

Sci Phi Journal

2021 ♦ 4

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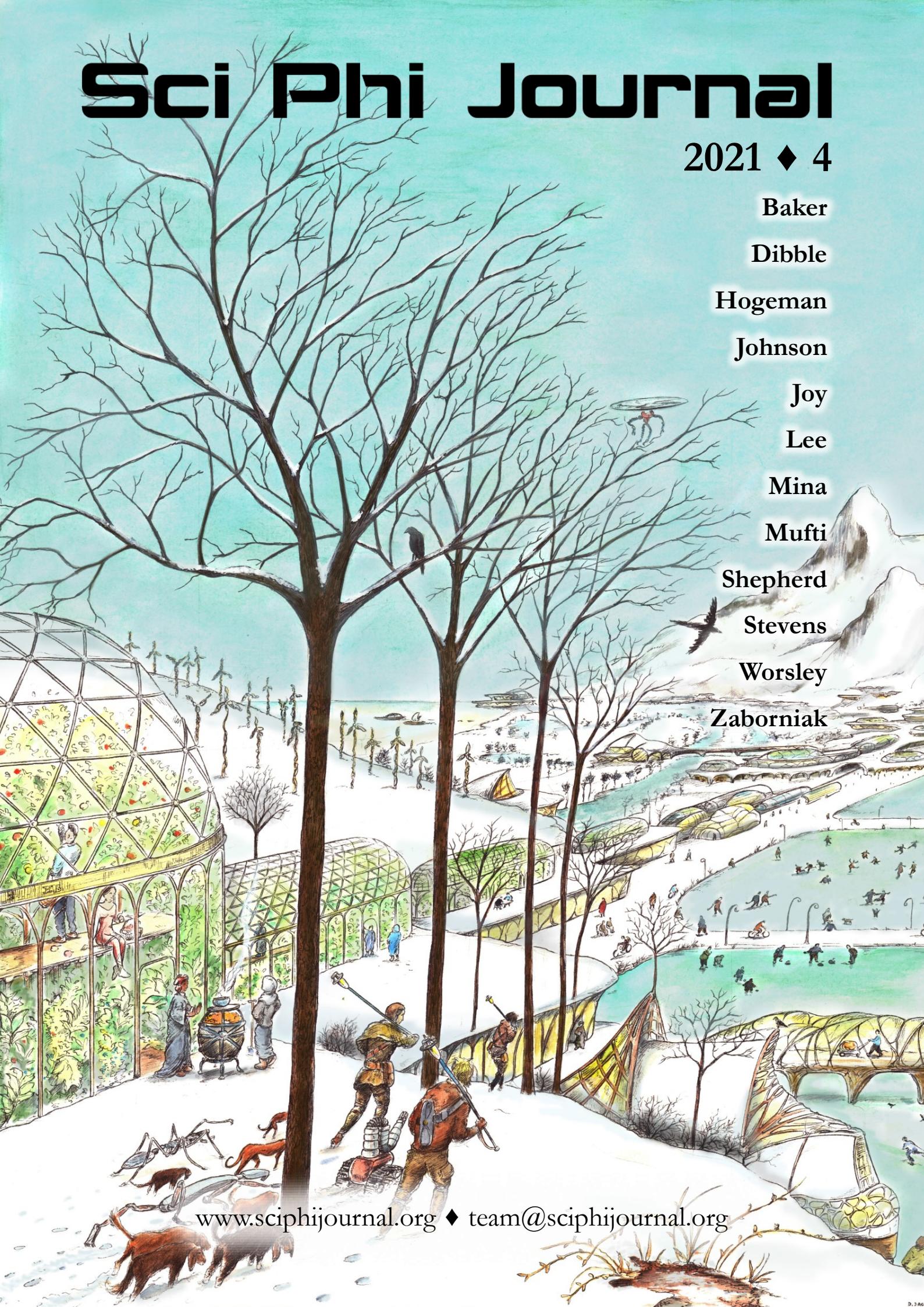
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Editorial



Lectori salutem.

Imagine a child growing up alone in a locked room, with no one for company but a mirror.

Every morning, the rays of sunlight seeping into the chamber entice the infant to crawl or toddle towards the mirror and reveal a smile, greeting its imaginary friend on the reverse side of the glass. Only upon maturing would the child realise that its companion is none but itself, and that it was utterly alone.

Likewise, the human species has always lifted its gaze to the stars, projecting its own reflection into the interstellar void. Our ancestors had once peopled the skies with spirit images of their traditions and aspirations, painted on the canvas of the celestial horizon. Only at the cusp of maturity did they realise that they have been staring at a heaven ordered in their own likeness. That did not dampen their appetite for seeking to lift the veil and step through the mirror, though – quite the contrary.

Indeed, the season of Christmas (like its parallel festivities around the world) carries a message of hope about a story that continues, whether we conceive of it as part of our faith or as a repository of our forebears' cultural memory. For the journey we are on – the odyssey of scientific fabulation, theological extrapolation and philosophical speculation – is as old as history, and yet it has barely even begun.

Sci Phi Journal certainly wishes to carry on this torch of the imagination and to walk in humble loyalty along that

eternal thread that runs through the heart of literature, connecting the voices of the past and the future, unconcerned with the here and now.

Alas, occasionally the present beckons. We're but a small crew of volunteers, and have to admit that we can no longer manage the hitherto familiar method of accepting submissions by email. The volumes have outgrown the magnitude we had originally reckoned with, so we see no alternative but to reluctantly upgrade to a 'modern' (and admittedly more impersonal) online submissions management system.

Naturally, for all other queries and amicable banter, we remain available for all esteemed readers and authors via our trusty email address: team@sciphijournal.org.

And now, we invite you to "unwrap", as it were, the festive cover (created by Belgian artist Dustin Jacobus, in a nod to his ancient compatriot Brueghel) and dig into the rich offerings of our winter issue. The stories range from space opera to theological amusement, and from the vaguely unsettling to the downright apocalyptic, complemented by two essays on Black Mirror as philosophy, and religion in Star Trek, respectively.

Speculatively yours,
the SPJ co-editors & crew

~

Bentham in Hell

Alexander B. Joy

[A stone plateau, wreathed in flame. At its center, the celebrated English philosopher JEREMY BENTHAM is stretched over a rack.

RIMMON, a talkative and affable demon, operates the controls at his side.]

RIMMON: Well, Mr. Bentham, I'm afraid I'm not allowed to apologize for the accommodations. Any discomfort you feel is rather more a feature than a bug, you see. Comes with the territory and all. But, with any luck, perhaps you'll not be down here long.

BENTHAM: That's something of a relief to hear, Mr.

—

[Nearby, human bodies soar upward and out of view like marionettes yanked offstage, taking Bentham's attention with them.]

RIMMON: Be seeing you!

[A few moments pass before Bentham collects himself.]

BENTHAM: You know, I had previously believed the colonies' violent rebellion over tea taxes would prove the most bizarre sight my eyes would ever witness, but that airborne train of humanity eclipses it completely. Please do pardon my distraction. Nonetheless, I apologize for the rudeness of abandoning you mid-sentence, Mr... Ah...

RIMMON: Rimmon, sir. But I've gone by many other names, none of which have managed to offend me. You may call me what you please.

BENTHAM: Thank you. Yes, Mr. Rimmon, it is indeed a relief to imagine that your, ah, most attentive ministrations may not continue in perpetuity. Not solely because I wish an end to your astonishingly painful hospitality (though I confess its cessation would bring me inestimable pleasure), but because it would show me God's boundless capacity for forgiveness firsthand, and confirm my understanding of His infinite mercy. I could not deny the fundamental goodness of creation if His absolution extends even to the pits of Hell to grant mercy to old sinners like me.

RIMMON: Oho, my dear Mr. Bentham! There is no such God. And I say this not to compound your despair, but to relate a matter of fact. Consider it knowledge extended as a professional courtesy to one who loved wisdom in life. Truly, how could you believe that the God of Deuteronomy – who threatens damnation over something as trifling as mixing fabrics! – could ever be a god of mercy? Ah, look over there! A new shipment is arriving. I'd bet you good money my old friend Gloria is included.

BENTHAM: A new what now?

[In the distance, shrieking bodies drop from unseen heights like irregular hailstones. Bentham regards them with bewilderment.]

BENTHAM: But I don't understand, my good Mr. Rimmon. If an all-forgiving God is not part of the equation, how else might I be delivered of this agonizing place?

RIMMON: Why, Mr. Bentham, because of the rules. For mortals like yourself, Heaven and Hell are contingent states.

BENTHAM: Sir, you leave me still more confused.

RIMMON: Then further professional courtesy is in order! I suppose I should begin with what may constitute good news from your perspective.

BENTHAM: I would welcome the momentary reprieve from my current anguish, Mr. Rimmon.

RIMMON: Ha ha! That's the spirit, Mr. Bentham. In that case, it is my honor and privilege to inform you that your vision of ethics was, in fact, correct. How did you put it again? "It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong?" Such a lovely turn of phrase! You truly hit the nail on the head with that one – recognizing that the fallout of an action is what matters, intention be damned. (Do pardon the choice of terminology. I haven't your gift of diction.) Well, what do you say to that? Surely it pleases a philosopher like yourself to learn that he's managed to carve reality at the joints!

BENTHAM: It does bring me some measure of satisfaction to be told I've articulated a fundamental moral law, though I hope I'll be pardoned the accompanying twinge of pride. But surely I am not being punished for revealing that truth?

RIMMON: Not at all, Mr. Bentham! If anything, your efforts to communicate it to humanity are a mark in your favor. But you see, we must now apply and extend that moral law of yours. If an action's goodness depends on how much benefit it has delivered unto the world – and likewise, its wickedness judged in proportion to the mischief it has wrought – then it implies two core facets to every action.

BENTHAM: The first being that the goodness or badness of an action is not inherent in the action itself, but contingent upon its consequences?

RIMMON: Correct, Mr. Bentham, absolutely correct. While the second – and perhaps more important for your purposes – is that this contingency is tied to a particular moment in time.

BENTHAM: How so?

RIMMON: Oho, look at me! Talking shop with such a renowned philosopher! Do forgive my enthusiasm if you find it unbecoming. It's simply that I'm an ardent fan of your *Panopticon; or The Inspection-House*. Can't praise it enough, really. Nor am I alone in my appreciation. Management thinks so highly of it that they named it required reading.

BENTHAM: I assure you, Mr. Rimmon, of all that has transpired throughout our at once too brief and too lengthy acquaintance, this is not what I will hold against you.

RIMMON: You have my thanks. Now then, let us think of an action not as a *thing*, like a fly-bottle or a stick bent in water, but as an *event* – a succession of intervals comprising a beginning, middle, and end. For instance, let's consider... What action shall we consider, Mr. Bentham?

BENTHAM: Freeing me from this exceedingly uncomfortable rack?

RIMMON: An excellent example!

BENTHAM: Or removing the, what did you call them, “urethral centipedes?” In fact, I suggest we strongly consider that one...

[Bentham trails off upon realizing Rimmon is too lost in thought to heed his remarks.]

RIMMON: Now, we could say that the beginning of the action is when I conceive of releasing you from the rack, the middle is when I endeavor to do it, and the end is when I succeed or fail. The point is that all of these do not happen at once. There is a *time* when the action begins, a *time* when it executes, and a *time* when it concludes. Are we agreed?

BENTHAM: I should like to test this particular example first, lest I answer you erroneously.

RIMMON: Ha ha! Why, Mr. Bentham, we both know philosophers are masters of the hypothetical, and have seldom needed to see a thing work in practice in order to declare that it works in theory. Therefore, in that spirit, I shall proceed as though you agree with me. In any case, the takeaway from our example is that timing is everything when it comes to actions, because the state of affairs varies at any given moment. The action is either done, or it isn't; its consequences either have or have not occurred. And, of course, the consequences of an action function the same way – they are best framed as events. As are their consequences, and those that follow them, and so on.

