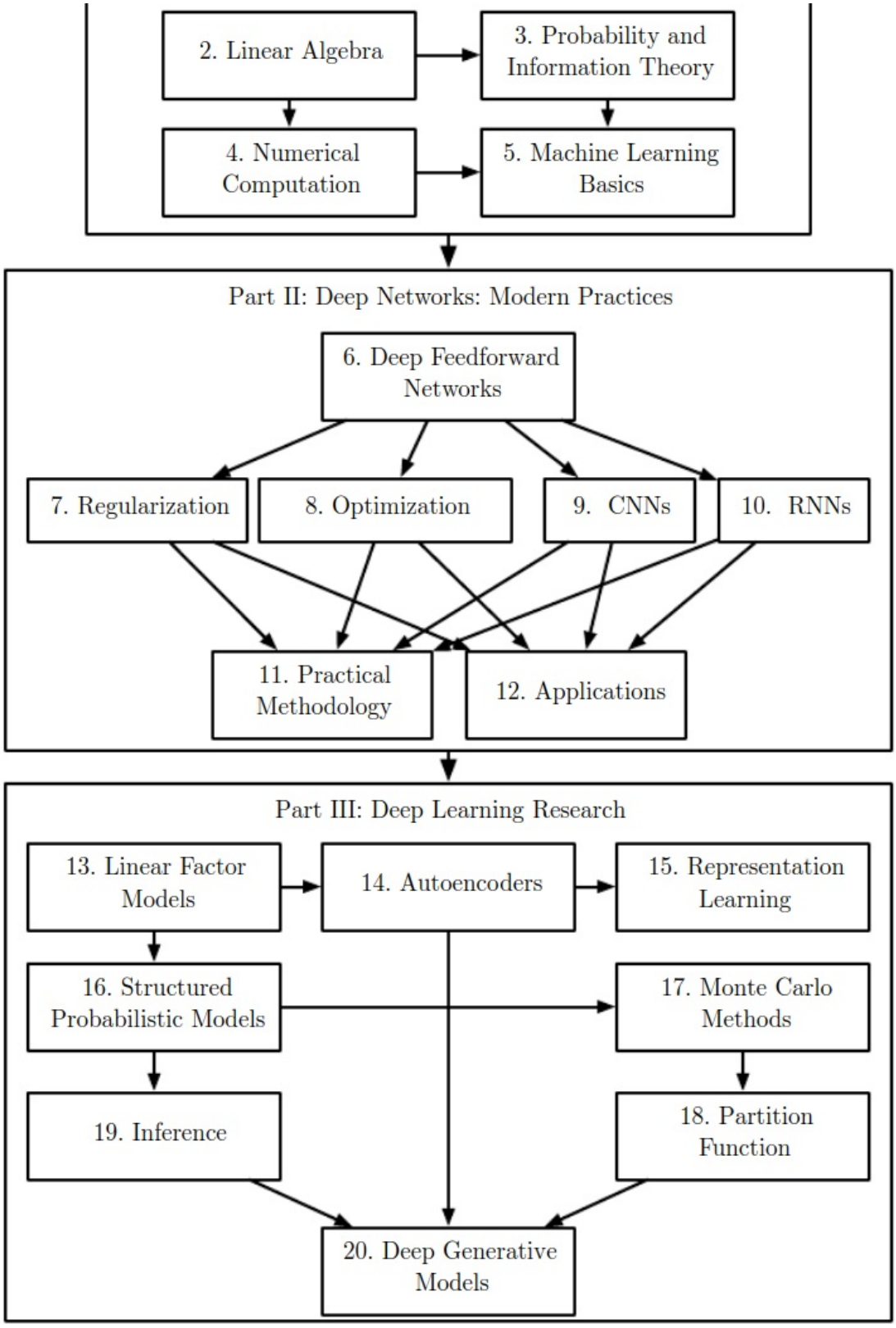
> *...postpone reading Nietzsche for the time being; first study Aristotle for ten to fifteen years.*
>
> – Martin Heidegger 1

> *As a researcher, either you won't understand something and you will feel stupid and like a worm, or you will understand something and think it's too trivial and hence still feel like a worm.*
>
> – Simon Peyton Jones

> *I was much further out than you thought*
> *And not waving but drowning.*
>
> – Stevie Smith

What do you need, to do new things? Imagine you're a junior researcher; a scientist; a dry-lab scientist; a Machine Learning person. For good and bad reasons you want to publish in **D**eep **L**earning, a decade-old bandwagon which continues to steamroll your field. You're rolling in the deep. How do you get to work?

A natural answer is to start at the beginning: go read the underlying mathematics.



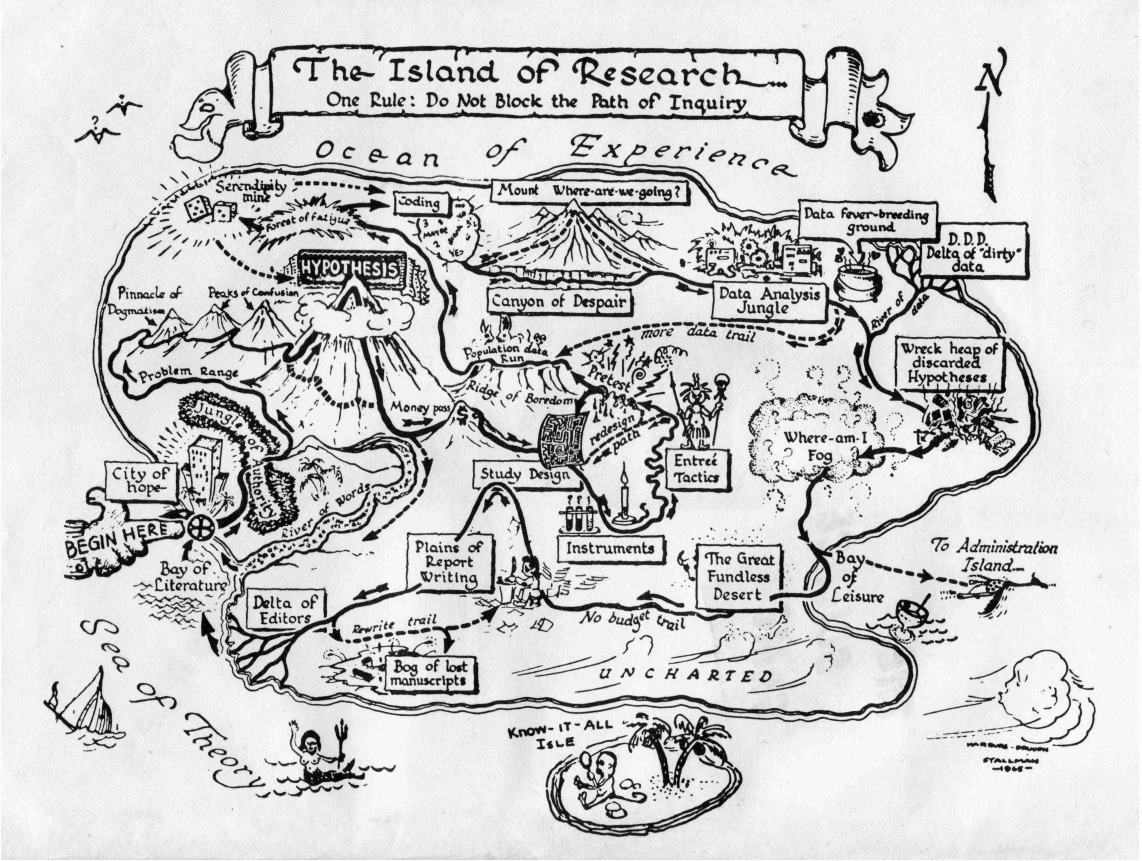
OK, say you go off and do that. You're not happy with your understanding: you can feel the aching gap in your knowledge of say linear algebra - that your looking at all those matrices *actively concealed* something important - but you figure it's enough for now.

It takes a month or six. Can you do new things now? No: you have to learn how to actually implement things. Brilliant people have built easy tools for you, so you learn one of those and reimplement some big papers. This is harder than it sounds, and you actually don't manage to reproduce half of the results. You add 3d6 unease and self-doubt.

That takes a month or two. Can you do new things now? No: you need a good idea. Where do you get those? 'Related Work', I guess. You go read. Later, your mouldering bones are discovered at your desk, with 200 tabs open and the Colab Disconnected modal still burning on your screen.

So much of the foundations I do not understand, and it would take a lifetime to fully understand them (and by then I'd have forgotten the first bits). With such a burden, how does anyone do new work? Well, by not doing any such thing.

- you have to just start
- you'll learn it when you need it
- most research is not done alone
- most researchers don't remember the low-level stuff, and don't have to
- you don't have to focus on one thing
- forcing yourself to work on something has large costs



Even after we reject foundationalism, the practical problem remains: what to learn, and how? I've been trying to think new things for about 6 years, but only recently got any good at it. Here are some things that may have helped:

Requisite attitudes

The Neurathian bootstrap

> *We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction.*
>
> – Otto Neurath

Beginning at the beginning, craving absolute foundations, mostly leads to paralysis. Sometimes this is because it takes too long to reach the frontier from the foundation; sometimes it's because the foundation is missing or impossible.

To live, you have to ignore things. So bite off a chunk of reality and ignore the rest. Manuel

Blum:

> *When working on a PhD, you must focus on a topic so narrow that you can understand it completely. It will seem at first that you're working on the proverbial needle, a tiny fragment of the world, a minute crystal, beautiful but in the scheme of things, microscopic. Work with it. And the more you work with it, the more you penetrate it, the more you will come to see that your work, your subject, encompasses the world. In time, you will come to see the world in your grain of sand.*

People don't talk enough about what they ignore. One exception: Andrew Gelman, one of the most influential statisticians alive, never bothered with measure theory, the deep generalisation / justification of probability theory.

The raft is our lack of fear at the lack of raft.

Comparing down

The above isn't about impostor syndrome, except insofar as I delude myself that others are not ignorant. I take impostor syndrome to be the subjective feeling of being inadequate relative to those around you. I'm talking about the objective sense in which no one has anything more than a piece of the puzzle; and yet some of them still manage to do new things. (To get a sense of how rough the subjective and objective problem is, note that PhD study breaks a quarter or a half of the smart people who try.)

Anyway: I had a very distorted view of how much an average PhD actually knows. Just as an undergraduate degree only shows you once had a small degree of knowledge on one or two topics, so too getting postgraduate funding only means that you're not totally dense and callow. This is good news! Not-totally dense and callow people manage to do many of the coolest things.

Unlearning education

> *Books should follow science; science should not follow books.*
>
> – Francis Bacon

I was lucky; by being born in the right time and right place, I got huge amounts of free education.

I was unlucky; an education was not what I actually needed; education trains you for the wrong task, in the wrong way. The ability to do research correlates with doing well on tests. But it is probably not well served by the current degree of optimising for tests, reading, and mere recall.

There are multiple mismatches: it focusses your attention on solved or toy things; it emphasises understanding old things rather than creating new things; it expects you to do your best, not to solve things; it mostly doesn't let you follow your curiosity; it mostly doesn't train you to handle the gross uncertainty of research. (Outside of mathematics, there is no marking scheme - not even peer review, not even awards at conferences. Maybe 10 years later you'll get some sense of whether you actually succeeded.)

Question first, not books first. Learning is best and most lasting when in the service of a goal you actually care about: not "better grades", not "impress distant superior", but "I want to build x". When it is part of you.

PhDs are still pretty artificial (they make you work ~alone, on one pre-specified topic which has to look sensible and follow an existing programme, with deadlines, and you're fed ideas), but at least their goal is not a total dead-end.

It’s not easy to unlearn tutelage, but at some point in your first few actual projects you might manage it.

Ideas are cheap

One useful piece of startup culture: “you have to ship”. It is *not* that your perfect idea is ruined by imperfect implementation: your idea is nothing until it exists; all implementations are an improvement over an idea. 2

Mechanisms

The above is about fixing your head. This bit is about how the vastness of the ocean actually ends up not mattering:

Abstraction as testimony

Some abstractions actually allow you to ignore what’s underneath; some boats don’t sink that quick. I’ve been playing with the internals of Pytorch recently. How many people understand the Tensor class? A couple hundred probably, for say 100,000 users of it, and who knows? a billion downstream users. In fact, most good software is about shielding you from details: even the statement `a = 1` is pretty computationally complicated. The world couldn’t work without the glory of testimony like this.

Collaboration

Even once you’ve selected a level of abstraction, trusted the bulkheads to hold, you can still split the work further: laterally across co-authors who are good at different parts. This is division of labour again, one of the most powerful social forces.

The average paper now has about 5 authors. Some of this is down to a deflation of what it takes to count as an author, but the rest is good stuff. One (conceptually) simple solution to the replication crisis in social science would be to require a statistician to be on every project, at least in the experiment design.

Momentum

Ideas generate ideas, success generates success.

In Spring, I worked on a coronavirus modelling project. In writing it I collected 15 major ideas that we didn’t have time for, didn’t have data for, which didn’t fit into the scope of that paper. One week after submitting it, a subset of that team wrote another paper on the methods used, including 3 or 4 completely novel ideas and tests and proofs. We could do this 3 or 4 more times without a hint of ‘salami slicing’, bad behaviour. If we could only sustain the energy.

Slack

> *You waste years not being able to waste hours*
>
> – Amos Tversky

One of the perversities of academic life is the absence of slack: spare time for just playing around. I won’t go into this here (see here instead), but here’s a nice story. A young

mathematician recently cracked a notorious problem as a side-project, no deadline, no particular expectation of success, almost an etude.

you have to have a question

https://acesounderglass.com/2020/06/09/where-to-start-research/

Teaching as learning

> *You think you know when you can learn, are more sure when you can write, even more when you can teach, but certain when you can program*
>
> — Alan Perlis

> *Consider the grad student in teaching mode… When the professor asks them questions, they're Expected To Do Their Best; when the undergrad asks them questions, they're just expected to answer. In the first case, they're expected to try; in the second case, they're assumed capable, an assumption that fades into the background.*
>
> — Nate Soares

The bureaucracies act as if you can only teach once you are a master. But I often feel that I don't understand anything until I try to explain it to someone else - hence this blog. Yet another unforced error of ordinary education: you're not allowed to learn through teaching until it's over.

"You learn the prerequisite in the next course." And I learn the prerequisite when I am allowed to teach the prerequisite.

See also

- Laura Deming's rage.
- Matt Might's ways to fail
- I think this post obsoletes some of the above.
- Peyton Jones, 'How to Write'
- Steinhardt, 'Research as a Stochastic Decision Process'
- Abram Demski in the Field,
- Nerst, Decoupling
- Alexander, 'Ars longa, vita brevis'
- Holden, 'Why Can't I Reproduce Their Results?'
- Soares, 'Stop trying to try and try'

1. ...in order to understand the Epic of Gilgamesh, you'll have to first comprehend the cave paintings and sculpture produced during the Upper Paleolithic. Without a full grasp of the cave paintings at Lascaux, you'll never be able to contextualize the oral tradition that produced Gilgamesh, leaving you without a full knowledge of the Septuagint, making your reading of Kierkegaard incomplete, making your reading of Heidegger & Derrida faulty.

   Of course, you'll need to learn Proto-Indo-European.</a>
2. There are subtleties here, about data fumes, info hazards, idea inoculation, and poisoning the well. But unless you're working on very strange things these are unlikely

to apply.

Tags: research, writing, self-help

Notes on inductive logic programming

1st March 2020

- *A neglected paradigm in AI and its struggles.*
- *Confidence*: 70%. Not my area. I played with a couple systems and read a dozen papers.
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 30 mins.
- Argument

> *Haskell programs never crash - because they are never run.*
>
> — paraphrasing Randall Munroe

Inductive logic programming (ILP) is a subfield of ML for learning from examples E and suitably encoded human "background knowledge" B, using logic programs to represent both inputs E, B and the output model h.

ML took over AI. What ILP shows is that the version of ML which exploded in the last decade is only one restricted form: "statistical ML" or "propositional ML".

The (potential) upsides of ILP are in some sense a *complement* of the benefits of deep learning, which is ubiquitous because of its tolerance of unstructured, noisy, and ambiguous data, and its learning hierarchical feature representations.

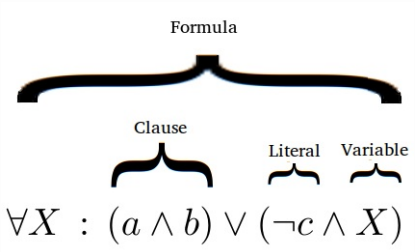
The field is tiny. As a suggestive bound on the ratio of investment in ILP vs DL, compare the ~130 researchers (worldwide) listed on the ILP community hub, to the 400 researchers at a *single* DL/RL lab, Berkeley AI Research.

This makes comparing it to other paradigms difficult, since "SOTA" means much less. We also don't have theoretical coverage: we don't know the complexity classes of many ILP systems.

ILP was motivated by the promise of learning from structured data (for instance, recursive structures), and of better knowledge representation. The resulting approach has interesting properties. For example, ILP yields relatively short, human-readable models, and is often claimed to be sample efficient (though finding comparative data on this was difficult, for me).

Background

As the name suggests, ILP is inductive logic plus logic programming: it constructs logic program generalisations from logic program examples. Both the data and the resulting hypothesis are represented in formal logic, usually of first- or second-order. For computability reasons, systems use subsets of first-order logic, often the definite clausal logic.



The parts of a logical formula, which could be input data, a constraint, or the output model.

The output of a call to an ILP system (what is induced by the learning algorithm) takes several names: a 'theory', a 'hypothesis', a 'program', a 'concept', or a 'model' (in the machine learning sense, and not the logical sense of a truth-value interpretation).

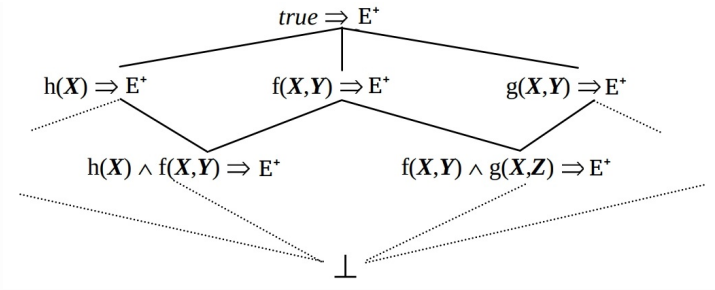
ILP is a collection of methods, rather than one technique or even family of algorithms, due to the many systems not based on Prolog-like inference, and the many nonsymbolic ILP systems. Our working criterion is just that the output of an 'ILP' system should be a logic program.

How it works

In the classic setting, the examples E are labelled with a binary class: positive examples E^+ and negative examples E^-. An ILP system searches a hypothesis space $\mathcal{H}$ until a program h is found such that $B \wedge h \models E^+$, and such that $\forall e \in E^- \; B \wedge h \not\models e$. In practice this is weakened in two ways: firstly by heuristic scoring, so that *most* positives and few negatives are covered by h; and secondly by using θ-subsumption rather than normal (undecidable) FOL entailment. h is then a relational description, in terms of B, of some concept common to the positive examples and absent from the negatives.

The normal ILP setting assumes that atoms are either true or false, and that hypotheses have a binary domain. Thus the first ILP designs produced only binary classifiers. But 'upgraded' (relational)\citep{laer} forms of many propositional ML techniques have been developed: multi-class classification \citep{clark}, regression with decision trees \citep{kramer-tree}, clustering \citep{brugh}, and even visual object classification \citep{plane}. This bivalence also entails the inability of early, exact ILP systems to handle ambiguous data.

We can view ILP as a search of the 'subsumption lattice', the graph that results from partially ordering hypotheses in $\mathcal{H}$ from most general ($\mathrm{true} \rightarrow E^+$) to most specific (the bottom clause $\perp$, a conjunction of evaluated predicates).



A subsumption lattice to search.

The lattice gives us two obvious approaches to hypothesis discovery in ILP:

- 'bottom-up' search, starting from an initially long clause (i.e. the feature values of individual examples), finds a specific clause to generalise from, and drops or abstracts away literals until a minimally general hypothesis that covers E^+ is found. This specific-to-general search direction is the default approach in the classic ILP systems Progol and Aleph.
- 'top-down' search proceeds from a short clause (for instance, the empty implication `true`, and adds literals to it until the expression becomes too specific to cover the examples. This might involve generating candidate clauses from a template, then testing these clauses against E, branching through the lattice when violations are found. This general-to-specific approach is used in Metagol and ∂ILP.

The expressive power of (even subsets of) first-order logic leads to ILP's computational complexity: the resulting combinatorial search over large discrete spaces is a notably difficult problem: it's in NP^{NP}. As a result, various forms of heuristic scoring are used to guide and prune the search.

Table 1 relates the various biases of ILP and DL. For instance, we can draw an analogy between the 'program template' that constrains an ILP hypothesis space and the architecture of a neural network; both constrain the hypothesis space and, until recently, both have been entirely handcrafted, though recent results in neural architecture search promise automation of bias provision. Divide inductive bias into

- language bias (hypothesis space restriction),
- procedural bias (how the search is ordered; also called 'search bias'), and
- simplicity bias (how overfitting is prevented).

I don't know the standard term for the many ways to bias an ILP run (mode declarations, program templates, meta-rules). So I'll call them user-supplied constraints (UCs).

Learning property	**ILP**	**DL**
Language bias	Program templates	NN architecture
Procedural bias	Various: classic search algos	N/A
Simplicity bias	Bound on program length	It's controversial
Search procedure	Local search for subsumption	Local search over gradients
Automated language bias?	No	Sometimes

Table 1

Example ILP algorithms

Generic algorithm: ILP as two-part search

AbstractILP (allowed inference rules R, language bias $\mathcal{L}$) :
Result: hypothesis h, a rule in first-order predicate logic

$H \leftarrow \text{initialHypotheses}(\mathcal{L})$;
while *not stop-criterion* **do**
  $h \leftarrow \text{Pop}(H)$;
  $r_1, \cdots, r_k \leftarrow \text{ChooseRules}(R)$;
  $h_1, \cdots, h_n \leftarrow \text{Apply}(r_1, \cdots, r_k, h)$;
  $H \leftarrow H + \{h_1, \cdots, h_n\}$;
  $H \leftarrow \text{Prune}(H)$;
end
return $h \leftarrow \text{Pop}(H)$;

Algorithm 1: adapted from Muggleton & de Raedt (1994)

At this level of abstraction (which overlooks the data, even), we see the structure and parameters of ILP in general:

1. `initialHypotheses`: defines the hypothesis space. High-performance ILP systems generally begin with only one hypothesis in this queue $B \wedge E^+$.
2. `stop-criterion`. Terminating condition. Examples include: finding a strict solution; meeting some threshold on the statistical significance of the heuristic score of a hypothesis.
3. `Pop`: which hypothesis to try next. This is half of the search procedure. It can proceed by simple classical search, e.g. LIFO (breadth-first) or FIFO (depth-first) or priority queue (best-first), or by heuristics (see `Prune`).
4. `ChooseRules` and `Apply`: determines which inference rules to use on H, for instance absorption, addClause, dropNegativeLiteral. These are generally syntactic modifications

of h, and yields a set of derived hypotheses $\{h_1 \cdots h_n\}$.

5. `Prune`: which candidate hypotheses to delete from H; the other half of the search. We score the hypotheses, for instance using estimated probabilities $p(H|\, B \wedge E)$. (Note that, in an exact system, generalisation and specialisation allow us to simultaneously assign $p = 0$ to all specialisations of hypotheses that fail to entail a positive, and $p = 0$ to all generalisations of hypotheses $\wedge$ example e^- that entail the empty clause.) An alternative score is the minimum compression length of h.

LaTeX

```
\vspace{\baselineskip} \smallskip

\begin{algorithm}[H]    \hline\smallskip     \textbf{AbstractILP} (allowed inference rules `\(R`\(, language bias `\(\mathcal{L}`\() :      \KwResult{hypothesis `\(h
```

At this level of abstraction (which overlooks the data, even), we see the structure and parameters of ILP in general: %it comprises a hypothesis search subroutine, and a clause selection (heuristic scoring) subroutine.

```
\begin{itemize}      \item `initialHypotheses}: defines the hypothesis space. High-performance ILP systems generally begin with only one hypothesis in this queue
```

Top-down search: The First-Order Inductive Learner

FOIL (background knowledge B,
positive examples E^+,
negative examples E^-) :
Result: hypothesis h, a rule in first-order predicate logic

$h \leftarrow \emptyset$
while E^+ *not empty* **do**
  clause $\leftarrow$ LearnNewClause(E^+, E^-, h)
  candidateTheory $\leftarrow B \wedge h \wedge$ clause
  coveredPositives $\leftarrow \{e \in E^+ :$ candidateTheory $\vdash e\}$
  $E^+ \leftarrow E^+ \setminus$ coveredPositives
  $h \leftarrow h \cup \{\text{clause}\}$
end
return h

LearnNewClause(E^+, E^-, h) :

---

clause $\leftarrow \emptyset$
while E^- *not empty* **do**
  bestLiteral $\leftarrow \arg\max_l$ Gain(clause, l, E^+, E^-)
  clause $\leftarrow$ clause $\cup \{\text{bestLiteral}\}$
  candidateTheory $\leftarrow B \wedge h \wedge$ clause
  coveredNegatives $\leftarrow \{e \in E^- :$ candidateTheory $\vdash e\}$
  $E^- \leftarrow E^- \setminus$ coveredNegatives
end
return clause

Gain(clause, literal, E^+, E^-) :

---

posCoveredBefore $\leftarrow$ Satisfies(clause, E^+)
posCoveredAfter $\leftarrow$ Satisfies(clause $\wedge$ literal, E^+)
negCoveredBefore $\leftarrow$ Satisfies(clause, E^-)
negCoveredAfter $\leftarrow$ Satisfies(clause $\wedge$ literal, E^-)

posPreserved $\leftarrow$ posCoveredBefore $\cap$ posCoveredAfter
gainAfter $\leftarrow \log_2(\frac{\#\text{posCoveredAfter}}{\#\text{posCoveredAfter}+\#\text{negCoveredAfter}})$
gainBefore $\leftarrow \log_2(\frac{\#\text{posCoveredBefore}}{\#\text{posCoveredBefore}+\#\text{negCoveredBefore}})$

return #posPreserved $\times$(gainAfter $-$ gainBefore)

LaTeX

```
\begin{algorithm}[H] \hline\smallskip  \textbf{FOIL} (background knowledge $B$,    \qquad\qquad positive examples $E^+$,    \qquad\qquad negative examples $
```

```
\vspace{\baselineskip}
```

```
\begin{algorithm}[H] \hline\smallskip  \textbf{LearnNewClause}($E^+, E^-, h$) :  \smallskip\hline  \smallskip\smallskip %  $\mathrm{clause} \leftarrow \emptyse
```

%This is also known as a 'greedy cover set' algorithm. % greedy covering heuristic

Bottom-up search: The default Aleph algorithm

Aleph(background knowledge B,
positive & negative examples E,
mode declaration $\mathcal{L}$) :
Result: hypothesis h

$h \leftarrow$ empty clause ;
while E *is not empty* **do**
  $e \leftarrow \text{Select}(E)$;
  $\bot_e \leftarrow \text{BottomClause}(e, \mathcal{L})$;
  $c^* \leftarrow \text{ClauseReduction}(\bot_e)$;
  $h \leftarrow h + c^*$;
  $E \leftarrow \text{Prune}(E)$;
end
return h

ClauseReduction(most specific clause $\bot$) :
Result: a clause c more general than $\bot$

activeSet $\leftarrow \{\}$
bestSolutionCost $\leftarrow \infty$
currentBestClause $\leftarrow \bot$

while activeSet *is not empty* **do**
  clause $\leftarrow$ Pop(activeSet)
  children $= \{i = 1, ..., n_k : \text{child}_i\} \leftarrow$ GenerateChildren(clause)
  $C_i \leftarrow$ Cost(children)
  $L_i \leftarrow$ LowerBoundCost(children)

  for $i = 1, ..., n_k$ **do**
    if $L_i \geq$ bestSolutionCost **then**
      children $\leftarrow$ children $-$ child_i
    end
    else
      if child_i *is a complete solution and* $C_i <$ bestSolutionCost **then**
        bestSolutionCost $\leftarrow C_i$
        currentBestClause $\leftarrow \text{child}_i$
        activeSet $\leftarrow \{i \in \text{activeSet} : L_i \leq C_i\}$
      end
      activeSet $\leftarrow$ activeSet + child_i
    end
  end
end
return currentBestClause

LaTeX

```
\begin{algorithm}[H] \hline\smallskip \textbf{Aleph}(background knowledge $B$,    \qquad\qquad positive \& negative examples $E$,    \qquad\qquad mode declar
```

```
\begin{itemize} %    \item \texttt{Select}: pick an example $e$ to be generalised.    \item \texttt{BottomClause}: 'saturate' the example - find the most specific cl
```

Classifying ILP Systems

There are dozens of ILP systems. We classify ILP systems using the following dimensions:

1. *Order of hypotheses*: does it allow first-order logic or higher-order logics in the representation of inputs, intermediates, and outputs?

2. *Target language*: Almost all ILP systems induce Prolog programs; however recent systems use other target languages, for instance Datalog (less expressive than Prolog) or answer-set programming\citep{ilasp} (more expressive).

3. *Search strategy*: whether the search is conducted top-down (that is, from general to specific) or bottom-up (starting with an example and generalising it), or whether both are used (as in 'theory revision').

4. *Exact or probabilistic search*: does the search include stochastic steps?

5. *Noise handling*: how are mislabeled examples or other corrupt data-points handled? An implementation detail, this can involve restricting specialisation in top-down search; allowing some negatives to be covered by a clause; or by using a neural network to preprocess data. % metagol is a kind of bootstrap scoring

6. *Inference engine*: Almost all ILP systems are meta-interpreters running on Prolog. More recent systems attempt to replace symbolic inference with latent embeddings in a structured neural network or some other differentiable structure, for instance the differentiable deduction (∂D) of ∂ILP.

7. *Predicate invention*: can the system induce new background assumptions during learning?

ILP systems differ along other dimensions, but the above are informative.

System	Order	Target	Search	Exact	Noise	Engine	Invent
FOIL	First	Prolog	Top-down	Yes	None	Prolog	No
Progol	First	Prolog	Top-down	Yes	Bounded	Prolog	No
Aleph	First	Prolog	Bottom-up	Both	Bounded	Prolog	No
Metagol	Higher	Datalog/ASP	Top-down	Yes	Scoring	Prolog	Yes

∂ILP	First	Datalog	Top-down	No	ANN	∂D	Yes

Theoretical bounds

One of the dirty secrets of computer science is that formal proofs about computability and complexity are often practically useless. (Neural networks trained with RL have dented PSPACE-hard problems like playing Go, and more generally worst-case theories like Rademacher complexity overestimate the actual generalisation error of neural networks.) But even then, still interesting.

How do we beat complexity results?

* Giving up worst-case performance: Worst-case complexity is not the same as average-case complexity \citep{impag}. Since, by definition, the algorithm will be dealing with average instances most of the time, worst-case performance may not be of practical importance. (However, this complacent view may make a system vulnerable to adversarial attack.)

* Giving up optimality: If we assume diminishing returns to optimisation, a suboptimal solution within a fixed margin (ϵ) of the optimal one may be exponentially ($\exp 1/\epsilon$) faster to find.

* Giving up correctness: Randomisation can reduce hardness significantly. Also, the cost of giving up (necessary) correctness can be offset in some cases by several independent runs of the algorithm that make the probability of an error vanish exponentially in the number of runs.

* Giving up generalisation: A narrower algorithm may be faster and still useful in most cases.

[Section forthcoming]

Expressivity

Computability

Complexity

Generalisation

Limitations

Naivety about noise and ambiguity.

In simple concept learners, a single mislabelled example can prevent learning entirely. However, progress has been made in handling noise and ambiguity: first, the low-hanging fruit of detecting mutual inconsistency in data (by deriving contradictions); and second limiting how far a top-down specialisation should go, when noise is assumed to be present. Further, the use of learned hypotheses for transfer learning between runs of ILP is limited by the noise a given learned program is likely to have picked up: current systems assume that background knowledge (like a transferred program) is certain.

Large resource requirements.

We discussed the terseness of ILP outputs as a virtue, but it's equally true that present systems cannot learn large theories given practical compute. The space complexity of admissible search (that is, algorithms guaranteed to yield an optimum) is exponential in hypothesis length for some systems like Progol. For this reason, predicate invention is limited even in state-of-the-art systems to, at most, dyadic predicates. This appears related to the expressivity of FOL.

Handcrafting task-specific inductive biases.

Almost all ILP systems use user-supplied constraints to generate the candidate clauses that form predicates (for instance 'mode declarations' in Progol and Aleph, meta-rules in Metagol, or rule templates in ∂ILP). In some sense these are just hyperparameters, as found in most ML systems. But templates can be enormously informative, up to and including specifying which predicates to use in the head or body of h, the quantifier of each argument in the predicate, which arguments are to be treated inputs and outputs, and and so on. Often unavoidable for performance reasons, templates risk pruning unexpected solutions, involve a good deal of expert human labour, and lead to brittle systems which may not learn the problem structure, so much as they are passed it to begin with.

This is an open problem, though recent work has looked at selecting or compressing given templates. The ∂ILP authors also report an experiment with generating templates, but the authors note that at least their brute-force approach is straightforwardly and permanently infeasible\citep{diffilp}.

Usability.

ILP systems remain a tool for researchers, and specialists at that: to our knowledge, no user-friendly system has so far been developed. (The RDM Python wrapper is a partial exception. To some extent this is due to the data representation: somewhat more than a working knowledge of first-order logic and (usually) Prolog are required to input one's own data. Whether this is a higher barrier than the basic linear algebra required for modern deep learning libraries, or merely a rarer skill in the data science community, would require empirical study. But the effect is the same: ILP seems more difficult to use.

The deep threat to knowledge representation.

The “knowledge representation” programme is challenged by rapid progress in learned representations and end-to-end deep learning in computer vision, natural language processing, and many other fields. Rich Sutton summarises this challenge as “the bitter lesson”: that massively scaling dataset size and model size tends to outperform hand-crafting of features and heuristics by domain experts. This is a ‘limitation’ of ILP insofar as it cannot itself follow suit and take advantage of learned representations to the same degree.

An even more contentious claim: perhaps we shouldn’t expect human-sized steps in advanced machine reasoning. If the bitter lesson holds in general, then expert elicitation is dead.

See also

- Our paper looking at ILP from an AI safety perspective.

Thanks to Javi Prieto, Nandi Schoots, and Joar Skalse for many, many comments.

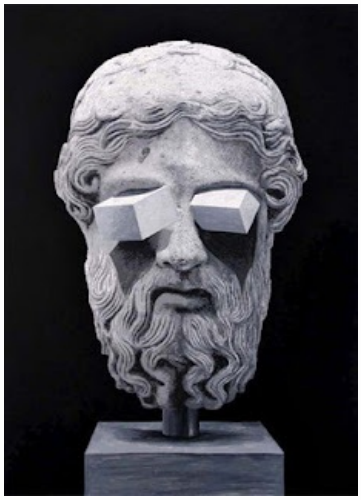
Tags: AI

Processing math: 100%

to desperately instrumentalise myself

29th May 2012

- *On realising that degrees are not skills and skills are a moral imperative.*
- *Confidence*: Obsoleted.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



> *...there is an internal ethical urge that demands that each of us serve justice as much as he or she can. But beyond the immediate attention that he rightly pays hungry mouths, child soldiers, or raped civilians, there are more complex and more widespread problems: serious problems of governance, of infrastructure, of democracy, and of law and order. These problems are neither simple in themselves nor are they reducible to slogans. Such problems are both intricate and intensely local...*
>
> - Teju Cole

> *Specialisation is for insects.*
>
> - Heinlein's Lazarus Long

Turns out that a degree - even one on ‘real world’ topics like, supposedly, economics - isn’t a skill. Isn’t really much to do with much. This is galling, because I have *bottled action* in me and have failed to get moral hydraulics to steer it.

Is that too reductive? I might not have such a quantity of good intentions without my years among the humanities; they only suck for obtaining *hard* skills. And ‘hydraulics’ means just narrow technical skills. To have those is to be able to instrumentalise oneself: to have the option of *production*. (More often, you’re made to get credentials that imply you are productive.)

What spiritual costs does this instrumentalisation levy? I was at a conference the other day where people were banging on in the Frankfurt way about ‘instrumentalisation’. I do sympathise with their background theory - which attributes modern atrocity and mental illness to the reign of scientism and the cult of practicality - but not in the uncritical, almost superstitious, way it gets invoked. Useful things are abhorrent to a certain mindset. Since they following Horkheimer who followed Kant, what I’ve read of Cultural Studies tends to bear an awful, watery stance, where an agent or project’s being *problematic* implies that it’s taboo, irredeemable, a moral medusa.

In discussing the ‘white saviour complex’, one speaker implied that objectifying someone you are trying to help is *such* an evil process that it negates any good your action might cause. Teju Cole:

> *From the colonial project to Out of Africa to The Constant Gardener and Kony 2012, Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected ... The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. 'The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm'.*

This conflict leads to condemning the attempts of all kinds of liberal structures (welfare state, NGOs, the UN), and from there, passivity. Because they rightly probe the mixed motives and identify unconscious power structures in do-gooders, the scholar can feel satisfied in holy inaction. This is the accidental turn of the ‘New’ Left ; reading is not only political, but *political enough*. The only labour you owe to the disadvantaged is your intellectual labour; since everything else you might try is tainted.

But as long as it is chosen, as long as it’s not the only thing you get to be, there’s little wrong with objectifying yourself, choosing to become, among other things, an instrument. The trick is to retain your radical goals even with a prosaic, professional, instrumentalised exterior.

(Case in point: East Africa is chronically, catastrophically short of Quantity Surveyors. Apparently.)

Long story short; let’s go make ourselves useful:

- Knots (1 week; £minimal)
- First aid (1 month; £minimal)
- Driving (4 months; £400)
- Databasing. (a month or so; £2000)
- PGDE (1 year)
- MA African Studies in Nairobi or Makerere (1 year; £1000)
- MSc Maths, Open University (takes 2 years part-time; £2500)
- MSc Dietetics, QMU (2 years pt; £4000)
- SVQ Mechanicking (just motorbikes, probably; 2 years pt; £1000)
- ACA Chartered Accountant (for NGOs, taking the ICAEW qualification, 2 years pt)
- Chinese (3 years in-country - cf. TEFL; -£2000)

2025, maybe:

- PhD in Irrationality (designing cognitive bias education programmes)
- or Development (new metrics and meta-analysis for aid dependency)
- or Animal rights law
- or Nutrition/Biochemistry (on the prospects of nootropics)
- or Transhumanism in general (on theodicy and the love of suffering)
- or Epistemology (radical scepticism's influence on contemporary philosophy)
- or Poetry (contemporary developments, or lack thereof)
- or Metaethics (on problems with Humean sentimentalism)
- or Nationalism (the idea of a national 'mentality' esp. Scottish)
- or Economic methodology (statistical/empirical tests of the most sophisticated models of fiscal impact)
- or Econophysics, University of Houston

Tags:

Insurance isn't necessarily a scam

20th August 2019

- *Two arguments against consuming insurance, and where they fail.*
- *Confidence*: 80%. Some details fuzzy.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Content notes*: Past conflict - I used to work in insurance.
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

Two of my friends believe insurance is a scam, for two different reasons. One is an argument from insurer profit, the other an argument from inequality. They're sometimes right - and when they're wrong it's because of interesting facts about human nature.

I limit the following to *for-profit, personal, noncompulsory insurance* (as opposed to mutuals, insurance taken out by organisations 0, or that used to compensate people we harm, or that compelled by law). I also assume you're honest with the insurer (don't have risk-relevant info they don't).

Some jargon

- *premium*: money paid to the insurer for cover.
- *underwriting profit* `= premiums - claim amounts - operating costs - taxes`.
- *investment profit*: return to the insurer from using premiums as free capital.

- *expected value*: the average payout, taking into account how likely it is.

```
EV = probability of win  x  payout if you win
```

- *utility function*: an abstraction about what we like; *the shape of our tastes*; a mapping from

```
event -> subjective goodness of event
```

- *self-insurance*: paying for losses out of your own savings.
- *general insurance*: anything but life insurance.
- *property-casualty insurance*: cover for personal property (cars, homes) and liabilities.

1. Argument from profit

```
1. Insurance firms make profit: their revenue > their costs.
2. Their costs are *at least* the true expected loss plus operating costs.
3. Therefore average premiums are higher than the expected loss.
4. Therefore the average honest policyholder is making an expected loss.
```

5

This becomes normative if we accuse the consumer of inconsistent preferences:

```
5. People want more money.
6. People buy insurance, which is on average a loss of money, by (4).
7. Therefore people are inconsistent and should stop (5) or (6).
```

This has two things wrong with it: one nonfatal, and one fatal but slightly arcane.

Insert ultimately irrelevant clarification

Premise 3 falsely equates "premiums" and "revenue".

Most insurer profit is "investment gains" - the money they make off investing the money you give them - and not the "underwriting profit", the direct flow from policyholders. (Most years have *no* property-casualty underwriting profit: they pay out more in claims than they get in premium. 24)

But these capital gains are being diverted from the policyholder - so the same argument applies one level up.

(You might say that someone holding risk should be compensated for doing so - but insurers *both* set prices and have absolute right of refusal, so nah.)

Another fact which doesn't really change matters is targeted discounts: for various reasons (geographical diversification, or boosting the portfolio size, etc) an insurer might decide to offer people policies below the "risk price". But this isn't generally true, and is never a majority of premiums.

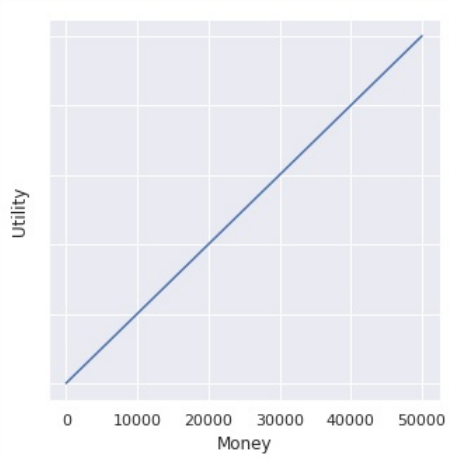
The real objection is that *humans are more complicated than that*. In particular, premise (5) obscures a fundamental fact about us: our utility is nonlinear, losses can hurt more than equal-sized gains delight, and uncertainty about losses is itself unpleasant.

Diminishing marginal utility

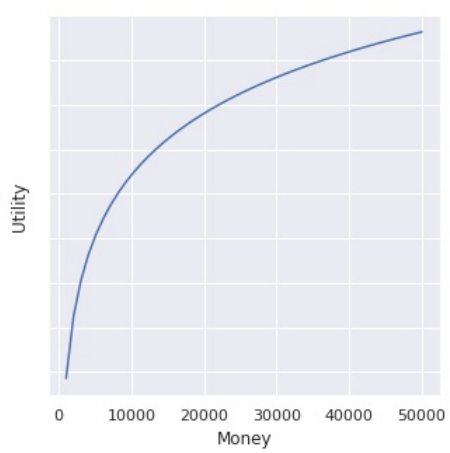
The world is beautiful because it varies. 1

- Proverb

In short, we value increasing amounts of any particular thing less and less per unit. (Think how unusual it is for you to pay to see the same film in the cinema twice *in succession*, or any four films on the same day. Or consider the case of biscuits.) If valuing money looked like this:



6 - i.e. if getting £1000 when you're rich was as welcome as it is when you're poor, and if you valued bankruptcy as only a little worse than extreme poverty, then insurance wouldn't make sense. However, people are instead something like this:



with a steep drop as you approach zero. As a result, it can be rational to purchase insurance, *for things you can't afford to replace*. 7

Some people think this is foolish, because people "shouldn't" have log utility in money: more is objectively better.3 But this is illegitimate, because economic rationality is defined *relative* to a given utility function (and, more practically, because one mostly doesn't get to choose what one values). 8

This is a classic modelling mistake: to maximise x rather than $U(x)$, to conflate the *event* with *exposure to the event*, to treat financial gain as identical with psychological gain.

Insurance is gambling, and we are good at gambling

(Where by 'we' I mean "mathematicians".)

When reaching 'zero' (bankruptcy or death) is much worse than similar-sized losses above zero, you don't use expected value, but instead the conservative Kelly criterion. Given a few assumptions, this tells you how much you should pay for bets / insurance policies, *given your current wealth*:

Say your house is worth V = £100,000 and that you have other assets worth W = £120,000. Say also that you know the annual probability of a house of your vintage in your area burning down, p = 1/10000 or something. Then you buy insurance if the cost of it, C, beats $$ \log(W - C) > p \times \log(W - V) + (1 - p) \times \log(W) $$ i.e. £22 is the most you'd pay per year, by one rational measure.

(Don't take this too literally. It is tricky to use the criterion properly: this post explains all the dubious assumptions involved, including that (in this case) it values losing your house as *infinitely* bad. But it's a good way of bounding things.)

That's enough to kill the argument, but actually there's more:

Risk aversion: uncertainty hurts

Some people are willing to lose a bit to "buy peace of mind", i.e. they prefer a fixed cost x to a random cost with the same expected value, $E(\theta) = x$. That's weak risk aversion, and people often act under a stronger version, paying a bit more to take a fixed cost, reducing their uncertainty.

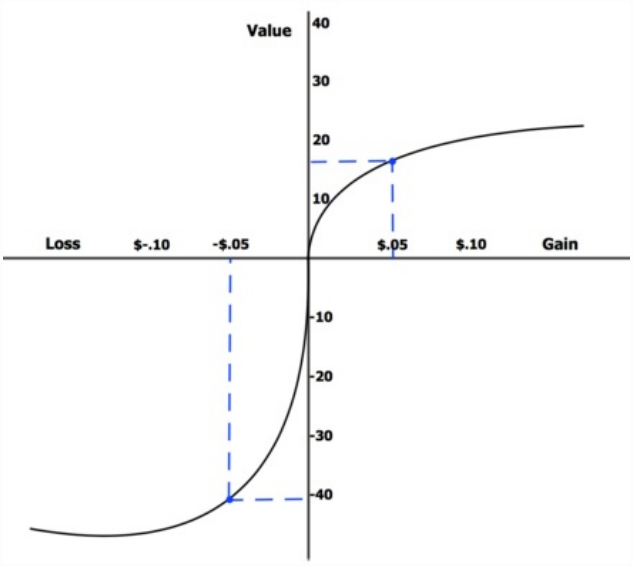
(This is the origin of "premium": the risk premium is the extra someone is willing to pay to mitigate a risk, over the expected value. The natural usage of "premium" is something else though…)

(NB: In utility theory this is the *same* phenomenon as DMU, in the sense of being implied by

the same shape of utility function. But it's psychologically distinct from the love of novelty in consumption, and I'm trying to stay close to psychological facts for these reasons.)

Loss aversion: bad is worse than good is good

People often prefer to avoid losing £x more than they prefer to gain £x. This maybe explains why they do things like take out loans and insurance, and hold on to possessions despite not using them, even when these have a (small) negative expected value. This is to "smooth" their budgets and prevent the dismay of cuts.



Ignore the numbers, though.

(It doesn't matter to us whether this is a distinct feature of human value, or merely a case of psychological inertia, where you want things to continue as they are.)

How literally can we take this 'function' stuff?

Strictly speaking, the above is at best a useful fiction, because we don't have "a" utility function: humans aren't consistent enough to be described by a single payoff curve, or any specifiable set of curves - what we value depends on what mood we're in, which depends on a host of chemical and accidental factors; and we often *don't know* what we like (or more: don't even *have* a preference) until we are made to choose things. So we violate the conditions of utility theory. Utility theory is a nice neat mathematical object.10 Humans are mostly buzzing blooming confusions. 9

Functions are an analogy for the (fairly solid) psychological regularities involved, not to make big claims about human simplicity. One useful part of the 'function' analogy is normative: utility theory reminds us that preferences *should be* commensurate, if you don't want to lose systematically.

---

2. Argument from regressive burden

So, insurance only makes sense for things you can't afford to replace (unless you have asymmetric info, unusual preferences, subsidy, regulation…). But this means that the poorer you are, the more insurance you can rationally use! Insurance can be seen as the rich selling the poor a bit of resilience.

If everyone had a chunk of savings ($10k?), rationally speaking there would be no petty

insurance - for things like household contents, warranties, flights, luggage. And this would reduce deadweight (wasted economic activity).

“There could be a better world than our present one,” this says. This is true and good to remember, but not helpful: a world in which the poor didn’t insure themselves against things they can’t afford to replace is worse than our present one.

Misc notes

Insurance and self-insurance

Argument 1, where it applies, implies that one should *save* the money you don't spend on insurance, until you have enough to "self-insure", pay out of pocket for all relevant uninsured losses. People generally don't, though, and so they are still being economically irrational when they go without insurance. (In particular, they don't get the investment profit that the insurer would have gotten, and, again, insurers often make an underwriting loss.)

Insurance as inertia or deletion of nonergodic nodes

To my surprise, the nonlinear utility "prospect theory" explanation for negative-EV behaviour has been under challenge for decades. An alternative explanation is "psychological inertia"

> *the anomalies loss aversion was introduced to explain — the risky bet premium, the endowment effect, and the status-quo bias — are characterized not only by a loss/gain tradeoff, but by a tradeoff between the status-quo and change; and, that a propensity towards the status-quo in the latter tradeoff is sufficient to explain these phenomena. Moreover, I show that two basic psychological principles — (1) that motives drive behavior; and (2) that preferences tend to be fuzzy and ill-defined — imply the existence of a robust and fundamental propensity of this sort.*

Another strand denies that such bets are negative value at all: if you consider not the single-decision expected payoff but the 'time-average growth rate of wealth', then supposedly insurance averages out positive over a population over (a long) time.

I'm not sure about this, and the debate has an unproductive amount of heat (Gal accuses the field of bias to explain loss aversion's long life), partly owing to Taleb's twitter brigade getting involved. (A fine display of his personal "IYIs".) But the evidence for loss aversion is certainly weaker than I expected.

Solve for the equilibrium

Motor liability insurance is mandatory in the UK, and in many places. One of my colleages works solely on motor, which he says makes him a *de facto* government employee - mostly not joking.

Ben Orlin on the grim future of perfect knowledge

> *When we looked at the coins, we reduced our uncertainty, and without uncertainty, insurance collapses. If we know in advance who will suffer — whose boat will sink, whose employees will win the lottery, who will suffer that NFL-dream-crushing injury — then insurance becomes impossible. You can only pool risk among people who share it. In our medical system, this problem is unfolding year by year. Genetic testing and improved statistics threaten the basic logic of insurance.*
>
> *I see no easy solution. If you individualize the rates, then some folks pay pennies while*

> *others face premiums almost as steep as the medical bills themselves. But charging everyone the same amount turns a project of mutual benefit, with each of us hedging against risk, into a project of collective charity, with some folks subsidizing others. That's a harder sell. It's one reason why American healthcare remains so contentious.*
>
> *As a teacher, I'm inclined to think of all knowledge as a gift. But insurance complicates that story. Our ignorance of fate can force us to collaborate against it. We have built a democracy from our uncertainty—and new knowledge threatens that balance, as sure as flood or fire. </blockquote>*

Here.

1. Most large endeavours couldn't exist without heavy insurance - the financial risk would scare everyone off otherwise. And being able to compensate people we harm, without ruining ourselves forever, is a clear win.
2. > *Il mondo è bello perché è vario.*
3. US market:
   > *Not a single underwriting profit was recorded in the 25 years from 1979 through 2003. And even though that streak ended in 2004, underwriting profits are anything but the norm they were in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In the eight years from 2004 through 2011, only three tallied underwriting profits.*
4. For a tiny number of people - those who give a lot to charity - this is justified, because they transfer money to help those at the sharper end of their own utility functions.
5. and the similar UK market:
   > *EY expects the industry to post a combined ratio of almost 98 per cent this year. The industry has only posted a ratio below 100 per cent — suggesting an underwriting profit — in five of the past 33 years.*
6. Actuaries aren't perfect modellers by a long shot, but on average they do ok, enough to unlock the net investment profit anyway. So premise (3) is true.
7. One reason Wodehouse novels are so enchanting is that they don't get boring despite being really formulaic. I've read 20 and plan to read the other 75.
8. Strong claims about the relationship between money and wellbeing are often made, though they currently contradict each other. One large study (n=1m) found "income satiation" (no strong evidence for increased happiness) at about $95k.

   But we don't need any parameter in this post. (It just amazes me that we are only just beginning to study this incredibly important subject, 200 years into the age of mature science, 100 into the age of premature social science.)
9. There *could* be people whose utility is linear in money - made happiest by simply following naive game theory and being risk-insensitive. But my friend is not one of them (you can tell because he isn't a ~~crack-smuggling~~ quant ~~who hacks crypto exchanges~~ in his spare time), so the argument as stated, as a general norm, fails.
10. You get further if you think of a person as a bundle of partially conflicting agents. (For a flawed prototype, consider Freud's plagiarism of Plato.)
11. Not that it's a complete solution to even rational preferences.

Tags: utility, rationality, finance

Bad introspections

17th August 2019

- *Some species of paying attention to yourself and how they fail.*
- *Confidence*: 90% that the bad ones are bad, 60% in the rest.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *Forces of digestion and metabolism are at work within me that are utterly beyond my perception or control. Most of my internal organs may as well not exist for all I know of them directly, and yet I can be reasonably certain that I have them, arranged much as any medical textbook would suggest.*
>
> *The taste of the coffee, my satisfaction at its flavor, the feeling of the warm cup in my hand — while these are immediate facts with which I am acquainted, they reach back into a dark wilderness of facts that I will never come to know... Where am I, that I have such a poor view of things? And what sort of thing am I that both my outside and my inside are so obscure?"*
>
> — Sam Harris

A popular method for finding things out is introspection, first-person reflection on your current mental content. Many of the rankest falsehoods were born this way - from absurd religious dogmatism, to psychoanalytic fairytales, to everyday delusions about one's motives and qualities. It has surged in the last decade, under the modest and retroactively scientific branding "mindfulness".

As usual I'm suspicious. Knowledge comes from perception (sometimes), reason (sometimes), memory (sometimes), testimony (sometimes) - the contribution of this other thing is unclear.

An empirical argument against introspection is that we've been introspecting for like 200,000 years (or, properly, for 3,000) and yet we didn't know very much about our minds until about 150 years ago, when we started to use other methods. (Against this, you could separate out two goals for psychological work - *personal instrumental* ones and *general scientific* ones - and then argue that without introspection we'd have been even worse at the first goal, over our species' history.)

Bad kinds of introspection

As backdoor to objective reality

- **Revelation or kashf**.
  Mistaking a hallucination for contact with ultimate reality.

- **Self-evident inference**
  e.g. Descartes has this regrettable habit of leaping from "clear and distinct" (inconceivably-false) ideas to big synthetic claims. He thought he could establish the existence of God by just noticing that he has an idea of god, a perfect thing.

- **Inference to one's past**
  If you use your current feelings as evidence for surprising claims about your distant past. e.g. From introspective things that a patient told someone else, Freud inferred

that her serious respiratory/neurological illness was *caused* by her resenting her father for his terminal illness. The history of psychoanalysis (cold-reading) from this Patient Zero on is full of this kind of thing, but the worst single event in it is maybe the lingering false memory craze of the 90s, which harmed thousands of people by leading them to make horrible mistakes about their early childhood, based on Freud's false ideas about repression. (To what extent is predatory/collaborative delusion even introspection? I don't know.)

- **Inference to deep time**
  Jung's idea of the collective unconscious is a mashup of a scientific hypothesis ("humans all share the following specific ideas as a result of our common ancestry") and a completely mad telepathic world-mind thing. Something like this might be possible - just not with this little data, or this method, or this investigator, or this entire worldview.

As backdoor to subjective reality

- **Inference to the unconscious mind**
  e.g. People insist on trying to find deep truths about the unconscious mind via dream interpretation, expending lots of ingenuity on what might well be a semi-random byproduct of long-term memory encoding.

- **Inference to latent identity**
  It's now common to identify what you *feel like* with what you are. This has good and bad sides, but in general the idea of a personal essence (as opposed to a personal family-resemblence of contingent properties) is false, and might imply a bad epistemology. (False since you would be a different person if your circumstances changed, even as little as "who you are currently talking to".)

As waste

- **Sitting with your eyes closed telling yourself you're not thinking**.
  Which is what many 'meditation' sessions probably are.

The common failure above is taking introspection too seriously. If you're doing it for fun or catharsis, and manage to prevent it leaking into your beliefs, then good for you. It's an art in fact - consider improv, freestyling, automatic writing, internal family systems. I'm only hostile to the epistemic side.

Phenomenology & mindfulness

Phenomenology is a sort of philosophy that focusses on introspecting 'structures', facts about consciousness. (I am frustrated that I can't find a list of facts they claim to have found, in their century of striving, but not surprised.) This is as opposed to psychophysics, the cool quantitative study of stimuli and their mental results. To me, philosophy is the impersonal attempt to be maximally pedantic, but who knows, maybe it pays to be pedantic about subjective experience.

And mindfulness is sanitised religious contemplation. (Then there's 'Focussing'.)

I don't know very much about either, but some normally critical people I admire think they are *very* good, so they might not be bad introspections.

Experimental introspection

There may be non-propositional, non-procedural knowledge. It wouldn't be surprising - the

conscious mind is a relatively small and unskilled thing. The problem is the idea of apriori invincible access to it.

How to test this? If the epistemological side of focusing was real, what would be different about its practitioners? Happiness? Cortisol? Decision speed?

I don't know. We are too skilled at deluding ourselves. But it would be pretty easy to run an experiment where Gendlinites tried to predict which patients recover, and then check that against predictions.

Open questions

Why should there be any therapy that works in general?

Grant that there is bodily knowledge; where is this knowledge stored? The enteric nervous system?

Why should introspection work? Theory of mind is for modelling other people so that they can't harm me.

Is there good introspection?

Of course; consider what happens when you rate a film you just saw out of 5, or in fact when you give any opinion.

The point is that what you get from introspection isn't truth, but raw data - data that may need tremendous processing (cross-referencing, explanation in evolutionary or personal-history terms, correction for known biases) to even on average increase your self-knowledge. Also that taking the measurement will alter the mental content, to a possibly useless degree.

Rules of thumb might be: Don't take it literally; don't imagine you're in contact with your unconscious or your essence; don't generalise, even to your past or future *self*; use it as at most weak Bayesian evidence about the idea.

Justified uses for introspection, for me:

- *Belief propagation*. It seems to help with aligning different parts of the mind, for instance getting my automatic and explicit circuits to pass information. Often a premise will change ("System 2"), without the intuitive associations changing ("System 1"). (Though I endorse resisting the inverse changes, where your feelings determine a belief.)

- *Hypothesis generation*. If you don't know what's wrong it is obviously helpful to get ideas from an entangled source.

- *Aid to debiasing*. Noticing is moving things from the periphery of your attention into consciousness, where you can evaluate it. For instance, people often don't "notice" their own current emotional state in this sense, but that's vital information if you're trying to be rational - if you're feeling threatened by a person or a topic, you're primed to reject arguments around it. A cue to double-check your reasoning, or to revisit once you've calmed down.

- *Emotional processing*. I don't know how or when thinking about things makes you feel better. But it usually works for me.

- *Pretext for deep conversations*. I've done a few of these kind of workshops, and every single time I meet really interesting people who are there to open up and talk about fun

serious things.

Related

- Schwitzgebel on our broad ineptitude
- Boring (1953). A history of introspectionism
- Danziger (1980). The history of introspection reconsidered

Comments

Hugh commented on *16 August 2019* :

> *I suspect that introspection-done-right is largely about breaking or counteracting negative patterns, not establishing positive ones. I recently saw a video that I'd uncharitably sum up as 'I used to harass random strangers for liking Marvel movies, but then I realised every tree is actually the same tree, so I stopped doing that and started feeling better.' I'm genuinely glad that person had that revelation.*
>
> *Also, if we're defining introspection widely enough, I think it's as much about constructing as discovering. As someone perennially low on sense-of-identity, I can't really begrudge people for putting in the time to build that for themselves, even if they tend to look (and/or be) crazy while doing so.*

Max commented on *19 August 2019* :

> *Three prominent things many seem to find with mindfulness meditation are:*
>
> *a) your experience (the „inner world simulation"+mental workspace+emotions+…) is not centered in your head or experienced by a seperate „self"-construct that resides behind your eyes. Experience in some sense is simply there.*
>
> *b) thoughts can be observed. Somehow I mostly feel like my thoughts are being actively thought by some self that is phenominologically positioned behind my eyes. I can lose this sense during mindfulness meditation, where a thought becomes just another phenomenon in a space of experiences.*
>
> *c) you can gain significant control over you being sucked into streams of ruminating thoughts. First you notice it and take a step back and switch into „these are all phenomena in a space of experience" mode. This usually takes away the mental energy that was invested into the thoughts and the thoughts stop feeding your emotional state, and the emotional state stops eliciting more ruminating.*
>
> *I recommend Sam Harris' Waking Up meditation course if anybody is interested in exploring such things. Investment: 10 minutes for 50 days and you should get a solid impression of mindfulness meditation.*

Post a comment:

Name

Email

Comments appear after moderation. You can use html or markdown.

Page just refreshes after successful submit.

Send

Tags:

'Infinite Jest' (1996)

3rd April 2011

- *How to pitch sincerity when sincerity is passé.*
- *Topic importance*: 3 / 10
- *Content notes*: suicide, nihilism

(c) Cody Hoyt (2009)

> ***4 Dating App Profile Cliches You Can Ignore if He Has a Dog***
>
> *...Anything mentioning "Infinite Jest". Yuck! I mean, besides the fact that David Foster Wallace was an abusive shitbag, a Tinder guy thinking he's deep for having read a book that thousands of his contemporary pseudo-intellectual bros have also read is a red flag. But honestly, you're absolutely allowed to ignore this one if he brings his chunky lil' english bulldog on your coffee date.*
>
> – Reductress

People like David Foster Wallace. But pretentious people like him, because his big book is difficult and they think his status will rub off on them; and but he did some horrible things, and so this large book's reputation is much larger still than it (e.g. As well as the usual exhaustive wiki cult attentions, there's a series of wacky blogs and a support group devoted to how gruelling it is; we view length as pretentious in itself, which speaks badly of our motives or attention span), and so you have to begin your discussion of this beautiful, tragic, *silly* thing clarifying that you're not like those other guys. Or maybe you can gesture towards doing that and then say no, I'm not going to do a disclaimer, if I don't have to do one for liking fucking Hamsun or Celine or London or Dahl or Althusser or Mailer or Koestler or Lakatos or Angela Davis or AA Gill or Malcolm X or Alice Sheldon or Stein or Burroughs or

Pound's writing.

> *The older Mario gets, the more confused he gets about the fact that everyone at E.T.A. over the age of [10] finds stuff that is really **real** uncomfortable and they get embarrassed. It's like there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy.*

Despite appearances, it has a very simple message. It's about the very real downside to being (hyper) intellectual: that your theories can get in the way of your physical sensations (rob them of their immediacy and emotional impact) and prevent you from interacting with others in an easy, fluent, direct way. It's about the rejection of postmodernism from within. But these are pretty niche disorders. Much more importantly it's about (what Wallace saw as) the general late-C20th tendency towards a toxic sort of irony, which destroys value by making people less receptive to the world, and which emotionally dulls those who take contingency to heart.

This is now called "the meaning crisis" and there's a large collection of internet people talking about it as if it was the most important problem in the world. I don't know to what extent our crisis is the same as DFW's one; I don't know to what extent this is a problem for one sort of sceptical Western intellectual and no one else. Insofar as you think Nietzsche predicted it correctly in 1880, it might be the same and a general problem.

But *Infinite Jest* distracts you from those simple meanings with a forest of calculus and psychopharmacology and Boston slang, with 200 footnote discontinuities and 7000 neologisms and proper nouns. I say that Wallace "rejects postmodernism" - whatever that means - but he stubbornly maintains the confusing, excessive, perspectival, mashup aesthetics which are the least fake denotation of the term. (In the last 20 years people have painstakingly built tools to clean the mess intentionally strewn before you.)

This message is essentially the same as a thousand Sunday sermons: "*be excellent to each other*", "*caring is cool*", "*only connect*". If it was not wrapped in armour-piercing arcana, fancy theory, and formal experimentation then its intended audience would never let it in. *Infinite Jest* has to be pretentious, because its audience is.

> *...I am just about the world's worst source of info on Infinite Jest.*
>
> – Wallace, letter to fan

It's hard to say things about *IJ* because, despite the above quote, in a real sense you are *competing* with Wallace if you do; *IJ* has already Freuded, Hegelled and problematized itself, not least in its 200pp of (plot-endogenous) footnotes. It also has no ending: you shlep through a thousand pages, work for weeks, and are rewarded with a slap.

It reports neurotic details of a dozen things I'm not interested in - tennis, optical physics, pharmacology, counter-pharmacology, the specifics of child abuse - and is riveting even then. Every hundred pages there's a passage to gasp and half-close your eyes at. It is warmth reporting on ice.

Misc notes

- James is Wallace; the samizdat is *IJ*. Both are over-the-top, both are missiles aimed at emotional detachment.

- Hal's mental illness is overdetermined: we're given half a dozen possible causes for his detachment from the world. Against the grand cultural point of the book in general, these are biological: drug withdrawal, drug toxicity, an exotic mould he ate, (plus burnout from the strictures of elite athletic training).

- Above, I focussed on the personal emotional-philosophical stuff. But there are a dozen plot threads, including an apocalyptic terrorism plot, and an idiot celebrity germaphobe president.

- There will be overlaps with its namesake *Hamlet*, though not for me, not yet, barring:
  "BERNARDO: Who's there?" - opening of *Hamlet*
  "I am…" - opening of IJ

  As well as the bit where James Incandenza (the father)'s ghost manifesting and warning… a character he's not related to - who notes that had the ghost appeared to his son, he would've messed the kid up…

  As well as Hal spending much of the second half of the book doing nothing brooding.

- *IJ* stylizes itself with things which have been considered the *opposite* of style - formal organisation titles, straightfaced repetition of details and nerdy facts and full names; unnecessary, often-unfunny subject-predicate clarifications (Wallace, that is); and oodles of technical explanations. The thousand footnotes give reading it an interruptive rhythm. So but there's constant digression in the text (at one point there's three pages of flashback and tangents between two lines of dialogue) and in your train of thought. Life is a series of more or less successful digressions.

- Almost everyone is in some way deformed: phobic, neurotic, addicted, displacing, disabled. It would be easy to assume that this is Wallace's view of us all, but *IJ* is cartoonish and deformed in a lot of ways.

- DFW is an omnivore, a generalist: *IJ* is nauseatingly detailed with academic arcana, medical/chemicological/mathematical/scientific passages, lC20th Boston slang, film-geek waffle, & what one reviewer called "pseudo-science" (but which are surely just "alt.hypotheses") - which theoretics all add up to sensory overload, and exasperation for anyone who expects to encircle and dominate what they read with their understanding.

- The "unreliable narrator" conceit in literature is making its worthy way towards cliché; the third-person-objective narrator who is nonetheless occasionally *ignorant* is entrenched but still crisp - but ignorant *footnotes?*

- The discourse changes style and inflection when swapping storyline to storyline - most noticeably when the Francophone Marathe is its object. (At one point I got suitably paranoid and saw the whole book as an informal report by the cross-dressing secret agent Steeply.)

- The physical contrast between brothers (Apollonian, Olympean) Hal and (Tiny Tim, deformed, innocent) Mario is unsubtle, but so. Mario and Lyle are perhaps the only naive, unironizing characters among, say, the hundred in the cast. This links Mario's innocence to his defect: innocence is a "defect" in an ironic world. And 'stupidity as innocence', too: stupidity as the absence of an attitude, rather than the absence of intelligence.

- Like Don DeLillo or Orson Scott Card, Wallace makes his children ridiculously hyperarticulate. I'm inclined to name this sort of thing "Hogwarts Syndrome", with the kids more sensible, prolix and interesting than any pack of children have rights to be.

- Mario notes at one point that he has lost his easy empathy with his little brother, that he cannot tell how Hal is feeling anymore: we the readers go through the same, beginning the book inside Hal's head at a moment of trauma and insight, and but gradually (as the cast expands) lose this closeness.

- The word “annular” recurs every thirty pages, though I only noticed this cause I had no idea what it meant. (*“...of or pertaining to a ring or rings, ring-formed, ringed.”*) I now think it’s a key MacGuffin, describing as it does
    - how IJ’s cold fusion works;
    - how (super-MacGuffin) James Incandenza’s film ouevre is structured;
    - how addiction works;
    - the appeal of suicide;
    - how they cured cancer by giving cancer cancer;
    - maybe the “Subsidized”, ruined nature of time in his near-future paratopia;
    - and *IJ* itself - how its storylines fit (rings-within-_IJ_’s-ring).

      He could have used “meta-“. It wasn’t ruined in ‘96.

Is irony toxic?

> *The topic of futility would arise only if one were trying to surmount time, chance, and self-description by discovering something more powerful than any of these. For Proust and Nietzsche, however, there is nothing more powerful or important than self-redescription.*
>
> *They are not trying to surmount time and chance, but to use them. They are quite aware that what counts as resolution, perfection, and autonomy will always be a function of when one happens to die or to go mad. But this relativity does not entail futility. For there is no big secret which the ironist hopes to discover, and which he might die or decay before discovering. There are only little mortal things to be rearranged by being redescribed.*

– Rorty

The other great clear postmodernist, Richard Rorty, actually celebrates irony (though it’s not quite the same thing that Wallace is attacking). Irony is like (radical) scepticism plus the pragmatic sense that you have to take *some* stance towards the world. So you admit that e.g. human rights are a Eurocentric construction, that you affirm them entirely due to an accident of birth and history, *but you still insist on them*.

It’s a philosophical question whether this makes any sense, whether it is actually impossible to obtain moral truths, whether intercultural comparison is valid. It’s an empirical question whether any human can be happy not taking things for granted, admitting that their worldview is arbitrary.

Term

There are six suicides in the book, not counting people who watch the *samizdat*. Joelle, Gompert, Day give long rationales, among others (eg. p648):

> *the person in whom Its invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. It is the weighing of two terrors, a rational decision, which rationality is invisible until you are there with the flames at your back…*

This can’t help but resonate now. Just because you’re a genius doesn’t mean you’ll ever arrive at any answers.

That a book about the importance of sincerity became, first, the object of a cheap signalling game and, subsequently, the object of scorn and the received epitome of pretension, is just one of those fucking things.

See also

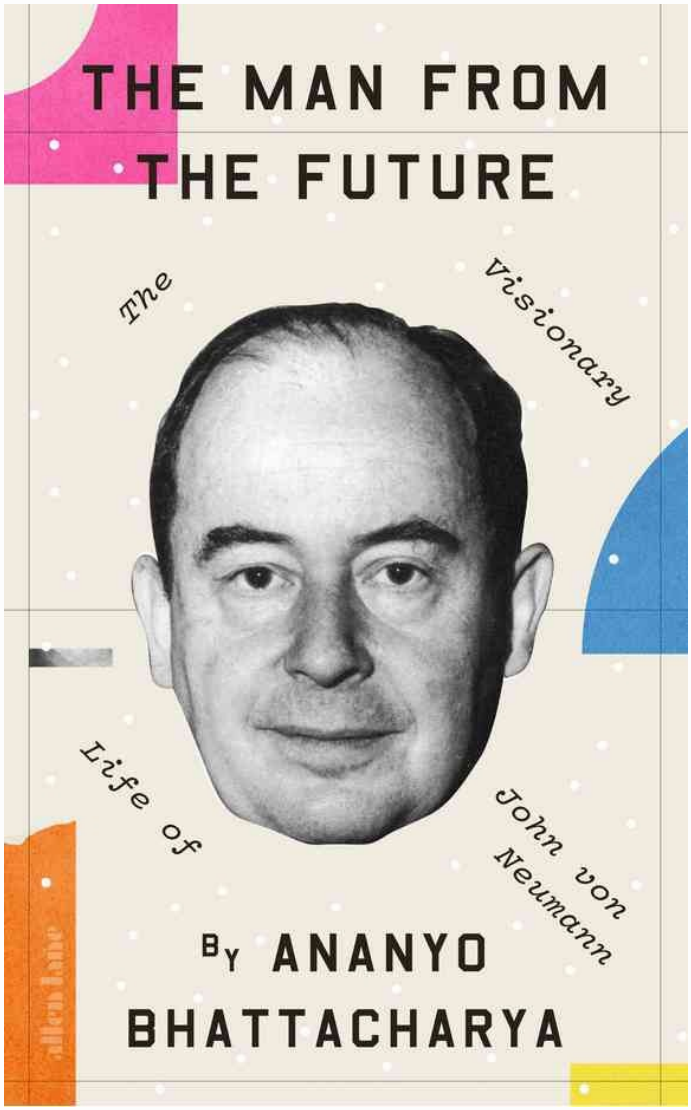
- Against the Culture
- Aaron Swartz, who had a similar disposition.

Tags: meaning

von Neumann

1st January 2022

- *On intelligence and virtue and the vexed connection.*
- *Confidence*: 90% (regarding the long dead)
- *Topic importance*: 8 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



An awaited book; in fact I awaited it before I knew it was being written. Here is one of the most important people to ever live, and what notice do we take? Before now: One bad old biography (and one-third of another) and many gigantic maths monographs. Such yawning gaps come from historians and biographers being obsessed with artists instead - consider the nine Jane Austen biographies published in the last 11 years - and our scientists being inarticulate at best. unable or unwilling to stand up for themselves, and unrepresented by the chattering classes. 1

It is incredibly difficult to cover everything von Neumann did - everything he did for the first time in history - even just everything with vast practical consequences which are still felt 60 years later.

