

State of Affairs:

The politicization of the populous is a major source of our "self-oppression"—especially in combination with capitalism. With the governmental expansion of the United States over the years, a consolidation of ideologies took place. This limitation in "choice" has severely reduced the ability to adapt with the rapid rates of change in culture. A nation built on "free-market" in commerce, but our "political-parties" are not subject to the same crucible of competition in ideology. It produced a "stability" to "normality", but as the expectations of government responsibility lower: so too does the perceived "normality" in "expectation." To solidify this system of exploitation in equality, we allowed those who have an invested interest in maintaining their status among the social hierarchy to monetarily influence governmental officials. We have sacrificed this perceived "stability" for an illusion of choice and freedom. It has given us the ability to deceive ourselves and distort our reality to something that doesn't feel like oppression.

A resolution without revolution, when contradiction is present, it's bound to fail—but it's still worth trying, and so I will. It comes down to a choice: whether we should treat each-other as "equals" or shall your worth be defined? In reality we are not born "equal"; this cannot be argued on this plane of existence. If you believe God loves everyone equally then that only applies to the "eternal" plane—an existence of which a conception cannot be applied to our current mode of operation. Now the practice of treating someone equally when you don't believe it to be true is difficult and requires a profound amount of empathy—even still you will fall short of this "ideal". It is a perspective I can see in moments and contains a never-ending supply of fulfillment. The practice of this "ideal" is bound to be manipulated by a nominal amount of the population who will take advantage of the empathetic nature of this manifestation. They will undermine and sow deceit within the population. Their success in manipulation could cause a similar structural trajectory to the one currently collapsing. . . If we don't treat everyone as "equal" and determine "value" to each individual: then this creates the necessity of competition and conflict—the usual breeding grounds for innovation. This structure is very prone to "tyranny". Whoever holds the power determines the value. So value must remain separate from politicization. Which leads to the problem of: how to quantify an individual's worth? An impossible task of approximating potential. Your worth should be determined by the amount you are willing to suffer for what you have. This sort of state will require a basic "value standard" in its treatment toward each-other. A culture of competition in creativity, relies heavily in their

morality. Whatever they conceive as "good" should be based on the creation "joy" in a unified existence.

This battle is happening on the cultural side, but it is being "politicized" at every turn. Everyone is too quick to box a thought into a world view that the idea is then aggregated and bastardized. The individual who proposes the initial thought then conforms to the pressure of recognition. They accept the praise of their watered-down idea for social validation of importance. Creating the cycle of unique thinker with a new evaluation; the adaptation and integration into established ideology, and validation in conformity. If you remain without a "label" then you can't be a commodity. A requirement to sell your thought is to be defined by it.

People have always separated me from groups by my ability. I've received compliments in nearly every aspect of existence I inhabit. Multiple people have told me I'm the smartest person they've met. My difference and rarity have always been singled out. This carries the added expectation of maintaining how you are "perceived". Better than most, I suppose I continued to exceed expectations; leading to a continual growth in ability. The weight of external expectation has never been anything that stressed me out consciously. My "likeability" and results in performance has afforded me the ability to manipulate the expectations placed upon me. . . The truth is: I enjoy being different, and other people seem to affirm these attributes. I can see my effect on people—for better or for worse. I was given the "gift" of "insight" as a result of curating my beliefs at an early age. My beliefs were only bound by my ability to "reason." In my unique nature, I've always fit-in with the populace. This ability required a certain understanding in the framework in which I was operating within, and also a curiosity as to why I am so different. I never opposed a "standard" without a reason as to why. To defy for its own sake is to critique without correction. In the humanities collective, only simplicity moves quickly—complexity requires millennia. Who is even to say I can speak for more than myself, but I try to encapsulate the average in my expression. I can feel the pulse of society and it feels weak. Growing old and dying from its loss of purpose, I try to bring hope. With the weight of meaning for humanity at my feet, I pick up as much as I can carry.

Empathy is relational to the amount of context used in the culmination of a perspective. The depth of your empathy in another is found in the web of references you have of similar experiences, and the emotions tied to their circumstance. There is a creative requirement in empathizing with a perspective that's far from your own. In the relational nature of

individual suffrage: you are limited by the depth of your own despair in comparison with another—without being creative in your empathetic approach. The farther from personal experience the cognitive empathy requires; the more creativity is required. If this is the case; the extent of your empathy relies on your ability to find individual moments in the circumstance you wish to understand and aggregate the collective emotion with the required context into a conceptualization of the perspective at hand. A culmination of shared subjective experiences and the emotions they inhabit invoke empathetic “understanding”.

Perspective is capped by your ability to rationalize emotion. To acquire growth in perspective, you must integrate contradictory experiences to your world view. It's a willingness to entertain a belief in a truth that is not your own. The more you see how a truth is believed; the more you can relate to the given perspective. If you can convince yourself of a truth that isn't your own; then your ability to assign reason to an action will expand with every newly adopted perspective of novelty in “truth”. An inability to conceptualize a circumstance that has led to an alternate conclusion of your own will lead to a reduction in rationalization of another's perspective. To only seek validation in your truth is to deny another's of their own. It's an insecurity to reduce a conclusion without embodying the steps required for it first. The subconscious instability of your own “truth” dictates the degree to which you are willing to inhabit the possibility of another. You must be stable in yourself before you can accurately assess a perceived instability in someone else. A “World-view” is the culmination of perspectives acquired that contain “truths” that are not your own.

Counter Arguments:

1. Emotion precedes or transcends reason; over-rationalization may flatten experience
2. Empathy can be immediate, biased, and collapse under too much context
3. Integration isn't necessary for understanding; too many truths risk incoherence
4. Empathy can be morally distortive, and reason can function without emotional basis

1. To empathize with the emotional state of an individual whose experience shares limited reference to your own: entails an intuitive ability to connect as many of the similarities of your own experience; to the circumstances that surround the perceived disposition of the subject.
2. "Immediate empathy" is found when there is an extreme amount of commonality in the experience. Bias is found in empathy when there is an invested interest in the conclusion of its effects. Empathy collapses under the micro analysis that is provided by context. Empathy should aim for its expression to contain a macro representation of the moment.
3. I'd argue that to "truly understand" experience is required.
4. Reasoning as a conscious entity is impossible without a form of emotion within its result. Mechanistic reasoning can be achieved, but its foundation was formed with an emotional undertone. The application of empathy is determined by the moral construct that your emotions were built on.

The hierarchical structures within a given society create a general set of formulaic expectations for the individuals that inhabit it. From these sets of expectations, "goals" are found.

This "subconscious training"—a phrase that is worth a laugh in itself—was done in the age ranges around 13 to 25. I've found that I don't really need to "prepare" for possibilities as much. Or at least it isn't as extensive as it used to be, when there is novelty to the circumstance. I do allow myself to be "wrong" and "unready." There is a balance that must be managed between planning and execution. I prefer to shy away from "unready." If I execute a task or dive into a situation, then I've already decided that my method might not work—or it could be completely wrong. I'm not sure what it feels like to do something when you aren't "ready"—maybe under-prepared, but never "unready." Do I surprise myself socially? Indeed I do! My "quick-wit" often surprises me—and others. There is a requirement for humor and it's timing. In certain social situations there will be a split in conversation. While the group is still in proximity with one another different topics will emerge and a bit of chaos arises. With myself being "highly attuned" to these happenings, I

like to challenge myself. I'll try to engage in both of the conversations in an attempt to bring the conversation back to a unification in involvement. A touchy practice of mine, I have to quickly deduce what the conversation is about and find something relevant to add—all while keeping social etiquette. I'll bounce between both until I find input that might merge the conversations. It surprises me when I manage to maintain two different conversations, on two different topics with multiple people and somehow know what everyone is talking about.

You know my distaste for labels well! I understood the cost of getting stuck in someone else's "ideal" far too early in life. I could see the road map to the typical life, and it seemed so...rigid. It was to specify with a qualification, have a wife and two kids, work for 40 hours a week for 40 years, and then die... Most people find their meaning, if they are worth anything, in their children. I saw that then, and I see that now. I thought there was something selfish in bringing a being into the world for meaning. That's still a difficult debate for me today. I just think there is more to life than working a nine-to-five, to only have children, and then for them to do the same. Does that seem fulfilling? To live for the moments you're not at work? We could easily work less and become more efficient in our collective processes. The unfortunate aspect is that people get caught in this life that's practically determined before they even realize what they wanted it to be. It's a trap that everyone wants you to take because they did. . .

It's all in the perception of normality.

It is from the depth of my internal darkness, that attracts the light that shines upon me.

The cost of authenticity is denying the "ideal" that the ones you love have of you.