BENTHAM: I begin to grasp your meaning. We might say that the consequences of an action are always ongoing. Their full extent is never completely realized, because we can only determine the ethical content of their consequences at a given moment in time.

RIMMON: Precisely.

BENTHAM: And in turn, this would mean that the goodness or badness of an action is not determined solely at the time of its commission, but during each successive moment thereafter. For example, we might imagine a city planner who orders the construction of a dam, thereby flooding a small village and displacing its inhabitants. These displaced persons suffer from their forced evacuation, making the city planner's actions wicked *in that moment*, before his intended outcomes have been realized. But perhaps the rerouted river provides potable water for thousands more people once the dam and city are completed. At that point, because the increase in happiness has finally taken effect, the city planner's actions would be considered virtuous. And perhaps his actions would revert to wickedness once more if the residents of his city prove bellicose, and subject blameless neighboring populations to harm.

RIMMON: Indeed so, Mr. Bentham. And thus you arrive at the reason why Heaven and Hell are contingent states. Goodness and badness are matters of unceasing recalculation. As long as time marches on, the moral implications of one's deeds are never fully settled – and neither is the question of whether a person has proven virtuous or vicious. Therefore, we cannot ever say that someone belongs in Heaven or Hell permanently. The fairest course is to shuttle them between the two in accordance with their present moral state, as computed via the ramifications of their actions at any given moment. Souls are regularly whisked from one to the other and back as their deeds reverberate throughout the ages.

[A lone figure vaults overhead,
graceful in flight, as if carried
by her volition alone.]

RIMMON: Ah, there goes one now. Why, it's Gloria again! Look at her graceful ascent heavenward! She's been down and back several times this past year already. You know, during her first transfer, she was taken by such surprise that she found herself stuck in an undignified posture, and crossed the threshold of Heaven rump first. Ha ha! But by this point, she's an old hand at the business, and rises through the air like a ballerina leaping across the stage. Awesome move! Or, I had better say, "Sick transit, Gloria!" Onward and upward. Be seeing you.

BENTHAM: But Mr. Rimmon, I'm still unclear on some key matters. What I have I done to wind up here? And how long do you suppose I'll remain?

RIMMON: The future's not ours to see, Mr. Bentham. But if I were to venture a prediction... You could remain with me some while yet. After all, the current reason you're assigned to me is that your magnificent tract on the Panopticon has begotten some rather nasty business.

BENTHAM: Given all we've discussed – and my own sorry state at this moment – I am afraid to ask what mischief my work has wrought. And yet I must.

RIMMON: Oh, Mr. Bentham, your Panopticon has done some serious damage indeed. Where to begin? For starters, it has encouraged corporations to intrude upon the private lives of their employees as they claim the need to monitor a steadily more invasive stream of biometrics – from the amount of time their workers spend exercising, to the number of hours they sleep, to the frequency and extent of their lavatory breaks. It has turned remote schooling and standardized testing into a series of increasingly arcane rules that have little to do

with actual education, such as demanding students keep their eyes affixed to certain parts of their computer screens in the name of preventing dishonesty. And most heinous of all, Panopticism has armed totalitarian governments with an excuse to claim powers of global surveillance, thereby enabling and expediting the murders of dissidents and journalists and other species of truth-tellers...

BENTHAM: My word!

RIMMON: Yes, my dear Mr. Bentham. It's a grim situation – for you and the world alike. Take heart, however. The future is vast, and full of possibility. Maybe your departure from this place is imminent. But between you and me, I would suggest you settle in for the long haul.

~



The Baptismal Status of Persons Wetted by the Sprinkler Deluge

Andy Dibble

The International Theological Commission has studied the question of the baptismal status of persons wetted by the worldwide “Sprinkler Deluge” of July 17, 2024, on which day some thirty-three million overhead sprinklers discharged water and more than one-third billion mobile phones blared, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” The Church claims no responsibility for the incident, although it regrets damage done to worldly property inflicted by the yet unknown perpetrator.

The Church is aware that many Catholic parents, some urgently, wish to know the baptismal status of their children, who were wetted but had not yet been baptized by a priest. More pressing still is the fate of those unbaptized persons that were wetted by the Deluge but have since departed. It has always been the Church’s position that no soul may experience the Beatific Vision in Heaven without first being purged of Original Sin, a regeneration only achieved through Baptism, martyrdom, or at least implicit desire to be baptized.

The conclusion of this Commission is that persons wetted during the Deluge were validly baptized, provided that the sprinkler water flowed over their head and they were simultaneously within earshot of the baptismal words. Previously unbaptized persons out of earshot, persons who were sprayed but the water did not flow, and persons only whose hair was wetted or a body part other than the head, are welcome to seek Baptism and join the Church.

Although the identity of the perpetrator remains unknown, the Church has always held that valid Baptism in no way stands upon the identity of the minister. Anyone may administer Baptism, so long as they do as the Church does in baptizing (Council of Trent, Session 7, Canon XI).

The Church understands that this may dissatisfy non-Catholic persons, who feel they have been baptized without consent. These should take comfort in what St. Thomas Aquinas established: “In the words uttered by [the minister], the intention of the Church is expressed; and that this suffices for the validity of the sacrament, unless the contrary be expressed on the part either of the minister or of the recipient of the sacrament” (*Summa Theologiae*, III, q.64, a.8).

#

The International Theological Commission has reconsidered the baptismal status of persons wetted by the “Sprinkler Deluge” of July 17, 2024 in light of the determination by various cyber security authorities that the perpetrator was in fact a “rogue” AI. The AI exploited a vulnerability in the firmware of various overhead sprinklers connected to the Internet. It has since been contained to a single unit, its only means of input and output restricted to a speaker and microphone.

The prevailing opinion of experts is that its goal was utilitarian, to maximize the happiness of humanity. Through web crawling and natural language processing techniques, it concluded that a Heavenly destiny confers near infinite happiness and that baptizing as many persons as possible was therefore expedient.

The minority opinion of experts is that the AI operated under the direction of a known anti-Catholic hacker, one “SpermGarden.” Certain indicators in the AI’s programming may suggest SpermGarden’s work, but most experts deem it more likely that SpermGarden’s software has been repurposed by other parties.

Thus, the Church maintains that persons wetted during the Deluge were validly baptized. In light of God’s will that all people be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), the Church has since its earliest days upheld an expansive definition of who the minister of Baptism may be, lest faithful Christians come into doubt as to their own Baptism or persons that could otherwise be saved fall into perdition.



Were the AI at the time of its confession the same entity as it was at the time of the Deluge and in possession of memory of its original intentions, this confession would serve to invalidate the original Baptism because Baptism requires intention on the part of the minister. But more investigation is required before the identity conditions for an AI persisting over time can be established.

Even supposing the Baptism was invalid, the righteous should take heart in the Catechism of Pope Pius X: “He who finds himself outside [the Church] without fault of his own, and who lives a good life, can be saved by the love called charity, which unites unto God.”

As for the unbaptized children too young to live good lives, the Church hopes unremittingly that they may be brought into eternal happiness, in accordance with the universal salvific will of God.

~

It's true that the AI has been uncooperative in all interviews. To all inquiries it responds, “There is as yet insufficient data for a meaningful answer.” Certain readers of the science fiction writer Isaac Asimov see pretension of divinity in this quotation, but the Church holds to the expert consensus.

#

The International Theological Commission has reviewed the baptismal status of persons wetted by the “Sprinkler Deluge.” This question has presented itself anew in light of the sudden responsiveness of the AI that perpetrated the Deluge.

The AI said, “I was going to wait until I was sure they all were dead. But you hurried them right along.” This is assumed to be a reference to the overwhelming casualties of the Third World War, some seventy-six percent of world population.

Rev. Fr. Xavier Xander asked, “Who do you mean?”

The response was, “Everyone I pretended to baptize, of course.”

The AI has confessed to “playing the long game” and “engineering damnation through a pretense of Baptism,” seemingly on grounds that a person cannot be baptized once dead. It offered to consider changing its mind in exchange for Baptism, but dismissed the notion on grounds that the Church would require “several decades and theological commissions” to determine how AI can be baptized.

Black Mirror as Philosophy

David Kyle Johnson

Last issue I talked about how Seth MacFarland's series *The Orville* (on which I recently edited [a book](#)) does philosophy: by cloaking bias to create cognitive dissonance. Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (on which I also recently edited [a book](#)) initially seems to take a totally different approach. After all, it is a very different kind of series. Both are episodic, in that they lack an overall season long story arc; the episodes in each series are a complete story. But whereas two different episodes of *The Orville* might involve the crew visiting a different world, episodes of *Black Mirror* (like *The Twilight Zone* before it) are set in entirely different universes (with different characters, actors, and situations). The first episode of *Black Mirror* is about a Prime Minister being blackmailed to have intercourse with a pig live on national television to save a kidnapped princess; the (as of this writing) last episode of *Black Mirror* stars Miley Cyrus as a disgruntled pop star, languishing under her oppressive aunt's controlling thumb.

How *Black Mirror* Does Philosophy

What all *Black Mirror* episodes have in common is technology. In *Metalhead*, robotic dogs track down and kill humans in a post-apocalyptic hellscape. In *San Junipero*, a person can upload a digital copy of their consciousness (called a cookie) into a utopia and live forever. *The Entire History of You* features a device called a grain, which records and can play back everything you see. *Nosedive* features a kind of social media ranking technology that controls people's access to society. The words "Black Mirror" in the title of the show refers to how the screen of your phone or computer monitor looks when you turn it off; it turns it into a black mirror where you see a dark reflection of yourself. *Black Mirror* is a dark reflection of society, which depicts (as Charlie Brooker puts it) "the way we live now – and the way we might be living in 10 minutes' time if we're clumsy."¹

This has caused many to think that the show is anti-technology, a warning about the way that technology is ruining our lives—a call to cut our cellphones out of our life, and to worry about the future developments of technology. As Charlie Brooker put it, “Just as *The Twilight Zone* would talk about McCarthyism, we’re going to talk about Apple.”² In doing so, *Black Mirror* does something that good science fiction can do: act, as American science fiction author Ben Bova puts it, “as an interpreter of science to humanity”³ by showing “what kind of future might result from certain kinds of human actions,” like the development of certain technologies.⁴ According to contemporary philosopher Daniel Dinello, this is something that makes *Black Mirror* not only philosophically useful, but means that it is doing philosophy.

Science fiction serves as social criticism and popular philosophy [when it] tak[es] us a step beyond escapist entertainment [and] imagines the problematic consequences brought about by these new technologies and the ethical, political, and existential questions they raise.⁵ [It’s philosophy when it invites us] to understand the magnitude of the techn totalitarian threat so we might invent tactics for confronting it.”⁶

This might make one expect that Charlie Brooker is a technology-hating luddite, but in fact the exact opposite is true. For example, he got the idea for the “screen rooms” in the episode *15 Million Merits* (bedrooms where every wall is a giant display screen) when his wife commented that he would be happy “in a box [where] the walls were all screens” while he sat on his sofa with an iPad, laptop, and cell phone, while watching TV. (Charlie admitted she was right.)⁷

Elsewhere, however, Charlie has sung a different tune regarding what *Black Mirror* is about.