- Chapter 2: fixing set theory where Hilbert and Russell failed
- Chapter 3: unifying matrix and wave theory where Dirac bodged and others failed
- Chapter 4: solution to a profound engineering challenge which changed the world forever
- ...

Great philosophers get several kinds of books written about them - two are the Life (which gossips about their upbringing and vices), and the intellectual biography (which actually tries to explain and show the development of their ideas). Bhattacharya's is more like the latter plus a smattering of parties, fast cars, and intellectual bitching.

Hodges is, in 600 pages, just able to enumerate Turing's achievements. Bhattacharya, in 284, is not even vaguely able to do this for vN. e.g. Almost no mention of his great work in group theory.

Very incomplete list of von Neumann's achievements:

- *Foundations of maths*: Paradox-free foundation of set theory with classes (superceded Russell)
- *Physics*: Unification of matrix mechanics and wave mechanics (superceded Dirac)
- *Physics:*: proof of the Ergodic hypothesis
- *Lots of group theory*, chiefly operator algebras
- *Foundations of QM*: axiomatisation of QM, unified wave and matrix mechanics.
- *Physics:* Clarified the measurement problem (for the first time?)
- *Physics:*: Central work on the Copenhagen interpretation
- *Physics / logic* Founded quantum logic
- *Economics*: Proved existence and uniqueness of general equilibrium
- *Physics:* Much-misunderstood constraint on all hidden variable theories. Maybe gappy.
- *linear programming*: duality and the first interior point method.
- *Fluid dynamics*: Fat Man implosion lens design. Discovery of the airburst efficiency. Many solutions in blast waves.
- Hardware engineering: Redesigned the ENIAC to be the first stored program computer
- Computer engineering: Earliest partial design of a modern computer. Lifted lots from Mauchly and Eckert (uncredited) but greatly superceded them.
- Patent busting on the digital computer design. Free for all.
- Minimax and dozens of central results in game theory
- Founded utility theory
- Marrying neuroscience and computer science forever
- Founded automata theory
- Intelligence explosion as x-risk
- ...

Bhattacharya covers about half of these.

- The most important question in all of education: How did Hungary produce so many geniuses? Why did they stop? The second has an obvious answer (the Holocaust), but the first is tricky. Theories of Jewish excellence do not suffice: why Hungary instead of

Poland (ten times larger population), Czechoslovakia, Britain? von Neumann's own answer was the empire's weird mix of 1) tolerance and rewards for Jewish people, while 2) still being extremely volatile and so making them uncertain how long this would last and so rushing to succeed.

- Bhattacharya's informalisation of the technical results here is impressive. At least one fuckup though: on p112 he confuses completeness for correctness.

- At one point AB ties the Hilbert and Gödel work to modernism. Modernist mathematics, the rejection of the past, the flight into abstraction and rigour. As if this was a general spirit. I don't know how to evaluate this idea.

- Sad to hear that a heavily modified ENIAC executed a stored program two months before the Manchester Baby. I hate to see the Man win over the garage nerds.

- Nash is nasty, well before he goes psychotic (self-aggrandising, straw Vulcan, racist). He makes von Neumann look soft and warm.

- Lovelace is not the first programmer. Klári von Neumann has a much better claim (if we insist on ignoring Babbage).

- So many brilliant people here, and far more obscure than JvN. Shapley, Barricelli, Collbohm, Goldstine, Harsanyi, McCarthy, Adele and Klári…

Err

We tend to deify people, and they never deserve it. What did von Neumann get wrong?

Mutually Assured Destruction

It's not obvious that this was a mistake - we're still here, MAD is a strong reason not to intentionally nuke people. But the sheer number of near misses and the overall estimate of 0.1% annual state risk, should make us think that the strategy was actually poor, that we are walking selection bias.
The less obvious response is that he knew all that and was trading some existential risk to block the Soviet Empire's anti-human practices from taking over. Since this argument also works for the Soviets, or for any value system which values itself, he seems to have settled for an appalling equilibrium. Tragedy of the value lock-in commons.

VN wanted cooperation, wanted a long life for humanity. But he couldn't trust enough not to escalate. The true altruist cannot afford to cooperate simply.

First strike on the Soviets

> *If you say 'why not bomb them tomorrow', I say, why not today? If you say 'today at five o'clock', I say why not one o'clock?*

(He recanted this a couple of years later.)

The mistake was twofold: to assume that the Soviets would continue growing, and to assume that the nuclear taboo would not hold. That taboo, that tradition is one of the most precious things in the world, and almost nothing is worth breaking it. To which you reply: 100 million people are not worth it? To which I can only apologise and suggest that 100 million are not worth 300 million.

Trusting Klaus Fuchs

He actually handed the Soviets a new nuke design through the infamous Fuchs.

Nonerror: **“Proof” of no hidden variables**

The conventional view is that von Neumann screwed up his no-hidden-variables proof, claimed to have shown the impossibility of hidden variables, and that this convinced everyone until Bell came along and exposed the error (30 years after Grete Hermann did it and was ignored). But this misrepresents the proof, which just says that a hidden variables theory will have to have a certain weird structure (which Bohmian mechanics does).

Targeting Kyoto

I don’t know if a nuclear strike on Japan was ultimately for the best (considering the appalling toll of the Pacific theatre on both sides, the likely larger toll of taking Honshū, and the second-order effects of showing the world that everything had changed). But that they were *civilian* strikes seems completely gratuitous. Striking Kyoto, the spiritual centre, in particular seems incredibly high risk.

Nonerror: **The brain is digital**

People act like he was naive about the brain as computer, but he just wasn’t:

> *the brain can prima facie be considered as a digital computer. However, upon further reflection, some elements of analog computing (e.g., the chemistry) will also become relevant in understanding the functioning of the brain.*

The von Neumann bottleneck

The world standard architecture for computers leads to a huge waste of CPU cycles, waiting for memory. This wasn’t such a big deal in the 50s, but CPU performance has masssively outpaced bus bandwidth over the last 70 years.

Against high-level programming

> *'von Neumann opposed the development of assemblers and high-level language compilers. He preferred to employ legions of human programmers (mostly low-paid graduate students) to hand-assemble code into machine language. “It is a waste of a valuable scientific computing instrument”, von Neumann reportedly said, “to use it to do clerical work.”.'*

Various dumb personal risks

He did not live like someone who understood expected utility and hyperbolic discounting. He ate way too much, drove incredibly badly, was an easy mark for salesmen, pissed off his wife by leching. He spent a lot of time travelling to government meetings. He let others

profit from his inventions. These imply irrationality - or a surprising lack of interest in his own wealth, longevity, time use, or marriage. This post collects other apparently bad decisions.

1. But a handful of scientists are great writers: Feynman and Dyson and Dawkins and Crick and Pascal and yeah Einstein is quotable and I was actually boggling at some of Gödel's aphorisms just the other day. Boltzmann is funny.

Tags: greats

==
https://keybase.io/gleech

I hereby claim:

  * I am an admin of https://www.gleech.org
  * I am gleech (https://keybase.io/gleech) on keybase.
  * I have a public key ASC5mJYMDOguo-dSEmSl4kBt8h6TPT_2zrKJJkIFsmrcPgo

To do so, I am signing this object: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which yields the signature:


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Using courts for algorithmic fairness

16th March 2021

- *Explaining the impossibility of algorithmic fairness to a high schooler.*
- *Confidence*: 80%
- *Topic importance*: 3 / 10

I got some fan mail on a paper I helped with last year!

> *Dear Mr. Leech*
> *I am a current senior at [High School], and I am currently researching predicting United States district court case verdicts. After reading your article, I had several questions I was wondering if you could find the time to answer:*
>
> *1) Is it possible to apply the LGFO algorithm to determining verdicts in court cases? How would you go about doing that?*
> *2) How were you able to bypass potential bias when creating this algorithm?*
> *3) While this algorithm can be applied to a binary classification, how could you potentially expand it to help in the training of the model?*
>
> *I would greatly appreciate any answers you could provide.*

I don't think any algorithm exists that can make verdicts on its own. And LGFO isn't intended to decide court cases. Instead it uses data from courts as a way of working out how to balance the many kinds of fairness, for any classifier which is making predictions about social input.

You might have heard that there are lots of ways of putting fairness into mathematical form, and that many of them contradict each other. You literally cannot satisfy them all. How then do we decide how unfair something is? How do we decide how much each type of fairness counts?

Our system solves this as follows:

a. A human picks a set of fairness definitions
b. A human gives the algorithm a set of past cases, along with the damages awarded in each case.
c. LGFO works out how much weight to give each kind of fairness, and so produces a classifier which is as fair as possible, if we trust the legal system to know this relatively well.

It does this by assuming that the amount of money awarded in a case scales closely with the unfairness of that case.

Now, your questions:

1) Is it possible to apply the LGFO algorithm to determining verdicts in court cases?
It gives you a general classifier, so nothing technically stops you applying it to verdicts, or to recividism predictions. But it wasn't developed for this and would only accept simple numerical inputs (like the defendant's age). I wouldn't use it in courts in its current form: it's like a prototype which would need a lot of work to customise for justice applications, because the stakes are so high and a bad system could really harm people.

2) How were you able to bypass potential bias when creating this algorithm?
All systems are biased, in the weak sense that you can't satisfy all fairness measures at the same time. The advantage of LGFO is that it limits the bias to be only as severe as the legal system it uses for input, in particular the civil tort system of your country. The bias of most other systems is not so limited: the user makes all kinds of decisions (e.g. the definition of fairness, the weight to give each definition, the thresholds at which the classifier flips) which could be much more biased. This isn't perfect, but at least the law is a partially democratic process. It's hard to see how to do better than this.

3) How could you potentially expand it to help in the training of the model?
There are lots of ways to extend it. One really easy way to turn a binary classifier into a multi-class classifier (e.g. from one which says "Hot / Cold" to "Hot / Warm / Lukewarm / Cold / Freezing") is to use "one-vs-rest": basically you train 5 binary classifiers and take the one with strongest confidence as the answer.

I hope your project goes well!

Tags: ai, ethics

Rebellion, and rebellion against rebellion

26th March 2019

- *What I learned from the Libyan Civil War.*
- *Confidence*: More in the rule than the example.
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Content notes*: War, rape, disinformation.
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *The wiser course might often be to do nothing, but it will seldom be without moral cost.*
>
> — Clive James

In 2011 my university hosted a debate about the fresh Libya intervention. Alongside the pie-eyed political scientists, some Libyan students were on the panel. They described rapes and massacres, how their families were praying for NATO intervention, how it was the only hope for democracy, how in fact their families were otherwise sure to die.

This was formative for me. I'd protested the 2003 Iraq War (reflexively, ineffectually) when I was in high school. But I'd been coming around to consequentialism, the worldview which forbids no action absolutely. It just made things make sense: suddenly I knew why I felt bad at luxury spending - because the same money could be saving lives. Other things which had seemed so important - recycling, Fair Trade, official foreign aid, metaphysics, poetry - took on ordinary proportions, stopped needling me, fell away. And so on.

I think a blanket rejection of war was the last deontological principle I had. I had a sure and accurate intuition of the horror of intervention. But here, unavoidable, was somebody telling me the horror of nonintervention.

Things got even more dramatic: The audience was packed with Quakers. They believed that nonviolent resistance is a simple and universal method for preventing violence. They were dogmatic, opposing even the no-fly zone; they didn't answer the questions people put to them, about the unarmed protestors killed; they were inarticulate and petulant, criticising the Transitional Council rebels for taking up arms, and forgetting to criticise Gaddafi at all. (In fact they almost defended him - in that particular dodgy New Left way - for his anti-imperialism.)

And yet they were completely correct about Libya, which 8 years later is still at war:

> *For the ninth time since 2011, rival Libyan factions are slugging it out to control the country's strategic "oil crescent," a coastal strip which begins 100 miles south of Benghazi and arcs westward 250 miles toward Sirte.*

> *Libya has not only failed to evolve into a democracy; it has devolved into a failed state. Violent deaths and other human rights abuses have increased severalfold. Rather than helping the United States combat terrorism, as Gaddafi did during his last decade in power, Libya now serves as a safe haven for militias affiliated with both al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The Libya intervention has harmed other U.S. interests as well: undermining nuclear nonproliferation, chilling Russian cooperation at the UN, and fueling Syria's civil war.*
>
> *Despite what defenders of the mission claim, there was a better policy available — not*

> *intervening at all, because peaceful Libyan civilians were not actually being targeted.*

The pacifists were right, even though they're a stopped clock. Amnesty didn't find any serious evidence of rape as a tactic. After the February killings of unarmed protestors, civilians don't seem to have been intentionally targeted by Gaddafi's forces. 1 (They were busy.) The rebels included plenty of horrible authoritarians, as revolutionary cadres are wont to do.

I don't know whether the Libyans on the panel were lying or misinformed, propagandists or victims of the same righteous fog of war that caught out Juppé, Cameron and Obama.

The lesson is twofold: war can be justified and almost never is. Also: disinformation, which has always been war's companion, makes a mockery of journalism and policy, of straightforward evidence collation - and it'll only get worse now they can target you with specific lies.

Don't understand me too quickly. The Quakers were right for the wrong reason.

The consequentialist argument against seemingly good wars is simple: it just almost never works. Your prior should be heavily against it. This time is not different. And this looks like pacifism most of the time, if an unusually watchful kind.

1. The misinformation went both ways, of course.

Tags:

Songs for the Extremely Online

22nd January 2022

- *Music about the internet, its dread and glory.*
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Content notes*: Doomers.
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *Could I interest you in everything, all of the time?*
> *A little bit of everything, all of the time?*
> *Apathy's a tragedy - and boredom is a crime!*
> *Anything and everything: all of the time.*

– Bo Burnham as The Internet

> *Because the Internet, mistakes are forever*
> *But if we fuck up this journey, at least we're together…*
> *No one's ever been this lost*
> *I just get the information, retweet or say it sucks*

– Childish Gambino

What does music tell us about the world? Almost nothing.

What does music tell us about the prevailing view of the world? Something: for most people it's more ideologically powerful than books.

The cool music of the noughties has a clear worldview. Too clear, if anything, but then the evils seemed clear. Anti-war, anti-surveillance, atheistic, pirate parties and information wants to be free. Freedom as a bipartisan or anyway double concept. The mood is agentic: "sure our foes have the power now, but if we *do* something, if we just have enough journalists and scientists and NGOs, we'll win." Moral clarity, even if naive, even if loud-mouthed.

What zeitgeist is embodied now?

Malaise. The songs I cherrypicked for this post are Not Okay, or whatever. They think this is to do with the internet, or the poisoned media environment, or the poisoned air, or whatever. These musicians are Extremely Online outliers and cannot stand in for the young, psychoanalysis of them does not generalise, does not characterise the default

ideology of the whole generation, or whatever.

But that said you can hear the apocalyptic apathy, the apathetic apocalypsism. (All about the end.) Depressive flagellants. ("*My tuition's paid by blood, I might deserve your fate or worse*.")

Incomplete cultural analysis of the last decade

What's wrong with what you think's wrong with the world?
* Anti-tech
* feeling of unreality.
* Post-truth. Misinformation. Russiagate paranoia, first-order programmable psychology.
* Climate change.
* Anxiety, weakness, fatigue, uselessness, guilt. To some extent this is just increased openness about old states. But not all?

What does it do, to stare constantly at your own fallibility and hopelessness? To attack yourself, and then pity yourself for being so attacked?

Anti-tech without the consolation of primitivism or traditionalism. Unable to log off because there's nothing else you value.

Somehow the top priority of the default worldview, racism, doesn't come up in these songs.

What changed in 10 years?

* Rate of interacting with anon strangers
* The left switched to personalising social problems. (Strictly speaking the theories are all still structural, but the praxis is radically individualist and moralistic.) Fuck Peterson: Marx is turning in his grave.
* Podcasts: The return of radio! The triumph of the crowd! Zines that people actually care about!
* Online dating dominates, sexting
* The death and rebirth of blogging

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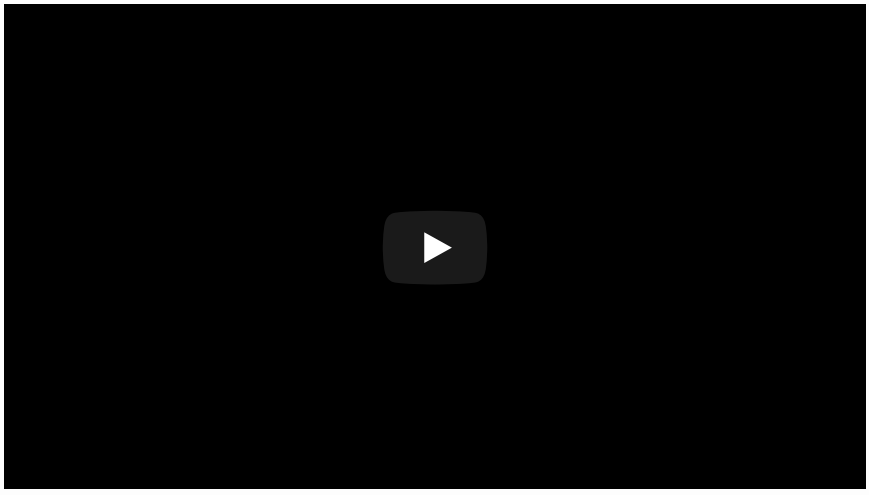
because the internet by Childish Gambino



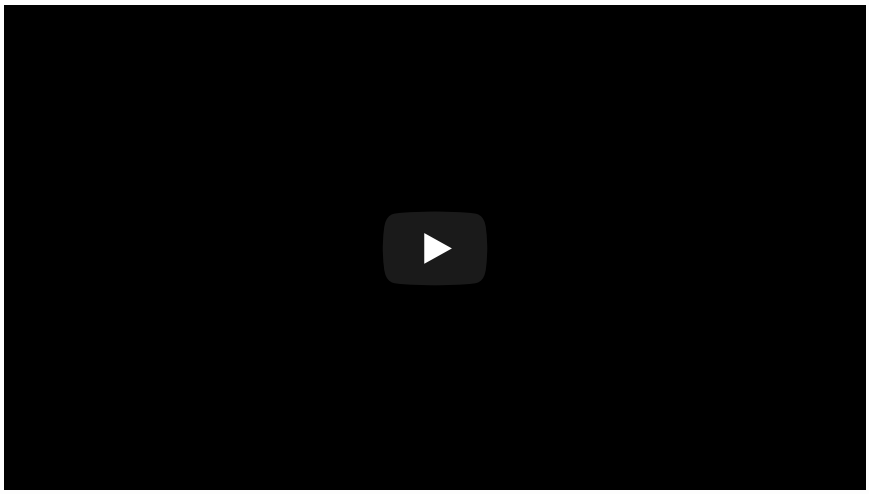
> *Man made the web, you don't need a name*
> *Man made of faults, I ain't too ashamed…*

> *Every thought I had, I put it in a box*
> *Everybody see it, just before the cops*
> *Andrew Auernheimer pulling on her weave,*
> *it's that Andrew Auernheimer*
> *Texts from people I never met, doors left open*
> *(Who is this? Don't do it, where are you?*
> *Who is this? Who is this?)*
> *I don't know who I am anymore*

This album is nearly 10 years old, and it certainly feels different, dated (e.g. namedropping "iphone"). But CG shares the essential queasiness of the rest of this internet music: he was clearly at the vanguard of the extremely online.

The mood is ultra anxious, decadent, but unlike others he manages to convey some wonder and love of info and tech.

Inside by Bo Burnham



A covid album more than an internet album. But the covid years were the most intense internet years ever.

He is always skilled, sometimes beautiful - but often limits himself to novelty songs. (What is a novelty? Something which works only once, regardless of the quality of that once.)

> *Mommy let you use her iPad; you were barely two*
> *And it did all the things we designed it to do*
> *Now, look at you! Oh, look at you!*
> *You, you! Unstoppable, watchable…*

White Woman's Instagram is a few things. It sneers. It's crabbed: seeing positivity makes him want to drag it down. It hides its basic negativity behind political piety: without the 'white' qualifier to validate it, it would have caused him trouble, "joyshaming" or whatever.

But then it drops all that and shows the woman mourning her dead parents and I defy you to keep smirking.

> *Her favorite photo of her mom*
> *The caption says, "I can't believe it*
> *It's been a decade since you've been gone…*
> *It's got a little better but it's still hard*
> *Mama, I got a job I love and my own apartment*
> *Mama, I got a boyfriend and I'm crazy about him*

> *Your little girl didn't do too bad*
> *Mama, I love you, give a hug and kiss to dad"*

(Although I'm not actually sure that cruelty was the base level intention, rather than cruelty-baiting. *If in fact* he was pretending to join in with our contempt - to get us to lower our guard and so feel ashamed when those dead parents make us remember that this is a [fictional? no matter] person and that taste-as-in-cynicism is a small thing - then this is greatness. But I fear not.)

What torments Burnham? Lockdown, clearly. Modern political guilt, but only somewhat. Something organic under it all.

Problematic is perfectly poised between sincerity and irony (*"Or that I'd live to regret it"*). The great moment is when the second half apologises for the first half of the song, an acute look at a very common online phenom, where someone apologises and then has to apologise after the initial apology gets savaged.

> *I want to show you how I'm growing as a person, but first*
> *I feel I must address the lyrics from the previous verse*
> *I tried to hide behind my childhood and that's not okay*
> *My actions are my own, I won't explain them away*
> *I've done a lot of self-reflecting*
> *Since I started singing this song*
> *I was totally wrong when I said it*
> *Father, please forgive me for I did not realize what I did*
> *(Or that I'd live to regret it)*
> *The times are changing and I'm getting old*
> *Are you gonna hold me accountable?*
> *My bed is empty, and I'm getting cold*
> *Isn't anybody gonna hold me accountable?*

But the song also distances him from his stupid, brilliant early work. Honour him for not allowing this to *utterly* crush him, for still telling some jokes, even if they're sad and reject comedy.

> *Stunning 8K-resolution meditation app*
> *In honor of the revolution, it's half-off at the Gap*
> *Deadpool, self-awareness, loving parents, harmless fun*
> *The backlash to the backlash to the thing that's just begun*
> *There it is again, that funny feeling…*
>
> ***Twenty-thousand years of this, seven more to go**…*
> *Full agoraphobic, losing focus, cover blown*
> *A book on getting better hand-delivered by a drone*
> *Total disassociation, fully out your mind*
> *Googling derealization, hating what you find*
> *That unapparent summer air in early fall*
> *The quiet comprehending of the ending of it all*
> *There it is again, that funny feeling*
> *That funny feeling*
> *Hey, what can you say? We were overdue*
> *But it'll be over soon*

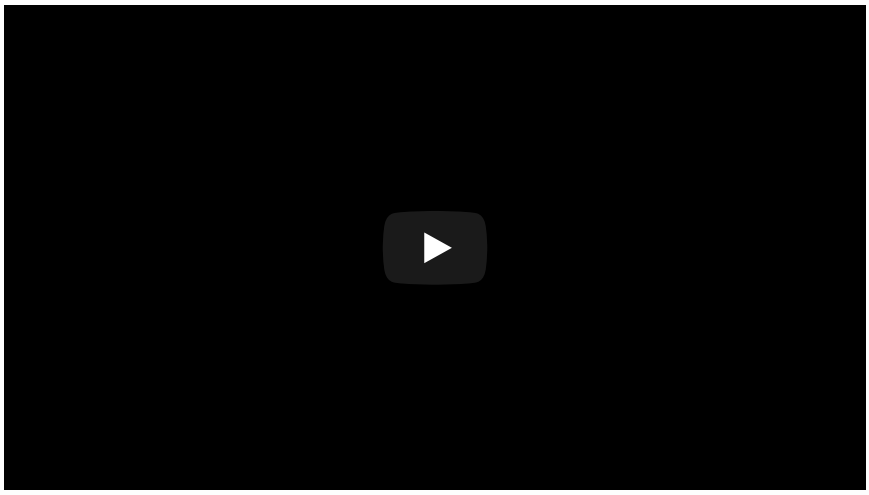
I expect this to age much better than Childish Gambino.

(BTW the visual design of the show is more than half of the artistry, so watch rather than listen.)

Moral Panic by Nothing But Thieves

I can't pin these guys down. 'Moral Panic' is a great title for satire - but they're too earnest and don't seem able to rise above their moment. e.g. There's a random dig at MAGAs. (They're English.)

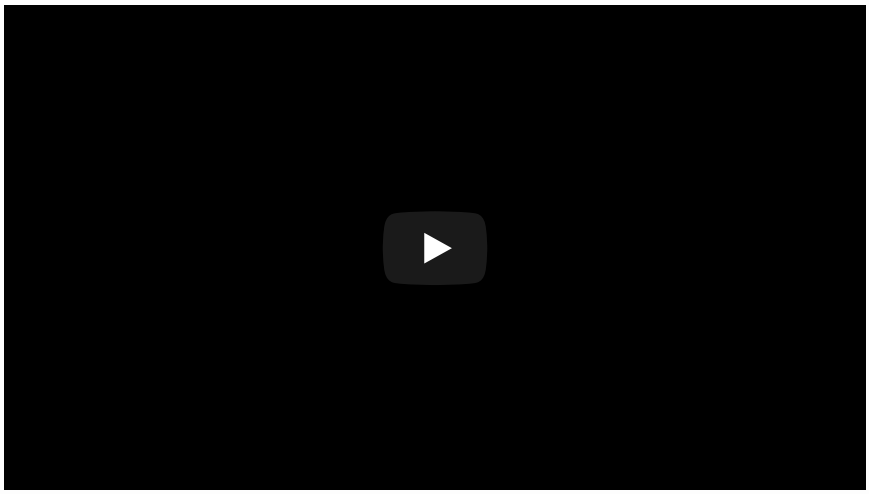
More like Pendulum than Mclusky. Still, one great song:



> *I fucking hate the internet*
> *The fame suckers in their block-long cars*
> *Five star hotel (i don't feel well)*
> *I think I'll cancel the honeymoon…*
> *I could use some healing soon*
> *Before I lose all feeling soon…*

> *We're shutting down the internet…*
> *I got some pills but not some help*
> *make my clicks spike*
> *Why don't we hit the minima?*

public void by Penelope Scott



Remarkable. Scott is both hyperintellectual and anti-intellectual, a radical with no theory and no praxis. (She has much the same revulsion towards formal microeconomics as I once

did. The title is a Java joke.)

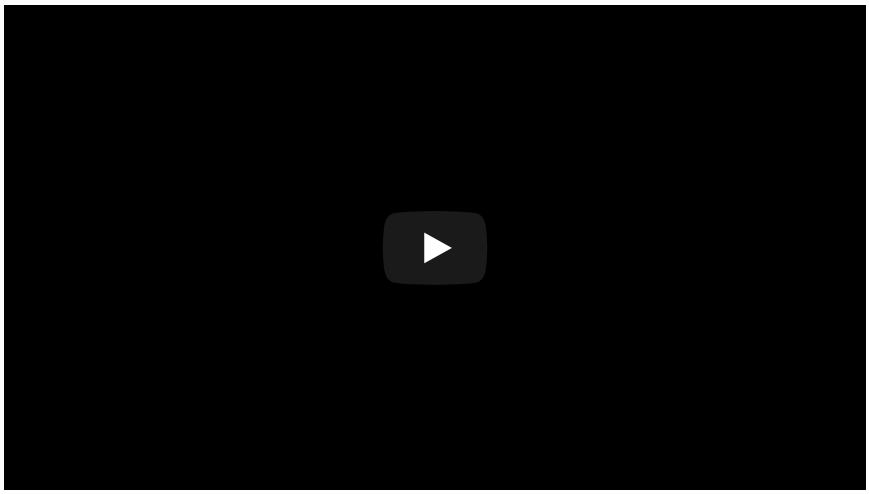
> *Atomistic rational behavior / Invisible hand savior*
> *Fucking up your definitions even though it's life or death*
> *Who fucking told you you were selfish*
> *Or even self-interested*
> *Don't you think it matters when we're with our friends, the best*

The obvious standout is *Raet*, an elegy of a Musk fan who woke up, a post-rationalist anthem. But *Moonsickness* is her lyrical triumph, or whatever the opposite of triumph is: exultant despair, proud sickness.

> *I've got one hundred hours to rearrange the stars*
> *And I'm the worst mistake that God has ever made*
> *You seem to integrate so fucking well*
> *But I make lemons out of lemonade…*
>
> *If you had children now you think*
> *You might just put them down*
> *None of us belong*
> *Everything I do is wrong*
>
> *And fuck I'm not a Marxist*
> *I'm not a fucking democrat*
> *Because of all this bullshit I'm not anything at all*
> *All I wanted was a framework*
> *None of them can live here*
> *There's nothing to believe in and there won't be til we fall*
> *And it's not all you man*
> *You were just a kid once*
> *God I'm such a fuck up…*
> *I've got one-hundred hours to rearrange the stars*
> *And I'm the worst mistake your God has ever made*
> *I can't get the numbers right*
> *I can't fucking count because not one goddamned thing is in its place*

Elsewhere she addresses the bizarre feminine love of true crime podcasts. (Google Trend for "true crime" against US violent crime rate...)

Solid State by Jonathan Coulton



Rare entry from the prior generation, someone with a reference for what things were like before. Cancel culture exists here. But actually it's only half current malaise and half an oddly detailed picture of a post-human malaise. ("*I lit up the sea, pulled down the stars for you*") "Sunshine" is a remarkable portrait of a Disneyland without children, sung by the final unemulated humans. Ray Kurzweil comes up in two different songs. You may take my mortality, you may take my toil, but you shall never take my misery.

> *Small mistake: "a terrible crime".*
> *It's better than solid state.*
> *It's all messed up, it's better that way*
> *Everyone you know, crooked little numbers game*
> *Everywhere you go, it's all the same*
> *Watch them rise and fall*
> *Human after all (take care of other)*
> *Used to be, the world was too far away*
> *Used to be, the stars didn't have much to say*

(Is the eponymous 'solid state' death? No, it's larger: it's the state of nonexistence: when your legacy, all evidence of your past and any continuing effects of your actions cease.)

> *The echo of a choice, the static that you leave behind / Is better than solid state.*

Brave is a portrait of the keyboard warrior, mostly the incel kind (though the right has no monopoly on resentment). It's not totally devoid of empathy.

> *Slack-jawed sheeple with their eyes closed*
> *There's too many of you, more than I can save*
> *When I torch the place, cover up my face,*
> *That will make me brave.*
> *Filling in the shapes of shadows in my cave…*
> *You speak and presto-changeo, now I'm the bad one.*
> *My heart hardening, counting up the lonely nights,*
> *all the little slights I'm taking to my grave.*

Pictures of Cats

> *All of the pieces and none of the places they go*
> *So I am looking at pictures of cats.*
> *Too close, so I'm pretending I'm far far away.*
> *Not now; I didn't want to be useless today.*
> *Try me tomorrow, today has been laying me low.*

Don't Feed The Trolls

The best depiction of the chilling effect.

The other artists mostly ignore surveillance, one of the defining evils from before. They feel they have larger problems

> *Dance like they're watching you, because they are watching you.*
> *And when the bright lights find you, don't let your heart get lazy*
> *Don't read the comments and don't feed the trolls…*
> *Appreciate the outrage, I did the best I could*
> *I thought about your thinkpiece, I don't think it's any good*
> *I just checked my privilege, and it looks fine…*

> *And when the bright lights find you, bro come on bro don't taze me*
> *Don't read the comments and don't feed the trolls.*
> *Don't read the comments and don't feed the trolls.*
> *Don't read the comments and don't feed the trolls.*
> *Don't read the comments and don't feed the trolls.*

To listen to them, you'd think the internet was a curse.

I'm reminded of the popular view of Twitter (and Reddit), as a sea of toxin which needs to be tightly controlled. Sorry to tell you that the toxin is coming from inside the house.

None succeed in capturing the internet's aesthetics and logics as well as Dril. But then nothing does.

Cherrypicking and lemonpicking

Shockingly good writing from a business professor, Forgues:

> *The problem is, extreme cases are rare. Rare enough not to show up in our random samples (or at least not in sufficient numbers for us to run statistics). So we resort to laboratory experiments or simulations, which bring rigour and yield strong results, but also face constant criticisms for lack of external validity. Or we single out cases for qualitative analysis, which allows in-depth understanding, but are mostly suited to specific (often processual) research questions. There is another way to sidestep the issue of rare cases. It consists in purposely taking identified rare cases and adding other observations randomly, and is known as case-control design. The case-control design offers promising research avenues for our field. It opens the door to a better understanding of breakthrough innovation, corporate misconduct, megamergers, financial restatements, etc. Still, this boils down to sampling on the dependent variable, something we have been warned against repeatedly as graduate students. The risk is sample selection bias and false inferences...*

So too with all cultural criticism, like the above.

See also

- Tyler on music as vehicle for ideas - formerly.

Tags: music, art, culture

magic words

12th August 2016

- *magic words*
- *Confidence*: 9
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Content notes*: entropy!

What is a magic word? A word which is not just a symbol? A causal word?

Such spells exist. Just say “noise” to yourself, and it appears. Shout “police!” long enough and you will summon the demon you name. “Confusion!”, in company. “Speech-act”. “Disquotation” après-moi. “Entropy!” arguably.

(All quite aside from *code*, the living words eating the economy and the intellect, and so the world.)

Tags: philosophy

Do masks work against COVID, at scale?

19th June 2021

- *Inferring the effect of mass mask-wearing on COVID.*
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

We have a new preprint!. Here's a full explainer thread.

We seem to be first to use the incredible UMD / Facebook survey of COVID behaviour to look at masks.

Short answer: Yup! 24.6% [6%, 43%] reduction in R the reproduction number, or cases / case.

We also have interesting secondary results

- Voluntary mask wearing started earlier and to a larger extent than previously realised. (64% of the world reported wearing masks by *May* 2020.)
- We have exactly two examples of noncompliance with mandates.
- Mask wearing has started falling (about 5% over May 2021) *in countries without fast vaccination campaigns*.
- Past work used the timing of government mask mandates. You really can't do this, because of the huge voluntary uptake prior to them.

What's the catch?

- We only use data from last summer, our wearing data is still a proxy (self-reported wearing), and our analysis is observational. See Discussion for lots more.
- Our analysis goes further in the quality of wearing data - 100 times the sample size, with random sampling and post-stratification - geographical scope, the sophistication of our infection model, the incorporation of the uncertainty in epidemiological parameters, and the robustness of our results (123 sensitivity experiments).
- Our analysis begins in May 2020, after some of the earliest mandates, as that's when data first became available.
- Summer 2020 has distinctive features: many regions began with NPIs already active; public behaviour had already changed following the (in)formal instructions of the first wave; and summer months are thought to have lower transmission
- We don't break the effect down by the venue of wearing. We don't look at cultural factors or serious differences in effectiveness of different types of masks. Our analysis is at the national (or US state) level, so we could miss subtler policy effects.

Our definition of 'mask-wearing' isn't stringent: it'd apply to a person who wears a cloth mask, only on public transport, 51% of the time; and to a person who always wears an N95 respirator outside home. So there's scope for more & better wearing, even in regions reporting high levels in our data.

Here’s a full explainer thread.

Here’s the code (end-to-end instructions).

Tags: code, science, research

Unthinking meat

31st January 2021

- *Homage to* ***Bisson****.*
- *Confidence*: Fiction.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10

“You’re saying they have an exquisitely sensitive and accurate sensory apparatus, and an unbounded memory capacity, and fully general problem-solving faculties?”

“Well, sort of:

“When they’re not focussing, which is 95% of the time, they can’t really be said to be intelligent at all. Much of what they say and do is hollow reflex motion.

“They also fill most of their bandwidth up with information which is worthless at best and usually actively misleading. They find fabrications more convincing than data. They rarely do what they think is most important.

“They also keep their current sense data, memories, moral evaluations, aesthetic evaluations, and political evaluations - their lust, fear, and avarice - all in the same chamber. This makes them confuse fact with value, rights with wishes, and desire with everything.

“Most of their lives are spent on coalition maintenance, social grooming, and monitoring and enforcing hierarchy.

“They have no access to much of the most action-relevant parts of their processor, which has developed backdoors to systematically delude the narrator about the system’s goals and motives. They are in effect incapable of honesty.

“While the processor is capable of running formal logic, very very slowly, in practice they use a series of appallingly non-Bayesian evolutionary algorithms to do almost all of their reasoning, including about the central concerns of their lives, mates, careers, and finance.”

“… not what you’d call a threat then.”

“Well, not to us.”

See also

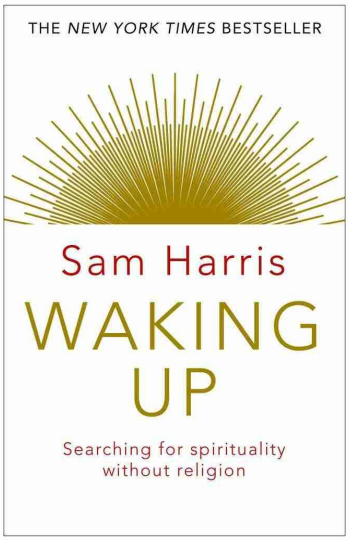
- The melancholy of pareidolia
- Why is quality rare?
- Pieties
- Where does reason end?
- Heuristics, cognitive miser, attribute substitution.
- Simler, Elephant in the Brain
- Constantin, Humans Who Are Not Concentrating Are Not General Intelligences
- Crichton, Gell-Mann Amnesia
- Taleb, Against News

Tags: fiction, rationality

'Waking Up' (2014) by Harris

26th April 2019

- *Some pros and cons, practical and philosophical, of reclaiming meditation.*
- *Confidence*: 70%
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



> *Most people who believe they are meditating are just thinking with their eyes closed.*

> *Forces of digestion and metabolism are at work within me that are utterly beyond my perception or control. Most of my internal organs may as well not exist for all I know of them directly, and yet I can be reasonably certain that I have them, arranged much as any medical textbook would suggest. The taste of the coffee, my satisfaction at its flavor, the feeling of the warm cup in my hand—while these are immediate facts with which I am acquainted, they reach back into a dark wilderness of facts that I will never come to know.*
>
> *... Where am I, that I have such a poor view of things? And what sort of thing am I that both my outside and my inside are so obscure? ... Am I inside my skull? Let's say yes for the moment, because we are quickly running out of places to look for me. Where inside my skull might I be? And if I'm up there in my head, how is the rest of me me?*

A surprisingly humble and sincere book. Some readers feel tricked - that Harris is smuggling in science under soft, false pretences. This isn't fair; he has done this stuff for decades, visited lamas in Tibet, put in the work. He wouldn't do so much insincerely; whatever his other failings, he's actually trying to bridge the two kinds of seekers.

(That said, the cover is a masterpiece of camouflage. Look at the soft colours, the sunny logo, the sans-serif purity, the unthreatening subtitle. Compare his other books!)

Consider all the things people mean by "spirituality":

1. subjective knowledge of ultimate / immaterial reality

1b. gaining supernatural abilities as a result

2. one's deep moral or existential values
3. personal growth
4. feeling of awe-inspiring beauty
5. introspection; close contact with one's own "inner dimension"
6. "the ability to step a little back from your emotions and thoughts, observe them as they are without getting swept up in them, and then evaluating them critically"
7. sense of love towards (all) others
8. the quest to see the ego and the self as illusory

With so much popular support - with so much baggage - it's not possible to throw out the word or concept; instead we have to try and reform it. This is Harris' mission - though in fact he focusses almost exclusively on (5) -> (8), the standard Buddhist therapy of not being hurt by distraction, bad luck, frustrated desires, a pesky inner homunculus.

And obviously he rejects (1): we are psychologising the whole thing. Paraphrased: 'Instead of making you experience reality, meditation lets you experience your mind; instead of strengthening your insubstantial soul, you're strengthening your mind.'

This is a healthy reconstruction in my view, but it certainly leads him to make controversial claims like "*The deepest goal of spirituality is freedom from the illusion of the self*". Metaphysically profligate readers will have no fun here. (But they knew that already.)

How can a scientist (or at least a pro-science talking head) boost a practice whichs aim to reject *thought*? Well, in most practitioners the rejection is a temporary one. And the trick is to distinguish thinking / experiencing (which are the locus of all value, and of decisions, and of creativity) from *identifying* with the stream of your thoughts, from being carried away, from being *permanently* distracted.

I'm an unpromising practitioner. For instance, this is kind of my jam. It's not the indescribability that bothers me - after all, any knowledge-how is indescribable (or rather describable only with millions of parameters). You can accept Hume or Parfit's reasoning - you can have the propositional knowledge, can know that "there is no self beyond my bundle of experiences". Meditation is supposed to be the know-how of nonessentialism, the skill of actually paying attention to the implications of this System-2 judgment.

But being 'nonconceptual' means no language, no premises, no reason, no jokes, no connection, no comparison. It means using none of my strengths, leaving none of my spoor. On the face of it this is a great loss to me.

I don't know that I do suffer as a result of identifying with my thoughts; I don't think that dissatisfaction lurks in every sensation I ever experience or also my whole life in retrospect. But the old claim, similar to Marxist or feminist 'false consciousness', is that I am too owned to realise I'm being owned:

> *beginning meditators... report after days or weeks of intensive practice that their attention is carried away by thought every few seconds. This is actually progress. It takes a certain degree of concentration to even notice how distracted you are.*

Freedom from desire sounds much like death to me, for all that Harris and others argue

that it can somehow coexist with passion against the suffering of others, with striving to be a better person, with chipping in to the Great Project of discovery, compassion, optimisation. Luckily the two strands of the Buddhist project seem to be separable:

1. really feeling that you are not your thoughts, not a homunculus behind your eyes having them;
2. not wanting things because wanting leads to disappointment.

A consolation: there's a sense in which meditation, introspection and phenomenology are highly, maximally empirical - they involve very close attention and analysis of the raw data. It just happens that the raw data (the sense-data) are irreplicable, private, closed, and so not directly a matter for science. Empiricism before science, consciousness without self. I like this part.

Mindfulness is billed as not just cool and true but *useful* -

> *No doubt many distinct mechanisms are involved - the regulation of attention and behaviour, increased body awareness, inhibition of negative emotions, reframing of experience, changes in your view of the 'self', and so forth - and each of these will have their own neurophysiological basis.*

Well, I do love self-regulation!

The following argument isn't explicitly stated by Harris, but I find it helpful as an existence-proof for the usefulness of nonessentialism:

1. We are happy and perform well when we're in 'flow' states.
2. Flow states involve "losing" yourself in a task, in a concrete, unhesitating sequence of perceptions and actions.
3. Therefore losing yourself can be good and helpful.

Also

1. We do not directly apprehend the external world; we know it through sense-data plus massive computational modelling tricks in the brain.
2. We know that the brain computes the wrong thing sometimes. (Cognitive biases, optical illusions, top-down processing, hallucinations.)
3. So, if such a thing is possible, it *could* be helpful to attend to sense-data more closely, to spot auto brain errors. *Maybe* more than fleeting sensory illusions too.

While I don't have a very clear philosophy of mind, I know I'm not a direct realist or substance dualist or identity essentialist, so I've no philosophical objections to breaking down the Self, either. Allons-y.

Does this stuff work?

Maybe. For the most important part, mental health, there is a consensus amongst positive and clinical psychologists in favour, d=0.3 or so - but unfortunately this means less than it should. It probably workson average for stress reduction - at least as much as taking a nap does, or valium, or sitting still and breathing deeply for a while. On the other end, it is definitely not the source of brain-juice-drinking power. Somewhere between these two limits we drift, deciding whether to spend time on it.

(Note also that there are likely to be types of people who are harmed by contemplation and self-negation.)

Is it worth it?

It's an expensive project: it costs me part of my most wilful and focussed hours, maybe 3% of all my waking hours, to be spent, if I am serious, for the rest of my life.

Even if I accept that mindfulness is a source of value, there's presumably still a tradeoff against clearer, quicker, more public sources: doing science or kindnesses or pleasures. 10 days spent in myself is 10 days not learning, not exercising, not enjoying, not helping, not meeting, in solitary. (And even on the contemplative axis it competes with Stoicism, with yoga, with writing, with psychedelics.)

It is sometimes claimed that it will increase my focus and so pay off in those narrow terms. But I'd be surprised if the effect was strong enough to overcome the high time investment.

Some contemplatives freely admit that the cost is very high: some contemplatives are not just salesmen. I met someone who claimed to be capital-e-enlightened. (He was otherwise articulate and modest.) He said it took 6 years' work, at many hours a week. I asked him if he could say how valuable it is in other terms - 'What else has been as good?' He said: a decade of intense psychotherapy, or two philosophy degrees.

(One ancient text teases us by setting 'seven years' as the required period, but in true troll-Buddhist style it then slowly walks back this helpful definite statement.)

I was looking forward to writing a gotcha here, but Harris (and thousands of years of arhats and yogis) pre-empted me:

> *...the deepest goal of spirituality is freedom from the illusion of the self -[but] to seek such freedom, as though it were a future state to be attained through effort, is to reinforce the chains of one's apparent bondage in each moment.*
>
> *One [solution] is to simply ignore the paradox and adopt various techniques of meditation in the hope that a breakthrough will occur. Some people appear to succeed at this, but many fail... Goal-oriented modes of practice have the virtue of being easily taught, because a person can begin them without having had any fundamental insight...*
>
> *...The other traditional response is... to concede that all efforts are doomed, because the urge to attain self-transcedence or any other mystical experience is a symptom of the very disease we want to cure. There is nothing to do but give up the search.*

I'm not actually worried by this, because I suspect the full-Buddhist anti-striving thing is unnecessary and... undesirable.

Grand doubt about grand doubt

Why should an evolved creature have the power to inspect its own sense-data? If we are constantly distracting ourselves with reified thoughts, what evolutionary role did this play? At the top of this review is Harris' droll diss about people deluding themselves into thinking they are meditating - but how *can* we know that we, or anyone, is not deluded? (Brain scans of inhibited medial PFCs are interesting but merely suggestive.)

This is more of a brain dump than a review: most of the above isn't directly from Harris, I'm riffing off better rational reconstructions of this ancient one-weird-trick. His chapter warning of the history of appalling abuse by gurus and yogis is a public service and I'd be happy to see it in every self-help book.

Some aficionados are a bit snobby about Harris and his app, just as he is aggressive about the religious and cultish sides. I suppose the great benefit of Harris *is* abrasiveness: this is the only way to reach a certain large demographic - the 'epistemic rationalist', the Skeptic, the Freethinker, the parachute RCT wanter. Harris has so much credibility as a rational thug that he can bring mindfulness to its most distant, conceptualising, recalcitrant population. I am open to the idea that this is a good thing.

See also my thoughts on ways introspection fails.

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*
2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*
3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

In this case, don't trust me much. I am no mind scientist; nor have I personally experienced the claimed benefits, I just know people who have. I've only half-tried this stuff. I am sympathetic to half the implied philosophy and deeply hostile to the other half.

Tags:

Legacy and the memory of legacy

20th February 2022

- *mocking the ancients and inventing hell*
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

A grave punishment in ancient Rome was *damnatio memoriae*: being written out of history. Ada Palmer's extremely melodramatic and for all I know accurate portrayal:

> *[the damned person is] neither slim nor mighty, stooped nor noble, just a shape… Somewhere in a dusty archive a baptismal registry records some Hildebrand, and, when that dry page molders… I can't look, I can't! Behind the shades, the broad gray plain, that sea of shapeless gloom extending on and on… all forgotten souls, minds empty of memory, smeared one into another… to this absolute dissolution Caesar damns his enemies… Not me! I will never let you take me! I will carve my memory into history, by work, by force, by guile, in swathes of blood and ashes if I must!*

Supposedly this remained an effective policy in the Renaissance:

> *In 1343… the Florentine republic that replaced the Duke of Athens ordered all memory of him and his rule erased, and all images and mementos of him destroyed immediately… In addition to the official punishments, a crowd of citizens stormed the government palace in order to burn archival documents… A crowd also cannibalized two of the duke's supporters in a particularly brutal form of bodily damnatio memoriae that seems to have emulated the corpse abuse practised on hated emperors in ancient Rome.*

Sometimes people even seem to prefer being lied about and demonised to being forgotten.

I cannot understand this at all, and (oddly for me) I don't want to. It just doesn't seem like a big deal. The pain and abuse of power preceding your expurgation is overwhelmingly more important.

I know why you'd do it to ideological opponents - to hide your crimes, to manage competing ideologies and pre-empt martyrs. So I understand the negationism of Seti and Stalin and the rest. (Actually, how often did it work? Lots of damned people are now more famous than their damners, an ur-Streisand effect. But *maybe* some cases were done so well that I will never know the numerator here.)

Then there's a sensible kind, which just attempts to remove the incentive for people to commit infamous crimes just for the sake of fame. (Our media merrily incentivise murder all the time.)

So I'm instead mocking the reaction of the target to posthumous punishment. Fearing damnatio memoriae is an ultimate kind of wounded pride. Men who appear to value being remembered more than life or anything. This seems related to the naive idea of 'living on' through your descendents.

I want to shake them. "Look man, I know we're all status-obsessed, but some of us try to earn status by doing things. Look man, I know death sucks ass, but using history as a consolation prize is pathetic."

My stepfather 1 died a few years ago. He was a nice man, but comically taciturn. I was a nice lad, but comically shy. We probably had about 5 serious conversations in 5 years.

One of them concerned his final rest. He told me that he wanted absolutely no monument, no gravestone and no plaque. He told me that it was meaningless and greedy to cling to things when you have no fingers. That he'd had his share of the world. God wasn't in it. When his sons in turn were gone, he wanted to disturb the waters no more. We dumped his ashes - the ashes - at sea.

Let's say he wasn't exceptional in this, that the mania for legacy has declined between Imperium and now. (Rather than being sublimated somehow.) A huge change. Meaning, relocated from public stature to private experience. Status, bounded by one life and one small group of people. Honour, a matter of living peacefully, tidying up after yourself, and turning off the light.

There is a version of this which would scare me - if anyone ever hated me enough to do it. Call it *damnatio opera*.

This is not the pathetic, primitive damnation of having your name chiselled off plinths and deleted from databases. "Ow my status!!" This is the undoing of everything good you have *done*. Your children eliminated, certainly. But also an unkindness to every person you've been kind to. An opposite murder for every life you save. Your parents' pride undone. All your writing, bit-rotted. All your arguments, refuted. All your charity seized. All that you inspired pruned. All happy memories spoiled or repressed.

Maybe people still know that you existed. But so what?

1. Something less than a stepfather but more than my mother's boyfriend idk.

Tags: death, meaning, longtermism

Staring at mystics

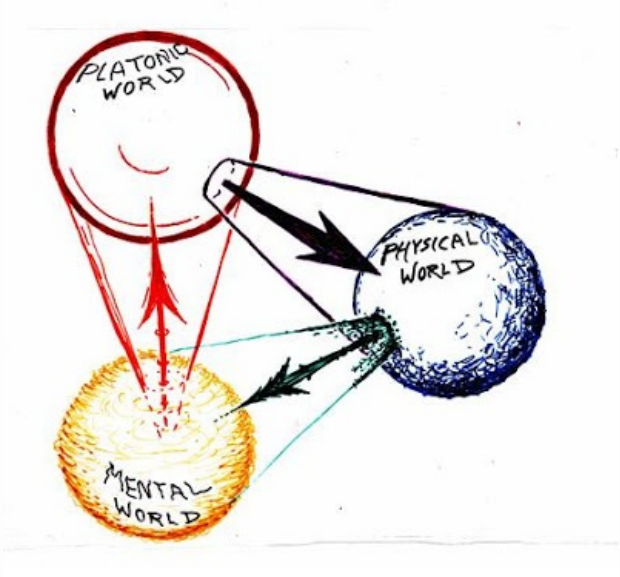
2nd January 2011

- *Trying to read the philosophical underworld charitably.*
- *Confidence*: 60%. I am more comfortable with reductionism than I was when I wrote this.
- *Topic importance*: 2 / 10
- *Content notes*: There is a lot of patent nonsense here.
- *Reading time*: 40 mins.

2020 update

One of the odder rabbit holes I ever went down:

I was so contrarian as a young man that I spent an entire month reading writers I myself viewed as sloppy and irrational, just because I was (implicitly) told not to pay them any attention by my philosophy teachers. Despite appearances, this came from an *excess* of scepticism: scepticism about the canon, about methodology, about academia.



(c) Roger Penrose, 1999

> *Can it be that so many men, of various times and nations, outstanding minds among them, have devoted so much effort, and indeed fervor, to metaphysics, when this consists of nothing more than words strung together without sense?*

– Rudolf Carnap

> *I think now that the right thing to do would be to begin my book with remarks about metaphysics as a kind of magic. But in doing this I must neither speak in defence of magic nor ridicule it. In this context, in fact, excluding magic has the character of magic.*

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *PI* manuscript

> *[Mysticism is] a philosophical urge gone wrong. Thousands of lesser philosophers are always with us to prove that it can go more wrong still, by trying to form systems out of no knowledge at all... The occult and mystical are perennial short cuts to a supervening vision... it is quite possible for the subtle visionary and the shouting dunce to inhabit the same skull... the essential truth about people prone to catch-all theories is that they aren't in search of the truth, they're in search of themselves.*

– Clive James

People don’t read philosophy. What do the pathologically open-minded people of the world read instead?

Bookshops tend to have only one shelf of philosophy, if that - and eight of something they call “*Mind, Body and Spirit*”: books trafficking in sentimental, pseudo-philosophical, pseudo-psychological superstition-porn. One step removed from Scientology.

Why care?

The most popular philosophers in the world do not receive any professional attention: they’re beneath notice. I call them the philosophical underworld. I refuse to dismiss them all just to fit in. Further: never mind **true**; **these ideas are loved**. They are the livelihood of four generations of global subculture. No matter how ill-founded, ill-grounded or even actively destructive, this gives studying them value.

Clarification

Consider three different things:

- **Naturalism**: that there is only Nature; all else (thoughts, sensations, spirit) are mental models of interactions of natural things.
- **Non-naturalism**: that there are actually things besides physics
- **Mysticism**: that you can directly access non-natural things. That the apriori is all you need, is *better* than the aposterior.

Ontology vs epistemology. There is a respectable and sober recrudescence of metaphysics My intention, as a rationalist physicalist, is to see the best arguments for non-naturalism, and to be more careful about labelling non-naturalists mystics. And to see if there are useful ideas in the mystics even.

Types

1. *Technical mystics* - Pure mathematicians (Neoneoplatonists), antirealist physicists, parapsychologists, deep ecologists, noeticists
2. Psychonauts - Drug gurus, Huxleyans, psychogeographers, hippies.
3. Avant trolls - Mysticism used as postmodern artistic device, blurring the distinction between epistemic and aesthetic. cf. Satirists, Debordistes, Discordians, psychological fictioneers, Visionary Surrealists, guerilla ontologists
4. Traditionalists - New Agers, occultists, Alternatives, gnostics & Theosophists, anchorites, cultists, astrologists, hand-wavers. All pseudoscientists go in here too.

Problems with my project

> *One of the downsides of working in philosophy is that it attracts a lot of people with mental-health problems.*
>
> – Joseph Heath

> *Oh, you've got the face on! The floaty face of the wise bird hovering on a million different quotes, about to do a massive wisdom shit on my head!*
>
> – Four Lions

1. Am I wrong? Is to be a "mystic" just to be unclear, hyperbolic and without justification? At very least, shouldn't it require the *mystical experience,* the sudden disreputable transcendence that the religious and the extremely ill encounter? Well. I'm keeping the word "mystic", with all its recent pejoration, because I'm leaving it open for you to critically dismiss. Even Sam Harris did so.

2. The best maxim in informal logic is _nil ad hominem_ - that we address what is said, not who says it. Even if he is called Ram Dass.

3. . It is very easy to slip into piousness when dealing with topics like these. Those writers who put on a rhetorical style to the detriment of their argument are not disqualified, but they do make themselves dubious. This can be best seen in the soft-mystic obsession for buzzwords and other Gladwellisms.

4. "Sir, there is a distinct difference between having an open mind and having a hole in your head from which your brain leaks out." - James Randi.

   4b. "*Any sufficiently rigorously defined magic is indistinguishable from technology*." - Niven's Law.

   Could be. Particularly, though, if we accept Heidegger's definition of technology.

5. If my category hard mysticism is really just for "unorthodox inquiry with focus on the significance of the subjective", how do I draw the line between Continental philosophers and rational mystics?

6. (And in what way is blabbering on about consciousness "socially unorthodox"? Everyone's at it!)

7. How is a transhumanist - a person certain to be a hyper-materialist and eliminative functionalist - supposed to be "mystical"? (Well, if we can make a mystic out of Turing...)

8. How soft can a 'critical' mystic get before they become a New Age quack?

9. Dude, we don't disdain the occult for _aesthetic_ or prejudicial reasons; it's because it's intellectually corrosive, isn't it? What grounds the claims made by these folk? One of Nietzsche's criticisms of Spinoza is a sort of Freudian nudge - "what kind of person needs such a *big* ontology, eh? Eh?" Related empirical suggestions are being made these days about the neurological underpinnings of sprituality. It's painted as a pathetic psychological trick. But people aren't ever going to stop doing metaphysics, not while they remain what I understand by "people". We might as well distinguish between doing it well and in a loose, deluded way.

Traits

- *Metaphysical cosmology*. (Thinking about everything at once. Just speculative systematization, not necessarily any worlds-upon-the-world. Usually implies a philosophy of life, too.)
- *Epistemically modest.* (this is the one that disqualifies almost all New Age writers)
- *Taking consciousness seriously* (not "taking it as given", nor as "the eternal soul!"; but as a potential ontological essence. They will have a metaphysics that subsumes what gets called spirituality rather than explaining it away.)
- *Taking values as seriously as facts*
- *Non-reductionism with respect to complex phenomena.*
- *Denial of the "conflict thesis".* (that religion and science are irreconcilable.)
- *Small-r-romanticism*: Passionate response to the world, and emphasising the philosophical significance of these feelings.
- *Capital-r-Romanticism: the World Unified*. (holism, pantheism, panpsychism, the "anima mundi". Openness to idealism almost required.)
- *Supposedly polymathic* (their wikipedia entries tend to list a half-dozen job titles.)
- Uncommon sense.
- *Weird epistemology* (some form of non-logical inference is involved - intuitionism,

"tacit" and "implicit" knowledge, Heideggerian work, embodied philosophy of mind, noesis...)
- *Opposition to methodological individualism* (the social version of nominalism.)
- *Celebrities, in their day* (Depending on your politics, this will seem to you either proof of the wishful, indulgent nature of their thought, or just that they communicated something people find important.)
- Attitude to free will varies extremely, from being the main motivator for their ontology, to utter Spinozist rejection.

We say there's "hard" subjects and "soft" subjects, with ductility proportional to mathematical rigour. Is there such a thing as "hard" mysticism?

Famously, mysticism came back in the 60s. It recurred for a number of reasons - a plausible sketch being that postwar disillusionment with the Western script of disenchanting materialism, led to consequent bad readings of Buddhism and Hinduism, the challenge of authority in art, romance, and war, fear of Cold War realities, sex freedom. But a minor reason is because the emergent Analytic philosophy, through its boring technical topics and formalism, withdrew from the public sphere. Rightly or wrongly, philosophy is considered the source of existential insights, and when it fails to supply it, less rational forces will supply.

There does not have to be intellectual dishonesty in holding that *there is more to this than this*. We've gotten used to branding this kind of thing 'mysticism'. So be it; but cut away the liars, Messiahs, irrationals and fanatics, leave in some of the schizophrenics, and you are left with the philosophical mystics.

Spinoza is the paradigm hard mystic. (This adds to the exemplar function he already serves for the groups "mechanical philosophers", "early liberals", "deductive rationalists" and "inspiring heretics".)

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911)

> *All science is experiential; but all experience must be related back to and derives its its validity from the conditions and context of consciousness in which it arises, i.e., the totality of our nature. We designate as "epistemological" this standpoint which consistently recognises the impossibility of going behind these conditions. To attempt this would be like seeing without eyes or directing the gaze of knowledge behind one's own eye. Modern science can acknowledge no other than this epistemological stand-point.*
>
> *No real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject constructed by Locke, Hume, and Kant, but rather the diluted extract of reason as a mere activity of thought.*

Early philosopher of social science. His idea of "erlebnis" - that knowledge is *lived* as well as *thought* - prefigured the nascent "embodied mind" trend by about a hundred years, and his encompassing philosophy of life is a good, rigorous non-naturalist start.

- Stanford.
- His "Introduction to the Human Sciences" (1883).
- Good piece on "erlebnis".

William James (1842-1910)

> *To use the organic causation of a religious state of mind in refutation of its claim to possess superior spiritual value, is quite illogical and arbitrary, unless one have already worked out in advance some psycho-physical theory connecting spiritual values in general with determinate sorts of physiological change. Otherwise none of our thoughts and feelings, not even our scientific doctrines, not even our dis-beliefs, could retain any value as revelations of the truth, for every one of them without exception flows from the state of their possessor's body at the time.*

American pragmatist, Christian, spirtualist, and one of the first modern psychologists. The New Thoughtists claim his "Religion of Healthy-Mindedness" as an inspiration.

- Stanford.
- Massive archive of targeted readings and such.
- Poignant piece on his hunt for evidence of ghosts.

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925)

> *...it is no longer possible in our time to offer a religion of unsubstantiated miracles; our religion must rather be a proveable science.*

Our first soft mystic: pseudoscientist, 'clairvoyant', cultist, and...alternative educator. Intended to found a "spiritual science" following work by Goethe. Founded the "Anthroposophy" movement instead, which enjoys a bizarre, continuing prosperity in sanitized forms, like the "Waldorf" schools. His ideas about the evolution of consciousness are rigid and simplistic, but pioneering. He also prefigures resistance to subject-object metaphysics: positivistic mysticism!?

- Bio.
- Archive and fan club.
- Hostile website declaiming the many silly things he believed.

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-1949)

> *Critical faith is freedom. Emotional faith is slavery. Mechanical faith is foolishness.*

Be wary of anyone who only speaks in aphorisms. Massively socially-successful Theosophist and...soft mystic. His "Fourth Way".

- Messy but exhaustive critique.
- Replies from devotees to a sceptic.
- And Robert Fripp's hip to it!!

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950)

> *Our actual enemy is not any force exterior to ourselves, but our own crying weaknesses, our cowardice, our selfishness, our hypocrisy, our purblind sentimentalism.*

Yogi, politician, narcissist, poet. His dad studied medicine at Aberdeen. Another borderline, this time one revered as a deity - though I'm not sure why. Updated Vedanta Hinduism with some Western frill. Through one idea, the "integral" (spooky spiritual evolution), he's the hidden influence behind a startlingly large New Age movement: "Integral Theory" (a blend of psychology, metaphysics and rank motivational speaking). Indian universities give out PhDs by the bucket on him, but you'd be lucky elsewhere.

- Hagiography.

- Academic, clear-eyed biography.
- One of the least clear wikipedia pages I've ever seen.

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961)

> *No one can flatter himself that he is immune to the spirit of his own epoch, or even that he possesses a full understanding of it.*

Psychologist and repugnant little man, but important and indubitably mystical. Dreams... I'd like to include Lacan, too, but he wasn't especially cosmic, just awkward.

James Jeans (1877-1946)

> *...to many it is not knowledge but the quest for knowledge that gives interest to thought — to travel hopefully is greater than to arrive.*

Physicist and popularizer. First guy to propose that matter is continuously created throughout the universe. Held that the universe is pure thought; the world is a mathematician.

- Bio
- Odd schema of his philosophy.
- "Physics and Philosophy" (1942)

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955)

> *To write the true natural history of the world, we should need to be able to follow it from within. It would thus appear no longer as an interlocking succession of structural types replacing one another, but as an ascension of inner sap spreading out in a forest of consolidated instincts. Right at its base, the living world is constituted by conscious clothes in flesh and bone.*

Catholic eco-pantheist.

- also Thomas Berry, Catholic cosmist,
- and a modern Chardiniste, John David Garcia.

Arthur Eddington (1882-1944)

> *We used to think that if we knew one, we knew two, because one and one are two. We are finding that we must learn a great deal more about 'and'.*

Physicist and cyclist. The first patron and popularizer of Einstein's theories. His grand Platonist "fundamental theory" ended up spiralling off into its own numerological navel (he denied new data which was getting in his way), but not in any notably different way than Dirac's more reputable ideas.

- Bio

Faqir Chand (1886 – 1981)

> *Who knows what may happen to me at the time of death? I may enter a state of unconsciousness, enter a state of dreams and see railway trains. How can I make a claim about my attainment of the Ultimate? The truth is that I know nothing...*
>
> *This is the secret which has been kept so guarded by all the religions and even by the gurus of [my] Radhaswami Faith. They have kept the public in darkness. They have*

> *exploited us; they have robbed us; they have cheated us and they have deceived us by saying that they go [transcend]*

Self-deconstructing guru; Socrates of the Punjab?

- Full book-length bio.

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963)

> *Now, experience is not a matter of having actually swum the Hellespont, or danced with the dervishes, or slept in a doss-house. It is a matter of sensibility and intuition, of seeing and hearing the significant things, of paying attention at the right moments, of understanding and co-ordinating. Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.*

Bloomsbury hippie. Orientalized Christian. Though he's an icon of Consciousness in general, his actual idea is "the perennial philosophy".

- Stanford note on perennialism.

Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986)

> *Truth is a pathless land. Man cannot come to it through any organization, through any creed, through any dogma, priest or ritual, not through any philosophical knowledge or psychologist's technique. He has to find it through the mirror of relationship, through the understanding of the contents of his own mind...*

Guru - social activist and sort-of-Spinozist. His adoptive parents paraded him around as the Messiah; others did so as a Buddha. Somehow he emerged from this experience as a human being. He doesn't avoid the assumption-heavy rhetoric of bad mysticism, but his philosophy is of a inoffensive humanistic kind, rather than esoteric. He's the patron saint of Bohmians, too.

- Intro by Bohm.
- Bibliography, gratis. (By "books" they mean "little essays" though).
- Dedicated journal, some philosophical work.

Wolfgang Pauli (1900-1958)

> *I do not believe in the possible future of mysticism in the old form. However, I do believe that the natural sciences will out of themselves bring forth a counter pole in their adherents, which connects to the old mystic elements.*

Of Schopenhauerian physics. Collaborated with Jung, but we'll forgive him that because weird things did keep happening to him.

The problem of wavefunction collapse led to a decent number of hard mystics amongst the great quantum theorists (note that there are now good physicalist Collapse Theories):

- Bohr's complementarity is an only mildly prickly solution;
- Schrödinger was open to Vedanta ideas throughout his life ("each individual's consciousness is only a manifestation of a unitary consciousness pervading the universe")
- Wigner is an out-and-out idealist.
- Heisenberg thought that pure realism was unscientific;
- while von Neumann has a huge, terrifying theory of how we produce finity.

Einstein, stop telling God what to do with his dice."
- Bohr

Arthur M Young (1905-1995)

Helicopter engineer and process theorist. Founded an "Institute for the Study of Consciousness", which (unlike every other place with this kind of name) seems sound.

- Fan club.

Alan Watts (1915-1973)

> *The idea of nothing has bugged people for centuries, especially in the Western world. We have a saying in Latin, Ex nihilo nuhil fit, which means "out of nothing comes nothing." It has occurred to me that this is a fallacy of tremendous proportions. It lies at the root of all our common sense, not only in the West, but in many parts of the East as well. It manifests in a kind of terror of nothing, a put-down on nothing, and a put-down on everything associated with nothing, such as sleep, passivity, rest, and even the feminine principles. But to me nothing -- the negative, the empty -- is exceedingly powerful. I would say, on the contrary, you can't have something without nothing... The whole idea of there being only space, and nothing else at all is not only inconceivable but perfectly meaningless, because we always know what we mean by contrast.*

The sweetest counterexample to the idea that mystics are necessarily obscurantist, hollow showoffs. His work in reconciling Eastern philosophy with modern-Western beats Pirsig, Capra et al to the inevitably popular "atheist spirituality" idea.

- Archive of work.
- South Park animation(!) of a dichotomy he liked.

Ilya Prigogine (1917-2003)

> *Thoughtful physicists concerned with the workings of thermodynamics realise how disturbing is the question of, as one put it, 'how a purposeless flow of energy can wash life and consciousness into the world.' ... The important laws, the creative laws, lie elsewhere ... Irreversibility is the mechanism that brings order out of chaos.*

Nobelled statistical mechanic, the "poet of thermodynamics". One of the first to suggest how life doesn't violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics (because our system is an open one, we "export" entropy and create a local "dissipating structure"). Later began to proselytise about how this proved the self-organising nature of the world.

- Overview essay by Joseph Earley.
- Somewhat breathless analysis of where it all gets Cosmic.
- A statistician pouring scorn on the "self-organising" phalanx of his work.

...Nobody outside of physics and chemistry has ever heard of Onsager, even though this is one of at least four fundamental contributions he made to statistical physics ... The reason is, of course, that [unlike Prigogine] Onsager did not claim any profound cultural, metaphysical significance for his work. (It has none.)"
- critic

William A Earle (1919-1988)

"Truth... is related to troth_, which is the same as loyalty or faith... The passion for truth which men of good will manifest is not a matter of ascertaining the exact chemical

composition of water or the number of grains of sand on the beach. It always was and remains a passion for recognizing and honoring the divinity in oneself and the other." Phenomenologist & film theorist. Helped found the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in America (a bloody thankless task!) Apparently set out to do critical mysticism more or less exactly as I construe it: "strictly philosophical transcendence". There's really very little work on him.

- Festschrift, and reviewed.
- 1951 piece on Spinoza.

David Bohm (1917-1992)

Open-minded physicist with mixed reviews. Worked on "quantum ontology", apparently in the true senses of each of those words.

- A curious, oblique fansite.
- Slightly culty work on "Dialogue" as salvation.
- He's in "The Re-enchantment of Science" (1988), on postmodern inquiry.

Timothy Leary (1920-1996)

"Turn on" meant go within to activate your neural and genetic equipment. Become sensitive to the many and various levels of consciousness and the specific triggers that engage them. Drugs were one way to accomplish this end. "Tune in" meant interact harmoniously with the world around you — externalize, materialize, express your new internal perspectives. Drop out suggested an elective, selective, graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments. "Drop Out" meant self-reliance, a discovery of one's singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice, and change. Unhappily my explanations of this sequence of personal development were often misinterpreted to mean "Get stoned and abandon all constructive activity."
The most blatant 'Head on our list. A dismissed Harvard psychology lecturer, allegedly for popularising LSD amongst undergrads. Nixon called him at one point "the most dangerous man in America". But most of his metaphysical work can be directly linked to work by Whitehead and . He also founded two at least mildly credible fields And the philosophy of drugs is a perfectly valid enterprise, even if your interests begin to...conflict.

- Archive, etc.
- Popbio.
- Review of his cheesy epic, Chaos and Cyberculture.

(See also Robert Anton Wilson (1932-2007), satirist and sceptic, who has a little posthumous nook on the MIT website. Also the best key-to-the-city announcement ever,) Ontology is the study of being; the guerrilla approach is to so mix the elements of each book that the reader must decide on each page 'How much of this is real and how much is a put-on?'"

Robert Pirsig (1928-)

It is an immortal dialogue, strange and puzzling at first, but then hitting you harder and harder, like truth itself. What Phædrus has been talking about as Quality, Socrates appears to have described as the soul, self-moving, the source of all things. There is no contradiction. There never really can be between the core terms of monistic philosophies. The One in India has got to be the same as the One in Greece. If it's not, you've got two. The disagreements among the monists concern the attributes of the One, not the One itself. Since the One is the source of all things and includes all things in it, it cannot be defined in terms of those things, since no matter what thing you use to define it, the thing

will always describe something less than the One itself. The One can only be described allegorically, through the use of analogy, of figures of imagination and speech."
Motorcyclist and rhetorician. Affirmative and philosophically serious, but he has only a vibrant fan-club and 20 million sales to console him (rather than academic credibility). In 2005, Liverpool awarded the first PhD with his "Metaphysics of Quality" as a thesis.

- The hyperactive MOQ community.
- More philosophical activism.
- That Doctor of MOQ from Liverpool Uni.

Carlos Castaneda (1925-1998)

"One goes to knowledge as one goes to war: wide-awake, with fear, with respect, and with absolute assurance. Going to knowledge or going to war in any other manner is a mistake, and whoever makes it might never live to regret it."
Superstar anthropologist, Shaman and phoney. His scholarly work is great if considered as meta-fiction: philosophical novels pretending to do anthropology... Goes on and on about "The Warrior", a vaguely Nietzschean agent. He went on to found his own martial art, and about a hundred neologisms: ricapituration, indulgence, the Tonal ...

- _Don Juan_ (1969), with commentary from himself, thirty years on.

Roger Penrose (1931-)

Does life in some way make use of the potentiality for vast quantum superpositions, as would be required for serious quantum computation? How important are the quantum aspects of DNA molecules? ... Do we really need to move forward to radical new theories of physical reality, as I myself believe, before the more subtle issues of biology — most importantly conscious mentality — can be understood in physical terms? How relevant, indeed, is our present lack of understanding of physics at the quantum/classical boundary? Or is consciousness really “no big deal,” as has sometimes been expressed? It would be too optimistic to expect to find definitive answers to all these questions, at our present state of knowledge, but there is much scope for healthy debate..."
Platonist physicist. He has (of course) protested that it's a new physics he wants, not new mysticism. His tentative model of 'quantum consciousness' can only be seen as unreasonable because current culture brackets out consciousness, trying to ignore or dissolve it. There is no significant difference between the project of Plotinus and physical Theories of Everything. What was mystic then is not so now. In the 1920s, cosmology was a deeply disreputable field: "a pseudoscience and the preserve of scientists who might have done some useful work in their earlier years but who had gone mystic in their dotage." - Hawking

- His foreword on Schrodinger's philosophy, with bio.
- Amazing illustrated lecture on his "Orchestrated Objective Reduction" model of mind.
- Book tracing the history of mathematical mysticism.