The tragedy is the social framework in which this game is played. We chase the ease of affirmation because suffering is seen as something to pity. The appeasement of another's belief is the decadence of it. As this frailty festers, belief becomes so weak that it's protected by the stigma that is placed on its resistance.

There is also an "equity" in social standing that is also at play in these moments. To cash-in reputation for hypothetical growth of a peer is a slippery slope. This "yes" or "no" in

approach must consider the probabilistic results of either response. Complexity at every level of analysis. . .

The saying "You don't change; your friends do" annoys me like no other. It shifts all accountability away from that which you can change—yourself. The implication of that expression is perfection. It's an expression born out of the collective neglect toward improvement. Of course your "friends" direction in value orientation can detour from your own, but to downgrade former "friends" to maintain the illusion of your own ideal is detestable in the least. Then I see the fragility behind those who desperately try to maintain their own illusions, and I want to help them find reality but denial hurts too much. . . As my sustained empathy turns to sympathy and degrades further; I stop before pity and poke at their "illusions." It is not a good feeling because I know how much effort it takes to maintain such a perception of self and I genuinely want people to be happy, but I'm risking their attempt at that with every prod of proposition. Then, on the other hand, I'm placating to their delusion of self and their perceived security in ideal.

It's not that I think about it often, but my friends rarely make fun of me—and I see in the distance of my mind, too many possibilities as to why. A few days ago one friend told me, without prompt, that it was because I'm "too nice." I could hear how he didn't believe his own words when he said it—so I replied with something that sounded "mean" but lacking conviction.

If I were to hypothesize a reason that is at the forefront of my mind—it doesn't only reside in the frontal-lobe but probably has the most mass, in reference to reasons, that gives this thought that sense of presence...likely I'm just sensationalizing a location for thought and alluding to menial knowledge of neurological structure. Imagine if I explained every meta-narrative of my sentence structure after each statement. . . I'd suggest that I self-deprecate enough to evade the need for others to feel an urge to. It's not like it's constant, but I must be intuiting, in moments of my blunder, the underlying joke from an outside perspective that should fall at my expense. I do get made fun of at times, but I don't really remember any that I didn't open the door to first. . .

But another thought has arisen. Quickly and difficult to hold onto the implications of, I was thinking about how I assumed that there was a single reason as an explanation of this

occurrence. Which brought to mind the general need for reduction when we try to "explain" anything. What came to mind was a need to be efficient as to not over use energy in fleshing out the deepest depths of description. We didn't evolve to "understand"; we evolved to survive. . . Just a quick trail of thought that happened in a matter of five seconds but took ten minutes to transcribe to the minimum.

On second thought (who only thinks once?) I have pondered upon this avenue before. My vulnerability mixed with awareness is a dangerous combination. Attuned to insecurities, I know where to poke. People have always told me their secrets—which is a tangent for another time—and I listen carefully to what they say. If you subtly remind people that you listen then they'll tell you more than they think. . . I'm also vulnerable which makes me subject to a lack of consideration in response. I learned how to be petty before I knew who I wanted to be. . .

Excellent wit, "pretentious fortune cookie" is an instant classic!

Life became a joke to me early adolescence. There is truth in "If I didn't laugh, I'd cry." Humor was an escape from self-pity. My "comedy" required a certain level wit to rationalize relief in social tension—positive body language. As my age progressed so too did my cognitive ability and level of analysis in depicting the comedic tragedy that life is. It was emotional manipulation of myself.

I remember a moment that happened my senior year of high school. I was standing in typical subconscious formulation for optimal conversation (a circle) and this girl, out of nowhere, says to me: "You used to be cool but now you're just weird." It was made in-jest but it was a clear observation. I probably said something "weird" but I can't confirm with memory. I retorted with "You were never cool." A biting remark but an observation of my own. She was "cool" but in the non-popular way—i.e. unattractive but decent athlete. . . I've always been weird—I was only then just starting to explore complexities in conversations without the motivation to be perceived as "cool." I still smile about her saying that. My "coolness" is a filter of how and what I'd like to present. Conscious of the body-language an awareness is limited to, I present comfortability.

Interpreting whatever is happening in my brain, into the letters that make up this level of introspection and description is a trip and a half. I'm not sure where any of this stuff comes from but it sounds like I'm translating a little part of my psyche into text with each sentence—the ink is my being.

...Life has been chaos for me—I only hold “stability” or “certainty” in imagination extrapolated from memory. I’ve been given no choice in my level of awareness for systems and their internal contradictions. I’m required to see what most only blindly accept. I simplify to myself in a moment and expand what has been applied in retrospect.

Emotions skew the perception of intent.

Pondering further on my becoming, my aversion to "specialization" comes to the fore of my mind. Since the pressures of expectations began to focus into outward expressions of intent in study, expertise, and career goals—I'd think to myself, how foolish it was to declare a trajectory with such little knowledge of what a given path might entail. You have no experience, but you "know" that's what you want to do with your life? I never sought "specialization." I've always been more keen on collecting different perspectives. Perhaps another layer of my "glass onion" reflecting back onto my current goals?

I do sense a shift in the public appraisal of “higher-education.” There has been a building of mistrust in those institutions. Their value lies in its “trust” from the public in what they advocate for as a collective is “truth.” Everything they now espouse as virtuous is undermined by this mistrust of groups that have attained “power” of influence over individuals. Mistrust of institutions arise when the perception of power is deemed corrupted and no longer corresponds with the goal of raising the standard of life for the individual.... But I don’t think I’m saying anything new here....

Fundamentally, “mistrust” comes down to a refusal to accept responsibility. “Institutions” are founded on the trust of the public that their intent is the raising of public good. The more people see the benefits; the more power the institutions gain. The “intent” of the institutions then is to maintain “power” at all costs regardless of public sentiment. So, they play both sides. They lie about their intentions to the public and eventually the public

recognizes they are being played. "Public relations" dabble in perception-politics but it's a losing game that has already been set up for them to fail. Capitalistic ideology denies "public good" for growth and maintaining power over individuals. Am I speaking nonsense?

I see it as a cyclical trend of societies. As long as institutions are the foundation of societies then there will always be growth followed by decay. The "half-life" is determined by the acceptance of the collective in the "lie" they are being fed.

Dabbling in answers to the riddles of life...

On the topic of "meta awareness," I had a profound peek into my own unconscious behavior the other day. It's rather difficult to express in words, but that hasn't stopped me before; so, I'll try to sum up the experience into something tangible... My "typical" meta-awareness usually occurs whenever I am focused on a specific problem and I catch myself in the act of thinking. No less strange every time it happens; I've grown accustomed to the spontaneity of these "insights" arriving whilst actively in pursuit of solutions. But this occasion was atypical from what I've grown to expect. My "focus" was on the plot of this show I was watching and rather enjoying which dispels "mind drift from boredom." Submerged into the show, I caught my "subconscious" analyzing an earlier instance from the day. As my focus shifted from the plot of the show to what I had been analyzing "unconsciously" the essence of why my mind was processing this memory emerged. All in the matter of a couple seconds, I realized I had been dissecting this memory for meaning and prevalence. It felt as though I had caught my "subconscious" as it arrived at its conclusion. It was a window into "meaning making" free from an awareness or intent to do so. The instant I recognized this process taking place, I had access to the internal logic responsible for its conclusion as well as my "unconscious" intent in doing so. It's one thing to catch yourself "thinking" while you have an active goal to do so, but it felt like a deeper insight into my "metacognition" when it occurred under conditions that seemingly had no prompt for an awareness to emerge. Television offers an escape from reality (and your mind) for many and I am no different. Turn-on, tune-in, and zone-out into a world not of your own. Where you aren't "required to think"—that's already been done for you. It's funny to me because my appraisal of "great art" (usually music) is in its ability for me to get lost in it. If my mind is able to drift without recognition then you succeed in pleasing my taste. . .