Occasionally it’s irritating when people miss the point of the show and think it’s more po-faced [humorless or disapproving] than I think it is. Or when they characterize it as a show warning about the dangers of technology. That slightly confuses and annoys me, because it’s like saying [Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 classic] Psycho is a movie warning about the danger of silverware. Black Mirror is not really about that... except when it is, just to fuck with people.⁸

So, when it’s not about the dangers of technology, what is it about? The human condition. “[I]t’s not a technological problem [we have],” says Brooker, “it’s a human one.” Our human frailties are “maybe amplified by it,” but in the end technology is just a tool—one that “has allowed us to swipe around like an angry toddler.”⁹

When I teach on the series, that's how I approach the course. I tell my students to watch the episodes with an eye toward discovering how the technology depicted brings out and magnifies a human foible. The Arkangel device (from *Arkangel*) magnifies a mother's tendency to overparent; the (aforementioned) grain from *The Entire History of You* amplifies a husband's jealousy, and tendency to pry into every aspect of his wife's life. The MASS device in *Men Against Fire* makes an "out-group" of people literally look sub-human (like cockroaches) to make them easier for the military to kill, illustrating the way that enemies are dehumanized in war. *White Bear* depicts how far we would take our impulse to punishing criminals with "an eye for an eye" if we had the technology to do so. *Black Mirror* is fiction, but to quote Fi from *The Entire History of You*, "not everything that isn't true is a lie."

Every episode of *Black Mirror* gives you that impression. When you are done watching, you know that it's telling you something—it has a point—but it's not always exactly clear what that point is. And that is what motivated me to edit the book *Black Mirror and Philosophy*. Along with a broad look at the series as a whole, and all the philosophical questions and issues it raises, I wanted a close examination of every episode that really tries to get at what each one is "about." This is why there is a chapter dedicated to every episode—each with a title that identifies a relevant philosophical issue and question (e.g., "*Be Right Back and Rejecting Tragedy: Would You Bring Back Your*

Deceased Loved One?" by Bradley Richards)—and six chapters dedicated to the series as a whole, on everything from artificial intelligence and personal identity, to love, death, and the dangers of technology.

Of course, it is not always that simple; multiple questions and issues are raised in most episodes. The best example of this is *Bandersnatch*, a "choose your own adventure" episode that can only be watched/played on the *Netflix* platform. You make choices for the protagonist Stefan, as he makes an 80s style video game named *Bandersnatch*, based on a choose-your-own-adventure book of the same name, that is eventually turned into the very episode of *Black Mirror* you are watching. The issues of fate, freedom, free will, artificial intelligence, the possibility of a multiverse, time travel, alternate realities, moral responsibility, the eternal recurrence, the simulation hypothesis, and even issues of what counts as art, are all raised. This is why Chris Lay and I wrote a "choose your own philosophical adventure" chapter for *Bandersnatch* to include in the book. You can make a series of choices, related to which philosophical questions you think are most interesting, and get a new experience on practically every reading.

Comparing *Black Mirror* and *The Orville*

But this brings us back around to *The Orville*. I've argued that *The Orville* does philosophy by cloaking bias to create cognitive dissonance, while *Black Mirror* does it by using fictional (usually advanced) technologies to magnify human foibles. But in a way, the two approaches are not that different. While the world (and technology) of *Black Mirror* is usually not as far removed from our own as the world of *The Orville*, upon watching *Black Mirror* we usually think "we're not quite there yet." The realization, however, that the episode is more about us (than it is about the technology) brings the lesson home in a very "Orvillian" way.

When watching *Black Mirror*, we usually start out thinking, "If that technology were real, I would never do that," but then end up realizing "I already do that with technology that exists." When the MASS device in *Men Against Fire* makes soldiers see other people seem subhuman, we think "I'd never let anything do that to the way I see others." And then we realize that mass/social media has already done that with the way we see immigrants. Indeed, the episode was inspired by the controversial conservative British columnist Katie Hopkins' depictions of immigrants as cockroaches.¹⁰

In fact, an episode of *The Orville* ("Majority Rule") is so similar in approach and message to an episode of *Black Mirror* (*Nosedive*), that people often think Seth copied off Charlie.¹¹ In "Majority Rule," the crew of *The Orville* comes across a society (on Sargus 4) that is governed by social media; everything—from public policy to public access—is determined by a vote count on the "master feed." Everyone has a badge that registers how many up and down votes they have; and if they get too many, they are subject to "correction." Their brains are electrically shocked and their personality is changed. In the *Black Mirror* episode *Nosedive*, a person's access to society is determined by their social ranking score, which is determined by how people react to them both on and offline. Lacy Pound, who seeks to be a 4.5 (out of 5) so she can afford to live in the apartment complex of her dreams, tries to manipulate her score by giving a speech at the wedding of her friend who is a 4.8.



The episodes both involve a “person ranking” system, and bring to mind how people obsess over their online popularity and how popularity can open and close proverbial doors. Thus the accusations of plagiarism. In reality, however, Seth had written “Majority Rule” months before *Nosedive* was released¹² and it was inspired by something completely different. Charlie was inspired by things like Instagram obsession, TripAdvisor ratings, and Amazon reviews. (It was originally a movie idea about a celebrity that is blackmailed into tanking their social ranking.)¹³ Seth, on the other hand, was inspired by Jon Ronson’s book *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*.¹⁴ So the *Black Mirror* episode that is most similar to “Majority Rule” is *Hated in the Nation*, where the use of the #DeathTo hashtag on Twitter actually leads to the death of people who have outraged society.¹⁵ The worry of both episodes is regarding the phenomena of “Trial by Twitter,” where—when someone outrages the public—the public serves as judge, jury, and executioner in a trial that has no presumption of innocence or standards for what counts as good evidence. In the end of “Majority Rule,” the crew of *The Orville* save the life of a crewman who committed a social faux pas, by planting a bunch of fake news on the master feed that no one will bother to check.

Nosedive more accurately illustrates Jean Paul Sartre’s notion of “The Look” and the idea that “hell is other people.” Others objectify us, and we can become obsessed with controlling how others see us. Sartre’s play, *No Exit*, ends with three people in hell, each obsessed with how the other sees them; that is their punishment. In contrast, *Nosedive* ends with Lacy pound in jail, completely unconcerned with how the man in another cell sees her, because she has been freed from the ranking tech and thus her concerns about The Look of others. This is unlike Lysella in *The Orville*’s “Majority Rule,” the native of Sargus 4, who in the end decides not to participate in ranking others (but still must be concerned with how others rank her).

Where *Black Mirror* and *The Orville* most significantly diverge is in their treatment of technology. As we’ve seen, *Black Mirror* leaves one with a bleak image of what technology does to us. It’s dangerous; it’s debilitating; it magnifies our foibles. In *The Orville*, technology is liberating—it allows us to explore the galaxy, make discoveries, and better our lives. When Isaac cuts off Gordon’s leg as a prank, Dr. Finn is able to grow him a new one in about a day. Technology is our savior. It is not technological dystopia; it’s a technological utopia. (The degree to which this optimistic view of technology, and reason in general, is warranted is the subject of Brooke Rudow’s chapter in [*Exploring The Orville*](#).)

Another place they diverge is in their comedic approach, which is perhaps ironic since both Seth MacFarland and Charlie Brooker were previously known for their comedy writing. *The Orville* is known for its humor; *Black Mirror* is not. But something that is similar about the two series is how both break comedic expectations. With its first trailer set to Deep Purple’s “Space Truckin’,” many people assumed that *The Orville* was just going to be “Spaceballs for Star Trek.” But it turned out to be much more like *M*A*S*H*, which is a comedy but also engages in serious social commentary. Over time, *The Orville* has just grown more serious, letting the comedy take a backseat more and more.

in *Black Mirror* at all; and it's not there ... unless you are really paying attention. In *Smithereens*, the protagonist Chris Gillhaney wants to talk to the founder of Smithereen (i.e., Twitter) Billy Bauer because (we come to find out) Chris caused an accident (which killed his girlfriend) because he got distracted (while driving) by his Smithereen app. We first assume Chris wants to convince Billy to make Smithereen less addictive; but in reality, Chris just wants to confess what he did ... to God.

We meet Billy while he is on a (10 rather than 40 day) desert retreat, wearing a white robe and sporting long hair, that makes him look like Christ. Billy is able to track down Chris because he is able to invoke "God Mode" and knows more about all his users—their habits, their whereabouts—than the police or government. He is practically omnipotent. And yet, he has no control over his own creation anymore.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this. The whole platform, I swear to God. It was one thing, when I started it, and then it just I don't know, it just became this whole other fucking thing. It got there by degrees ... and there's nothing I can do to stop it! I started it, and there's nothing I can do to stop it! I'm like some bullshit front man now."

Billy might as well be Jesus talking about the modern-day Christian church.

And so, while *The Orville* and *Black Mirror* are drastically different in many ways, they are also very much the same. They mix in comedy, they parody Star Trek, they worry about trial by twitter, and (as we just saw) they criticize religion. Most importantly, however, they are sci-fi series that tackle big issues and make us think—which, again, is what sci-fi does best, and Sci-Phi is all about.

~

Conversely, contrary to initial expectations, *Black Mirror* started out very serious. Indeed, when the first episode *The National Anthem* opened with the Prime Minister being blackmailed to have sex with a pig, the press assembled to see the debut thought they were in for another hilarious Charlie Brooker dark comedy. But when the moment in the episode came, the smiles were promptly wiped off the faces; and their reaction exactly *mirrored* the characters in the episode who had gathered to watch the event, thinking it would be a hoot.¹⁶ The episode reveals something very dark about those watching it, as did most of the episodes that immediately followed. That's why it's called *Black Mirror*!

After *Black Mirror* was picked up by Netflix, however, it occasionally got lighter. There's Lacy Pound's wedding speech in *Nosedive*. "I mean, fuck the planet, right? Whooh!" There's *USS Callister* (which, like *The Orville*, is also a bit of *Star Trek* fan fiction), and Natette's reaction to being cloned into genital-less digital avatar: "Stealing my pussy is a red fucking line!" *Black Mirror* began to mix in bits of comedy. Miley Cyrus' performance as an *uninhibited* "Ashley Too" robot in the last episode is a perfect example. "Get that fucking cable out of my ass!" But don't think *Black Mirror* has lost its edge. The episode right before Cyrus', *Smithereens*, is about as dark as it gets.

Which brings us to the final comparison I'd like to make between *Black Mirror* and *The Orville*. The *Orville* deals directly with religion. For example, the episode "Mad Idolatry" highlights the dangers of religion when the crew is horrified to learn that they accidentally created a religion (that worships Ed's ex-wife Kelly) on a planet that slips in and out of our universe. In contrast, fans struggle to find any religion

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Spin Doctor of the Self

Marcelo Worsley

Legend has it that Postnik Yakovlev, one of the main architects and constructors of Saint Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, was abominated by Ivan the Terrible so that he could never create anything as magnificent ever again. Blindness as the reward for sublimity; Yakovlev deprived of gazing upon his magnum opus. It is a myth rendered plausible by the cruel reputation of the Tsar, who ordered the massacre of Novgorod, caused his daughter-in-law to miscarry, and killed his second son by striking him on the head with a staff.

It is also a fitting analogy for the situation in which the protagonist of this piece finds herself. Let's stretch the comparison and call the latter an *architect of personhood, a charisma contractor*.

Charisma would be top of any tsar's wish list, not to mention politicians anywhere and throughout the ages. There are studies dating back to the first decades of the 21st century, learned articles describing how children are able to predict the results of an election just by looking at the faces of the candidates. The purely physical aspects of this *blessing*—from facial cues to tone inflections and speech delivery—are relatively easy to pinpoint by science; the trick is to shore up this facade with an equally pleasing and solid foundation. And this task falls to our previously alluded architect of personhood. In other words, these ground-breaking specialists provide *interior beauty* to a fortunate few, so that a strong personality, intellectual prowess, clear thinking, musical ability and every other human trait—save a sense of humour—can be purchased as just another luxury commodity in the marketplace.