Fritjof Capra (1934 -)

> *Mystics understand the roots of the Tao but not its branches; scientists understand its branches but not its roots. Science does not need mysticism and mysticism does not need science; but man needs both.*

Borderline, bridging the worlds of thought-porn and philosophy. The skinny is this: Quantum physics has come to parallel certain Eastern philosophical themes, especially those of Taoism. Capra himself is original and low on nonsense, but the 'quantum mysticism' that he popularised contains a shit-ton of spooky charlatans. Zen Buddhism, for example, isn't (just) constipated, misty-eyed hokum; it insists on and obsesses over the physical world,

and takes as its aim the destruction of mental constructs mistaken for the world: good philosophical work.

- Scraps.

Eugene Gendlin (1926 -)

> *Many philosophers avoid physics for fear of bringing reductionism into philosophy. They avoid human experiencing, for fear of bringing psychology in. Anything "ontic" threatens to bring alien explanations to philosophy. Heidegger knew better. Everything must be brought to philosophy, to questioning how it is thought, and to let it be differently...*
>
> *My reform of phenomenology was not taken up. Of course I think: That is why phenomenology is rejected today. The popular assumption of neutral, uninterpreted "phenomena" had to fail. But the style has swung to assuming that all experience derives wholly from implicit assumptions breakable only by discontinuity. Either way misses the non-logical transitions.*

Philosopher of psychology and populariser of large Continental ideas. I concede that the first signs are bad: is it cultish? (check, the "Focusing Institute"); is there proliferation of self-help buzzwords? (check, "Thinking at the Edge") ; is there a free online library, and paid courses? (check). But his "philosophy of the implicit" is a development of Wittgensteinian themes, though what I've read seems a little simplistic, in need of sceptical trimming. (Particularly in his claim to be "beyond postmodernism".) This is perhaps inevitable.

- Autobio.
- Intro piece.
- Large archive.
- Bit on the selfhelp side. (...)

Terence McKenna (1946-2000)

"There is a spiritual obligation, there is a task to be done. It is not, however, something as simple as following a set of somebody else's rules. Most people make it naively by thinking clearly about the present at hand, but we intellectuals are trapped in a world of too much information. Innocence is gone for us. We cannot expect to cross the rainbow bridge through a good act of contrition; that will not be sufficient...The imagination is everything." Psychedelic philosopher (shaman), altered statesman, and elf follower. "Loathes science" apparently, which strikes me as a pretty dim thing to say.

- Journalistic portrait.
- Suitably twisted archive site.
- "New Maps of Hyperspace" (1989)

Ken Wilber (1949-)

> *The real intent of my writing is not to say, you must think in this way. The real intent is: here are some of the many important facets of this extraordinary Kosmos; have you thought about including them in your own worldview? My work is an attempt to make room in the Kosmos for all of the*

> *dimensions/levels/domains/waves/memes/modes/individuals/cultures, and so on ad infinitum. I have one major rule: Everybody is right. More specifically, everybody — including me — has some important pieces of truth, and all of those pieces need to be honored..."*

Star spiritualist 'psychologist'. (A borderline gone to the Soft Side). Helped along the dubious "interpersonal psychology" field. His early work reconciling contradictory accounts of the ego is apparently good, but then rises the cultish, demi-Hegelian "Integral Theory" business. Recently endorsed faith healers & quantum quackery.

Note: William James believed in ghosts. Irrationality in one place affects only the argument it's used in.

- Dizzying array of philosophy-scented pie charts here.

- Exhaustive critique.

It'd be a mistake to go to these people looking for The Answer. But this isn't what I go to Epicurus, Kant, or Dawkins for, either.

See also * Shalizi, Philosophies' Evil Twins

Tags: philosophy, nonsense, rationality

Nation playlists

2nd September 2020

- *My favourite music from various places.*
- *Topic importance*: 2 / 10

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uk

Scotland

List

The Boy With the Arab Strap - Belle & Sebastian
Son Of A Gun - The Vaselines
There's Got To Be Something - Ivor Cutler
Coming in from the Cold - The Delgados
Suddenly I See - KT Tunstall
A Girl Like You - Edwyn Collins
When I Argue I See Shapes - Idlewild
Pearly-Dewdrops' Drops (7" Version) - Cocteau Twins
Inhale Exhale - Anna Meredith
The Conversation - SACRED PAWS
I Heard - Young Fathers
The Knight & the Shepherd's Daughter - Various Artists
Ashokan Farewell - Aly Bain, Jay Ungar
The Angel's Share - Calum Stewart
Morven Psalm 103: 13-14 - Live - Gaelic Psalm Singers, Calum Martin
Join Our Lusty Chorus - Alasdair Roberts
John Taylor's Month Away - King Creosote, Jon Hopkins
Fisherman's Blues - 2006 Remaster - The Waterboys
Week Off - Malcolm Middleton
Cocain - John Martyn
Jersey Thursday - Donovan
Theme For An Imaginary Western - Jack Bruce
Needle of Death - 2015 Remaster - Bert Jansch
Koeeoaddi There - 2010 Remaster - The Incredible String Band
Salters Road - Karine Polwart
Sailing - The Sutherland Brothers
The Modern Leper - Frightened Rabbit

This Is The Life - Amy Macdonald
Paper House - 2016 Remastered Version - The Associates
Consolation Prize - Orange Juice
As A Matter Of Fact - 7 Version - Spare Snare
Gilt Complex - Sons And Daughters
Ulysses - Franz Ferdinand
Just Like Honey - The Jesus and Mary Chain
Dry the Rain - The Beta Band
Push off My Wire (Bliss) - Lockah
Lost In Tokyo - Koreless
Flickering Debris - Lanark Artefax
Caramel - Konx-Om-Pax
Music Is Math - Boards of Canada
Ultra Thizz - Rustie
In My Arms - Mylo
£ - Proc Fiskal
Uh - Gasp
The Rumour - Andy Stewart
Òran an t-Saighdeir Ghàidhealaich - Kathleen MacInnes
Suspended From Class - Camera Obscura
The Leanover - Life Without Buildings
I Want You, But I Don't Need You - Momus
Dress Up in You - Belle & Sebastian
Where We've Left Our Love - Arab Strap
Christmas Steps - Mogwai

Resources

Hogg's "All that Ever Mattered"
Simon Reynold's "Rip it Up and Start Again".
jockrock.org
SAY Award

Also did a spillover playlist to catch the many characteristic but less loveable cuts.

England

Bristol

List

Hide U - Kosheen
Hellebore - Safetyword
Sour Times - Portishead

Holding On - Julio Bashmore, Sam Dew
Hi-Potent - Roni Size, Reprazent
We Are Time - BBC John Peel Session 1978 - The Pop Group
Shitkicker - Malachai
You're so Kool-Aid - Oliver Wilde
Hymn Of The Big Wheel - 2012 Mix/Master - Massive Attack
Juvenile Delinquent - Black Roots
Fire (Spotie) [feat. Busy Signal] - Jus Now, Dismantle, Busy Signal
Psychedelic Runway - Joker
Overcome - Tricky
An Even Harder Shade Of Dark - The Third Eye Foundation
My Evil Is Strong - Tricky
So Hot (Wash Away All Of My Tears) - Amp
My Dreaming Hill - Flying Saucer Attack
Katang - Zun Zun Egui
Brainfreeze - Fuck Buttons
Never Fight A Man With A Perm - IDLES
The Greatest Show on Earth - Strangelove
Rain Check - Sleeping States
Nicole - Gravenhurst
Without Permission - Caroline Martin
Summer Set - Mr. Acker Bilk & His Paramount Jazz Band

Resources

"Hit Factories", Karl Whitney

Leeds

List

Kennedy - The Wedding Present
Where Were You - Mekons
Space Is the Place - Spacehog
A Friend For Life - Boyracer
Not Great Men - Gang Of Four
Asylums In Jerusalem - 2001 Digital Remaster - Scritti Politti
Something Good '08 - Radio Edit - Utah Saints
Femme Retrospectif - Original Mix - Riley & Durrant
Second Shot - The Cassandra Complex
Say Hello, Wave Goodbye - 7" Single Version - Soft Cell
Marian - Version - Sisters of Mercy
Wasteland - The Mission
A Steady Hand - I LIKE TRAINS

English White Boy Engineer - 1982-87 All The Singles And B-Sides - The Three Johns
My Favourite Dress - The Wedding Present
Bombay Stores Disco - Vibracathedral Orchestra

Resources

Rip it Up and Start Again by Simon Reynolds

Sheffield

List

Mardy Bum - Arctic Monkeys
Do You Remember The First Time? - Pulp
Weekend Without Makeup - The Long Blondes
She Said - Longpigs
Goodnight - Babybird
The Time Is Now - Moloko
Poison Arrow - ABC
Seconds - Remaster 2002 - The Human League
Carnival Love - Toddla T, Miraa May
Vasto - Cabaret Voltaire
Hot on Heels of Love - Throbbing Gristle
Missing In Action - Comsat Angels
Photograph - Def Leppard
Run for Me - Richard Hawley
When I Go - Slow Club
This Forest - The Rheingans Sisters
Walk On Stalks Of Shattered Glass (Version) - Hula
Beep Street - Squarepusher
Third Stream Boogaloo - Derek Bailey

Resources

"Beats Working for a Living: The Story of Popular Music in Sheffield 1973-1984", Martin Lilleker
"Hit Factories", Karl Whitney

London

forthcoming

Manchester

List

Psycle Sluts - 48 Chairs
Autonomy - Buzzcocks
First of the Gang to Die - Morrissey
Mathematics - Cherry Ghost
A Song For The Lovers - Richard Ashcroft
Baiser - Chris Sievey
To You - Remastered - I Am Kloot
Cloudy Lemonade - Alfie
Stone on the Water - Badly Drawn Boy
Cause a Rockslide - Badly Drawn Boy
A Song From Under The Floorboards - Magazine
Who Works The Weather - The Great leap Forward
Made of Stone - Remastered - The Stone Roses
Reverend Black Grape - Black Grape
Laid - James
This Is How It Feels - Inspiral Carpets
5 8 6 - 2020 Digital Master - New Order
Pacific 202 - 808 State
Bike - Autechre
Voodoo Ray - A Guy Called Gerald
Feel Something - Holy Other
No Reptiles - Everything Everything
I like it when you sleep, for you are so beautiful yet so unaware of it - The 1975
Ain't No Love (Ain't No Use) [feat. Melanie Williams] - Sub Sub, Melanie Williams
Dus' - Brassy
Hit the North Part 1 - The Fall
Working And Shopping - Tools You Can Trust
Suspended Sentence - John Cooper Clarke
I Believe - Buzzcocks
Warsaw - 2010 Remaster - Joy Division
Blindness - The Fall
rat poison - Superqueens
Fireplace - Kiran Leonard
Childlike Faith In Childhood's End - Van Der Graaf Generator
Winter Hill - A Certain Ratio
Debra - Big Flame
Down in Outer Space - Spaceheads
Numb - Andy Stott
Cichli - Autechre

Resources

Too many

Liverpool

List

Call Me Mr Demolition Ball - Hot Club De Paris
Come Back - The Mighty Wah!
Fault Lines - SPQR
Lazarus - The Boo Radleys
Little Black Numbers - Remastered - Kathryn Williams
A Country Practice - Half Man Half Biscuit
Two To Birkenhead - Bill Ryder-Jones
Enola Gay (Peel Session 2) - Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark
Playgirl - Ladytron
Jokin' Me - Stealing Sheep
Ain't Talkin' 'Bout Dub - Apollo 440
Come Into Our Room - Clinic
Blossoms Falling - Ooberman
The Ballad of Tom Jones - Space
Love of the Loved - Cilla Black
Wondrous Place - Billy Fury
What a Way to End It All - Deaf School
Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying - Gerry & The Pacemakers
Cavern Stomp - The Big Three
Arty's Wife - Mike Hart
Something - The Beatles
Jealous Guy - John Lennon
What Is Life - George Harrison
Coming Up - Live At Glasgow - Paul McCartney
Dreaming of You - The Coral
Nothing's Real but Love - Rebecca Ferguson
The Killing Moon - Echo & the Bunnymen
Shorley Wall - Ooberman
Went to Town - Rooney
Yes...That's Positive - a.P.A.t.T.
Sunburnt Impedance Machine - Mugstar
Blow My Mind - International Pony Rmx - Deejay Punk-Roc, International Pony
Liverpool Medley - The Real Thing
I Wish I Could Talk in Technicolor - Wired to Follow
Tsintskaro - Capac
For What Is Chatteris... - Half Man Half Biscuit

The Light At The End Of The Tunnel (Is The Light Of An Oncoming Train) - Half Man Half Biscuit
Twenty Four Hour Garage People - Half Man Half Biscuit
Floreat Inertia - Half Man Half Biscuit
Surging Out Of Convalescence - Half Man Half Biscuit

Resources

Brighton

List

I’m On Fire - Electrelane
Get It Together - The Go! Team
Pull Shapes - The Pipettes
I Wish I Was Someone Better - Blood Red Shoes
7 Seconds - Porridge Radio
The Bay - Metronomy
Humble - Ren, Eden Nash
Love On My Mind (feat. Amanda Wilson) - Freemasons, Amanda Wilson
Get So ill - Krafty Kuts
Weapon Of Choice - Fatboy Slim, Olodum
Weapon Of Choice (feat. Bootsy Collins) - Remastered Version - Fatboy Slim, Bootsy Collins
Days To Come - Bonobo, Bajka
September '99 - Phats & Small Remix - Earth, Wind & Fire, Phats & Small
When I Was A Youngster - Rizzle Kicks
Impossible Objects of Desire (Radio Edit) - Fujiya & Miyagi
Mannie - 12mind, TME
Post Punk Progression - Cut La Roc
Infinite Wave - Slugabed
C'est la Vie - Magicofficialtmc
Ideologically Unsound - Poison Girls
The Jinx - Peter and the Test Tube Babies
Waiting For The Winter - The Popguns
English Girls - Animal House
Skepticism - Dove House
What a Beautiful Day - Remastered Version - Levellers
Island - Fear of Men
Two Wooden Spoons - Emma Gatrill
That Certain Feeling - Percival Mackey
Lights Out - NEON SAINTS Brass Band
Brighton "Symphony of A City" I — Ed Hughes

Resources

Wales

List

Are You with Me Now? - Cate le Bon
The Taxi - Young Marble Giants
Throwing Bricks At Trains - Future Of The Left
Mulder and Scully - Catatonia
La Tristesse Durera (Scream to a Sigh) - Manic Street Preachers
Fire in My Heart - Super Furry Animals
Just a Day - Edit - Feeder
You! Me! Dancing! - Los Campesinos!
Hanky Panky Nohow - John Cale
Jêl Caerdydd - Calan
Ym Pontypridd mae 'nghariad - Yr Hwntws
Without You - Remastered 2010 - Badfinger
98.6 - The Bystanders
Back into the Future - Man
Break the Chain - Gene Loves Jezebel
Finished Symphony - Deadmau5 Remix - Hybrid, deadmau5
Jumbo - Underworld
She Will Only Bring You Happiness - Mclusky
Diamonds Are Forever - Shirley Bassey
Blerwytirhwng? - Super Furry Animals

Resources

The Roots of Rock, from Cardiff to Mississippi and Back, Peter Finch

'Blerwytirhwng?' the place of Welsh pop music, Sarah Hill

Welshnot blog

Music Blog Wales blog

Northern Ireland

List

Suspect Device - Stiff Little Fingers
Teenage Kicks - The Undertones
This Is a Test - Oppenheimer
If It's Not You - Language of Flowers
Bring On the Sunshine - The Moondogs
Gay - StoneFish
Shining Light - Ash
Rock Club - The Dangerfields
Screamager - Therapy?
Needle In The Groove - Pat McManus
Honeychild - Ghost Of An American Airman
Beside You - 1999 Remaster - Van Morrison
Here Comes the Night - Them
Revolving Doors - Meilana Gillard
Hey Lisa - David Holmes
Neo-Geocities - The Host
the belll - the olllam
The Summerhouse - The Divine Comedy

Resources

americas

Brazil

List

Irene - Caetano Veloso
Off And On - Moacir Santos
A Minha Menina - Os Mutantes
Mistério do Planeta - Novos Baianos
Glória - Tom Zé, Os Brazoes
Quero Sambar Meu Bem - Tom Zé
Bat Macumba - Os Mutantes
Preta Pretinha - Novos Baianos
Cravo E Canela - Milton Nascimento, Lô Borges
Águas De Março - Elis Regina, Antônio Carlos Jobim
Choro #1 - Bola Sete
Canto de Ossanha - Baden Powell
Ratamahatta - Sepultura
Inner Self - 2020 Remaster - Sepultura
Endangered Species - Sepultura
Não Vá Se Perder Por Aí - Os Mutantes
O Estrangeiro - Caetano Veloso

Resources

The great Evan G

Canada

List

Myriad Harbour - The New Pornographers
You Oughta Know - 2015 Remaster - Alanis Morissette
Critics - Gay
Cause = Time - Broken Social Scene
Jealous Of Your Cigarette - Hawksley Workman
No Cars Go - Arcade Fire
This Lamb Sells Condos - Owen Pallett
Alcohol - Barenaked Ladies
Barrett's Privateers - Stan Rogers
Suzanne - Leonard Cohen
California - Joni Mitchell
Miss Chatelaine - k.d. lang
Mushaboom - Feist
I Was A Daughter - Basia Bulat
Light Of Loving - Faith Healer
Freewill - Rush
Dear Coach's Corner - Propagandhi
Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black) - Neil Young
Running On Nothing - Fucked Up
Fuck the Pain Away - Peaches
Feel Infinite - Jacques Greene
Es-so - Tune-Yards
Carpal Tunnel Syndrome - Kid Koala, Money Mark
In Red - Azeda Booth
Idlewild - Julia Kent
Duration Part One - Sixtoo
Duration Part Two - Sixtoo
Duration Part Three - Sixtoo
The righteous wrath of an honorable man - Colin Stetson
Storm - Godspeed You! Black Emperor

Resources

America

One per state could be cool.

euro

France

List

Ça me vexe - Mademoiselle K.
D.A.N.C.E - Justice
Rectangle - Jacno
Pipornithology, Pt. II - Chassol
Run Into Flowers - M83
Cut Dick - Mr. Oizo
Les Professionnels - Air
End of the World - Stanley Brinks
La foule - Édith Piaf
Le déserteur - Boris Vian
Tous les garçons et les filles - Françoise Hardy
Agathe ou Christie - Christie Laume
Et maintenant - Gilbert Bécaud
Mr Patrick - Philippe Katerine
Il est cinq heures, Paris s'éveille - Jacques Dutronc
La Seine - Extrait de la bande originale un monstre à Paris - Vanessa Paradis, -M-
Crebe de chet - André Ricros, Louis Sclavis Quartet, Alain Gibert
Marions les roses (chant de quête) - Malicorne
Les cigognes nénuphars - Forever Pavot
The Drowned Girl - Yann Tiersen
New-York avec toi - Remasterisé en 2015 - Téléphone
Poney Pt. I - Vitalic
Rough Sex - Lords Of Acid
Tour Du Monde - Aquaserge
Pump - Jackson And His Computer Band
Arcades - C2C
Daniel Darc - Abd Al Malik
Pinacle - Lucio Bukowski, Oster Lapwass, Anton Serra
Karaté - Yelle
I Love Ma Guitare - Rinôçérôse
Tot und Hoch - Heimat
Antisocial - Trust
Back to Heldon - Heldon
The Four Horsemen - Aphrodite's Child
Ork alarm - Magma
Lumière Blanche Schneeturm - Ulan Bator
Flying Whales - Gojira
De Motu Pendulorum - Lightwave
Dopees - Dorine Muraille
Short Circuit - Daft Punk
Veridis Quo - Daft Punk

Resources

Query "albums de la décennie" was my way in.

Germany

List

These Days - Nico Creole Love Call - Comedian Harmonists Sunny - Boney M. Hier kommt Alex - Die Toten Hosen Männer - Remastered 2016 - Herbert Grönemeyer Hallogallo - NEU! You're so Cool (Main Title) - Hans Zimmer Burning - The Whitest Boy Alive Blaue Augen - Ideal Radioactivity - 2009 Remaster - Kraftwerk Major Tom - Coming Home - Peter Schilling Forever Young - 2019 Remaster - Alphaville The Power - SNAP! Pogo - Digitalism Hearts - L.S.G. Fertilized - Mouse On Mars, Cavern of Anti-Matter Dickes B (feat. Black Kappa) - Seeed, Black Kappa Iris/Retinal Scanning - Der Zyklus Freeze - Klaus Schulze The Light 3000 - Schneider TM, KPT.Michi.Gan Masimbabele - The Unknown Cases Pius in Tacet - Pantha Du Prince Dawn - Deuter Flowers For Yulia - Max Richter The Garden - Einstürzende Neubauten Schön von Hinten - Stereo Total TV-GLOTZER (WHITE PUNKS ON DOPE) - Nina Hagen Eine Eigene Geschichte - Blumfeld Mack the Knife - Kurt Weill, Lotte Lenya, Roger Bean Love On A Real Train - Tangerine Dream Return To Innocence - Enigma She Brings the Rain - CAN The Sad Skinhead - Faust Ah! - Popol Vuh Knifflige Fragen - Air Liquide Revolution Action - Atari Teenage Riot Soap Shop Rock - Live - Amon Düül II

Resources

Italy

List

Pelle Di Luna - Piero Umiliani
Se telefonando - Mina
Maracaibo - Lu Colombo

Luglio, agosto, settembre (nero) - Area
O Cessate Di Piagarmi - Alessandro Scarlatti, Nora Fischer
Corale - Leggenda Del Re Infelice - Fabrizio De André
Tu vuo' fa l'americano - Renato Carosone
Via con me - Paolo Conte
Stormi - Radio Edit - Iosonouncane
Fiore mio - Andrea Laszlo De Simone
Girlfriend - Mind Enterprises
The Shape Of Trance To Come - Lorenzo Senni
Faces - Prod. Roberto Ferrante - Clio
Knights in White Satin - Remastered - Giorgio Moroder
Tina, Are You Ready? - Valentine
Imago - Daniele Baldelli
Komodo - Mauro Picotto
Beta - Franco Battiato
Bologna Rock - Confusional Quartet
Madhouse - Jennifer Gentle
Io Sto Bene - CCCP – Fedeli Alla Linea
Start a Fight - Raw Power
Stomp - Uzeda
Jone - Banda Ionica
Ballate a ballu tundu - Tenores Di Bitti
Tarantella calabrese - Daniele Sepe
Impressioni di Settembre - Premiata Forneria Marconi
Sospesi nell'oblio - Squadra Omega
La mente vola - Alphataurus
Fantas - Caterina Barbieri
Ostia - Zu
Stigma - Ufomammut
Iniziare - Alessandro Cortini
Ecstasy of Gold - Ennio Morricone, Yo-Yo Ma, Roma Sinfonietta
"Vedi! le fosche notturne spoglie" (Anvil Chorus) - Giuseppe Verdi
Le Ultime Parole Di Brandimante - Le Stelle Di Mario Schifano

Resources

Scaruffi (2002), A brief summary of Italian rock music

Netherlands

List

Valse De La Bourgeoisie - Willem Breuker

Kid's Allright - Bettie Serveert
Always Share - Daryll-Ann
Pick Up - Solex
Prayer for My Demo - Urban Dance Squad
Boom, Boom, Boom, Boom!! - Vengaboys
Better Off Alone - Alice DJ
Magik Journey - Radio Edit - Tiësto
War Chant (Marcel Dettmann Edit) - mixed - Psychick Warriors Ov Gaia, Marcel Dettmann
We Are You in the Future - Martyn
Chrono - Remastered Version - DJ Hidden
J'espere Ca - Machinefabriek
If the Hat Fits the Suit - The Ex
Once I Was a Lady - Lucky Fonz III
It's Time - Dog Faced Hermans
For All Slaves A Song Of False Hope II - Gnaw Their Tongues
Ursonate (1986): Erster Teil - Jaap Blonk

Resources

Estonia

List

Sa Haara Kinni Mu Käest - Tõnis Mägi
Tere Perestroika - J.M.K.E.
Upa-Upa Ubinakõnõ - Tuulikki Bartosik, Ramo Teder, Mari Kalkun
Õdangule - Maarja Nuut
Kauges külas - Curly Strings
Maa Hing (The Earth Soul) - Triinu Taul
Ära koo mu käpikuisse päikest - Tallinna Tehnikaülikooli Kammerkoor
Ilus Ole/Be fair - RÜÜT
(In the End) There's Only Love - Ewert and the Two Dragons
Mets Neidude Vahel - Collage
Change (Ballad of Barbie & Ken) - Röövel Ööbik
21.04 - Lootus
Kaks vööd - Remix - Bill Wells, Imandra Lake
Piccadilly At Night - Jimmy Roqsta
Ma Tahaksin Kodus Olla - Mari Kalkun
Kaes On Aeg - Velly Joonas
Buoyant March - Ratkiller
Langeb Tähti Sülle - Hypnosaurus
Last Night - Andres Lõo

Fish Sticks Rhapsody - Estrada Orchestra
X-RAY - Tommy Cash
Hingede Öö - Maria Minerva
Don't They Know - Mart Avi
Karolini Lugu Nr 1 - Nagy Bögö
Estonian Lullaby - Veljo Tormis, Jan Garbarek, The Hilliard Ensemble
Sonata for Solo Violin - Eduard Tubin, Frank Almond
Looduspildid - Veljo Tormis, musica intima
Für Alina - Arvo Pärt, Alexander Malter

Resources

Hungary

List

Gay Hussar - Agaskodo Teliverek
Gyöngyhajú lány - Omega
Muro Shavo Kiki - Ternipe
Ha Szívedben Sok A Bánat - Fonó zenekar
Dob + Basszus - hiperkarma
San Franciscan Nights - Gábor Szabó
Khade Sukar - How Beautiful - Parno Graszt
Budapest - Tamás Cseh
Szerelem, szerelem (Love, Love) - Márta Sebestyén
Hidegen fujnak a szelek (Cold Winds Are Blowing) - Muzsikás
Húsrágó Hídverő - Kispál és a Borz
Kamikaze - A.E. Bizottsag
Kereszteslovag - Mini
Garbage Pail Crocodile - Agaskodo Teliverek
Én Már Nem - Szabó Balázs Bandája
The Atheist - True Anomaly Balearic Remix - Corvin Dalek
Ohne Chanteuse - Yonderboi
Eső, Pt. 2 - From "Sátántangó" - Vig Mihály
Kabócák, Bodobácsok - Thy Catafalque
Tsitsushka - Thy Catafalque
Bilder infor drommarna och doden — Akos Rozmann
Totentanz, S. 525 - Franz Liszt
Roumanian Folk Dances For Orchestra, Sz. 68 - Béla Bartók
Babylon - Sándor Szabó, Michael Manring, Balazs Major
A csitári hegyek alatt - Anita Csóka
Lontano - György Ligeti

Resources

Spain

List

O Tren - Andrés Do Barro
Gloria - Nosoträsh
Gente De Mierda - PUTOCHINOMARICÓN
In Spain We Call It Soledad - Rigoberta Bandini
Me Voy de Casa - Tequila
Tirando Piedras al Río - Miguel Abuelo, Nada
La Zona Fantasma - Aviador Dro
Resistiré - Estela Raval
The Boys of Summer - DJ Sammy
Bailando - Alaska Y Los Pegamoides
Sunshine - John Talabot
Hay un Hombre en España - Astrud
Me Maten - C. Tangana, Antonio Carmona
Desaparecido - Manu Chao
Un Veneno - C. Tangana, Niño de Elche
¿Por Qué Me Tengo Yo Que Enamorar? - Los Fresones Rebeldes
Mejor - Los Brincos
Rock and Roll Star - 2017 Remaster - Loquillo
Mediterraneo - Joan Manuel Serrat
Algo Personal (with Calle 13) - Joan Manuel Serrat, Calle 13
Dos Días - Lucas Masciano
Bipolaridad - Señor Mostaza
Antillas - El Guincho
Alma de Cantaora - Amparo Sánchez, La Abuela Margarita
Santa Leone - Pájaro
Entre Dos Aguas - Paco de Lucía
La Facienda - Mariluz Cristóbal Caunedo, Lliberdón
Asturias (Leyenda) - Isaac Albéniz, Simon Dinnigan
Spanish Dance No. 1 - Manuel de Falla, Itzhak Perlman, David Garvey
Moscú Está Helado - Esplendor Geométrico
La Revolución Sexual - La Casa Azul
Hazme una Perdida - Tremenda Jauría
Agentina 2 - Pablo 0 - Coconot
Garden - Hinds
Sol - Guillermine

Miss Ántropa - Estrogenuinas
Dope and Love - Tokyo Sex Destruction
Two Questions - Aina
Euphoria Under water - The Unfinished Sympathy
Di No al Speed - Sin Dios, Intolerance
Máquinas de Producción - Escuela de Odio
Con Sangre de Quien te Ofenda - Orthodox
Un cercle autour du soleil - Alfredo Costa Monteiro, Bruno Duplant
Absurd Summer, No.2 - Koji Asano

Resources

Portugal

List

Dantza Con Noivos - Kepa Junkera, Julio Pereira
Ai meu amor se bastasse - Aldina Duarte
Trângulo Mângulo - Gaiteiros de Lisboa
Com Um Brilhozinho Nos Olhos - Sergio Godinho
Faro Luso - Julio Pereira
Maria Albertina - Humanos
Acordas P'la Manhã - Peste & Sida
O corpo é que paga - António Variações
Dia Mau - Ornatos Violeta
MPTS - Branko, PEDRO
Problem Number 6 - Bruno Pernadas
Coral de Recife - Montanhas Azuis
Demagogia - Lena d’Água
Ayrton Senna - Norberto Lobo
Fon-Fon-Fon - Deolinda
Mudam-se os Tempos, Mudam-se as Vontades - José Mário Branco
Rio-me de Janeiro - They're Heading West, JP Simões
Ouvi Dizer - Ornatos Violeta
Não Posso Mais - Pedro Abrunhosa
Rua Nova da Piedade - Gabriel Ferrandini
The Primal Word - Rodrigo Amado
Wave Field - Radio edit - Rafael Toral
Crimine - Nuno Canavarro

Resources

asia

Japan

List

Rydeen - YELLOW MAGIC ORCHESTRA
Only You - Hakushi Hasegawa
君じゃなきゃダメみたい - Masayoshi Oishi
veloceでまた会いましょう - New oil deals
Fire Brain - Kroi
The Micro Disneycal World Tour - Cornelius
多分、風。 - Sakanaction
Ai No Yume feat. YASUAKI SHIMIZU - FPM
うたのけはい - Ichiko Aoba
4:00A.M. - Taeko Onuki
さくらんぼ - Ai Otsuka
LITTLE BUSTERS - the pillows
ロックンロールは鳴り止まないっ - 2015remaster - Shinsei Kamattechan
Linda Linda - Japanese - Drinking Boys and Girls Choir
LOVE Zukkyun - Soutaiseiriron
Soranin - ASIAN KUNG-FU GENERATION
Haiku - The Mops
I Wanna Eat Chocobars - Shonen Knife
Melon Soda - tricot
ストラトキャスター・シーサイド - Suspended 4th
Amamizu - Masakatsu Takagi
Uruku Tumi Gushiku (Mimura Bushi) - Takashi Hirayasu & Bob Brozman
Jing Jing - Shokichi Kina
Koza Renka - Takashi Hirayasu
島人ぬ宝 - BEGIN
月は東に日は西に - Tokyo Kid Brothers
Gloomy Reflections - Shinki Chen
Remember Love (Bonus Track) - John Lennon, Yoko Ono
Don’t Worry Kyoko (Mummy’s Only Looking for a Hand in the Snow) - Yoko Ono
TEEVEE - Hiroshi Yoshimura
King Dragonfly - Susumu Yokota
獣ゆく細道 - Sheena Ringo, Hiroji Miyamoto
カリソメ乙女 - DEATH JAZZ ver. - Sheena Ringo, Soil & "Pimp" Sessions
IOA - OOIOO
Woman On The Screen - Boris
Pop Sicle - High Rise

LONG SEASON - Fishmans
Between 7:50 - 8:05 PM - Taj Mahal Travellers
Satori Part II - Flower Travellin' Band
Marrakech - Ghost
Amnesia - Sigh
Wasan - J A Caesar
A Speeding Car - MONO

Missing on Spotify: Yuka C Honda, *Shiki no Uta*, OORUTAICHI, Katamari, that one track from GITS, this version of 'Linne'.

Resources

Ian Martin's blog
Kato David Hopkins' book
Japrocksampler by the mighty, unreliable Julian Cope. More likely his top 50.
Scaruffi on the weirder stuff.
Various skronk-heavy lists from Reddit
The Spotify Sound of Japanese [X] playlists are surprisingly bad. I don't think I got any cuts from any of the 10 lists.

Mainland China

List

沙漠足跡 - 劉瑞鄭
Ass Hole, I'm Not Your Baby - Hang On The Box
Wings of Light - RUI HO
Machine It (Shirobon Remix) - Sulumi
Fat Girl Slim Boy - Hard Queen
爱河 - DJ - DJ王展鹏
Arp Kicks - Goooooose
Enter the Tigerwoods - Howie Lee
三十年 - Shanren
Sunny Spring and White Snow - Red Chamber
Flower (Yi Zhi Hua) - Zhou Dongchao
落木 (Luo Mu) - Zhaoze
暢打腔 - Xiao He
哆嗦哆 - 木推瓜
钢铁是怎样没有炼成的 - 木推瓜
七次機會 - 吹萬
422189 - Zslo
我昨晚夢見你了 - 輕描淡寫

Revolution is only a sad illusion - Li Jianhong

Resources

Julian Lee's obsessive pages
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXVLwNkw84Q
https://radiichina.com/2010s-best-chinese-music-record-labels/
https://outofbookmill.tumblr.com/post/106335558268/the-beastly-archives-an-anthology-of-essaysby

Not totally satisfied with this one, even though I went as deep as I think you can while not being there.

Hong Kong

List

Resources

Pretty thin. I am probably missing two or three sub-scenes with more good stuff.

oceania

Australia

List

The Throne of Agony - Scraping Foetus off the Wheel
The Divine Chord - The Avalanches
Solitude Is Bliss - Tame Impala
Got It Bad - LEISURE
Clap Your Hands - Sia
I Believe in You - Kylie Minogue
Bleeding Heart - Mia Dyson
You've Lost Me There - Cardinal
Friday On My Mind - The Easybeats
From St. Kilda to Kings Cross - Paul Kelly
Marco Polo Suite - The Cannanes
Don't Leave - Ben Lee
The Ship Song - Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds
This One Eats Souls - The Blackeyed Susans
Country High - Ticket
Was There Anything I Could Do? - Remastered - The Go-Betweens
Lights & Music - Cut Copy
Addicted to Bass - Puretone
Talk It Out - Matt Corby, Tash Sultana
Ride - Baker Boy, Yirrmal
Never Be Like You - Flume, kai
HyperParadise - Flume Remix - Hermitude
! (The Song Formerly Known As) - Regurgitator
Metal Dance - Spk
Corporate Anthem Part 1 - Soma
God's Buzzsaw - Ya Ya Choral
I Feel a Song Coming On - Essendon Airport
Mother Who's That Man? - Clitoris
Annie Run Run Run - The Orange Humble Band
Too Hip To Stumble (& Too Straight To Fall) - James Griffin
Hold On - Darren Hanlon
The Orange Tree - Cathie O'Sullivan
Hey Rain - PENNY DAVIES & ROGER ILOTT
Waru - Apakatjah
Not Like I Was Doing Anything - The Cat's Miaow
Music Is Crap - Custard
Turnstyle - Sodastream
don't tell me - Feedtime
Amoxycillin - Magic Dirt
Tojo - Hoodoo Gurus
You Are Not My Friend - Frenzal Rhomb
Life to Go (Landsakes) - Died Pretty
Covered in Chrome - Violent Soho
Eastside Stories - Underground Lovers
Sonny's Burning - The Birthday Party
Motherless Children - The Drones
Carry Me Home - The Living End
Friends Of Mrs. S - Jackie Orszaczky, Graham Morgan, Peter Jones, John Robinson
I Offered It Up to the Stars and the Night Sky - Dirty Three

Resources

Chapter Music
Scaruffi as ever, as ever
Loads and loads of Spotify playlists to mine too.

Caveats

Alright, so it is weird to do one list for all of Brazil (pop. 210m) and one for Bristol (pop 0.6m). I welcome contributions from scholars of the music of Feira de Santana (or indeed from any place on earth).

My selection from non-Anglophone countries will be biased towards obviousness and against wit. I forgive a gifted lyricist almost anything (for instance, I love early Mountain Goats), and I mostly can’t here.

Most countries seem to have local Indie Gods: Tragically Hip (Canada), Microdisney (Ireland). Mostly don’t survive leaving their context.

Tags: music

Why I'm not a philosopher

20th August 2017

- *Philosophy's functions & benefits, and why they aren't real(?)*
- *Confidence*: Polemic
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.
- Cross-posted here.

Resolution (2021)

I have been flip-flopping on this post every few months for 4 years. I've cracked it at last:

the *median* philosophy degree does nothing for the world. But the tails are heavy. Is the left tail (Herder, Rousseau, Marx, Freud, Zhu Hongdeng, Inazō, Schmitt, half of bioethics) as heavy as the right tail (Mozi, Santideva, Smith, Bentham, Ramsey, Singer, Sen, Bostrom)? [1]

I think it's extremely difficult to know your own potential, and also surprisingly difficult to know which tail one is in.

So my actual answer to the statement in the title is: because I am not confident I'm exceptional, and not confident I'm the good kind of exceptional. The rest of this post is for those like me.

> *Can you tell them, with a straight face, to follow philosophical argument wherever it may lead? If they challenge your credentials, will you boast of philosophy's other great discoveries: that motion is impossible, that a Being than which no greater can be conceived cannot be conceived not to exist, that it is unthinkable that anything exists outside the mind, that time is unreal, that no theory has ever been made at all probable by evidence (but on the other hand that an empirically adequate ideal theory cannot possibly be false), that it is a wide-open scientific question whether anyone has ever believed anything, and so on, and on, ad nauseum? Not me!*

– David Lewis

> *People are not confident [analytic philosophy] can solve its own problems, not confident that it can be modified so as to do better on that first score, and not confident its problems are worth solving in the first place... what we see is a desperate scramble to show that the skills or tools we have might find some problem space wherein their, our, worth can be made manifest… I do not think such a problem space has been forthcoming.*

– Liam Bright

It's simple: The greatest nontechnical minds in history have all failed to work out the nature of the world just by thinking about it, and so would I.

(Technical minds sometimes manage it, but only with a lot of help from data, plus maths, plus just thinking about it. But that isn't philosophy, anymore.)

...

Alright alright it's *not* simple. Aside from the pursuit of truth, which it is manifestly bad at: why do philosophy?

the philosopher as intellectual janitor

The standard rejoinder to the account of philosophy implied above is that philosophy is not about *adding* to a body of knowledge, but instead clarifying the concepts used in other bodies of knowledge. (Mental plumbing). This is how naturalist philosophers think of their role, e.g. WVO Quine:

> *...it is scrutiny of [the] uncritical acceptance of the realm of physical objects itself, or of classes, etc., that devolves upon ontology. Here is the task of making explicit what had been tacit, and precise what had been vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing kinks, lopping off vestigial growths, clearing ontological slums.*

Or Wittgenstein, the radical janitor: "*In philosophy we are not laying foundations but tidying a room, in the process of which we have to touch everything a dozen times.*"

The standard rejoinder to this rejoinder is to ask for a single natural language concept which has been successfully "tidied" (analysed or dissolved) in this way.

philosophy as justification of belief and action

Maybe philosophy's job is giving a general "foundation" to what we do. That is, it doesn't discover new things, instead it provides pure rational backup for intuition or science. Descartes is the obvious example, though foundationalism remains extremely popular among philosophers and theologians:

> *Throughout my writings I have made it clear that my method imitates that of the architect. When an architect wants to build a house which is stable on ground where there is a sandy topsoil over underlying rock, or clay, or some other firm base, he begins by digging out a set of trenches from which he removes the sand, and anything resting on or mixed in with the sand, so that he can lay his foundations on firm soil. In the same way, I began by taking everything that was doubtful and throwing it out, like sand …*

I think it's fair to regard this as a dead-end: after thousands of years of trying, we apparently can't ground much purely a priori.

More controversially, I'm no longer sure why we need it. Many things don't seem to need (philosophical) justification - for instance, a thing's just being fun seems enough. Other things (e.g. beliefs that affect the lives of others) do seriously need rational justification, but receive this in the findings of the mature sciences. Remaining ones, like the justification of fun, or science (which we can't justify using science, say) are interesting but not pressing.

If you pointed a gun at me, I'd answer with some blend of pragmatism ("whatever works is justified enough"), reliabilism ("if you got the info from a reliable source, it's justified") and externalism ("things can be justified even if we don't know how"). But you have to do some philosophy to get to that position - and certainly a majority of philosophers don't agree.

philosophy as activity

Another common one is that philosophy isn't a thing (e.g. a body of claims), but a process, which has idiosyncratic private value for each person who instantiates it. As Adorno has it:

> *The crux is what **happens** in [philosophy], not any thesis or position... Essentially, therefore, philosophy is not expoundable. If it were, it would be superfluous...*

Or Fichte:

> *Make no mistake about this: nothing that I or any other teacher can lecture to you about is philosophy. If we're lucky, we may possess some philosophy ourselves, but we cannot give it away.*

(This explains why we read so much old/obsolete work: we're learning by demonstration!)

- ### philosophy as virtuous self-examination

  A literally classic view is that philosophy is the noble attempt to understand oneself and to rise thereby above the animals and your own mortality. And maybe this act is too personal to be a matter of facts and maxims, to be transmittable as mathematical theorems or biological taxonomies are. Or, more recently, Alain de Botton:

  > *Socrates compared living without thinking systematically to practicing... [e.g. pottery] without following or even knowing of technical procedures. One would never imagine that a good pot would result from intuition alone; why then assume that the more complex task of directing one's life could be undertaken without any sustained reflection on premises or goals?*

  But you can't understand yourself if you're not right about yourself. Nor can you be 'authentic'. This is obviously an empirical question, and one I can't find even self-report survey data on. Seeing what strange false inferences great philosophers have made about themselves should give us pause.

- ### philosophy as therapy for the human condition

  Another ancient claim: philosophy is good for your mental or spiritual health - for instance, it stops you fearing death, or envying others, or suffering as a result of misfortune. (And this is what "being philosophical about" something means.)

  Epictetus:

  > *A philosopher's school is a surgery: pain, not pleasure, you should have felt therein. For on entering none of you is whole... Think you to be a philosopher, acting as you do? ... Nay, you must watch, you must labor; overcome certain desires; quit your familiar friends... as the price of these things you gain Freedom, Tranquility, and passionless Serenity."*

  Or again Alain de Botton:

  > *art and philosophy help us... to turn pain into knowledge.*

  However, despite this long tradition, whether philosophising leads to peace of mind is an empirical question, and what little data we have suggests that (formal) philosophical study actually correlates with mental illness. The lifetime prevalence of depression among philosophy students is maybe 24%, compared to 5-15% in the general population. I'm not saying which causes which. (This is of course the

modern kind of philosophy; maybe the ancient kind is kinder.) Here's some stronger evidence from all of graduate school, not just philosophy.

Anecdotes abound. Plenty of people say that Stoic philosophy made their life better. But the most seriously philosophical person I've ever met was constantly miserable because of it. He was dogged by philosophy's failure to rebut the radical sceptical paradoxes (like the ineliminable possibility of you being a mere brain in a vat right this second), which failure meant that none of his perceptions could be trusted with the certainty he needed. (You can't even kill yourself, if you worry death won't end existence, and might bring something worse.)

Real Buddhist practice seems to run similar risks of permanent disorientation and despair. The point is to remove false comforts and convictions, after all. Who's to say you will like what you find, underneath delusion?

- philosophy as state space search over coherent worldviews

Maybe philosophy doesn't have to answer questions to be useful. We can read Cicero's ancient diss:

> *There is nothing so absurd that it has not been said by some philosopher.*

as a compliment: we consider everything. Philosophers are then in the business of conditionally constraining logical space (e.g. "given physicalism, what could one's philosophy of mathematics be?"), not ruling on the correct path through that space. Hypothesis generation, not model selection. This extremely modest view of philosophy's scope is not so common. But you can sort of see it in Wittgenstein:

> *Is scientific progress useful for philosophy? Certainly. The realities that are discovered lighten the philosopher's task, imagining possibilities.*

and Massimo Pigliucci :

> *Unlike science, where we do seek answers to questions determined by empirical evidence, philosophy is in the business of exploring possibilities in logical space. There are often many such possibilities, since the constraints imposed by logic are weaker than those imposed by empirical facts.*

A priori reasoning can't tell you how the world is, but it can tell you what the world cannot be, when you find a contradiction. This is legit, but it just isn't as useful as increasing our confidence in positive claims about the world.

We need more truths first, to help control the combinatorial explosion of possible philosophies. When people try and iterate over large spaces without empirical help, you end up with Einstein's decades of fruitless Unified Field work, or with hundreds of weak models of cosmic inflation, or the history of metaphysics. Philosophy is premature optimisation, on this account.

- what about experimental philosophy ?

They've got the right idea: they don't rely solely on intuition and deduction. Millions of intelligent words have been wasted because no one thought to check up on the core 'justification': the word "intuitively..." that pops up in the middle of the paper.

But the x-phi people aren't doing philosophy in the bit of their work that is distinctive. They're social scientists at that moment. And there's so much that they can't touch with surveys.

Related: there are of course hybrid scientist/philosophers, with more hope. The most important current philosophers, in terms of likely moral effects, are people like Nick Bostrom, Katja Grace, Toby Ord, Amanda Askell, and Nick Beckstead . But their work could not function without mathematical argument and scientific research; they are as much speculating scientists as philosophers. (There are quite a few scientific philosophers, e.g. Julian Barbour and Clark Glymour. Two of the mainstream greats of the last century, David Lewis and Hilary Putnam both made serious mathematical discoveries too.)

This gives the game away again: it is really only apriorism I'm disparaging, the idea that informal reason alone can solve large questions. But two-thirds of philosophers endorse apriorism, so the point's probably relevant.

- ## what about logic?

The logic department get a lot of objective, objectively important stuff done. And there are other formalised subfields with similarly undeniable achievements.

But their methods are quite far from the core of the field; they are castaways of a historical accident; their closest kin are in computer science or maths departments. (All of the logicians I know are into programming, for instance.) Logic is a member of that one kind of philosophy that humans are good at. (Which we don't call philosophy anymore.)

- ## philosophy as improving us for other enquiry

Bertrand Russell:

> *"Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation."*

Does the study of philosophical questions actually make us better scientists or citizens? More than studying science does? At present there is no reason to think so .

Even if it does, this still implies that philosophy is secondary: that one should use philosophy as a means of better addressing one's main concern. It would mean you should philosophise and be something other than a philosopher.

- ## philosophy as improving our view of what the world *should* be

Some ethical philosophies don't aim at discovering truths, and yet (a handful of) ethicists have improved the world greatly, via improving our view of what the world should be. This seems to me to have been mostly practical ethics - less "what are the principles of good and evil?" than "is it ok to be gay?", "is it ok to lock up and torment nonhuman animals?", "do we have responsibilities towards future people?" but some great theorists are also great practitioners and activists.

Yes: there has been moral progress, and some of this is due to philosophy. (I know this, because I am a data point. David Pearce's essays changed my life, and they are half conventional ethics / philosophy of mind, half wild inference from scientific results.) So the above critique applies to nonformal, nonethical philosophy.

Even then, I think the expected value of being an average ethicist is probably less than that of being an average scientist. And the mere study of ethical questions seems to have little effect on one's behaviour. (The philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel is pursuing this vital and amusing avenue of scientific research.)

- ## philosophy as about truth - we just haven't had enough time

There are hundreds of times more philosophers working now than in past eras, and they can read and argue far more widely than those before them. We *could* see progress from this ten-thousand-fold increase in labour and networking. Greg Lewis notes that we should expect the greatest philosopher ever to be alive today, simply on statistical grounds: there are many more people alive and no reason to think that the culture or genes of e.g. Ancient Greece was inherently superior.

The clock time spent on philosophy is impressive: 3000 years. But the above implies that the lived time, the total years of effort, is insignificant until quite recently. Georgia Ray: "15% of all experience has been experienced by people who are alive right now."

Sure, the distribution of philosophical workers is skewed towards the present and future. But from my (amateur) stoop I don't see us converging on any answers despite our historically awesome workforce - just frantically salami-slicing to get something out there in a journal, thousands of times a year. So we are trying to boil the ocean with 100,000 zippo lighters instead of just 1,000.

Our sample size isn't very large for some subfields. My favourite research programmes are Population ethics and the study of existential risks, normative uncertainty, the philosophy of information and the digital philosophy. The case against newbies like them is obviously a lot weaker. They have taken *at most* a few hundred philosopher-years to date So suspend judgment: they each get 1000 philosopher-years starting now.

Other reasons philosophers today should be the best:

- Actual constraints on reality from fundamental physics.
- Powerful logics (FOL, HOLs, modal, utility theory)
- Free library of almost every other philosopher ever, most of whom speak the same language.
- Computers for simulation & note-taking & word processing even

(Constraints make it easier to find the truth, but harder to publish arbitrary things.)

- ## philosophy as defence against unavoidable philosophy

Maybe you either do philosophy explicitly, or get pwned by a bad (or anyway unvetted) philosophy. Maybe we need philosophy to undo the damage of bad philosophy, to rid ourselves of philosophical delusions. As Wittgenstein puts it:

> *What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the*

> *ground of language on which they stood.*

I reject this view because I don't think philosophical problems generally are just linguistic errors or ideological disorders, as they say. I just also think that philosophy apparently can't solve them. If anything can. David Pearce, a scientifically literate philosopher, believes this:

> *The penalty for not doing philosophy isn't to transcend it, but simply to give bad philosophical arguments a free pass.*

True, but you don't need to be a philosopher to watch out for sneaky philosophers.

- ## philosophy as fun

What if I just really like it? Like Hume:

> *I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me... I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and should I endeavour to banish them by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I feel I should be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy.*

This is also fair enough, except that I think we have a duty to do more than please ourselves. (And anyway Hume's pleasure depends on his having a chance of hitting the truth.)

This kind of philosophy is a game - the hardest game, yes, since the rules are themselves at issue. I love it, but that is not enough.

- ## the present work's sceptical empiricism as philosophy

> *To mock philosophy is to be a true philosopher.*
>
> - Pascal

Isn't this essay a work of (meta)philosophy, and am I not drawing serious, useful inferences from it - "to go do something else"?

Well, my original point was an induction from past philosophy to my philosophy career, and induction tends to be used in science, not philosophy. But I grant you that generalising hastily, like I have, is characteristic of philosophy.

Where does this leave us?

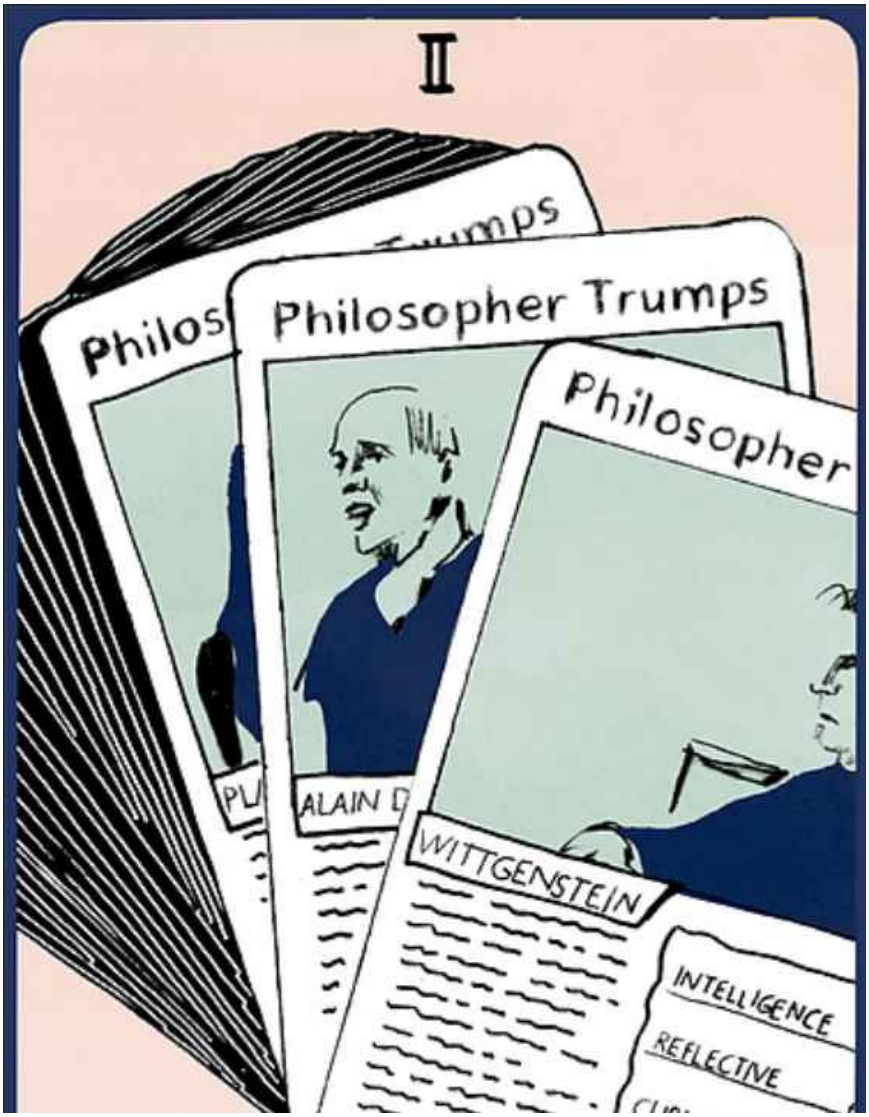
I find myself piling up many kinds of philosophy one should be doing - e.g. negative philosophy against bad philosophy, practical ethics, schemes for handling moral uncertainty, logic, population ethics, existential risk. But then I remember the left tail, of very harmful philosophers.

The relatively small *active* effort on many questions (at most a few hundred careers, and more often much less than one) is a good argument for it not being impossible to solve philosophical questions. (Less-likely impossible in proportion to neglect.)

Also there's the importance of non-perverse philosophy for making a future artificial intelligence; it doesn't need to be right or definite, but it needs to land in a non-insane part

of philosophical space.

A real nonphilosopher would not feel the need to write something like this.



Dedicated to the University of Aberdeen, who in a 6 year period either fired, lost, or pushed out of teaching all but one of the excellent philosophers who taught me: Gerald, Joe, Bob, Gerry, Guido, Nate, Tony, Catherine, Crispin, Grant, Russell, Aidan, Dylan, Aaron, Filippo, Francesco, Luca.

See also

- Broadness as trivial predictor of philosophical status
- Tom Adamczewski, Philosophical Success Stories
- Massimo Pigliucci, Progress in Philosophy
- Graham Johnson, Conceptual engineering: the revolution in philosophy you've never heard of
- Schwitzgebel on philosophy that opens

- The dangerous ravings of David Stove
- Luke Muehlhauser, Philosophy: A Diseased Discipline
- Spolsky on the risks of abstraction even in practical matters
- David Pearce, Long diary entry containing a metaphilosophy & applied physicalism.

Example of solving a philosophical question

In 1690 William Molyneux asked whether concepts generalise across senses - if a blind person gained sight after a life of blindness, would they be able to visually immediately recognise a sphere?

This inspired lots of very clever philosophy over the years. The answer, at least in a small clinical study (n=5), is no.

No disgrace to Molyneux; he was able to form a hypothesis centuries before it could be tested, and this is helpful work. But what did the philosophical discourse contribute?

Is philosophy technical?

- If "technical" means 'containing precise reasoning', yes.
- If "technical" means 'containing symbolic (mathematical or statistical or Logical) reasoning', sometimes but mostly not.
- If "technical" means 'impenetrable to outsiders', yes - and often with the vitiating appearance of nontechnicality.
- If "technical" means 'constraining expectations to one part of the space of possible outcomes' then no not really. (Wittgenstein: "*Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language... It leaves everything as it is.*")

It's possible to do maths without symbols - and so in fact we did, for most of its history. So what's the difference between informal maths and philosophy? I think it's to do with researcher degrees of freedom. By working with extremely strict and limited definitions, rather than fuzzy natural-language concepts, mathematicians remove lots of their leeway to fudge and be ambiguous. It is always possible in philosophy to just deny any particular inconvenient premise, to dispute an intuition, to substitute your own reality; but to do so of mathematical axioms or definitions is to no longer be talking about the same thing.

In philosophy the degrees of freedom are extreme, including things like denying basic logical principles. (These are I suppose technically possible for scientists to use, but you'd probably struggle to get it published.)

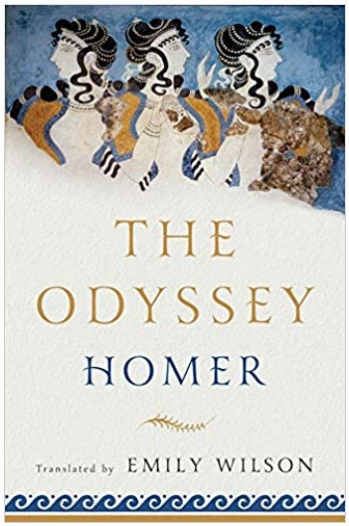
1. Of course, the tails of science are also heavy. Heavier. But it's easier to tell which you're in.

Tags: long-content, philosophy

'The Odyssey' (2017) by Emily Wilson

3rd September 2019

- *Rant about a great work with barely a trace of greatness.*
- *Confidence*: 50%. I must be missing something.
- *Topic importance*: 2 / 10
- *Content notes*: murder, hypocrisy, imperialism, the bad guy wins
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



I don't want to hector Homer, but somehow this was both boring and evil, childish and didactic. I won't belabour the book's immorality, since it's so obvious; it's the near-total absence of artistic merit that is not obvious. I found nothing in it worth reading or quoting until Book 9, nearly halfway through. These are songs of praise of warmongering pirates. (People love pirates, and I say let em. Just don't call them paragons.)

The ideology is dad porn, a set of thin, obvious, animal values. "Kings do whatever they want - death for messing with a noble; don't cross the priests; offer huge sacrifices; always do what your husband and dad say; the unlucky and the disabled are cursed and to be shunned; blood is blood is blood." (It's not as if they could easily have been otherwise. Too poor, too lawless and misruled, too near to nature.)

> *The ghost*
> *of Agamemnon answered, "Lucky you,*
> *cunning Odysseus: you got yourself*
> *a wife of virtue—great Penelope.*
> *How principled she was, that she remembered*
> *her husband all those years! Her fame will live*
> *forever, and the deathless gods will make*
> *a poem to delight all those on earth*
> *about intelligent Penelope.*

(Odysseus sleeps with half a dozen other women and demigods, most of them begging him to, and needless to say suffers nothing of it.)

There's no mention of the suffering of the several cities he sacks, or the many tacitly raped women. Dozens of people are murdered for being rude, though. For a quasi-sacred text there's a surprising amount of unpunished priest killing (e.g. Leodes).

The structure is awful: we see almost nothing of Odysseus for the first quarter of the poem,

instead following his son around as he listens to a series of boring old men. Most of Odysseus' feats are not shown, are instead related by him as unaffecting stories. (I suppose we could amuse ourselves by treating this as unreliable narration, but they certainly didn't.) And the poem doesn't end at its climax, instead meandering on through another few books of pointless back-patting.

(Should I go easy? After all, this is groundbreaking work, the *prototype* of art. Sure; I'll go easy if you stop hyping it and making everyone read it as an exemplar.)

It must be a cliche among classicists that the 'Classical' civilisations were not classical in the sense of being austere, logical, tasteful, or contemplative. That they were not Apollonian, that only a handful of people in them were. I hope my rant here is not just me being misled by the modern sense of "hero" - but the fact is that Odysseus wins, is praised endlessly, and his rights trump all else.

This isn't just me being clueless, post-oral, and close-minded: The ancients were well aware that the ending is unsatisfying crap. One popular headcanon was that, after Odysseus slays the suitors, he is immediately exiled from Ithaca, set adrift again. Cue the music!

One reading of Odysseus' name is as variant of the verb 'to be hated'. So a calque might be "King Punchable of Ithaca". ("*the most unhappy man alive*")

Odysseus is treated incredibly well by almost everyone, despite his crimes. Complete strangers oil him up and dress him in fine "woolen cloak and tunic" *eleven times*, and he is given precious weaponry and potions for nothing several times. This is supposed to reflect on him, but instead it shows the Greek ideal of hospitality, one of the few nice things in that culture.

He appears to sincerely miss Ithaca (his status more than his wife), weeping frequently. But he also fucks about all the time, for instance staying an entire year voluntarily enjoying Circe.

It is completely unclear what O does to deserve his fortune. (Whereas his misfortune is always directly linked to his own machismo or idiocy.) The only virtues we see him exercise directly (not counting brute aggression and discus throwing) are courage and cunning (specifically lying). Ok, he also makes one good speech:

> *'Listen to me, my friends, despite your grief.*
> *We do not know where darkness lives, nor dawn,*
> *nor where the sun that shines upon the world*
> *goes underneath the earth, nor where it rises.*
> *We need a way to fix our current plight,*
> *but I do not know how...*

I suppose we can put the rest down to charisma, the oddest and least rational of human powers.

> *'It seems that everybody loves this man,*
> *and honors him, in every place we sail to.'*

Everyone extols him without him ever demonstrating the virtues they extol. (Politeness, propriety, wisdom, strategy...) Every other idiot is "godlike" at something or other, and seeing the state of their gods you see how this could be true. At least it's funny:

> *He went out of his bedroom like a god*

> *King Menelaus, you are right... Your voice is like a god's to us.*

> *Majestic, holy King Alcinous*

> *leapt out of bed, as did Odysseus*
> *the city-sacker. Then the blessed king,*
> *mighty Alcinous, led out his guest...*

(The gods are stupid mirrors of Greek nobility; for instance they have supernatural slaves, the nymphs.) This at least is a philosophical difference between them and I: in their superstitious idealist mode, properties aren't for describing the present, but instead the timeless essence of a thing. Wilson:

> *Ships are "black", "hollow", "swift" or "curved", never "brown", "slow" or "wobbly"...*
> *Penelope is "prudent Penelope", never "swift-footed Penelope", even if she is moving quickly. Telemachus is thoughtful, even when he seems particularly immature.*

All the feats of the heroes are totally dependent on the power of gods. If they say you can't sail, you can't.

> *His skin*
> *would have been ripped away, and his bones smashed*
> *had not Athena given him a thought.*

> *Athena poured unearthly charm*
> *upon his head and shoulders, and she made him*
> *taller and sturdier, so these Phaecians*
> *would welcome and respect him.*

Without Hermes or Athena constantly intervening, O would be nowhere, achieve nothing. One nice tension here though:

> *But death is universal. Even gods*
> *cannot protect the people that they love,*
> *when fate and cruel death catch up with them.*

One of the few times I felt sympathy for Odysseus was when he was trying to lead his men, who are mainly large-adult-sons. (Same with the suitors.) One breaks his neck falling down a ladder. They undo a month of work by playing with the bag of winds. Several times they are totally paralysed by their wailing and tantrums.

> *As when*
> *a herd of cows is coming back from pasture*
> *into the yard; and all the little heifers*
> *jump from their pens to skip and run towards*
> *their mothers, and they cluster round them, mooing;*
> *just so my men, as soon they saw me,*
> *began to weep...*

> *The other men...*
> *wept for those that died. I ordered them*
> *to stop their crying, scowling hard at each.*

Odysseus occasionally draws his sword on them for backtalking him, or running around like Muppets. Their deaths are roughly equally due to Odysseus' aggression and avarice, and their own foolishness.

I cheered the uprising against him, who are completely in the right. But of course they lose, because of mere divine intervention.

OK I lied: I will talk about evil. Though by the end of this I was jaded and dismissive, the

aftermath of Odysseus slaughtering the suitors still struck me as an atrocity unusual for the genre:

> *"When the whole house is set in proper order,*
> *restore my halls to health: take out the [slave] girls*
> *between the courtyard wall and the rotunda.*
> *Hack at them with long swords, eradicate*
> *all life from them. They will forget the things*
> ***the suitors made them do** with them in secret,*
> *through Aphrodite..."*
>
> *"I refuse to grant these girls*
> *a clean death, since they poured down shame on me*
> *and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors."*
>
> *At that, he would a piece of sailor's rope*
> *round the rotunda...*
> *just so the girls, their heads all in a row,*
> *were strung up with the noose around their necks*
> *to make their death an agony. They gasped,*
> *feet twitching for a while, but not for long.*

I've read de Sade, Kaczynski, Himmler, Houellebecq, Egan and Watts at their most dyspeptic; it's not that I'm squeamish about real or fictional evil, or that my sulking sense of justice blinds me to aesthetics. This sort of thing happened; nothing cannot be said; maybe even nothing cannot be said beautifully. It's just that, again, there is nearly no nobility and no classicism in this. I am so glad this culture is gone.

Did its audience know the story was bullshit? Or was it scripture to them? (Like most scripture, it is pathetically ignoble, violent, and self-serving.) Well, they don't seem to have had scripture, not even Hesiod. So Homer is more like Dante or Milton for them: not sacred, but pious and moralising.

How big was mighty Troy? How noble was godlike Odysseus? How petty their pantheon? How long this epic?

- Even thought-provoking bits like the lotus eaters or Cyclopean anarchism are over in less than half a page.
- Surprised when Zeus was described as "husband of Hera".
- The "no man" pun thing was so stupid I had to put the book down for a couple of days.

Normally I would stop reading a book this bad, but I read it to prepare for *Ulysses*, so I dragged myself through.

I don't think the badness is due to Wilson. I actually quite like her style, and it's the skeleton of plot, sentiment, and moral that repulses me.

Her introduction takes up a quarter of the entire book. It's good and sane but repetitive,

taking pains to spell out all the ignoble and questionable, all the ugly and clumsy parts. I don’t know how she keeps up her enthusiasm for the book, in the face of them, but more power to her.

One man's modus ponens is another man's modus tollens

You can read the above as a demonstration of my lack of taste: if every prof on earth says it's great (not just Great, but great), if people stubbornly persist in honestly saying how much they got from it, then you can simply invert the inference. Gavin says *Odyssey* bad; *Odyssey* good, therefore Gavin bad.

Maybe I just need to read another, less spartan translation. But then it would be Chapman's artistry and not Homer's.

Maybe I'd get it if I read Bloom's book about it. But it's longer than the original work, and I am uninterested in works which strictly require an interpreter to get any value from them.

I think it's mostly likely a missing mood of mine. I don't even vaguely sympathise with Odysseus' values, his need for dominion, his vengeance, even his homesickness.

Tags: review, literature

Opinions

There’s no point in listing my mundane views, so these are my unusual views. I’m more boring than this makes me sound.

Health

- Doctors get too much credit for the doubling in longevity in the last 200 years: nutrition and public health measures (plumbing, water treatment, immunisation) explain more than individual medical therapies. (We know this because the largest improvements were before 1920, when medicine really began its stride.) This seems to still be true for the present day.
  NB: Morbidity might be different.
  (*Confidence*: 80%)

- Massive amounts of medicine is based on bad or anecdotal evidence. RCTs very often find that age-old, popular, uncontroversial treatments have no average effect, or worse. Doctors often ignore the stats on treatments, relying on binary ideas of risk and contraindication.
  (*Confidence*: 95%)

- But even the best evidence-based medicine is surprisingly unreliable, in the sense that most treatments won't work for most people. e.g. even *morphine* has a "number needed to treat" post-op pain of 2.9. i.e. on average, it reduces pain intensity by at least half for only every third person it is administered to.2
  (*Confidence*: 90%)

- The UK does not add iodine to its salt; instead it is added to cattle feed and we blindly hope humans get some benefit if they drink a lot of milk. British vegans should take iodised salt, and perhaps also the omnivore population: several small studies from the 2010s found that levels in young women were about half the adequate level. Society depends on people like this. 1
  (*Confidence*: 80%)

- In the general population, multivitamin use does not reduce mortality, and are even potentially harmful owing to overdosing beta-carotene and vitamin E. More generally, antioxidant supplements are not net positive. Many dietary supplements have no effect.
  (*Confidence*: 80%)

- Reducing salt is a surprisingly bad treatment for high blood pressure. If you *more than halve* your sodium intake, the average effect on systolic blood pressure is a 1% drop (white people with normal BP), or up to 4.5% (white people with hypertension), and it has an array of bad effects on your hormones and lipids. (For reference, thiazide gives an 8% drop and ACE inhibitors give a ~7% drop.)
  (*Confidence*: 70%)

- Vaping is a really remarkable public health measure: thousands of times less carcinogens, increased cessation change, massively reduced second-hand exposure, incredibly low cost. All of the reported acute deaths involve bootleg vaping fluid with excess vitamin E. Banning vaping and not smoking is a perfectly perverse policy which should be expected to shorten Californians' lives by thousands of years per calendar year.
  (*Confidence*: 70%)

- Stannous fluoride toothpaste is better for your teeth than the common sodium fluoride; it's antimicrobial. (It used to taste a bit worse.)

(*Confidence*: 80%)

- "Prophylactic scaling" - where a dentist scrapes deep between your teeth despite no sign of gum disease, has little evidence of benefit, is unpleasant and expensive, and can damage enamel.
(*Confidence*: 80%.)

- Paracetamol (acetaminophen, Tylenol) is a bad choice for first-line pain relief. It's less effective than the alternatives: its number needed to treat is 3.5 [2.2, 13.3], worse than ibuprofen (1.7) or diclofenac (1.8), and worse than aspirin for migraine. It has an extremely low "therapeutic index": chronic liver damage can occur from 2 x 500mg tablets, and 8 tablets is dangerous. (Compare this to aspirin's 8 and 15 x 300mg.) About 20% of paracetamol-induced liver damage is accidental. NSAID alternatives cause problems for many people, but it's often possible to identify those at risk, and I see no reason to privilege avoiding gastrointestinal trouble over liver trouble.
(*Confidence*: 90%.)

- Smoke from fireplaces is an incredibly powerful risk factor for lung disease, much stronger per gas volume than cigarettes. The personal risk from a proper stove is limited, but neighbourhood effects can be severe.
(*Confidence*: 80%)

- The evidence for *any* health benefits from pre-exercise stretching is notably weak.
(*Confidence*: 70%)

- You should wear earplugs on the subway. Many of them run loud enough to cause permanent damage to your hearing: the London tube reaches 105 dB on some lines. This level of noise causes tinnitus reliably, and tinnitus may be associated with all kinds of mental health havoc.
(*Confidence*: 80%)

- Universal screening for rare things (breast cancer, depression, terrorism, whatever) is in general bad, because few diagnostic tests have good enough specificity to prevent this causing a horrific number of false positives.
(*Confidence*: 80%)

- Daylight Saving Time is an unacceptable public health burden. This is mostly down to the acute 6-16% increase in car accidents, but it seems to cause a 5% increase risk of heart attack and more for stroke.
(*Confidence*: 70%)

- Most people wash their hands in a way that doesn't help much. Needs to be >20 seconds, lots of soap, back and front, lots of friction. (Also, washing your hands properly a lot leads to dry skin and cracks, a major risk factor for infections...)
(*Confidence*: 90%)

- Around a third of people north of latitude 40 are deficient in vitamin D during winter. (e.g. UK) Big oral supplement doses work, though you may also need extra vitamin K2 to clear the induced calcium from your blood.
(*Confidence*: 80%)

- Zinc acetate lozenges are one of the few things shown to be effective against the common cold, reducing duration by maybe 24 hours.3 However, there are anecdotal reports of heavy use blunting your sense of smell.
(*Confidence*: 70%)

- Intermittent fasting (e.g. skipping one meal a day, but eating more in the other two) seems to be very good for you.
(*Confidence*: 70%)

Science

- I am extremely ignorant about myself. My preferences, my aliefs, my causes. So are you for you.
  (*Confidence*:)

- It seems that reinforcement learning, game theory, evolutionary game theory, and theoretical market calculation are very close and in many places equivalent. The thing they all are special casing could be called "distributed optimisation". This is mind-bending, a perfect illustration of the absolute power and relevance of computational complexity, and maybe useful.