...I suppose it's only right to wrap this up with the memory and its significance. Rather mundane the moment was to be but as I do so cleverly, my "subconscious" extracted another tint in shade to what colors me different. A conversation took place about "routine" among my colleagues. They were all describing their mornings and how they always follow a certain "order of operations" if you will, in preparation for the day. I listened how they expressed an almost "superstitious" belief that if their "order of operations" didn't take place in its usual way then they weren't going to have a "good day." After their descriptions subsided, I began mine. I was just the opposite to what they described. I didn't have a "set-routine" that I required of myself to accomplish in order. Sure, I have specific goals to accomplish before I embark on the day but I've never held myself to an order. In fact, I consciously change the order once I see a "routine" taking place. This came as a shock to my audience. One of them called me a "psychopath" for actively disrupting habits of routine—of course his comment was made in jest but the point remains. I was under the impression that most people intentionally disrupt repetition to avoid the mundane monotony of doing the same thing the same way everyday but that was certainly not the case with this group. They actively avoided variances; whereas I sought after them. They found comfort, control, predictability...escape? in their routines. My reasoning for apprehension in abiding by a self-imposed routine is quite complex if fully fleshed out but I should be able to capture the "gist" of it. It all circles around the disruption of familiar thought patterns. Other than "efficiency"—something most people are terrible at—routine offers the opportunity to turn off the prefrontal cortex. Do I dare to say...think less about what they are doing? Either way, for me, "routine" feels like flirting with "escapism." And I can already predict that you will try to elucidate me with the "benefits" of "routine" but let me cut you off before you even begin: I'm fully aware of the multitude of benefits found in streamlining mundane aspects of life to processes that don't require "complete conscious awareness." They are not lost on me; yet, they are precisely the reason in which I avoid over-reliance... What meaningful memories have been found in routine? Doing the same things the same way every day is barely a life worth living in my eyes. . .

As for the popular notion that "routine allows your thoughts to wander freely:" I've found it is true that "novelty in thought" does emerge, but the routine itself has to be created with the "manifestation of novelty" in its creation. "Day-to-day" routines aren't created with this perspective in mind. These "routines" offer created to discourage variance—undermining novelty. If "routines" are created to limit variance, then you are inclined to keep traversing the paths of thought that manifested earliest—once you no longer needed to consider the steps of said routine. The familiarity of action associated with thoughts creates an almost guardrail like path for your "freely wandering" thoughts to slip into the comfort of. Intuitively

it would seem that the connections within the brain of similar actions producing similar thoughts leading to similar results is precisely what provides routine its utility in the first place. I believe there is a conflation that "routine is the sister of flow-state," but I'd suggest their relation to be rather distant—a second cousin. You can marry her but the "pregnancy of ideas" is rarely as rich in novelty. . .

I might add that all this came to me in the blink of an eye while watching a TV show. This is what I had caught my subconscious processing. A random conversation about my coworker's daily routine and my lack thereof was enough of a discrepancy to spark cognitive processes to operate on an "understanding" of why I'm opposed to stagnations in routine without consciously trying to do so. It's absolutely baffling how smart I am without even trying to be.... that probably shouldn't be the take away from this anecdote but it makes me laugh when I think about how "dumb" I feel sometimes—meanwhile my subconscious is trying to understand why I diverge in this seemingly small difference in approach to repetitive actions and their implications. It's in these "flashes" that I see how peculiar my psychology truly is. There is little doubt in my mind that only a handful of people would find curiosity in this small divergence. In my highly attuned sense for these types of moments that make up my day; I noticed their difference from my own, but that was all I did....I noticed.

I know this sounds arrogant but everyday it feels closer to fact: it's like I'm operating on a completely different "cognitive-code" than everyone else. Forgive my internal belief, but deep down I've always felt "better" than nearly everyone else. I curtail this beliefs expression because it's unbecoming in social circumstances. It's easy to find things that people are better than me at, but if my life experiences hitherto have taught me anything: that it's only for a lack of effort and time. A very dangerous self-belief; I'm aware. Imagine how scary it is for me when I'm treated as such. When people express their admiration toward my being with such a high degree; it renders my efforts to remain humble in the social-lens, whilst also maintaining my high self belief, a highly neurotic affair of emotional alchemy. The unmatched "utility" I provide to the people in my life makes me into a tool for solving problems. Most people only see me as a solution to their problems. If they had it their way, my cultivated cognition would only think of what's important to them. What makes it even more difficult is that they seem "unaware" of their own internal drive to use my intelligence strictly for their benefit. I've been aware of these social dynamics for some

time now. I see how they dress up implication with arbitrary symbioticism. I play the game when required and receive the praise...sometimes it's nauseating to "understand."

My goal in nearly every relationship is to reduce their need for me—how arrogant is that hahaha!

I've always been ambiguous about certain aspects of my private life with "friends"—as everyone is to a certain extent. I'm careful about what I divulge, which is obvious with the understanding of my propensity in "perception-craft." What I do share is never disingenuous by any means, and I mean it always to be an open door for further understanding of who I am as a person. This is to say—when I began my book, I told my coworkers who I also consider my friends and a few family members as well. At this point it's been nearly four months since I disclosed this information. I get-it, how many people know someone working in the trades and also writing philosophical memoir? I know how strange my project is, but it required a lot of vulnerability of me to even disclose this pursuit. I know how weird I am but I wanted to open another door—easily the biggest yet to see who I truly am. Since I etched this key to my soul and gave it to my friends, only once have I been asked how it was coming along. I bring it up the topic of my book when there is a direct reference from conversation to something I've written about, fishing for any semblance of interest from those who I hoped would at least do me the honor of feigning interest, but it's apparent I expect too much from those I consider "friends." I take pride in my listening ability when people divulge aspects of their life. In conversation I'll reference things they've told me in the past so that they feel heard. I'll listen to a story you've already told me because I know how my reaction affects your mood. In nearly every "friendship" I've ever had, the dynamic has always been that I was more invested in their life than they were to mine. The connection is always skewed to me cultivating an incredible understanding of who they are as an individual, but on the other hand, I never feel "known." They only want to know the easily accessible surface level information I provide. They learn enough to maintain the ideal I provide to them. I'm not displacing blame from myself; as I see it, this dynamic has my subconscious defense mechanisms fingerprints all over it. That doesn't take away the fact that I offered a glaring opening into "closer connection" and no one is willing to step in to take a look...

...it is my tragedy. My fate will always be that of the orphan. Peering into and past the masks of those that surround me. I whisper their secrets back to them, telling them it's okay to

hide sometimes. That there is no point trying to hide from me. I know what they are scared of. I know what everyone is scared of. They get a taste of death when they look into my blue eyes. I live so close to the edge that anyone who even tries to get close is one false step away from their deepest despair that they don't dare to risk themselves by reaching out. My soul was corrupted early and it's a disease only known to a few. The door to my soul is open now for all to see, but I'm obligated by my conscience to explicitly warn everyone who dares to enter. In fact, I plead that they keep their distance from me because there is no cure—only cope. My radioactivity provides warmth so I attract. The intensity of the heat is usually deterrent enough. This eternal flame ignites pyromaniacs and burns them into ashes waiting for the wind to carry them away. You have to have been born from the nuclear fusion to withstand my proximity. . . My clarity will always be at the cost of never being close again.

I've always found it odd that most people don't remember things they learned in middle school or high school. It's a weekly occurrence for me to recall something I learned in school from those days that pertains to whatever happenstance I find myself in. Not that I expect people to remember some random quote they read while sitting in the library in 6th grade, but I don't think I have a single memory of anyone, from current or former relationships, referencing something they learned in school. You could argue: a memory of someone referencing material they learned in middle school wouldn't calcify to a prevalent memory to keep. But, this is something I've noticed since my early 20's. Leading me to believe that most people just have poor memories or didn't pay attention in school. On the other hand it suggests (I'm going to shoo-in my favorite quote from Donald Trump) "I have one of the greatest memories of all-time!" Regardless, it has always been obvious to me that my ability to remember random (mostly useless) information is above average—talking to me is like microdosing Wikipedia.

Operations in abstraction:

the constant need of conceptualizations
following ideas until a new one comes
only to forget why you started
the deeper you go
the longer it takes to resurface
testing your breath each dive
until you learn to live beneath
the sound of the waves grow quiet
until your next beach is an island...

The Emergence

It's strange to say, but that hasn't stopped me before....The past seven months of my life has felt like an exponential growth period in my brain's development. Everyday that passes seems like another lesson embodied. The seventeen years that transpired after my father's death was filled by so much experimentation, never really knowing exactly what my life's trajectory was. Those days were encompassed with such an anxiety for all the different paths I envisioned my life could take. In every thought experiment it always felt like I was missing something. In the back of my mind I think I knew my life wouldn't be typical. Still, the external pressures of expectation forced me to calculate the multitude of different scenarios of how I could be fulfilled while conforming within the current social construct I'm subjected to. Yet, my fate wouldn't allow me to cave under such pressures. Well, I have, in certain ways, adapted to survive and maintain my opportunity to express my difference. My adaptability in mask creation had reached a point where I was even beginning to fool myself. Maybe I was normal? But I wasn't and never could be. I was running away from my fate—wondering why I wasn't happy. After all those years of trying desperately to deny the weight of my existence, I finally stopped looking for how I can be happy with the prescribed norms of my culture. I couldn't chase shadows that weren't my shape anymore. It was time for me to live my life, to stop denying what makes me who I was born to be. The world must conform to me and not I to it. This year has been filled with me shedding the layers of expectations, an unraveling, and demasking. With each day that passes now, I see my future with ever more detail. It's time to live my life...