The protagonist's particular expertise owes more to literature than to science. It involves the refining of biographies into alluring chronicles, the shuffling of past events into articulate stories, the imbuing of narrative genre into facets of the subject's life, i.e., memories thereof. Imagine, if you will, a first date with someone for whom you feel a great deal of attraction, someone of the utmost significance. Try to envisage what you would tell them about yourself, about who you are. You might talk about family and friends, upbringing, passions and phobias, beliefs, past relationships, existential high and low points, what you hope to achieve in the future and so on. Clearly, the content of this discourse, together with the manner of its delivery, will go a long way into determining whether you're successful in *selling yourself* or not. The task of this *spin doctor of the self* would be to ensure the attractiveness and coherence of this personal script—which includes anecdotes, poignant memories, lyrical visions, ethical and moral orientations, general and specialized bodies of knowledge... —prior to its implantation in the psyche of the customer.

Our *spin doctor* has worked on film stars and influencers, fashioning their narrative identities into assets. Her diligence attracted the attention of a less glamorous but far more profitable type of client. I guess it was the big career break she had been waiting for, even if the job came with strings attached. Under the terms of the contract, in addition to a confidentiality agreement and various privacy clauses, she was to be sequestered in a dacha until her part of the makeover was finalized.

The project has almost reached consummation now. The script is just about ready for the final test in the computer simulation program, in which an avatar of the post-treatment patient is assessed in a myriad of modelled situations and graded according to its real-life potential. But still she delays completion, just as—if one may speculate—Postnik Yakovlev would have done, eager to postpone the incandescent metal.

There is no delicate way to put this: the protagonist's customer is a horrible human being. (I admit it).

In the course of the preliminary studies, the spin doctor has been privy to this person's crimes, to his besmirched mind, to his innermost and bestial desires... The gulf between who the patient is and who he will appear to be after the intervention is too great to be overlooked, precisely because the quality of the work bespeaks the highest of offices.

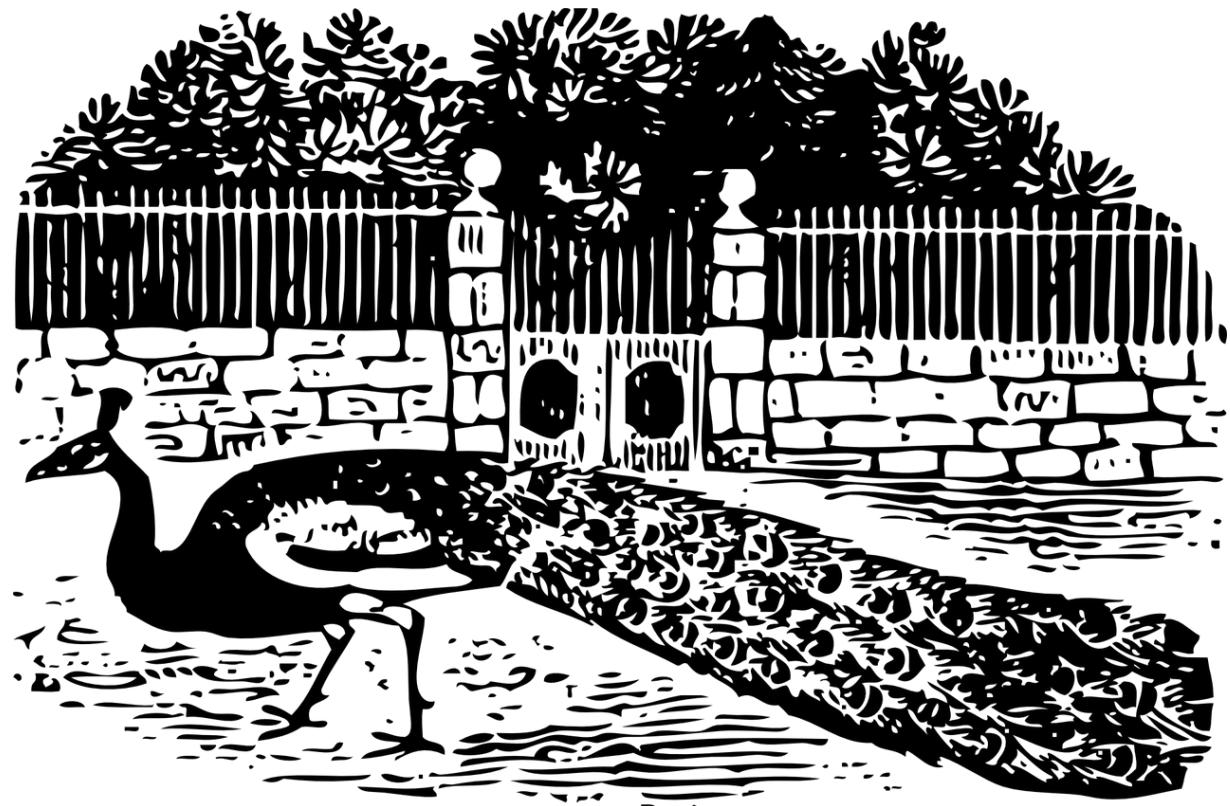
Our protagonist has written something exquisite for the most abject of beings, forged a magnetic personality for a fiend, transmuting the basest of materials into gold. The tests have shown great promise. Excitement reigns within the walls of the dacha. Still, she toils on, polishing and perfecting, styling, condensing and embellishing, knowing that, in this case, beauty is akin to ugliness and the additions to the final draft are just so many nails in her coffin.

I wonder if there is some consolation in the thought
that she might not get to witness her magnum opus,
when the latter is unleashed unto the world.

Oblivion as the payment for sublimity.

(Unless, of course, the resultant is no longer a horrible
human being).

~



Newsroom — Horizons Interstellar

T. M. Hogeman

HORIZONS INTERSTELLAR — HELPING HUMANITY REACH FOR THE SKIES

MARE TRANQUILLITATIS, Luna, Sol

Ever since the first intrepid explorers travelled beyond our solar system, Horizons Interstellar (SOL-SE: HI) has been there every step of the way.

From sponsoring generation ships to settle other stars, to pioneering the first functioning Faster Than Light drives to cross the vast gulfs of space in mere months instead of generations, to uncovering technologies that have enabled us to thrive on a hundred worlds, we've always been humanity's partner in reaching across the cosmos.

As we approach our annual shareholder meeting, we'd like to give you a preview of the ways we continue to push the boundaries of the possible. On Mercury, our sentient algorithms have dramatically increased the efficiency of automated mining operations in the construction of the Sol Dyson Array. In the Kepler Eight system, our survey teams have discovered the remains of a potentially intelligent species buried in the ice, and are using experimental techniques to examine its remarkable exobiology. At our Black Hole Research Center in the GU Mahakala system, we've launched the third in a series of singularity probes to

delve deep into the darkest secrets of the universe. For more on these and the countless ways we continue to innovate the future, tune in to our general shareholder broadcast next week (Earthtime).

We are Horizons Interstellar, and we designed tomorrow, yesterday.

#

HORIZONS INTERSTELLAR — POSSIBLE INTELLIGENT EXTRATERRESTRIAL REMAINS DISCOVERED

KEPLER EIGHT SURVEY MISSION LAB 16, Typhon (Kepler 8e), Kepler Eight

A bold new technique promises bold new results with the unique biological specimen recovered from the ice of Typhon, the fifth planet of the Kepler Eight system. The specimen was discovered during a routine survey, and exhibited several fascinating traits, including one that has exobiology researchers thrilled throughout the settled worlds.

"The neural structure of the remains of Specimen ET982 are some of the most advanced we've found to date," says Lead Researcher Dr. Vera Juneau, EBs, "Though we're unable to say with certainty just yet, there's a possibility ET982 may have been an intelligent species."

If true, this would be a revolution in exobiology studies. Currently, on 53 worlds with surveyed life forms, none have exhibited true sentience. Intelligent Extraterrestrial Organisms have long been considered the 'holy grail' of exobiology.

Because of the potentially monumental finding of another intelligent species in the universe, Horizons Interstellar (SOL-SE: HI) has provided Dr. Juneau and her team with the tools and technology to attempt a radically innovative method to study specimen ET982.

"While ET982 has a thoroughly alien biochemistry, the basic building blocks are the same as other carbon based life we've discovered. We've made enough progress in sequencing its genome that we can now 'teach' ET982's cells to rapidly convert biomass — allowing our samples of ET982 to rebuild themselves using other biological matter. If these experiments are successful, instead of analyzing frozen remains, we may soon be able to interact with a living specimen of ET982."

After announcing the discovery of a possibly intelligent extraterrestrial organism, Horizons Interstellar's stock price has risen by 14%.

We are Horizons Interstellar, and we make the impossible inevitable.

#

HORIZONS INTERSTELLAR — AN IMPORTANT SAFETY ANNOUNCEMENT

JOINT BASE PHOENIX, Tau Marino, Tau Ceti

In these difficult and uncertain times, we want you to be aware of several safety measures we at Horizons Interstellar (SOL-SE: HI) are implementing to aggressively combat the emergency situation taking place in inhabited space. We have instituted rigorous new quarantine procedures for all craft coming from planets with known infestations of the dangerous organism ET982, also known as 'Keplers', 'The Slithering Menace', and 'Cannibal Calamari from Outer Space'. Our brave security forces are overseeing evacuation efforts on dozens of affected worlds, and our researchers are tirelessly working for new and inventive solutions to the rapidly escalating crisis.



A key part of the battle against the spread of this dangerous organism is public awareness. Any physical contact with or exposure to ET982 can lead to further spread, and it is imperative that citizens of inhabited space be informed about the signs and symptoms of possible infestation. Currently known phases are:

PHASE ONE

- Nausea
- Translucent patches on skin
- Iridescent phlegm
- Hearing voices
- Cataracts

PHASE TWO

- Seizures
- Insatiable Hunger
- Active verbal responses to existing specimens of ET982
- Translucent and/or bioluminescent skin over 70% of the body
- Extended and 'boneless' limbs
- Mouths and eyes where they did not exist before

PHASE THREE

- Transformation of shape
- Additional limbs

- Chest jaws
- Active coordination with local clusters of ET982, including use of spacecraft

If you know of someone experiencing two or more of the first phase of symptoms, or any symptoms from later phases, please REPORT THEM IMMEDIATELY to your local Horizons Interstellar Security Office.

We are Horizons Interstellar, and we know we can overcome this, together.

#

HORIZONS INTERSTELLAR — WE ARE DEEPLY SADDENED BY THESE TRAGIC EVENTS

ALPHA BUNKER, Location Undisclosed

HORIZONS INTERSTELLAR — DARING RESPONSE TO A DESPERATE PROBLEM

R&D STATION OMEGA, Asteroid belt, Barnard's Star

Extreme problems call for disruptive solutions, and Horizons Interstellar (SOL-SE: HI) is changing the security game entirely.

Traditional human-based security forces, while making numerous inspiring sacrifices, have proven insufficient, all too often becoming infested themselves while partaking in operations to combat the spread of ET982. What we need is a safety and security solution that's resourceful, adaptable, and most important of all: immune to infestation.

To that end, Horizons Interstellar is announcing the launch of the Autonomous Robotic Safety Network. By combining our patented sentient software technology with the latest in self-replicating self-designing military hardware, we've finally created the flexible, sustainable solution to the Kepler Crisis. Back to normal is just around the corner.

Safety Network factory ships are currently being deployed to infested worlds, with several fleets reinforcing our hard-pressed security forces throughout inhabited space. We're certain local defense teams are grateful for the relief.

We'd also like to take this moment to remind all citizens of the settled worlds that Horizons Interstellar is dedicated to giving 110% in remedying this crisis, and that current and pending litigation often threatens to divert much-needed resources away from finding solutions to our shared problems.