- Academic publishing is not rational. Pre-publication peer review is weak; post-publication peer review is where it's at. http://blog.mrtz.org/2014/12/15/the-nips-experiment.html

- It is wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. This might be because it reliably leads to moral harm, or might be in itself. It is very often wrong to not act on insufficient evidence.
  (*Confidence*: %)

- Probability theory has normative force: epistemic norm.
  (*Confidence*: %)

- Debate is probably bad. It encourages an undetectable form of irrationality, rewards aggression and wit over accuracy, and drives attention away from nonbinary, nondecisive evidence.
  (*Confidence*: 70%)

- Ivy League online courses have a 95% dropout rate. You can learn from the greatest lecturers in the world, for free. Yet, when you withdraw the job-market signalling of a Degree, no one gives a fuck. Combined with the fact that most internet-connected people do not even enrol, we have grounds for a terrible fact: A huge majority of people are not intrinsically interested in learning.
  (*Confidence*:)

- Freud was not a scientist. He did not discover the unconscious. He does not deserve most of the acclaim he received and still receives.
  (*Confidence*: 90%)

- A great many of the most famous findings in psychology of the C20th and C21st are exaggerated or spurious. The replication crisis means that you should apply a sceptical prior, shrinking all nonpreregristered effect sizes by a factor of 2 to 10.
  (*Confidence*: 70%)

- Juries should be replaced by judges, especially in cases subject to bias or complexity.
  (*Confidence*: 65%)

- Many common arguments in defence of philosophy fail. Others don't: it defends you against bad philosophy, .
  (*Confidence*: 90%)

- Having a degree in a topic means surprisingly little about your knowledge of it, your authority over it, your ability to apply it to appropriate domains. This is partly just due to forgetting.
  (*Confidence*: 90%)

Politics

* Cultures are worth nothing except in how they improve the lives of their participants. (And to a much lesser extent, their spectators.) The same with language. (*Confidence*: %)

* Non-retributive justice: Criminals are purely victims of circumstance (genetics, environment, personality. not choosing to make the choices they made). We should abandon punishment as a goal and instead focus only on preventing future harm. (*Confidence*:)

* Most international flights have large externalities for both carbon and pandemic risk, and should be taxed accordingly. (*Confidence*:)

Grand

Technology is our only hope for some problems: individual death, species death, life after Sol. (*Confidence*: %)

The long-term future of humanity matters much more than anything else. (*Confidence*: %)

We need productivity growth, and probably output growth too. There isn't enough output in the world to support everyone yet. (*Confidence*: %)

Progress: Contrary to popular and elite opinion, the world has been getting better in key ways (poverty, violence, gender, disability, race discrimination, intellectual depth, freedom) for 70 years, and better in some key ways for 200 years. There’s a chance we could continue this to a dizzying degree. (*Confidence*: %)

Heuristics and biases: Humans are deluded in predictable and previously adaptive ways. Why we don’t make sense. Implies scepticism. (*Confidence*: %)

Scientific imperialism: Despite that, we sometimes succeed in knowing. It’s wrong to believe things on insufficient evidence. Technical skill is vital for successful thought and some kinds of action. Naturalism works methodologically and maybe ontologically too. (*Confidence*: %)

Effective altruism: outcome-oriented, maximizing, cause-impartial egalitarianism. You can’t reliably act morally if you don’t know the truth. (*Confidence*: %)

Longtermism: Most value lies in the future; the moral significance of our lives is dominated by our effect on that. Implies focussing on “existential risks”, things that could end the entire future at once. (*Confidence*: %)

Cosmopolitanism: The rich world’s relative inaction for the global poor is an enormous moral catastrophe. (*Confidence*: %)

Animal welfare: The suffering of nonhumans is also an enormous moral catastrophe. (*Confidence*: %)

Bioprogressivism: Nature is not amoral, above judgment. Nor is it obviously good.

Natural death is an enormous moral catastrophe _in itself_. (Ending it could lead to worse problems, like permanent autocracy, ecological collapse, but probably not unfixable ones.) (*Confidence*: %)

Consequentialism can capture the intuitions behind deontology and virtue ethics, but not

vice versa. (*Confidence*: %)

Computers

- Password managers defend you against several of the worst cybersecurity risks.
(*Confidence*: 80%)

- VPNs are highly imperfect and still worth £30 a year if you pick one of the battle-tested ones.
(*Confidence*: %)

- The answer to "What was the first computer?" is complicated. The usual answer, the ENIAC, is arbitrary.
(*Confidence*: 90%)

Trivia

- Most book reviews contain no critical thought, no more than the blurb plus several "Yay"s or "Boo"s. Trust a review in proportion to the amount of direct quotation in it.
(*Confidence*: %)

- Most vegan food is fine, it just doesn't have enough fat. Double the oil and become happy.
(*Confidence*: 80%)

- MSG is a relatively healthy and delicious ingredient for all kinds of cooking. (It contains 1/3 the sodium of table salt.)
(*Confidence*: %)

- This is the best method for preparing garlic on every axis.

- Macs are severely underpowered for their price. Even factoring in longevity and usability, they are still a bad deal for people who like performance.
(*Confidence*: 70%)
- Japanese animation is, on average, better than Western animation - visually, musically, and thematically. (It has worse depths of idiocy, perversion, and repetition, but it is easy to avoid these once you learn the symptoms.)
(*Confidence*: 80%)

- There is surprisingly little evidence that Turing committed suicide. There was no autopsy; nor was the supposed suicide weapon ever tested for poison; he had been using cyanide at home for electroplating; he was a messy person throughout his life, with unwashed hands.
(*Confidence*: 60%)

- Science fiction is important, since, unlike most fiction, it tries to direct our attention to the unprecedented, what we can change. It is also (contingently) less focussed on incompetence and wallowing. It is where we get to do a dry-run of future moral problems, which are the greatest moral problems.
(*Confidence*: %)

- Private insurance is not a scam - if you can't afford to replace what you're covering.
(*Confidence*: 80%)

Speculative

- PhD study might be powerfully harmful to the average student's mental health.

- Talk therapy works a little. But in strange ways: the content, the theory of the practitioner, doesn't seem to matter. Maybe therapy is about 1) having a high-status clever person actually listen to you and 2) apply the outside view and explicit rationality to your problems. For many people, it is their only source of the animal lift (1), and explains why hierarchy is important.
  Testable prediction: larger effects from psychiatrists than counsellors, and from fancy office decor.
  (*Confidence*: 70%)

- The campaigns against food waste and against plastic food packaging are laudable, but they have costs. Excess food production is a de facto emergency buffer against the many things that can cause supply chains to break down temporarily. Plastic food packaging is a major contributor to the secular decrease in food poisoning.
  (*Confidence*: 60%)

- It might be a good idea to make governments pay minimum wage for the paperwork it assigns its citizens.
  (*Confidence*: 50%)

- Very intense, very blue light could have good effects on people with seasonal depression, or even the cognition of people without it.
  (*Confidence*: 60%)

- OPEC, the oil cartel, are one of the most effective environmental groups in history. By keeping the price of oil about x times higher than it would be under competitive pressure, they drove massive improvements in heating efficiency, and provided a de facto subsidy for non-oil energy development.
  (*Confidence*:)

1. > *Using the median UIC in schoolgirls and the number of school-aged children with an insufficient iodine intake, the UK is now in the top ten iodine-deficient countries worldwide, positioned between Angola and Mozambique.*
2. However, NNT is a measure over a binary outcome, and may not mean what I take it to mean.
3. The first review I cite is withdrawn, but its conclusions are the same as its main critic, citation #2.

See also

- Brian Tomasik
- Katja Grace
- Pablo Stafforini
- Hundreds of philosophers
- Various collected unpopular opinions
- It often feels like all of Tyler Cowen's thousands of posts are opinion compilations. But here's two explicit ones.

Maths at the Open University

24th March 2019

- *Review of a venerable online maths degree.*
- *Confidence*: 90%
- *Topic importance*: 3 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *Anon: "What would you give, to be two standard deviations better at math?"*
> *Scott Alexander: "Ten years of life."*

Sometime in 2012, I realised that you can't do without maths for general impersonal truth-seeking - and that I didn't know enough of it to do science, or even real data analysis. Nor did I have the confidence to self-study. What to do?

Maths is probably the best subject to learn online, because set problems can *always* be cracked with sufficient thought, and because learning it *can't be done* without lots of independent thought and silent focus anyway. 1 And Britain has been doing cheap, high-class MOOCs for 50 years, in the form of the giant public Open University.

6 years later, and I've got a BSc (Hons) in Maths and Stats, working a full-time job throughout. I know something now. It was good! But it probably wouldn't be for you, if you're not strange in the particular ways I am.

To see if it's good in general, better than my emoting is checking the graduation rate: how often do people see enough value in it / get sufficient help to finish the course? The median completion rate for MOOCs is about 4% (edX); the OU is about 14% for all courses. 2

The functions of uni

Why do people go to uni? And how well does the OU serve?

- *Skill acquisition*: High. Probably slightly better than the average university. I will never forget TeX, Maxima and Mathematica, distribution theory, model checking, statistical pitfalls. The key thing that makes uni beat self-study (for most people) is structure and tempo: maths is hard, so unless you are blessed with the knack or iron self-control, you will be helped by deadlines and curricula. What makes the OU beat other unis is the friendliness of the materials and the quality and volume of the exercises.

- *Signalling*: Low/Medium. Finishing the course signals unusual determination, top decile; doing it alongside work signals unusual energy, practicality, time management. But the open admissions mean there is none of the sheer Distinction of fancy places, where you are rewarded just for what getting in implies about you. And since most people won't know about the determination signal, it can't help you.

- *Network*: Low. The average student is older and more influential, but you're less likely to bond.

- *Socialising*: Low. Only tutorials and forums, no serendipity or golden timeless afternoons.

My syllabus

- *MST121 Using mathematics* - Algebra refresher, trig, functions, calc, etc.

- *M140 Introducing statistics* - descriptive stats, sampling theory, lines.
- *TM129 Technologies in practice* - toy robotics, home Linux admin, Windows networking.
- *MST125 Essential mathematics 2* - proof technique, number theory, conics, linear algebra, ODEs, mechanics, eigens, combinatorics.
- *MST210 Mathematical methods and modelling* - Newtonian mechanics, oscillators, vector calculus, systems of particles and two-body problems.
- *M248 Analysing data* - exploration; distribution theory; inference; point & interval estimation; boring hypothesis tests; nonparametric tests; regression.
- *M249 Practical modern stats* - experimental design; time series; multivariates; basic Bayesianism.
- *M343 Applications of probability theory* - spatial processes; discrete-time processes; queuing theory, epidemiology, birth-death and population genetics; renewal processes, Brownian motion models.
- *M346 Linear modelling* - the regression ladder up to the full, lovely, outmoded GLMM.
- *M373 Optimization* - numerical analysis and iteratives; Gaussian elimination; linear and integer programming; constrained non-linear optimization.
- *M347 Mathematical statistics* - asymptotic results, distribution theory; Classical inference; Bayesian inference and simulation.
- Electives I didn't take but wanted to: Complex analysis, graph theory, stochastics.

I would rank these for you, but then part of the experience depends on the tutor you randomly get. M343, M373, M347 are among the best courses I've ever taken: the very deep, nonroutine, hard-to-digest foundations of almost all science.

The above is a practitioner's sort of degree: more algorithms than proofs, more computation than abstraction, more utility than rigour. But this is probably what most of you are looking for; if you want to be a theorist, you can specialise in the nice complex courses instead, but it might be better to look elsewhere.

Benefits

- *Absolutely maximal flexibility*. You *can* do a full degree in 2 years if you're crazy, or in 16 years if a lot of life happens to you. (They estimate 16 hours a week for part-time study, but I managed with about half that.) There's a start date every 6 months. OU degrees are even available to sailors on nuclear submarines submersed for months at a time. No lectures - good riddance. Most tutorials are streamed and recorded. The *only* physical requirement is going to an exam centre one week once a year.
- *Structure and tempo*. I found the deadlines and personal tutoring incredibly helpful, relative to getting a textbook and trying to summon willpower. Much better than other MOOCs I've done, too, and not much less motivating than my face-to-face degree.
- *Personal tutor*. Each course has a tutor who you can write to as much as you like, and who respond within a day. Most tutors give you their home phone number - which I never used, but which gives you an idea of the service ethic. The tutors are mostly

maths PhDs or veteran longbeards. Once you know LaTeX emailing precise questions becomes viable.

- *Excellent course materials*. These are mailed to you and are also available online. They're high quality and totally self-contained - which is a mixed blessing, since I didn't learn how to handle real maths references text (with their masses of irrelevant results and sadistic 'exercises left for the reader'. I will have to learn this for grad school.
- *Zero entry requirements*. "The university of the second chance": Everybody gets in, and there's a few competence streams to prevent terror/boredom. There's an optional high-school-level course to give you the really basic building blocks. For the highly driven, it's an alternative to school without the brakes: a few kids have speed-run it by the age of 15.
- *Cheap*. OK, so on this I got lucky.

> *The total cost for an Honours degree (with a Scottish address): **£6,048**.*
> *Total cost (England or international): **£18,072**.*

NB: About 1 in 10 students get fees paid by their employer - it's so cheap, it buys your loyalty, and they can write it off. I got the whole thing paid this way, plus a bunch of study leave.

- *Breadth*. I've got a rough idea of large parts of pure mathematics, even though I took every statistics elective I could. I won't pretend this is more than me being able to learn any subfield now.
- *Time to marinate*. To me, taking twice as long is much better for learning. Lots more time for intuitions to be built, for shower-thought epiphanies, for the pieces to get joined up. This is also a serious test of the spaced recognition technique - I refreshed calculus once a year for six years. (This is a strict positive, despite using up more of your life, because you can do it quicker if you like.)
- *Beautiful, fixable typesetting*. When you're starting out in maths, you constantly make mistakes. (Later, mistakes are only very very frequent.) If you're writing by hand, this leads to hours of wasted effort rewriting fixed proofs. You're taught LaTeX in the second or third course, and from then on all your homework submissions can be in that.
- *Automated drudgery*. Later courses let you delegate lots of the rote work (like inverting bloody matrices) to computer algebra systems like wxMaxima, trusting you to know what you're doing.
- *Open assessment metrics*. They post the pass rates and top-marks rates for each course. Decades of past papers online too.
- *Prep camp*. There's a student association for OU maths, the M500 Society. They run a cheap annual exam prep camp in a giant hotel conference place in Milton Keynes. It's surprisingly good!
- *Zero group work*. If you're pathologically independent, like me, then this is a large plus. For most people, it is demotivating and low in meaning.

Problems

- *Distance means dropout risk*. The graduation rate is much better than the average MOOC, but still way below traditional unis. Most of this gap is probably because the OU is so much less selective than the face-to-face unis; so despite appearances the gap is less a bug than a feature. (The remainder of the gap is probably mediated by lack of social interaction and meaning-making.)
- *Not especially deep*. You graze quite widely over geometry, number theory, calculus, diffeqs, first-year physics, combinatorics. As a result, you're regularly returning to

elementary matters - so my second year courses were the first time I felt fully challenged. The only thing I covered in any depth was probability theory and stochastic processes, but that's because of my choices.

- *No undergraduate research*. No option for a maths dissertation, which is great if you've no ambitions in the matter.
- *No continuity of teachers*. This mostly scuppers your chances of getting a single strong academic reference (instead there's a centralised bundle of comments from past tutors).
- *Not especially prestigious*. The completely unselective start of the pipeline isn't as bad for the degree's signalling as you'd think, because you need to be pretty strong to make it out the end. You basically lose the entire bottom eight deciles. (One third of graduates in my course get a First, which isn't so easy - takes 85%+ on all final courses.) Anyway it hasn't stopped me getting into a decent grad programme (after doing a bunch of additional side projects).
- *One nonmaths elective*. It's compulsory to take one course outside your major - luckily the Linux / Windows networking one was useful.
- *Bad philosophy of science*. The stats courses are stubbornly crap-frequentist, and require you to parrot false or misleading statements ("*p > 0.05, therefore...*") to get full marks. (This problem is far from unique to the OU though.)
- *Crap proprietary software* (MathCAD, Minitab, GenStat, SPSS). The stats courses demand that you install various meh packages. Licences are included in the fee, but it's still a wasted opportunity to learn superior and future-proofed data science tools. I did most of the exercises in SciPy anyway, and only lost a couple points to pedantic markers.
- *Handwritten exams*. I never write with a pen anymore, so I had to spend a couple of weeks building up hand muscles before exams. It's kind of painful.

Bottom line

On the spectrum between "buy a textbook and sweat it out alone" and "attend 20 hours of compulsory lectures, do 20 hours of compulsory exercises - and spend all your time with people doing the same", it's closer to the former. But this was no bad thing, for me.

It doesn't develop your research skills very much - a *lot* of the homework exercises involve spotting the right algorithm to use, out of a small number of given algos, then turning the crank. (Though I *occasionally* came up with my own method - e.g. using the fundamental theorem of algebra to terminate a root-finder - and got full marks.) Proof is underemphasised, relative to full university treatments.

The full £18k sticker price probably isn't worth it unless you have really hard constraints on your geography or time. If you can get subsidised - which is pretty easy - and if you're an introvert, it's great.

1. I have friends who tried the OU Spanish language degree and didn't do well, for obvious reasons.

   Another reason to study stats is that it's one of the only subjects which improves your reasoning outside of the classroom, outside of being directly primed to think about it (it demonstrates "far transfer of learning"). (see Chapter 2 here)

2. This can be taken two ways though: the rate for face-to-face degrees is 80%. But most

of this "distance gap" is probably because the OU is so much less selective than the face-to-face unis - so it isn't necessarily a bad sign.

Bit of student satisfaction stuff here, but remember that satisfaction may be inversely correlated to learning (students like easy classes).

It's difficult to compare the private rate of return on an OU degree, because the median graduate is so much older than other unis, and so earns more for other reasons.

Tags: maths, review, uni

Existential overheads

24th August 2016

- *Time costs of being alive and average.*
- *Confidence*: 70%
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Argument

Average time used for basic upkeep of the organism 2, on a weekday:

- 7 hours sleep. (29%)
- 7 hours production (29%)
- 1.5 hours commute (8%).
- 1.5 hours cooking/eating. (8%)
- 0.5 hour hygiene (2%)
- 0.3 hour exercise (1%)
- 0.3 hour shopping (1%)

= Leaving 6 hours for actual, discretionary life (25%).

The above is not exactly *waste*, since each of them have their own pleasures, since some fraction of people would perform their jobs even without pay, and since (unfocussed, mostly non-meaningful) cognition continues throughout them. 3 But it is still unfree.

Three possible reactions to the realisation that 75% of your time is not wholly yours:

- *Quiescence*. Many people seem to spend their 25% on screens and tidying.
- *Mindfulness*. Maybe what's bad about the above ratio is in our head, and maybe close attention to the world around us can make the above meaningful.
- *Rage*. Fuck that: Optimise, race, and cut.

Against the dying of the day

> *expecting a large increase in the average (treating it as a latent variable in being spread across many measured variables) is entirely missing the value of productivity. It's not that one gets a lot done across every variable, but one gets done the important things. A day in which one tidies up, sends a lot of emails, goes to the gym, walks the dog, may be worse than useless, while an extraordinary day might entail 12 hours programming without so much as changing out of one's pyjamas.*
>
> - Gwern Branwen

How do we get life back?:

- 1 hour off commute by taking public transport (used for reading)
  - (Or + 1.5 hours off commute by working from home)
  - (Or + 0.5 hour from cycling your commute)
- Maybe 0.5 hour saved on sleep from oral melatonin.
- 0.5 hours saved on lunch from having a 'complete meal' shake.
- 0.4 hours off shopping from home delivery
- 0.2 hours by taking caffeine & theanine in pills instead of boiling decoctions.

- 7 hours by finding work you really think should be done. And by you.
- 10 hours from becoming a crusty freegan (8 hours off work 1.5 off commute, 0.5 off hygiene).

1

The most effective strategy for preventing waste of life is hard to quantify in terms of hours per day: it is the behaviour implied by the expression "*proceed til apprehended*". Job requirements are often nonsense. Surveillance is (so far) gappy. Guards are largely indifferent. Meetings can usually be skipped. Some red tape is purely decorative: not even the demanding authority thinks it matters. 4

1. *Objectively, should I care?*
2. This is a childless developed-world person, clearly. In large parts of the world washing your clothes (in the river) takes a good two hours, where it is minutes per week if you've a washing machine.
3. Most delightfully shower thoughts.
4. There are situations where the spell is inapplicable, like anything to do with the police or sex.

Tags: lists, rationality, self-help, quantified-self

'Terra Ignota': the ecstasy of uncertainty

29th November 2021

- *The most atypical scifi series of the last 20 years*
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Content notes*: **Massive spoilers**.
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.

> *Palmer's series suggests [that] science fiction should not be viewed as just another literary genre, but as the genre where Enlightenment—the hopes for radical human self-improvement, the dream that we might collectively control our own fate as a species, the determination to transcend our own limitations — takes refuge in an anti-Utopian age that seems determined to deflate any such ambitions...*
>
> *Its ambitions and achievements far surpass... the limited imagination of fictions that confine themselves to representing everyday life. More than philosophy or political theory, science fiction is the genre through which our age joins the Great Conversation.*
>
> — Lee Konstantinou

Regarding "Terra Ignota", a series of novels by Ada Palmer:

The series is a lot of things. It is the most sustained fictional portrait of Archipelago and polystates, one of the few utopias I would maybe like to live in. Palmer *starts* in an Enlightenment utopia (post-war, post-nationalism, post-scarcity, post-gender, post-theocracy, post-fideism, post-meat, post-capital-punishment, post-nuclear-family, general justice via universal voluntary surveillance) and then shows what the tensions will do to any system that has to handle humans as we are.

The worldview diversity is probably the greatest thing about it. I've read twenty-author anthologies with less variance in values than this. Speaker's Corner and SSC comments have nothing on Palmer. You think I'm being bien-pensant right now, praising diversity - but there are fascists in it! Sex-murder teens! The Worst Fan In The World! Rapist priestesses! All

About half of readers find the prose unbearably clotted and affected. (If you've read books from more than two hundred years ago you'll have some immunity.) I loved the many didactic discursions - e.g. de Sade's Christian name being a plot point, sections written in speculative future Latin - but I think most readers will not love them. You'll have to be fine with long fourth-wall violations, long passages in macaronic Latin, hallucinated philosophers reacting to C25th scenes by expositing their extrapolated view of the 25th Century, allusions that yell 'REMEMBER ME??' in your face (Hobbestown, the anarchist commune). I found the narrator's madness engaging but it does divert every chapter a bit.

(Meme: "in the grim darkness of the C25th, mankind has divided into its elemental archetypes: jock, fash, hufflepuff, freud, stemlord, landlord, libertarian, person with a country of origin instead of a personality, and 'meh'". This is no critique of Palmer when we remember that all such groupings will arise through partially random historical contingencies: the resulting categories don't need to make sense and probably won't.)

The books depict superpowers, *even if we ignore the 2 or 3 supernatural beings*. The Mardis, the Censors, and the set-sets have ridiculous amounts of predictive power using Weird Data Science, predicting the timing of world events 20 or 30 years out. The Brillists have this power, plus mind reading, and bizarro mind control, and arbitrary hacking power.

These are *so* much more powerful than the tame AIs and giant mechas of the Utopians. But the plot is unchanged by them until the last book, at which point they are easily subverted for confusing reasons.

“Worldbuilding” is often a red flag. It predicts an author who cares more about their lore than their characters or plot, who is going to fail to make you *care* that the legal system or the conlang or the magic system is consistent. Palmer is the queen of worldbuilding, *and yet she gets over it*: her characters somehow nevertheless rule the series. It is quite obvious that large amounts of her notes did not make it into the 2000 pages of this series.

> *I could see you, across the sky, the crowded sea, a thousand black and winged shapes for every tardy, well-meant [dove]. But humans began digging a canal across the Gulf of Corinth more than three thousand years ago and finished it in 1893. It’s worth trying things again. Apollo Guardian of Strangers knows that it’s worth trying things again. Especially for [peace].*

Book 1: *Too Like the Lightning*

I choked a little at the constant coincidences, and at the enslaved protagonist meeting literally every elite in the world in the space of two days. (“Providence” innit.)

Misc

- Utopia, the strict scientific min-discount consequentialists, are the smallest hive in the books, certainly less than 1% of the population (and this strikes me as accurate: almost no-one lives their life with this kind of devoted rational focus). But 30% of Palmer's (ultra-nerdy) readers identify with them the most! This, then, is a confirmation of her names for individual Utopians - Bester, Seldon, Micromégas...

- The most dramatic social change here isn't the tabooing of gender or social religion: it's the unprecedented level of intellectualism in the masses. Everyone flocking to a philosophical therapist every week???

- Filled with "competence porn" - i.e. the elites are manipulative, egotistical, and yet still acting in (what they think are) the best interests of the world.

- I'm less impressed with TLTL's religious infrastructure on a second read. The idea that people, when totally forbidden from having any social component to their religious life, would opt in any numbers for the established religions, is too absurd. I suppose this is because I've become convinced that most of our religions are essentially social, phatic, nonepistemic, nonontic. You'd expect a massive majority for vague views like deism, over the ultra-ultra specific infrastructures of e.g. Catholicism

- The Masons are shown as heroic, vast in numbers, and yet they seem most of the way to fascism. With one bad MASON, they could ruin everything. Their superiority complex, retributive deontology, lack of individualism, and willing lack of freedom, are in far more severe contradiction to the Hive Alliance than the conflicts Palmer chooses to emphasise. Cornel is a liberal tyrant and a longtermist, and so they do good despite their terrible potential. (It’s not just their power - Utopia is powerful too. It’s the sheer lack of checks.) I wish I could say I find it unrealistic for a billion people to larp full-time as a Roman pleb or Mussolinian. This is the depth of Palmer's ability to pass intellectual Turing tests: she manages to steelman fascism, to make half-fascists wholesome characters! 4

- The office of Anonymous doesn’t make sense. Has there ever been a writer who successfully spoke for humanity? Is solving epistemic logic puzzles really the only qualification you want for such a person?

- *Palmer* as the silent, misery-sowing creator: "*I, Mycroft Canner, so improbably alive, was the first human to stumble on this miracle. I am sure of only one thing, reader: there is Providence. There is a Plan at work behind this world, and a Mind behind that plan*"

- One of Palmer's most common relationships is the Innocent + Monster dyad. Bridger and Thisbe, Bridger and Mycroft, JEDD and Dominic, JEDD and Chagatai, Mycroft and Saladin, Heloïse and Madame, Spain and Madame, Carlyle and Julia, Carlyle and Dominic, Carlyle and Thisbe. Every Thug needs a lady.

- Taleb interpretation! O.S. are "fragilistas"; the Mardi conspiracy is weaponised Taleb.

Book 2: *Seven Surrenders*

The sunny, war-free Hive system gets subverted multiple times. The Cousin democracy is fake. The Masons get exposed. But every Hive is governed at the whim of Madame and her captive orgy. Missed the first time: The Madame conspiracy are as bad as you'd expect, silently squeezing the pluralism and democracy out of the world

> *Perry has been a midlevel member of this establishment for six years now. No one could advance so far in politics without some help from here.*

Book 3: *The Will to Battle*

Many riches. There are constantly five or so subplots on the go, and when one ends it spawns two others. Best are its careful sketches of deep divides: Tradition vs progress, act vs rule, order vs freedom, safety vs optimum return.

Some of the oppositions fall flat because I don't have the requisite respect for the other side. For instance *Damnatio memoriae* - the official expurgation of someone from history - is presented as an ultimate horror (the pain and execution preceding it is overwhelmingly more important).

> *[the damned person is] neither slim nor mighty, stooped nor noble, just a shape... Somewhere in a dusty archive a baptismal registry records some Hildebrand, and, when that dry page molders... I can't look, I can't! Behind the shades, the broad gray plain, that sea of shapeless gloom extending on and on... all forgotten souls, minds empty of memory, smeared one into another... to this absolute dissolution Caesar damns his enemies... Not me! I will never let you take me! I will carve my memory into history, by work, by force, by guile, in swathes of blood and ashes if I must!*

I can admire Palmer's rendition of the old bad legacy code (it has driven quite a lot of history) but I give no part of a real morality. The dead are past caring.

Elsewhere, the Aura (metaphysical identity) of art is used to devalue perfect replicas of the nuked Coliseum and Forum (which seems like magical thinking to me):

> *All false. Our race cannot afford such losses again... On the Acropolis the tears we shed are still tears of connection: where I stand Socrates stood. In the [replica] Roman Forum, by the [replica] Coliseum or the [replica] Patheon, they are regret tears. Replicas cannot touch. That is what we all want, to touch what someone touched, a special someone... whose story reached forward through history...*

Speak for yourself; a perfect simulacrum is enough, though it screams depth to say otherwise. (I'm not actually salty: I love the breadth of ideologies on show here. No doubt

someone else will grumble about how thin and unconvincing the utilitarian views presented here are. By writing so many good characters in disagreement, Palmer has passed about 10 Intellectual Turing Tests.)

- On the other hand, I feel the horror of true deontology quite keenly:

> *Dominic would happily watch the world burn if he could defile the blasphemer's corpse amid the coals.*

- Much as I like Jedd Mason, his rise to the top of every state - the expressionless, motionless, Spectrumy king of the world - is implausible, even given his mother's scheming; it only makes sense with Intervention. Which is fine, because Palmer is committed to that, but it would still have been nice to have a natural path.

Misc

- Achilles is an actual hero here - where in the *Iliad* he is merely impressively violent. Actually as any fool knows, the ancient heroes are mostly morally small, beneath even us. ("Hero" meant "Big Man", not "saviour".) This is good news, that Achilles (and say Jahweh) are not paragons any more.

- Miracles happen; Bridger is magical through and through, not even needing a virgin birth. So there was no need for JEDD to be born of woman and Spain. Except that this allows him to be a stark example of Hegelian becoming, which here is the way that God speaks. (And what filth he says.)

- Next time you complain about how undemocratic your country is, consider: The Mitsubishi here are not only a planned plutocracy, they also have 4 orders of delegated authority: the voters elect representatives who elect representatives who elect representatives who elect the executive.

- Oh Mycroft. I spent the first book and a half wondering exactly why he is so indispensable, hounded, beloved. This mostly answers it: it's a mixture of macaronic language, dog charisma, and weird athleticism.

- Nice, surprising bit of anarchism: Hobbestown, the anarchist syndicate, is the 'safest' place in the world. OK, its because of the deterrent of capital punishment but still.

- A decent portrayal of the burgeoning far-future-focussed ethics, in the otherworldly, post-political, arch-instrumentalist scientists, Utopia. Palmer clearly sympathises with them. One contradiction in her portrayal, though: the Utopians are monomanaical consequentialists, who'll do anything to prevent human extinction or stasis. But they're shown throwing massive resources at trivial uneconomic projects (trivial compared to WMD destruction, space colonization, and terraforming): an underwater city, a city on Antarctica, robots in the shape of mythical beasts. I suppose it's possible this is a PR thing, either to charm or recruit.

  Their oath actually inspired moral guilt in me, which is hard to do:

  > *I hereby renounce the right to complacency, and vow lifelong to take only what minimum of leisure is necessary to my productivity... I will commit the full produce of my labors to our collective effort to redirect the path of human life away from death and toward the stars.*

  </li>
- Palmer knows about a lot of things: Hobbes, evolutionary history, the way a small boat makes waves. Her using this knowledge never felt contrived to me - but again I suspect this is a niche I happen to fall in.

  > *The fittest survived, but with the conquered within them, as conquered bacteria became the mitochondria which feed the cells that crawl through volvox, trilobite,*

> *and coelacanth toward Mars.*

- It suits me that the psychoanalyst bioconservative Hive choose to be the enemies of the future:
  > *"War?" Utopia offered.*
  > *[the Head Analyst] Felix Faust... accepted the handshake. "War."*

- It's written with a future (C27th?) reader in mind - but then Mycroft explains too much; nothing is taken for granted, and this is obviously on our account, tainting the conceit.

- Its gender dynamics don't constitute a polemic; instead the Hives' failing utopia shows what most feminist / Critical / international relations theory misses. 'Xenofeminism' (tech-positive, bioprogressive feminism) is a more complete answer to gender harms. But, hearteningly, even mainstream figures like Nussbaum seem to be on board with similar projects:
  > *this calls for the gradual formation of a world in which all species will enjoy cooperative and supportive relations with one another. Nature is not that way and has never been. So it calls for the gradual supplanting of the natural by the just.*

- > *A man may leap into the fray in the name of Liberty, Homeland, Human Rights, Justice, but never Economics.*

  (more's the pity)

- > *If my Saladin is childhood's fear, the unknowable evil in the closet's depths, I have become adulthood's fear, fear of power, law, illustrious contacts, police resources, covert agencies, and sweet judicial murder.*

- Mycroft's 'death' is immediately subverted by a footnote from him. But then the chapter plays out as if we hadn't seen that footnote, and so it loses most of its emotional charge. This is weird but obviously totally intentional. Twists the twist before the twist can begin. Not sure what's going on - maybe Palmer had tired of doing ordinary twists. (There are a lot of them.)

Book 4: *Perhaps the Stars*

Of the war between Myopia and Utopia.

Hold on until page 125. That wait would be fatal in a first book, but everyone who makes it here, to book four, has proven hardier.

Not a lot of war in this war novel before then. Instead, a Hufflepuff hum - faint in previous books, risen in this one. I don't mean to be mean: the philosophical principle that nice things are important, philosophically rich is one of mine. But 9A, the narrator, is too much the overgrown child. They say "snugglier". They emphasise snacking. Someone cries in every chapter I think. Like Odysseus. They also rave against free speech (though Palmer is a historian of censorship and should not be identified with 9A).

Neotene domesticity is all very well for Becky Chambers, but it doesn't gel with the other gigantic aesthetic banners of this work (the Enlightenment consummated and their language appropriated; a society transformed, deluding itself to be peaceful; the ideological roots of conflict, the inexorability of war's logic, thus this realistic war between lovers and friends). It is simultaneously too twee and too pretentious 2.

The achievement of this book - besides the truly baroque prose, the truly insane narration - is that it nearly succeeds in making every faction *reasonable*. Uncertainty justifies terrible things, the most terrible: distrust, surveillance, subterfuge, war. 1. I can't remember this being done so well. Maybe in Hugo or Dumas.

I am a big fan, but, so I dislike a lot about this book. I find the central conflict arbitrary, and the central psychological claim wrong. Actually maybe I just dislike the Ninth Anonymous, puppy Odysseus.

The main gripe

The Gordian / Utopian split - the heart of the whole series - is not at all crisp.

What is the real war about? "Earth vs Space". "In vs Out". "Unity vs fragmentation". Variety vs far greater variety. Life extension vs space exploration.

Here's a solution: Just let the ones who want to stay stay!

People often pose life extension and space exploration as opposites, but they just aren't, and so they are an unsuitable pair to base thousands of pages of conflict upon. I can't take Faust seriously when he arbitrarily prefers current people to all of the thousands of worlds' worth of people that space exploration would bring. He misses the great daily loss of entire galaxies, lost forever. He says he wants ems, which could pack the earth denser with minds. Well consider the greater packing of galaxies full of ems! The only way it makes sense is if they're selfish, scrabbling to keep themselves alive. His war, his terrorism, is thus rooted in repeated errors, and the books are rooted in his war. I cannot love this.

How to have them clash deeply

Make Utopia pro-death!

> *"Science advances by funerals! Out of the way, uncle!"*

Make Gordian paternalist authoritarians!

> *"Utopia is drawing from the Urn and will get us all killed!"*

Also nearly all the main characters are Utopian fellow travellers, take one side, which belies Palmer's normal preternatural sympathy for all. (Am I supposed to like Im-Jin?)

What would I have as the war's great theme? The one from the last book is fantastic and underemphasised here: faith in a benevolent dictator vs pragmatic, aggressive scepticism. The second? Past-regarders and future-regarders. Long reflection vs Builders. Noble lie vs radical honesty. Bioconservatism vs transhumanism (represented already, a little). Theory vs praxis. Academia vs autodidacts. Stamp collecting vs engineering. All better than the chosen "inwards vs out".

Ugh to 9A

For two whole books, it is pretty mysterious why Mycroft is so important. Later, you realise it's because he's the only person who can speak to Jedd in his mongrel language, a world-class data scientist, and physically monstrous to boot. There is no such explanation for 9A.

> *Free Speech, that old tool of plutocracy, the intoxicating, rosy blossom under whose petals parasite lies can breed and multiply until they devour all the garden. None of us wants that. I hope none of us wants that, but there are still Free Speech zealots in this day and age, and they're just the type to have communications tech, to build a radio or study Morse code, and volunteer to join our network as a link and pass on... death. I'm*

> *panicking, I know it. Everyone understands why we need censorship... I do believe it was a pretty thing once, Free Speech, such a lofty notion, but we outgrew it with our communications revolution, as with our machine guns we outgrew pretty chivalry.*

Odium! Also odious:

> *our true beliefs are visible in what pokes above the psyche's surface in those moments when the overflowing heart sings out in gratitude, and then we learn what name it calls: Nature, Humanity, Reason, God, Gaea, Fate, subtle Prometheus, or Providence that takes so much but gives this.*

(i.e. every worldview a religion - I spit. Some less so than others!)

Ugh to Jedd

There was for two and a half books the question mark above Jedd - someone raised by a mother famously good at contorting human desires, with no scruples about instrumental harm. Sure, he *thinks* he's an infinite Creator from a nearby universe. But at least in the surface text this question mark disappears, for Mycroft and Outis and whoever anyway. (Palmer is clever enough that we can revive the question mark without doing damage to the text, but it does take effort.)

The fundamental problem, then: Jedd is not actually morally superior, which is why I don't like people kneeling to him. 3 Absolute caring is not actually the perfect morality. He beats the monsters and Kosala and beautiful primitive Mason, but not Huxley. This is stupid for instance:

> *Some occupations, mainly medical, may be judged too essential to subtract from, but for the rest, even the most important projects in the world" — tremble, Utopia and Gordian — "we must give up a portion of what would have been our life's works to restore what we can of the devastated life's works of the dead*

Postponing a death from heart attack is essential, but preventing deaths from aging isn't?? A debt to the past is lexicographically above all present and future people?? He *is* good at cutting knots, removing the bizarre theory-blind fatalism of the Censor, Gordian, the Mardis, and even Utopia. Nothing like the stupidity of a group with an overfit predictive model.

What about Jedd's philosophy? Like Yahweh, he has serious problems with respecting boundaries. That his subsumption and illiberal eternal hugging is taken so seriously is annoying. His lack of socialisation is half stupidity (demanding unconditional surrender at the cost of millions of lives), half defamiliar genius (why do people die, father?). That he is a particularist, favouring his family to the point where this has a serious chance of outweighing every other being and the course of history he chooses, belies his being particularly alien or godlike. Kin favourites is classic mammal. A common bit of silliness:

> *"…languages are precious enough to be worth people dying for. A human life has infinite value, infinite consequences over the universe of space-time, but apparently They think a language is another order of infinity."*

Piety. I can't think of any language worth anyone dying for, as long as we have one.

The peacefall is a very weak ending to the series, just as the Romanova section is a very weak beginning to book 4. Even with the dominant hugginess of the last book, I keep looking for dark Straussian things in between.

Ugh to Brillism

Naive infinite ethics is the root of the conflict. Gordian says each human mind is infinite and so infinitely valuable; Utopia says "uhhh but the light cone is larger". Jedd in the middle goes "hmmm yeah can't see anything wrong with treating each person as equally valuable with a universe full of people, what a moral puzzle".

In fact almost no part of Brillism makes sense. They hate set-sets for reducing natural personality and cognitive variety. But every set character we see is different from the others - and different from all natural characters! Sets are strictly increasing the variety of humanity. There's nothing wrong with depicting bad philosophy, but it's presented as a serious dilemma and I don't think Palmer thinks Brillism is mistaken, just ruined by extremism and instrumental harm.

There's no retribution in the aftermath of the war - the trendy hugginess wins - but there's not even any proportionality. Utopia suffers more than Gordian!

> *No repercussions, then, for Gordian's deceit? They get it all, even their collaboration, Bridger's relics shared, thy Jehovah's great wealth shared with the twin projects? That does not feel like justice. It does not feel like goddess Nemesis, reader, who ravages the guilty, paying pain with pain. It feels like something better.*

This is an unreasonable level of trust in Faust; if someone commits mass murder and mind rape once, you should expect them to do it again. By all means let them work on great projects for the world they defiled. But defang them first, and watch them. Again, they have maximally unjust and dangerous powers - mind control, social control. Theirs are by far the worst crimes in the series. But *they get away with it*. Out of respect for Palmer I will reach: this makes sense if Faust has manipulated Jedd's judgment of Gordian. Their defeat is a secret final victory. The open-sourcing of Brillism will serve them, will pay off later against Utopia.

Ugh to universal quietism

One last deep disagreement: the war is said to be needed (by Utopia) because humans are growing too comfortable to go to deep space. 6 But this seems completely backwards to me. Just as a small minority of people in the richest parts of the world strain unprecedentedly without needing to - marathons, free soloing, biohacking, psychonautics, workaholism, and yes, space - I expect greater wealth and tech to inspire a similar proportion of contrarian strivers. And it only takes a few hundred offworld to seed all else.

This is Utopia's bizarre error / overconfidence, or Palmer's error which makes itself true for them. Gordian have no blame in it for once - it's enough for Utopia to believe it.

Misc

- I like the Renaissance conceit of calling god The Great Author, and Jedd's conceit of calling the Utopians "small authors", small gods. Later, this is expanded into a huggy thing where all humans are small authors - in the afterword Palmer implies more: that we're all obeying the Utopian oath by working so much as 40 hours a week.

  I honour this thought - for instance a cleaner is in fact doing something of moral significance when they work, is in fact imperceptibly pulling on the rope that leads to the future. But it's a piety to say that all stories are equal-sized, that all pull the same.

  > *Many have described to me the journey from feeling they could never maintain such a high standard to realizing that we already are.*

  No. There is more to do.

- So many hundreds of details, like the Brillist / Gordian double name (ideology and instantiation). Recalls GNU / Linux. The verisimilitude of mess.

- The stable stagnation following the exponential age seems pretty implausible. Then there's the laughable smallness of the AI threat - one serial killer(!). (I suppose Utopia solved AI alignment. But then set-sets would have to be obsolete, unless the other Hives hated U-beasts, which they don't seem to.)

- There's a moving sequence about chronic fatigue, also one of Palmer's personal

crosses. Wheelchair as throne.

- Cato as Hephaestus, the divine inventor, yields a funny insight: all of this could have been avoided with sufficient technological progress. Can everyone have what they want, with sufficient technological progress? No, but it gets you pretty close.
- The book takes a slightly absurd view of the wisdom and effectiveness and moral stature of the UN. Maybe they get better over 400 years of irrelevance.

- The plot is excessive, and I think it's intentionally difficult to track all the threads. Fine, but one bit goes too far for me: Achilles' dying speech implies alternate timelines and him as a multiverse hopper. And this in turn makes Palmer's god less stupid, if he is the multiverse maximiser, the only theodicy I find even vaguely satisfying. Palmer's mainline theodicy is different: the universe is the offering of a blind mute god who wants to talk to a solipsist god. It's pretty cool.

- The main characters spend lots of their most critical resources on documentation, history monging. Sniper's chapter is bought at extreme expense, Mycroft's whole shtick... This is *sorta* realistic - militaries have war artists and official bookworms. But it's not usually the commanders and chief strategists scribbling for posterity as the death squads stalk their corridors. Palmer uses epistolary devices to great effect, but I find myself wishing they'd focus on the war for a sec.

- I like the Mitsubishi a lot more in this one 5. Palmer makes me notice that the rich are a minority. Less vulnerable than the others, but there's a high floor to the vulnerability of any small group.

- The novel could do without religion. Jedd could be a vast noble alien, and we would have no need for This World's Creator or even Bridger. The relics are Faust's stated casus belli but others are easy to imagine. The narrators' abjection before Jedd makes their tweeness worse. If there's a god, you should wrestle him, not kneel. I could do without the extended *Iliad* plot mirroring too.

- This book will age better than most, but parts of it ring trendy, sarky, Whedony. Like the UN / African Union coming out of nowhere to save the day. The bold, unclichéd treatment of gender of past books - as gravity, as a seductive force that can be covered up but not ignored, dimorphism as transgression, feminine arts as mind control, pronouns as a spicy personality marker:

  > *Their comportment invites it, that toxic artificial helplessness that coded feminine in olden days, and makes us all fall over ourselves wanting to do things for Heloïse, so much so that we stifle when they try to do things for themself.*

  Here it gives way to a soppy constructionism, gender as conspiracy:

  > *Madame toiled fifty years—fifty!—to revive patriarchy, narrowing the gates and cramming all high offices she could with the prey this mantis matriarch found easiest, all masculine in mind and genitalia… The Big Three leading this World War: matron Danaë, nursing Lesley, me, and not a dick among us. Where are they now, Madame? The artificial creatures, stiff and male and defined by their penises, you said would rise once war dispelled our supposedly fake equality?*

  Well, you did contrive two dozen of your own male characters to coincidentally fall, to yield this panel. (She returns to the interesting moderate view in the great denouement.)

So I only have deep invalidating problems with the main narrator, the God, the main

antagonist, and the whole point of the main conflict (half of all events in book 2, 3, and 4). That I still esteem these books should tell you something. Palmer *gets it*:

> *I hope the ideas, the fragile and imperfect Hives of 2454, and the battered but changing-for-the-better Hives of 2456, will help you rise with strength tomorrow morning as you lift your oar, or pack, or first aid kit, whatever task at hand, they're all the oar so long as you still carry in your breast the ancient spark, contagious, shared from breast to breast, that has died out a thousand times, but never yet in every breast at once. We will.*

I am so glad. There is nothing like it in C21st literature. I am only able to attack its philosophy (philosophies) because it's so clearly and sympathetically drawn, because so intellectually ambitious. I am certain there are readers out there who view Utopia as trivially wrong (though it's hard to imagine anyone loving terrorist Gordian. They're from Ingolstad!)

Characters routinely do the reasonable thing, including positive-sum trades with their mortal enemies, including instrumental harm for enormous stakes. It is one of the few works which sees the full stakes so clearly, which sees the world-historical significance of nerds, science fiction, and technical tat, both beneath and beyond the average novelist.

Over-the-top, wrong, and great.

See also

- Robnost trying to understand why the bad bits are there
- dril

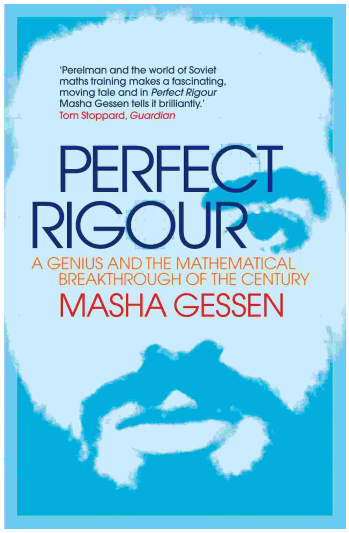
1. Palmer slips a few times.
   Kosala freaking out and blowing up the Almagest *ex ante* doesn't change anything; Utopia-Mason already have the Alexander, space weapons. Moreover, her killing MASON is completely obviously going to kill many more people and prolong the war, and early peace is her only goal.
   I cover the great emptiness of Brillist anti-exploration below.
2. The book is saturated with *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, and I fucking hate the *Odyssey* and am probably gonna hate the *Iliad*.
3. He's no more morally superior than Mike Valentine Smith, one of his thirty namesakes.
4. Palmer knows all this and nerfs them in the denouement.
5. disregarding their purported sadism in Mycroft's literally hallucinated odyssey.
6. > *Why not both, Mycroft?*
   > *A week ago, I could not have answered you, reader, but now I think I can. The light is almost out. Space is too terrible, and Earth too good, not only space too hard but Earth too good, the gifts of Nature, more, for we have spent this hundred thousand years not only building boats and braving seas but tilling fields and planting cities, cultivating Earth's great human garden... our ancestors worked hard to make a better future for their children, and it worked. Life now is good. Not just for most, for all of us, such health, such plenty... Gordian has its own infinity which will not make us brave an airless sea, or weep upon a rock alone. Ever. They bypass grim Poseidon, leave the god who rings the Earth to stand mote-keeper of his black kingdom alone, and chance not to his mercy. Their branch is warm and easy, happy, without aspera, their frontier the Institute's own motto Profundum et Fundamentum, the boundless deep and foundation: the mind. As progress husbanded by Gordian's genius makes Earth yet happier...*

Tags: fiction, meaning, longtermism

Perelman

8th January 2019

- *Maths, morals, and character in the early work of Grigori Perelman.*
- *Confidence*: Empty speculation.
- *Content notes*: anti-semitism, cruelty to children, literary cruelty to adults
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



A review of 'Perfect Rigour' (2009) by Masha Gessen.

'Perfect Rigour' is not so much a biography: instead it's a study of anti-Semitism in Russia, the viciousness of Soviet academia, and the wonderful subculture that lived uneasily within it. This subculture was the superhuman apolitical dreamland, mathematics. It could only exist because of sacrifices by famous and decent men, Kolmogorov and Aleksandrov. Their selective maths schools seem to have been the only nice places in the entire empire, at least for those with a taste for actual discussion, or unalloyed truth.

(It can't be a biography because the subject refused to talk to her, does things that are very hard to explain, and doesn't go out much.)

Even so, Gessen is well-placed to write this - she was a maths nerd in Soviet Russia around the same time. As far as I can tell (which isn't very far) her grasp of the maths (one chapter for the crown jewel) is fit for purpose. But Gessen is out to bust Perelman's reputation for hyper-individualism; so she focusses on the devoted teachers and functionaries that pulled strings to get an abrasive Jew into the heart of Soviet academia, and his incredible luck in starting graduate study just as Glasnost happened.

She wants to highlight the poverty of his character - his antisocial withdrawal, his complete and intentional ignorance of politics, his naivete, his savantism. It doesn't work. Yes, he's rigid; maybe he is composed of a curiosity, a competitiveness, an ethics, and nothing else (no vanity, humour, romance, charisma, empathy, theory of mind, tolerance, compromise, doubt).

So what? Why does everyone need to be rounded? Does she sneer at athletes, the other people with lives this seemingly contorted and simple? Relatedly, David Foster Wallace managed to get over himself:

> *The restrictions on [this pro-tennis player's] life have been, in my opinion, grotesque; and in certain ways Joyce himself is a grotesque. But the radical compression of his attention and sense of himself have allowed him to become a transcendent practitioner of an art – something few of us get to be. They've allowed him to visit and test parts of his psychic*

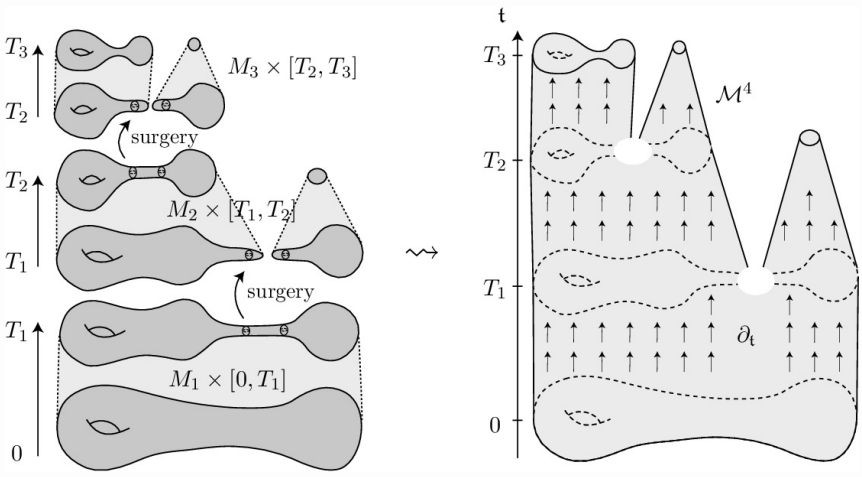
> *reserves most of us do not even know for sure we have (courage, playing with violent nausea, not choking, et cetera).*
>
> *Joyce is, in other words, a complete man, though in a grotesquely limited way.*

Gessen is, to be frank, quite cruel: she never passes up an opportunity to mention appearances - that that athletic boy of 1970 is "*now an overweight and balding computer scientist*", that the house of a man caring for his wife with late-stage dementia is "*a messy place, lived in awkwardly*" and he himself "*similarly unkempt*"; that Perelman didn't change his underwear or clip his nails as a teen. This is the shallow side of the *New Yorker* style on show - or else the malign side of Russian honesty. Either way: no. (Though Perelman would probably approve.)

> *[Perelman] sounded his voice only if a solution required his intervention; looked forward to Sundays, sighing happily and saying that he could "finally solve some problems in peace"; and, if asked, patiently explained any math issue to any of his classmates though apparently utterly unable to conceive of anyone not comprehending such a simple thing. His classmates repaid him with kindness: they recalled his civility and his mathematics, and none ever mentioned to me that he walked around with his shoelaces undone...*

The great mystery, which Gessen understandably can't touch, is why after 36 years of focus he suddenly stopped doing the only thing he'd ever done. How could he? How can that much momentum be shed? What does such a man do next?

If you don't care about maths or if you can't abide people being mean to nerds (as both the old apparatchiks and Gessen were) then skip this book.



Coffins

Valery Ryzhik's story about the evil entrance exam he sat is so, so sad:

> *"Coffins" were questions specially designed for the Jewish applicants... rejection was administered in a peculiarly sadistic way... if [Jews] succeeded in answering correctly the two or three questions on the ticket, then, alone in the room with the examiners, they would be casually issued an extra question... a problem not merely complex but unsolvable. The examiners would then nail the cover of the coffin shut: the Jewish applicant had failed the exam...*
>
> *"They did not even manage to find a problem I couldn't solve; I sat for three hours after the exam was over, I solved them all, and still they failed me. I was just a boy. I went home and cried."*

Saint Erdos and Saint Perelman

One of the oddest things about Perelman is that he'd disagree with me when I called maths "apolitical". This, combined with his being an actual deontologist in a world of opportunists, maybe explains him turning down a million quid and the highest honours his world can bestow: *maths*, the least animal and least irrational thing we have, is still too political for him.

> *[Hamilton] was smiling, and he was quite patient. He actually told me a couple of things that he published a few years later. He did not hesitate to tell me. Hamilton's openness and generosity — it really attracted me. I can't say that most mathematicians act like that.*

> *I personally decided for myself that it was right for me to stay away from verification [of his proof] and not to participate in all these meetings. It is important for me that I don't influence this process."*

> *Perelman told Interfax he considered his contribution to solving the Poincare conjecture no greater than that of Columbia University mathematician Richard Hamilton. "To put it short, the main reason is my disagreement with the organized mathematical community. I don't like their decisions, I consider them unjust."*

> *He mentioned a dispute that he had had years earlier with a collaborator over how to credit the author of a particular proof, and said that he was dismayed by the discipline's lax ethics. "It is not people who break ethical standards who are regarded as aliens," he said. "It is people like me who are isolated… there are many mathematicians who are more or less honest. But almost all of them are conformists. They are more or less honest, but they tolerate those who are not honest."*

> *We asked Perelman whether, by refusing the Fields and withdrawing from his profession, he was eliminating any possibility of influencing the discipline. "I am not a politician!" he replied, angrily.*

There was a bit of dishonesty and jostling at the time of the announcement - but nothing compared to any other science, let alone any government. Maybe the protective bubble everyone set up for him was bad for him, because it robbed him of perspective and so made the mild case of fuckery he suffered seem like a complete invalidation of mathematical culture.

But maybe a rigorous rule-based mind would always explode eventually, even if given a scale to measure instances of bias.

The clearest precedent is Paul Erdos: also rude, also monomanaical, also recognisably a saint in some sense.

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*

2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read*

something; or

3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

In this case: I have a maths degree but basically no comprehension of topology.
Cross-posted from Goodreads.

Tags: bio, maths, ethics, review, greats

Present pieties

4th June 2015

- *What's the spirit of the age? What does everyone have to like?*
- *Confidence*: 90% that most of the rich world feels obliged to these things.
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.
- Argument

> *...one knows a piety from a principle because even those who oppose a piety have to pretend to honour its core point.*
>
> – Adam Gopnik

> *...one way you know that something is an institution is that you don't have to give reasons for it. Getting a college degree, like getting married, is what people do.*
>
> – John Emerson

What does everyone *have* to like? (Better: what does everyone *say* they like, in the West, if they're respectable?) By construction, most people don't like the things hipsters like. What do *even hipsters* fail to react against?

Not everything in the following list is bad, just mysteriously universal or unquestioned. I also wanted things independent of Left/Right politics, because they are both obvious and plainly not universal. So I haven't included Gopnik's example (gay marriage) despite it having all the hallmarks of a piety – e.g. finding support even among ancient enemies, having only confusing opponents we could report on, gawkily.

They're also superficial in comparison to the deadly pieties, 'things one loses one's job for opposing'. For which 'heresy' might not be excessive. Though that takes our term for 'things others will kill you for saying '.

Update (2020)

To my surprise there has been some movement. It is now *much* more common to be sceptical of the media (the "MSM" boogeyman), though of course most non-mainstream sources are no better. (Alyssa Vance: "*Sometimes the media is lying to you. Unfortunately, people who say 'the media is lying to you' are, on average, lying to you even more.*".) Data journalism has grown and had at least a tiny effect on the great rivers of groundless nonsense.

One piety I missed, which was present in 2015 but has gotten much worse, is the entire world **Obsessively Following the US National Election Cycle** for one-quarter of their entire lives. Given how impotent the audience is to do literally anything about it but panic, and how low-quality almost all of the coverage is, this is self-harm on a very grand scale.

1. Following the news.

The element of truth (What good is reading the news?): It's important to try to understand stuff. People act badly in the absence of oversight; the powerful act even worse.

The errors enforced: 'News is a good way of understanding the world';
'a newspaper is representative of events';

‘news is a guide to what’s really (causally) important in the world’;
‘newsreading is a necessary condition of showing concern or solidarity with the world’.

How widespread is it? Trying to find evidence for any of the pieties is annoying: after all, these just are things that slip past critical notice. 60% of UK adults are on the stuff daily. The last Eurobarometer found 87% of people watching TV every day, 89% of them watching the TV news, so let’s fudge this as 80%. (They may well be inflating their attentiveness, but this lip service serves my point and so is not actually statistical bias at all.)

What’s the objection? The permanent state of the media: sensationalist, rushed, oversimplified, unscientific, unaccountable. Most people know that you shouldn’t believe the likes of the *National Inquirer*. But one study found that 80% of ‘quality’ British journalism has been a false journalism, copied and pasted from PR sources. Even stories that aren’t compromised by their propaganda origins are subject to irrational pressures, oversimplification to false balance to statistical illiteracy. Unanalysed reporting is plausibly worse than no information. You never forget the first time you see a completely-invented quote attributed to you in an article.

Epistemics aside, I also have a much calmer inner life since I stopped reading news. The only time the omission has affected me at all, in 8 years, is the Gatwick drone cockup.

We might reserve the word ‘journalism’ for the real kind: public third-party investigation of the powerful when they stray. We need journalism in this limited sense, and we probably need *a* mass media to push the result - if only to scare powerful groups into behaving well.

That would make my abstention free-riding, a bad thing. But real, long-form, book-grade investigative journalism is rare, edged out by clickbait. And actually-existing journalists with their awful incentives are not up the task. Reporting is (or should be) a kind of rapid social science, much harder than other social sciences because it can so rarely wait and think.

The resistance to news

- Nick Davies, the big whistleblower in the UK media.
- Nassim Taleb.
- Aaron Swartz.
  \
- Gwern
- Michael Crichton.
- Charlie Stross
- Ozy Frantz.
- Aaron Gertler.
  \
- AppliedDivinityStudies
- Robin Hanson skewers it like always:
  > *... if you care less about signaling intelligence and connectedness, and more about understanding, then consider reading textbooks, review articles, and other expert summaries instead of news.*

- Georges Perec:
  > *The daily papers talk of everything except the everyday. The papers annoy me, they teach me nothing. What they recount doesn’t concern me, doesn’t ask me questions and doesn’t answer the questions I ask or would like to ask."*

- Since I wrote this the online froth about the "MSM" has increased.

2. Travel

Even quite level-headed people have a hyper-inflated view of the intellectual and spiritual benefits of travelling. It is hard to find anyone any more than grumpy about a particular trip, or snobby about the way others travel. The hype of going places is not at all new. But the modern practice - mass, international, touristic - has holidays as the centre and peak of your year. It is the safest conversational topic outside of the weather.

The element of truth: There are still a lot of different ways to live, and many experiences that don't come across in print. I suppose compulsive xenophobes are the only really principled anti-travellers.

The errors enforced: The possibility of fleeing yourself. Mere sensation as sufficient for understanding. In poverty tourism: the superior virtue of the oppressed. For the cost of three weeks in Japan you *could* buy the 150 best-ever books on Japan, or the best 50 books plus 10 of the best Japanese meals in your home country (etc). You would come out of this knowing different things from your alter ego, but not obviously worse things. (Then there's the sleep cost and the illnesses.)

Claimed benefits:

- broaden your sense of possibility,
- jolt you out of your received notions,
- force you to try new things,
- force you to look at the world anew
- serendipity, all the things that people don't write down.

Stationary travel (going to one location and really getting to know it for months) can deliver the benefits promised of normal travel, the sub-week consumption of surfaces. But all of the above can be achieved from any location, with a bit of mental footwork. My estimate is that people get about one serendipitous thing every two weeks away. (If you count getting mugged or malaria as serendipity, which I do.)

How widespread? 78% of rich-world people plan to this year (p.20 here). 91% of Britons</a> polled by Ipsos.

The resistance to travel

- Jess Riedel: Why don't travel fans equally recommend foreign writing?
- Brian Tomasik
- This travel writer is annoyed at people exaggerating the significance of their own travel, which is all I suppose I am annoyed at.
- Martha Gellhorn is a funny example, since she spent her whole life travelling. But with open eyes:

  > *One needs Equanil here too, not just in our white urban civilisation; tranquilisers against impatience, against the hysteria induced by heat, and the disgust at dirt...*

- Not really this.

- Emerson:

  > *I have no churlish objection to the circumnavigation of the globe, for the purposes of art, of study, and benevolence... But he who travels to be amused, or to get somewhat which he does not carry, travels away from himself... He carries ruins to ruins. Travelling is a fool's paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from...*
  >
  > *Our minds travel when our bodies are forced to stay at home.*

- Dan Frank actually tries to defend travel relative to an equal spend on remote learning, which is an improvement over the usual. He makes some nice points, but the strong, open, understanding-based kind of travel he defends is still incredibly rare.

3 …while professing environmentalism

4. Nature

The cult of travel usually goes along with a slack-jawed endorsement of the natural world.

The element of truth: The mind-foiling beauty (if you're not looking too closely at what is doing what to whom). The shocking amount of detail and seeming design. There is a level of ugliness only human structures or actions demonstrate.

The error enforced: Modernity as a bad deal. That 'natural' means good, when in fact a huge amount of the good things in the world are in direct opposition to natural teleoi. That GM (etc.) is essentially hazardous or wrong.

The resistance to nature

- Wild animal suffering is at last a significant topic in some corners of academia.
- Most rationalists in the weak sense of policing appeals to nature.

5. The internet

Because it contains a good and growing representation of the world entire, this is a hard thing to be properly against. (You might manage it by being depressed to fuck, or anti-technology in general. But that degree of Luddism probably entails being against most social progress.) So I have to rename this 'technological utopianism' if it is to have any real bite. (Though note this research programme.)

The element of truth: Knowledge, obvs. And the self-creation it enables is probably good for all kinds of people.

The error enforced: That the uses of abstractions on network protocols are inevitably progressive. That politics has changed fundamentally.

The resistance to web

- The primitivists, who are usually wrong.
- Evgeny Morozov, who is against technological hype
- Similarly Vint Cerf.
- Nicholas Carr, who is probably not right.

6. Higher education.

The element of truth: Ideas are important. Four years of relative freedom at the beginning of adulthood is fantastic. There's a lot more to life than economics. It will be hard to replicate the deep internationalism and the universal parental and governmental approval in alternative spaces. Research and cultural transmission are important and gain greatly from local networking.

The error enforced: That *going to university* has inherent value (rather than the skill, knowledge, perspective which unreliably attend students' attendance). That this inherent value justifies giant personal debt and diversion of public spending (from, e.g. the economic emancipation of all). That it's *university* that provides an intellectual or spiritual boost, rather than exposure to ideas, rigour, and peer discussion - each of which are tending towards being free, outwith the academy. That institutional learning is best learning. That you need credentials to be credible.

The driver of disastrous trends: the one by which more jobs arbitarily require more degrees; the one where a degree is a hollow class marker and networking tool rather than anything to do with (resented, quickly forgotten) knowledge or culture. These overvaluations are scuppering some people's lives.

The resistance to school

- Scott Alexander
- Bryan Caplan Caplan Caplan Caplan (...)
- Taleb again.
- Peter Thiel.
- Left critics are mostly only against the brute vocational and corporate side of universities - not the core piety of inherent value. An exception is the wonderful John Emerson.
- 'The Last Psychiatrist', a lurid and brutal writer.
- oh do go on.
- This scene in Good Will Hunting is the only mainstream statement of the nonspecialness of university:

  > *Will: See, the sad thing about a guy like you is, in 50 years you're gonna start doin' some thinkin' on your own and you're going to come up with the fact that there are two certainties in life: one, don't [wield academia to humiliate people], and two, you dropped 150 grand on a fuckin' education you coulda got for a dollar-fifty in late charges at the public library!*

7. Reading, the moral and spiritual necessity of.

The sharpest tooth in the bunch, for me. The news piety is a special case of this, I suppose. And half the internet one, too. How often do you feel insecure about having not read a Portentous Classic? How often do you lie about having read them?

The element of truth: Reading is incredible, a telepathic link from the best thinkers. A handful of small, as-yet-unfalsified studies find an increase in empathy from reading.

The error enforced: That reading *anything* will do: form over content. That it offers unique benefits, when many people just don't need the reminder to have perspective or empathy or whatnot.

The resistance to books

- Andy Matuschak off in a corner on his own.

Mostly only satirical attacks on reading seem to be possible:

- Alain de Botton hopes that his children don't have to read, because reading is a "response to anxiety", and thus a bad sign.
- Mikita Brottman likens it to masturbation and challenges the edification side, but then snaggle-pusses sideways saying that both are good 'self-explorations' anyway. (Here, here, here.)
- Steven Johnson trying to make videogames look good.
- Pierre Bayard's happy satire. But even his mouthpiece fails to criticise reading properly:

  > *The books we love offer a sketch of a whole universe that we secretly inhabit, and in*

> *which we desire the other person to assume a role.*
>
> *One of the conditions of happy romantic compatibility is, if not to have read the same books, to have read at least some books in common with the other person—which means, moreover, to have non-read the same books. From the beginning of the relationship, then, it is crucial to show that we can match the expectations of our beloved by making him or her sense the proximity of our inner libraries.*

- Karnofsky is very unsentimental about it

(I myself am pious about this, failing to really even hypothetically attack it.)

How does this happen?

Well, as I've conceded, each of them has some intrinsic appeal. But that aside: herding and signalling is the boring but probably most important component. Then there's marketing, which I actually don't see as that powerful. Preference falsification is cool but requires some great force that makes everyone lie without co-ordinating the lie.

Each of the above sustain an identity in their host. And once a practice gets into your identity, it can extract a huge amount from you, without you ever thinking to complain. It may seem far-fetched that someone could identify with their consumption of journalism, but behold the Extremely Online, the politics wonks, the amateur pundits on a million radio call-ins, all over the earth.

See also

- Liam Bright on the link between neoliberalism (yes, really) and identitarianism.

Tags: social-science, criticism

The trouble with supplements

10th December 2019

- *The stalled revolution in personal biochemistry.*
- *Confidence*: 70%
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *there may be useful interventions, but they will be of little value on average — if the benefit is universal, then it will be small; if it is large and predictable, then it will be limited to the few with a particular disease; otherwise, it will be unpredictably idiosyncratic so those who need it will not know it. Thus, the metallic laws: the larger the change you expect, the less likely it is; the low-hanging fruit, having already been plucked, will not be tested; and the more rigorously you test the leftovers, the smaller the final net effects will be.*
>
> - Gwern Branwen

> *every mouthful of food you and I have ever taken contained many billions of kinds of complex molecules whose structure and physiological effects have never been determined – and many millions of which would be toxic or fatal in large doses… we are daily ingesting thousands of substances that are far more dangerous than saccharin – but in amounts that are safe, because they are far below the various thresholds of toxicity. At present, there are hardly any substances, except some common drugs, for which we actually know the threshold.*
>
> - Edwin Jaynes (...)

In the last century, half a revolution happened: you can now buy many thousands of substances that claim to promote health, and perhaps a couple of them do.

The point is to fine-tune your health: to prevent idiosyncratic disorders, to treat ubiquitous “subclinical” or “subsyndromal” or (worst of all) “idiopathic” health problems. All the little things that make life worse. And so most UK adults take supplements (about half of those multivitamins). Several problems with this:

1. *Absence of general evidence / Evidence of harm*. Many supposedly health-promoting substances have uselessly weak evidence. For instance, frequent use of multivitamins is probably somewhat harmful: they *increase* mortality for the average user, maybe due to overdosing you with antioxidants.

2. *Physiology is personal*. Even for substances that have general warrant, the ‘heterogeneity’ in their effects and side-effects can be enormous, even for quite closely matched pairs. (For instance, some people don’t get *any* stimulation from caffeine for genetic reasons. Morphine, the central example of a powerful and basic drug, has a “number needed to treat” post-op pain of *2.9* - i.e. on average a high dose only works well for one in three people!)

3. *Geographical and seasonal variation*: for instance, during winter, around a third of UK adults are deficient in vitamin D.

4. *Snake oil on the margin*: The supplement industry is regulated (for instance, you have to apply to the European Commission if you want to make a health claim for your product), but misleading claims and inaccurate concentrations are common. (For instance, the Ayurvedic supplement bacopa has been known to contain unsafe levels of

lead and other heavy metals.)

5. Powdered supplements are often 2-4x cheaper than pills, but are fiddly and sometimes taste bad. 1

6. *What counts is latent*: There are now cheap places to get blood tests (or genome hits) for particular biomarkers, which you'd think would close the gap. But blood markers are only proxies for the *real* target variables: mortality, productivity, mood, etc.

The missing half of the revolution is measurement. The sensible supplementer needs three kinds of data to avoid waste and unnecessary risk:

- general clinical findings,
- personal experiments (biochemistry before and after, control doses, measurements of actually valuable responses),
- chemical assays of particular products.

A shame that general clinical findings are so unreliable, and that getting strong personal data remains the province of heroically nerdy people, willing to invest dozens of hours into self-experimentation (reading papers, double-blinding with self-filled capsules, data collection), including learning how to analyse the results sensibly. There's something sad about this: that external validity is so hard in biomed (and society…) that all we can really trust is local inference, n-of-1 description.

Despite plummeting measurement costs (blood tests down by 100x, genome sequencing down by 100,000x, all the consumer QS gizmos), the money and time required for an actually-scientific supplement habit are still prohibitive. So: you take safe inexpensive things and live with the uncertainty - or, more, you rely on a prior that evolution is hard to beat on body matters, and lean against taking anything except the most convincing substances.

There are economies of scale to summarising and operationalising research, testing batches, and filling capsules. And removing gatekeeping for cheap important tests has the benefit of raising our autonomy, putting us in control of at least the minor things. So is this a gap in the market? I don't really know, I just want it to exist. (There are already well-funded toy versions of a personalised service, but their offering is pretty superficial so far.)

Another general counterargument

There is sometimes value in mere sufficiency. Across species, across phyla, there seems to be a pair of modes for a metabolism: full-steam growth vs damage control. (This is an abstraction over thousands of metabolic processes of course.) From Ricon's excellent Longevity FAQ:

> *When there is an abundance of nutrients, the signal is to focus on reproduction, while when they are scarce, the cell focuses on reducing the production of, and promoting the repair of, damage.*

The underlying claim is something like "metabolism is violent, so things which boost it may end up causing damage". And similarly, it's at least possible that antioxidants dampen the body's active repair mechanisms.

So aiming to close all gaps - calories, amino acids, antioxidants - may end up having *bad* metabolic effects!

1. For instance the nutritional shakes used by the NHS are three times cheaper in powder form. They're still £17 each for some reason, possibly because they're verifying the contents of each batch within narrow tolerance.

Tags: quantified-self, biology, rationality

Reversals in psychology

26th January 2020

- *A list of exaggerated psychological phenomena*
- *Confidence*: High that I'm representing the current evidence well, low that all of these will stay reversed.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Content notes*: I am not a social scientist.
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.
- Cross-posted here.

Now a crowdsourced project elsewhere. Seeking volunteers!

A medical reversal is when an existing treatment is found to actually be useless or harmful. Psychology has in recent years been racking up reversals: in fact only 40-65% of its classic social results were replicated, in the weakest sense of finding 'significant' results in the same direction. (Even in those that replicated, the average effect found was half the originally reported effect.) Such errors are far less costly to society than medical errors, but it's still pollution, so here's the cleanup. 1

Psychology is not alone: medicine, cancer biology, and economics all have many irreplicable results. It'd be wrong to write off psychology: we know about most of the problems here because of psychologists, and its subfields differ a lot by replication rate and effect-size shrinkage.

One reason psychology reversals are so prominent is that it's an unusually 'open' field in terms of code and data sharing. A less scientific field would never have caught its own bullshit.

The following are empirical findings about empirical findings; they're all open to re-reversal. Also it's not that "we know these claims are false": failed replications (or proofs of fraud) usually just challenge the evidence for a hypothesis, rather than affirm the opposite hypothesis. I've tried to ban myself from saying "successful" or "failed" replication, and to report the best-guess effect size rather than play the bad old Yes/No science game. 2

Figures correct as of March 2020; I will put some effort into keeping this current, but not that much.
Code for converting means to Cohen's d and Hedge's g here.