The Handshake:

A strange moment just occurred. I went to my grandparents' house to have dinner with them and a few other family members. They had invited one of their friends—whom I'd never met. He was an older gentleman, which aligns with the relationship he has with my grandparents. Upon first impression, he seemed rather average to me. As I entered the house, I was immediately introduced to him by my grandfather. As is accustom by the culture I find myself in—a grasping of each other's hands (a handshake) was initiated by the stranger. I conformed to the expectation of reciprocation under the spell of "performing niceties." He held onto my hand for too long—it was quite strange. He had a hard time understanding my simple name. I literally had to spell it out to him as he was trying to process the two syllables and three letters. You can tell a lot by these first introductions. There is an etiquette that's implicitly involved in the handshake gesture. You match the "firmness" of the handshake to the recipient. I'm not one to impose my hand strength upon another. I usually offer a firm grip, but anything more is unbecoming. He was out of pocket in his approach. His grip outmatched mine in an obvious manner—likely an inherited insecurity of being forgotten. I gathered all this in this in the matter of ten seconds. The impression he left on me was probably not his intention.....

I probably never would've remembered this interaction if it weren't for a simple question he posed before I left. As I was saying my goodbyes to my family. He asks me: "What do you do?" It was an unnecessary question considering my pending departure. Regardless of the intent, I hate that question. That question only asks a person to simplify themselves so that your existence can be categorized and your identity labeled. It's a social way to play sincerity in a capitalistic culture—where identity is tied to your economic production. When this unprovoked question landed at my awareness I hesitated. My false-start of a reply suggested at my reluctance to answer. With slight bewilderment at the "non-question" he asked, I told him "I do what I want." My tone was sarcastic, but the implication of my distaste was evident upon a closer look. In those brief moments, I ran through all the answers I wanted to say. Like: "Writing a cross disciplinary theoretical analysis of trust's relationship to societal decay. What about you?" But I told him, "I do electrical work" instead. I said it as if it wasn't even relevant to mention. With my grandmother, grandfather, and aunt sitting at the table with him. The tension was not quite palpable as my grandfather interjected before it was. He's probably a "nice guy"—although he did say some off-hand remarks on immigration. Either way, I realized why philosophers talk shit about other philosophers.....it's easy to write about what you don't like about someone else.

The Troll-toll

I just have to read a YouTube or Reddit comment to feel smart. I often wonder who these people are who comment on YouTube and Reddit. I've asked around and yet never found one.

It reminds me of my gaming days. Back when I was grinding Destiny on the Xbox, random people would send me messages that were almost always negative—same for Rainbow Six Siege. I'd think to myself, "Why are they wasting their time typing out these messages to a random person?"

I developed a strategy for these individuals: when typing a message, Xbox would recommend certain words that correspond with whatever the last word was. This associative function brought me great joy. When a hateful message emerged in my inbox, I'd respond with the most random collection of words to form sentences that occasionally made sense. The best ones were semi-coherent.

The replies were always confused. "Why are you talking about dinner reservations with me and my cousin, who has the most amazing friends and family?"

I'd like to think some of those people realized the futile nature of what they were doing.

I should note that these exchanges were around 8 years ago. The best moments are when I'd get one on my hook—someone who thought the "game" was to have the last word. Once I had their attention, I'd change my strategy: it was now about an apology.

I'd type these extensive messages outlining what they were doing by sending hurtful messages. Poking at their own insecurities by trying to put another person down. These were my favorite moments. Some never apologized, but many did.

It is kinda hilarious to look back on that now. I love imagining them wondering, "Who is this guy?" And to be honest, I never really thought about it that deeply. It was my natural response to unprovoked insults. The thought process was simple: why are they wasting their time and energy by spreading deceit to a random person, and how can I influence it? It was also just a fun game for me to elicit an apology a couple of messages after being insulted. If I were in a serious text exchange, I'd even wait to start a new match so that I wasn't distracted—hahahaha!

I was just thinking about a moment that occurred earlier in the night. I was at my little brother's football scrimmage with my mom and older brother. We were watching as my

little brother's team was on offense and they just made a big run play for about thirty yards. As they were lining up for the next play, I told my mom and older brother that they were going to run the same play. Which they did. I laughed and said that's high school football—and they laughed too. A little while later, one of the players got hurt (broke his leg) and they called an ambulance to the field. It's common courtesy to kneel while a player is injured on the field. When the ambulance arrived, driving onto the field, it blocked our view of the situation. One of my little brother's teammates tell everyone to stand up and assemble. As soon as I heard him say that I wanted to tell my older brother that they were going to pray—as a joke. But then they actually did start praying which made it even funnier. I tell my brother this and we both start mocking the gesture quietly. My mom ended up getting in on it too. A few jokes later and my mom asks "Did they get him up yet?" He was down near the other sideline and the ambulance was parked between our view. I told her "No, we'll know once the visiting bleachers start clapping and then we'll start clapping." She was like "Shut up" in a "you're right" kinda way. And that's what happened—they clapped first and then we clapped.

Around seventeen years old, I had just transferred schools to play football on the other side of town—the motive behind that is another story in itself. The transfer made me ineligible to play for six games. I couldn't even dress-out—so I just watched. At one practice, I was standing with the head coach watching the defense prepare against the scout offense. The scout team's role is to mimic the formations and plays of the next opponent. The team we were playing next runs the "wing-T" formation—an offense I've played against since I was six. I was known for my abilities on defense—that's where my talent was. Without being able to play to impress the head coach, I tried prediction instead. We had watched a few plays go by. Not really saying much to each other. As the scout team offense lined up in a formation I'd seen countless times, I said "Watch out for the double hand!" warning the defense. It's a reverse hand-off trick play that those teams only use on occasion. And I wouldn't be telling this story unless they ran the play. The coach asked me, bewildered, "How'd you know they were going to run that?" I didn't really have a satisfying answer. It was probably a mix of "I don't know" and "I just knew." He didn't seem too satisfied with my answer either.....

I'll share another insight into my psyche. There isn't much that really naws at my hope for humanity in my day-to-day life to the extent that this does: excessive use of brakes in traffic. At the end of my work day, on my way home, there is always traffic in a couple sections of the interstate. The inefficiency I witness on this forty-five minute drive is

absolutely draining. I'll be as energetic as I can possibly be leaving work but that drive home is like psychological warfare for me.

There is this "habit" 95% of drivers have in traffic that erodes my energy. There is this term "stop and go traffic" that encapsulates what I experience five days a week. The problem is multifaceted—as they usually are. There is so much ego involved on the road that it would blow your mind. People equate being passed or even letting someone merge into their lane as a personal attack. So once they reach traffic, they don't want to leave enough space between their car and the one in front of them for anybody to switch lanes. With barely any distance between cars, if the one in front of you hits their brakes, you have less time to react. And if you add the prevalence of phone usage to the equation, then every brake light they see is responded to in kind—regardless of whether braking was actually needed.

Traffic ends up playing out like this: hit the gas, slam on brakes (check your phone), hit the gas, slam on brakes (check phone). It's a vicious cycle of that enrages me. This problem could easily be solved by everyone leaving enough space between the cars that every brake light can be assessed if you will decelerate enough by letting off your gas or if you actually need to use your brakes to slow down. Most truck drivers understand this because they need more space to slow down. The "stop and go traffic" is very stressful for someone who likes predictability. And don't get me started on the simple gesture of the blinker—it's almost a status symbol not to use it.

These traffic and driving experiences were the inspiration for the driving metaphor in my trust paper. Just as you noted, when I find myself in these traffic situations, I'm the one who tries to set the pace so we aren't slamming on our brakes every thirty seconds. As long as I can see through the rear and front windshield of the car in front of me I'm comfortable because I can see when the cars farther ahead are using their brakes and calculate how much gas I need to apply. But when I'm behind a truck or a vehicle with tinted windows, I have to update my level of trust and with this my anxiety also raises.

I had a moment just yesterday where I was in this very situation: stop and go traffic. The car in front of me slammed on their brakes out of nowhere (probably on their phone) forcing myself and the car behind me to slam on our brakes as well. After I stopped, I started shaking my head. I was cursing all these dumb ass motherfuckers who don't know how to

drive—under my breath. I looked up in my rear-view mirror to see the guy behind me doing some hand gestures at the other lane that's moving steadily. He must have seen me shaking my head because he was looking at me through my mirror. I translated his gestures as "What the fuck are these idiots doing?" Before this moment he maintained a careful distance between us. It was nice to see another person who understood how to make traffic bearable. I smiled through my mirror, shaking my head in agreeance. That moment did restore a bit of faith that it's not all lost, but that was a very rare moment.....