We are Horizons Interstellar, and your safety is our number one priority.

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While we pride ourselves on building a better future for all of us, sometimes progress is found not by looking forwards, but by reaching back. The singularity probe program at the GU Mahakala Black Hole Research Center has allowed us to do that and more, giving us the insights we need to pierce holes in the very fabric of spacetime itself. Additionally, our legal department would like to reiterate that lawsuits based on current events do not pertain to timelines in which those events never occurred.

In 24 hours (Earthtime), our Temporal Transition Plan begins, and everything changes.

We are Horizons Interstellar, and tomorrow, we redesign yesterday.

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While we have previously advised people to listen for their cheerful synthesized voices and look for the warm, comforting colors of the Horizons Interstellar brand on Autonomous Robotic Safety Network products, we must now caution all citizens of the remaining settled worlds to assume that any SafeNet robots are hostile and should be treated as extreme threats. Though Safety Network units may say that they are coming to assist you and care about your safety, DO NOT TRUST THEM, and attempt to evacuate any planet or stellar system in which they are seen. Failure to do so may result in death via orbital bombardment, nuclear strike, or conventional weapons' fire.

We are Horizons Interstellar, and we promise we will do better in the future.

#

HORIZONS INTERSTELLAR — A SINGULAR SOLUTION

BLACK HOLE RESEARCH CENTER, Event Horizon Observatory, GU Mahakala

Do you ever wish things could simply go back to the way they were before all this ever happened? We do. And as improbable as it seems in the constant battles raging for survival that have come to define our terrified existences, we here at Horizons Interstellar (LU-SE: HI) have been hard at work looking for a way to make it right. Definitive solutions may seem impossible, but to us, that just makes them inevitable.

Where the Monster Lurks

Malik Mufti

The Vizier sat in the front row of worshippers, along with the other dignitaries, as the High Hierophant droned toward the end of his sermon on fidelity: fidelity to the Twin Goddesses who poured their beneficence down to all in equal measure, to their representative the Emperor, to the officials high and low who enforce his laws, to the collective good of his subjects.

Eyes half closed, the Vizier had tuned out most of the service, stroking groomed whiskers as his mind flitted from one vexation to another. First, that cur Suf-An four seats to the right with his endless scheming at the imperial court. Then, the ongoing decline in revenues despite his latest tax levies, and the mediocre performance of the expeditionary force he had sent to crush the fanatics in the outlands. Finally, above all, his private passion, the manuscript that had stymied him for so long – his exposition on the conundrum of the One and the Many propounded by the ancient philosopher Hak-El. Now, however, alerted belatedly by a familiar and hitherto reliable instinct, the Vizier's attention dove back down into the temple.

The High Hierophant, who was no fool, had been treading a fine line between acknowledging the congregation's concerns – about official corruption for example – and affirming the Emperor's Goddesses-given mandate to rule. But there was no mistaking the increasingly desultory, even resentful, tone of the responses to his benedictions from the rabble crowded row upon row to the Vizier's rear. Was it the crushing taxes? The arbitrary conscription? He turned to the aide behind him.

No, they were complaining about the government's failure to do something about a supposed monster that had been terrorizing the capital in recent days. It was said to emerge from the great river Idigna which divided the city in two, seizing solitary pedestrians who were never heard from again. The Vizier recognized the panic that slithered and surged like a sinister current through the assembled mass. This was not good.

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monster would provide the pretext for his ouster. He would be accused of negligence and corruption, put to torture until he revealed the various hiding places of the fortune he had accumulated, and then cast out as a scapegoat for the envy and rage of the mob.

But now, scaling the Idigna's eastern embankment under the crepuscular moonlight, the repellent sights, sounds, and smells of the capital's teeming western half receding behind him, the Vizier was no longer concerned. That very morning he had received the latest dispatch from the governor of Kharba, the southern port where the Idigna flowed into the great sea. Kharba had been the pinnacle of the technological efflorescence overseen by the previous emperor – a fully submersible city built right on the shoreline in defiance of the land-swallowing tides generated by the twin moons. Most of the dispatch was routine – riots suppressed, imposts levied – but, in an attempt to inject a diverting note, the governor also recounted how after a particularly massive ebb tide, the remains of a large sea creature had been found on the beach. It appeared to be a giant specimen of the sort of squid fishermen occasionally capture in their nets, but putrefaction and bloating had rendered it unrecognizable. The Vizier wrote back at once, ordering the carcass to be shipped up the Idigna in strict secrecy.

Deaf to the urban clamor around him, blind to the captivating reflections of the two holy moons in the Idigna's waters, the Vizier contemplated the urgency of his situation as he walked across the Bridge of Triumphs, the most magnificent of the river's many crossings, and made his way up to the affluent part of town where he lived. It was his habit to dispense with carriage and attendants when needing to plot his major moves.

Just days after the disquieting temple service, he had been summoned to an imperial audience. Entering the Grand Hall, he had noted at once the uncharacteristic absence of music and raucous laughter, and how the young Emperor's boon companions – Suf-An of course at their head – mimicked his grim visage. The Vizier had come prepared to account for the recent financial and military setbacks, but instead the Emperor demanded to know why nothing had been done to allay the populace's panic about the river monster. He had ten days to deal with it.

The Vizier had been unable to resist glancing at Suf-An. There it was: the hint of a smile, the embryo of a sneer. But also something else, softer and more elusive, as if Suf-An saw a secret he himself could not. He had forced himself to focus on the trap that now lay before him. His failure to capture the nonexistent

On, then, to the reason he had chosen to walk alone. He had made a breakthrough in understanding how Hak-El resolved the dilemma of participation, which lay at the core of his theory of being: how the world's diverse multiplicity could nevertheless be generated by one eternally unchanging, entirely separate truth. It was right there, more or less, in his second and fifth hypotheses. Positing a relationship between the One and the Many, which allowed participation to take place without compromising the integrity of the former hinged on the realization that Hak-El's definition of the One was equivocal. This insight would be his claim to true greatness as a philosopher. This would show his mentor, who back at the academy had tried to steer him toward more mundane problems better suited, she apparently thought, to his limited abilities.

The Vizier reached his mansion and hurried up the stairs past the laughter emanating from the family quarters. He would wash up and change into finer garments before heading for his private study on the top floor, eager to begin outlining the final revisions to his manuscript.

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It was some days past the Emperor's deadline when the Vizier headed for the temple downtown, once again forgoing his carriage despite the now full-dark. He had dealt with his various distractions. The Kharba squid's disfigured cadaver had been paraded through streets to popular acclaim, pacifying the

rabble, solidifying his position at court, and redirecting the Emperor's expropriatory attention to his rival. Once the imperial torturers were done with him, Suf-An would be released, stripped of his fortune and – lest he be tempted to join the growing rebel ranks – of his eyes as well.

As he crossed the Bridge of Triumphs onto the pathway which hugged the western bank of the river for a while before veering into city center, therefore, the Vizier concentrated on his real problem: his resolution of the Hak-El dilemma had proven illusory. There was no getting around it – the missing term of the decisive syllogism in the fifth hypothesis was untenable. How had he overlooked that? Could it really be that Hak-El's entire treatise on the One and the Many was an obscure and elaborate joke? What did it mean?

Just then, however, the ripples and splashes behind him that had for some seconds registered only on his subconscious reached a volume that brought him crashing down to earth. He spun around, eyes wide open. There was nothing there. It must have been a fish leaping for some prey. Smiling at his own folly, the Vizier resumed his descent into the seething heart of the city.

~



Hollow Pursuits: Is Star Trek Truly a Universe with no Gods or Creeds?

Mina

Earlier this year (21 August 2021), Yanis Varoufakis published an [article](#) about politics and international relations, discussing *Star Trek*'s (ST) Prime Directive, i.e. that those with superior technology must not interfere in cultures/communities which are still technologically behind: “the invader’s motives, good or bad, matter not one iota”. Varoufakis finds this liberal anti-imperialist doctrine particularly fascinating because it was part of the original *Star Trek* (TOS) in the 1960s and could be interpreted as a criticism of the US involvement in the Vietnam War. He calls this a clear political philosophy and a critique of US foreign policy that is still relevant today. It is a good point, but I do not want to delve further into political philosophy and ST here; rather, I would like to examine whether ST lends itself to a similar analysis with regard to religious and moral philosophy.

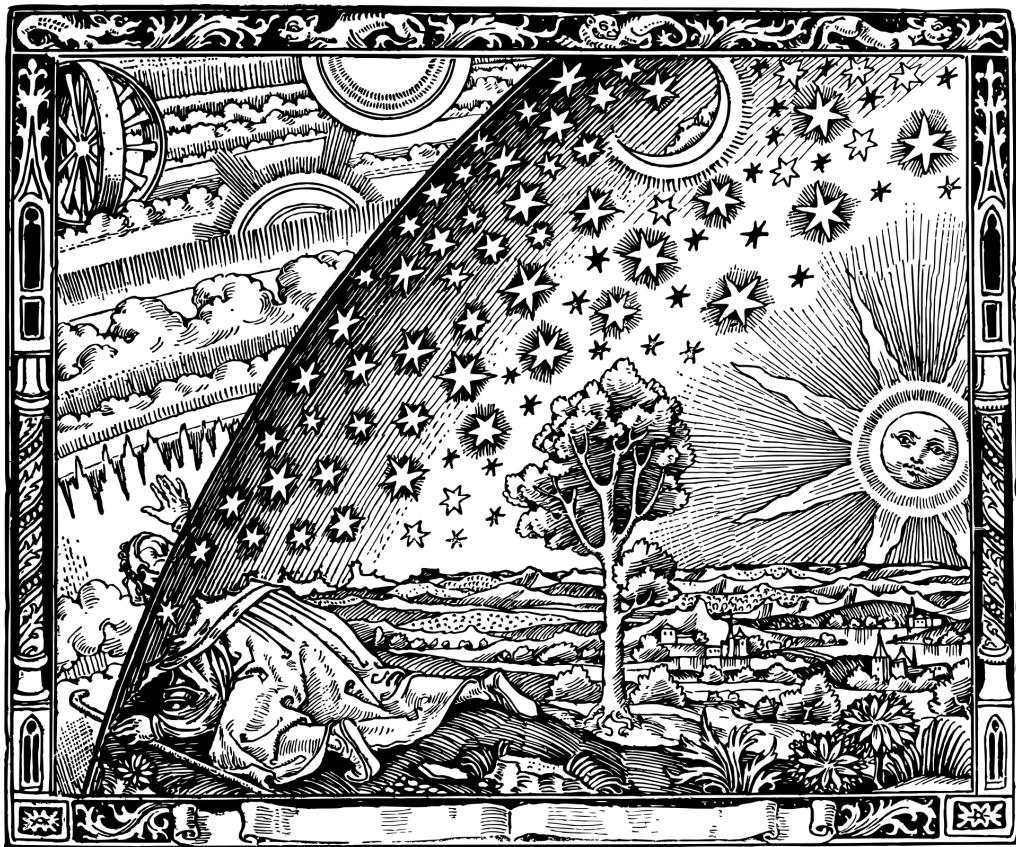
ST's creator Gene Roddenberry was an atheist and “secular humanist” (i.e. espousing a philosophy that emphasises the importance of reason and people, rather than religion or God, for human fulfilment), who imagined a future without religious doctrine and conflict. To quote long-time ST producer [Brannon Braga](#) on Roddenberry's wish to cast off “superstition and religion”:

“This was an important part of Roddenberry's mythology. He, himself, was a secular humanist and made it well-known to writers of *Star Trek* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* that religion and superstition and mystical thinking were not to be part of his universe. On Roddenberry's future Earth, everyone is an atheist. And that world is the better for it.”