Social psychology

No good evidence for many forms of priming, automatic behaviour change from 'related' (often only metaphorically related) stimuli. 3

- Questionable evidence for **elderly priming**, that hearing about old age makes people walk slower. The p-curve alone argues against the first 20 years of studies.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Automaticity of social behavior', Bargh 1996; 2 experiments with n=30. (~5200 citations)

- **Critiques**: Doyen 2012 (n=120), Pashler 2011 (n=66). Meta-analysis: Lakens 2017. Total citations: ~44
- **Original effect size**: d=0.82 to d=1.08.
- **Replication effect size**: Doyen: d= minus 0.07. Pashler: d= minus 0.22

- No good evidence for **professor priming**, improved (“+13%”) performance at trivia after picturing yourself as a professor vs as a thug.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'The relation between perception and behavior, or how to win a game of Trivial Pursuit', Dijksterhuis and van Knippenberg (1998), n=60.
(~1000 citations).
- **Critiques**: O'Donnell et al, 23 direct replications, cumulative n=4,493. Lakens 2017 again. Citations: ~40.
- **Original effect size**: 13%
- **Replication effect size**: 0.14% [-0.71, 1.00]

- No good evidence for the **Macbeth effect**, that moral aspersions induce literal physical hygiene.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Washing away your sins: threatened morality and physical cleansing', Zhong & Liljenquist 2006.
(~1190 citations).
- **Critiques**: Siev 2018, meta-analysis of 15 studies, cumulative n=1,746.
Citations: ~6
- **Original effect size**: g = 0.86 [0.05, 1.68] for Study 3.
- **Replication effect size**: g = 0.07 [-0.04, 0.19] among the independent labs

- No good evidence for **money priming**, that “images or phrases related to money cause increased faith in capitalism, and the belief that victims deserve their fate”, etc.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Mere exposure to money increases endorsement of free-market systems and social inequality', Caruso 2013. n between 30 and 168
(~120 citations).
- **Critiques**: Rohrer 2015, n=136. Lodder 2019, a meta-analysis of 246 experiments.
(total citations: ~70)
- **Original effect size**: system justification d=0.8, just world d=0.44, dominance d=0.51

- **Replication effect size**: For 47 preregistered experiments in Lodder:

  g = 0.01 [-0.03, 0.05] for system justification,
  g = 0.11 [-0.08, 0.3] for belief in a just world,
  g = 0.07 [-0.02, 0.15] for fair market ideology.

- No good evidence of anything from the **Stanford prison 'experiment'**. It was not an experiment; 'demand characteristics' and scripting of the abuse; constant experimenter intervention; faked reactions from participants; as Zimbardo concedes, they began with a complete "absence of specific hypotheses".

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison', Zimbardo 1973 (1800 citations, but cited by books with hundreds of thousands of citations).

- **Critiques**: convincing method & data inspection - Le Texier 2019 (total citations: ~8)

- **Original effect size**: Key claims were insinuation plus a battery of difference in means tests at up to 20% significance(!). n="21" (typo for 24?).

- **Replication effect size**: N/A

- No good evidence from the famous **Milgram** experiments that 65% of people will inflict pain if ordered to. Experiment was riddled with researcher degrees of freedom, going off-script, implausible agreement between very different treatments, and "*only half of the people who undertook the experiment fully believed it was real and of those, 66% disobeyed the experimenter.*"

Stats

- **Original paper**: Behavioral Study of obedience, Milgram 1963. n=40 (~6600 citations). (The full range of conditions was n=740.)

- **Critiques**: Burger 2011, Perry 2012, Brannigan 2013; Griggs 2016 (total citations: ~240).

- **Original effect size**: 65% of subjects said to administer maximum, dangerous voltage.

- **Replication effect size**: Doliński 2017 is relatively careful, n=80, and found comparable effects to Milgram. Burger (n=70) also finds similar levels of compliance to Milgram, but the level didn't scale with the strength of the experimenter prods (see Table 5: the only real *order* among the prompts led to universal disobedience), so whatever was going on, it's not obedience. One selection of follow-up studies found average compliance of 63%, but suffer from the usual publication bias and tiny samples. (Selection was by a student of Milgram.) The most you can say is that there's weak evidence for compliance, rather than obedience. ("Milgram's interpretation of his findings has been largely rejected.")

- No good evidence that tribalism arises spontaneously following arbitrary groupings and scarcity, within weeks, and leads to inter-group violence . The "spontaneous" conflict among children at **Robbers Cave** was orchestrated by experimenters; tiny sample

(maybe 70?); an exploratory study taken as inferential; no control group; there were really three experimental groups - that is, the experimenters had full power to set expectations and endorse deviance; results from their two other studies, with negative results, were not reported.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Superordinate Goals in the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict', Sherif 1958, n=22; (His books on the studies are more cited: 'Groups in harmony and tension' (1958) and Intergroup Conflict and Co-operation'.)
(~7000 total citations including the SciAm puff piece).

- **Critiques**: Billig 1976 in passing (729 citations), Perry 2018 (citations: 9)

- **Original effect size**: Not that kind of psychology. ("*results obtained through observational methods were cross-checked with results obtained through sociometric technique, stereotype ratings of in-groups and outgroups, and through data obtained by techniques adapted from the laboratory. Unfortunately, these procedures cannot be elaborated here.*")

- **Replication effect size**: N/A

(Set aside the ethics: the total absence of consent - the boys and parents had no idea they were in an experiment - or the plan to set the forest on fire and leave the boys to it.)

Tavris claims that the underlying "realistic conflict theory" is otherwise confirmed. Who knows.

- **Lots of screen-time** is not strongly associated with low wellbeing; it explains about as much of teen sadness as eating potatoes, 0.35%.

Stats

- **Original paper**: Media speculation? (millions of 'citations').

- **Critiques**: Orben 2019, n=355,358

- **Original effect size**: N/A

- **Replication effect size**: median association of technology use with adolescent well-being was $\beta = -0.035$, s.e.=0.004

- The usual suspects responded with a spec curve analysis (great!) and go fishing for a subgroup where the effect is notable. They find one (social media time in girls rather than screentime in the young), but only after misusing Rohrer 2018 to justify dropping important confounders as potential mediators.

- No good evidence that **female-named hurricanes** are more deadly than male-named ones. Original effect size was a 176% increase in deaths, driven entirely by four outliers; reanalysis using a greatly expanded historical dataset found a nonsignificant decrease in deaths from female named storms.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Female hurricanes are deadlier than male hurricanes', Jung 2014,

n=92 hurricanes discarding two important outliers.
(~76 citations).

- **Critiques**: Christensen 2014. Smith 2016, n=420 large storms.
(total citations: ~15)

- **Original effect size**: d=0.65: 176% increase in deaths from flipping names from relatively masculine to relatively feminine

- **Replication effect size**: Smith: 264% decrease in deaths (Atlantic); 103% decrease (Pacific).

- At most weak use in **implicit bias testing** for racism. Implicit bias scores poorly predict actual bias, r = 0.15. The operationalisations used to measure that predictive power are often unrelated to actual discrimination (e.g. ambiguous brain activations). Test-retest reliability of 0.44 for race, which is usually classed as “unacceptable”. This isn’t news; the original study also found very low test-criterion correlations.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Measuring individual differences in implicit cognition: The implicit association test', Greenwald 1998, n=28 for Experiment 3
(12,322 citations).

- **Critiques**: Oswald 2013, meta-analysis of 308 experiments. Carlsson 2015.
(total citations: ~650)

- **Original effect size**: attitude d=0.58; r=0.12.

- **Replication effect size**: Oswald: stereotype IAT r=0.03 [-0.08, 0.14],

  attitude IAT r=0.16 [0.11, 0.21]

- The **Pygmalion effect**, that a teacher’s expectations about a student affects their performance, is at most small, temporary, and inconsistent, r<0.1 with a reset after weeks. Rosenthal’s original claims about massive IQ gains, persisting for years, are straightforwardly false (“*The largest gain... 24.8 IQ points in excess of the gain shown by the controls.*”), and used an invalid test battery. Jussim: “90%–95% of the time, students are unaffected by teacher expectations”.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Teachers' expectancies: Determinants of pupils' IQ gains', Rosenthal 1966, n around 320.
(700 citations, but the popularisation has 10,500).

- **Critiques**: Raudenbush 1984, Thorndike 1986, Spitz 1999, Jussim 2005
(total citations: ~2100)

- **Original effect size**: Average +3.8 IQ, d=0.25.

- **Replication effect size**: Raudenbush: d=0.11 for students new to the teacher, tailing to d=0 otherwise. Snow: median effect d=0.035.

- At most weak evidence for **stereotype threat** suppressing girls' maths scores. i.e. the interaction between gender and stereotyping.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Stereotype Threat and Women's Math Performance', Spencer 1999, n=30 women
  (~3900 citations).

- **Critiques**: Stoet & Geary 2012, meta-analysis of 23 studies. Ganley 2013, n=931. Flore 2015, meta-analysis of 47 measurements. Flore 2018, n=2064.
  (total citations: ~500)

- **Original effect size**: Not reported properly; Fig.2 *looks like* control-group-women-mean-score = 17 with sd=20, and experiment-group-women-score = 5 with sd=15. Which might mean roughly d= −0.7.

- **Replication effect size**:
  Stoet: d= −0.17 [−0.27, −0.07] for unadjusted scores.
  Ganley: various groups, d= minus 0.27 to 0.17.
  Flore 2015: g= −0.07 [−0.21; 0.06] after accounting for publication bias.
  Flore 2018: d= −0.05 [−0.18, 0.07]

- Questionable evidence for an increase in **"narcissism"** (leadership, vanity, entitlement) **in young people** over the last thirty years. The basic counterargument is that they're misidentifying an age effect as a cohort effect (The narcissism construct apparently decreases by about a standard deviation between adolescence and retirement.) *"every generation is Generation Me"*
  All such "generational" analyses are *at best* needlessly noisy approximations of social change, since generations are not discrete natural kinds, and since people at the supposed boundaries are indistinguishable.

Stats

- **Original paper**: Twenge 2006, 'Generation Me', but it's an ancient hypothesis. Various studies, including national surveys.
  (~2600 citations)

- **Critiques**: Five studies from Donnellan and Trzesniewski, n=477,380. Arnett 2013, Roberts 2017, Wetzel 2017
  (~660 total citations)

- **Original effect size**: d=0.37 increase in NPI scores (1980-2010), n=49,000.

- **Replication effect size**: Roberts doesn't give a d but it's near 0. something like d=0.03 ((15.65 - 15.44) / 6.59)

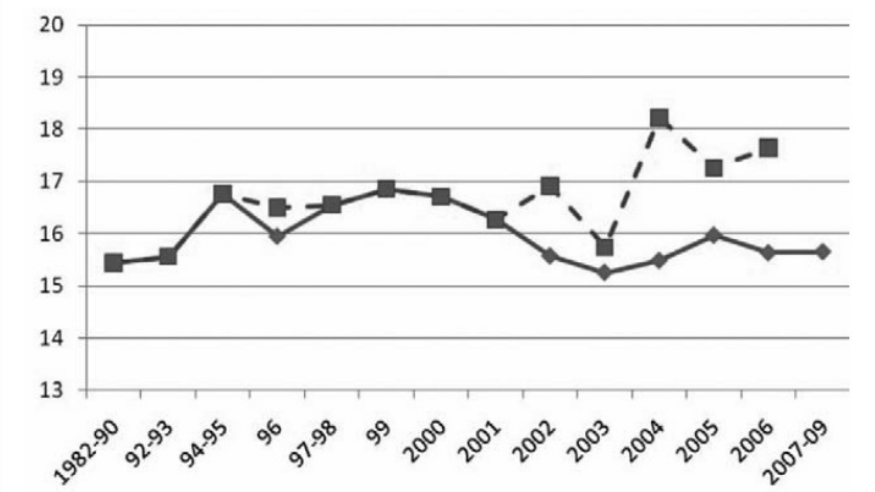


Fig. 1. College students Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) scores from 1982 to 2009. *Y* axis represents one standard deviation on the NPI scale. Dashed line shows results based on data presented in Twenge et al. (2008). Solid line shows results when new data is added to the original meta-analysis.

Table 3 here shows a mix of effects in 30 related constructs between 1977 and 2006, up and down.
Wetzel: d = minus 0.27 (1990 - 2010)

- Be very suspicious of anything by Diederik Stapel. 58 retractions here.

Positive psychology

- No good evidence that taking a "**power pose**" lowers cortisol, raises testosterone, risk tolerance.

> *That a person can, by assuming two simple 1-min poses, embody power and instantly become more powerful has real-world, actionable implications.*

After the initial backlash, it focussed on subjective effect, a claim about "increased feelings of power". Even then: weak evidence for decreased "feelings of power" from contractive posture only. My reanalysis is here.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Power Posing : Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance', Cuddy, Carney & Yap 2010, n=42 mixed sexes.

  Many, many errors. Disowned by one of its authors. Thanks to a reanalysis by someone else, we actually have the data.
  (~1100 citations; 56m views on TED).

- **Critiques**: Ranehill 2015, n=200 (not an exact replication);
  Garrison 2016, n=305;
  Simmons and Simonsohn 2016, p-curve check of 33 studies;
  Ronay 2017, n=108;
  Metzler 2019, n=82 men.
  Crede 2017, Crede 2018: multiverse analysis shows that the original result is heavily dependent on posthoc analysis choices.
  (total citations: ~400)

- **Original effect sizes**:
  h = 0.61 in risk-taking,
  d = minus 0.30 for cortisol,
  d=0.35 for testosterone
  d=0.79 for feelings of power

- **Replication effect size**: risk-taking d = [−0.176],
  testosterone d = [−0.2, −0.19, 0.121],
  cortisol d = [−0.157, 0.22, 0.028, 0.034]
  most CIs overlapping 0

- Weak evidence for **facial-feedback** (that smiling causes good mood and pouting bad mood).

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Inhibiting and Facilitating Conditions of the Human Smile: A Nonobtrusive Test of the Facial Feedback Hypothesis' by Strack, Martin, Stepper 1988.
  n=92 twice.
  (~2200 citations).

- **Critiques**: 17 replications, Wagenmakers et al 2016,
  (total citations: ~220), Schimmack 2017

- **Original effect size**: d = 0.43 (0.82 out of 9)

- **Replication effect size**: 0.03 out of 9, CI overlapping 0.

  A meta-analysis of 98 studies finds *d*= 0.2 [0.14, 0.26] with an absurdly low p value, and doesn't find publication bias. But this latter point simply can't be right. Given d = 0.2 and the convention of targeting 80% power to detect a real phenomenon, you would need very high sample sizes, n > 500. And almost all of the included studies are N < 100. Schimmack finds strong evidence of publication bias on a subset of these papers, using a proper power analysis.

  98 pieces of very weak evidence cannot sum to strong evidence, whatever the p-value says. (The author agrees.)

- Reason to be cautious about **mindfulness** for mental health. Most studies are low quality and use inconsistent designs, there’s higher heterogeneity than other mental health treatments, and there’s strong reason to suspect reporting bias. None of the 36 meta-analyses before 2016 mentioned publication bias. The hammer may fall.

Stats

- **Critiques**: Coronado-Montoya 2016

- **Original effect size**: prima facie, d=0.3 for anxiety or depression

- **Replication effect size**: Not yet.

- No good evidence for **Blue Monday**, that the third week in January is the peak of

depression or low affect ‘as measured by a simple mathematical formula developed on behalf of Sky Travel’. You’d need a huge sample size, in the thousands, to detect the effect reliably and this has never been done.

Cognitive psychology

- Good evidence against **ego depletion**, that willpower is limited in a muscle-like fashion.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Ego Depletion: Is the Active Self a Limited Resource?', Baumeister 1998, n=67.
(~5700 citations).

- **Critiques**: Hagger 2016, 23 independent conceptual replications
(total citations: ~640)

- **Original effect size**: something like d = minus 1.96 between control and worst condition. (I hope I'm calculating that wrong.)

- **Replication effect size**: d = 0.04 [−0.07, 0.14]. (NB: not testing the construct the same way.)

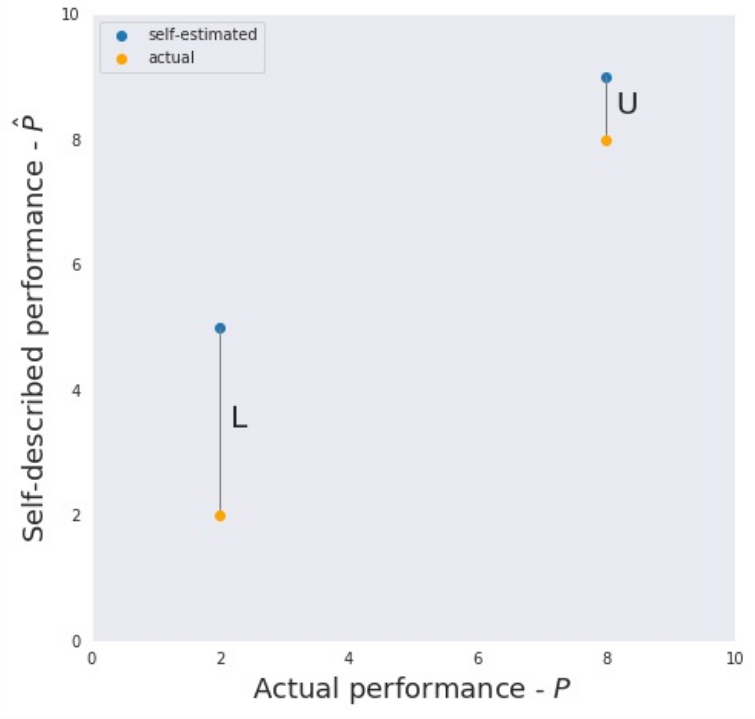
- Mixed evidence for the **Dunning-Kruger effect**. No evidence for the “Mount Stupid” misinterpretation.

Stats

First disambiguate the claim

5 claims involved, three of which are just popular misunderstandings:

1) the one the authors actually make: that poor performers (e.g. the bottom quartile) overestimate their performance more than good performers do: $$L > U$$

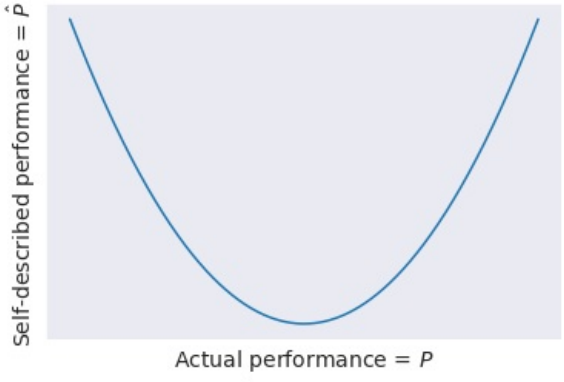


6

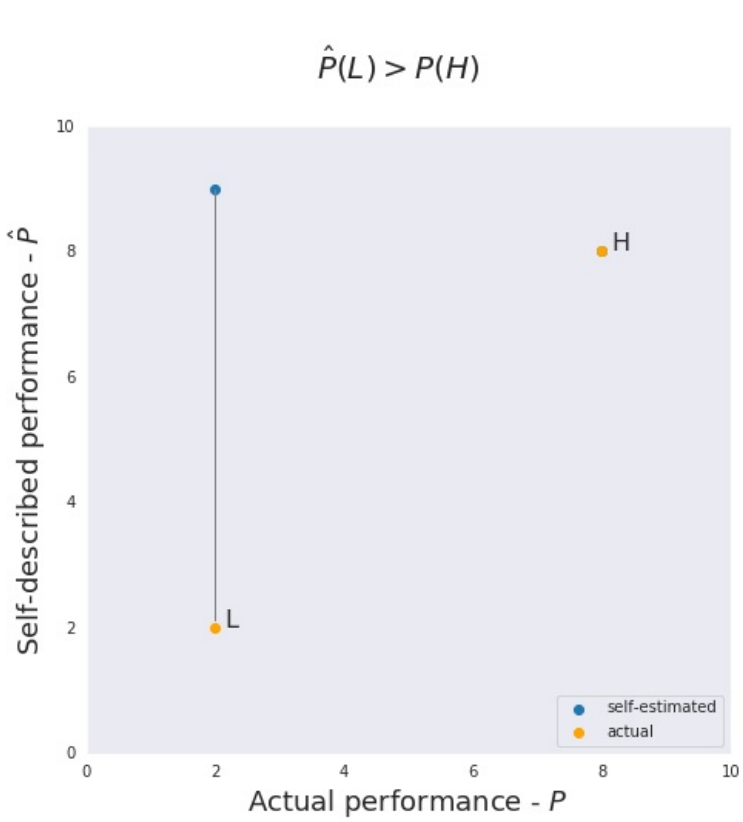
(Formally "the difference \(\hat{P} - P \) has a negative slope over actual performance moderator".)

2) that people in general overestimate their own ability \(\hat{P} > P \)

3) the meme: that there's a u-shaped relationship between perceived and actual ability. "The less competent someone is, the more competent they think they are".



4) Alternatively, that poor performers think they're better than good performers.



5) the authors' explanation: that (1) is *caused by* a lack of 'metacognitive' skills, being able to reflect on your ability at the task. That it's a cognitive bias suffered by the worst at a task. 5

- **Original paper**: 'Unskilled and unaware of it: how difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments.', Dunning & Kruger 1999, n=334 undergrads. This contains claims (1), (2), and (5) but no hint of (3) or (4).
  (~5660 citations).

- **Critiques**: Gignac 2020, n=929; Nuhfer 2016 and Nuhfer 2017, n=1154; Luu 2015; Greenberg 2018, n=534; Yarkoni 2010.
  (total citations: ~20)

- **Original effect size**: No sds reported so I don't know.

  2 of the 4 experiments showed a *positive* relationship between score and perceived ability; 2 showed no strong relationship. And the best performers tended to underestimate their performance. This replicates: the correlation between your IQ and your assessment of it is around \(r \simeq 0.3\). (3) and (4) are not at all warranted.

  (5) is much shakier than (1). The original paper concedes that there's a purely statistical explanation for (1): just that it is much easier to overestimate a low number which has a lower bound! And the converse: if I am a perfect performer, I am *unable* to overestimate myself. D&K just think there's something notable left when you subtract this.
  It's also confounded by (2). Here's a great explainer.

- **Replication effect size** (for claim 1): 3 of the 4 original studies can be explained by noisy tests, bounded scales, and artefacts in the plotting procedure. ("*the primary drivers of errors in judging relative standing are general inaccuracy and overall biases tied to task difficulty*".) Only about 5% of low-performance people were very overconfident (more than 30% off) in the Nuhfer data.

  Gignac & Zajenkowski use IQ rather than task performance, and run two less-

confounded tests, finding $r = -0.05$ between P and errors, and $r = 0.02$ for a quadratic relationship between P and $\hat{P}$.

Jansen (2021) find independent support for claim 1 (n=3500) (the "performance-dependent estimation model") and also argue for (5), since they find less evidence for an alternative explanation, Bayesian reasoning towards a prior of "I am mediocre". (Fig 5b follows the original DK plot style, and is very unclear as a result.)
Muller (2020) replicate claim (1) and add some EEG stuff.

Some suggestion that claim (2) is WEIRD only.

- Questionable evidence for a tiny "**depressive realism**" effect, of increased predictive accuracy or decreased cognitive bias among the clinically depressed.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Judgment of contingency in depressed and nondepressed students: sadder but wiser?', 1979 (2450 citations).
- **Critiques**: Moore & Fresco 2012
(211 total citations)
- **Original effect size**: d= minus 0.32 for bias about 'contingency', how much the outcome actually depends on what you do,
n=96 students, needlessly binarised into depressed and nondepressed based on Beck score > 9. (Why?)
- **Replication effect size**: d = minus 0.07 with massive sd=0.46, n=7305, includes a trim-and-fill correction for publication bias. "Overall, however, both dysphoric/depressed individuals (d= .14) and nondysphoric/nondepressed individuals evidenced a substantial positive bias (d= .29)"

- Questionable evidence for the "**hungry judge**" effect, of massively reduced acquittals (d=2) just before lunch. Case order isn't independent of acquittal probability ("unrepresented prisoners usually go last and are less likely to be granted parole"); favourable cases may take predictably longer and so are pushed until after recess; effect size is implausible on priors; explanation involved ego depletion.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Extraneous factors in judicial decisions', 2011 (1040 citations).
- **Critiques**: Weinshall-Margel 2011, Glöckner 2016, Lakens 2017
(77 total citations)
- **Original effect size**: d=1.96, "the probability of a favorable ruling steadily declines from ≈0.65 to [0.05] and jumps back up to ≈0.65 after a break for a meal",
n=8 judges with n=1100 cases.
- **Replication effect size**: N/A.

- No good evidence for **multiple intelligences** (in the sense of statistically *independent* components of cognition). Gardner, the inventor: "*Nor, indeed, have I carried out experiments designed to test the theory... I readily admit that the theory is no longer current. Several fields of knowledge have advanced significantly since the early 1980s.*"

Stats

- **Original paper**: Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Gardner 1983

  (37,229 citations).

- At most weak evidence for **brain training** (that is, "far transfer" from daily training games to fluid intelligence) in general, in particular from the Dual n-Back game.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Improving fluid intelligence with training on working memory', Jaeggi 2008, n=70.
  (2200 citations).

- **Critiques**: Melby-Lervåg 2013, meta-analysis of 23 studies.
  Gwern 2012, meta-analysis of 45 studies.

- **Original effect size**: d=0.4 over control, 1-2 days after training

- **Replication effect size**:
  Melby: d=0.19 [0.03, 0.37] nonverbal; d=0.13 [-0.09, 0.34] verbal.
  Gwern: d=0.1397 [-0.0292, 0.3085], among studies using active controls.

  Maybe some effect on non-Gf skills of the elderly.
  A 2020 RCT on 572 first-graders finds an effect (d=0.2 to 0.4), but many of the apparent far-transfer effects come only 6-12 months later, i.e. well past the end of most prior studies.

- In general, be highly suspicious of anything that claims a positive permanent effect on adult IQ. Even in children the absolute maximum is 4-15 points for a powerful single intervention (iodine supplementation during pregnancy in deficient populations).

- See also the hydrocephaly claim under "Neuroscience".

- Good replication rate elsewhere.

Developmental psychology

- Some evidence for a tiny effect of **growth mindset** (thinking that skill is improveable) on attainment.

Stats

Really we should distinguish the correlation of the mindset with attainment vs. the effect of a 1-hour class about the importance of growth-mindset on attainment. I cover the latter but check out Sisk for evidence against both.

- **Original paper**: 'Implicit theories and their role in judgments and reactions: A word from two perspectives', Dweck 1995 introduced the constructs.
  (~2200 citations).

- **Critiques**: Sisk 2018, a pair of meta-analyses on both questions, n=365,915 ;
  Folioano 2019, a big study of the intervention in English schools, n=4584.
  (~180 total citations)

- **Original effect size**: Hard to pin down, but up to r = 0.54 / d=0.95 in some papers.

- **Replication effect size**:
  Sisk: r = 0.10 [0.08, 0.13] for the (nonexperimental) correlation
  Sisk: d = 0.08 [0.02, 0.14]
  Folioano: Literally zero, d=0.00 [-0.02; 0.02]

- Mixed evidence for a small **marshmallow effect**, that ability to delay gratification as a young person predicts educational outcomes at 15 or beyond (Mischel).

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Attention in Delay of Gratification', Mischel 1970, n=68, all children of Stanford academics or their friends.
  (~ 1000 citations).

- **Critiques**: Watts et al 2018 (n=918), Benjamin & Mischel 2020 (n=113 of the original participants!)
  (total citations: ~ 120)

- **Original effect size**: r= [0.42, 0.57] for SAT

- **Replication effect size**: Watts: r=0.28. But after controlling for the socioeconomic status of the child's family, the Marshmallow effect is r=0.05 or d=0.1, one-tenth of a standard deviation for an additional minute delay, 'nonsignificant' p-values. And since it's usually easier to get SES data...

  B&M (2020) note that preschool self-control is not predictive for success at 46. However, the impressive Dunedin longitudinal study (n=1000 over 29 years) is some independent evidence for childhood self-control being persistent on many things, including dropping out of school. (Also some hair-raising results: "24% of the study members had been convicted of a crime by the age of 32 y.")

- “Expertise attained after **10,000 hours** practice” (Gladwell). Disowned by the supposed proponents.

- No good evidence that tailoring teaching to students’ preferred **learning styles** has any effect on objective measures of attainment. There are dozens of these inventories, and really you’d have to look at each. (I won’t.)

Stats

- **Original paper**: Multiple origins. e.g. the 'Learning style inventory: technical manual' (Kolb), ~4200 citations. The VARK questionnaire (Fleming). But it is ubiquitous in Western educational practice.

- **Critiques**: Willingham 2015; Pashler 2009; Knoll 2017 (n=54); Husmann 2019 (total citations: ~2400)
- **Original effect size**: ???
- **Replication effect size**: [ ], n=

Personality psychology

- Pretty good? One lab's systematic replications found that effect sizes shrank by 20% though. See the comments for someone with a fundamental critique.
- Anything by Hans Eysenck should be considered suspect, but in particular these 26 'unsafe' papers (including the one which says that reading prevents cancer).

Behavioural science

- The effect of "nudges" (clever design of defaults) may be exaggerated in general. One big review found average effects were six times smaller than billed. (Not saying there are no big effects.)
- Here are a few cautionary pieces on whether, aside from the pure question of reproducibility, behavioural science is ready to steer policy.
- Moving the signature box to the top of forms does not decrease dishonest reporting in the rest of the form.

Marketing

- Brian Wansink accidentally admitted gross malpractice; fatal errors were found in 50 of his lab's papers. These include flashy results about increased portion size massively reducing satiety.

Neuroscience

- No good evidence that brains contain **one mind per hemisphere**. The corpus callosotomy studies which purported to show "two consciousnesses" inhabiting the same brain were badly overinterpreted.
- Very weak evidence for the existence of **high-functioning** (IQ ~ 100) **hydrocephalic people**. The hypothesis begins from extreme prior improbability; the effect of massive volume loss is claimed to be on average *positive* for cognition; the case studies are often questionable and involve little detailed study of the brains (e.g. 1970 scanners were not capable of the precision claimed).

Stats

- **Original paper**: No paper; instead a documentary and a profile of the claimant, John Lorber. Also Forsdyke 2015 and the fraudulent de Oliveira 2012

(citations).

- **Critiques**: Hawks 2007; Neuroskeptic 2015; Gwern 2019
(total citations:)

Alex Maier writes in with a cool 2007 case study of a man who got to 44 years old before anyone realised his severe hydrocephaly, through marriage and employment. IQ 75 (i.e. d=-1.7), which is higher than I expected, but still far short of the original claim, d=0.

- **Readiness potentials** seem to be actually causal, not diagnostic. So Libet's studies also do not show what they purport to. We still don't have free will (since random circuit noise can tip us when the evidence is weak), but in a different way.

- No good evidence for left/right hemisphere dominance correlating with **personality differences**. No clear hemisphere dominance at all in this study.

Stats

- **Original paper**: Media speculation?

- **Critiques**:
(total citations:)

- **Original effect size**: N/A?

- **Replication effect size**: [ ], n=

Psychiatry

- At most extremely weak evidence that psychiatric hospitals (of the 1970s) **could not detect sane patients** in the absence of deception.

Parapsychology

- No good evidence for **precognition**, undergraduates improving memory test performance by studying after the test. This one is fun because Bem's statistical methods were "impeccable" in the sense that they were what everyone else was using. He is Patient Zero in the replication crisis, and has done us all a great service. (Heavily reliant on a flat / frequentist prior; evidence of optional stopping; forking paths analysis.)

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Feeling the future: Experimental evidence for anomalous retroactive influences on cognition and affect', Bem 2012, 9 experiments, n=1000 or so.
(~1000 citations, but mostly not laudatory).

- **Critiques**: Ritchie 2012, n=150. On one of the nine.
Gelman 2013; Schimmack 2018, methodology.

(total citations: 200)

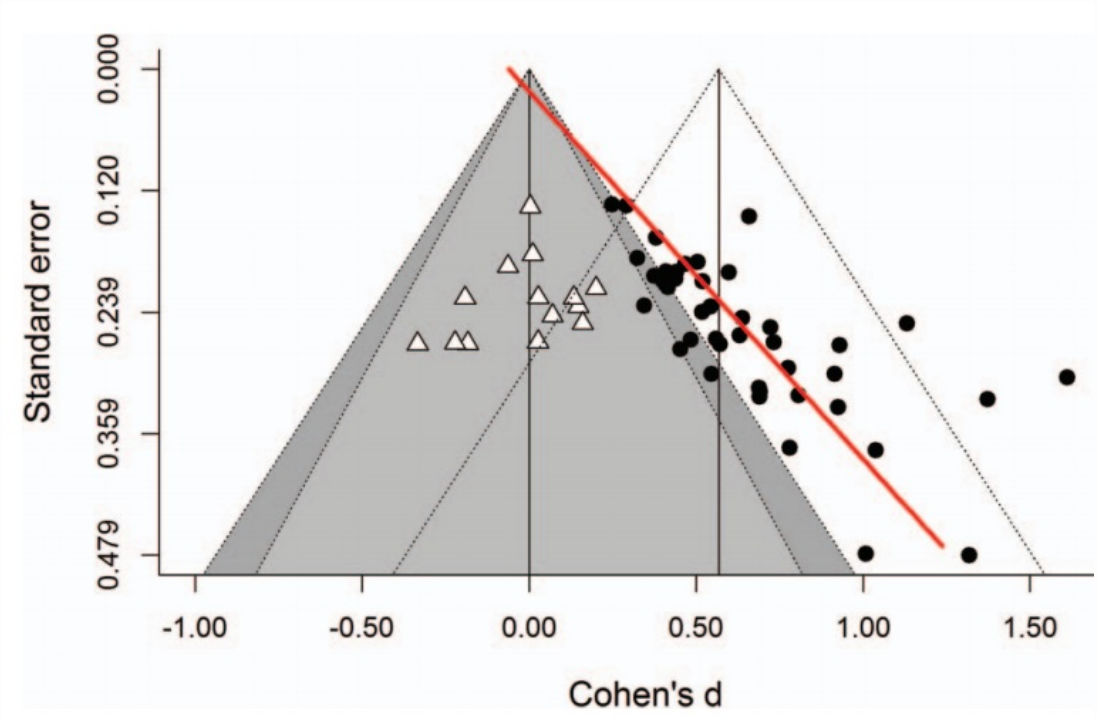
- **Original effect size**: Various, mean d=0.22. For experiment 9, r= minus 0.10.
- **Replication effect size**: Correlation between r= minus 0.02

Evolutionary psychology

- Weak evidence for **romantic priming**, that looking at attractive women increases men's conspicuous consumption, time discount, risk-taking. Weak, despite there being *43* independent confirmatory studies!: one of the strongest publication biases / p-hacking ever found.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Do pretty women inspire men to discount the future?', Wilson and Daly 2003. n=209 (but only n=52 for each cell in the 2x2)
(~560 citations).
- **Critiques**: Shanks et al (2015): show that the 43 previous studies have an unbelievably bad funnel plot. They also run 8 failed replications. (total citations: ~80)



- **Original effect size**: d=0.55 [-0.04, 1.13] for the difference between men and women. Meta-analytic d= 0.57 [0.49, 0.65] !
- **Replication effect size**: 0.00 [-0.12, 0.11]

- Questionable evidence for the menstrual cycle version of the **dual-mating-strategy hypothesis** (that "heterosexual women show stronger preferences for uncommitted sexual relationships [with more masculine men]... during the high-fertility ovulatory phase of the menstrual cycle, while preferring long-term relationships at other points"). Studies are usually tiny (median n=34, mostly over one cycle). Funnel plot looks ok though.

Stats

- **Original paper**: 'Menstrual cycle variation in women's preferences for the scent of symmetrical men', Gangestad and Thornhill (1998). (602 citations).

- **Critiques**: Jones et al (2018)
(total citations: 32)

- **Original effect size**: g = 0.15, SE = 0.04, n=5471 in the meta-analysis. Massive battery of preferences included (...)

- **Replication effect size**: Not a meta-analysis, just a list of recent well-conducted "null" studies and a plausible alternative explanation.

Note from a professor friend: the idea of a dual-mating hypothesis itself is not in trouble:

> *the specific menstrual cycle research doesn't seem to replicate well. However, to my knowledge the basic pattern of short vs long term relationship goals predicting [women's] masculinity preferences is still robust.*

- No good evidence that large parents have **more sons** (Kanazawa); original analysis makes several errors and reanalysis shows near-zero effect. (Original effect size: 8% more likely.)

Stats

- **Original paper**: (citations).

- **Critiques**:
(total citations:)

- **Original effect size**: [ ], n=

- **Replication effect size**: [ ], n=

- At most weak evidence that men’s strength in particular predicts **opposition to egalitarianism**.

Stats

- **Original paper**: Petersen et al (194 citations).

- **Critiques**: Measurement was of arm circumference in students, and effect disappeared when participant age is included.
(total citations: 605)

- **Original effect size**: N/A, battery of *F*-tests.

- **Replication effect size**: Gelman: none as in zero.
The same lab later returned with 12 conceptual replications on a couple of measures of (anti-)egalitarianism. They are very focussed on statistical significance instead of effect size. Overall male effect was b = 0.17 and female effect was b = 0.11, with a nonsignificant difference between the two (p = 0.09). (They prefer to emphasise the lab studies over the online studies, which showed a stronger difference.) Interesting that

strength or "formidability" has an effect in both genders, whether or not their main claim about gender difference holds up.

Psychophysiology

- At most very weak evidence that sympathetic nervous system activity **predicts political ideology** in a simple fashion. In particular, subjects' skin conductance reaction to threatening or disgusting visual prompts - a noisy and questionable measure.

Stats

- **Original paper**: Oxley et al, n=46 (citations). p=0.05 on a falsely binarised measure of ideology.

- **Critiques**: Six replications so far (Knoll et al; 3 from Bakker et al) , five negative as in nonsignificant, one forking ("holds in US but not Denmark")

  (total citations:)

- **Original effect size**: [ ], n=

- **Replication effect size**: [ ], n=

Behavioural genetics

- No good evidence that 5-HTTLPR is strongly linked to depression, insomnia, PTSD, anxiety, and more. See also COMT and APOE for intelligence, BDNF for schizophrenia, 5-HT2a for everything…

- Be very suspicious of any such "candidate gene" finding (post-hoc data mining showing large >1% contributions from a single allele). 0/18 replications in candidate genes for depression. 73% of candidates failed to replicate in psychiatry in general. One big journal won't publish them anymore without several accompanying replications. A huge GWAS, n=1 million: "*We find no evidence of enrichment for genes previously hypothesized to relate to risk tolerance.*"

> *[What I propose] is not a reform of significance testing as currently practiced in soft-psych. We are making a more heretical point… We are attacking the whole tradition of null-hypothesis refutation as a way of appraising theories… Most psychology using conventional H_0 refutation in appraising the weak theories of soft psychology… [is] living in a fantasy world of "testing" weak theories by feeble methods.*

– Paul Meehl (1990)

What now? When the next flashy WEIRD paper out of a world-class university arrives, will we swallow it?

Andrew Gelman and others suggest deflating *all* single-study effect sizes you encounter in the social sciences, without waiting for the subsequent shrinkage from publication bias, measurement error, data-analytic degrees of freedom, and so on. There is no uniform factor, but it seems sensible to divide novel effect sizes by a number between 2 and 100 (depending on its sample size, method, measurement noise, *maybe* its p-value if it's really tiny)…

The melancholy of pareidolia

Let me drop out of my proper "effect size estimation > binary truth or falsity" talk for a moment: There is something unbearably sad about the Wikipedia page for Ego depletion.

It's 3500 words, not including the Criticism section. It is rich with talk of moderators, physiological mechanisms, and practical upshots for the layman. And it is quite possible that the whole lot of it is a phantom, a giant mistake. For small effect sizes, we can't tell the difference. Even people quite a bit smarter than us can't.

If I wander around an old bookshop, I can run my fingers over sophisticated theories of ectoplasm, kundalini, past lives, numerology, clairvoyance, alchemy. Some were written by brilliant people who also discovered real things, whose minds *worked*, damnit.

We are so good at explaining that we can explain things which aren't there. We have made many whole libraries and entire fields without the slightest correspondence to anything. Except our deadly ingenuity.

Selection criteria

I include a claim if there was at least one of: several failed replications, several good meta-analyses with notably smaller *d*, very strong publication bias, clear fatal errors in the analysis, a formal retraction, or clear fraud.

I also include cases like growth mindset, where the eventual effect size, though positive, was a tiny fraction of the hyped original claim.

I compare to the original paper's effect size because I am lazy and barely capable of the better alternative, a careful averaging of high-quality supporting papers.

Thousands of bad papers are published every year, and catching them all would be a full-time job even if they were all included in systematic replication or reanalysis projects, ripe fruit. My rule is that if I hear a spurious effect discussed, or see it in a book, or if it could hurt someone, it's noteworthy.

Why trust replications more than originals?

Near-universal rates of pre-registration and higher rates of code and data sharing. (For "direct" replications, the original target study has in effect pre-registered their hypotheses, methods, and analysis plan.)

But I don't trust any of them. I look for 3+ failed replications from different labs, just to save me lots of rewriting, as the garden of forking paths and the mystery of the lefty p-curve unfold.

Mandatory errata

Some popular books with uncritical treatments of the above

- *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell

founded on the 10,000 hours for mastery claim.

- *Behave* by Robert Sapolsky
  Himmicanes, power pose, facial feedback, ego depletion, Implicit Association, stereotype threat, broken windows theory, Macbeth effect.

- *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman
  Entire chapter on all kinds of priming. Facial-feedback, Effects of Head-Movements on Persuasion, Location as Prime, Money Priming, Death Priming, Lady Macbeth Effect. Cognitive disfluency. Ego depletion. Wansink. Hungry judges. Denies the "hot hand".

- *Nudge* by Thaler and Sunstein
  Wansink, Baumeister, Dweck.

- *Smarter* by Dan Hurley.
  Dual n-Back and all manner of nonsense nootropics.

- *Peter Watts is an Angry Sentient Tumor*
  A sadly muddled defence of Bem

TODO

unconscious thought advantage
no bilingualism cognitive advantage
grit
* Heat priming
* Intelligence priming
* Disgust priming
* Honesty priming
* Cleanliness priming
* God priming boosts pro-sociality
* Social distance priming
* Commitment priming reduces forgiveness
* Achievement priming
Positive mood boost helping effect
Superiority-of-unconscious decision-making effect
Behavioral-consequences-of automatic-evaluation
Self-control relies on glucose effect
Physical warmth promotes interpersonal warmth
Power impairs perspective-taking effect
Fertility facial-preferences effect
Font disfluency impairs/improves cognitive performance
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11409-016-9154-x

Status-legitimacy effect
Red-impairs cognitive performance effect
Reduced pro-sociality of high SES effect
Moral licensing effect
Color on approach/avoidance
Playboy effect
Self-protective subjective temporal distance effect
Trait loneliness hot shower effect
Superstition boosts performance effect
Red-boosts-attractiveness effect
American flag priming boosts Republican support
Unethicality darkens perception of light
Fertility on voting
Modulation of 1/f noise on WIT

Time is money effect
Embodiment of secrets
Warmer-hearts-warmer-room effect
Treating-prejudice-with-imagery effect
Grammar influences perceived intentionality effect
Attachment-warmth embodiment effect

1. A counterexample from the COVID-19 pandemic: the UK's March 2020 policy was based on the idea of behavioural fatigue and Western resentment of restrictions; that a costly prohibition would only last a few weeks before the population revolt against it, and so it had to be delayed until the epidemic's peak.

   Now, this policy was so politically toxic that we know it had to be based on some domain reasoning, and it is in a way heartening that the government tried to go beyond socially naive epidemiology. But it was strongly criticised by hundreds of other behavioural scientists, who noted that the evidence for these ideas was too weak to base policy on. Here's a catalogue of bad psychological takes.

2. The polite convention in psychology seems to be to not mention the original effect size.

   See also "the link between x and y may be more contingent than previously assumed" or
   "we found strong moderators for the association between x and y".
3. Semantic priming is still solid, but the effect lasts only seconds.
4. `radishGroupMean = 8.35 #minutes`
   `controlGroupMean = 20.86`
   `radishGroupSd = 4.67`
   `controlGroupSd = 7.30`
   `radishGroupN = 22`
   `controlGroupN = 22`

   `cohens_d(radishGroupMean, controlGroupMean, radishGroupSd, controlGroupSd, radishGroupN, controlGroupN, True)`
5. > *incompetence, like anosognosia, not only causes poor performance but also the inability to recognize that one's performance is poor.*

   - original paper
6. Ignore the magnitudes, this is made up data.

See also

- A review of 2500 social science papers, showing the lack of correlation between citations and replicability, between journal status and replicability, and the apparent lack of improvement since 2009.
- Discussion on Everything Hertz, Hacker News, Andrew Gelman, some star data thugs comment.

Thanks to Andrew Gelman, Stuart Ritchie, Anne Scheel, Daniël Lakens, Gwern Branwen, and Nick Brown for pointers to effectively all of these.

All honour to the hundreds of data thug / methodological terrorist psychologists I've cited, who in the last decade began the hard work of cleaning up their field.

Tags: long-content, science, psychology, lists

Punk as ideology

6th September 2010

- *Serious or ironic? Political or aesthetic? Yay or boo?*
- *Confidence*: High in the historical claims; N/A for the cultural criticism.
- *Topic importance*: 3 / 10
- *Content notes*: Too late. Suicide, swastikas, humanism, anti-humanism, ironic immorality.
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.
- Argument

> *Punk is a music that is inherently hilarious. To try to make serious punk music is like trying to make serious happy hardcore. That's never been its purpose for me.*
>
> – my mate James

> *It has always been my way to de-value the fashionable, light-hearted, impulsive traits that people associate with punk, because punk is more than that, so much more. Those elements become trivial in the light of the experience that punkers share.*
>
> – Greg Graffin

Punk is ancient: say 40 years old. Anything this old in the modern age will in fact be several different things uneasily sharing a name. 3

It's easy to view punk as necessarily political and necessarily left-wing. But neither are generally true. Just one instance before we get into the weeds: The Ramones, the *central* example of a punk band, have exactly one even vaguely political song, a mild response to one faux pas by Reagan. (Their guitarist was a crabby Republican.)

At first, punk was *negative*: defined by its opposition and not a positive programme; and also as in nihilistic and downbeat, focussing on the worst things in the world for aesthetic reasons.

For best effects, set this playlist going before you continue.

Punk wasn't new

> *No Elvis, Beatles or the Rolling Stones in 1977*
>
> – The Clash

An interminable question among punk fans is when punk started, who counts as the pioneer, who counts as the precursors.

Well, the sound of "Year Zero" 1976 wasn't new: the incompetent garage rockers and a couple of the 'Kraut' rockers of the late 60s sounded exactly the same as the New Yorkers and Londoners of the late 70s. Television (1973-1978) get tagged as both a proto-punk and a post-punk band: simultaneously before and after, influence and pre-emptive successor. 1

The alliance of pop music and political radicalism wasn't new - consider all the *actual* social experimentation by the (hated, derided, 'soft') hippies. The hippies did pirate radio and DIY and zines. The hippies actually fought the police en masse, not just at gigs. The largest-scale punk practice, the Punk House or squat is just a tiny wee co-op commune, the sort of thing tried for hundreds of years, and the earliest examples are tied to Andy Warhol.

Even compared to other subcultures, punk is unusually closely tied to its music and fashion. Are there punks who don't like punk rock, who don't like patches and studs? Not many. What we call a subculture is a vague mix of subversive aesthetics, politics, and lifestyles. Sometimes it's principled, and sometimes it is just about the thrill of being contrary, of 'countersignalling'.

The punk look was kinda new, but really just a stronger form of greaser and hard mod style.

Nihilism and anti-establishment art is very old. And even the punks would have known about the aggressively negative art of 50s England.

What was novel about punk was not its content or its form, but its reception: nasty music at the top of the charts, all kinds of weirdos on TV with major label contracts, and a permanent change to the available palette of pop music.

What *is* novel about punk is its longevity: a radical arty youth movement of the mid C20th which did not lose all of its adherents, only most of them, and which continues to recruit from every new generation of contrary individualist teenagers.

Fashion movement that became political, or vice versa?

> *I was messianic about punk, seeing if one could put a spoke in the system in some way*
>
> – Dame Vivienne Westwood, Order of the British Empire

Another common talking point is "fashion punks": the superficial apolitical poseurs who dilute or co-opt the true scene.

You can guess what I'm going to say here: this is a perfect inversion of the origins of punk, among NY art schoolers and literal avant-garde haute couture (haut-en-bas). (Anti-fashion is still fashion: have you *seen* any catwalks lately?)

Sid Vicious wore a swastika to shock, while out on the town with his Jewish girlfriend; he wasn't an outlier. Maybe half of Misfits songs are about murder, rape, paedophilia, abduction, mind control, body horror, cannibalism. Insincerity was there from the start. Larping extremism.

No restriction on the "taste" of your lyrical content (nuclear terror, foetal meals, Hakenkreuz) but authoritarian restriction on style.

"Fashion" is probably too narrow: this kind of punk was shock art, instances from all media.

Why did early punk seem political?

I think it's people mistaking official documents as a complete picture of 70s culture. Punk

really did challenge a couple of dull British institutions: TV and radio were very clean and tightly controlled; but *people* never have been all that clean and controlled.

It's now hard to imagine a Western government banning pop music, but it wasn't long ago. Everyone *is* an unlicenced radio station now, via Youtube or podcasting or whatever.

An analogy: people look at photographs of Victorians and see stiff joyless people. But this is a mistake, two mistakes: you had to hold extremely still for a long time to get the exposure to come out without blurring, and the people in the photographs are disproportionately upper-class and thus unusually mannered.

Punk *needed* official disdain to feel relevant. Outside the west, it is quite often subject to oppression far beyond what the original American and British punks underwent.

Timeline

- March 1974: Television debut at CBGB
- Autumn 1974: Westwood's clothes shop reopens as SEX, the edgiest place around.
- August 1974: Ramones debut at CBGB
- January 1976: Issue #1 of 'Punk' magazine
- June 1976: Sex Pistols at the Lesser Free Trade Hall
- December 1976: Sex Pistols on the Bill Grundy show. 3rd ever televised "fuck".
- May 1977: "God Save the Queen" reaches #2 in the UK charts. A blank space is left on some charts (but not the official BBC one, and not #1, contrary to punk lore).

The WH

Smiths chart on the week the Sex Pistols peaked

What is ideology anyway?

The most common use is for "a political view I don't like". 2

Here I only mean "ideology" in the new neutral sense of 'a set of political beliefs'. (Whereas Marxists and politicians use it as an insult.)

Anti-politics

Some people define "politics" as "collective, negotiated use of power" - and in this sense, while anarchism (and fascism) is a form of *government,* it is not a form of *politics*.

Even late, post-80s punk is anti-political in one sense: it avoids existing social mechanisms like democracy or lobbying or markets. It is difficult and thankless to work within the system as a punk - if you succeed in changing something, then you will have failed, by becoming part of the establishment. Punks seem more likely to spoil votes. And the idea of a punk politician feels paradoxical, just a stunt.

Punk intellectuals

Punk as ideology has no central texts. If it has scripture, manifestos, intellectuals, then most punks haven't read them. Bizarrely, *lectures* are a main unit of discourse, besides of course the vague lyrics and ephemeral zines. But everyone is a self-publisher now. (I'm kind of out of the loop now, so I don't know whether punk on the internet thrived after zines declined. From the outside it doesn't look like it.)

Nonpunk sources:

1. Chomsky
2. Pilger
3. Mumia Abu-Jamal
4. Zinn

Actual insiders:

1. Terry Eagleton
2. Henry Rollins
3. Jello Biafra
4. Greg Graffin

Disclaimer (2020)

I wrote this a long time ago, before I was capable of gathering and analysing actual data. These days I'd do massive web scraping and get the empirical view. Don't take this too seriously.

So it wasn’t political, and then it was.

The ideology

> *Empty factories to the east and all our waste*
> *The shape of things that came, shown on the broken worker's face*
> *To the west you'll find a silicon promised land*
> *Where machines all replace their minds with systematic profit plans*
>
> *The course of human progress staggers like a drunk*
> *Its pace is quick and heavy but its mind is slow and blunt*
> *I look for optimism but I just don't know*
> *Its seeds are planted in a poison place where nothing grows*
>
> *Just one political song, just one political song*
> *To drop into the list that stretches years and years long*
> *Just one political song, just one political song*
> *To drop into the list that stretches years and years long*

– Op Ivy (1989)

One way to handle the messiness and variance of political ideologies is to give up the search for sufficient beliefs, away from the attempt to cleanly distinguish true punks from fake punks. Instead you can try splitting it into

- core beliefs (the essence of the thing),
- adjacent beliefs (other commonly found themes),
- peripheral (fringe but distinctive) beliefs.

This clunky approach lets us account for the mind-jarring variety of people that all call themselves liberals, or socialists, or whatever. The downside is that this always makes the "core" sound banal, because it has to be something that appeals to everyone.

A first attempt

- Authenticity
- Social conscience
- Alienation
- Freedom

There are systematic opposite trends for each of these: e.g. Sid's insincere swastika shirt, punk pop's replacement of social alienation with personal alienation, the punk uniform, the enforced conformity of hardcore or the ridiculous backlash against Bad Religion's proggy second album.

Situation

A standard theory of punk equates it with Situationism, French absurdist Marxism. Despite Malcolm McLaren's initial posturing, and a couple of actual proponents, this isn't right: punk is larger than this. Both irony and Marxism are adjacent elements.

Core elements

- *Anti-elitism*. Entails amateurism, hatred of pretence. (This is *not* the same as egalitarianism, below.)
- *Alienation*. From something or everything mainstream: careerism, consumerism, ordinary social interactions, romance, nation, foreign policy, religion, species, even hedonism. In particular:
- *Anti-establishment*. The System. If you have the energy you might dream of breaking away and creating a perfect part inside the evil whole, the punk house.
- *Individualism*. Entails nonconformity; customized, deviant appearance [itself a new uniform]; drugs; refusal of ordinary roles. Free thought. 4

Adjacent elements

- *Snobbery*. A rejection of pop culture, as brainwashing commercialised shit or just shit. One in a series of rejections one must conduct to be truly DIY. (Entails abhorrence of popularity, the fear and hatred of "selling out". Often painted as anti-consumerism.
- *Inverse snobbery*. Off-hand rejection of bourgeois quality and tradition. Generally not because of a Marxist critique, but because boring or inaccessible or old. (This is just anti-elitism again.) 5
- *Authenticity*. Honesty and autonomy as far more important than quality. DIY and amateurism and abhorrence of profit.
- *Irony*. A lot of punk is self-consciously dumb fun, and a lot of the rest covers extreme things for the hell of it.
- *Nihilism / Pessimism*. Focus on the worst things in the world. War, crime, atrocities, etc. Often identification with the freakish, the low, the cheap and the taboo, for kicks (Lou Reed, Iggy) or semi-political art (Patti Smith). Obsession with kitsch and cool. (Richard Hell) Sometimes also primitivism.
- *Egalitarianism*. But often in a specific *inverted* way: "We are all sub-human scum. You're no better than me, I no more than you.". Entails the DIY ethic, bands playing in the crowd - but more importantly an usual degree of activism, direct action, civil disobedience.

> *look at you, then look at me / there is no difference I can see*
>
> – D.R.I, rather than say Barney the Dinosaur

- *Internationalism*. One reason punk remains so lively is that people listen to foreign bands, and then somehow manage to book them for international tours. This makes the community much larger, more interesting, and more sustainable. Among the few other cultures which pull this off to this degree are metal, Art and football.
- *Anti-capitalism*. Common but not as common as you'd think from outside. Few bands really took it on with real seriousness. Entails guilt about consumerism, disdain for material comforts, opportunistic squatting, freeganism. 6
- *Rationalism*. Atheism, Skepticism, lip service to the great social theorists. This is the upside of basing your worldview on Noam Chomsky's.
- *Animal rights & environmentalism*. I don't know numbers, but definitely a disproportionate awareness of social justice, ethical and environmental issues, at least where this conforms to the above anti-state, anti-tradition rules. (Entails veganism and BIKEPUNK.)

- *Syncretism*: basically any genre has some band doing the "-punk" version of it. The ska-reggae-dub-punk complex of the early 80s was particularly important. This is the antidote to the purists still listening to dull iterations of exactly the same music forty years on. I think this is yet another factor in punk's longevity. 7

Peripheral elements

MiSanDao, Chinese oi

- *Working-class consciousness*: As in far-left Oi.
- *Racism*: As in far-right Oi. Apart from the explicit kind, the rest is maybe just the background level of society at large, or maybe exacerbated by the edginess and dark irony. Punk, like its descendent indie music, is disproportionately white, but note that this may be a boring statistical thing.
- *Feminism*: There was a bit of gender flex in punk originally (compare Joey Ramone to Mick Jagger), and many women in the NY mix. But, then hardcore was *much* more macho than ordinary society. It took a while for the natural mix of feminism and punk to really show up.
- *New Anarchism*. Anarchism was fairly dormant from the end of the Spanish Civil War to the 70s. While it was previously a thing for angry young men, it is now the quintessential youth politics, away from the mannered, literary resistance of Kropotkin or Proudhon, towards the tragically hip Hakim Bey and Howard Zinn and David Graeber.
- *Libertarianism*. I have in mind people like Steve Albini and Frank Kozik), but you see this in the anti-SJW kind of punk a lot - "you can't judge me".
- *Straight edge*. Self-control fetishism. No booze, no drugs, often no meat, and sometimes even no casual sex.

> *'Punk rock' is a word used by dilettantes and heartless manipulators about music that takes up the energies, the bodies, the hearts, the souls, the time and the minds of young men who give everything they have to it.*
>
> - Iggy Pop

It is a style, it became an ideology, and it remains a community. All in all, a good way to spend your teens.

Case study: Against Me!

> *Sell out or set out against.*
>
> - *Shit Stroll*, 1997

> *it's so much less confusing when lines are drawn like that*
> *When people are either consumers or revolutionaries.*
>
> - *Those Anarcho Punks*, 2003

> *Foul play! There's a target on the audience -*
> *Vampires! We're only in it for the money -*
> *Diluted! We took the movement to the market -*
> *So fuck us! We totally sold out the scene."*
>
> - *The Shaker*, 2005

> *Protest songs! in response to military aggression.*
> *Protest songs! trying to stop the soldiers' guns.*
>
> - *White People for Peace*, 2007

> *The revolution was a lie.*
>
> - *I Was A Teenage Anarchist*, 2010

Against Me! are a great example of many phenomena that haunt counterculture bands - and tell-me-where-you-live-I-will-gig-in-your-toilet folk-punk most of all.

- a morbid fear of co-option and "selling out" (i.e. of success);
- the need to sermonize, to confirm one's membership in the unsold-out orthodoxy;
- snobbery ("fucking radio rock!");
- a love of levelling-down;
- utterly restricted aesthetic options.

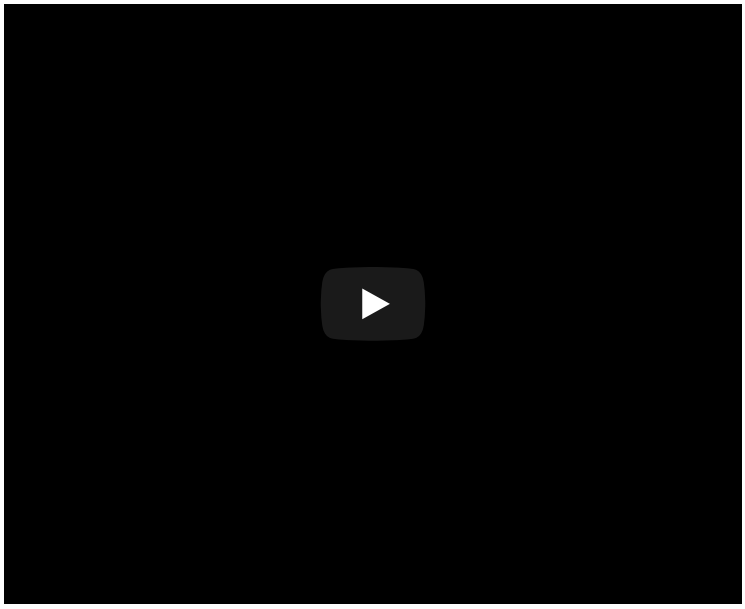
AM! lived in a place where "major label debut" means not "the beginning of your pro musical career", but *its spiritual end*. They got out, though only via the most impressive fanbase alienation of recent years. They went from Crass to blink-182, Plan-it X to Sire (and back to DIY)

Why on earth would you attack political idealism? Oh yeah; because it's infested with posture, self-importance, intolerance and wilful technical ignorance. As such, large bits of it are an impersonation of a political movement. Lightly-donned, ill-conceived political idealism is a force *preserving* the status quo: firstly since, in rejecting due process and reform, it ends up achieving nothing; and secondly because, if-and-when it takes up direct action, it alienates most people, who could help change things on grander scales.

"The personal is political; so, *everything is political;* and, if you're not making political *épater le bourgeois!* music then you're a fucking shill. With us or against us. All or nothing."

I don't want to attack DIY; why on earth would you? These folk care about financial and artistic autonomy to the point of only needing to break-even from it (if that). These folk freed themselves (and you) of the self-aggrandizing, fifty-foot-high-stage mythology that chokes rock music. Oh yeah; because in hermiting itself off, it disparages most people and the things most people like; demonizes things which actually do good, like trade; and cos it leads to tall-poppy syndrome.

2000



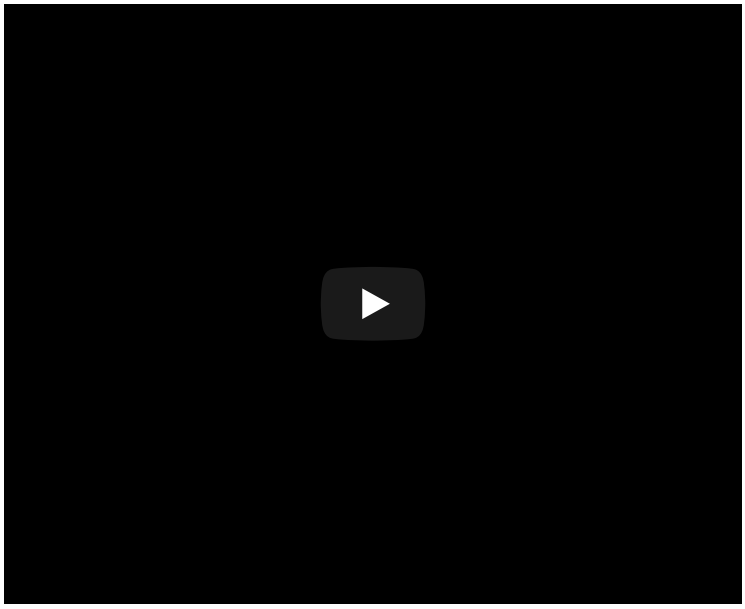
Despite its screamed historical content, this is really about love across political lines. The bassline is pure doo-wop, a simple addition to the long list of punk songs that ignore the "Year Zero" myth and the neurotic rejection of melody. There's anxious self-consciousness throughout the AM! discography; the last single is just the most blatant one. Then there's their getting tired of pretence; sleep (passivity, peace) is another main motif. ("8 Hours", "Turn those Clapping Hands"). This is as should be; making art which is about many things, many brilliant greys.

2003:

Upon signing to Fat Wreck Chords, though - a successful, famously socially progressive, non-corporate, non-RIAA entity that apparently doesn't bother with contracts - there was ideological blood in the water.

> *Disgruntled fans slashed the tires of their tour van in one town and graffitied it in another (scrawling "remember when you mattered" but misspelling "Against"). At a concert in Texas a protest band called Against Us! played in the parking lot outside the club. A writer for Maximum RocknRoll, the granddaddy of DIY zines, went so far as to issue a fatwa against the band, listing tips readers might find handy for disrupting Against Me! shows (like pouring bleach on their T-shirt table).*
>
> *"He came to a show and let off a stink bomb," Seward says. "We were like, 'Well, this smells,' and kept on playing." Even in a notoriously balkanized subculture, this kind of abuse was over the top..."*

By the time the pitchfork-toting scene had proven that they were a self-obsessed deadend packed with snobs - AM! were on their way to Warner. The singer recently got into some ugliness with a drunk kid angry at their pop music.



The really funny thing is that at no point did they stop being politically radical.

Proportion of songs with specifically political lyrics

- **Vivida Vis:** 33% ("In the Name of What?" "National Myth" and "This Is Control")
- **12" EP:** 40% ("I am Citizen" & "All or Nothing")
- **Acoustic EP:** 33% ("Those Anarcho Punks", maybe "Reinventing")
- **Reinventing Axl Rose:** 54% ("Starving", "Jordan's", "Those Anarchos", "Reinventing", "Baby I'm An Anarchist", "8 Hours" sort-of)
- **Eternal Cowboy**: 28% ("Cliche", "Rice and Bread", "Turn those Clapping Hands" - their best)
- **Former Clarity:** 29% (sort-of "Justin", "From Her Lips", "Holy Shit!", "Clarity")
- **New Wave**: 40% ("New Wave", sort-of "Up the Cuts", "White People", "Americans Abroad")
- **White Crosses**: 40% (1, 2, 6, 10)

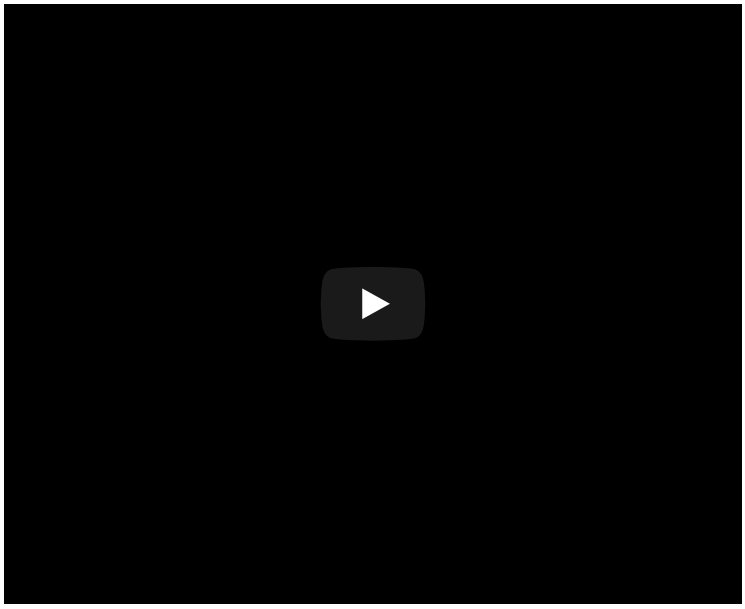
So it's not *lyrical* dilution. The last album even calls out old Robert McNamara's war crimes, in a massive pop-punk chorus.

"Aha!" cries our strawman purist. "But they are *politically* diluted! Deed over word! Look what they did to Plan-it X! In profiteering, they have abandoned DIY!"

No. This view is an analogue of admitting that you do not listen to *music* at all; you listen instead to artists, scenes and Propositions.

The backlash against Against Me! is aesthetic. People who reject them for their pop-punk sound and sharp new wardrobe are right in one way - there is no easy way to separate content and style - but dead wrong about the politics of accessible sounds.

2005:



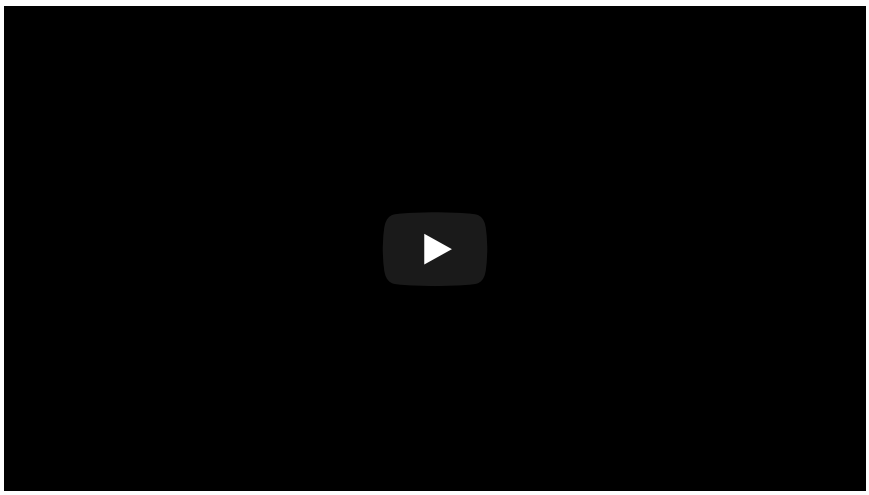
2007:

It's difficult to pinpoint where they stopped being punk, because I don't care. *New Wave* and *White Crosses* are populist, post-emo rock'n'roll bullshit, and a good thing too. *New Wave* is unpleasantly self-conscious; more than half the album is about the music industry, as if they signed up to Sire just to make a musical report for the underground. Unrepentent too, mind; featuring the tall one out of Tegan and Sara. (And why not.)

What is interesting is that they didn't have to mature into pop-punk, the Green-Day-with-a-vocabulary that they did. *As the Eternal Cowboy*, the first Fat Wreck release, is a bunch of short vignettes that flirt with all kinds of sounds, deciding what to become. There's something that could become great folk. They might yet develop this more oblique stuff, pull more "Pints of Guinness".

Even the album's name, "New Wave" is a stuck-out tongue - read it as "replacement of punk" the parvenu pop that "co-opted" punk in the 80s... And, with hindsight, the 2005 album title is another sly one.

2010:



Profound cheese; specific Springsteen; wordy Weezer; marxist My Chemical Romance. (For once the music video really adds - that massive grin at 3:11...)

> *I do think that, unfortunately, a majority of kids out there aren't necessarily interested. Instituting a draft might be the only thing that will really make them political. But it's not just kids, most people in general are happy just to be ignorant to what's going on.*

Where does someone's right to prefer ignorance end? I don't know - but slashing someone's

tyres for wanting to make slightly different music says a lot about you.

Personal note

I went 200 miles to see Leatherface as a teen. It turned out to be an over-18s gig, so I was bounced. The band heard about this within 10 minutes of it happening, and the singer came out to persuade the bouncer to let me in. It didn't work.

I listened to the start of the gig through a vent round the outside of the venue. Stubbs introed "Dead Industrial Atmosphere" with "CAN YA HEAR ME GAVIIIIN". Later, an audience member came out and changed clothes with me (pork pie hat, horrible leather waistcoast) and I walked past the bouncers. On seeing me inside, the band jumped up and down with glee.

There are other communities that do such things for strangers for free, including their high-status members. But it's a weekly occurrence for punks.

(A school night.)

Epigram

> *one of the things that makes the punk stance unique is how it seems to assume substance or at least style by the abdication of power:* ***Look at me! I'm a cretinous little wretch! And proud of it!***
>
> *So many of the people around the CBGB and Max's scene have always seemed emotionally if not outright physically crippled — you see speech impediments, hunchbacks, limps, but most of all an overwhelming spiritual flatness. You take parental indifference, a crappy educational system, lots of drugs, media overload, a society with no values left except the hysterical emphasis on physical perfection, and you end up with these little nubbins: the only rebellion around, as Life magazine once labeled the Beats. Richard Hell gave us the catchphrase "Blank Generation," although he insists that he didn't mean a crowd with all the dynamism of a static-furry TV screen but rather a bunch of people finally freed by the collapse of all values to reinvent themselves, to make art statements of their whole lives.*
>
> *Unfortunately, such a great utopian dream, which certainly is not on its first go-round here, remains just that, because most people would rather follow. What you're left with, aside from the argument that it beats singles bars, is compassion. When the Ramones bring that sign onstage that says "GABBA GABBA HEY," what it really stands for is "We accept you."*
>
> *Once you get past the armor of dog collars, black leather, and S&M affectations, you've got some of the gentlest or at least most harmless people in the world: Sid Vicious legends aside, almost all their violence is self-directed...*
>
> *anytime you conclude that life stinks and the human race mostly amounts to a pile of shit, you've got the perfect breeding ground for fascism. A lot of outsiders, in fact, think punk is fascist, but that's only because they can't see beyond certain buzzwords, symbols, and pieces of regalia...*
>
> *there's a difference between hate and a little of the old epater gob at authority: swastikas in punk are basically another way for kids to get a rise out of their parents and maybe the press, both of whom deserve the irritation. To the extent that most of these spikedomes ever had a clue on what that stuff originally meant, it only went so far as their intent to shock. "It's like a stance," as Ivan says. "A real immature way of being*

> *dangerous.”*

– Lester Bangs (1979)

(before the good ideology)

1. Note that 'Year Zero' was a Khmer Rouge socialist slogan.
2. My own preferred unkind meaning is ideology as unreflective, tribal philosophy.
3. Strong evidence that punk isn't one thing: how many other subcultures need a renowned disclaimer like "Nazi Punks Fuck Off"?
4. Obviously not literally free thought, since no tight-knit human culture ever manages to allow that.
5. I had these snobberies in the core, but in retrospect the old purism is dead: there are now plenty of punks who admit to liking pop, not just Joey, and the noughties were rammed full of punk covers of classic ballads, which is actually how I learned about great pop.
6. As always, this coexists with commodity fetishism, e.g. $200 for a rare anarchist cassette tape.
7. A good example is Joe Strummer, who did punk while it was new, making some of the best punk albums (as opposed to punk songs), but who quickly moved on to dub and reggae and 'world'.

Tags: music, culture, politics, subculture, criticism

Why is quality rare?

24th March 2015

- *Why in general is it harder to do things well than badly?*
- *Confidence*: 80% that I've captured the main contributors.
- *Topic importance*: 8 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Podcast version here.

> *χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά. (Beauty is hard.)*
>
> – Solon or Plato

I recently realised I don't know why quality is rare. Some possible reasons:

- ***Brute probability***
  'Quality is rare because the number of quality states is much smaller than the number of bad states of things - and neither nature nor artifice are enough to target the former very well or very often.'
  If you've spent much time looking at C20th modernism, this will seem plausible.

- ***Social constructionism***
  'Quality is rare because we estimate a thing's quality by its rarity, or by how hard it is to do.'
  (Cop-out, true only of positional goods and not others.)