Conformity curtails creativity when external influences dictate internal expressions.

I am the Narcissist to disillusionment, but most would rather nod-off in their bliss.

You know what's scary about my "trust theory?" I'm trying to build the longest suspension bridge ever dreamed of, between dogma and uncertainty, but I can see how it could be a path between two dogmas.

Nietzsche thought "the strength of a person's spirit is directly related to their capacity to tolerate truth, especially unpleasant or uncomfortable truths." I think of "strength" a bit differently, and possibly the same. For me, the strength of spirit is directly related to how many contradictions you can integrate within your awareness. In this thinking, "unpleasant/uncomfortable truths" might be seen as "contradictions" yet to be integrated. "Toleration" seems too close to denial for it to be an attribution of "strength."

Strength is formed by exposure to uncomfortable truths; but the power of strength is relational to the integration of contradictions.

I just reread the aphorism that contains this quote (#39). Nietzsche continues by adding qualifying factors to the level of truth one is exposed to. As he says, "...more precisely, to what extent he would need it to be diluted, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified." This brought to mind the resolution of the integration in comparison to its relative truth. The same qualifications must also be applied when discussing the output of power that's found in a given integration of contradiction. A falsified truth, when integrated, will result in the falsification of power—which is an illusion.

This leads us to conclude:

The strength of a spirit is formed by the precision with which it engages with uncomfortable truths; its power is measured by its ability to integrate contradiction without the falsification of opposing truths.

Prediction:

I predicted one of my friend's thought patterns the other day. Over the past year, he's been getting into golf—it's just about all he talks about. We were working in this room together. I must have been thinking about the influence between new concepts and how they change perceptions, because I asked him, "Has golf changed your relationship with grass?" —I enjoy opening dialogues with these kinds of obtuse questions. He asked what I meant, and I elaborated, "When you look at people's yards, do you think that would be a nice putting green?" He started laughing and affirmed my question with a yes. He reiterated "I do that all the time"—with a tone suggesting amazement that I knew this about him. It was pretty funny that I intuited this just by thinking about his hobby and how that has affected his cognition.

Confrontation:

I have an interesting way of confronting behavior. For instance, once it was time to pack up and leave work today, I was presented with another opportunity. We were working on the third floor. I was down the hall, around thirty feet away from the youngest of my coworkers. I was getting my things together to get ready and head down the stairs, and he says, "Hey, can you carry your Sawzall down?" I looked up and, from across the hall and quickly assessed what he was already carrying. He had a few things around his tool belt, but still had both hands free. So I replied "No." The tone of his response was one of annoyance, "It's your Sawzall." My rebuttal, still across the hall, "Did you bring it up here?" He confirms he brought it up. So I continued, "If you brought it up here, then you can take it down." With dissatisfaction, he let out a groan of compliance. I didn't even know he had borrowed it and brought it up there. All he had to do was carry the six-foot ladder down with one hand and the Sawzall in the other. It's no problem carrying a six-foot ladder in one hand, but he obviously didn't want to do it. He makes his way down a couple of minutes before me. After I caught up with him at the bottom near the electrical room, I said, "Don't 'ughh' me, you're the one who brought it up there." I said it in a joking manner—poking fun at his expression. He retorted jokingly, "I hit some lady with my ladder as I was walking down the stairs

because of you." I said, "You gotta learn how to control a ladder with one hand," and the confrontation diffused. If I didn't have to carry a ladder down as well as my water and fire caulking stuff, I would have helped him. His response was that of a child who hasn't heard "No" enough... He thought just because it was mine that I should have to take it down. He didn't understand that the responsibility of the tool shifted as soon as he took it from its place. He wanted the best of both worlds, usage without the responsibility of its return.

Extrapolating TOM:

I was working with this "old-head" who is also the owner's dad (Bobby Joe). We get along great despite our age difference and his heavenly-inspired Christian lifestyle (—he's a "by the book" kinda guy). Recently, the general contractor has brought in another person to oversee the construction of the apartment building. He is the third successor to occupy the authority of this role since we started this job. This guy isn't much different from those whom he's replaced. Since he arrived, he's been attempting to assert his authority, which is expected. This typically plays out by the new guy in charge finding something to complain about and expecting you to fix it. He has particularly focused on my lack of safety apparel. I have an aversion to certain safety precautions. I believe many of these give a false sense of security, which leads to more injuries. I'll abide by precautions if my individual judgment necessitates it. This means, if the chance that something could fall and hit my head is near zero, then I won't wear my hard hat. The same can be applied to high-visibility attire. If I'm not working in an area with low visibility, then it seems unnecessary for me to wear it. This new guy doesn't follow the same logic. My first interaction with him went as follows. I was wearing this orange shirt one day that technically isn't "high-vis" but close enough—given that I'm not directing traffic. I walked into the makeshift office to look at the prints to verify some distances between light fixtures, and he walked up behind me. Placing a hand on my shoulder, he says, "You're killing me. Where's your high-vis?" I replied with "Is this not high-vis enough?"—pointing to my bright orange shirt. He replied, "It's supposed to be yellow." He was wearing his safety vest, and I pointed to it and said, "What color is that?" It was orange detailing that outlined his mostly black "high-visibility" vest. He stumbled over his words—so I forgot what he said next. That was the end of that interaction. A few more instances occurred where he'd try to reprimand my lack of visibility, but I never really gave him any mind. If I didn't acknowledge his presence, then he usually left me alone. This brings us to this most recent event. Working with the old-head, I was landing some branch circuits into some outlets, and he walked by. Of course, I wasn't in compliance with the dress code. I didn't have my hard hat on or a safety vest. He says to me, "Where's your stuff at?" and I casually replied, as if I didn't have time to hear him complain, "over there"—

pointing fifteen feet away. He didn't say anything else and kept walking. I started telling the old-head that I wouldn't mind wearing the safety stuff if he was honest as to why he wants me to wear it. He wrapped it up as if he cared for my safety, and I don't believe that to be the case. Explaining my reasoning to my coworker further: it seemed his motivation for hounding me about safety apparel was from a selfish desire to retain his job and protect himself. I haven't had one inclination that he actually cared about me. My coworker took up his side of the argument and said that nobody wants to see anyone get hurt. I agreed, but added that his enforcement doesn't seem to be from that perspective. He wants the appearance of safety and the security of his job and lifestyle. Bobby Joe responded, "You just can't read people like that, man." I told him, "I've been reading people my whole life—although I have been wrong before."

So I tried something today at work.... When I talk about the guys I work with it's usually Jimmy or Ashton. Ashton is nineteen years old and rather naive—he's the young one who I've referred to in previous messages. Jimmy is a few years older than me and has over a decade of experience doing electrical—but still looks up to me. He's intelligent and enjoys discussing multifaceted topics, but he often parrots popular notions without much thought as to why—he kind of performs intelligence if I'm being absolutely blunt about it. Ashton is the one who is obsessed with golf (the friend who's thought pattern I predicted). Jimmy also plays golf but is new to the sport and still a novice. Today, on our lunch, we were all sitting together in front of the fan in the electrical room. I had the idea to ask Jimmy the same question I asked Ashton a week earlier. I had guessed that golf hadn't changed the thoughts he had about well-manicured grass. The reason I wanted to ask; wasn't for confirmation, but to see whether either one of them would notice the phenomenon that underscores the bottom of the question—how your thought patterns shift when exposed to different perspectives. I asked Jimmy as Ashton sat beside him, "Jimmy, I'll ask you the same question I asked Ashton a week ago. Since you started playing golf, has your relation with grass changed?" Noticing a bit of confusion, but having both of their attention, I clarified: "when you see a nicely cut lawn do you ever think that it could be a nice putting green?" He understood what I was asking and confirmed my assumption with a "no" that ended on a higher pitch as if it was a question. I went on to explain what how it shifted Ashton's thoughts and he said "I'm not as obsessed." He went on to explain all the other ways he thinks about grass—how much he appreciates the aesthetic of a nicely manicured lawn. I subtly hinted at how weird it was that our interests can shift the relation between objects and the thoughts that are associated with them. But that was about as far as the conversation went. Ashton had checked out at this point and found some clip on his phone that he thought was worth sharing. . .

Everyone brushes upon the ineffable at some point in their life. The choice is in your interpretation of it.