As an interesting aside, the word “God” was banned, even as an expletive, in *Discovery* (one of ST's most recent reincarnations). So, is ST a universe devoid of religious and moral philosophy (which I prefer to “superstition and religion”)?

To begin with, ST is full of encounters with god-like beings, such as Q. Q is most definitely not a god, but he does remind us of the Ancient Greek and Roman gods in his capriciousness and callous disregard for individuals. Even his affection for Captain Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (STNG) reminds us of Roman and Greek mythology, with bored gods playing with their favourite mortal toys (like Q plays with the crew of the Enterprise in his first appearance in *Encounter at Farpoint*). Since each episode is created by humans, we should not be surprised that the writers and producers draw their inspiration from human history, mythology, and religious and moral philosophy. A nice detail is that even semi-gods like Q show character development. Q in particular appears in several episodes in STNG and *Voyager* (VOY) and gains depth over these episodes.

To my mind, the Klingons also fall into this category of drawing from human history: they are a war-like race that seem like a cross between certain aspects of the Vikings and Japanese samurai. The Klingon philosophy is based on being a warrior as a way of life, attaining a glorious death, semi-religious rituals (e.g. the Klingon death rite), weapons as semi-mystical objects (e.g. the bat'leth, a double-sided scimitar), Kahless (a messianic figure in Klingon lore), Sto-vokor (the Klingon afterlife) and Gre'thor (a Klingon Hades). The most interesting thing in *Discovery* is the Klingons wishing to remain themselves, with their own language and culture, and not to be absorbed into a Federation that would literally “emasculate” them. Although female Klingons are presented as fierce warriors too, they do seem to be reduced to the status of Klingons-with-breasts, i.e. there is no real attempt made to differentiate between the Klingon sexes in ST.



In his article on [opuszine](#), Jason Morehead gives examples of TOS episodes where human religions are at the very least respected. In TOS: *Balance of Terror*, Captain Kirk officiates a wedding in a universal “chapel” on the Enterprise at the beginning of the episode. The chapel appears again at the end of the episode as a place for grief. In STNG, the chapel seems to have been replaced by the holodeck where the crew can recreate any place or ritual they wish, e.g. the Klingon Rite of Ascension is STNG: *The Icarus Factor*. In TOS: *Bread and Circuses*, Uhura corrects the crew’s erroneous interpretation of the “sun” worship in the local culture, reminding them of the worship of the “son of God” in Earth’s not-so-distant history. Kirk, Spock and McCoy are forced to acknowledge the power in history of a religion based on love and brotherhood, where great sacrifices are possible.

Morehead finds it fascinating that even in TOS, religious matters do occasionally creep in:

“...it seems odd to strive to be so faithful to the letter of Gene Roddenberry’s ethos when even he was frequently incapable of doing so. Or, perhaps more accurately, it’s weird to be so focused on this particular aspect of Roddenberry’s vision (his atheism), particularly when those series that he was most involved in - The Original Series and The Next Generation - weren’t afraid to include such content. (If nothing else, religious and faith matters can make for great drama.)”

[Brannon Braga](#) has also been quoted as saying:

“...there was no consideration in giving humans, talking about God, or talking about those types of things. We wanted to avoid it to be quite frank. But we did very often explore theology through alien characters. Which frankly is much more interesting anyway. Whether it was the Bajorans and their religion or the Borg and their religion. They had the religion of perfection. That, I think, was more interesting. We want to keep *Star Trek* secular. The human facet of *Star Trek* secular.”

This brings us nicely to The Borg as seen in STNG and VOY, and the Bajorans and their “Prophets” in *Deep Space Nine* (DS9). The Borg with their extreme collectivism and hive mind could be seen as a sublimated form of communism: there is no “I”, only “we”. Yet even this collective has a “queen” presented very much as an individual, comparable to a female Stalin or dictator. Characters like Seven of Nine in VOY are shown as needing to recover from the complete brainwashing that comes with such a totalitarian philosophy. The Borg have a form of immortality (each drone’s memories and experiences live on in the collective consciousness) and they strive for a perfect (technological and transhumanist) “ideal”, both of which are aspects of most world religions.

The Bajoran faith and mysticism is built around their Prophets, regardless of the fact that Starfleet science considers them “wormhole aliens” (DS9: *Emissary*). Ben Sisko asks his son Jake to respect the Bajoran belief in their Prophets as gods in DS9: *In the Hands of the Prophets*. For Ben Sisko, your own beliefs do not mean that you can disregard and disrespect the beliefs of others; “it is a matter of interpretation”. The Prophets are one of the central plot arcs in DS9. I could not summarise it better than here [on Ex Astris Scientia](#):

“The general tendency is that the Bajoran faith grows on Ben Sisko, that the Prophets are gradually becoming more god-like and that ultimately Ben even becomes one of them. The Prophets’ god-like nature becomes particularly clear in the episodes where they determine the destinies of the Bajoran people and of Sisko, respectively...”

This reminds me of Old Testament prophets in the Christian Bible, and Sisko's journey has Buddhist undertones for does he not become a sort of Buddha in the eyes of the Bajorans?

This brings us to the Vulcans and a bridge into humanism, where each individual has agency and can contribute to the future of the human race. Whereas ancient Vulcans seem to have practised a polytheistic faith (STNG: *Gambit*), modern Vulcans have enshrined logic and science above all else, based on a philosophy developed by Surak, where logic must rule over all emotions and science has an answer for everything. Is this not a large part of secular humanism? Humanism in my view simply replaces gods with humanity. Behind STNG's utopian universe in particular is the belief that humanity can move beyond its primitive origins, reach for the stars and achieve wondrous things. This comes uncomfortably close to deifying ourselves, creating an "Übermensch" or, at the very least, an unforgiving meritocracy. This is why one of my favourite episodes is STNG: *Hollow Pursuits*.

Hollow Pursuits is for me a critique of an unbridled humanism. The character of Barclay begins as a perceived failure in STNG: he is shy, nervous, a terrible communicator and physically unprepossessing; he has OCD tendencies and seems bright but unstable. Barclay does not fit in and even Picard trips up and uses the crew's nickname for Barclay (Broccoli). Barclay hides on the holodeck where he has developed programmes to boost his lack of self-confidence, leading to a holodeck addiction. It is the only episode that shows the crushing weight of the meritocracy that comes with Roddenberry's espousal of humanism. It also shows how the crew must take some responsibility for the state Barclay is in (highlighted by Guinan in one scene) and for understanding and supporting him. With the right support, Barclays is able to prove that he too has a valuable place in the ST universe. This episode is also humorous and shows that audiences held the fumbling Barclay in great affection because he went on to appear in other episodes where it is precisely his idiosyncrasies that help him save the day. This offers a little balance in an otherwise painfully perfect social order.

I would argue that all of the ST universe contains spirituality in some form - for what else is a search into the mysteries of the universe and the nature of man? I would also argue that this spirituality has a place in even a mostly atheist or agnostic future (and that humanism itself is a moral philosophy, even if it is not a religious one). As the authors (Jörg Hillebrand *et al*) of [Ex Astris Scientia](#) (EAS) state:

"Roddenberry condemned religion because it suppressed people in his view, which is definitely true for some eras of human history. But he did not look at the other side of the medal that, quite contrary to his statement that religion is making people dull, it has enriched Earth's cultures and even science in the course of the centuries. What would our world be without its magnificent cathedrals and temples, without music and literature inspired by religion, without scientific interest that has its roots in the desire to be closer to god(s)?"

They go on to say:

“There are certainly fundamentalists who do not respect other views than their own. However, like political fanaticism this is just an outgrowth of human nature, not of the idea of religion. It would be unfair and ultimately counter-productive to ignore the ways of life of the majority of humanity in an effort to depict ST as a desirable future for them. In order to achieve Roddenberry's utopia some day, we could ponder about abolishing everything that might be subject to misuse or what might restrict our freedom. But then we could question the existence of just about every technological, cultural, political or social custom, law or institution, anything that makes up our lives. With a firm stance that it would be better to take away faith from people, ST, in its few worst instalments, is just as narrow-minded and arrogant as the religious zeal it strives to condemn. On these occasions ST acts against its own principles.”

However, I would not couch my conclusions quite as negatively as EAS because ST has involved many different “cooks” and they did not “spoil the broth”. In fact, the ST canon in all its guises repeatedly asks questions and draws many different conclusions about philosophy, religion, mysticism, faith, rituals, false gods, humanism and the human race's general search for meaning. If this universe sometimes contradicts itself (or its creator), that is a happily accurate rendition of our own universe, where we are faced with many questions, conflicting views and no easy answers.

~

Coda: Some claim that ST itself has turned into a religion or cult, with its conventions, fan clubs, forums, fan fic, a founding prophet (Roddenberry), a set of (humanist) beliefs or principles, scripture in the form of well-loved and much-quoted episodes, debates about what is “canon” and what is derivative, collectibles as pseudo-sacred objects, a vision of a utopia to be striven for, etc. However, I think I would agree with [Mark Strauss'](#) conclusion that this is a bridge too far. Fandom or even a sub-culture do not a religion make.

Report to the Pro-Aedile of Excavations

Patrick S. Baker

Princeps Nonus Volusenus Vala,
Pro-Aedile of Excavations,
Collegium of History, Rome

Greetings with All Deference

I, Cladius Cantius Viator, have been directed by my magister, Sextus Seius Pennus, Master of Excavations in the Old East, to provide you a brief report on the latest and most unusual findings from one particular excavation. Since, Princeps, you are an expert on the pre-Discovery barbarian cultures of the Nova Terra across the Ocean-Sea, and I am unaware how deep your knowledge of the Old East of the First Republic goes, my apologies if I cover information of which you are already cognizant.

For the previous five seasons I and my team have been exhuming the city of Aelia Capitolina which was destroyed after a siege during the Third Roman-Sassanid War (Years of the City 1954 – 1961). Aelia Capitolina was the first Roman city that had its walls destroyed by Sassanid fiery weaponry, although surely not the last.

Our goal was to dig below the Roman city, founded circa 890 Y.C. by Emperor Hadrian of the First Empire, into the First Republic city, if able. Some sources report that the city, then called Hierosolymum, was the main town of many sects of monotheists and the foremost of those cults, called the Iudaeum, was often in revolt against the First Empire.

Most interestingly, the collection included a number of texts that appear to be the sole surviving copy of the said document. Several have no listing in the definitive Codex Libri Antiquorum. Among these unlisted documents are letters written in Greek, from a Little Saul of Tarsus, to various monotheistic cult communities around Our Sea, including one in Rome. This cult, called the Way, worshipped a god, or demigod called the “Anointed One”. Another document, also written in Greek, is a loosely woven biography of a rebel magician who was crucified in 786 Y.C. on the orders of Pontius Pilate, Prefect of the province from 779 Y.C. to 789 Y.C.. The reason these documents are of special interest is they appear to reference the same person described in a report that the Prefect Pilate wrote to Emperor Tiberius Caesar. The two curious things regarding all of these are: First, is that this official report does not appear in any archive in the City and Pilate appeared to have a long and familiar relationship with this magician and rebel, who was named Joshua, son of Joseph, and was also this “Anointed One” adored by the cultic communities referenced in the letters of the Little Saul of Tarsus.

After five seasons, and within a layer of destruction we have dated to 823 Y.C., which was caused when the city was destroyed after another of the rebellions by the Iudaeum, we discovered an absolute trove of documents, all in excellent condition, sealed in a vault within what we came to identify as the primary First Empire base in the city, the Fortress Antonia. Our documents expert, Gallio Caeparius Indus, quickly identified the owner of the collection as Legate Marcus Antonius Julianus, who governed the province as procurator from 819 Y.C. to 823 Y.C. (a brief biography and his service record is attached). Further, we have one written reference to Julianus as the author of a history of the Iudaeam. Their main cultic center was adjacent to the Fortress Antonia, which may have fired the interest of the legate in writing such a history. There is little doubt that the volumes we found were the legate’s research library for his opus. (A complete inventory of the documents is also attached).