- ***Labour theory of quality***
  'Quality is rare because it is actually a function of the *amount of skilled labour* spent on the thing, and skilled labour is rare.'
  (False, even for just explaining or moralising *exchange* value.)
  Related: to be competent at something takes a rare conjunction of traits: intelligence and conscientiousness and slack to build skill.

- ***Inverse labour theory of quality***
  'Quality is much less rare than it used to be, because of machine production. Quality is proportional with driving humans out of manufacturies. The knowledge economy and the cultural economy are mostly crap because they are not automated enough.'
  (Fits disturbingly well.)

- ***Labour thermodynamics***
  'Quality is rare because good things occupy lower-entropy states and so, by the second law, require more Work to create and maintain.'
  Is cleaning the best example of this?

- ***Weak incentives***
  Most people ordering most tasks are not capable of judging the quality (quickly). So most tasks *can't* incentivise quality, so people don't put in the effort required.
  This is clearly only a partial answer - why would we default to low quality if it was equally easy to do high?

- ***The Metaphysics of Quality***
  Robert Pirsig has a complicated answer which he hides behind two big autobiographical / allegorical novels. As far as I can tell his answer is: quality isn't a property of objects or even situations: it's an interaction between your mind and your object, a Kant-style

apperception. The implication is that you can cultivate finding quality everywhere, and this is a big part of the contemplative traditions of the world; why they're good.

I want to retort that things aren't that easy, that powerful forces put us in this state (see below) and that mere introspection should not be expected to foil such forces. But it's been a long time since I read *Zen* and I dimly recall that he's not naive, that he doesn't blame us victims.

- ***Evolved hastiness***
  'Quality is optimality. Optimality is rare because we were tuned for satisficing ("good enough"), not optimisation ("good as possible"). On the evolutionary scale, we didn't have time to optimise anything, so hasty mediocrity is our default state. We clearly can do better sometimes, we just don't do it without trying.'

- ***Evolved tastelessness***
  'Quality is rare because prehistoric 'savannah' tasks admit of fewer grades of quality than those stipulated by audiophiles or wine buffs today. (The impala was either edible or inedible.) So our *quality organs* are underdeveloped.'

- ***Evolved shallowness***
  'Quality is rare because we evolved to value the new, and most things aren't new. An obsession with novelty was a winning strategy in the ancestral environment. So we devalue the common in order to direct more attention on the rare and thus and thus maximise diet balance / mating opportunities.'

  Big issue with this: novelty has been increasing massively in the last 300 hundred years, and going by the ambient pessimism, I'm not sure people's experienced value has been tracking that huge increase. (Note also that this is social constructionism with a different hat on.)

- ***Environment shift: Out of our depth***
  That is, our environment has shifted far from the one we formed our heuristics and hard-wired competencies in. The atomic actions of the modern world (punctuality, lifelong learning of new systems, temperance when surrounded by superstimuli, being relaxed in large crowds, extreme focus duration - sometimes for an entire hour!) are basically absent in the ancestral env. Neither our genes nor our culture have adapted enough yet.
  Prediction: it should be much easier to find high quality in primordial things: hunting, swimming, dancing, group singing, language. 1

- ***Evolved reward bias: pessimism***
  Paul Christiano notes that when you are designing agents, if you don't know the correct reward function then you are much better served by giving them falsely low reward (including random jump-scare penalties) than falsely high reward. The latter leads to inactivity and randomness; the former to desperate intelligence. This is the best single explanation.

These are not probably mutually exclusive. I'll fill in new ideas and evidence for each as I go.

That bad things are easy and good things hard, that pain is sometimes chronic and pleasure always fleeting, seems like the largest part of "the Human Condition".

Consider: if we were immortal but otherwise exactly as we are, then a lot of people would still have a terrible time. (Even ignoring the dementia and cachexia.)

But if we were stubbornly happy - if we often experienced joy for no particular reason, if the worst misfortune was quickly recovered from - then at least to me this seems like the

remaining problems of mortality, meaning, progress would become ordinary ill-defined problems rather than the miserable ruinous wicked problems they are for many people now.

(The natural crabbed, reward-biased response is to worry that such “hyperthymic” people would be deeply deluded or unempathetic. We have a couple of real examples suggesting otherwise.)

1. *Evidence*: Native speakers of a language are remarkable in their recall and live generation, even when the language is luridly complex. The weakness of adult language learning is no counterevidence, since you wouldn't need more than one.

   Counterevidence: Physical and social clumsiness is common, with maybe 6% with some form of dyspraxia. Many people find it extremely difficult to find a partner. The current physical and social environment is very different, but we fail on easy cases, e.g. dropping things when walking on flat surfaces.

Tags: meaning, philosophy, transhumanism, suffering, biology

```
sudo apt-get update
sudo apt-get install ruby-full build-essential zlib1g-dev

echo '# Install Ruby Gems to ~/gems' >> ~/.bashrc
echo 'export GEM_HOME="$HOME/gems"' >> ~/.bashrc
echo 'export PATH="$HOME/gems/bin:$PATH"' >> ~/.bashrc
source ~/.bashrc

gem install jekyll bundler
bundle install

echo 'alias jekse="bundle exec jekyll serve --incremental"' >> ~/.bashrc
jekse
```

Comparing up and down

31st July 2014

- *Choosing your reference class for happiness or growth.*
- *Confidence*: 80% that this axis is important, but the details are vague and untested.
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Argument

> *Everything is amazing right now, and nobody's happy… I was on an airplane and there was internet, high speed internet on the airplane… I'm watching YouTube clips; it's amazing… then it breaks down and they apologize: 'the internet is not working'. And the guy next to me goes 'pah! this is bullshit!' …*
>
> *Everybody on every plane should just constantly be going: "Oh my God, wow!" … you're sitting in a chair in the sky! …People say 'there's delays on flights' - delays? Really? New York to California in 5 hours! That used to take 30 years and a bunch of you would die on the way there…*

– Louis CK

> *we do not notice absolute changes in stimuli; we notice relative changes. Which leads to an answer to the question above: the error that needs to be reduced in the brains of organisms such as ourselves is not absolute error, but relative error.*

– Varshney & Sun

When deciding whether a situation is good or bad, you can compare up (to a superior reference class) or compare down.

A key finding of the behavioural and psychological sciences is that humans don't take absolute measurements (naturally). Instead we find some similar object and judge things relative to it. This is why anchoring, framing effects (etc) work on us, when they shouldn't. Most importantly: we seem to judge value this way too. The tantalising possibility is that we can *create* value for free, by merely changing our framing.

Examples:

- To have gratitude for x is to compare down to a world where you don't have it.

- Clinical trials with placebo controls are comparing down, to (roughly) nothing; clinical trials with reference treatment controls are comparing up.

- Comparing *between* people is difficult: too much varies (energy; aptitude; lottery of fascinations) and ordering them is anyway risky. Better to compare up to your personal best, or down to your past self.

- "It's just a drop in the ocean" is comparing up, to having solved the entire problem all at once. This is very useful for correcting people who think their ineffective policy is amazing (recycling, say). David Mitchell: "*Yet what is any ocean, but a multitude of drops?*"

- One of the strongest ways to make me realise my good fortune is checking my 'temporal privilege'. In many ways it is better to be a minimum-wage worker now than to be Julius Caesar, or King Croesus in their time. There's no amount of money you could give me to live in the year 1700 even. (It's far larger than the other privileges.)

  When people (or I myself) complain about the tedium or inauthenticity of white-collar jobs, I retort, "But think of how painful and miserable and cold and hungry and scared and ignorant our ancestors were! Your problems are small on the long view, and in such a rich society there is an alternative". (Gwern's calculation is not prudential: it is a tool to force you to realise your freedom and your luck.)

- When rating my own posts' importance, I compare up to the most important possible work: the one that discusses how to preserve value until the far reaches of the future, over trillions of years. If I compared down, to an average social media status update, then my scores would be much higher.

- When I play saxophone I often feel frustration at not sounding like Coltrane or Parker (up); but when I sing I feel joy at just being able to make noise (down). I'm not sure which mindset has led to better improvement.

- Picking a too-extreme reference class leads to absurd decisions. When my food is starting to go bad, I opt not to eat it – when I might instead compare down to having no food at all and a skeletal death.

- Strong consequentialism (the view that it is mandatory to improve the world as much as you can) compares up, and only up, to a perfect altruist with my skills and resources. It doesn't matter that most people do relatively little for others; it doesn't matter if I do a lot already.

- I think some part of politics reduces to this. When questions of UK social justice come up, my first thoughts are things like, "Yeah, but the British minimum wage is in the top 15% of global incomes". I compare down to the global working class.

  This is true and important, but for some purposes 2 it is also stupid, since on the sad margin of nationalist politics, giant public transfers to GiveDirectly are not on the table. Unless they are, it is true but does not *help* to paint the locally poor as globally rich. (Maybe some people are inefficiently rich on *any* reading.)

  However, we have to remember that the converse – comparing up, to a better arrangement – often means making a comparison with something that doesn't exist, never has, and may not be able to.

When it’s important to improve, you want to compare up. When it’s more important to feel good, or to just *get on with it*, you want to compare down. I try to do plenty of both. “*Relative to the human average I’ve done a lot and know a lot.*” and “*On the grand scale of things, I haven’t done very much yet.*” Comparing up is more natural to me, so I make an effort to recall my achievements and the base rates.

Saying “what I have is good” might reduce your drive to improve the situation. Are the two package deals 1) gratitude & de facto conservatism, or 2) aggro, envy, & progress? Yes, maybe, but we can always try to alternate. really fast.

Questions

- When does comparing down improve mood?
- Does comparing up actually lead to greater improvement?
- When does comparing down improve motivation, by making you more relaxed and self-aligned?
- When does comparing up harm mood?
- How does this fit with ideas of hedonic setpoint and the first-derivative view of welfare? (That people don't feel levels, they feel changes.)

Science

I found exactly one paper vaguely testing the comparing-up intervention. But the similarities between physical perception and value perception (both involve relative top-down processing) make me wonder if predictive processing is involved. The connoisseur's hammer for every psychological nail.

There is some relation to Stoic philosophy and CBT too.

The idea is in the same space as growth mindset, or grit, or any number of overhyped academic rehashes of gumption.

Then there's mindfulness, which is a different claim about one's stance having strong effects on value of experience.

Better to be a subaltern in New York than the emperor of old Rome

Branko Milanovic, just before setting up a strawman to dismiss:

> *For Julius Caesar to read a book overnight, easily move at night around his palace, or listen to the songs he liked would have required perhaps hundreds of workers (slaves) to hold the torches or sing his favorite arias all night. Even Caesar, if he were to do that night after night, might, after some time, have run out of resources (or might have provoked a rebellion among the singers).*
>
> *But for us the expense for a similar pleasure is very small, even trivial, say $2 per night. Consequently, some people come to the conclusion that Caesar must have had tiny wealth measured in today’s bundle of goods since a repeated small nightly expense of $2 (in today’s prices) would have eventually ruined him. Other people at Caesar’s time had obviously much less: ergo, the world today is incomparably richer than before.*

The exception is of course the dubious goods of position and domination. But I don't want these, and don't want to want them.

Alisifuyejua, limemwangaza

"*Alisifuyejua, limemwangaza*" is a Swahili proverb meaning "the sun shines on the one who praises it".

I like it a lot; it reflects a couple of things about human happiness. It's probably orthogonal to the reference class stuff above; instead it's another component of a good stance toward the world: looking for the good in things. There's a hint of positive-thinking woo to it — as if the world responded *causally* to devotion — but discard that in favour of:

1. *People* are the loci of value; value is produced by the interface of minds with certain parts of the world; it is not written into just us or the order of things.

2. No value without receptivity. Being conscious isn't enough. (I think you can sensibly distinguish 'receptivity to good' from hope, and hope from expectation.)

3. Misery can destroy most of the lived world. (Ain't no sunshine; who loves the sun; I don't believe in the sun.)

(Other things I take it to *not* be saying: "Fake it til you make it"; "misery is the fault of the miserable"; "hope is enough to be happy".)

But how much is receptivity under our control? It will take some odd psychology work to capture that variable. Interesting political-theory discussion of being receptive as the key to most good things here. ("Ethics and Global Politics" Vol 4, No 4 (2011).)

A pig happy

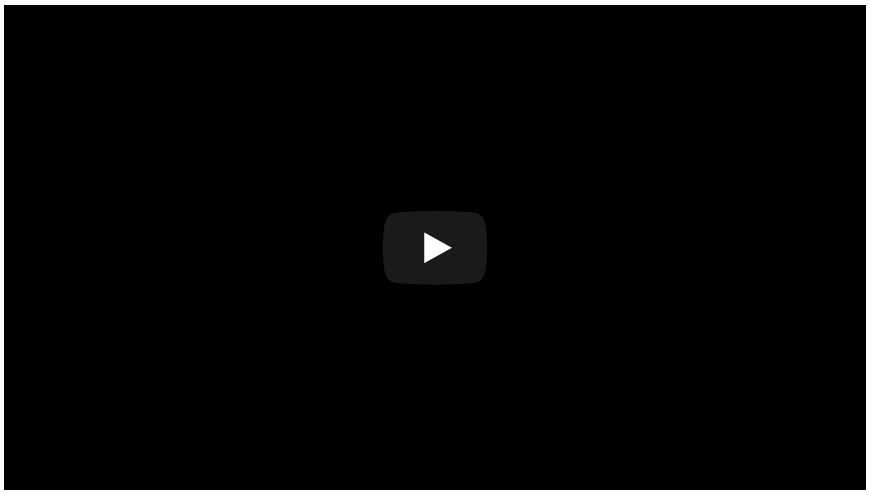
Assume that the above sort of thing was arbitrarily powerful, that we could feel good at any moment. Is generalised levity desirable?

An old current of thought is dead-set against it (I call it "lacrimism", to go with the ancient doctrine "deathism"). Roger Scruton can always be counted upon to piss in the beer with style: he believes that ubiquitous wonder and joy is impossible, and would make us swinish idiots, "a kind of postmodern individual" he doesn't want to be seated next to at a dinner party:

> *Everything deep in us depends upon our mortal condition, and while we can solve our problems and live in peace with our neighbours we can do so only through compromise and sacrifice. We are not, and cannot be, the kind of posthuman cyborgs that rejoice in eternal life, if life it is... The soul-less optimism of the transhumanists reminds us that we should be gloomy, since our happiness depends on it.*

We should listen to this, but we have reason not to heed it. Not least because lacrimism is self-fulfilling: if no-one believes that it is possible to have a Good life without suffering and vice, it can never become possible. This sounds idealistic, but I think its counter-quietism is inherent to science:

> *the greatest enrichment the scientific culture could give us is... a moral one... scientists know, as starkly as any men have known, that the individual human condition is tragic... But what they will not admit is that, because the individual condition is tragic, therefore the social condition must be tragic, too... The impulse behind the scientists drives them to limit the area of tragedy, to take nothing as tragic that can conceivably lie within men's will....*
>
> - CP Snow



Scruton as Merritt's protagonist.

Self-help Satan

> *Farewell happy fields*
> *Where joy for ever dwells: hail horrors, hail*
> *Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell*
> *Receive thy new possessor: one who brings*
> *A mind not to be changed by place or time.*
> *The mind is its own place, and in itself*
> *Can make a heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.*
> *What matter where, if I be still the same,*
> *And what I should be, all but less than he*
> *Whom thunder hath made greater?*

See also

- The Parable of the Talents by Scott Alexander
- *Choosing the Zero Point* by orthonormal
-
- Stoicism seems to be the philosophy of constantly comparing down.

1. Anything except an ideal, universalist state or other gathering.

Tags: self-help, mental-health, philosophy

Rubinations

20th October 2011

- *An excellent trend in C21st pop - young producers + past-it singers.*
- *Topic importance*: 3 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

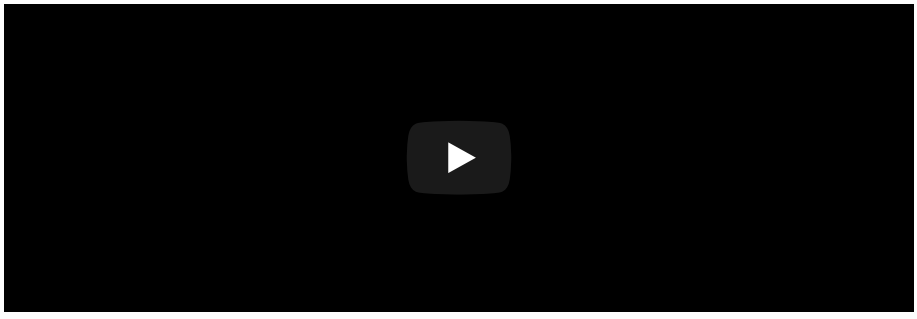
Playlist

One of the nicer things in the last 20 years of pop music are *rubinations*, after Rick Rubin, an early innovator in it:

1. an over-the-hill musician
2. is renewed, accrues critical acclaim
3. from working with a young svengali producer,
4. on an album containing covers (especially surprising ones).
5. The festival circuit
6. or very large sales follow.

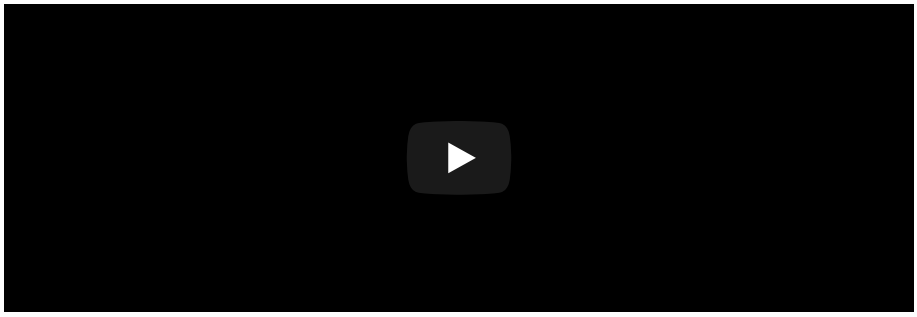
May-September music.

- Johnny Cash (& Rick Rubin) - American Recordings (1994-2003).
  Satisfies #1, 2, 3, 4, 6.



- Loretta Lynn (& Jack White) - on 2004's Van Lear Rose.
  Satisfies 1, 2, 3, 4.

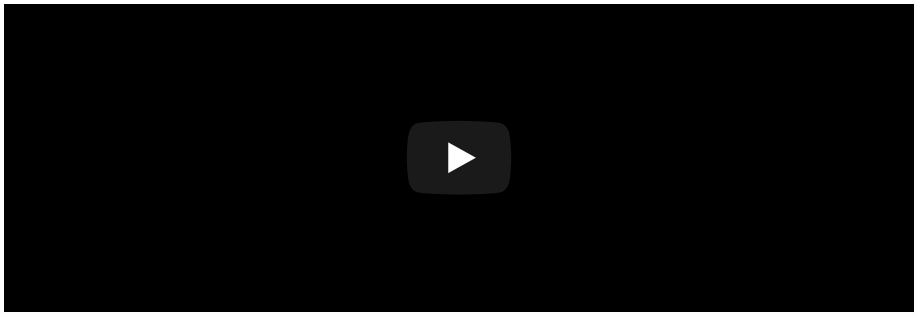
- Mavis Staples (& Jeff Tweedy) - 2010’s You Are Not Alone (and others). 1, 3, 4.



- Wanda Jackson (& Jack White) - on 2011’s The Party Ain’t Over.
  Satisfies 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & perhaps soon 6.

- Shirley Bassey (& the world) - on 2008’s The Performance. Satisfies 1,2,3,4,5, and of course 6.

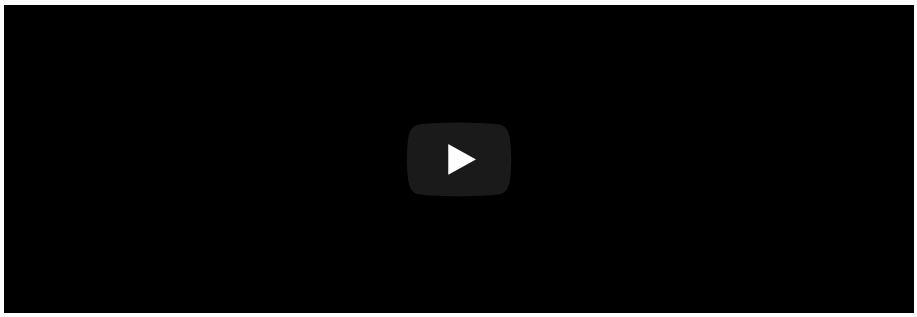
- Neil Diamond (& Rick Rubin)- on 2005’s 12 Songs.
  Satisfies 1,3,4,5 & 6.



- Vashti Bunyan (& Max Richter & Animal Collective!) - on 2005’s Lookaftering.
  1, 2, 3, 4, 6.

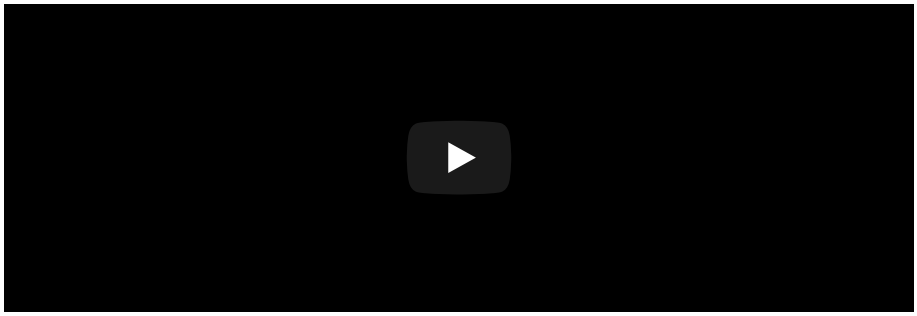
- Bettye Lavette (& Joe Henry) - on 2005’s I’ve Got My Own Hell To Raise.
  1,2,3,4,5.

- Willie Nelson (& Daniel Lanois) - on 1998’s Teatro.
  Satisfies 1,4,6.



- Willie Nelson (& Ryan Adams) - on 2004’s Songbird.
  Satisfies 1,2,4,5,6.

- Howlin Wolf (& Norman Dayron) - on 1971’s The London Sessions.
  Satisfies 1,2,3,4.



- Muddy Waters (& Johnny Winter) - on 1977’s Hard Again.
  1,2,3.

> *Embedding forbidden, but click here. The best single blues session?*

- Leonard Cohen (& Sharon Robinson) - on 2001’s Ten New Songs.
  2,3,6.

- RL Burnside (& Jon Spencer) - on 1996’s A Ass Pocket of Whiskey and others.
  1,3,4.

- John Fahey (& Jim O’Rourke) - on 1997’s Womblife.
  1,3,4.

- Glen Campbell - 2008’s Meet Glen Campbell, cover dreck.
  1,3,5.

- Gil Scott-Heron (& Richard Russell) - on 2010’s I’m New Here.
  1,2,3,4.

- Roky Erikson (& Will Sheff) - on 2010’s True Love Will Cast Out All Evil.
  Satisfies 1 and 3.

- Candi Staton (& Mark Nevers) - 2006’s His Hands.
  1,3,4,5.

- Robert Plant (& T-Bone Burnett) - on 2006’s Raising Sand.
  1,2,3,4,6.

- Jimmy Cliff (with Tim Armstrong!) on Rebirth (2012)
  1, 2, 3, 4

- The Stooges (& Steve Albini) on The Weirdness.
  1,3,6.
  [No.]

Tom Jones continues to try, but he didn’t rise anywhere in the first place, and so did not fall, and so cannot be renewed.

Alt-washing

A less exalted mirror image of these albums, though: pop stars having one album produced by a high-cred cult figure. While it's easy to interpret rubinations - producers are music nerds, rebirth is a deep and appealing trope everywhere and always - I do not pretend to know what these mean.

Tim Armstrong (P!nk)

Howe Gelb (KT Tunstall)

Bill Laswell (Motorhead, Ramones)

Odd choice, I grant you: but the point is that, however revered they are, these are two of the least experimental rock bands.

Jon Brion (Sky Ferreira)

Steve Albini (The Cribs)

Glyn Johns (Linda Ronstadt)

I could've made this list easier by just doing "surprising producers" - John Darnielle and Erik Rutan,

Tags: music, criticism, lists

Misreading Russell on radical scepticism

1st February 2012

- *Two responses to radical scepticism I hallucinated.*
- *Confidence*: N/A; revisionism, not actual history.
- *Topic importance*: 1 / 10

> *The philosopher believes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the building: posterity discovers it in the bricks with which he built and which are then often used again for better building.*
>
> - Nietzsche

Philosophers do this funny thing where they write about old philosophers, but apply wildly anachronistic or counterfactual ideas to them, in an attempt to fix their arguments for them. The following was my attempt at this sport, as an immature young man infatuated with philosophical method.

> *The hardest of hard data are of two sorts: the particular facts of sense, and the general truths of logic … Without this assumption, we are in danger of falling into that universal scepticism which, as we saw, is as barren as it is irrefutable.*
>
> - Russell (1914)

> *Indeed, there is little but prejudice and habit to be said for the view that there is a world at all.*
>
> - Russell (1931)

> *If, however, anyone chooses to maintain solipsism [scepticism] … I shall admit that he cannot be refuted, but shall be profoundly sceptical of his sincerity.*
>
> - Russell (1948)

The following reads two of Bertrand Russell's epistemologies (1912 & 1948) in terms of recent work, i.e. as a system of epistemic norms. This is revisionism – it is just what Russell could have done against radical scepticism, if he'd been around now.

His book *Human Knowledge* is much more interesting than it gets credit for; it prefigures several new schools: it is proto-virtue epistemology, proto-externalist, proto-Bayesian, and proto-naturalised epistemology.

A general sceptical argument

Derived from Descartes' dream argument:

1) It is possible that sceptical hypothesis *S* is true.
2) I cannot with certainty determine *S* is false.
3) If I cannot with certainty determine *S* false, then some serious class of my beliefs lack "knowledge" status.
C) So some serious class of my beliefs lack "knowledge" status.

---

i. Reconstructing Russell

> *"…the traditional epistemological project [saw the] theory of knowledge as bulwark against scepticism; proponents of [the new virtue epistemology] anticipate its displacement by a more diverse set of concerns…"*

- Guy Axtell

> *"Mathematics and the stars consoled me when the human world seemed empty of comfort. But changes in my philosophy have robbed me of such consolations… It seemed that what we had thought of as laws of nature were only linguistic conventions, and that physics was not really concerned with an external world. I do not mean that I quite believed this, but that it became a haunting nightmare, increasingly invading my imagination."*

- Russell

Did Russell naturalise epistemology, do virtue epistemology, or employ an ethics of belief? Well, his last major philosophical work, *Human Knowledge* (1948) pre-dates Quine's launching of the naturalising project by twenty years, and also pre-dates the first explicit piece of 'virtue epistemology' by thirty years - so the idea is absurd revisionism.

But anachronism has its use: there are few absolutely novel concepts and questions in these new approaches to epistemology; they are shifts in emphasis and method, away from the so-called "doxastic paradigm". (Aristotle, for instance, can be artlessly seen as a virtue epistemologist, and there have recently been considered accounts of René Descartes, Pierre Duhem and even (tenuously) WVO Quine as virtue epistemologists.)

Let's see if we can fix Russell's responses to radical scepticism. I focus on his tacit use of epistemic norms (hence, 'ethics of belief'), rather than on virtue theory or naturalism. The trick will be to preserve Russell's realism and *HK*'s early naturalistic epistemology in meta-epistemology. I draw on two of his books: *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912) and *Human Knowledge* (1948).

"Virtue epistemology": naturalism + normativity + speech-act theory + practical reason.

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ii. Epistemic normativity

To ascribe knowledge is to evaluate positively as well as to describe a state. Epistemology cannot avoid normativity, since even the most naturalised accepts at least one epistemic norm:

1. *Radical Quinean norm*: "Epistemology should not be normative."

An epistemic norm is a some standard with a bearing on knowledge. They are not preferences.

Duncan Pritchard gives a stricter realist definition which accords with Russell: "*a rule which one follows in order to gain true belief*."

Pascal Engel adds sensible conditions: "*For a principle to be genuinely normative, it must have normative force, and to be able to actually regulate belief. It must also have normative freedom... one must have the possibility of violating it.*" (As opposed to an epistemic virtue: "*an embodied habit that promotes the acquisition, maintenance, and transmission of epistemic goods.*")

Distinguish meta-epistemology (which yields methodology) and the 'ethics of belief' (which yields norms) – but unfortunately the distinction isn't clear. Russell discusses both together as 'maxims', and others in the past called both 'principles'. I take choice of methodology as reducible to epistemic normativity. The notion is a bit plastic – for instance, logical laws seem statable as epistemic norms:

2. Coherence norm: "one ought not to believe p and not p."
3. Closure norm: "one ought to believe that q if one believes that p & that p entails q."

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iii. Some hefty qualifications

- Russell's epistemology is motivated by a specific view of logic and semantics. I'm skipping all that. I address the extent to which, despite his innovative method, Russell (1912) was a 'traditional' epistemologist – some family-resemblance of internalist, infallibilist, methodist & foundationalist - in section iv.
- Russell's semi-naturalised epistemology in *Human Knowledge* poses an issue: how are we to discuss norms in a 'natural' descriptive epistemology? One answer is that Russell's 'naturalistic turn' (from 1940 on) wasn't the kind that demands the reduction of normative facts to natural ones.
- We can express his realism and anti-psychologism by construing Russell (with the rest of 'traditional' epistemology) as a normative cognitive monist, holding that there is one universally applicable set of correct epistemic norms.
- The practice could be intellectually venal: "*Kornblith contends that once traditional epistemologists admit that the Cartesian program of deriving beliefs about the world from certain foundations fails, they end up endorsing as legitimate whatever principles enable them to ratify the beliefs they started with.*" Against this valid worry I'd firstly say that the epistemic norms are as open to criticism, as any position in philosophy; and, secondly, this doesn't stick to *HK* Russell, owing to his naturalistic epistemology: any epistemic norms he endorsed would (in principle) be open to empirical test. (Except the Postulates; see section v.)
- My interpretation does not contort him into a virtue epistemologist: I focus on doxastic norms (abstract rules) rather than epistemic virtues (agents' traits). John Greco gives two necessary conditions for virtue epistemologies: the acceptance both "that epistemology is a normative discipline" and "that agents and communities are the primary source of epistemic value and the primary focus of epistemic evaluation…" Russell endorsed the first but not the second (excepting suggestive passages in *HK*).

Thus qualified, what remains of the merits of the approach? The clearest answer comes in the gap between his 'traditionalist' fixation on scepticism and his non-traditional responses to it.

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iv. Russellian indirect realism as epistemic norm

> *When… we speak of philosophy as a criticism of knowledge, it is necessary to impose a certain limitation. If we adopt the attitude of the complete sceptic, placing ourselves wholly outside all knowledge, and asking, from this outside position, to be compelled to return within the circle of knowledge, we are demanding what is impossible, and our scepticism can never be refuted…*
> *But it is not difficult to see that scepticism of this kind is unreasonable.*

- Russell

In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell tries to explain our knowledge as a process of abduction from directly apprehended facts ('knowledge by acquaintance') to facts that explain them ('knowledge by description'). Here is a representation, which I'll modify as the sceptical challenge runs its course:

Assumptions

- Minimal realism: Experiences are caused by things other than experiences.
- Minimal causal law: If like cause, then like effect.
- Incorrigibility: What is known non-inferentially is proof against radical scepticism.
- Methodism: Aims to find the criteria for knowledge without claiming instances, thus avoiding circularity.
- Foundationalism: "*Starting with the common beliefs of daily life, we can be driven back from point to point, until we come to some general principle, which seems luminously evident, and is not itself capable of being deduced from anything more evident.*"
- Principle of Acquaintance: "*Every proposition which we understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted*"

Norms

4. *Commonsense norm*: We should prefer views which grant us knowledge.
5. *Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism*: One is permitted to assume things are as they appear, except when there are positive grounds for doubting this.

5'. Russell's norm of doubt: "We cannot have reason to reject a belief except on the ground of some other belief."

6. Internalist's norm: beliefs are to be justified only by one's own psychological experiences: the justifying relations between one's experiences and beliefs are to be worked out from 'inside'.
7. Justification norm of assertion: You ought not believe p unless you are warranted to assert p. (As opposed to the default Knowledge norm of belief: You ought not believe p unless you know p.)

On to radical scepticism. Russell offers a *normative* response. The normative backdrop of sceptical paradoxes (given norm 6 and 7) is:

8. *Lack norm of doubt*: If not sufficiently grounded, any belief is open to legitimate doubt.
9. *Infallibilist norm of assertion*: You ought not believe p if p is open to legitimate doubt.
10. *Prove-it norm*: The burden of proof for any claim falls to the claimant.

(8) and (10) are essential to critical thinking – but when combined with internalism (6), they generate a destructive sceptical demand: hyperbolic doubt and synchronic reconstruction in sequence: "*take the totality of things you believe, subtract [your] claim and everything that you cannot defend without assuming it, and now show that the claim is correct.*"

Russell thinks this is impossible (see norm 5'), and tries to block this scale of scepticism by showing the position it entails to be unreasonable, and so negligible. (He is in effect defending the bare thesis *Dogmatism*, that at least one of one's knowledge-claims is true,

& that one knows it is.)

Reconstructed:

```
P1. If it is impossible to meet a demand, then that demand is unreasonable.
P2. It is impossible to meet the sceptical demand.
P3. If the demand is unreasonable, then the sceptical position is unreasonable.
C. The sceptical position is unreasonable. (by double modus ponens)
```

But this requires a further epistemic norm underlying the whole attitude:

11. *Dogmatic norm*: It is unreasonable to doubt dogmatism if there are no possible reasons that could persuade someone who doesn't believe it to believe it.

This is obviously ad hoc, but it has bigger problems. Say there are only two possibilities:

1) if one finds compelling reasons to endorse dogmatism, one must believe it (and thereby stop being a sceptic) on pain of unreasonableness; and
2) even if one does not find compelling reasons, then (11) makes one unreasonable not to believe it.

The unacceptable implication is that inability to ground a position is taken to be a compelling reason to believe it. (It also breaches Engel's condition of normative freedom, given above.) Further:

```
P1. By (8), every belief is subject to examination and the possibility of doubt
P2. Dogmatism is a belief.
P3. Thus the sceptic can examine dogmatism and possibly doubt it.
P4. Examinations must admit the possibility there are no compelling grounds.
P5. If they are not found, one need not believe dogmatism.
P6. Russell's reasoning entails that dogmatism cannot be truly examined.
C. So by contradiction of basic norms, the argument fails.
```

It could be rearticulated as a properly general norm:

11'. *Cogency norm*: It is unreasonable to doubt a position if there are no possible reasons that could persuade someone who doesn't believe the position to believe it.

But this is absurdly strong: even if Russell were to accept it (and the suggestion is philosophical slander), the argument collapses, since:

```
P1. (11') stamps as indubitable all sets of beliefs that cannot
be justified except by circular reasoning.
P2. There are a vast number of such sets.
P3. Many of those sets will be incompatible with each other.
C. (11') generates and asserts a vast number of contradictions.
```

---

v. epistemic norms in *Human Knowledge*

Human Knowledge (HK) offers another foundationalism, but one that rejects pure empiricism.

It gives up epistemic ground – conceding that data are private, and we cannot demonstratively infer an external world from them – and then tries to retain knowledge of the external world by lionising "non-demonstrative inference". It is in a detailed and somewhat Bayesian treatment of it that the meat of *HK* is said to lie.

But HK actually develops a double theory of knowledge, with two sets of standards, since it

also holds the core doctrines of what we now know as naturalised epistemology: it is fallibilist, views some knowing as animal behaviour, takes “best science” as a given and invites psychology to bear on epistemological questions. His argument boils down to a pragmatic demand to widen our conception of reasonable justification to include (some) non-demonstrative inferences:

```
P1) Scientific inference is not demonstrative.
P2) Either it is unreasonable, or not all reasonable argument is demonstrative.
P3) Scientific inference is not unreasonable.
C) Not all reasonable argument is demonstrative.
```

The project is to canonise scientific inference, which sidelines scepticism (though he claims to not be merely ignoring it).

Norms

Norms 4, 5 and 7 carry over from Russell (1912).

12. *Naturalist’s norm*: the primary problem of epistemology is a descriptive one: “when does scientific method allow us to infer an unobserved thing from what we observe?” This can rightfully be done without demonstrative answers to the normative question. (rejection of norm 6).

The most remarkable part of *HK*, though is his presentation of five “postulates”: really vague contingent general facts, which together give the minimal ontology that permits applied probability, and thereby induction, and thereby scientific inference (and some of commonsense):

- Postulate of quasi-permanence (accounts for objects without ontology)
- Postulate of separable causal lines (accounts for regularities and, e.g. motion)
- Postulate of spatio-temporal continuity (enables realism: unperceived existents)
- The structural postulate (accounts for e.g. improbability of a repeated coincidence)
- The Postulate of analogy: (accounts for persisting properties and other minds)

After surveying the options (that he could conceive of, see below), Russell claims for these the status of non-inferential synthetic apriori knowledge – “if it can be called ‘knowledge’”. But he clearly anticipates the sceptic’s valid reply. His positive argument is unusual, utilising as it does a special conception of knowledge that prefigures epistemic externalism (italics):

> *In what sense can we be said to ‘know’ the above postulates? … [inductive standards] are valid if the world has certain characteristics which we all believe it to have … therefore we may be said to “know” what is necessary for scientific inference, given that it fulfils the following conditions: (1) it is true, (2) we believe it, (3) it leads to no conclusions which experience confutes, (4) it is logically necessary if any occurrence… is ever to afford evidence in favour of any other occurrence.*

The analogy to the *Problems*’ problematic anti-sceptical strategy is clear. But what is the epistemic status of the postulates? They don’t fit assumption, empirical fact (since they enable empirical generalisation), Kantian category, apriori intuition, logical law, methodological principle or, alas, epistemic norm. (This is partly due to Russell’s reformulation of the basic terms of epistemology.)

Some recent resources resonate. For instance, Roderick Chisholm is indebted to *HK*; his principles of evidence are akin to laws built from Russell’s postulates – or, indeed, to epistemic norms over non-demonstrative inference. But Chisholm held them to be necessarily true apriori, to give prima facie evidence, and to be ‘internal’ “*in that the proper use of them at any time will enable us to ascertain the epistemic status of our own beliefs at that time*.” Unfortunately, though, the necessity alone would alienate an HK-Russellian, since Russell devotes almost a full chapter to an explanation of his rejection of necessary relations over and above his postulates.

Hinges

The “hinge proposition”, hinted at among Wittgenstein’s last notes, has become a regular feature of recent sceptical discourse. A hinge proposition is said to work outside justification as conceived in norms (7), (8), (10) – it is not itself knowledge, because it is outside epistemic evaluation. Recall:

8. *Lack norm of doubt*: If not sufficiently grounded, any belief is open to legitimate doubt.

Wittgenstein clearly rejects this. Speculatively:

7’. *Hinge norm of justification*: There are some beliefs which in some contexts one may legitimately believe without justification.

8’. *Hinge norm of doubt*: There are some beliefs which in some contexts one ought not to doubt.

Kornblith’s concern about unprincipled principles comes to mind. But in any case Russell’s postulates are not good candidates for hinge propositions, since his examples are everyday, pre-theoretical beliefs, leading to an exemplary Wittgensteinian suggestion: that it necessarily slips between philosophy’s fingers.

Failing these reconstructions of Russell’s postulates, though, their status is unclear. They could be wishful thoughts, or the most abstract appeal to common sense ever.

The “Russellian” Retreat

> *We can live with the concession that we do not, strictly, know some of the things we believed ourselves to know, provided we can retain the thought that we are fully justified in accepting them … what we might call the Russellian Retreat… we must content ourselves with probability, defeasibility and inconclusive justifications where standardly we had wanted to claim more.*
>
> – Crispin Wright

An unpopular solution, also named for Russell: admit defeat. Retreat from knowledge: take the radical sceptical paradox to be truly informative about the concept *knowledge* – but retain entitlement to one’s justified beliefs.

> *To be entitled to accept a proposition in this way, of course, has no connection whatever with the likelihood of its truth. We are entitled to proceed on the basis of certain beliefs merely because there is no extant reason to disbelieve them and because, unless we make some such commitments, we cannot proceed at all. Any epistemological standpoint which falls back on a conception of entitlement of this kind for the last word against scepticism needs its own version of (what is sometimes called) the Serenity Prayer: in ordinary enquiry, we must hope to be granted the discipline to take responsibility for what we can be responsible, the trust to accept what we must merely presuppose, and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

Returning to the epigram: the anti-sceptical ‘responses’ above are not foundations, refutations, nor Moorean denials of scepticism. (They do not yield certainty.)

On the bright side, *HK* prefigures several (of what we currently think of as acutely differing) approaches: virtue, doxastic ethics, Bayesian, externalist, and naturalised epistemology. Maybe the divides between these are not insurmountable.

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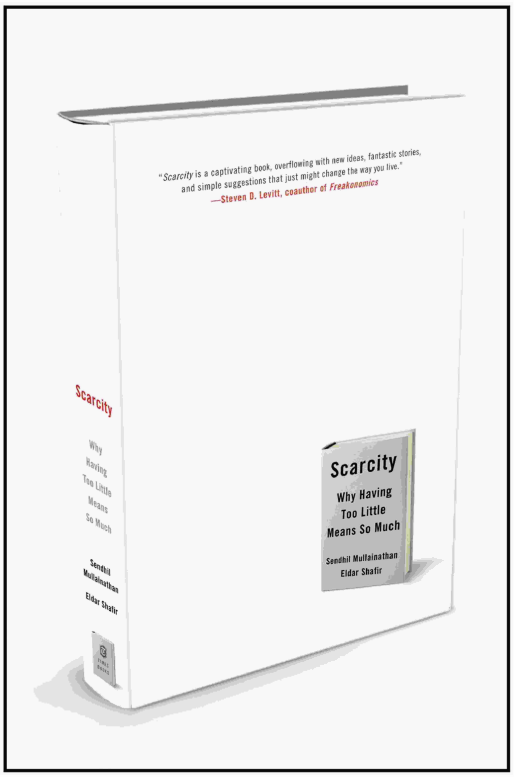
Tags: philosophy, ethics-of-belief, epistemology

'Scarcity' (2013) by Shafir & Mullainathan

2nd May 2019

- *A practical theory of the mind's panic mode and its giant harm.*
- *Confidence*: 50%. (some failed replications.)
- *Topic importance*: 7 / 10



Economics bills itself as ‘the study of decisions under scarcity’, but a lot of it is actually about excess: luxury substitution, savings rates, futures markets, conspicuous consumption… But even these theories are about constrained optimisation, just with looser constraints.

That’s the material side. The psychological side of painful scarcity - the panic, mental narrowing, and sense of doom - was completely absent from my economics classes, but without it you can’t really understand poverty, and can’t value economic growth as the life-saving, *mind*-saving thing it has been.

Reasons scarcity is bad:

1. Lower consumption is often less good (and sometimes maximally bad, if we count emergency medicine as a consumer good).
2. Less freedom (fewer choices)
3. Anxiety (emotional penalty)
4. Cognitive penalty (bandwidth wasted on worrying about)
5. Excessive focus on the present compromises planning for the future (“tunnelling”)
6. Have to spend more time on careful allocation (“juggling”)
7. Excess self-consciousness means worse performance (“choking”)
8. Can poison social interaction by encouraging zero-sum thinking and so wasteful conflict.1
9. It recurses: Mistakes lead to real sacrifice (debt; traps; no slack means penalties bite, further reducing slack). Scarcity causes more scarcity by screwing with your planning

and implementation skills.

Economics only really handles costs (1) and (2). Psychology at its best handles (3-7). (9) is the author's new contribution, I think: cognitive economics. The study of decisions under scarcity - but now the internal view.

Without some spare resources it's impossible to be free, to be generous, to relax. That's obvious. Less obvious is that without slack you can't even think straight: there's a "bandwidth tax" on the poor, reducing their effective intelligence and willpower by - apparently - an entire standard deviation. Most of the experiments cited in this are about money scarcity, but their ingenious move is to generalise to all of us, to all conditions where a person lacks some instinctively (evolutionarily) key resource: e.g. money, time, calories, or friends. As well as being a plausible and exciting theoretical synthesis, this makes the book more evocative for rich-world readers:

> *We have used the psychology of scarcity to create an empathy bridge. We have used experience with one form of scarcity (say, time) to connect to another form (money). Having known what it's like to badly need a little more time, we might start to imagine what it's like to desperately need a little more money or even more friends. We used this bridge to draw a connection between a busy manager fretting about insufficient time before a deadline and a person short on cash fretting about insufficient funds to pay rent.* [2]

Exciting! I've been reading development economics and behavioural science for years, and I still got a lot of new results and a gosh-darnit gears-level Practical Theory of Mind.

They compress all the constructs and determinants of their real theory into a simplified idea, "bandwidth". This is a shorthand for working memory *&* fluid intelligence *&* attention span *&* decision consistency *&* persistence *&* executive control *&* long-term planning inclination. They admit at the start it's a compression, so that's fine.

> *With compromised bandwidth, we are more likely to give in to our impulses, more likely to cave in to temptations. With little slack, we have less room to fail. With compromised bandwidth, we are more likely to fail.*

Lesson: To optimise your life, you can't 'optimise' too hard, in the sense of pushing right up against your budgets. This idea is not new; a different book would cross disciplines and tie this to queuing theory and distributed computing, trying to find general theoretical truths about systems. (What's the maximum sustainable load for a server? For a life?) Excess capacity, 'slack', is short-run inefficiency *and* long-term shock-tolerance and thus true efficiency. The point seems to apply to servers, hospitals, and a single human life viewed from inside.

This also adds to Taleb's critique of naive finance, encouraging 'risk-sensitive optimisation' (death-sensitive). They extend bounded rationality from a computation and search budget to limited attention and willpower.

The book's big philosophical question is the old Essence vs Context chestnut ("the poor are worse parents, drivers, borrowers" vs "given these constraints, people are worse parents, drivers, borrowers"). But it's a new twist: as well as causing permanent developmental deficiencies, poverty levies temporary mental costs:

> *This shortfall is not of the standard physiological variety, having to do with a lack of nutrition or stress from early childhood hindering brain development. Nor is bandwidth permanently compromised by poverty. It is the present-day cognitive load of making ends meet: when income rises, so, too, does cognitive capacity. The bandwidth of the farmers was restored as soon as crop payments were received. Poverty at its very core*

> *taxes bandwidth and diminishes capacity.*

This surprises me: I generally accept that people are hard to change, that engineered context is relatively weak. But then all attempts at self-improvement are a denial of essentialism about *something*, and I'm well into those.

> *To explain why the poor borrow excessively, we do not need to appeal to a lack of financial education, the avarice of predatory lenders, or an oversized tendency for self-indulgence. To explain why the busy put off things and fall behind, we do not need to appeal to weak self-control, deficient understanding, or a lack of time-management skills. Instead, borrowing is a simple consequence of tunneling.*

They don't sugarcoat it: they accept the massive body of evidence on how burdened the poor are, on dozens of axes. And they note that just giving them cash rarely solves the problem because this doesn't change the logic enough.

> *The poor stay poor, the lonely stay lonely, the busy stay busy, and diets fail.*

One big gripe: They use the word "scarcity" for both a physical shortage (i.e. the normal economic sense) and for this special psychological burden. (Not having, and having your mind captured by not having.) This needs two words; it muddies their thesis.

They've persuaded me that late fines are an extremely regressive tax. I'm open to the view that reducing poor people's options is sometimes best for them (e.g. if they are "*hurt by the ability to borrow* [at extortionate rates]" because it prevents them smoothing their income in a credit cycle). I agree that bandwidth is the deepest kind of human capital.

Their treatment of the mental costs of education is extremely important, given NGOs' blithe promotion of education over all else. (And it's a further argument for unconditional cash transfers.)

> *To capitalize on a bonus payment for a child's medical checkup, a parent must set up the appointment, remember to keep it, find the time to get there and back, and coerce the child to go (no child likes the doctor!). Each of these steps requires some bandwidth. And this is just one behavior. Conditional cash transfer programs seek to encourage dozens, if not hundreds, of these good behaviors. Just understanding those incentives and making the necessary trade-offs—deciding which are worth it for you and which are not, and when—requires bandwidth.*
>
> *We never ask, Is this how we want poor people to use their bandwidth? We never factor in this cost in deciding which behaviors are most worth promoting. When we design poverty programs, we recognize that the poor are short on cash, so we are careful to conserve on that. But we do not think of bandwidth as being scarce as well. Nowhere is this clearer than in our impulse to educate.*

I'm a keen and cynical student of social research, and but I only recognised one spurious result in the whole book. (ego depletion, p.107 - and that only in a hypothetical tangent.) They did a pretty convincing within-subjects study on sugar farmers before and after harvest income, which nails down the effect as far as I can see.

Only not five stars because we can't give any social science book five stars until it is 20 years old and more severely scrutinised than this.

Risks

The Slack doctrine advocates not trying exactly as hard as you can, holding back a reserve. Even granting the good psychological and algorithmic reasons to do this, this gives the imp of perversity space to take more than you actually need.

Premortem for unified scarcity theory

If in 10 years we find that the theory above is in fact not a good one, what will the weak points have been?

* Confounders in the sugar experiments?
* Strong genetic predisposition to tunnelling.

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*

2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*

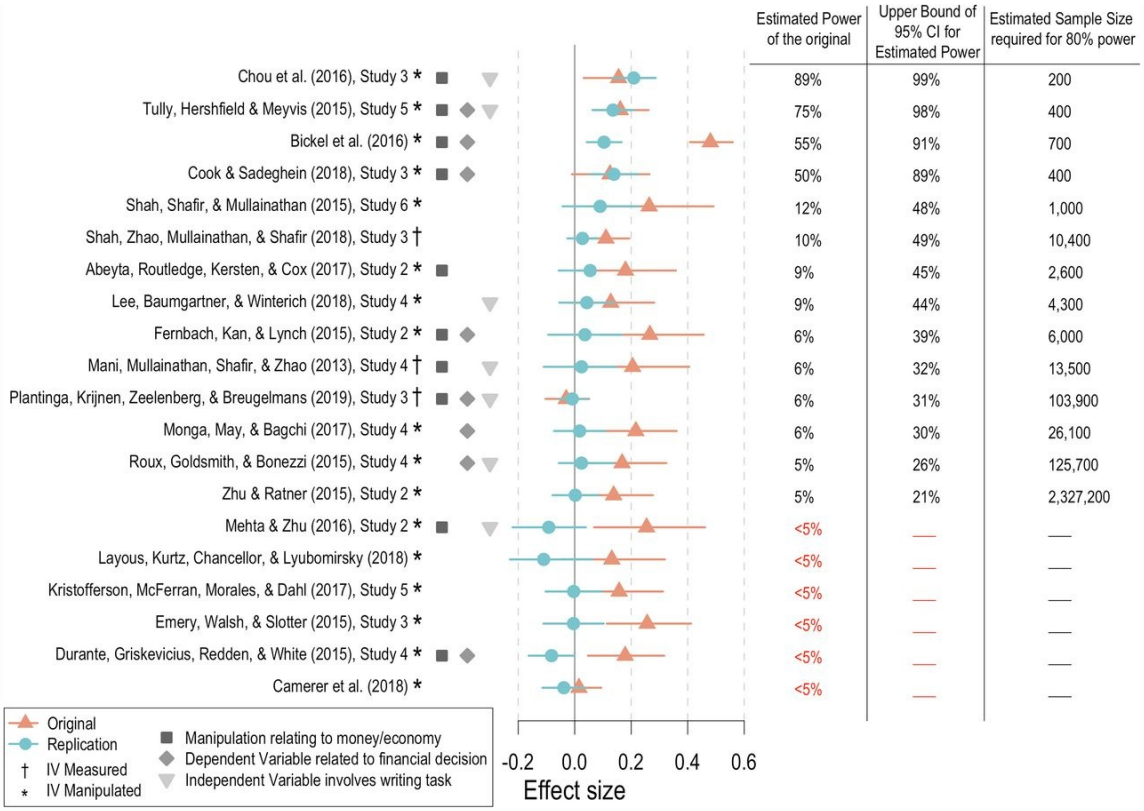
3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

In this case: I have an economics degree and a strong amateur interest in psychological methodology. Though I am only half a scientist. I looked for specific critiques of the experiments this is based on, and didn't find any, but it is new work and not heated.

Scarce evidence?

Camerer 2018 replication and meta-analysis wiped out Then O'Donnell 2021's bundle of 20 replications



Their own rerun found that one of the effect didn't replicate, but "scarcity itself leads to overborrowing" did.

1. Although see Junger for positive social effects of acute, *temporary* shared adversity.
2. It's common to mock people for claiming that they are "time-poor", since the speaker will generally have a high income and will have chosen their situation, while the poor involuntarily suffer both money and time poverty.

   '*Scarcity*' implies that you should ease up on them, since there are serious quality of life losses from doing too much to keep up your mortgage and your au pair and your fitness and all that.

Tags:

The One True Sceptic

6th March 2021

- *A living, breathing demonstration of the limits of philosophy.*
- *Confidence*: 70%. My knowledge of modern epistemology has eroded a lot in 8 years.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

> *The man scarce lives who is not more credulous than he ought to be.*
>
> – Adam Smith

> *I will call the imaginary philosopher who acquiesces in the Cartesian paradox a Cartesian skeptic, and the (even more) imaginary philosopher who acquiesces in the Kantian paradox a Kantian skeptic.*
>
> – James Conant

I love contrariness. I love Saudi cross-dressers, sober punks, bleeding-heart libertarians, worker-poets, poet-scientists, vegan meat growers, Mormon transhumanists, pro-nuclear pro-GM environmentalists. But all contrarians are rank amateurs. We all take there to be a world, we all take ourselves to know things about it and ourselves. We cling to our views, define ourselves with them, even if by taking the opposite of some other group's beliefs.

I have something on all of you. In university I knew an *actual* sceptic. Not a "fucking-love-science" atheist; not a special-case doubting Thomas. No: A full blown *we do not know if there is a world* radical. The most seriously philosophical person I will ever meet.

I found this extremely engaging, because I was trying to be the kind of person who strictly followed argument, who had philosophy as the centre of their life. I never took on radical scepticism as a full belief (or a full absence). But it still helped me: it was an exposé of the lack of justification for most things I saw around me - no matter how intimidating or high status. Most people start with a protective epistemic helplessness (in the positive sense of not treating any single argument you can't immediately counter as coercive). I had to learn it. I gave up on certainty, on certain useless definitions of knowledge, and on armchair inquiry. I am now glad of it.

If meeting such a person - if realising that a common kind of philosophy cannot answer the sceptical paradoxes - doesn't cure you of a naive relationship with philosophy, nothing will.

Radical scepticism is *useful*. OK, Descartes used radical scepticism to convince himself that God's existence was certain. But we can use it for real reasons: to release ourselves from illegitimate authorities (including ourselves), to probe the idea of knowledge by looking at the limit case, or to get over naive philosophy. "If it can't beat this..."

A classic sceptical argument

P1. One may be a [brain in a vat]. (◊S)
P2. If one knows one has hands, then one knows one is not in a vat. K[p] -> K[~S]
P3. One doesn't know one is not in a vat. ~K[~S]
C. So, one does not know one has hands. ~K[p]

If you don't like vats, substitute in "dreaming", or "completely insane". (I give a more sophisticated version here, as well as a case study of a very great philosopher repeatedly failing to answer it.)

My point is not that the above establishes C. But it provokes a second-order conclusion:

C². “So? Let’s just be fallibilists, then.” / “So? Let’s just be externalists, then.”

If philosophy P leads to this argument, then reject P.

A weird sceptical argument

I protested. (I did this repeatedly, over years.)

“OK, but the *continuity* of my experiences is extremely strong reason to think that there’s one process generating them, e.g. an external world.”

The Sceptic: “Imagine a sheerly chaotic universe: weird particles all constantly in flux, bonding and unbonding in a way which has no relation to our world. Once in an unbelievable number of years, for the merest fraction of a second, these particles settle into the same structure as your brain right now. Say you flicker into awareness for that fractional moment, before the system scatters and you are lost. Another aeon passes. Then by chance the system settles into the next timestep of your brain. All of your beliefs are wrong in this scenario. Do you have any way to distinguish that world from the one you prefer to think about?”

Me: “OK but then there’s still a world.”

The Sceptic: “Not yours.”

The Cartesian problematic

> *the only winning move is not to play*

What enables the sceptical paradoxes? A big bundle of positions:

- *Internalism*. The demand for everything to make complete sense to us, before we will call it justified.
- *Infallibilism*. The demand for everything to be certain before we will call it knowledge.
- *Foundationalism*. The demand for everything to be based on rational axioms.
- *Apriorism*. The demand for this justification to be given without reference to any mere experience, mere science, mere.
- *Methodism*. The idea that philosophy can’t take anything for granted; we have to start from no knowledge and justify the method.
- *Theorism*. As in the opposite of pragmatism. Living head-first.
- *“The doxastic paradigm”*. Treating yourself as a (mere) holder of beliefs, some justified or not, some knowledge or not.

Conant calls the family resemblence of them “the Cartesian problematic”.

All of the ‘solutions’ (externalism, hinge epistemology, virtue stuff, phenomenal conservatism, pragmatism, disjunctivism) include or consist in a refusal to play the sceptic’s game - which is just the standard game of modern Analytic philosophy!

Convincing yourself that the sceptic can’t be beaten *if you grant him the initial premise, that we can’t say we have knowledge already*, must weaken your enthusiasm for the project of apriori conceptual analysis of anything. This was very useful to me!

If sceptical argument succeeds under the above, then at least one of the above is wrong. (Denying internalism is enough.)

The advantage of it is that it is in some ways the strictest kind of inquiry - stricter even than mathematics, which is allowed to invent concepts and work entirely in conditionals. And for most people, strict thought cures itself.

Judgment under perfect uncertainty

You might protest that the Sceptic was lying or deluded, that he didn't actually doubt everything. After all, he managed to cross the road, stopping at the right moments to not get run over. This is a classic unfair accusation: scepticism is about certain knowledge, not mere animal reflexes. The fact that he was given beliefs by his inheritance and upbringing does not make them knowledge.

"Well why do I need certainty instead of 99.999% confidence?"

Why indeed?: We don't, because you and I are not really philosophical. I was, or thought I was; but my friend made me realise it was not good to be.

(He was also a notorious troll, but not about this. You don't spend ten years of your life on one question if you are joking.)

There is surprisingly little interaction between radical doubt and inaction. One of the only other people I know of who might be a true sceptic, Peter Unger is also an extremely dedicated anti-poverty activist. Moral cluelessness, a limited but still radical kind of scepticism, is a chief preoccupation of some of the most active moralists of our time.

The sceptic's loss function

> *To be right, be vague. To be productively wrong, be precise.*

One way of making sense of True Sceptics (and mere methodological sceptics like Descartes) is through the language of statistics. What is the loss function of radical scepticism? What are they trying to avoid?

Well, it implies that it's better to avoid a single error, believing a single false thing, than to hold a million true beliefs. It optimises for error avoidance, rather than knowledge maximisation.

How can those things differ? By placing excessive weight on "unknown" for all propositions, you suspend judgment and so give up the chance of knowing in favour of never being wrong.

The emotion of living behind the epistemic barrier

The word for being paralysed by doubt is "aporia". It isn't pleasant. Think of the pain of being "nerdsniped", except there is no solution. My Sceptic was quite open about the intense seasickness and distress that doubt caused him. (But the real sceptic can't even commit suicide: who can say what death brings?)

But one of the promises of Greek scepticism was equanimity! Maybe it's like Keanu:

> *I'm at that stage in life where I stay out of discussions. Even if you say 1+1=5, you're right - have fun.*

Most people don't take ideas seriously enough. They are unmoved by multiple sound arguments; they don't mind being completely inconsistent (i.e. *necessarily* wrong); they are

content to live totally within convention, to have an ideology instead of a philosophy. So most people don't need a True Sceptic to turn them back from taking ideas too seriously. But I did.

Philosophy is just evidence like any other kind of inquiry. There's a limit on how strong the evidence can be: it's bounded by how often mathematicians make undiscovered errors. In practice the average bit of philosophy is much less strong than that. But it seems to still be enough to act on, in data-poor regions of life, i.e. most of life.

See also

- Food as solution to scepticism
- Some Insufficient Reasons Why I Am Not a Philosopher
- Torturing Bertrand Russell on radical scepticism
- Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*
- Hookway, *The Primacy of Practice*
- Epistemic learned helplessness
- Nāgārjuna, Nietzsche, and Rorty's Strange Looping Trick
- Reality is often underpowered.

Tags: philosophy, ethics-of-belief, epistemology

Self-help, hard and soft

7th June 2020

- *Four types of trying to be better.*
- *Confidence*: 80% that this beats the current 0-D or 1-D idea. 50% that this is the best phrasing / 2D projection.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Content notes*: Pretty high-context. See here first.
- Argument

I get annoyed when I click a post and find that it's not a list of things to try, or a cool tool for reasoning or deciding - but instead high-context talk about inner concerns. But I don't endorse this annoyance, and I try to be less narrow.

The following may be helpful if you're like me, and want to understand what people are doing and so circumvent annoyance. (I think it beats "rationality" vs "post-rationality" because it drops the incipient in-group/out-group stuff and focusses on what people are actually doing.)

I began with a vague 1D idea: that there's "hard self-help" (actionable, crisp, objective) and soft self-help (contemplative, open, subjective). This is really not useful without using two dimensions, though:

	External	**Internal**
Legible	Lifehacks	Techniques
Illegible	Attempts	Seeking

Examples:

	External	**Internal**
Legible	supplements, exercise, Things I Use, Quantified Self, checklists, Anki, time management, Algos to Live By,	Models, CBT, bug lists, IDC, Focussing, this 2x2
Illegible	brainstorming, CoZe, Oblique Strategies, 'Actually Try', 'Dive In', going with your gut	Art, 'stream entry', Kōans, aphorism, Replacing Guilt

Notes

- This abstraction clearly strains to cover its large, wild, continuous domain.
- The top axis covers a few things. It could be "Environment optimisation vs Inner alignment", or "Action vs Contemplation", or "Objective vs Subjective".
- My original name for the left axis was "Algorithm vs Heuristic".
- The idea of a "Rest Day" is a legible algorithm: 1) Make no appointments; 2) Do what you want. But each instance is different and highly illegible. "*Why am I doing this? Because.*" Outer loop is algo, the inner loop is heuristic.
- If it worked, biofeedback would be the exemplar of *legible-internal*.
- This is probably not the most significant difference beween rationality and post-rationality: that might be "rationality realism vs anti-realism".
- I have no idea where to put Circling. It's right in the middle.

Build your own typology

- *Particular vs General*: Is it targeting one bug or a raised ‘waterline’? Object vs Meta level? Incremental or revolution?
- *Objective vs Subjective*: Is the target your environment (including the body) or your mind?
- *Action vs Contemplation*: Does the idea involve doing things besides thinking or introspection?
- *Algorithmic vs Heuristic*: Is the idea a complete recipe or a general prompt?
- *Propositional vs Nonpropositional*: Is the target beliefs, skills, plans, or attitudes?
- *Cognitive vs Emotional*.
- *System 1 vs System 2*: Is the target implicit or explicit?
- *Scientific or Rational evidence*: What reason is there to expect it to work?
- *Some feedback or no feedback*: how easy is it to check if it works?

Free-associating some vaguely related distinctions

- Analytic vs Continental
- Hard SF vs Soft SF
- STEM vs Humanities
- Exoteric vs Esoteric
- System 2 vs System 1
- Clarity and Accessibility

Tags: self-help, rationality

Irony, sincerity, nostalgia, neoteny

9th January 2021

- *The unending cycle of irony and sincerity.*
- *Confidence*: 55%. Cultural criticism, i.e. guesswork, cherry-picking and priors.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Argument

> *Friend 1: Do you know any writing on the recent trend of milennials/zoomers going for '**earnest**' or 'wholesome' content*

> *Friend 2: We live lonely, disconnected, meaningless lives in a broken society on a dying planet. If Avatar: The Last Airbender or videos of people rescuing ducks brings a moment of emotional well-being into someone's life, so be it. I also think it's for the same reason that we're currently obsessed with the end of the world and can't get enough zombie movies and games about nuclear war.*

> *Friend 1: I guess a better question would be: "Is youth culture inherently sardonic and ironical, and do people deep down resent that." Why do you think our culture is so nostalgic now?*

> *Friend 2: I think it's a misstep to assume that the Millennial/Zoomer desire for wholesomeness is ironic. I think that, even if it was initially ironic (out of a sort of defensive desire to be 'cool') or whatever, a lot of it is entirely sincere now. Personally, about 3 years ago, I watched all of The Last Airbender while I was recovering from a really bad panic attack and it genuinely made me feel a lot better.*

> *Friend 1: No sorry my point was the default mood of our times is irony, and people's desire for earnest things is genuine and sincere, I didn't make that clear.*

> *Friend 2: The easy answers are that people are trying to go back to "a better time", but considering that most of the people celebrating 1980s culture weren't born until at least the 1990s, it can't be only that. I personally think that a lot of it is to do with the 80s being enormously optimistic (in an aesthetic sense). 80s design was all about the future - sharp angles, bright colours, an obsession with technology. But, more than that, it's not only the 80s - the 90s are **coming back now as well**. Surely it can be argued that a desire for sincerity and earnestness is exactly because the default mood of our time is ironic? Is it too simple that one is simply a response to the other?*

> *Friend 1: My thoughts too. I think the big cultural change of the last twenty years is people extending their adolescence way into the late 20s and 30s. And the rise of 'don't know how to adult' lingo. Maybe the nostalgic thing is part of that. Like I think you could make a fair case for rumours by Fleetwood mac being one of the most universally popular albums with under 40s atm. By which I mean amongst middle-class people in Canada etc. (I'm aware that if you live in raqqa you probably have other cultural shifts that come to mind when musing on the last 20 years.)*

> *Friend 2: I think that extended adolescent thing has more to do with technology than people realise. Technology is literally changing the way that society expects people to work, socialise, present, behave etc faster than they can adapt to it. In response, I think a lot of people defer committing to 'a life'.*

Me:

I am unpersuaded that the impulse to sincerity is new (that is, less than twenty years old), it's just more visible now.

One good keyword is "the meaning crisis": i.e. the absence of satisfying total objective systems that make you feel like you understand your role, can measure your success.

No one runs surveys on this so I'll use famous manifestos as a proxy since I just need to show that there are examples over time:

- 1770: Young Werther fever. Landmark for when the culture (in German youth) was way *too* earnest.
- 1890: Nietzsche. Prediction that people will get ironic and weird after religion. …
- 1985: Kitsch. "New Sincerity" (DFW obvs, but moreso people like Albom and Sedaris)
- 1999: Dogme 95, Stuckism
- 2005: EMO! An absolute powerhouse, maybe a quarter of all teens in some way.
- Now: Wholesome memes, mumblecore, cottagecore

> *Is youth culture inherently sardonic and ironical?*

Pro: Many teenagers are in constant low-level pain (acne, growing, sleep deprivation, boredom, uncertainty, self-consciousness, depression) and pain makes us sharp and anti.

Con: I think teens just need to do the opposite of what's around them. Irony is pervasive now, so (some) go anti-irony. But sarcasm is versatile, so you can still be sarcastic about sarcastic people; you can negate from inside.

There's also a hybrid pap of sincerity and irony which is maybe more common than sincerity: consider any Disney / Marvel / etc product: almost every line of dialogue will be sassy, and parents are more often than not the bogeymen, but underneath the work is black-and-white morality tale, with friendship, folk deontology ("*we don't trade lives*"), and vague but ironclad humanism.

Allow me some silly theorism, to drag in abstruse academic bullshit to this discussion of silly pop culture products. Some people blame intellectuals for irony. There's a huge cottage industry of secular prophets denouncing irony. They call it "cultural Marxism" or whatever the almost-made-up bogeyman is. Think Jordan Peterson, James Lindsay, and many more unsavoury characters.

I think they are literally twenty years too late. Twenty years ago, if you wanted to be an intellectual (which stupidly means: "person who thinks about society"), you had to pay some lip service to the French Theorists, or set out in explicit opposition. But Theory is dying. In its place are a new wing of anti-pomo dogmatists with nothing in common with them except radicalism and jargon. The rise of cancelling and the political domination of inner life *could not happen* in a truly ironic worldview. Instead we get the Marvel version of irony: sassy Puritanism.

> *Is youth culture inherently sardonic and ironical, and do people deep do…*

It's inherently about looking cool, and among emotionally incompetent people in pain, a perennial shortcut to coolness is negativity, detachment, and seeming not to care. But both Tony Stark and Captain America are cool: sincerity has always been an option in youth

culture

> *Why do you think our culture is so nostalgic now?*

I buy Friend 2's bit: nostalgia is a way of fighting loneliness. If there are now millions of subcultures, if it is now harder to interact with a random peer because the options spread us all out so much, then pop culture and remakes allow us to go back to when there was a shared milieu.

This reinforces neoteny, our twenty year adolescence: you can easily go back to the old if you're not very emotionally distant from it.

Ofc adults in the past were equally bewildered, if not more bewildered than us. But the taboo against admitting it disappeared some time in the last 30 years. Slackers and losers gained some ground. Oh and ofc nerds massively gained status, and we are highly childish in two senses: social incompetence and open enthusiasm

---

> *We live lonely, disconnected, meaningless lives in a broken society on a…*

Another reason for nostalgia, fleeing backward, is if you believe the present is broken and not going to improve. My big prediction is that this reflexive pessimism is going to drop this decade. This year has seen 4 or 5 giant tech breakthroughs, and there are more coming soon. I also think the exaggerated timelines and extent of the climate emergency will lead to a fall in doomy greens.

Progress -> optimism -> sincerity -> disappointment -> backlash ->

It'll come back of course. And pessimism is more robust to facts than optimism, so it'll never go away entirely.

When was the last time "The future is going to be fun" was a dominant view? 60s?

I'm on a higher level of bloody-minded contrariness than your average bear

1. the ironic eye rollers
2. the new new sincerity wholesomes
3. the modernists (neolibs)
4. the postmodernists
5. the vulgar anti-postmodernists
6. the illiberal left and right

So despite being an edgy stemlord I will be reading Foucault and Bourdieu this year.

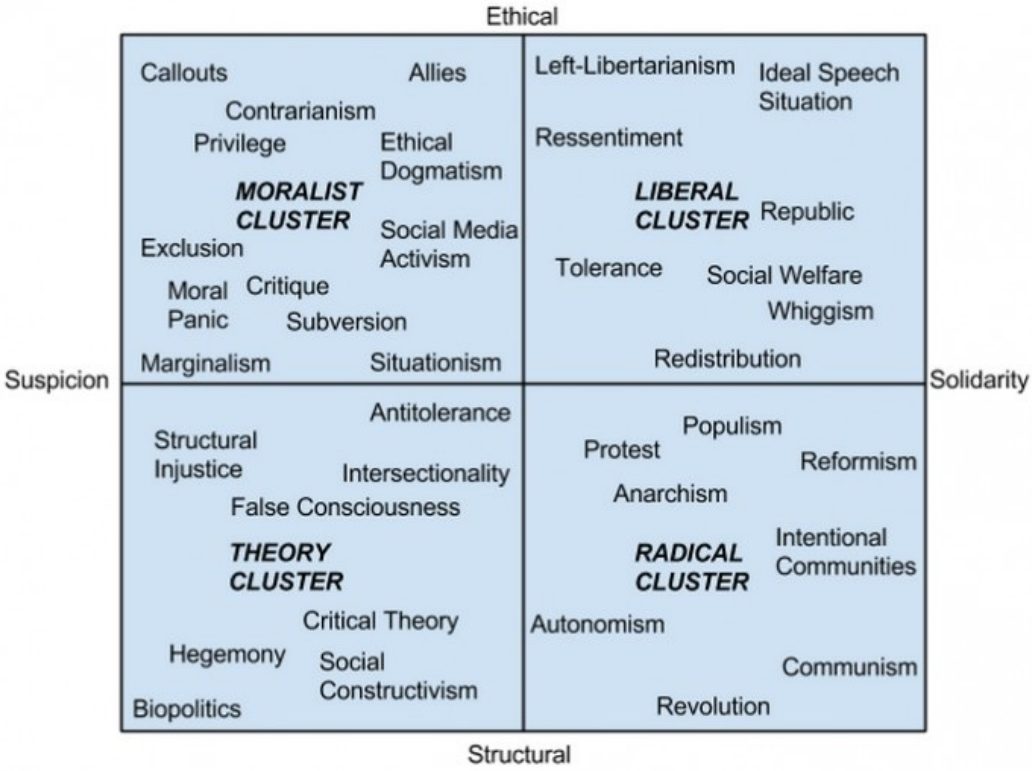
If this discussion was social science rather than mere criticism, we'd have to unpick the several dimensions being squashed:

1. Positivity / negativity
2. Sincerity / irony
3. Concreteness / theory
4. Ethics / Structure
5. Solidarity / suspicion
6. Realism / relativism
7. Pleasure / Maturity

with culture war left/right stuff jittering everything a bit across all these axes.

The only reason this post isn't useless, that it isn't fatal to squash them, is that many people allow themselves to be psychically herded into a flat 1D projection of real political/ethical//existential space.

Auerbach: trust x agency.



Ok I need to shut up but:

Irony is good because it's sceptical, and we run a permanent yawning deficit of scepticism as a civ.

Irony is bad because it's deadening, it interposes itself between you and direct enjoyment, direct communication, the ding-an-sich or even ding-für-uns.

Sincerity is dangerous because it *must* be credulous, it must take preferences, experiences, naturalness for granted, at least in the moment. Chronic sincerity invites manipulation, disinformation, and so on. As always, we must work out how to maintain both.