I smoked some weed my friend gave me last night and I must have been pondering the limitations of a "scientific worldview." This worldview is founded on the belief that everything can be explained—at least that's my understanding. The benefits of this are obviously apparent but that isn't my concern. My concern is this emerging realization that maybe everything can't be explained, labeled, categorized, and quantified. For some reason I felt the urge to place meaning on the ineffable. A sentence came to mind. "Everyone has an unexplainable moment—what's yours?" It's a paradoxical sentence—which is why I love it. I put it in my notes and let the thought simmer until this morning. My reframing to "Everyone brushes upon the ineffable at some point in their life. The choice is in your interpretation of it" was my attempt to capture the responsibility of the individual when choosing perspectives of unexplainable experiences.

Is it luck or skill?.....it's never binary. The tags to my car have been expired for over two years now. Up until eight months ago, I hadn't been pulled for them. It's something I've been aware of since they expired. Everytime I step into my vehicle to drive there is a risk of being pulled over by a cop. I'm pretty trained in the art of evading the "one time." Whenever I first got my license, I'd drive around and smoke weed on the backroads around my town. There's plenty of stories I could tell that would contradict my evasive maneuvering around cops. I got pulled over frequently when I was young, but never faced any serious consequences. After not being pulled over for about five years my luck ran out near the end of January. It was right after my first therapy session. During the session the psychologist asked me if I had been in any legal trouble. I told her no, but my tags are expired—and she laughed at my joke. It just so happens that I foresaw my future fate. On this long winding two lane highway, the cop got behind me. I watched as he pulled out and thought to myself, "welp—I'm getting pulled over." He followed me down this road for about fifteen minutes. There was this weird feeling you have when you know you're going to get pulled over. You're just kinda waiting to see the lights from atop their car in your mirror. There aren't many safe places to pull someone over on the road we were on. Cops usually like to wait for you to make a turn onto a safer road in these circumstances. Eventually, it was time for me to make my turn—so I signaled my move. Turning on my blinker signaled his lights and I pulled

into the parking lot of "The Hope Center." He walked up to my car as I was rolling my window down. He got up to my window and asked me "did you know your tags are two years expired?" I chose honesty and said "yes." Obviously he wanted a reason as well and I told him "I don't have any good excuse for you." I've watched many cop interaction videos and this gave me an idea of how to treat cops. Their interactions are usually laced with deceptive tactics. The guilty party always has an excuse to try and get out of a ticket. The interactions you rarely see are the ones with accountability. He asked for my insurance and I pulled it up on my phone but it was expired. He wasn't too happy about that and asked "have you ever been in trouble?"—implying with the law. Recognizing his implication, I denied it and said "only with my mom." He didn't get the joke and thought my mom and I got in trouble together. I had to explain the joke to him—which is never good. He then walked away from my window to run my license. After this he walked back up and told me he was going to give me a warning. Expressing gratitude I shook his hand and said "thanks." I offered a goodbye anecdote about what I said to my therapist. I'm pretty sure he thought "this guys weird" when he walked back to his car. I've since gotten two more warnings about my registration. The latest occurrence happening an hour or so ago. On my way to pick up my little brother from football practice, I ended up behind a cop. It's usually not a bad place to be, but this time another one snuck up behind and I was trapped. To add insult to injury another cop joins the parade and gets behind the other one. As soon as I turn on my blinker to pull into my little brothers school—I get the lights. With two warnings already under my belt using the same strategy, the test was to begin. It was nearly the same rhythm as the first and the second one. I led with honesty, but didn't reveal my other warnings—they didn't ask so they didn't need to know. He asked about my insurance too and I was honest. After the "if I see you again and you haven't fixed it" I ended up with another warning. . .

I just caught myself thinking about how often I should be happy. This brings thoughts about the external environments role in the availability of ideas. Many have said, "creativity is birthed through necessity" but I wonder how much creativity is a product of your representation of reality. Are there particular perspectives that can be achieved to improve creative thinking?

Nah—I'm cool. I was just looking at some recent philosophy publications in some random academic journal and was like "who reads this stuff? oh, other philosophers." There weren't many abstracts that seemed appealing. They all had the same rhythm to them. The

sterilization of the texts leaves a dry taste in my mouth—it's palpable....but I'm being dramatic.

From my approximation, this is precisely where philosophy is required and where academia fails. The space between abstract concepts and their representations and manifestations on the average. The further your understanding reaches into abstraction the harder it is to find your way back to the average. When you're constantly surrounded by peers who operate on similar levels, you lose the ability to relate your insights back to the average. The further your distance from the average, the more necessary it becomes to retrace your steps.

Much of my life has been about shaping "ideals" to live up to—consuming perspectives, crafting perceptions, manipulating desires, curtailing expectations—it's strange that I've been able to do all of this successfully. This did come at a cost though—a lack of laundry routine. I'd rather think about the inflection someone used when they said "hello" rather than fold clothes—hahaha!

Safety Contradictions:

I had the opportunity to point out some hypocrisy today, but I held my tongue. I was walking out to the row of portable restrooms that sit outside the temporary office at work today, and guess who I saw? The “safety guy” who’s been hounding me about my lack of PPE. He walked out of his air-conditioned office wearing his safety vest but didn’t have his hard hat on. I was wearing full PPE—it was the perfect moment to call him on his shit. It took everything I had not to ask “Where’s your hard hat?”—but I didn’t.... I gave him the courtesy that I asked in return. I suppose we’ll see if it’s reciprocated.

If we just look at my interactions with the “safety guy,” I’m obviously maneuvering the circumstances. At a deeper level, maybe it’s my self-perceived rationalization of ethical conduct—an ad hoc response to selfish intent that could lead to negative consequences....

As I ponder my existence hitherto, it seems these traits have always been present in one way or another. I must have developed a sense of dishonest authority in its representation. This isn't a trait that manifests within every interaction I have with a superior. It seems I only undermine authority when there's an impression that they are acting with a personal self-

interest dressed up as mutual benefit. Perhaps it's the lack of respect that accompanies this behavior. They think they are being clever, but it's only an insult to my intelligence.

Oh—I should add that nobody likes this guy. He's gotten off on the wrong foot with everybody. The rest of the crew had a negative interaction with him and had already been whispering about it. I'm no stranger to the games of political life. My assessments of his motivations were affirmed by my other coworkers. And I'd like to also add, I don't lead with skepticism unless it's preempted or present upon first impression. There's never skepticism without reason.

I might have also made an honest remark that he didn't like too much, as well. This happened a little before the last anecdote. I was working in this room, and it was a particularly hot day, so I didn't have my vest on. He walks up and asks why I didn't have it on. I told him that it was too hot to needlessly wear it. He's like, "I'm wearing it." I remarked, "Yeah, it's not that bad when you sit in an air-conditioned office all day." Flustered, he says, "You could wear a high-vis shirt." I said "fair point" and walked off. I have started to comply, though. Only because one of my friends told me he complained to him about my dress. I don't feel my intolerance is justified if it implicates a bystander.

I'll give you one more anecdote about an interaction I had with him... I was up on a ladder in the hallway making up some can lights. The floor was pretty empty, and my back was turned to one end of the hallway. It was another one of those times when I wasn't compliant. I noticed him entering the hallway behind me—he didn't know that I saw him. I just carried on twisting joints. He thought he was sneaking up on me, but I could feel his presence behind me. He stood there for a second as if he was waiting for me to turn around. I refused to give him the time of day. He then poked my back and I said "What's up?"—in a tone that was more like "What the fuck do you want?" He starts walking down the hallway and says, "Just making sure you're paying attention." I replied, "Always." Had I turned around and given him the satisfaction of my attention, I could almost guarantee he would have said something about my lack of a safety vest and hard hat.

It always baffles me how a striking amount of incredibly intelligent people don't question their own assumptions. Their raw ability seems to pigeonhole them into a particular stance or belief. There are some that get buried so deep with validation that by the time they recognize their position it's too late to turn back. It's the fear of reframing past accomplishments as farcical. They'd undermine the stability of their own ideal that lays in accordance with their identity. They get so far on their refusal to concede that they burn their reputation with their pride.

It's interesting how intelligence and an individual's sense of self-worth are intertwined. There's a moralization that occurs when you are perceived to provoke question to somebody's intelligence—regardless of intent. Nearly everyone operates with a notion that they are smart in some capacity, but damned be the one who elicits question to your perceived understanding. These fickle folk are the ones who demonstrate the least desire for attaining knowledge. It's almost a reluctance to pursue understanding in order to maintain delusion. If a problem arises, and they don't readily have a solution, it's outsourced and instinctively forgotten to exist. I see it every day: novelty emerges in their eyes and they turn their head to avoid the pain of not knowing. It's too much work to recognize a gap in knowledge and correct it. These illusions are exacerbated by their insecurities unconscious negation of their internal contradictions.....