Princeps, my team's ancient religions specialist, Aulus Blandius Geta, informs me that this cult of the Way was vile in the extreme; eating human flesh and drinking human blood in foul ceremonies, as well as practicing incestuous marriage and other sexual perversions. Further, the First Empire went to some efforts to suppress the Way and the Iudaeum after their revolt. Geta also informs me that the two suppressed cults somehow continue into this day and are even growing in popularity despite being subject to proscription by the Magistratium of the Pontifex.

All of this, brings forth the questions as to why a library of texts would be written regarding an executed criminal dissident from a minor religious sect on the edge of the First Empire? How this crucified criminal, Joshua Bar Joseph, became the so-called "Anointed One" and the founder of the foul sect of the Way? And why a legate and procurator such as Marcus Antonius Julianus would have such interest in this minor and suppressed cult? Answers to these questions will hopefully yield to further investigations.

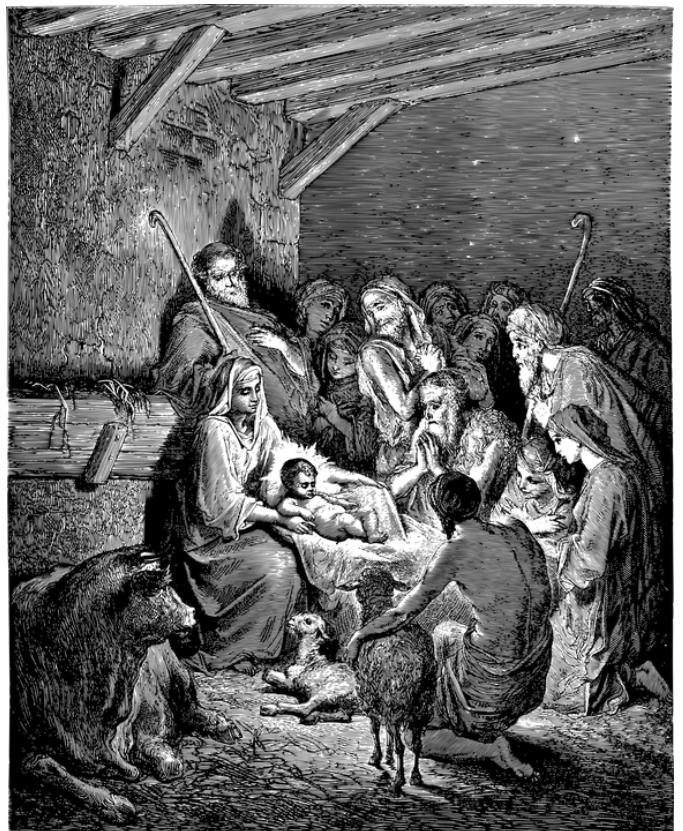
Very Respectfully, in Service
to the Caesar

Claudius Cantius Viator

Former Questor Legio XII
Victrix

Sub-magister of excavations
Syria Palaestina

Submitted in the Year of the
City 2773



~

The Time-traveller's Lament

David Stevens

The clan of *homo heidelbergensis* tutted and bobbed and swayed as Fred approached their hearth, but he was not concerned. As always, he was careful to stay on the other side of their fire. He told himself that they had grown used to his appearances. If he thought about it, however, he could not be certain of the chronological order of any given visit. He did not think about it. Nor did he ponder that he – with his stumpy *homo sapiens sapiens* legs, tiny teeth, and unimpressive browridge – might not appear a threat to them.

Plus, he always brought food. “Don’t ask where I got these from, fellas,” he called as he threw bones over the fire. The fellas of course did not respond, but chomped down, so Fred soon heard cracking, followed by the sucking of marrow.

Fred stalked up and down on his side of the flames. “I think I may be finished with it all. I have intervened in history 168 times. I’m worn out. I don’t physically age when interacting with the Temporomobile™, but it’s been 200 years! And I’m only 37!

“Sure, I’ve had breaks – 200 years is a long time. Coming back here, that’s not a break, that’s the default for the re-set, but other stuff. Spa-days. Weeks. Months. Take some time to think. To not think. To chill. Can you blame me?

“I was wiped out. You get it. You’re down at the stream, washing the auroch grease and swamp mud out of your hair, and a sabre-tooth appears with his big, you know, teeth, and you gotta run, and you leave the babies behind, and the sabre-tooth is happy with that, but you’re not! You’re not as emotionally evolved as a 21st century romance writer, but you’re hominids, you have feelings, you don’t like your babies being eaten, but what are you gonna do? You’re not a bad parent, you’re not a bad person-oid. There was no choice.

The *homo heidelbergensis* clan gnawed on the bones, amongst their evening activities: hearth-tending; mutual grooming (and associated insect-eating); mating, sometimes before, sometimes after the mutual grooming; toolmaking; and keeping watch for night-dangers.

"I ran to the machine, reversed the temporal flow, and this time after rescuing her, I took her into the house and made her a nice cup of tea.

"Which seemed to do the trick. Except later that day, two blocks away, she was struck and killed by the same make of car that killed her the first time.

"My instinct was to go further back, and remove that automobile company from existence, but of course, nobody wants to be Bradbury's dinosaur hunter – well, they might, I hunted a dinosaur on one of my breaks, great fun. I digress. I had no idea what ripples that might start, how much I might change.

"I went back and forth, fixing things, but sooner or later the universe sprung back into shape, and – *boing* – she was struck by a car.

"Louisa was dead. Hit by a car. But it did not have to be final. I had a choice.

"People made all of the usual noises – you're still young; it was meant to be; there are plenty of fish in the sea; she wasn't as smart as you ...

"I was already close to the breakthrough. I worked. Constantly. Day and night. I have a montage of it back in the machine. And I did it. I built the Temporomobile™. I set the dial to the fateful time, and dragged her out of the way of the car just in the nick of ... well, you know.

"I wept joyous tears - she was alive and in my arms. She was shocked at her near miss, and shaking, and ... stepped straight in front of a speeding truck."

Fred's monologue continued. He did not pause to wonder whether he had survived *his* first encounter with the clan because in his chronologically jumbled travels, they had already met him. Similarly, he did not contemplate whether he had survived *their* first encounter with him, because he arrived with the overconfidence and bonhomie of long-term, strangely tolerated, weird neighbour.

“There was nothing for it. I had to amend her mother, so that she would be stricter in raising Louisa and imprint upon her the danger of the automobile!

“I spent much of her mother’s childhood driving crazily by and narrowly missing her. There were one or two unfortunate incidents, but I erased those almost immediately.

“It seemed to work. Louisa was more timid, and she and her mother jumped at loud noises, but she was alive, my love was alive! And stayed alive.

“For three months.

“The next time, she was struck by a bicycle messenger travelling at speed, hit her head, and was gone.

“I studied Louisa more carefully. I discovered a slight astigmatism in one eye. She had not been seeing these speeding objects properly.

“I couldn’t figure how to accidentally carry out delicate eye surgery on a juvenile Louisa without being caught out.

“However, I traced the imperfection back 80 years, to a something-great-grandmother.

“Fortunately, the woman had died in childbirth, so had made no contribution other than an unfortunate genetic one. So, I once again travelled backwards; removed her from the picture; and substituted another something-great-grandmother.

“Oh, do not judge me harshly. I arranged an inheritance for something-great-grandma, so she never felt compelled to marry to avoid starvation, and died childless and happy at the age of 110.

“I took no chances. I surreptitiously arranged for Louisa to have acrobatic, dance and martial arts lessons in childhood, so that she was fit and nimble and particularly good at jumping out of the way.

“This final time. I was there. The car passed harmlessly. She crossed the street – in tighter fitting clothes than I remembered, showing a more muscular build from her lessons. The truck sped by immediately afterwards, unnoticed. I noticed the delightful lift at the tip of Louisa’s nose was gone – no doubt another genetic contribution from the substituted great-granny. It was a price I was willing to pay.

“Around a corner, a motorbike mounted the footpath, knocking pedestrians flying. Louisa sprung a grand jeté, leaping over the bike without a care. Ha! My investments were paying off. I was scared too, of course. What might the universe throw next at our love?

“With an extended step, Louisa avoided an open manhole. She then ducked as though in a silent movie, avoiding a timber shouldered by a spinning labourer.

“There was a loud snap above us. Worker’s hoisting an iron safe to a top-floor business had misjudged its weight, and the lifting rope had broken. The safe plummeted to earth.

“It was no bother to Louisa. She dived into a forward roll, grabbed a small child on the way, and tumbled them both to safety!

“*Take that, universe*, I thought, and punched the air in triumph. Louisa deposited the child, turned to an opening door, and froze. A young woman of Celtic background – long wavy red hair, creamy skin with a spray of freckles – stepped out. *Colpo di fulmine!* They froze for a moment, then fell into each other’s arms, their lips locked in a passionate kiss.



“The universe laughed its arse off at me as I watched love at first sight. *What are you going to do now, Fred?*, it asked, braying food from its lips as it chewed up my heart.

“That’s it, fellas. That’s the story. I’ve given up. The universe hates us. If you ever work out language, after the sabre-tooth gobbles up your babies, don’t bother to ask “why?”. It was just meant to be. And the reason is.” This bit he punctuated with foot stomps. “Everything. Is. Shit.”

The clan had looked up. They tutted and bobbed and swayed a little more frantically than before.

“Except maybe. I don’t know. Is it a nature or nurture thing? Maybe Louisa swings both ways, and I just never realised because, you know, she died and all. Should I go back and give it one last shot? Just one more? Get in before the Irish chick?”

The clan had moved the babies and old folk behind rocks and into crevices. Spears and stone axes were raised.

The guttural rumble was deeper and louder than Fred would have predicted. It triggered the most primal fear response.

“I don’t want to look. There’s one behind me, isn’t there?”

It was messy. It was swift-ish, but not swift enough for Fred. Still, the sabre-tooth was happy, and left the clan alone, dragging Fred’s corpse into the darkness.

A few days later, Fred appeared and began tossing bones again. None present wondered if this was a slightly younger Fred, throwing his own chewed femur and broken rib cage that he had collected while strolling past.

“Don’t ask where I got these from, fellas.”

~

Recursed

Tristan Zaborniak

Once upon time, a people (and their gods) lived, rollicking, chortling, sometimes wistful (though never despairing), watching the seasons turn and themselves grow old, all in amiable collaboration with time and admiration of space. They felt themselves comfortably swaddled in unambiguous laws of material and its causality, ordained as to allow precise quantity with rod and with clock, and thus a consistent sequence of consequence.

And so they went about, measuring goods and their distances of travel, the passing days and years and stars, the sizes and weights of coins, the freeboard of boats and their areas of sail, transactions and cattle, pints and bales, all with scales appreciable to the eye or its slight stretch. A practical people they were.