One solution is to be sincerely truth-seeking, honestly critical. DFW is a model, or Rorty's "*yes they're a eurocentric fiction but I still insist on human rights*". These stances are unavailable to most people, because they don't feel very good: they're a tightrope act of negative capability. Almost no one can apparently do this. I have to watch myself or else I fall into a culture war faction, or an anti x mood, or self-satisfied technocrat superiority.

See also

- Irving, A constructive critique of Sapiens and Homo Deus
- Against the Culture
- Notes on Infinite Jest
- Strangers Drowning
- Blindsight

Tags: meaning, philosophy

Blogging is dead, long live sites

27th April 2020

- *Trying to write anything more than ephemeral noise on the internet.*
- *Confidence*: Oral history plus semantics plus declaration of intent.
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- Argument

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Blogging peaked in 2009; I was there, just.

Suggestive data

Writing a ‘web log’ was mostly social: like a public diary; as if everyone was a hyper-local newspaper columnist with a letters page. “Here’s what I’ve been up to”; “here’s my reaction to what Dubya just said”; “I just remembered a thing”; “here’s why (a)theists are dumb”. More about process than product.

Half a dozen people used to comment on everything. There were various Spheres, where amateurs and professionals of various sorts thought out loud and gossiped and bitched. Famous economics professors followed my obscure fumbling posts, inexplicably.

It had an economy, thousands of people making a living off it (or anyway someone making money off it). That racket is still there, but the clever or young people long ago moved to Youtube, Insta, podcasts, and newsletters.

Blogs were supplanted by centralised social media. This was maybe because they're more effective for broadcasting and harvesting status, and because no-one there is aiming for more than ephemerality. (When was the last time you looked at what anyone said on Facebook last year?) In the transition period, your Twitter or Tumblr page got called a microblog. 2 But people moved on, making the original unit superfluous.

My point: 'Blogging' has been used for *both* short-term indie punditry/self-expression, and long-term indie creative/intellectual work. The first is now on social media. The second lives on: I learned more from these personal sites than I did in three stints at university. Many of these sites are called blogs, but I say leave the word to the first thing.

An overlooked fact: the internet dies off at an astounding rate. The average link stops working after about two and a half years. Not only was blogging reactive and local; it was also mortal.

Impressive

	Durable	
	Low	*High*
Low	Blog	Evergreen content
High	Live performance	Long content

1

Why prefer the bottom-right? Why not write ephemera, or for oneself only?

No binding reason: just if you want to do something big; if your ego or your morals demand it; if you want to seed more than a one-time flurry of agreement, disagreement, indifference, impressions. The rest of this piece is about the second column.

Essays vs blogposts

> *blogging is not a form of writing… Blogging is an activity that is so distinct from the experience of writing that it should be called something else altogether. One does not write a blog post except in the sense that one "writes" a shopping list or a business plan…*

> *Blogging, in my experience, reduces writing to the short-term effects you have on your readers and they have on you. You try to have an immediate, essentially real-time impact on the discourse, which makes it much more like speech than writing. . . .*

– Thomas Basbøll

So, when I'm in a poncey mood, I say I don't write blogposts - they're essays. This ain't no blog, it's a site! Basbøll uses "Writing" for the real deal, to be backwards compatible with the likes of Roland Barthes. But this is the most confusing possible name for it.

In a way it's funny to set up essays as a superior substitute for blogging / social media musing, since "essay" (*attempt*) was itself self-consciously inferior to big tedious monographs from the start. ("The essay - or microtreatise.")

But never mind terminology. The inimitable Gwern aims for "long content", work updated continuously for decades, living, growing piece by piece into magnificence:

> *how do you write a personal site with the long-term in mind? We live most of our lives in the future, and the actuarial tables give me until the 2070–2080s… What sort of writing could you create if you worked on it (be it ever so rarely) for the next 60 years? What could you do if you started now?…*

> *what would constitute Long Content as opposed to the existing culture of Short Content?…*

> *the pages will persist through time, and they will gradually improve over time. But a truly Long Now approach would be to make them be improved by time—make them more valuable the more time passes.*

It's not about being pompous or pretending to have timeless wisdom; it's the attempt to do things that become more and more amazing, which are worth keeping updated, worth living up to.

e.g. Depending on the field, a PhD might involve reading 100 - 400 papers, doing a thousand hours of asynchronous, unpredictable Innovative Work, then writing about 5 papers. Minus the admin, the teaching load, the mandatory courses, etc: call it 6000 hours. If you did this for 5 hours a week, say on a Sunday afternoon after waking late and having brunch and ambling about, you could do something of comparable scale over about 20 years: with no financial implications, no sweat, no mental breakdown. *While working full-time on other things*, and with my life 30% gone already, I could do 5-10 things this hard, just with suitable long-sighted use of weekends. 3

(As it happens even serious academic work is surprisingly volatile; around half the links in the average academic paper die within a decade. There are often alternative ways to recover the target document, but not always.)

(As it happens I think most PhDs don't have much impact on the world: they are read by say 4 other people, and maybe *should* not be read by many more than that. But that's good: instead I can do a thousand bits, each their own contribution to the future of all things.)

If you're reading this, you probably have a lot of energy, up to 10 big tickets. What do you want to spend them on?

Foundations of long work

1. Slack
2. Perspective
3. Lifespan.
4. Backups (your stuff *and* your links)
5. Unusually resilient or portable software.
6. Public version control to prevent impropriety (memory holes, retcons, unstable testimony).
7. Maybe a notification for big updates, or a way of reporting diffs.
8. Something worth growing.

Examples of great follies

- Piero Scaruffi is the original: 5 decades of sustained idiosyncratic work. He has steadily built a corpus of unbelievable depth and breadth, including 9,000 detailed album-by-album profiles of musicians, and 10 spin-off books which seem to support him financially.

- After Scaruffi, the next I encountered was John Emerson, a scholar of ancient Chinese philosophy, Victorian history, heterodox economics, whatever. Speaking to him, his greatest regret was in not finding a community to challenge and be challenged by, to

develop and be developed by. This is one great risk for independent scholars: isolation.

- Gwern. Besides 100 small projects, he has made himself the authority on brain training, darknet markets, clever anime criticism, and more recently behavioural genetics.

- David Pearce is about as influential as any freelance philosopher can be. Along with the similarly distinguished researcher Brian Tomasik, his huge collection of sites on utilitarianism, transhumanism, fundamental ontology, nootropics and psychoactives, animal rights, etc, has inspired a whole community of well-funded independent scholars. (NB: Note Pearce's unrepeatable trick of registering dozens of common vaguely related domain names; a spiderweb.)

- There is of course historical interest in seeing what pundits were saying at a given point in the early 21st century. The philosopher Robert Paul Wolff's site is a nice example of the dual nature of a blog: it contains his daily record of American political news *and* his vast, life-distilling tutorials on the great German philosophers. (Inbetween the two are his recollections of taking tea with Bertrand Russell and dancing with a Pulitzer Prize winner's wife.)

  This dear man makes me reconsider my strict division: leave both in, let a blog be high and low, short and long. Just as long as you do big stuff if you can.

- Andrew Gelman's blog manages the contradictions effortlessly. He reacts to hundreds of new papers a year, but posts on a 9-month lag after writing. This allows him to uncouple from the reactive journalistic stuff, and lets us see if his take holds up. I have learned so much from it, and indeed it is an accumulating, long-term project: it documents his shift towards understanding the deep problems in large parts of academic science.

- Cosma Shalizi's notebooks + book reviews + one-offs.

- Nassim Taleb has for 15 years maintained a single page(!) with 160 entries all loosely tied to the idea of 'opacity' or systemically unobservable factors in all kinds of domains.

- Bill Christensen's collection of 3,200 ideas, indexed by the first time a science fiction writer had them, and when they were realised in real life. Also an exhausting feed of all highbrow discussion of the ideas or sci-fi itself.

- Peter Gibson has been building a database of Philosophical Ideas, 20000 so far, where he tries to tag high-level premises and so allow basic cross-referencing and comparison of philosophers. I don't think this site is a good way to learn philosophy or the history of philosophy, but as a tool for generating surprising ideas...

- Bill Beaty is a very clear example of how odd and wonderful you can become if you spend decades tooling around on your own.

- Kurtis Frank wrote the original version of Examine.com pretty much on his own. This is now a respectable commercial operation, one of the few mostly trustworthy sources in the great sewage-ridden field of nutrition and supposed nootropics. But originally it was

his research summaries and enthusiastic anecdotes about all the stuff he had personally swallowed.

- TVTropes is not an auteur product like the others, but its scope and sheer depth represents far more than a lifetime of work. It's one of the most successful pieces of collaborative long content. It will live.

Independent and academic scholarship

I haven't said anything about where to do this work. (In what institution.)

A lot of the sites I list in the accordion above are by part-time autodidacts, or retired scholars. I suppose this is because the incentives in academia are so often towards either small publons or giant monographs, each of which are set in stone once done. (Unless they are grossly flawed enough to trigger academia's slow, dumb immune system.) (Or my search process is biased towards lone wolves.)

But the average academic work is more lasting than the average internet work. But it isn't only durability we're after. But it's also more rigorous than the average internet work.

Robin Hanson has spotted a trend among independent scholars, a systematic bias against rigour, and so against durability.

> *over time amateurs blow their lead by focusing less and relying on easier, more direct methods. They rely more on informal conversation as analysis method, they prefer personal connections over open competitions in choosing people, and they rely more on a perceived consensus among a smaller group of fellow enthusiasts. As a result, their contributions just don't appeal as widely or as long.*

Take Hanson himself: he has about 100 academic publications, two big books, and something like 3000 blog posts. Which will be his biggest contribution in the end?

Maybe tenured academics are the people best placed to do long content: lots of time, lots of connections, some pressure towards rigour and communicability. But you should be able to do it outside uni, if you're wary.

Think tanks are the usual way to be a full-time intellectual outside academia. But there are innovations that could enable group reinforcement and dialectic on a wider scale, for the many great part-timers: Researchers.one is the fullest version so far. Also The Winnower; The II. Preprint servers and post-publication review.

See also

- Long content is really uncommon. Even great internet writing with a view to the long term (e.g. Eliezer Yudkowsky's sustained braindump of 2007 to 2009) is never updated, when its problems are found at all. This should worry us, since it implies it's hard to do. Maybe few people have stable enough goals and interests to do this, or just enough time.

- The situation may be even worse in open source software, with projects overwhelmingly dead by 6 months old.

- Basbøll, 'What is blogging?'

- Gwern, ‘Long Content’
- Stock and flow (2010)
- This has something to do with Digital gardens, but those are just an intermediate public phase between raw notes and final essays. Alive though.
- Link rot

1. By analogy, a good example of "High scale, low durability" are the incredible temporary buildings made for World's Fair expos.
2. Which makes Insta and Tiktok 'picoblogs'.
3. 20 hours at the weekend, 50 weeks a year, for 60 years = 60,000 hours. Probably quarter this for most people, owing to family commitments, senescence, value drift, illness, akrasia. So only 2 or 3 astonishing, unbelievable monuments to human wonder.

   For most people this is only sustainable for things you love doing, if then. But there are plenty of those.

Tags: longtermism, self-representation, writing, lists

Stimulant tolerance, or, the tears of things

7th October 2020

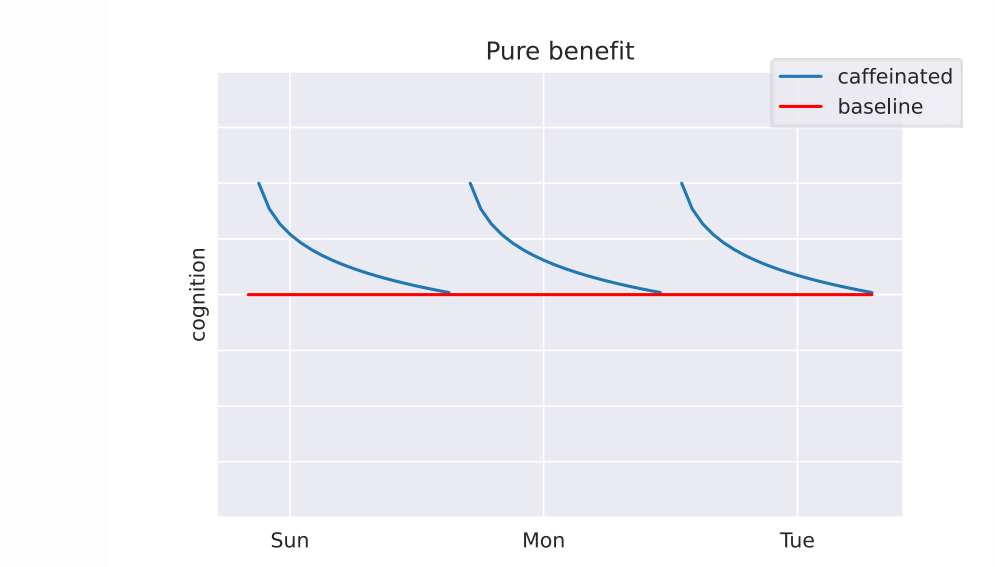
- *Do stimulants do anything, used chronically?*
- *Confidence*: 60%. Involves human nutrition & high-level behaviour, two difficult sciences.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10

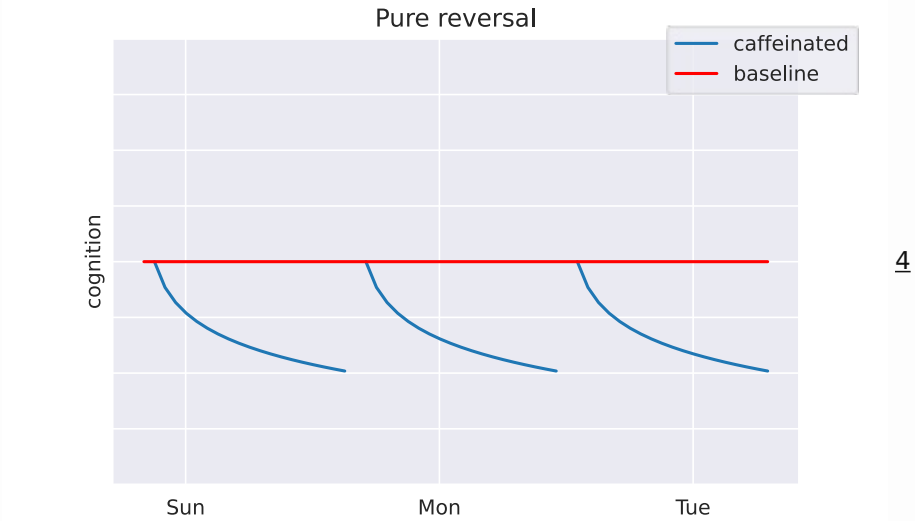
> *Withdrawal from caffeine causes… headache, fatigue, decreased energy/activeness, decreased alertness, drowsiness, decreased contentedness, depressed mood, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and feeling foggy/not clearheaded… abstinence from low doses, such as about one small cup of coffee per day, also produced symptoms of withdrawal.*
>
> — Karima et al (2009)

> *Despite 100 years of psychopharmacological research, the extent to which caffeine consumption benefits human functioning remains unclear.*
>
> — Rogers et al (2013)

You wake at 7am and, as usual, immediately put the coffee on.

Consider two (extreme) scenarios for a quickly-eliminated, chronic-use substance like coffee:





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In one case, the caffeine lifts you above your previous performance and then resets over the day. In the other, the morning caffeine undoes a withdrawal, returning you to your previous performance, but then makes you *worse* than before by the end of the day.

The worry is that chronic use of caffeine creates a problem and then masks it by associating itself with the relief of those symptoms. (This might further be disguised if acute caffeine use is like the left hand graph.)

(Again, that right-hand graph is not realistic. In reality the graphs will cross; the rest of this is just wrangling over where the crossing is. Does caffeine actually raise average performance?)

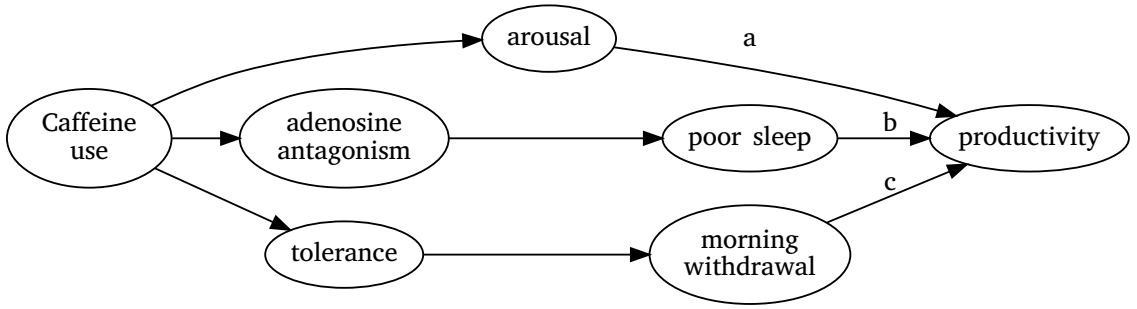
The theoretical reason to expect that chronic use looks like the right-hand graph is "downregulation": the body foils most attempts to permanently increase almost anything to do with the brain. Then there's a bunch of empirical studies that attempt to measure whether chronic effects are net positive.

- *strong withdrawal reversal hypothesis*: the cognitive effects of chronic caffeine use are not net positive.
- *beneficial naivety hypothesis*: the cognitive effects of caffeine use are net positive in naive users.

I take this seriously enough that I quit caffeine. But if withdrawal reversal *and* beneficial naivety are both true, it implies that we should instead *cycle* caffeine (use on one day, then take a break). But then what's the cycle length that avoids harm?

Could billions of people really do something every day and not notice it has no net effect? Could science fail to discover or communicate this for decades, despite the experiments being cheap and safe? (…)

Causal graphs



The sceptical hypothesis is that `|b+c| > |a|`.

What could caffeine help with?

To see the overall effect of caffeine, we need to distinguish closely related effects:

- Mental stamina (how long you go)
- Subjective energy (how hyped you feel)
- Motivation (how able to start you are)
- Vigilance (how much you focus)
- Working memory (how well you keep current tasks in mind)
- Recall speed (how quickly you remember past things)
- Recall accuracy (how well you remember) 1

We could bundle all of these up into “productivity”, but that’s extremely difficult to measure.

Gwern, who has looked into this more than me, continues to take it, since he assumes the motivational effects are net positive:

> *For me, my problems tend to be more about akrasia and energy and not getting things done, so even if a stimulant comes with a little cost to long-term memory, it’s still useful for me.*

This just raises the question of whether the motivation effect is real or a reversal though. (It might be that not all of caffeine’s effects get blocked over time; for instance the athletic gains.) I suppose motivation is easier to subjectively check than cognition.

As always, cost-benefit

This post suggests that there might be no cognitive benefit. But that’s only one part of the coffee phenomenon:

- Money cost
- Anxiety
- Maybe some harm to long-term memory
- But if you like the taste, then it’s probably worth it (you might be confusing withdrawal relief with flavour though)

How fast does tolerance build?

Karima:

> *caffeine withdrawal occurred after as little as three days of caffeine exposure*

This suggests that if you’re cycling it, you could take it two days on, n days off. (With n somewhere between 2 and 30.)

(In practice, people only seem to use it daily or never, but I don’t know if this bimodal thing

is mostly biological.)

Literature

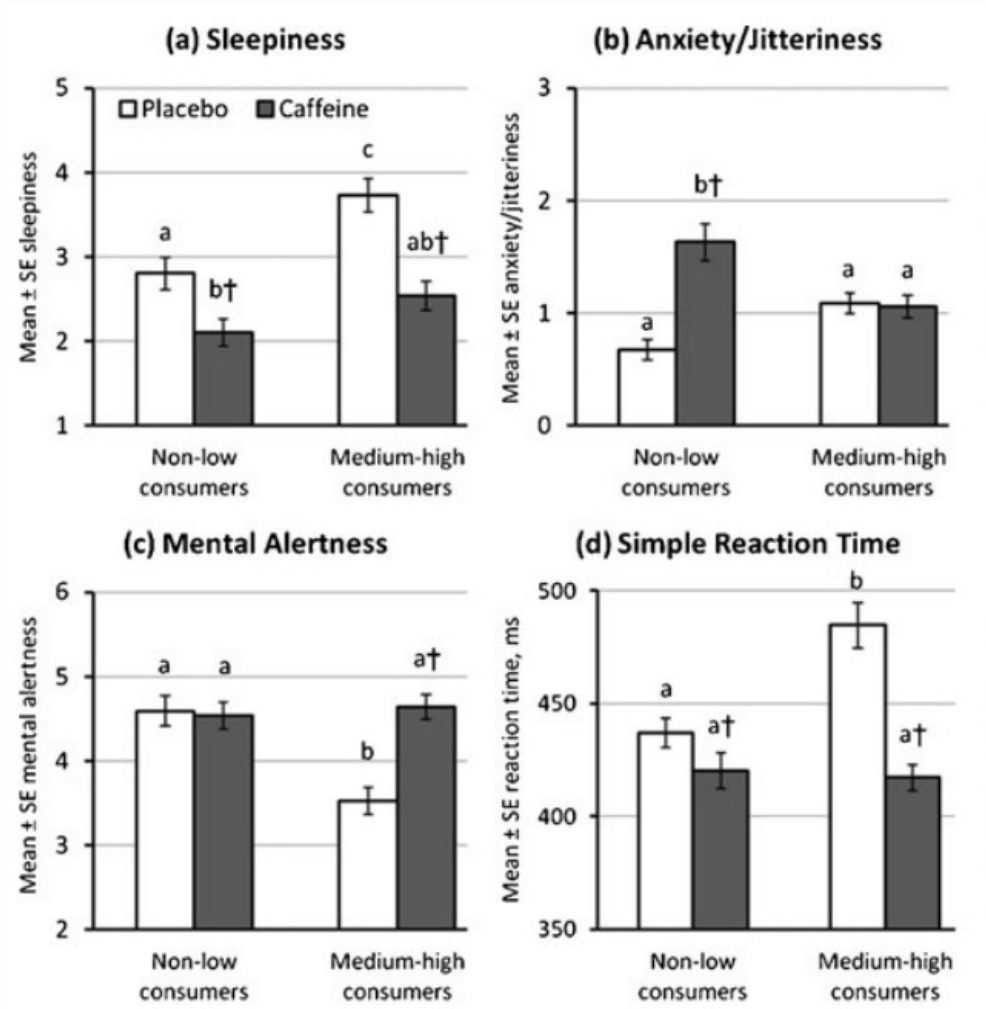
This question - whether 80% of all adults are fooling themselves - is surprisingly little studied, and the ones that have been done include lots of useless n=20 studies.

There was a cluster of work in the early 00s, mostly confirming or consistent with withdrawal reversal, but very little since.

Keywords: “withdrawal reversal”, “net [beneficial] effects of chronic administration”.

The real deal

I found one good recent study with strong pre-hoc controls for confounding: Rogers (2013), n=369, blinded:



The terribly named “Non-low” mean “non-consumer or low-consumer of caffeine”.

Overall, the high caffeine users are worse than the non-lows when each are given placebo, and are not notably better than the non-lows when both are given caffeine. This is consistent with withdrawal reversal.

Mere physiology

Sigmon et al (2009) :

> *There was almost no evidence for net effects of chronic caffeine administration on these measures [cerebral blood flow velocity, EEG, and subjective effects].*

Alertness

Rogers et al (2010):

> *Caffeine did not increase alertness in [low-intake] participants. With frequent consumption, substantial tolerance develops to the anxiogenic effect of caffeine, even in genetically susceptible individuals, but no net benefit for alertness is gained, as caffeine abstinence reduces alertness and consumption merely returns it to baseline.*

James (2014) is methodology showing how difficult we find it to get rid of the withdrawal confounder (for just one: caffeine crosses the placenta, so there may be very few humans who are *truly* caffeine naive!).

Design for a self-experiment

Caffeine metabolism is mediated by several genes we know about 3. In effect this means that we need to produce a few different estimates, one for each relevant genotype; it could well be that you're one of the lucky ones which the above genetically naive studies gloss over.

If you don't have your DNA sequence, or if you distrust the maturity of caffeine genetics, as you should, then you want to run an experiment:

Outcomes

1. Cognition
2. Motivation
3. Subjective wellbeing

Leave productivity out of it for now.

Aims

1. Work out if the chronic gain is larger than the withdrawal harm *for you*.
2. If it is, then work out the optimal cycle period *for you*.

Protocol

1. Quit caffeine. Zero intake for 3 weeks 2
2. Use Cambridge Brain Sciences to get a caffeine-naive baseline. Say at least a month of that.
3. Use 100mg powder at the same time every day (more ergogenic, precise dose).
4. Add 100mg theanine (since we're interested in the best case rather than the isolated effect of caff).
5. Daily tests for say another month.

(For later blinded experiments, get a friend to produce a coded pillbox of alternating 100mg caffeine powder and 100mg cornflour. Add these to something strong like 100ml orange juice to mask the extreme bitterness. Pulpy juice should help cover textures too. Quinine is similar)

Other stimulants

The above reasoning about downregulation applies to most other stimulants: nicotine, modafinil, etc. Nicotine apparently interacts with caffeine, so you'd want to do a clean univariate experiment for each.

See also

- Gwern, who gave me the idea
- Lovely collection of links and questions.

1. We can ignore other things that caffeine is clearly very good for

   * Emergency sleep deferral.
   * Reaction time
   * Athletic performance.
   * Making yourself anxious for some reason

   I'm also ignoring the neuroprotection claim, that it helps delay dementia.
2. A dose is ~completely cleared well within 2 days (max half-life 9.5 hours). Withdrawal *symptoms* stop after at most 9 days, but who knows how long the downregulation lasts.
3. And we know the ceiling on the genetic component:

   > *Twin studies find the heritability of caffeine-related traits to range between 0.36 and 0.58*

4. That graph is one dose per day but we can imagine the effect of several doses being similar, either with multiple cycles per day or a bigger crash overnight.

Tags: biochemistry, self-help, quantified-self, biology

'Strangers Drowning' (2015) by MacFarquhar

28th June 2018

- *on the rarity and beauty of seriously good people*
- *Confidence*: 80%
- *Topic importance*: 9 / 10

> *I don't know whether there are any moral saints. But if there are, I am glad that neither I nor those about whom I care most are among them... The moral virtues, present... to an extreme degree, are apt to crowd out the non-moral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character...*
> *there seems to be a limit to how much morality we can stand.*
>
> – Susan Wolf

> *...the moral narcissist's extreme humility masked a dreadful pride. Ordinary people could accept that they had faults; the moral narcissist could not. To [André] Green this moral straining was sinister, for the moral narcissist would do anything to preserve his purity, even when doing so carried a terrible price... there was "pseudo-altruism", a defensive cloak for sadomasochism; and there was "psychotic altruism", bizarre care-taking behaviour based in delusion... the analyst surmised that the masking of their own hostility and greed from themselves might be one of altruism's functions*
>
> – Larissa MacFarquhar

> *...we cannot and should not become impartial, [Bernard Williams] argued, because doing so would mean abandoning what gives human life meaning. Without selfish partiality—to people you are deeply attached to, your wife and your children, your friends, to work that you love and that is particularly yours, to beauty, to place — we are nothing. We are creatures of intimacy and kinship and loyalty, not blind servants of the world. 1*
>
> – Larissa MacFarquhar

Twelve profiles of recent radical altruists, and the backlash they receive from the rest of us. (^) Besides, MacFarquhar has some deep reflections on the good life and human nature to work through. So: There are people who shape their lives around the need of the world – in particular around strangers who are constantly, in some sense, drowning. This category of person does more than just work a caring job and be dead nice to those around them: instead, their entire lives are dominated by the attempt to do the *most* good.

Profiled altruists

- A fairly fearless nurse who organised the Fast for Life and trained generations of Nicaraguan nurses, continuing for thirty years despite specific threats to her life by Contras.
- A pseudonymous animal rights activist who has rescued or won improved conditions for millions of chickens.
- Two early effective altruists, Julia and Jeff, who live frugally and donate more than half of their salaries to the most effective NGOs in the world. They plausibly save 100 lives a year, far more than a doctor or firefighter (even before considering replaceability).
- A real Christian, who opened her church to the homeless (over the hostility of her flock) and donated a kidney anonymously.
- A charismatic, outcaste social worker and jungle statesman, who created a self-sustaining leper ashram, 5000-strong, out of nothing. Also his equally hardcore descendents.
- A Buddhist monk who created the largest suicide counselling site in Japan, stressing himself into heart disease.
- The omni-parents of Vermont, who adopted 24 of the least cute and easy children on the lists.
- A taciturn altruistic kidney donor.
- A burned-out idealist.4

(I've compiled data on their nature here.3)

MacFarquhar appears suspicious about these people, whose lives are taken over by their morals. She calls them "do-gooders" while admitting the term is dismissive.2 Even the most humble and quiet do-gooder is, she thinks, making an extremely arrogant claim: that the moral intuitions of the whole species - i.e. family favouritism, supererogation, the right to ignore the suffering of strangers - are totally wrong. She leaves no-one unsuspected.

> *an extreme morality as Singer's or Godwin's can seem not just oppressively demanding but actually evil, because it violates your duty to yourself. To require a person to think of himself as a tool for the general good could be seen as equivalent of kidnapping a person off the street and harvesting his organs to save three or four lives... even to ask this of yourself seems wrong, even perverted. Impartial, universal love seems the antithesis of what we value about deep human attachment.*

But these lives are victory laps: the victory of broad reason over narrow animality. MacFarquhar is more nuanced, less willing to dismiss particularism, nepotism and speciesism – which are together known as common sense. (Though I have only a mild case of the radicals: for instance, I am mostly immune to misery about the state of the world,

and I help my loved ones without much guilt. I'm giving 10% now and 50% eventually, but I am such a bookish scruff that the absence of luxuries does not really cramp my life at all.)

One part of Williams' humanist case against radical altruism has dissolved in the last decade: the idea that single-minded ethical focus must erode your connection to your community. Well, the effective altruists are growing in number and maturity; they offer a deep, global community of at least partially serious people to support and be supported by: and all with the stamp of moral consistency.

MacFarquhar doesn't much like utilitarianism, but she is too moved and impressed with her subjects to take the standard, safe, quietist line (which her reviewers have tended to). Throughout, she presents contradictory philosophical propositions, and makes it difficult to know which she believes; she constantly uses indirect speech and deictic discussion, blurring her voice with the debate at hand. This is, I think, an impressive rhetorical strategy – an "esoteric" one. The book is addressed to common sense readers, but also to our uncertainty and faint guilt; it's dedicated to her parents, but explicitly constructed to bring us closer to the altruists:

> *I took out all the physical descriptions because if you're looking at someone's physical appearance, you're on the outside. Similarly quotations, which seem as though they should be the most intimate form, because they come directly from the person's mouth. Again, in fact, the only way you hear someone speaking is if you're outside them. So if you translate quotation into interior thought, which simply means taking away the quotation marks and saying 'he thought' rather than 'he said' – that's a more intimate way of encountering someone.****

So *Strangers Drowning* covertly brings us closer to radical altruism. Her task is not to establish their ethical premises, nor to win over new obsessives: instead, she simply shows us their sincerity and incredible effects on the world – and, better, shows the lack of evidence and interpretive charity behind their opponents' aspersions. (This goes for the Freudians, the Objectivists, and the anti "codependency" crowd.) It humanises the threatening side of ultimate goodness. She mostly avoids editorialising about the radicals. But one of her clear conclusions is that these people are not deficient, instead having something most people lack:

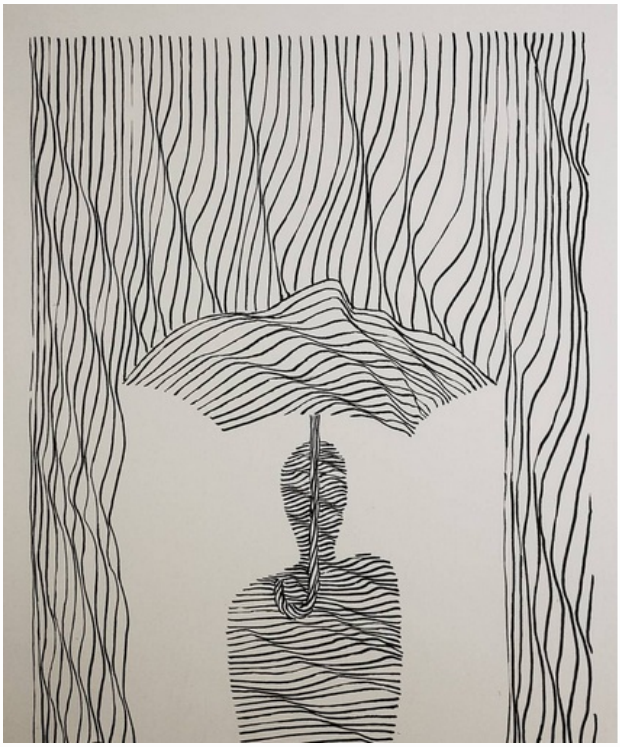
> *What do-gooders lack is not happiness but innocence. They lack that happy blindness that allows most people, most of the time, to shut their minds to what is unbearable. Do-gooders have forced themselves to know, and keep on knowing, that everything they do affects other people, and that sometimes (though not always) their joy is purchased with other people's joy. And, remembering that, they open themselves to a sense of unlimited, crushing responsibility...*
>
> *The need of the world was like death, [Julia] thought — everyone knew about it, but the thought was so annihilating that they had to push it out of consciousness or it would crush them. She understood, and yet did not understand, why other people didn't give more than they did. How did they allow themselves such permission? How could they not help?*

while also noting that, in general

> *If there is a struggle between morality and life, life will win... Not always, not in every case, but life will win in the end. Sometimes a person will die for a cause; sometimes a person will give up for duty's sake the things that are to him most precious. But most of the time, the urge to live, to give to your family, to seek beauty, to act spontaneously...*

> *or to do any number of things other than helping people, is too strong to be overridden... It may be true that not everyone should be a do-gooder. But it is also true that these strange, hopeful, tough, idealistic, demanding, life-threatening, and relentless people, by their extravagant example, help keep those life-sustaining qualities alive.*

An amazing book, anyway: charged, critical, structurally ingenious, and filled with humanity – or, with this other, better thing.
[Galef Type: Data 2, Values 2]



"Sedia hujan sebelum payung" (c) Zaky Arifin (2015)

Good riddance

The chapter on the blitheness and cruelty of the psychoanalysts enraged me - all the more because MacFarquhar leaves their unscientific bullshit unchallenged, instead letting it mock and degrade itself. (One hopes.) *So much* glib spite:

> *ANNA FREUD:* *Altruists are bossy, because the urge that is usually behind the fulfillment of one's own wishes is now placed behind the fulfillment of the wishes of another person. The wishes have to be fulfilled in a certain way, in the way the altruist would like to fulfill them for himself or herself. After all, the bossiness of do-gooders is proverbial...*

(My, what rigorous science.) So, here's yet *another* way I am fortunate to live when I do: these people have by now been mostly sidelined in polite discourse. The harm they are able to do is much reduced, and I need not spend my whole life convincing people that they are just making things up.

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*

2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*

3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

In this case: I have a philosophy degree and have read millions of words about demanding ethics and the quantitative approach to do-gooding. I've met a couple of the protagonists and find Macfarquhar's depictions very accurate.

1. Note for later the absent quotation marks around MacFarquhar's report of the psychoanalysts' and Williams' positions.
2. "Do-gooder" is still much better than Wolf's term "saint", because, as MacFarquhar notes, to call someone a saint is to nullify the challenge of their actions: saints are not just 'people who do really good things'; they are (thought to be) a different sort of being.

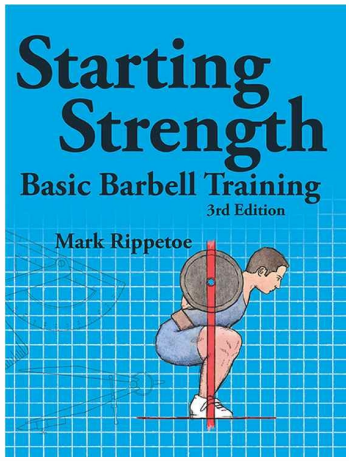
   Any movement (like EA) which seeks to make radical altruism mainstream has to resist this demarcation and get people to see such a life as, first, good; then, possible for them; and then reasonable - the sort of thing that people would do if they thought about it more.
3. Philosophy - e.g. Peter Singer, Will MacAskill, Toby Ord, Mark Lee, Geoff Anders, Stephanie Wykstra - looms large here, in this little corner of the species; larger than organised religion. Since all of the philosophers are from Analytic departments, this gives the lie to the generalised standard criticism of academic philosophy (: that they are fatally detached from the concerns of society, dehumanised, etc).
4. MacFarquhar's account of Stephanie is misleading: she makes it seem like she has opted for ordinary amoral innocence, where the real Stephanie has taken on an incredibly high-impact job, activism for oversight of pharmaceutical clinical trial data.

Tags: ethics, effective-altruism, meaning

'Starting Strength' by Rippetoe

22nd February 2020

- *The art & philosophy of lifting heavy things for no reason*
- *Confidence*: Anecdotal - 100% for me, 60% for you.
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Content notes*: biological determinants of mental health
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



> *...a life is like iron. If you make good use of it, it wears out; if you don't, rust destroys it. So too we see men worn out by toil; but sluggishness and torpor would hurt them more.*

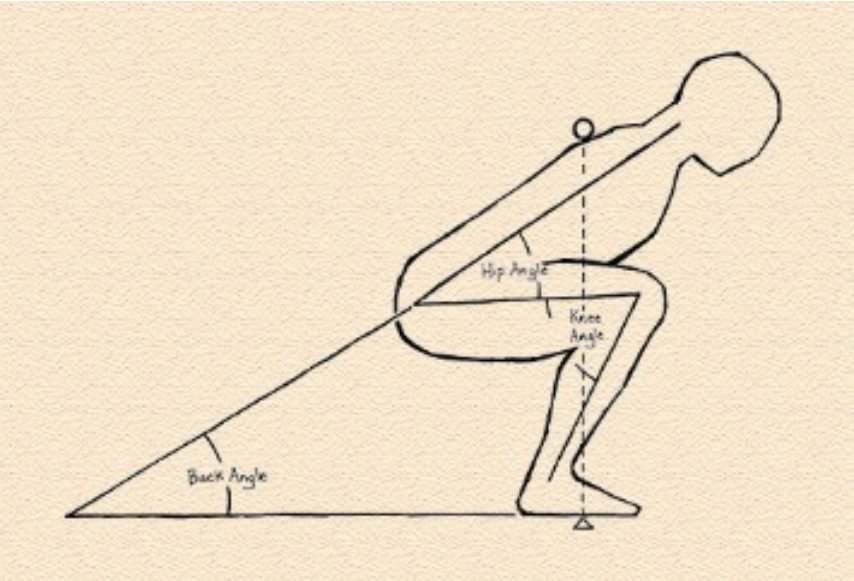
– Cato the Elder

The first paragraph of this fitness book has stronger writing than you'd ever expect:

> *Physical strength is the most important thing in life. This is true whether we want it to be or not... Whereas previously our physical strength determined how much food we ate and how warm and dry we stayed, it now merely determines how well we function in these new surroundings we have crafted for ourselves as our culture has accumulated. But we are still animals – our physical existence is, in the final analysis, the only one that actually matters. A weak man is not as happy as that same man would be if he were strong. This reality is offensive to some people who would like the intellectual or spiritual to take precedence. It is instructive to see what happens to these very people as their squat strength goes up.*

It begins with a metaphilosophical salvo(!)

This message is repulsive, unjust, and almost exactly fits my experience. (Though he's being imprecise: better to say "the most important *foundation*", that fitness is a key instrument rather than the highest terminus. Though even then it's not "most important", since it neglects even larger nonintellectual effects on my philosophy of life: love, and grand moral scheming.)



There is lots of reasoning from first principles, which is satisfying and gives it an Athenian air, but which I can just barely evaluate. Luckily it is just so easy to check if he's right (for your case).

> *The force of gravity acting on the bar is always acting straight down in a vertical line. Therefore, the most efficient way to oppose this force is by acting on it vertically as well. So not only is a straight line the shortest distance between two points, but a straight vertical line is also the most efficient bar path for a barbell moving through space in a gravitational framework.*

> *Your bench press strength doesn't adapt to the total number of times you've been to the gym to bench or to your sincerest hope that it will get stronger. It adapts to the stress imposed on it by the work done with the barbell. Furthermore, it adapts to exactly the kind of stress imposed on it. If you do sets of 20, you get good at doing 20s. If you do heavy singles, you get better at doing those.*

> *"good technique" in barbell training is easily and understandably defined as the ability of the lifter to keep the bar vertically aligned with the balance point.*

Rippetoe is the source of the recent renaissance in cheap simple barbells (free weights, i.e. dozens of muscles recruited at once) over circuits of giant single-muscle machines. (In the West, anyway; large parts of the world, e.g. Russia, apparently never gave up their bars.) He tells a plausible mean story about the perverse economic incentives that led to the latter, 1980-2010.

There is too much detail here - he discusses variants of the movements and the debate over them. But what a trivial criticism that is! I think most people could skip two-thirds of the book, since there's detailed kinematics for each move, instructor tips and gym-building tips, but it's interesting throughout. You could get the key parts from the final Programme section, then the "what not to do" chapter closing sheets. Warm-up sets chapter was very useful.

> *if your schedule does not allow time for proper warm-up, it does not allow time for training at all... [The squat] should be carefully and thoroughly prepared with a couple of empty-bar sets, and then as many as five sets between those and the work sets.*

There's an abrupt shift in tone, in the chapter on lifting for kids: he starts citing University press books and listing comparative numbers for his claims. So this is a crusade for him.

It is unlikely that you'd learn form from this alone, even like reading it and applying it live with a mirror. It is unlikely that you could find a PT with this much physical knowledge or clarity.

He's quite bitchy, which I like but you might not:

Figure 2-24. Don't do this, you fool.

> *if you continually miss workouts, you are not actually training, and your obviously valuable time should be spent more productively elsewhere.*

If you're not increasing your max weight lifted, you're not training, and so not following his programme. The obsession with increase is still not mine. Strength, yes, exertion yes, but constant expansion? I aim for 100kg squat, and expect to attain it this year. *Not* herniating weight, not kneecapping weight, not sclerotic weight: nice big weight. Maybe once I get there I will grow bored, will again be confounded by the power of concrete body on worldview, and have to start climbing again. He thinks everyone gets injured eventually. But is this under the permanent revolution programme?

[Since writing this I looked quite hard and couldn't find any evidence that injury rates increase with (slowly attained) weight, until you get to the crazy competition levels.]

> *Ambition is useful, greed is not. Most of human history and the science of economics demonstrate that the desire for more than is currently possessed drives improvement, both personally and for societies. But greed is an ugly thing when uncontrolled and untempered with wisdom, and it will result in your progress coming to an ass-grinding halt.*

> *If you're a little fluffy around the belly, you have obviously already created the conditions necessary for growth. You'll usually start out stronger than the skinny guy, and because your body hasn't got the problems with growing that skinny guys do, strength gains can come more easily for you if you eat correctly.*

I've been doing a derivative of this program since October last year: no trainer, lots of missed sessions, just the primary exercises, 1 hour and out, a scaled-up ordinary diet, and I still saw decent gains, +50kg onto my initial squat. Rippetoe claims this could be achieved in half the time with many gallons of milk and much more aggro, and I see no reason to doubt him.

Philosophical aspects of lifting

> *What sort of philosophy one chooses depends… on what sort of man one is; for a*

> *philosophical system is not a dead piece of furniture that we can reject or accept as we wish; it is rather a thing animated by the soul of the person who holds it.*
>
> — Fichte

> *Gradually it becomes clear to me what every great philosophy really was – namely the confession of its originator, and a sort of involuntary and unconscious autobiography…*
>
> — Nietzsche

- As above: The body helps determine the mind. You should be wary of your own philosophy, not just because of your local social conditioning, but also because of your diet, your habits, your daily kindness, and your bench. The lifter is Sisyphus, happy.

- Weights are a strong psychological intervention, perhaps the third-strongest I have found, after love and higher purpose. It's comical, how much of my deep teenage unhappiness, and sincere existentialism, was grounded in concrete fixable problems, and how little I understood that they were both fixable and not in fact intellectually grounded. Not knowing how to talk to girls, not exercising, not actively helping people: these produced my philosophy. Now *that's* absurdism!

- No excuses, no wiggle room, no ambiguity: lifting a lot without injuring yourself is a brute fact, unbiased. Rippetoe: "*cause and effect cannot be argued with or circumvented by your wishes and desires.*"

- 'He's a growing loun!' my granny would say, justifying my early gluttony. Well, twenty years later here I am again, a growing boy. Artificial growth, body neoteny. What does a sense of increase, of coming potential, do to you?

- > *Waiting until soreness subsides before doing the next workout is a good way to guarantee that soreness will be produced every time, since you'll never get adapted to sufficient workload frequency to stop getting sore.*

- There are so many ways to do it wrong. (Only some of those wrong ways break you - the others just slow you down or confuse your body.) Rippetoe focusses on five movements, out of however many thousand physiologically possible ones. These are picked for excellent reasons, tested over decades.

- > *Exercise is the thing we must do to replicate the conditions under which our physiology was – and still is – adapted, the conditions under which we are physically normal. In other words, exercise is substitute caveman activity, the thing we need to make our bodies, and in fact our minds, normal in the 21st century.*

- > *Psychologically, 20 [rep max] work is very hard, due to the pain, and lifters who are good at it develop the ability to displace themselves from the situation during the set. Or they just get very tough.*

- I live in my head. But the hip drive out of a deep squat is such a strong strange confluence of forces, vaguely under my control but more accurately an explosion I light the fuse on, that I am driven to notice and appreciate neuromuscular marvels.

Why listen to Rippetoe on this topic?

Decades of personal experience plus strong amateur theory plus distilled folk wisdom, in a domain with rapid and unambiguous feedback. He's quite open about unknown things, e.g. the molecular nature of soreness. Sometimes a little defensive, against experts less near to the metal. Sample:

> *Most sources within the heavy-training community agree that a good starting place is one gram of protein per pound of bodyweight per day, with the rest of the diet making up 3500–6000 calories, depending on training requirements and body composition. Although these numbers produce much eyebrow-raising and cautionary statement-issuing from the registered-dietetics people, it is a fact that these numbers work well for the vast majority of people who lift weights, and these numbers have worked well for decades.*

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*
2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*
3. *incredible amounts of logic-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

I've followed Rippetoe's programme inconsistently for 4 months and still got good returns - worth it for mental health alone. I know sophomore biology and physics, and nothing he says here contradicts any of it.

Tags: review, philosophy, mental-health

Things I Use

11th April 2020

- *Objects which have recently improved my life*
- *Confidence*: 99% for me, 50% for you.
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

No affiliate links, because I am lazy.

Prices given are what I paid, usually during a sale.

Health

- Bowflex SelectTech 552 dumbbell (£180). By my desk; much harder to avoid than the gym. 15 dumbbells in one. I love how little space they take, and the design is extremely satisfying. You can get by with one.
  Expected lifespan: 15 years?
  Cost per year: £12.

- Power rack and barbells (£1000 for own gear, or £30 / month gym membership). Barbells give me big structural and mental changes. Commercial gyms are fine but you can do far better in environment and cost if you have room for your own gear, or know somebody who does. I was lucky enough to have a mate with a free garage. They also keep their value really well, so resale should be roughly the same as initial cost, which might mean that you actually save relative to gym.
  Expected lifespan: Bar should be 10+ years. Rack maybe 20 years. Plates N/A.
  Cost per year: £50 if you have space / £250 if renting a space with two other people.

Advantages of garage gym over commercial gym:

- Privacy
- No time wasted commuting

- No time wasted queueing
- Can workout in anything, save on gym gear
- Music of choice
- No idiots dropping 150kg from head height at 110dB.
- No disease
- Open 24h
- Plausibly cheaper than public gym (< £250/year if you can split with friends).

Buyer's guide

I got a set second-hand. For iron plates, £2 / kg is a good price. You want to append "Olympic" to your search queries, just means everything is a standardised size and fits together.

Garages are pretty costly in cities. Outside of London you can find them for <£80 a month. Split between two people takes you to £480 a year, comparable to the cost of an average peak-time gym membership, minus facilities but plus private gym advantages you'd otherwise pay £1000 for.

Other gear

There's no limit to the amount of gimmicks you could buy, from 30x markup powders to belts and so on.

I'm trying out weightlifting shoes for barbells (£70). Feel nice and nonslip, and subjectively make squats easier. You're advised to get a UK size too big, because your feet expand under load.
Expected lifespan: 3 years?

- Dahon Espresso D24 folding bike (£320 on the Cycle To Work scheme, down from £530). Full size wheels and front suspension: fine for offroad. Folding means you can take it on trains, subways and car boots despite the size. The wheels it comes with are ridiculously thick, but you can get road ones. Probably saves me about 100 hours a year walking, and also gives me joy. I loved the old version, which had a bike pump hidden in the seat column.
  Expected lifespan: 10 years light use with £100 annual service.
  Cost per year: £120 per year, amortised.
- Powdered greens (£25 for 100 days). I like leafy veg, but the cost and the low shelf-life makes me eat it less than I want. I mix 10g of this into my morning shakes and feel virtuous at least. Wait for it to be 40% off.
  Cost per year: £80
- Zinc acetate lozenges (£10 for 30). There's some evidence that keeping particular ligands of zinc in your mouth when you have a cold speeds up your recovery, maybe by a full day. Many other viruses also perish under zincky attention, so they're out of stock as of Spring 2020.
  Cost per year: £5
- Sleep mask (£8). I slept poorly after I moved to the city, mostly because of ambient light. Now I don't! You want one which curves away from your eyelashes and isn't too hot. This is excellent.
  Expected lifespan: 2 years?
  Cost per year: £4
- Oxymetazoline (£8 for months). Never mind the Vicks or the steam bath. This clears your nose in seconds; makes sleeping when ill *much* easier.
  Cost per year: £8
- Anyone can book a winter flu jab for about £10. IIRC, in expectation this should save you about 12h of misery / lost work.

Expected lifespan: 1 year
Cost per year: £10

- Either stannous fluoride (£3 for 2 months) or hydroxyapatite toothpaste (£3 for 2 months). (The normal kind of toothpaste has the less effective sodium fluoride.) I haven't seen one with both, so might be good to alternate. *Expected lifespan*: 2 months.
  Cost per year: £15 over normal paste.

- Blood tests are cheap now! (£30 or so.) Even if you don't feel bad, there's very little reason not to check, say every two years. Vitamin D and iron are a good start; "subclinical" deficiencies of them are common. I found I had slightly low ferritin, and this was such a cheap thing to fix. This service signs you up to a biannual subscription, but you can just cancel after the first one.
  Expected lifespan: 2 years
  Cost per year: £15

Food

- Queal shakes (£1 per meal). I was skeptical at first: "complete meals" (artificial food) seem procrustean (assuming dietary science is finished) and joyless. But it's based on oats and soy protein. This dissolves much better than Huel and has loads of flavours. I pad it out with rice protein powder and so usually get about 5 shakes out of a bag.
  Cost per year: Same as a solid breakfast.

- MSG powder (£4 for 200 meals). Average vegan food is good but just needs a lot more fat and umami. I get the latter from a sprinkling of magic dusts (MSG and nutritional yeast). There is no good evidence that it has any negative health effects, and in fact it's a little healthier than table salt (less sodium).

- You want one good chef's knife. (You hurt yourself less with a really sharp knife since its motion is more predictable.) I just bought a random £25 one in Tesco and it is excellent.
  Expected lifespan: 3 years if you sharpen it
  Cost per year: £10

- Fastbake breadmaker (£50). British supermarket bread is crap. This makes 900g of warm, chewy, custom bread for about 55p. Chuck in poppy seeds or linseed or nuts for 10p, done. Wholemeal is trickier, needs a little bit of vitamin C powder. Power is maybe 5p.
  Expected lifespan: 4 years?
  Cost per year: roughly the same as shop bread.

Productivity

- Filco Majestouch mechanical keyboard (£99). Feels amazing, built like a tank. The noise takes some getting used to. I went for Red switches (quieter but also less tactile). I don't need a numpad but *maybe* you do. (PS: you have to love Japanese web design, as long as you don't have to rely on it.)
  Expected lifespan: 10 years? Or never if I get into soldering.
  Cost per year: £10

- Sublime Text (£35). I do basically all of my writing and coding in this editor. Wonderful search, regex, markdown, and build options. Packages for everything. There are languages that really need IDEs (Java comes to mind), but I don't write in em. You can get it free, but I wanted to support it. I hear VS Code is even better but I am content.
  Expected lifespan: Forever.

- This blog is hosted on Netlify, they are amazing and free for small fry.

- Wire up your laptop for calls (£5). Who knows how much of social difficulties are due to people disliking latency on your calls? Replace the cable every couple years just in

case.

- Bose QuietComfort 25 (£150). Being able to turn down noise is a superpower: actual focus. They even made working in an open-plan office intermittently tolerable. They don't work *that* well on conversations, but are excellent for humming appliances, engine roar, wind. Lasted 3.5 years so far. These are the wired ones because I resented paying an extra £100 for a transponder; I've had to replace the cable twice, 2 x £7, and probably about £20 of batteries.
  Expected lifespan: I guess 5 years?
  Cost per year: £30

- Nicotine lozenges (8p a day). Better than caffeine. Vaping is cheaper but riskier and restricted in many locations. Takes a little while to get used to the mild burning. This is the only thing on this list with real risks. *DO NOT EAT A WHOLE ONE WHEN YOU START; start with 0.5mg or less and don't swallow it*.
  Cost per year: £30

- Amazing Marvin is the nicest to-do list ever. It's programmable and supports dozens of different productivity systems, recurring reminders, timers, whatever. Lifetime subscription is pretty cheap during Xmas sales too (£150).
  Expected lifespan: Forever. (10 years)

- 45W Corn Light (£20). I don't have SAD, but during winter I noticed a little bump in mood and energy from hanging up 3 of these very bright blue LED clusters. Each is about 400W equivalent in terms of halogen bulbs.
  Expected lifespan: Probably 10 years.

- A big plastic timer (£15). Useful for cooking and for remembering that the pomodoro work technique exists. The original brand is ridiculously expensive.
  Expected lifespan: 10 years.
  Cost per year: £1.50

- ThinkPad Carbon X1 laptop with customs maxed out (£1600). Light, fast, beautiful, runs Linux without a peep. m.2 drive is worth every penny. 1
  Expected lifespan: 6 years.
  Cost per year: £250

- I don't know if it counts as productivity, since I spend about an hour a day playing with it, but Roam is the best personal knowledge base software I've seen. Text, maths, code, images, bidirectional links, single-copy imports… It promises to unify me across decades. (My blogs also do this, but only for the top 1% of thoughts.) Workflowy and Notion are a tree: Roam is the awesome power of a graph, which is what thoughts are like. Currently free, soon to be pricey.

Travel

- Berghaus Freeflow 35+8 backpack (£80). This has a clever mechanism at the back to shrink and grow the volume by 25%, and also a harness to leave a gap between your back and the bag, preventing deathly hike sweats. On extra small mode it fits even stingy Ryanair airline cabin requirements (there's some optical illusion about you wearing your cabin bag on your back, I've never been bothered about it in 43L mode. (If you wear two jumpers and a jacket just for passing through the gate, 35L is two weeks' basics, no cabin bag.) I've had this for 8 years, maybe 100 difficult trips including long haul airports and 1km mountains, and it's fine.
  Expected lifespan: 'Lifetime guarantee'. (20 years?)
  Cost per year: £4

- Moto G7 Power (£160). I resisted getting a smartphone for 8 years. I still think it's a huge threat to productivity, and a privacy disaster. But for travelling it is a massive help: boarding passes, Maps, taxis, translation, mobile data. Also allows me to replace my ereader, my GPS, my trips to ATMs, my camera, my printer. Group chats have been relatively useful already. The new UK Railcard is app-only too. This has the largest

battery life on the market (26h of low-res video playback), and is cheap and good.
Expected lifespan: 4 years.
Cost per year: £40

Services, Security

- KeePassX password manager (£0). Works on every platform: Linux, Win, Mac, Android. Probably saves a few minutes a week and a lot of mental overhead. See here for why you want this.
- Protonmail is free and actually secure.
- Private Internet Access VPN (£50 per year). VPNs are imperfect, but they help mitigate a few different problems (IP tracking, unencrypted traffic, ISP logs, public wifi spoofing, geo-locking, app requests). PIA got a subpoena for their logs and they came up clean. Again, see here.
- Pi-hole ad blocker (£25). Stops ads at the source, for every device in your house at once.
Expected lifespan: 5 years.
- Vanguard ETFs. One of the most surprising facts is that automatic index funds outperform "actively managed" (paying a finance person) ones, after you subtract their fees. Vanguard are the original and are among the lowest fees, about 0.15% of your return. I use a variant of the Simplicity Portfolio and rebalance every 6 months. You may be amused to hear that they are "communist". Above, I said that only nicotine has any real risk - but these are a layer of abstraction over the stock market, so obviously be careful.
- Focusmate (£3 a month). I work from home a lot, and this lets me force myself to have arse in chair by 8:30am. That's worth it alone. One friend thinks it makes him 20% more productive on top of that; I'd say 5%. (Come join me in the EA room!)
Expected lifespan: 1 month.
- Emergency backup bank account (Free). A couple times in the last decade I've been locked out of my account due to a false-positive for fraud, or lost my bank card. To be able to get to the bank / to work during the day (or four) this takes to resolve, I have a backup bank card with about £100 on it. You can also just stash a little cash in your house, but this is more general than that. Free, takes maybe one hour including the appointment some UK places make you do.
Expected lifespan: Forever.

Fun

- KS Miami bluetooth speaker (£20). Surprisingly good bass; makes watching things on a laptop much less dreadful. Good battery life too.
Expected lifespan: 4 years.
Cost per year: £5
- Tailored socks. One of my favourite possessions. I have socks which *actually* fit for the first time. (The creator took 6 measurements!) It was a gift, but I would probably pay £30 if I was rich.
Expected lifespan: 3 years.
- Two actually nice shirts (£40). There are a lot of weddings in my life at the moment. And besides that it's nice to surprise people once in a while.
Expected lifespan: 3 years.
Cost per year: £15
- Fairy lights make all rooms nicer, any time of year (£20 for loads).

Cost-effectiveness

Rather than just telling you their cost, I should say how much good they do per pound. Ignoring the free ones, which you should just go and get now, I think the best are:

1. Vanguard ETFs. Negative cost, and they're hard to beat on returns/fee unless you're full-time Finance. NaN:1
2. Sleep mask. Massively improved sleep quality, without having to alter the room, close the windows, whatever. 100:1.
3. Dumbbells. A cheap gym membership is £150 a year; using these a couple times a week for 2 years means I've saved hundreds of pounds and dozens of hours commuting. They should last 15 years, so maybe total 30:1. (During the present lockdown, with gyms closed, the dumbbells get a temporary massive boost too.)
4. Meal shakes once a day. Saves money (if a lunch would otherwise be £4) and time. Also a handy automatic prepper store. 10:1.
5. Mechanical keyboard. Assuming this decreases my RSI risk by 1%, it will have paid off 10 times over. But also in comfort and fun alone. 10:1

Why write this? One of the big bottlenecks to improving your life is just knowing that it's possible to improve a given part. For some reason people don't share their data on this, probably a reaction against vulgar consumerism.

See also

- 1000 nerds

- Scott Alexander
- Rob Wiblin
- Sam Bowman
- Mark Xu
- Alexey Guzey
- Jose Ricon
- Peter McCluskey
- Philip Storry
- Various (2012)
- Various (2020)
- Rosie Campbell
- Michelle Hutchinson
- Arden Koehler
- Louis being mean
- Spencer’s joy
- 100 bookish types

Tags: self-help, lists, quantification,

Favourite maths tools

2nd November 2021

- *Software & sites that make it possible for me to do maths*
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Content notes*: I don't like videos or MOOCs.

Writing

I’m open to the idea that pen n paper are superior to typing, for *learning*.

- But I stick everything in Roam. Nested lists, LaTeX, PDFs, images and videos, all in one doc.

e.g.

- I am no longer sure if it’s worth learning LaTeX, but if you want to or have to, for the love of god use Overleaf. Saves hours a year on install headaches.
- Years and years in, I still sometimes encounter symbols I don’t know the name for. Detexify has saved me many hours
- MathPix is an AI maths recogniser, so you can go from e.g. handwritten notes to Latex. Very good accuracy, though the formatting often needs cleaning up.

Computer algebra (“solve this for me”)

- WolframAlpha. Obvs! Pro is worthwhile for absolute beginners, gives you infinite stepped examples.
- Maxima. If you need something heavier and free. I see no point in Mathematica or SAGE or even Octave.
- SymPy. Satisfying but not productive. Only if you’re 10x stronger at programming than maths, as I was.
- I’m surprised there’s no product of this yet (neural net beats Mathematica on univariable integration)

References

- I’ve probably spent more time on MathOverflow than I have in textbooks.
- Search engine for formulae. Wolfram does this a bit too.
- Catalogue of groups
- Catalogue of graphs
- Catalogue of categories
- I’ve never actually used OEIS but some people seem to get real life use out of it.
- Currently open problems ranked by importance

Viz

- draw.io is way better than it looks. You can easily make publication-quality vector

graphics. The good bits of Powerpoint.
- Loads of graphing tools at Desmos (e.g. teaching linear programming in 2 variables)
- Geogebra looks fine too
- Never used either, but for generating beautiful video with a lot of work you now have MathBox and Manim

Challenges

- Project Euler is the second best way to learn a new programming language (once you know one deeply). Some people do way better at the computational than the analytic, and this is one bridge you can take.

Courses

I have only ever liked and finished one MOOC (and in general I dislike learning from video).

- But people seem to love OpenCourseWare.

See also

- Ranking lots of linear algebra material

Tags: maths

Showing over saying

10th September 2010

- *Wittgenstein's Tractatus in pictures*
- *Confidence*: 70%.
- *Topic importance*: 3 / 10

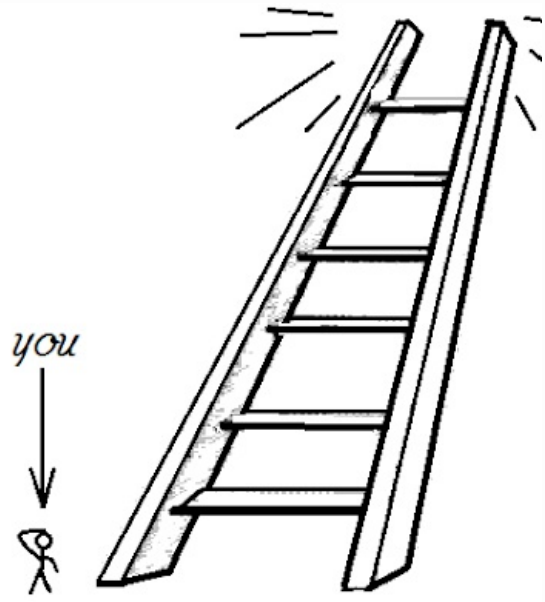
2020 Update

Like any maximally nerdy (but romantic) young man of the last century, I tried to understand the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* when I was 19. I did not succeed, even given the help of someone who has spent half his life reading it. This was not surprising, since I didn't understand symbolic logic or the predicate calculus or Fregean semantics when I tried, and bounced off the Sheffer stroke.

And, despite appearances, *this is not a work of rationalism at all*: it only reduces everything to logic in order to show up logic. But in the process of trying I came up with cool drawings of some of it.

Don't take these too seriously, as the Austrian said to the Welshman.

- I couldn't draw. Still can't, but now I have TiKZ and matplotlib to produce beautiful vectors, where he had only MSPaint.
- The central conceit, taking "zeigen" to mean visualisation, is not what he means by that.
- Wittgenstein is not an empiricist about number, so image 6.02 is beautiful but wrong.
- The examples of states of affairs I give (giving birth) are highly metaphorical; Wittgenstein's "objects" are infinitesimal things, "atomic" in the Greek sense. I think "redness" might be one. The simplest possible units of what constitute facts.

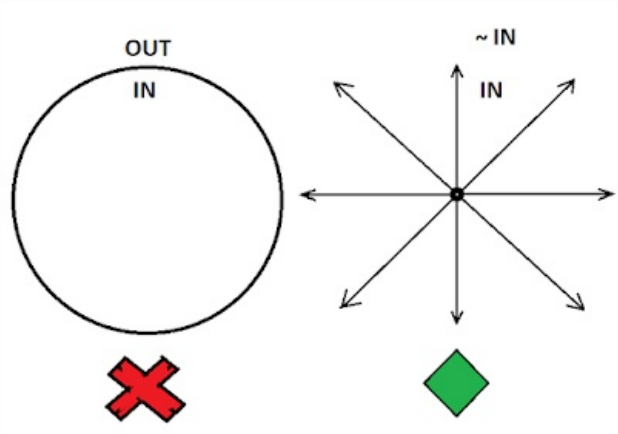


> *Wittgenstein does not, however, relegate all that is not inside the bounds of sense to oblivion. He makes a distinction between saying (sagen) and showing (zeigen) which is made to do additional work.*

> *There are, beyond the senses (Sinne) that can be formulated in sayable propositions, things that can only be shown. These show themselves in the form of (contingent) propositions, in the symbolist and logical propositions, and even in the unsayable (metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic) propositions of philosophy. 'What can be shown cannot be said.' But it is there, in language, even though it cannot be said.*
>
> – Anat Biletzski

> *A 'picture' is a model of reality... A picture cannot depict its pictorial form: it displays it.*
>
> – Ludwig Wittgenstein

Sketches of a minimalist metaphysics: “the most that can sensibly be said” about everything at once, and then some. A work of theoretical semantics which invites the reader to read it as a poem, and to reject it. I wanted this post to be wordless, but you won’t get much out of it if I don’t do some setup. A version with the German original and both flawed English translations is here.



Proposition 6.41

The whole *Tractatus*

1. Reality is the aggregation of everything which could be real.
2. What is real are facts. A fact is a *specific* configuration of existing fundamental things.
3. When we think, we model a possible world. The structure of the model is logic.
4. When we think properly, we are entertaining a premise with a determinate concept attached.
5. Whether a statement is successful depends on whether its constituents are.
6. All statements have the same structure. With one general formula (just one powerful function, the "N-operator", the denial of all propositions f[x]), you can derive the fundamental particles of language and, from there, all more complex statements. The formula of an ideal language: $[\bar{p}, \bar{\xi}, N(\bar{\xi})]$
7. There is more to all this than can be put in words.

Definitions

Pardon the German, but it's really important to keep things separate, because his ideas are so particular and weird. For instance, he does not count vague thoughts as "thoughts" ("Gedanken"). What he means by "picture" is really odd: more like a modal logic formula than a diagram.

- '*Sachverhalt*': A 'state of affairs' or 'atomic fact'. (see Proposition 2.)
- '*Gegenständ*': An 'object' or 'simple': the merest constituents of reality.

- '*Satz*': A sentence (...or 'proposition').
- '*Elementarsatz*': A fundamental particle of language; a primitive concept. Mirror the Gegenstände.
- '*Sinn*': A 'sense', which here means a determinate proposition: the truth-conditions of a sentence.
- '*sinnlos*': 'Meaningless'. Lacking a single, totally clear propositional content. (e.g. tautologies and contradictions).
- '*unsinnig*': 'Senseless'. Total nonsense; a sentence which is too malformed to ever carry sense (e.g. metaphysics, ethics, the *Tractatus*)
- '*Gedanke*': A thought - but, again, he means only clear, 'sinnvoll' thoughts.

Background assumptions

Some of these are never stated, and I struggle to see how you'd work out that he has made them without immersing yourself in Frege and Russell.

1. The Context Principle: "*A [word] has meaning only in a proposition. Every variable can be conceived as a propositional variable*." - 3.314

2. The false (falsch) is not the nonsensical (Unsinnig) is not the senseless (Sinnlos): "*Sense must be determinate*." - 3.23.

   Statements fail to express thoughts when
   1. any constituent of them lacks a truth-value, or
   2. is of indeterminate sense - that is, when any constituent is a pseudo-concept (e.g. "world"; "fact"; "God"; "object"; "the Good"; "beauty").

   The Tractatus fails in almost every line; under its own rules, it is plain nonsense. Compared to observation statements, logic is 'senseless', but philosophy is even less than that: nonsense. (6.54)

The overall argument

Never presented as an argument, heaven forfend:

1. Logic is Transcendental
   "*Logic is not a body of doctrine, but a mirror-image of the world.*" - 6.13

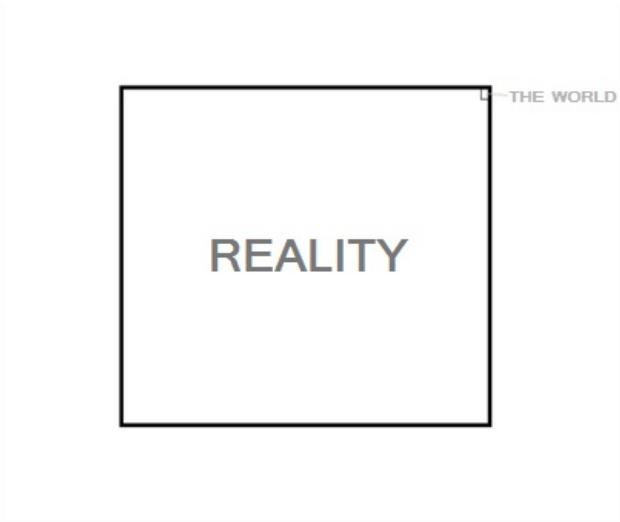
2. Language is logical
   (proper sentences about proper things have reducible logical structure.)

3. So language is transcendental.

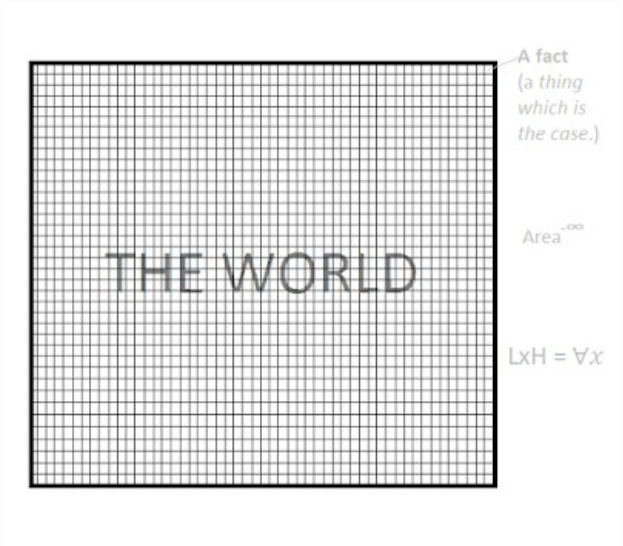
Hence language can lead to *knowledge* and finally end philosophy (or the Cartesian project, at least).

The logical structure of language has "multiplicities" which relate directly to the external world, or, to the true barebones meaning of statements. This explains everything which is clear and determinate, and everything else about life cannot be explained in language, so there's no point doing philosophy about it.

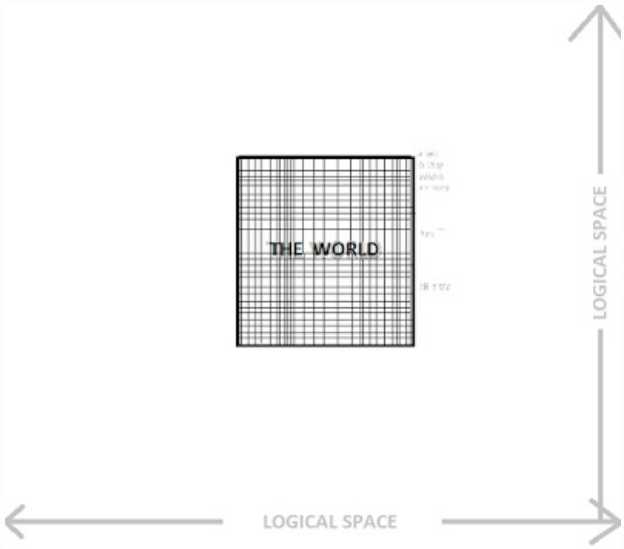
> *4.003 - Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical.*



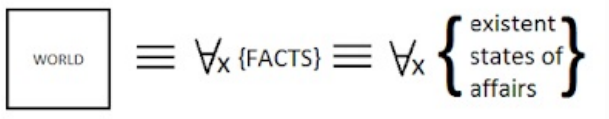
1. The world is all that is the case.