My instincts conjure conclusions from intuition and I consciously reverse engineer my reasoning to test my subconscious calibration. Surprise, surprise, I often find myself to be right—confirmation bias is a bitch.....

I'll share one more anecdote that just came to mind.... When I was in the 9th grade I had physical education. Naturally, one of the football coaches was the teacher. With me being on the football team and as a recurring theme in my life, quite well at it: I had a different relationship with the coach than my other classmates. On the first day of class he was taking attendance and called my name. He made some comment about me needing a nickname to go by. I just made a joke off the cuff "You can call me TCO." He was like "TCO?" I said "Yeah, The Chosen One." I didn't think he'd actually call me that, but he wrote it into his roll call paper. For the rest of the year in that class and next three years of football, I was referred to as "TCO" by all my coaches. It kinda made me a little uncomfortable. I'd explain to the coaches that called me that what it stood for, but they didn't really care..... Just another one of those weird moments in my life that contained more than I expected. It's like people just accept how different I am when I express it. You'd think it affirms you to be more like yourself, but it's almost the opposite effect. When people treat you differently for being yourself, but you notice that almost no one else is, you feel like you are doing something wrong. You have that thought "Why isn't everyone else doing this?" It's because of this feeling you get—that desire to "fit-in."

There is a memory from my twelfth grade year that comes to mind. I was sitting in chemistry class while the teacher was giving a lecture on covalent bonds, or whatever, and all I was doing was listening. To me, I assumed everyone was listening. It wasn't the most fascinating information, but it was enough for my attention. The teacher was rather young with little experience, and I could tell he was still a bit uncomfortable with his role as well as the subject matter. It was a pretty laid back environment and he never pressed his authority. After this lecture, as the class was about to end, some of the kids would gather around his desk, and we would talk about whatever came to mind. I'm not sure how it came up, but he gave me a compliment. He told me that he could tell that I was actually listening to what he was saying. He continued by expressing how much he appreciated it. I found it odd that he'd point this out, but I accepted the compliment gracefully—expressing my love for science with an anecdote about the YouTube channel "SciShow." It was just one of those moments where I thought I was doing the bare minimum, but it got recognized as "above average." For me, learning never required much effort and I enjoyed new information wherever I could get it. After he pointed this out, I started to notice how some of my peers wouldn't even look at him during the lectures. These are the same ones who would ask me "why are you so smart." I never really had an answer until then. I'm just good at listening and I've cultivated an ability to recognize what's relevant to the goal at hand.... I just thought I'd share that little anecdote and what I've taken from that memory.

I seem to always have these "serendipitous" moments. It doesn't even feel like I'm looking for them either. I started to really notice them around the age of fourteen. Before then I leaned heavily into "atheistic ideology" but once I started to recognize these, what I called then, coincidences I couldn't help but believe that there was some "higher power" at play. There are moments now where it feels like I'm reading too deeply into something most people would gloss over. But I think I'm starting to come to the conclusion that I just have a far better understanding of the dynamics that are really at play in everyday life. I'm captivated by the complexity that shapes the smallest actions. Sometimes I forget that everyone isn't formulating thoughts the same way I am. Or they are but they stop short at whatever level of analysis they are "comfortable" at. We were waiting to leave work earlier and one of my friends was talking about me to a guy that works for the general contractor. My friend told him: "Nobody makes me think as much as he does" pointing at me. I replied: "It's a curse"—another half-truth disguised as a joke. These sort of compliments are always so tricky to navigate. A part of wants to say affirm but that can be seen as arrogant. The other part of me, the side that usually manifests, is humble and downplays my intellectual capacity, but I'm starting to think this has a negative effect on me. For one, I'm subtly undermining the genuine compliment of a friend and practically calling him "dumb" for

making such a claim. The other is that when I undermine myself it's obvious that I don't really "believe" what I'm saying. I can almost feel the "eye-roll" of "We all know you're a genius Ian. You don't have to hide it." I know I should probably just say thanks and offer a compliment of my own but then I'm just playing into what is usually just the complementors own attempt at affirming their own belief about themselves using me as their mode of expression. Nietzsche once suggested that most people only compliment that which they see in themselves—a true compliment has to come from something you disagree with, something not found within you....How did I end up here from talking about serendipity? Oh well—another diatribe from yours half-truthfully! Hahaha

Let me offer an anecdote from the other day to help you understand. We were eating lunch a couple days ago (myself and two friends) when the topic of murder came up. We were debating the “death penalty” and somehow arrived at the difference between 1st and 2nd degree murder. One friend thought he knew how they were defined but was ill informed. Having a decent understanding of what the actual definitions are I correct the first friend and explain the differences between the two rather simply—I even provided examples of both. After I put a bow on the explanation they both seemed to “understand” and the conversation continued. Not but a few minutes later the terms I had just defined were again brought back into the fold. The second friend genuinely asks me “what’s the difference between 1st and 2nd degree murder?” My other friend and I are both shocked at the sincerity of a question that was literally just explained. We give him a “hard time” as friends naturally do. I go on to explain the difference again and ask him to then explain it to me—half joking and a little frustrated... I don’t expect someone to be fully engaged by what I’m saying, but that question told me that they are barely putting in any effort into listening to what I have to say...

The “frustrating” part is that he was the one who brought up the topic of murder in the first place. It’s not like I hold a tyranny over conversations. I’m very comfortable in silence. I’d rather silence than be provoked into defining terms that are forgotten in minutes only to be asked to repeat myself. It’s like some people feign “curiosity” so there isn’t silence and I fall for it every time. They are the ones who ask: “why are you so quiet—what’s wrong?” Some people are only interested in “how many different ways can we have the same conversation?”

I was observing myself experience a negative emotion today, and upon noticing I let myself stay in that state for an amount of time I deemed appropriate for the circumstance. This is something I've been doing since early adolescents. When this "awareness of emotion" happens, it's almost like measuring entangled particles. As soon as I notice the emotion, I'm no longer in the same "state." It works great for "negative" emotions because "awareness" always shifts the intensity closer to "baseline." For "positive" emotions the same applies. This ability to recognize emotions seems to have the drawback of reducing the overall range of intensity in positive and negative emotions. While I might not get as mad as other people; I also don't seem to get as happy?...sometimes it seems that way.

Honesty's Function:

I understand how context is required for determining approaches to honesty, but anything that is less than what is deemed by yourself as "full honesty" always contains a misrepresentation of "truth." And when you dare to be "fully honest," you're seen to be "insensitive" or an asshole for not misrepresenting your own beliefs for the fragility of another's. A "truth" withheld is also a breach in trust. It's impossible to navigate our current social conditioning without simultaneously chipping away at "trust" and your own internal need to express beliefs. In this, there is a value judgement as well...

The majority of people would assert "honesty" to be a "virtue," and they'd likely agree that this "honesty" is conditional on its probabilistic outcome. However, the dominant condition usually takes the form of a moral proclamation. Namely, is this "honesty" likely to produce discomfort, suffering, displeasure, or any other consequence deemed "negative" by the party expressing "honesty" and what they consider the reaction to be from their recipient? Honesty's morality, whether it's "good or bad," is dictated by its "utility." But "lying" isn't viewed with the same grace; its effect is seldom considered in its moralization—especially when implicating innocence. Here lies a conflict that plagues individuals such as myself. I strive to be honest at every moment, but participation in social circumstances requires you to perform "half-truths" shielded by value judgements in a probabilistic moralization of your "truths" consequences. Strength of emotion can dispel the highest "intent." As an individual, withholding a "truth" from someone often feels like a lie. Inevitably, you are left to decide whether you are a "good" or "bad" person. You can feel like a "bad" person from being "honest," but you are nearly always a "bad" person for lying. . . If humanity's goal is to reduce feeling "bad," then it seems we are doomed to decay. This is the result of a moral framework that doesn't allow ambiguity. For every reduction in "discomfort," another

reduction of the opposite aspiration seems to coincide..... —Something that I was just thinking about while taking a piss.

Do you know what's strange? Catching yourself thinking. . . As much as it happens, you'd think one might grow accustomed to the sensation. There are these brief moments throughout my day where multiple "awarenesses" are unfiltered by the usual "subconscious processes" that typically consolidate "conscious awareness" into a particular indescribable manner. When these "unfiltered moments" arise, it often feels overwhelming but illusively brief. It's a flash into the mechanisms that make up individual moments, a glimpse into presuppositions hidden from normal experience. "Meta-cognition" seems to imply intent, but these instances are anything but a decision. Perhaps it's practice applied by instinct?