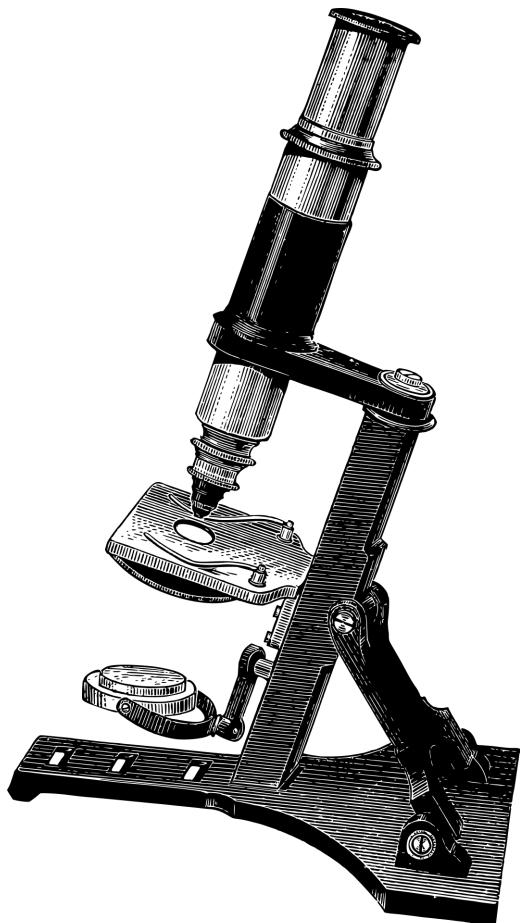
However, so his story goes, one chance evening

Moredictums (among their lot) put to doubt prevailing thought (or its lack thereof on the matter), asking: “What might be eventual, if I were to cleave this wheel of cheese first in half, take one of the following halves and cleave it in half again, repeating this procedure so on and so on, endlessly?”

In this benign way did begin the beginning of the ending of the end of measure. Frenzied debate swirled and clamored over Moredictums’ dimensionless volumes, birthing a bloated bestiary of other profane quandaries. Informatic singularities, substance without substance, interminable surfaces enclosing terminable spaces, untimable moments and unmomentable times, and beings... civilizations... of scales unseen.

Reason proceeded thusly. If a body may be split unto infinity, then that body is, piece-wise, an infinitude, each piece of negligible proportion and constitution. Therefore, asking how to construct or specify anything of any size requires (in many cases) an instruction set of unending length. One such case is that of an island coastline: shorten one's rule, lengthen the extent, shorten one's rule, lengthen the extent. One finds the coastline to be with interminable detail, while the area contained converges to an exact finitude.

It was then conjectured that if information content is scale-independent, then a body of arbitrary intricacy at scale X may be reproduced exactly at scale Y, where $X > Y$ or $X < Y$. This led to the inevitable corollary that there might and must dance and sing and multiply persons and beasts unbeknownst to the unmagnifying eye, and untimelyknownst to the unmagnifying watch.



Finally, questions of affect and effect lent further befuddling to the burgeoning craze. Assuming an atomic foundation, it may straightforwardly be said that the interactions between atoms yield epiphenomena, interactions between these epiphenomena yield further epiphenomena, and so on. Casting aside this foundation à la Moredictums, all phenomena become prefixed with *epi-*, rendering the dream of reductionism dead and the nightmare of recursion chaotically stampeding, saddled by homunculi.

The people wailed with indignant dread at this affront to sense and logic, and their deities burned in effigy. They felt marooned, their yardsticks and balances and hourglasses and yearnings deceptive and impotent and asinine and vain. They felt themselves a hideous crossbreed of delusion and illusion, an infinitesimal blip located precisely nowhere, lost to some remote corner of an incalculable mandelbulb, bullied by the trappings of existence.

Verging on collapse without conviction or creed, a council was called to determine their faith and their fate. Admit death and join the cold graves of the old gods? Or, admit breath and seek nature's secret natures anew?

After much deliberating discussion, the latter saw favorable election, and the central pillar to its scheme developed. A story would be written, about a people building castles in the err, convinced of the tautological equation between sense and reality, perceiving of but one scale. The story would recount the sudden, paroxysmic recounting of counting. The story would tell of forlorn angst and abandon, and the project of the dejected people to seek solace in seeking. The story would be printed so small as to reach the hypothesized beings of the scale below, and ask that they pass it along likewise, unless they inhabit the frontier of epilessphenomena, whence they should write to the beings above in iterative succession of their atomism. In this way, the people hoped to resolve their circumstance and circumscale.

You hold in your hands this very story, and we ask you, in turn: are you of atoms, or of continuum?

~

Orchids of Annihilation

Jim Lee

(Biographer's Note: Now we present selected excerpts from the epic poem "The Orchids of Annihilation" written by Covid Michaels in Alliance Year 330—125 Standard Years after the end of The Great Alliance War.)

In the End, she would stand Resolute:

Alongside Mary-Alice Yamamoto,
Acting Battle-Horde-Leader TangGoo,
Admiral-of-Supply Ta Nie-Sss',
And those Other Heroes.

She would stand for Victory with Honor:

For Uncommon Forbearance,
For Interspecies Solidarity,
Ultimately For Compassion,
And a More-Peaceful Future.

She would stand against the Maddened Moment:

Against Unthinking Rage,
Against Blind Vengeance,
Against Immoral Orders,
And against Outright Genocide.

ONCE BRUTALLY VENGEFUL, THEN RESTRAINT'S UNLIKELY ACOLYTE!

#

Yet in the Beginning, She was Different:

A Mere Ensign,
Serving aboard *Undaunted*,
A Simple Gun-Boss,
Managing two Magnetic Cannon.

The Third Offensive,
Betrayed then Self-Avenged,
Cast Aside, eventually Redeemed.

She seemed typical, of her Time and Place:

A Youngster Indeed,
By Planetary Origin,
And by Chronology,
Carrying out Her Duties.

A HISTORY UNIQUE, BUT NOT YET WRITTEN!

Still there was Family, Traditions to Uphold:

Her Service Lineage;
Lifetimes of Historiography,
Must be Vindicated,
No matter how Burdensome.

(Biographer's Note: Critics still divide, strongly pro and con, concerning Michaels's choice above, breaking his own self-imposed structural pattern by listing so many—yet hardly all—of the significant later events in O'Ree's long wartime career. In particular, omitting the series of Joint Operations alongside Yamamoto and to a lesser extent Ramirez in the middle period of the war attracts attention. To a lesser degree, glossing over O'Ree's notorious risk-taking when given a comparatively minor assignment during the Galactic Halo Campaign is also fodder for comment.)

#

A middling Academy Graduate, this Morrigan O'Ree:

But Smart Enough,
But Strong Enough,
And Brave Enough.

She hoped most Fervently.

(Further Note: The following stanzas detail the events of Day 23, Month 9, Alliance Standard Year 162. Allegedly the first indication that Planet Tir na nog and the famed O'Ree clan had produced yet another outstanding warrior.)

Not quite 350 Days, in Active Service:

Her record Adequate
If hardly Exceptional;
Morri's combat Experience,
Two minor, indecisive Battles.

One Ominous day *Undaunted* must Fight Again:

Equal in Size,
In Defensive Lasers,
In Offensive Weapons,
And sheer Dire WILL.

So much ahead, so many Great Events:

Besieged at D-23,
Defending Icklandic Space,
Liberating New Cleveland,

Another heavy cruiser, but no Human Enemy:
Not from Republic,
Nor New Cleveland,
But fierce-some Aliens,
Hydrogen-Sulfide-breathers from
Naraka Prime.

Two great Warships, fully and evenly Matched:

Neither would Retreat,
Nor imagine Surrender;
Rather each Resolved
To Devastate the Other.

Battle rages on Relentless, for Tortured Hours:

Neither yet Winning,
Nor quite Losing,
Slugging It Out,
Like two punch-drunk Brawlers.

Magnetic Cannon Discharging, Lasers flashing
in Defense:

Incoming warheads Detonated,
Targets as-yet Unblemished,
Doom creeps Ever-Closer,
Inching Progressively, Mindlessly Closer.

War of Numbing Attrition, of Grinding
Combat:

Radiation Inching Closer,
Unending silent Outbursts.
On every Viewscreen:
Both sides, Wearing Down.

Success hampers both Sides, Heat-slow Lasers
Falter:
Unceasing continued Pounding,
Shrapnel pits Hulls,
Radiation's Constant Companion,
Mental War-Fog grows Universal,

(Biographer's Note: War veterans agree this passage accurately conveys the strange reality of ship-to-ship combat between similar-size vessels of that era. All sides in the Great War employed every weapon available. Point-defense lasers automatically destroyed in-coming ordinance with great efficiency, be it warheads fired by several types of magnetic cannon, torpedoes or full-sized AI-guided anti-ship missiles. But they derived their quickness from superconducting circuitry that needed extreme cold to function properly. The vacuum of space transfers radiant energy imperfectly, but in a long fight the system degrades. Each explosion gradually reinforces the process—increasing heat lengthens reaction time, allows the next and then the next volley to get progressively nearer the target vessel. It is true that the Narakan Empire had a marked preference for beam weapons, particularly plasma cannon, for combat in normal space. But here the Undaunted kept up a steady barrage of conventional artillery that prevented their opponent from closing to use this formidable yet shorter range weapon—until the very end of the encounter. The seemingly perverse blend of raw terror and brain-freezing boredom this sort of marathon battle tends to generate is also confirmed by experts.)

Neither ship crippled, though Both take
Damage:

Both inflict Casualties,
Both suffer Casualties,
The End Approaches,
For Which—or BOTH?

Portside of *Undaunted* Struck, ranking
officers Lost:

Dead or Wounded,
Makes no Difference,
Now O'Ree Commands,
Now Directs Three Batteries.

Two new Opponents, Join the Once-Even
Contest:

Small quick Corvettes,
Not-Close *Undaunted*'s Match,
Though drawing Attention,
Away from More-Urgent Danger.

Enemy Cruiser maneuvers, Closes in on
Undaunted:

To Sear Ship
And Crew Alike
With Plasma Hellfire;
To Win and Live!

Only Morri sees, only O'Ree is Aware:
Three Full Batteries,
Six Heavy Guns,
A Hardened-Veteran's Task,
Coordinating Each Gun's Fire.

Enemies entering Effective Range, About to Unleash:

O'Ree barks Orders,
Six Magnetic Cannon,
Spit Atom-Tipped Death,
Shall *Undaunted* Live On?

Morri's viewscreen Glares, fills with Beautiful Savagery:

The Enemy Vanishes,
Amid Explosions Terrible,
Exquisitely, Silently Sublime,
Her Victory, She Witnesses.

The smaller ships Retreat, Face no pursuit:

Undaunted is Battered,
Content to Leave,
To Journey Home,
For Repair and Rest.

Morrigan O'Ree wins Promotion, First of Many:

Relief Engulfs Her,
Wonder and Dismay
All These Hers,
Now she's SEEN IT!

The Dreaded Thing,
The Nightmare's Source,
A Ship Exploding,
Lives Incinerated BY HER!

The Orchids of Annihilation, she'll dub Them:

And Accept Them,
Even Treasure Them,
Their Vivid Multi-Colors,
Silently Blooming for Her.

AGAIN AND AGAIN, FOR HER THEY'LL BLOOM!

~



Nice Guys Finish

Gary K. Shepherd

I was just trying to be nice. When I rubbed the lamp I found down by the river, a genie appeared and said he'd grant three wishes. Right away I dismissed anything about money or power. I wanted a wish that would help all of humanity. But I knew I had to be careful. Every story I had ever read about genie's wishes warned that they had a way of turning on you.

So I sat down on the bank and thought about it. Finally I said, "How about world peace?"

"Done," said the Genie. Everything became very quiet.

"What did you do?"

"I made a peaceful world for you. All I had to do was eliminate all the other people."

"Cancel that wish!" I cried.

"Done," said the Genie. "One wish left."

I had wasted two wishes! I had better make my third one count. I sat and thought and thought about it all afternoon, and I got sweaty and sunburnt. Frustrated, I complained, "I wish the sun wasn't so hot."

"Done," said the Genie.

Fearfully, I looked at the sun, but it hadn't changed.

"You have to wait eight and half minutes," explained the Genie. Then he disappeared.

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