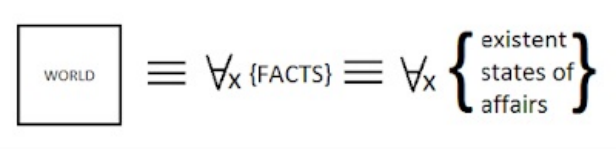


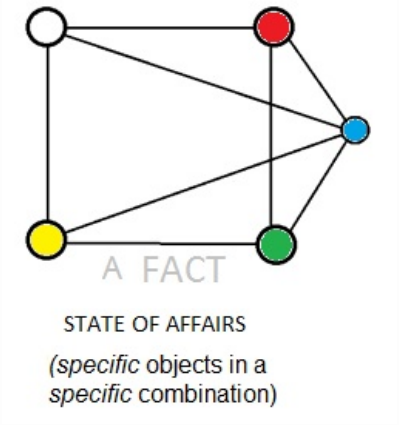
1.13

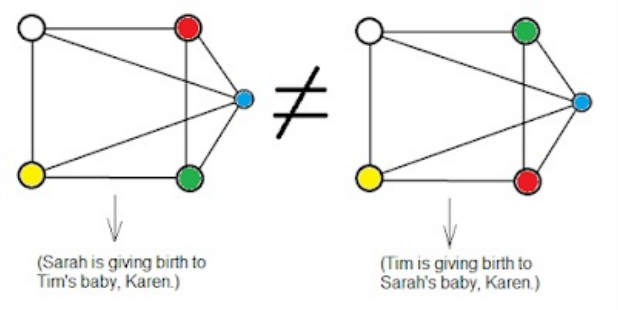


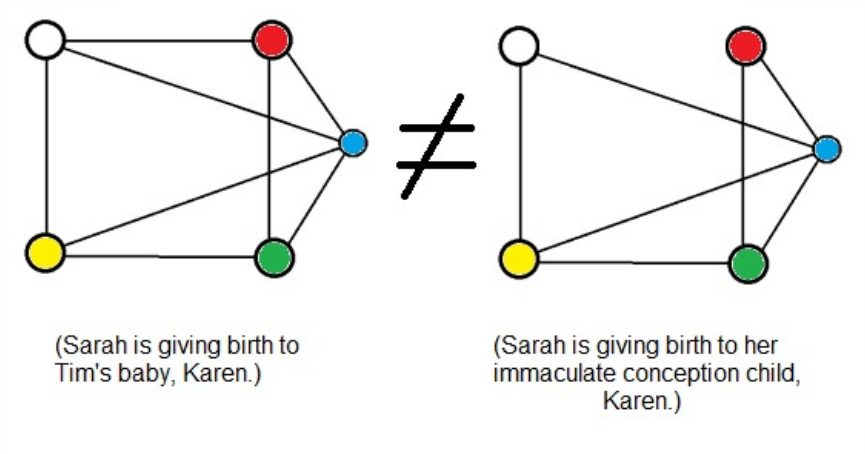
2. What is the case is the existence of states of affairs

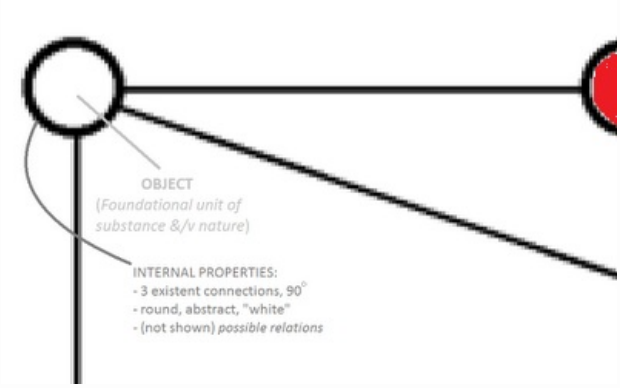












TODO

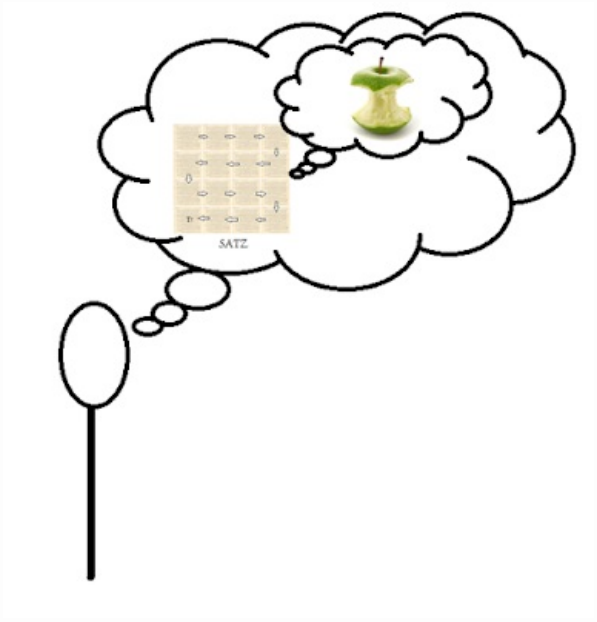
2.12 - A picture is a model of reality.
2.141 - A picture is a fact.
2.172 - A picture cannot depict its pictorial form: it displays it.
2.19 - Logical pictures can depict the world.
2.223 - In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality.
2.224 - It is impossible to tell from the picture alone whether it is true or false.

3. A logical picture of facts is a thought.

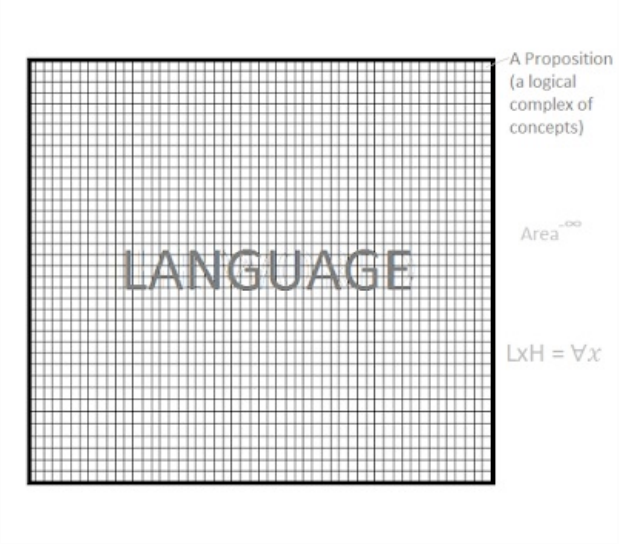
TODO

3.01 - The totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world.
3.1 - In a proposition a thought finds an expression that can be perceived by the senses.
3.3 - Only propositions have sense; only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning.
3.332 - No proposition can make a statement about itself, because a propositional sign cannot be contained in itself.

4. A thought is a proposition with a sense.



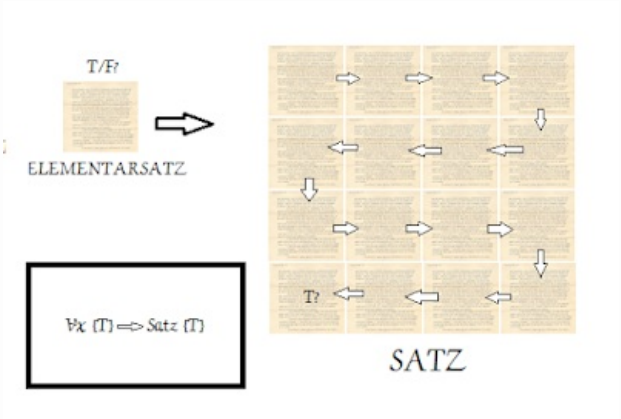
4.001



TODO

4.003 - Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical.
4.0031 - All philosophy is a 'critique of language'. The apparent logical form of a proposition need not be its real one.
4.11 - The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science
4.461 - Propositions show what they say; tautologies and contradictions show that they say nothing.
4.464 - A tautology's truth is certain, a proposition's possible, a contradiction's impossible.

5. A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions.

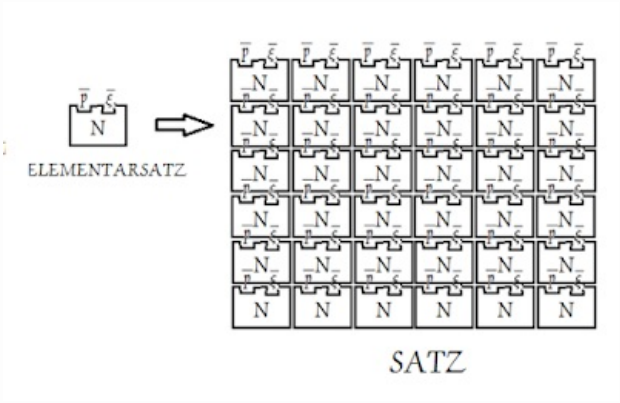


TODO

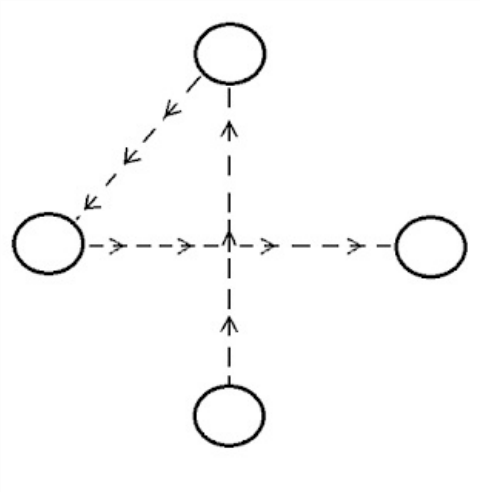
5.3 - All propositions are results of truth-operations on elementary propositions.
5.6 - The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.
5.61 - We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either.
5.621 - The world and life are one.
5.63 - I am my world. (The microcosm.)
5.632 - The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world

6. Truth-functions and propositions have the same

general form



6.02



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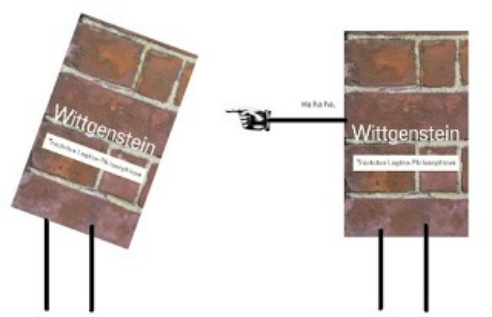
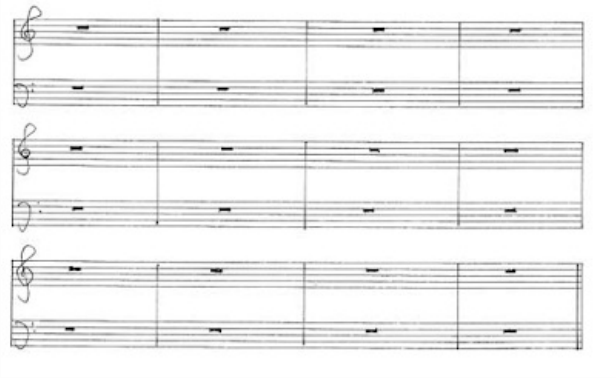


TODO

6.13 - Logic is not a body of doctrine, but a mirror-image of the world. Logic is transcendental.
6.2 - Mathematics is a logical method.
6.21 - A proposition of mathematics does not express a thought.
6.41 - The sense of the world must lie outside the world.
6.431 - At death the world does not alter, but comes to an end.
6.4311 - Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death.
6.44 - It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.

7. Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent.



All the things in these pictures can easily be said: they all fit into a set of propositions (albeit a self-refuting set): it's called *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Drawing is only a kind of saying; the kind of reference that he means by *zeigen* is less concrete and more important than this.

Tags:

Neither Turing, neither Searle

1st March 2009

- *Elementary philosophy of mind with one original argument.*
- *Confidence*: 75%, but only because conclusion is wholly negative.
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Argument

> ***SIMPLICIO**: 'Some computer programs might be able to pass a Turing test, but that doesn't provide any evidence that they can think. They might use all the right words, but that doesn't mean they understand what the words mean.'*

The Turing test is sometimes portrayed as a proper crucial experiment verifying the presence of intelligence - i.e. a sufficient condition for thought - and sometimes just as evidence for thought. But it was actually originally intended to *sidestep* the question of whether machines can think: Turing deemed that "too meaningless for discussion."1 His replacement question is:

> *Is it possible for a finite-state digital computer, provided with a large... program, to provide responses to questions that would fool an unknowing interrogator into thinking it is a human being?*

(In fact Turing made a precise forecast, specifying the memory bounds, and a point estimate of when it would be passed with specific accuracy:

> *I believe that in about fifty years' time it will be possible to programme computers, with a storage capacity of about 10^9 [bits], to make them play the imitation game so well that an average interrogator will not have more than 70 per cent chance of making the right identification after five minutes of questioning.*

This forecast did not come to pass (and still hasn't after 73 years), despite ordinary computers now having more than a hundred times the specified RAM, about 125 MB.)

So put, this is clearly an operationalisation of "intelligence" without reference to consciousness, intentionality, semantics, understanding or any of the other "mentalistic" concepts of philosophy of mind. (This is still a useful sidestep 80 years later.)

Appealing to "understanding", as Simplicio did above, implies rejecting functionalism. (Where functionalism views the input/output relation or function as constituting or producing mental activity.) So Simplicio is taking John Searle's line, of the necessity of 'original intentionality' (purposefulness, aboutness) for a system to be a mind. Searle:

> *...the presence of a program at any level which satisfies the Turing test is not sufficient for, nor constitutive of, the presence of intentional content. [Jacquette] thinks that I am claiming "Program implies necessarily not mind" whereas what I am in fact claiming is "It is not the case that (necessarily (program implies mind))."*

i.e.

```
1. Programs are purely formal (syntax-only).
2. Human minds have mental content (semantics, beyond syntax).
3. Syntax by itself is neither constitutive of, nor sufficient for,
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```
semantic content.

4. Therefore, programs by themselves are not constitutive of, nor sufficient
for minds.
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Note that we've slipped from talking about intelligence (often glossed as "the production of good outputs given varied inputs") to talking about minds (which could mean intelligence, or first-person consciousness, or...). For whatever reason, this happens all the time.

The real trouble comes in his positive case - Searle's "Chinese Room" metaphor (in which no component of a translation system understands Chinese, but the Room can translate it nonetheless, giving the right input/output pairs). The Chinese Room is a punchy illustration of premise 3 above, intended to demonstrate an instance of intelligent behaviour without understanding or mental content.

```
1. Searle: "purely syntactic systems lack subjective experiences."
2. Searle: "I have subjective experiences."
3. So: "I am not a purely syntactic system." (modus tollens, 1&2)
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This is unsatisfying: computer systems (hardware + program) are not "purely syntactic"; they have changing internal states altering according to inputs plus internal structure, a setup highly reminiscent of the representational theory of mind in humans.

Worse: as reconstructed, there's an actual fallacy here. The Chinese Room implies that syntax is not sufficient for semantics, despite the impossibility of being a syntactic system and verifying this assertion directly.

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1. Searle: "purely syntactic systems lack subjective experiences."
2. Searle: "I have subjective experiences."
3. So Searle: "I am not a purely syntactic system." (modus tollens, 1&2)

4. The only system Searle has knowledge of the subjective experiences of
is himself.

5. So if Searle is not a purely syntactic system, he has no knowledge of
what it is like to be a purely syntactic system,
6. So if Searle is not a purely syntactic system, he therefore cannot
assert premise 1. (5, + the knowledge account of assertion).
7. But if Searle is a purely syntactic system, (1) is false. (by 2)

8. You're either a purely syntactic system or you're not.
9. Therefore premise (1) is either unwarranted or false. (by 6 & 7 & 8 )
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Despite Turing's inspiring attempt to sideline it, the metaphysics of mind is a live concern; Searle's objection, that the kind of minds *we know about* seem to depend on / arise out of intentionality is fine as far as it goes. But we are too ignorant to go about generalising about minds given our solitary example of the species: we haven't seen enough (as Sloman puts it, enough of the "space of possible minds") to say that particular human correlates are necessary for intelligence.

Disclaimer

This was my first original philosophical argument. (The original version of it was much less

clear though.)

These days I wouldn't use infallibilism as the baseball bat I did just there ("*Searle isn't certain so Searle doesn't know*."); I'd go for probabilism instead. That is, I think I now deny my premise (4).

And I'd say more about Searle's odd dichotomy between representational machines who are 'pure' syntax vs those which are fully semantic. But I've mostly left it as it was because I enjoy it.

Chomskyan Descartes

I can't miss the opportunity to pass on a Good Fact: the Turing Test was suggested 300 years earlier by Rene Descartes!

> *If there were machines which bore a resemblance to our bodies and imitated our actions as closely as possible for all practical purposes, we should still have two very certain means of recognizing that they were not real men.*
>
> *The first is that they could never use words, or put together signs, as we do in order to declare our thoughts to others. For we can certainly conceive of a machine so constructed that it utters words, and even utters words that correspond to bodily actions causing a change in its organs. … But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do.*
>
> *Secondly, even though some machines might do some things as well as we do them, or perhaps even better, they would inevitably fail in others, which would reveal that they are acting not from understanding, but only from the disposition of their organs. For whereas reason is a universal instrument, which can be used in all kinds of situations, these organs need some particular action; hence it is for all practical purposes impossible for a machine to have enough different organs to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the way in which our reason makes us act.*

That Descartes could not conceive of any such machine, while Turing could, is an important lesson in philosophical method and embodiment:

1. conceivability (by a particular person, or a particular species) is far too weak to do metaphysics with, as Descartes did. ('Philosophers' Syndrome: mistaking a failure of the imagination for an insight into necessity.' - Dennett)

2. "What you can imagine depends on what you know." It is not that Turing was necessarily the superior mind; for he had the benefit of a superior context. (Which he helped invent, but the point is recursive.)

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1. Turing:

   > *The [test] may perhaps be criticised on the ground that the odds are weighted too heavily against the machine. If the man were to try and pretend to be the machine he would clearly make a very poor showing. He would be given away at once by slowness and inaccuracy in arithmetic. May not machines carry out something which ought to be described as thinking but which is very different from what a man does? This objection is a very strong one, but at least we can say that if, nevertheless, a machine can be constructed to play the imitation game satisfactorily, we need not be troubled by this objection.*

Tags: AI, philosophy, argument

Uncritical thinking

16th January 2020

- *Claims about critical thinking gains from university*
- *Confidence*: 80%
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

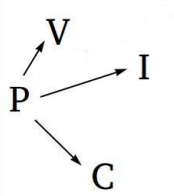
> *The intellectual skills you will gain in critical analysis and communication developed through your programme will be greatly sought after by employers for any career you choose, including business, and your options will be wide.*

2

My philosophy department used to trumpet their graduates' income statistics as evidence that critical thinking is valued in industry, and so as evidence that taking philosophy is prudent. 1

This was an amusing triple failure of critical thinking: they confuse correlation and causation ("*philosophy degree and income gain, therefore philosophy degree causes income gain*"); they fail to consider selection effects (philosophy students are a bit posher (Fig 6.10) or foolhardy than the average student, so there's a confounder); and it can be read as a Yes Minister fallacy:

1. A philosophy degree causes an income premium.
2. If something causes an income premium then it is valued in industry.
3. A philosophy degree causes critical thinking.
4. Therefore, critical thinking is valued in industry.



As it happens there is some evidence for university imparting critical thinking skills, maybe half a standard deviation over 4 years. Amusingly, philosophy does not stand out from any other university subject. A fourth problem with the shilling above.

Actually, in the spirit of the thing, let's take a look at that meta-analysis.

> *Students' critical-thinking skills do improve in college. The difference is comparable to a student whose critical-thinking skills start at the 50th percentile and, after four years in college, move up to the 72nd.*

But do they follow nonstudents of the same age and cognitive ability? Maybe the gains are just from the brain maturing, in or out of college. ("*The most common exclusion factors were... using a noncollege sample (11.4%)"*) So they explicitly choose not to compare to the control group!

They note a massive collapse in estimated effect size over the years - conceivably due to The Saecular Corruption of Higher Learning, but perhaps more likely due to the spread of less superstitious, less hermetic statistical methods among those who study the studiers:

> *Given an equal mix of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, the predicted 4-year gain*

> *is 1.22 SDs for a study published in 1963 (80% credibility interval [0.75, 1.68]), whereas the predicted gain is only 0.33 for a study published in 2011 (80% credibility interval [−0.11, 0.78]).*

Shall we extrapolate that trend to the critical thinking meta-analyses of 2059? (Note that the 2011 credible interval includes a possible *loss* of critical thinking!)

They talk of SD gains, and the absurdity of +6 SD, in terms of Cohen's d. So they are assuming that critical skill is normally distributed. Why? ("*Variations on this effect size are commonly used in critical thinking research.*" O well that's alright then.)

What's the construct they're measuring? Ability to pattern-match basic fallacies (like I did above)? The ability to win arguments? "Has this person heard the following words you always hear at university?"

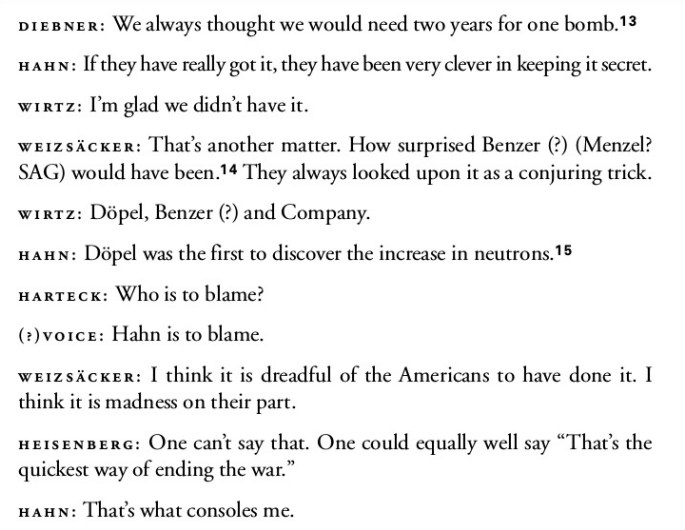
1. (They don't trump anymore, possibly because philosophy was recently associated with decreased earnings, in the UK. Instead they say barely grammatical things like the opening quotation.)
2. Let it be known that I resisted calling this post "Uncritical critical-thinking thinking". A triumph of critical thought.

Tags: rationality, uni, social-science

'Hitler's Uranium Club' (2008) by Bernstein

1st June 2017

- *The failure of Nazi nuclear research, and the farce after it.*
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



DIEBNER: We always thought we would need two years for one bomb.[13]

HAHN: If they have really got it, they have been very clever in keeping it secret.

WIRTZ: I'm glad we didn't have it.

WEIZSÄCKER: That's another matter. How surprised Benzer (?) (Menzel? SAG) would have been.[14] They always looked upon it as a conjuring trick.

WIRTZ: Döpel, Benzer (?) and Company.

HAHN: Döpel was the first to discover the increase in neutrons.[15]

HARTECK: Who is to blame?

(?)VOICE: Hahn is to blame.

WEIZSÄCKER: I think it is dreadful of the Americans to have done it. I think it is madness on their part.

HEISENBERG: One can't say that. One could equally well say "That's the quickest way of ending the war."

HAHN: That's what consoles me.

> *There are few, if any, other instances in recorded history where we have the conversations of leading figures as they complete one era, come to terms with it, and prepare their strategy for the next. It is as though these men were lifted out of history at a crucial turning point—from the age of conventional weapons to the nuclear era — placed within a timeless container and told to discuss their past and future as the recorders roll.*
>
> - Jeremy Bernstein

Astonishingly dramatic; also as pure as primary sources get. Months of secret eavesdropping on the German nuclear scientists, including just as they hear of Hiroshima and so their eclipse. Innocent of the microphones, the men concede their ignorance without ego, their character without any obfuscating propriety.

There are still two impurities: their words are both transcribed and translated by strangers (the German originals were destroyed). The physicists speak to us here in full sentences, with little of the fragmentariness and repetition of real speech. And it takes someone as highly trained as Bernstein to get us over the technical barrier. Even so, this is as plain and self-interpreting as history gets. For six months these men play madlibs, argue, and run around the garden, while the English and we listen in.

Two of them are unjustly detained: Hahn is a sweetheart and von Laue a droopy hero. The Party functionary Diebner is a funny guy, even though he has the most responsibility for the Nazi weapons project. Harteck is the most technically astute by far: he guesses a huge amount correctly, all in the teeth of loud ignorance by his more prestigious peers. von Weizsacker is the slimiest. Heisenberg is just *weird*: there's a faint echo of the clear-sight-and-moral-vacuum of Eichmann. Enormous intelligence and no sense.

HAHN: Yes, "235."

HARTECK: That's not absolutely necessary. If they let a uranium engine run, they separate "93."[4]

HAHN: For that they must have an engine which can make sufficient quantities of "93" to be weighed.[5]

GERLACH: If they want to get that, they must use a whole ton.[6]

HAHN: An extremely complicated business, for "93" they must have an engine which will run for a long time. If the Americans have a uranium bomb then you're all second raters. Poor old Heisenberg.

LAUE: The innocent!

HEISENBERG: Did they use the word uranium in connection with this atomic bomb?[7]

ALL: No.

HEISENBERG: Then it's got nothing to do with atoms, but the equivalent of 20,000 tons of high explosive is terrific.

The morality of their wartime actions does not come up very much (except when raised by sweetheart Hahn or von Laue). They are mostly glad of the destruction of the Nazis, and Wirtz is horrified by the scale and singularity of SS murder. But the rest are more self-regarding than pro or anti Nazi. (Again, it is wonderful to read these and actually know they meant it.)

(What about the morality of our reading the reports? I don't have a clear opinion, but doing so after their deaths seems mostly fair.)

They very often speak about money, Heisenberg in particular. (Not just research funding or aid for their families in Occupied Germany, but dolla dolla bills.) On hearing that Hahn had won a Nobel:

> *"it says that you are supposed to receive the Nobel Prize for 1944." The excitement that struck the ten detainees at this moment is hard to describe in a few words. Hahn did not believe it at first. In the beginning he turned away all the offers of congratulations. But gradually we broke through, with Heisenberg in the lead, who congratulated him heartily on the 6200 pounds.*

Bernstein's editorial voice is a bit strong. Representative footnotes on the transcripts:

^{236}U, which can then fission. Bagge, perhaps misled by some probably garbled newspaper account, has made a salad out of all of this.

50 Heisenberg still seems to be treading in heavy water. As far as I can see, what he is saying makes no sense at all.

51 Ditto.

52 Insofar as I can make any sense of this, I suspect that it is connected with Heisenberg's previous confusion between the critical mass—many kilograms—and the mass that is actually fissioned in the explosion—about 1 kilogram.

But his other qualities are huge and unique: he knew some of the protagonists personally, and worked on nuclear weaponry himself. He *is* out to get Heisenberg, and overreads a few times. But this is because people (Powers, Frayn to a degree) persist in rose-tinting him: there's this idea that Heisenberg feigned incompetence at reactor-making as anti-Nazi activism. The transcripts make clear that he'd have made a bomb if he could, not because he is a Nazi or a German but because he was amorally curious, and hungry for primacy. Heisenberg does object to Nazism. But not very strongly.

Bernstein's conclusion is that the project was pretty much a shambles. They had a two-year

head start on the Allies, but failed for several reasons: they had < 1% of the funding of the Manhattan Project, an unbelievably bad administration and communication of data and ideas, and key resources like deuterium kept getting bombed. But Bernstein feels able to go for the jugular:

> *reading this lecture, I am once again struck by the intellectual thinness of this group. Here are ten German nuclear scientists — nine if one does not count von Laue — who are supposed to be the cream of the crop, the intellectual elite, of German nuclear physics, men who had been working on these questions for several years. And look at the discussion it produced.*
>
> *To see what I have in mind, let us entertain the following fantasy. Suppose the tables had been turned and ten of the best Allied scientists had been interned in Göttingen when a hypothetical German atomic bomb went off. Whom shall we include? Fermi, Bethe, Feynman, Serber, Wigner, von Neumann, Oppenheimer, Peierls, Ulam, Teller, Bohr, Frisch, Weisskopf... What would the technical conversation have been like? No doubt there would have been disagreements and some fumbling. But like this? The question answers itself.*

Yet *even with these handicaps*, it looks like Harteck could have built a basic pile in 1940, if the project was headed by someone less arrogant than Heisenberg. And that pile would have brought all the funding, and maybe sorted out their many collective muddles and lack of engineering care.

DIEBNER: I wonder whether there are microphones installed here?

HEISENBERG: Microphones installed? (laughing) Oh no, they're not as cute as all that. I don't think they know the real Gestapo methods; they're a bit old fashioned in that respect.

5/5 for Bernstein's commentary and the hair-raising fact of their existence.

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*
2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*
3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

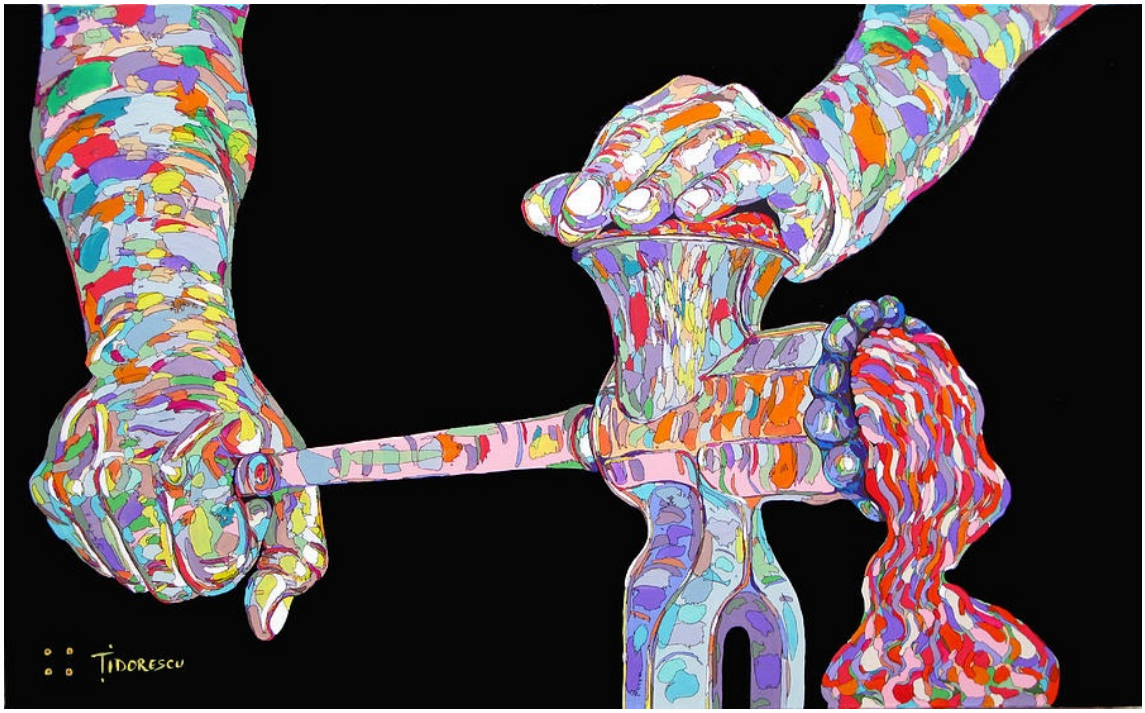
In this case, don't trust me much. I am no physicist, and only half a scientist.

Tags: bio, history, physics

on veganism

22nd August 2016

- *My view on meat and similar things.*
- *Confidence*: 80%
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 20 mins.



(c) Lucian Tidorescu (2013)

I don't give money to places that harm animals; the biggest part of that is not buying meat, eggs, dairy, etc.

I haven't written much about it; I dislike signalling in that way and I'm suspicious of the effects of calling-myself-things on my thoughts.

There's a certain kind of vegan - anti-modern, pious, loud - that perhaps limits the audience for animal rights. So I had better pipe up with my supposedly more rational, bioprogressive / ecomodernist form. (Someone else will have to handle the task of making it not seem weird.)

I was recently interviewed on the topic for some sociology research:

Can you tell me in your own words, what your definition of veganism is? What are your reasons for being vegan?

Veganism is usually 'not consuming animal products'. My sort follows from a more general view of what is ethical: 'don't cause *harm* to anything which can probably experience harm'.

Vegetarianism is actually implied by common beliefs, but few people act like they've joined the dots:

1. It is wrong to cause unnecessary harm.
2. Factory-farmed meat animals suffer.
3. Humans do not need to eat meat to live or thrive.
4. Therefore eating factory-farmed meat causes unnecessary harm.

5. Therefore it is wrong to eat factory-farmed meat.

My brother is a meat-eating freegan, but that fits consequentialism: it is not eating meat that causes harm, but sending economic signals that eventually cause the meat industry to cause harm. Similarly, I wear clothes bought from charity shops, including leather; since reusing clothes does not constitute economic demand, it causes no animal suffering, so it is morally neutral. Or, actually slightly positive, since it obviates the production of new clothes.

I don't mind if people say I'm not 'vegan' as a result. The label is not the point: stopping the harm is. It all boils down to harm reduction:

- *direct harm*, since the industry inflicts pain on billions of creatures, totally unnecessarily;
- *macroeconomic*, since meat production wastes huge amounts of water, land and energy, which deprives many humans of resources and drives up food prices;
- *environmental*, since the carbon emissions involved could eventually cause vast suffering through climate change;
- *antimicrobial resistance*: the industry includes antibiotics in the feed of animals, to prevent the disgusting conditions from affecting output - this systematic administration squanders a very precious resource: the effectiveness of our medicines; this process potentiates:
- the *zoonotic* risk: most human pandemics have been novel mutations in nonhuman diseases. So, by incubating billions of animals in terrible conditions, the meat industry is thus an unparalleled opportunity for global plagues.

What does it mean to you personally?

It is a minor chore I undertake in order to meet minimal ethical standards: first, do no harm.

Can you remember a specific moment that triggered your veganism? What was this?

I'd been vegetarian since I was 16, for utilitarian and anti-capitalist reasons (e.g. McDonalds deforesting Brazil for grazing). In a first year ethics course, my lecturer pointed out that ethical vegetarianism is hypocritical:

- since the dairy and egg industries are either the selfsame companies that form the meat industry, or their operations share profits and harmful processes with the meat industry;
- since surprising amounts of harm are an essential part of even nonlethal factory farming (e.g. male chicks electrocuted to death at birth, calves separated from mothers at birth).
- Environmental vegetarianism is also inconsistent: cow's cheese causes more CO_2 equivalent emissions than chicken meat.

Veganism appeals because it prevents most harm, and because it is consistent where ethical vegetarianism is not.

Can you tell me about your transition to veganism? How long did this take? How did you carry it out?

It took me three years to accept the seriousness of this and switch. I didn't know any vegans (even the aforementioned lecturer ate cheese). Milk was the biggest hurdle; I am very into all-day cereal. So I tried every form of plant milk I could until I got used to it. (Almond and horchata win.) I still miss pizza sometimes, but I actually no longer think about my diet from day-to-day; it is second nature.

Were there any challenges or personal concerns you had during your transition? How did you deal with them?

I had to cook properly for the first time in my life. And my decision was and is mocked in friendly terms by my high school friends (but never university ones). I researched the nutrition quite intensely and still keep up a solid regime. I take B12, vitamin D, creatine, and choline, to cover potential deficiencies. (These “subclinical” deficiencies aren’t so well studied, but the remedies are safe and cost less than £1 per day, so it’s a good deal.) The odd potential effects of soy isoflavones on hormonal balance was another one; I eat below 25g of raw soy per day.

Health, as a standalone motive for veganism, is not well-supported; the studies that show e.g. decreased cancer or cardiovascular disease are selecting from a population that is already unusually health conscious (and I don’t know of any proper controlled trials). It could be true, but at present it isn’t warranted. I want more people to go vegan, but decisions should be evidence-based or go home.

Are there any challenges or concerns that you have today with regards to your veganism? How does this make you feel?

None really. I live in Glasgow and London which are both amazing for it.

You stopped being vegan for a short period of time: what were your reasons for this? What made you return to veganism? How did stopping make you feel?

I lived in Tanzania in 2012; the available vegan food consisted of plain haricots, spinach, cassava and potato; not at all complete enough, in protein terms, for a long-term diet. The family had a well-treated cow, so I milked it and had boiled milk with breakfast. I was completely fine with this decision, until I learned that I had contracted giardiasis, probably from that milk!

Has your sex and/or gender ever been brought up as an issue/subject with regards to your veganism in any way? How did this make you feel?

It was an issue when I lived in China, where meat still has a status that it has largely lost here; many men eat as much meat as they can, for both class and gender signalling. I was teased for being squeamish or feminine in both the UK and China, but more in China. (In Tanzania it was sometimes respected as very sophisticated, but never emulated.)

I don’t mind; my gender is not really relevant to me (except insofar as being male and not having dysphoria has probably made my life easier). I don’t understand people who are stung by the above kind of mockery.

Do you promote veganism in any form? If so, in what ways? What has the reaction been to this?

I don’t actively promote it; I view my role as normalising the practice by not being single-minded or stereotypical about it. I lie in wait; people usually bring it up themselves and the subsequent conversations are my contribution. I have turned perhaps a dozen friends onto the necessity of it. I don’t have formal research to back this up, but I suspect that this method prevents fruitless interactions caused by vegan dogmatism and omnivores’ “anticipated reproach”.

I recognise the need for louder activists; I will donate to the Humane League, a transparent, evidence-based animal organisation (with an amazing name) who do this work well. I would support the criminalisation of factory farms, if that turned out to be a more effective way of solving the problem than e.g. alternatives like in vitro meat or (in the short-term) meat offsets.

You chose to be vegan for reasons that could be seen as trying to work towards a much bigger cause. Do you feel this way, like that you are part of a much larger movement? Or do you practice veganism and your choices are purely a personal thing?

Yes; I am an abolitionist about involuntary suffering; I have crazy sci-fi views about how we might achieve this.

The natural world seems an appalling place; billions upon billions of creatures starving or being eaten alive or raped every day. But we simply do not have the capacity to do much for them now; ecology is far too complex for us to know that intervention would not cause even more harm. There is a fledgling academic literature on the topic, but we are a long way from fixing this.

The least we could do is not make the problem worse, but people inexplicably support increasing the number of obligate murderers in the world (that is, “reintroducing wolves” and all that).

We are fortunate that science and industry are developing a way for us to end this quickly without unrealistic social change or a potentially counter-productive legal ban on factory farms: cultured meat (physically identical animal protein, produced without harm through cell biology) is here, and its price has dropped by a factor of ten thousand in a few years; some (biased) people forecast that mass produced cultured meat could undercut factory farms and drive them out of business within 30 years.

This may be already covered, but: how do you set boundaries for yourself on what is and is not acceptable to buy or consume? And are there any situations in which you would be more lenient?

The general principle is: no unnecessary harm to anything that can feel it. In modern urban life, this means: don’t go hunting and don’t buy anything any way that gives money to the harmful industries. In traditional societies where hunting is still a primary food source, it means: hunt with large guns, not bows. In poor mountainous societies where sufficient crops cannot be grown it means keeping goats and sheep is permissible (until the world trade network links up with you and offers a fair price for soya).

My friend has chronic anaemia: her eating the occasional fish is arguably necessary harm.

You can consume animal products without moral problems if e.g. they’re taken from out the bins of supermarkets (actual theft is an economic signal however so none of that); if they’re heirlooms; or if it was already dead (e.g. roadkill); or if we get more info about the combination part of the binding problem which lets us classify borderline cases.

(There is a chance that eating clams is morally neutral; they have no central nervous system, i.e. nowhere that signals could be integrated into an experience.)

I don’t do any of the above, for aesthetic reasons (as well as because my protease levels have changed so much in 10 years that it would probably be a very unpleasant experience!)

You’re a member of an organisation, Giving What We Can, that helps charities proven to deliver much needed care at a low cost. With regards to your own ethical framework, is it the case, that this is more important than being a member of an organisation that is more focused on animals rights or promoting veganism? What are your reasons?

GWWC is actually closely associated with the work of Peter Singer, perhaps the most famous animal rights thinker. But it’s true that they prioritise the suffering of humans - but this isn’t necessarily an ideological decision, since we have a principled (and partially objective) way of ranking which organisations to support: the QALY per dollar. I donate to the Humane League (animals), the Against Malaria Foundation (humans), and GiveWell

(incredibly deep research into charity effectiveness, including animal charities), in that order. If any animal organisation shows itself to be more effective (measured in QALYs per pound) than the first two then I will switch to them too.

Is being a member of an organisation that promotes veganism an important part of your ethics?

Not inherently; only insofar as the meat industry is the worst thing in the world and insofar as the ways that one person can tackle it are as powerful as the ways I can tackle e.g. malaria in humans. I am very pessimistic about collective action in this case; most people simply do not care about meat animals, and will not switch until we make cultured meat cheaper than factory meat.

I’m not a joiner really; I only joined GWWC in order to commit myself to a nonselfish life. No way out now, not without looking like a dick!

See also

- Ethics > climate in a small sample of Scottish vegans

Tags: ethics

'Trompettes de la Mort' (2005)

24th April 2021

- *Rescuing and reading a great lost album.*
- *Confidence*: N/A, criticism.
- *Topic importance*: 2 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

Listen

> *Autumn comes, the trees are naked, I am shaking like a leaf*
> *Praying for a sudden house-move; a traffic accident; just some relief...*
> *I only laugh now with permission, do his bidding, got no choice;*
> *When I speak I say what I'm told to, when I speak I don't hear my voice...*
>
> *Even if I could scale the fences, that'd no longer get me out.*

– Joe Tucker

My favourite album from 2005 is almost completely ungoogleable. 2 As far as I can tell it's the sole work of Joe Tucker, very slightly better known for National School and better known for his comedy scripts. (His brother plays the cornet in a skit and there's a little bit of extra backing vocals on Track 1, 3, 16.)

It's incredibly *generous*. 20 top-grade melodies - more than one per track, one per minute! - with moving lyrics and bizarrely good production. I'm probably grading on a curve because it's a shoestring labour of love, but I really do love it. (*The Copyright to Life* has played at random in my head about once a month for 10 years.)

Most people's lyrics are very general, but I love the hyperspecific - particular objects, particular idioms, particular moments, particular people. And almost no-one covers the deadening language of the bureaucracies that almost all of us live inside - "transferable skills", networks, forms, house prices, liabilities. Tucker does, and so brings in the dread and glory of actual life.

> *Look in the houses, see them glowing tungsten red:*
> *Designers, teachers, labourers, brutalist architects.*

> *I can hear the breath on your lips, the blood in my head.*
> *Someone speaks a house price that dare not be said.*

It's normal to not exactly fit your life, and so normal things can express that.

The arrangement is twee: the two most prominent voices are xylophone and Hammond organ. If you're not paying attention you might think the lyrics are twee ("*I want to eat vegetables, save the meat for the heavy-hearted*"). It also borrows melodies from church, Pink Floyd, Alice Cooper.

It's not a concept album but it is a suite, which people often mistake for a concept album. If there is a concept, it's refusing to let life deflate you - even if you find yourself in a little life, alone and ill-conditioned. Or the need to see your life as a story, for all that school and work and ill health demean us, stopping us see ourselves as protagonists. (If you can't manage to live grandly, then fantasise.)

> *My trade was a whaler -*
> *but the whales are no longer biting.*
> *I retrained in data management*
> *and I came back fighting*

(At first I thought this was mocking the character, but now I think we should admire his strength, his ability to imbue his life with meaning.)

Trompettes de la mort (trumpets of the dead) are mushrooms. I haven't quite cracked the connection between vegetables and existential resilience, but mushrooms thrive in all sorts of bad conditions. Then there's several songs about the sea which I also haven't related to the social trauma theme or the vegetable theme.

I hear Tucker sing 3 characters:

- Track 1, 4, 14 are the narrator (not as shrill)
- Track 8 has the only sinister presence, a retired policeman with questionable pastimes. He too is coping. ("*high on tea and thoughts of liberty; I'd die for the monarchy*"). Authority over others and perversion as two other solutions to the problem of life, besides creativity.
- The other tracks seem to be one character.

The protagonist

He tries to be upbeat. He fears the sea, or "the sea". He feels obscurely that school and work have deformed him ("*Even if I could scale the fences, that'd no longer get me out.*") He gets a job in IT, or maybe insurance. He identifies with Orwell of *Down and Out*: a tourist of poverty. He fantasises to cope.

> *I'm an in-filling unit of a high performance team*
> *I breathe transferable skills, I dream the collective dream*
> *I fight from a workstation with a wall partition for a shield*
> *Videoconferencing to no man's land, the office is a battlefield*

There's a lovely upbeat number about the inventor of CBT, which tells us that he needs that. (CBT is about being able to steer away from false destructive thoughts.) Though *Man Overboard* is pretty clear too:

> *Looking out to sea - hard to believe that it's going to swallow me.*
> *Clouds build, seagulls cry. I feel scared, but I will not wipe my eyes.*
> *Now fetch me those binoculars, there's an island I want to see*
> *This could be spectacular - feel the silt washing over me.*
> *Hold me down: I'm not where I'm supposed to be.*
> *When I left this town, the girls would not speak to me.*
> *Hold on tight, grab the sides - careful, we might collide*
> *Hold on now, mind that wave - my life will not be lived.*
> *Brave men find my boat, bottom up but still afloat…*
>
> *The luxury cruise liner, the cargo ferry:*
> *Both look the same at the bottom of the sea*

It's wise. There's a lot of bad defaults in life, a lot of things to see through:

- Most writing is hollow and arbitrary and ill-justified. Tucker just points this out for tabloids, but the problem is there in almost all papers, academic journals, books.
- School is very painful for a minority of people, and many of those it imprisons don't benefit very much.
- People differ, and only some kinds of people are served by default kinds of work, socialising, housing, whatever.

> *He tells me he runs faster, he hits harder, he climbs higher*
> *I'm not one to argue (and anyway these aren't things that I admire).*

The rejection of bourgeois life is one thing. But it's shallow - **as if** just inverting something freed you from it. (Similar to the indie snob who dislikes things merely because they are popular.) But it's a start.

The amateur astronaut - someone out of their depth, chasing a dream too large for them - is a natural image. I've seen half a dozen things use it to great effect.

> *Her indoors brings me a cup of tea whilst I light the fires*
> *The engine screams fizzing cacophony as I climb inside*
> *Leaving the earth far behind of me, danced them into dots -*
> *Jupiter, Saturn, and Mercury! Wish you were here, love you lots.*

I think it's my album of 2005 1, and until I dug around in my ancient wma rips and stuck it on Youtube, none of you could know it. Which implies that there is another album of the year out there, undiscoverable except to the 10 people who knew the artist personally. (The album of 2017 is definitely on Bandcamp or Youtube, but you'll never find it anyway.)

1. What else?

- The Sunset Tree
- Antony & the Johnsons 2
- Fiona Apple
- Illinois
- Kate Bush
- Potemkin City Limits
- Out-of-State Plates
- Black One
- Black Sheep Boy
- The Campfire Headphase
- Sunlandic Twins
- LCD Soundsystem 1
- Z
- Kanye 2
- Twin Cinema
- Run the Road

Sunset Tree is better, and similarly rich in melody and lyrical detail, but I'd rather listen to *Trompettes* than any of those.

2. The death of Myspace left a huge gulf in underground music, up to 50 million tracks lost. Mostly terrible bedroom bands, but surely also works of genius. It won't happen again; Youtube's use of semi-legal fan labour means more or less everything since 2009 is preserved, no matter how obscure.

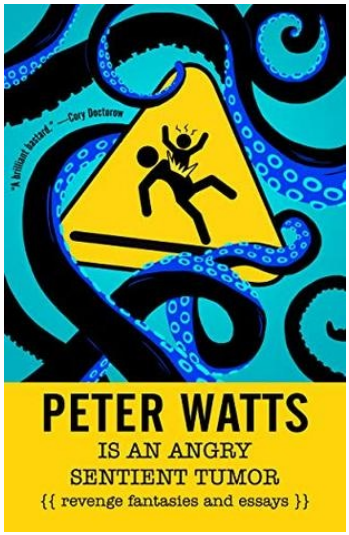
Listen!

Tags: music, art, death

'Peter Watts is an Angry Sentient Tumor' (2019)

8th February 2020

- *On the paranoid style in North American blogging.*
- *Confidence*: 90%
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Content notes*: unwarranted apocalypticism, antinatalism
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.



> *Eleven years after the birth of the most neurologically remarkable, philosophically mind-blowing, transhumanistically-relevant being on the planet, we have nothing but pop-sci puff pieces and squishy documentaries to show for it. Are we really supposed to believe that in over a decade no one has done the studies, collected the data, gained any insights about literal brain-to-brain communication, beyond these fuzzy generalities?*
>
> *I for one don't buy that for a second. These neuroscientists smiling at us from the screen —Douglas Cochrane, Juliette Hukin—they know what they've got. Maybe they've discovered something so horrific about the nature of Humanity that they're afraid to reveal it, for fear of outrage and widespread panic. That would be cool.*

Selected blogposts from a thoughtful doomer. Name a hot button, anything, and Watts will elevate it to the scariest thing in the world: internet surveillance, zoonotic viruses, climate change, Trump, the security detail around the G8.

There's much to like: his bloody-minded sympathy, Left nihilism, boundless sensawunda, viscera instead of prose - and but deep unreliability when he gets on a subject besides marine biology. He is vulnerable to anything cool or fucked up. I worry if I find myself agreeing with him, since he so often misleads himself.

> *If I am indeed fated to sink into this pit of surveillance capitalism with the rest of you, I'd just as soon limit my fantasies about eating the rich to a venue that doesn't shut you down the moment some community-standards algo thinks it sees an exposed nipple in a jpeg.*

Everything he does is *excessive*. Of course, this makes for good aesthetics and bad epistemics.

Like Charlie Stross, Watts reads horrifying things into the news, informed by the toxic half of history but also by a nebulous paranoia which leads them astray. (Representative sample from Stross: "*[media incentive] has been weaponized, in conjunction with data mining of the piles of personal information social networks try to get us to disclose (in the pursuit of advertising bucks), to deliver toxic propaganda straight into the eyeballs of the most vulnerable — with consequences that are threaten to undermine the legitimacy of democratic governmance on a global scale.*". Watts:

> *Bureaucratic and political organisms are like any other kind; they exist primarily to perpetuate themselves at the expense of other systems. You cannot convince such an organism to act against its own short-term interests... It's not really news, but we seem to be living in a soft dictatorship. The only choices we're allowed to make are those which make no real difference... On a purely selfish level I'm happier than I've ever been in my life, happier than I deserve. Of course it won't last. I do not expect to die peacefully, and I do not expect to die in any jurisdiction with a stable infrastructure. At least I don't have to worry about the world I'm leaving behind for my children; I got sterilized in 1991.*

)

The two biggest fumbles here are his posts on Daryl Bem and high-functioning hydrocephalic people. It is no shame to fall for either: these are highly respectable academic errors (not hoaxes), and Bem's methods were exactly as valid as the average psychology paper of the early C21st. Watts' mistake isn't to insist that ESP is real, but to leap to the defence of the weird *just because it is weird*, to the point where he rejects Hume's maxim ("Laplace's principle"), a basic incontrovertible *theorem* of Bayesian inference.

> *[Bem's] results, whatever you thought of them, were at least as solid as those used to justify the release of new drugs to the consumer market. I liked that. It set things in perspective, although in hindsight, it probably said more about the abysmal state of Pharma regulation... I'm perfectly copacetic with the premise that psychology is broken. But if the field is really in such disrepair, why is it that none of those myriad less-rigorous papers acted as a wake-up call? Why snooze through so many decades of hack analysis only to pick on a paper which, by your own admission, is better than most?*
>
> *The question, here in the second decade of the 21st Century, is: what constitutes an "extraordinary claim"? A hundred years ago it would have been extraordinary to claim that a cat could be simultaneously dead and alive; fifty years ago it would have been extraordinary to claim that life existed above the boiling point of water, kilometers deep in the earth's crust. Twenty years ago it was extraordinary to suggest that the universe was not only expanding but that the rate of expansion was accelerating. Today, physics concedes the theoretical possibility of time travel*

Another big miss is his emphasis on adaptive sociopathy as the cause of our problems, rather than say lack of global coordination power. He is also completely off the deep end on climate change as existential risk, sneering at anyone who disagrees, no matter how well-informed. (He's far from alone in that.)

> *there's no denying that pretty much every problem in the biosphere hails from a common cause. Climate change, pollution, habitat loss, the emptying of biodiversity from land sea and air, an extinction rate unparalleled since the last asteroid and the transformation of our homeworld into a planet of weeds—all our fault, of course. There are simply too many of us. Over seven billion already, and we still can't keep it in our pants.*

Notice the pattern: faced with an apparent dilemma, he happily chucks the strongest, most basic principles to maintain his paranoia (the principles "extraordinary claims require

extraordinary evidence" or here "it is good for people to have children if they want, good lives have worth").

This bias would be entirely fine if he only admitted error later, about his predicted Trump race riots for instance.

> *The real danger isn't so much Trump himself, but the fact that his victory has unleashed and empowered an army of bigoted assholes down at street level. That's what's gonna do the most brutal damage.*

Most of these posts are entertaining but betray one-way critical thinking: for some reason he can barely see the other half of the world, that we are winning in all kinds of ways.

Lots of learned and fun film reviews: I relaxed, since criticism need have no truth-value. He likes 'Arrival' more than 'Story of Your Life', which fits: the film is bombastic, paranoid, politicised, unsubtle.

> *When **you** can buy the whole damn store and the street it sits on with pocket change; when you can buy the home of the asshole who just disrespected you and have it bulldozed; when you can use your influence to get that person fired in the blink of an eye and turn her social media life into a living hell—the fact that you don't do any of those things does not mean that you've been oppressed. It means you've been merciful to someone you could just as easily squash like a bug... Marvel's mutants are something like that. We're dealing, after all, with people who can summon storm systems with their minds and melt steel with their eyes. Xavier can not only read any mind on the planet, he can freeze time, for fucksake. These have got to be the worst case-studies in oppression you could imagine.*

> *it still seems a bit knee-jerky to complain about depictions of objectification in a movie explicitly designed to explore the ramifications of objectification. (You could always fall back on Foz Meadows' rejoinder that "Depiction isn't endorsement, but it is perpetuation", so long as you're the kind of person who's willing to believe that Schindler's List perpetuates anti-Semitism and The Handmaid's Tale perpetuates misogyny.)*

Watts reacts with caution and indignation to any police presence, even a compassionate visit to the homeless man sleeping in his garden. It would be crude to explain away Watts' style and worldview by reference to his unusually bad luck: his flesh-eating disease, his senseless beatdown and prosecution by border cops, his publishing travails, his scientific and romantic flops.

I'm probably only so down on him because I got so excited by *Blindsight* and its promise of actual science fiction by an actual scientist. He is certainly well above-average rigour for a political blogger, and well above-average imagination for anyone.

I was promised fictional luxury space communism

Peter Watts; Charlie Stross; Richard Morgan; William Gibson; NK Jemisin; Cory Doctorow; China Mieville: all doomers, all conflict theorists, all writing only dystopias. What's going on? Why is it so hard to find an actually optimistic leftist science fiction writer? (Alright I suppose we have Ken Macleod.)

A glib answer is that they (cynically: their audience) feel they have lost the present (to racist populism, to failed emissions coordination, to surveillance capitalism) and project this

into a lost future. I hope I wouldn't let my imagination be so easily determined by the short-lived, contingent success of my ideological opponents.

I hear Chomskyan echoes in the blogs of the above, so maybe his analytical pessimism is also to blame. The idea of being in a perfect closed system, with anything you do co-opted and even your protests serving the system somehow.

Does solarpunk have anything worth reading yet?

Why listen to me on this topic?

Nonfiction book reviews by nonspecialists are hazardous. It is just not easy to detect pseudo-empirical bullshit without

1. *immersion in the field and/or good priors for what makes for an extraordinary claim in it;*

2. *incredible amounts of fact-checking gruntwork, at least 5x the time it takes to just read something; or*

3. *incredible amounts of argument-checking, which doesn't need domain knowledge.*

I always try to do (3) but surely often fail.

In this case, I am probably about as trustworthy as Watts. Though I am only half a scientist.

Tags: review, epistemology, replication

Yoga hypothesis dump

13th April 2019

- *List of possible reasons yoga feels good.*
- *Confidence*: N/A, speculation.
- *Topic importance*: 4 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

Mindfulness is trendy in my social circle, as part of a wider attempt to psychologise and appropriate the good bits from religion (gatherings, singing, self-transcendence, gratitude, existential hope, annual rituals). As a Brit - as a proudly and wilfully fettered person - I am suspicious of all this grinning and trusting and spirit. 2

To my surprise I like yoga. (The hardish kind, 'ashtanga'.) I never regret going, and usually emerge with a clear head and a warm glow. Why?

At some point I'd like to do a proper literature review on the purported outcomes of yoga vs meditation and so on (with a suitable correction for how bad and inflated medical/psychological research is) but for now I just want to list hypotheses (in the manner of this great post by Katja Grace). 1

1. **Just endorphins**. It's resistance training of a kind, so it produces the usual exercise high.

2. **Stretching**: I don't stretch outside class. Maybe it's a *de facto* massage.

3. **Deep breathing**.
   - *Brute oxygenation*. Maybe I don't breathe enough in everyday situations.
   - Most mindfulness gives focussing on your breath massive significance, as a way to occupy your stream of consciousness and sort of stop thinking (or stop identifying with your stream). As a *break* from thinking this seems plausibly good, but of course some strains of the source religion take it further and treat thought and explanation as an enemy. See hypothesis #6.

4. **Giving up agency for an hour**: Maybe it's pleasant to do as you're told, to not make active decisions (in moderation!).

5. **Focussing on concrete things**. For me, I think all of the supposedly therapeutic effect of not thinking comes from having to focus on moving carefully, from being actively distracted from my flywheel mind.

6. **Corpse mode**: At the end of a session you completely let go for 5 whole mins. It feels fantastic (though it doesn't work without the preceding hour of strain). All exercise would probably produce great effects if it ended in this way. (That's the literal translation, incidentally.)

7. **Group psychology**: Most people like doing things in a group.
   - There's an aesthetic angle to doing things in unison, cf. choir singing.

8. **Proprioception fun**: your eyes are closed for much of the time. Is it a pleasant challenge to move one's body without visual feedback and balancing?

9. **Thought of being toned**: Usual optimism produced by physical activity.

10. **Bare feet**: It's pleasant to take off my shoes.

11. **Silliness**: I quite like silly things, and wobbling in Warrior III is silly.

12. **Mystic decorations**: Maybe there's a guilty pleasure in listening to woo for once.

13. **Inversion**: Is there something about being upside down?

14. **The company of women**. Gender split in my class is 9:1. This is a novelty, doesn't happen in any other part of my life. (Except choir.)

15. **Improved concentration**. Insight or apparent insight into your stream of consciousness, how perception is really a real-time model of your surroundings.

16. **Improved body awareness**. Awareness of being an animal

Most of these suggest their own tests naturally. You test (5) by doing your own thing, (8) by doing it alone, etc. The null hypothesis is that it's just (1), which you test by sitting still and trying not to think of anything. (I did. It wasn't nice.)

Even after we find out the active ingredients of the pleasantness, we still don't know that yoga improves e.g. cognition or mental health or productivity, except insofar as feeling good is constitutive of those. (Which it is to some degree.)

What else?

1. I did a Gracean hypothesis dump on why quality is rare here.
2. Just one example: in Anglicised yoga the sternum is called the "heart's centre", despite that not being where the heart actually is. It looks like there was a clash between symmetry and awkward fact, and symmetry won. (I realise this might be a translation thing, or a metaphorical heart. Treat this as a stand-in for the method's prescientific, nonempirical red flags.)

Tags:

The Worst Game Ever

21st October 2016

- *A true story about model error, noisy decisions, and the birth of tragedy.*
- *Confidence*: 90% that my interpretation is right. Speculative stuff in the second half.
- *Topic importance*: 6 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Argument

I was at a corporate team-building event, because I wasn't persuasive enough to not be. I was a prisoner.

The organisers set up a game: a three-player, unknown-length iterated Prisoner's dilemma. There was no initial discussion, but free discussion every two rounds. Payoffs were the standard unitless numbers, shifted so that some outcomes were negative. Scores began at zero. No objectives were given.

All co-op	**Some defect**	**All defect**
All +1	Defectors +2 Co-op: -1	All -2

I *swear* I am not making up the roles the players tacitly settled into: perfect archetypes of game theory.

A. a Homo economicus (who clearly took Micro 101 and nothing further).1

B. an ineffective altruist, trying to get everyone to the global maximum, but without any leverage or provocability. Opened with co-operate, tried again after every negotiation round until the second half when he got in a huff.

C. a noise generator. Random action, or, action based on his reading of opponents' body language.

A:

> *It's totally straightforward, there's only one right answer: for Prisoner's dilemmas, the only Nash equilibrium is 'always defect', because it only makes sense to defect in the final round, and the inference to prior rounds is timeless.*

Me:

> *No, that's for the known-length case with two players! And for when you can assume perfectly rational opponents! And for when their actions are independent of yours, with no communication! And you're aiming for personal loss minimisation, but you weren't given a loss function: you don't know that negative scores are non-fatal (or that they allow for "losing the least").*

He didn't listen. Heedless in the grip of theory, the ecstasy of proof, (A) defected every time. During the communication, he was sometimes honest about his strategy and sometimes pretended to accept a truce.

The game ran about 15 rounds, I think ending early in despair. We ended with all scores negative, between 1 and 10 points under. It was announced that everyone had lost, since -1 represented death. Everyone sulked, especially the organisers.

This was in fact an *incredible* lesson, but not the one the organisers wanted me to learn.

- Decisions make no sense without a loss function! Probably the organisers had no idea about loss functions or equilibria or mathematical induction backwards in time, but I could have drawn it out of them. (Scary thought: society depends on statistical inference, and yet some massive majority of those inferences (the null-hypothesis significance tests) are made in total ignorance of their implicit decision theory.
- What's wrong with co-operating every time? Well, setting aside the poor bot's own (generally terrible) outcome: it invites exploitation, and so can actually be destabilising in a sense, compared to precommitted tit-for-tat.
- It is really amazing how stupidly a clever person can act if they are relying on a clever false theory. This can result from any method, any species of reasoning, but using maths badly is the most complete way of disabling such a person. This is why, despite appearances, we have to listen to mouthy gits like Taleb: there really are model error monsters out there.
- Even in the absence of A's model error, the presence of noise would have completely destabilised the equilibrium anyway. We were doubly doomed.
- The game wasn't long enough for the other key ingredient of super-rationality to arise: forgiveness, necessary in all closed-source stochastic domains, like life.
- Body language reading *could* be a real skill, but either way I think most people don't have enough skill to substitute for outside-view reasoning - even in toy examples like the above.

Anthropics and game theory only work on themselves

When reasoning about what I should do, if I reflect on what my predecessors must have done in order for me to exist, and then generalise this to my descendents (since they are a sort of partial copy of me), I could convince myself that I should do what would maximise my chance of coming into being. (This is all under the assumption that I am the sort of being which should exist, at least equally compared to the counterfactual people in other chains of descent.) But this doesn't work unless the other people in the chain are also doing anthropics.

Similarly, you don't benefit from doing game theory on an unpredictable opponent (for instance one who doesn't know or rejects game theory).

See also

- *The Use and Abuse of Formal Models in Political Philosophy*, Robert Paul Wolff.

Thanks to Misha Yagudin for the anthropics point.

1. Not a real Homo economicus, obviously: instead a Homo sapiens running a bad simulation of one, at the same time shutting down the common sense that might have saved him.

Tags: stats, social-science, game-theory

Existential risk as common cause

17th October 2018

- *Why many different worldviews should prioritise reducing existential risk.*
- *Confidence*: 70%.
- *Topic importance*: 10 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.
- Cross-posted here.

Imagine someone who thought that art was the only thing that made life worth living. 1

What should they do? Binge on galleries? 2 Work to increase the amount of art and artistic experience, by going into finance to fund artists? Or by becoming an activist for government funding for the arts? Maybe. But there's a strong case that they should pay attention to the ways the world might end: after all, you can't enjoy art if we're all dead.

1. Aesthetic experience is good in itself: it's a 'terminal goal'.
2. The extinction of life would destroy all aesthetic experience & prevent future experiences.
3. So reducing existential risk is good, if only to protect the conditions for aesthetic experience.

The same argument applies to a huge range of values.

1. [good] is good in itself: it's a 'terminal goal'.
2. The extinction of life would destroy [good], and prevent future [good].
3. So reducing existential risk is good, if only to protect the conditions for [good]. 3

Caspar Oesterheld gives a few examples of what people might plug into those brackets:

> *Abundance, achievement, adventure, affiliation, altruism, apatheia, art, asceticism, austerity, autarky, authority, autonomy, beauty, benevolence, bodily integrity, challenge, collective property, commemoration, communism, community, compassion, competence, competition, competitiveness, complexity, comradery, conscientiousness, consciousness, contentment, cooperation, courage, [crab-mentality], creativity, crime, critical thinking, curiosity, democracy, determination, dignity, diligence, discipline, diversity, duties, education, emotion, envy, equality, equanimity, excellence, excitement, experience, fairness, faithfulness, family, fortitude, frankness, free will, freedom, friendship, frugality, fulfillment, fun, good intentions, greed, happiness, harmony, health, honesty, honor, humility, idealism, idolatry, imagination, improvement, incorruptibility, individuality, industriousness, intelligence, justice, knowledge, law abidance, life, love, loyalty, modesty, monogamy, mutual affection, nature, novelty, obedience, openness, optimism, order, organization, pain, parsimony, peace, peace of mind, pity, play, population size, preference fulfillment, privacy, progress, promises, property, prosperity, punctuality, punishment, purity, racism, rationality, reliability, religion, respect, restraint, rights, sadness, safety, sanctity, security, self-control, self-denial, self-determination, self-expression, self-pity, simplicity, sincerity, social parasitism, society, spirituality, stability, straightforwardness, strength, striving, subordination, suffering, surprise, technology, temperance, thought, tolerance, toughness, truth, tradition, transparency, valor, variety, veracity, wealth, welfare, wisdom.*

So, from a huge variety of viewpoints, the end of the world is *bad*, you say? What a revelation!

: the above is only very interesting if we get from “it’s good to reduce x-risk” to “it’s the most important thing to do” for all these values. This would be the case if extinction was both 1) relatively likely relatively soon, and 2) we could do something about it.

1) What could kill us all, in the coming century?

Some big ones are: nuclear winter, runaway climate change, runaway AI, and biological weapons. Regarding (1), 80,000 Hours report an educated guess of the total probability:

> *Many experts who study these issues estimate that the total chance of human extinction in the next century is between 1 and 20%… These figures are about one million times higher than what people normally think.*

(And if you think that knowledge of the future is radically uncertain, note you should devote *more* attention to the worst scenarios, not less: ‘high uncertainty’ is not the same as ‘low probability’.)

2) What can we do about it?

Most of the direct work involves technical research, going into the civil service, or improving the way other big institutions make decisions (e.g. philanthropy, science, NGOs). But anyone can fundraise for the direct work and have large expected effects.

In fact, the amount of funding for mitigating existential risks is a terrifyingly small fraction of total government and charity spending (annually, maybe $10m for AI safety, $1bn-5bn for nuclear security, $1bn for biosecurity): much less than 1%. Full list here.

Say we did all that. How much would it reduce the risk? We don’t know, but a 1% relative decrease per $1bn spent is a not-obviously-useless guess.

Would this level of mitigation override direct promotion of [good]? As long as you place some value on future generation’s access to [good], I think the answer’s yes.

So it looks like there’s a strong apriori case to prioritise x-risk, for anyone who accepts the above estimates of risk and tractability, and accepts that *something* about life has, or will eventually have, overall value.

Who doesn’t have to work on reducing x-risk?

- People with incredibly high confidence that extinction will not happen (that is, well above 99% confidence). This is much higher confidence than most people who have looked at the matter.
- People with incredibly high confidence that nothing can be done to affect extinction (that is, well above 99% confidence).
- Avowed egoists.
- People who think that the responsibility to help those you’re close to outweighs your responsibility to any number of distant others.

- People with values that don’t depend on the world:
    - Nihilists, or other people who think there are no moral properties.
    - People with an ‘honouring’ kind of ethics - like Kantians, Aristotelians, or some religions.

        Philip Pettit makes a helpful distinction: when you act, you can either 'honor' a value (directly instantiating it) or 'promote' it (make more opportunities for it, make it more likely in future). This is a key difference between consequentialism and two of the other big moral theories (deontology and virtue ethics): the latter two only value honouring.

        This could get them off the logical hook because, unless "preventing extinction" was a duty or virtue itself, or fit easily into another duty or virtue, there's no moral force against it. (You could try to construe reducing x-risk as "care for others" or "generosity".)

        I find it hard to empathise with strict honourers - they seem to value principles, or the cleanliness of their own conduct, *infinitely more* than the lives or well-being of others - but the intuition is pretty common (at least 30% ?).

- People that disvalue life:
    - Absolute negative utilitarians or antinatalists: people who think that life is generally negative in itself.
    - People who think that human life has, and will continue to have, net-negative effects. Of course, deep ecologists who side with extinction would be aiming at a horrendously narrow window, between ‘an event which ends all human life’ and ‘one which ends all life’. They’d still have to work against the latter.
    - Ordinary utilitarians might also be committed to this view, if certain unpleasant contingencies happen (e.g. if we increased the number of suffering beings via colonisation or simulation).

- The end of the world is actually not the absolute worst scenario: you might instead have a world with unimaginable amounts of suffering lasting a very long time, a ‘quality risk’ or ‘S-risk’. You might work on those instead. This strikes me as admirable, but it doesn’t have the kind of value-independence that impressed me about the argument at the start of this piece.
- People who don’t think that probability estimates or expected value should be used for moral decisions. (Intuitionists?)
- You might have an eccentric kind of ‘satisficing’ about the good, i.e. a piecewise function where having some amount of the good is vitally important, but any more than that has no moral significance. This seems more implausible than maximisation.

(That list is long, but I think most of the bullet points hold few people.)

Uncertainties

- We really don’t know how tractable these risks are: we haven’t acted, as a species, on unprecedented century-long projects with literally only one chance for success. (But

again, this uncertainty doesn't licence inactivity, because the downside is so large.)

- I place some probability (5% ?) on our future being negative - especially if we spread normal ecosystems to other planets, or if hyper-detailed simulations of people turn out to have moral weight. If the risk increased, these could 'flip the sign' on extinction, for me.
- I was going to exempt people with 'person-affecting views' from the argument. But actually if the probability of extinction in the next 80 years (one lifetime) is high enough (1% ?) then they probably have reason to act too (though not an overwhelming mandate), despite ignoring future generations.
- Most people are neither technical researchers nor willing to go into government. So, if x-risk organisation ran out of "room for more funding" then most people would be off the hook (back to maximising their terminal goal directly), until they had some.
- We don't really know how common real deontologists are. (That one study is n=1000 about Sweden, probably an unusually consequentialist place.) As value-honourers, they can maybe duck most of the force of the argument.
- Convergence is often suspicious, when humans are persuading themselves or others.

Fates other than death

The above talks only about extinction risk, and omits the other two kinds of existential catastrophe: "unrecoverable collapse" (e.g. humans surviving in the traditional subsistence manner, but losing all knowledge and exhausting all easily harnessable energy sources) and "unrecoverable dystopia" (e.g. technologically complete global fascism).

These have their own wrinkles, but the general point remains: most values are ruined by them.

Criticisms

1. "This model assumes utilitarian/long-term ethics, but in fact in the population this is a minority view and 'honouring' ethics are far more common than is presumed here... so for many people today it needn't be a common cause."
I definitely don't assume utilitarianism. I also think I only need a very weak kind of long-termism - "future matters a bit". I haven't calculated the exact discount or anything. I'd more evidence for honouring being common, I couldn't find much. My intuition is that scholars get misled by their name for common sense morality - "folk deontology" - and that most people are a context-driven bag of honouring and promoting.
"common" is not meant to mean "universal", but "shareable". how would something be 'shared' (amongst all) without it being 'universal'? These are core premises that are accessible (whether or not they are accessed) from virtually any existing position or value system (excluding XYZ at end) — the point is not that everyone today does accept them, but that many could without changing their core beliefs.

2. "The structure of the argument would be rejected by contemporary liberals, a dominant view in anglophone political philosophy, which is not necessarily well captured in the category of 'honouring' ethics."
If this means Rawlsians, then yes they're not so simple. But they have some principles (maximin) which they would forego great good to obey, so there's an honouring core to them.

3. There are many value systems that place an all-else-equal value on survival, in the abstract; but which place disvalue on their political opponents winning, and so would be willing to incur a certain risk of existential catastrophe if it would help them defeat/contain these adversaries (this is essentially the gamble of nuclear deterrence). Any ideology plus a

proper long-term perspective should be much less willing to make that tradeoff. Even if I feared a defeat of my cause X by Y, from a long-term perspective, so long as the world survives I might prefer to ‘take the hit’, with the hope that X might then eventually re-emerge.

1. For example, Nietzsche said '*Without music, life would be a mistake.*'
2. Steady now!
3. I think I got this argument from Nick Bostrom but I can't find a reference.

Tags: longtermism, philosophy, xrisk

You do you

12th August 2017

- *All advice has someone who needs to hear the opposite.*
- *Confidence*: N/A
- *Topic importance*: 5 / 10
- *Reading time*: 10 mins.

Out at London Pride, uncharacteristically. Around 1am, as you do, find myself in an intimate discussion with a stranger. Who leaps to what he imagines is my defence:

> He: "*What are you into?*"
>
> I: "Women, mostly."
>
> "*Oh right.*"
>
> "It's a limited view, though. I wish I was more open."
>
> "*What? There's no such* thing*! You got to accept yourself!*"
>
> "Sure, but - I'm only attracted to like a tenth of the population; it would be objectively better to have a larger pool, and to see all of beauty."
>
> "*Hey,* hey*: stop it, you don't need to justify yourself. You are you, so you do* you*. Don't do anyone else.*"
>
> "That's a beautiful thing to say, and there's a lot of people in the world who really need to hear it. Not me, though."
>
> "*It's true for everyone! You'll only hurt yourself by not being yourself.*"
>
> "No, though. Consider: monkeys like bananas and sex; humans like bananas, sex, *and* philosophy and sports. So the value space visible to the latter is -"
>
> "*- Look, you're not going to change by overthinking things. So skip it! I'm not questioning you!*"
>
> "I am questioning myself. And so I often change. I don't want stock acceptance. Challenging me when I am not as good as I could be is better than acceptance: you take me seriously. You give me actual help.
>
> When I 'do' me, I justify myself to myself. In others this can be neurotic, self-sabotage. For me it is creation. If you wanted to google it, there's a word for it. Only at home when taking a pickaxe to the walls, to see if they're actually solid."

Tags: self-help, rationality