Christianity, in the interpretation I was encouraged to believe, was a joke to me, and I'd try to get those who believed to laugh at it. Having always been fascinated with history, and at this time, the Second World War. Memories emerge. My eldest male cousin on my father's side was in college, and I'd often spend the night with him on the weekends. He and his brother were raised by my grandparents, devout to the Church of Christ. They were inculcated into the ideology early, as regular churchgoers. Spending the night on a Saturday meant sacrificing sleeping in on Sunday—the lord got to rest, but I didn't. His apartment was an hour drive through many backroads to reach our grandparents' church. On one of these trips, it was my brother and I in the back of the car with my cousin driving and his fiancée in the front passenger seat. The conversation must have been about Jesus, typical for a Sunday, because I had what I thought to be a clever quip. Riding in the back seat, around the age of twelve, I suggested that "Hitler actually did a good thing by killing so many jews since they killed Jesus." It was an attempt to make an argument for the genocide of a race that killed God incarnate from the Christian perspective. My cousin took the thought experiment in another direction. A more approachable critique of the doctrine. He compared Gandhi and his ideals to someone who lives by the Christian accord but substandard and asked why Gandhi must burn in hell for eternity even though he was a "great person." It was a question he later posited to my grandfather. He was an order of operations kind of guy. Belief was in the steps you take for him. His answer doesn't come to mind—I probably dismissed it.

Theft:

Last Friday sucked. As someone who works in the trades, the standard for my company is to be at the jobsite at six in the morning. I usually get there around six-fifteen because of my genetic predisposition to being tardy—or I just lack discipline. Either way, I hate waking up that early. But Friday was different. I showed up ten minutes early and got there only five minutes late.

In the mornings, all the guys (Bobby Joe, Anthony, Jimmy, and Ashton) are usually all huddled up around our job boxes in the parking garage of the apartment buildings we've been installing the electrical for. Each trade has a location where they hoard their material for the job. Ours just so happens to be in the dungeon of the parking garage—under the first level. With the job being as big as it is, we have a plethora of material that's kept on hand. We group up there in the morning because a few of us leave our tools in the job boxes overnight. They have locks on them, and it's better than bringing all your tools in each day.

So, I get to work early on Friday and make my way down the stairs to the garage. Jimmy, Ashton, and Anthony were getting material ready for the day's project—standing around the job boxes, talking about their weekends. I say my hello's and go to get my tools out of the box, but they weren't there. I thought to myself, "Huh, that's weird." Looking around, thinking, maybe they took it out to get something from underneath it, but still no sign. I asked, "Have y'all seen my bag?" They all said no, and I got worried. I took another look into the job-box and found my tool-belt with my tape measure, 11-in-1 screwdriver, flathead, and channel locks. But my knipex strippers weren't in my pouch on my belt with the rest. I knew something was up at this point. I usually just lay my belt on the shelf of the job-box, because those are the tools I'll use every day. Anthony asks Jimmy if he had opened the job-box up this morning, and he said, "No, I thought you did." Anthony then said, "I opened up the other one, but this one was already open when I came down. A tension in the air started to become noticeable. There were thousands of dollars' worth of tools in there, but whoever got into it only took my backpack full of hand tools (my Geiger counter was also in there—which I don't really know why I have—) and my impact driver. They left Ashton's backpack, which is identical to my own, and every sort of power tool used by an electrician, with all the batteries needed for their operation.

It almost seemed like a fluke. They only took my stuff. After a minute of disbelief, I told them I'm going to start looking around the jobsite. I thought maybe the thief was still there. Everyone else was still trying to figure out how they got into the job-box to begin with—the lock didn't look like it had been tampered with. There are 150+ units in this apartment building, and I was determined to check every room. Starting at the closest point, I began my search.

The location of the property backs right up against a railroad. As I was searching from room to room and not finding any hope, I looked out from the balcony toward the railroad tracks and saw a bag lying on the ground below me. I was probably an hour into my search at this point and had made it up to the third floor. I couldn't see what kind of bag it was, but I could tell it was a backpack. I made my way back down the flights of stairs to investigate. As I got close to the bag, I knew it wasn't mine, but it did have about three feet of some Romex half-stuffed into it. Copper is a hot commodity for opportunistic crack-heads.

Finding it odd that my bag was missing and I just so happened to find this bag, I took a few pictures of the crime scene. I continued to investigate the area and found some damning evidence. In a small clearing, where the fence that establishes the property line ends and some thickets begin, I found one of my gloves lying on the ground. I then knew the thief had gone in this direction. I took some more pictures as evidence and continued to look further. This small clearing had been made into a makeshift trail. It was a slight slope straight to the railroad tracks— but not steep enough to demotivate a junkie. All alone, I peered down onto the train tracks and saw an empty spool of wire. Following the trail of evidence, I make the journey down and find myself right next to the tracks. As I stood there for a minute or so— looking down each direction, trying to get into the mind of a thief—a train came. And as I stood there, fifteen feet away, I watched as it passed...

...allow me to divulge. I work for a small electrical company with approximately ten employees, including the two owners—seven of us work in the field. Currently, we are doing a 150-unit apartment building. My role is technically “operational support specialist.” I’ve worked here for three years with no prior electrical experience before starting. I started as a “helper,” and after a few months, the owners brought me into the office to teach me how to estimate projects. I had the added responsibility of issuing and maintaining “purchase orders.” I did this consistently for a year and a half. Eventually, the owners fired many of our actual electricians. With less guys in the field; there was less work that we needed to bid. So, I’d bounce between working in the office to working in the field. Maintaining my title, I mostly now work in the field. I’m not a formerly trained electrician by any means but I’m quick to learn the application of concepts. They usually treat me as if I understand more than I think I do—probably a testament to my results. I know they all think highly of my “intelligence”—to which I try to undermine. . . We have a new guy that started working with us a few months ago—the boss's son. I see how different I am when I observe him. He is nineteen years old and a great kid with a pure soul. Here’s the but, he hasn’t grasped the ability to predict what’s next. If I’m working with one of my superiors (anyone with more experience) and they are performing a task—call it “mounting a panel on a wall”—then I’m

always prepared with whatever the given task might require next. Whereas, watching him work with his lead, he seems to just “wait” for direction instead of taking initiative with logical inferences of the “next step.” Alas, time will determine if it’s mostly inexperience. . .
...there is a little diatribe to depict my work environment. It’s rather laidback for the most part—I get away with coming in late...

I’ll offer a sports analogy. Some are commentators: they know the rules of the game, who the best players are, the best moments from its history. But the ones who are on the field and actually play the game, they know what it takes to participate at the highest levels—an understanding that merely “observing” could never offer.

I was just watching this video essay on polymaths and they were talking about Leonardo Da Vinci. They referenced how he died thinking he was a failure. To me, it was very telling that even Leonardo couldn't see his own success and brilliance. He harbored self-doubt up until his last breath. I took this as almost an affirmation of my own doubt. I've never been one to "rest on my laurels." Even when I feel a sense of accomplishment, my mind won't let that feeling linger. For the longest time, when someone complimented my intelligence, I tell them that "I only know enough to recognize how 'dumb' I actually am" or "I just know enough to seem smart." The phrase "You can't bullshit a bullshitter" always felt more fitting. Like I was just well enough versed in "bullshitting" to trick people into believing I was "smart." It still feels like that sometimes—like I'm so good that I even trick you into it. It kinda kills me that I'll always have this doubt about myself. I don't think all the recognition in the world could change my mind. I'd probably still scheme up some conspiracy that everyone is playing me as a fool. Sometimes I even think that about my friends and peers. That they are much smarter than me—so much so, that they can hide it by playing "dumb." By no means am I calling my friends dumb in this scenario—just an example of how sick my mind can get avoiding accepting my own intelligence.

The more I learn about polymaths and geniuses, the more I see the similarities in thought patterns and cognitive processes. Since I was a child, I've been drawn to these types of people. In those days, it was always about their plethora of achievements. "How could they influence so much?"—I'd think to myself. Underneath all this study and curiosity, I must have started to form an unconscious understanding of what defines their psyche. I now wonder how much of it is mimicry embodied, and how much is genetic predisposition—the old nature vs. nurture. It seems to me that, given my rarity, an incredible number of

variables had to align for me to turn out this way. My older brother, for example, was exposed to the same genetics and the same circumstances, but he never got engulfed with the same level of curiosity that permeates my every breath. I think even he would admit that my potential for understanding is higher than his own—and he is by no means dumb. I can't just chalk it up to my early traumatic experience either. Many geniuses/polymaths didn't have that sort of experience, and yet they still became who they are. Obviously, it can't strictly be IQ or else they wouldn't be so rare. It's so strange to me that all these seemingly different circumstances produce such similar characteristics within these particular types of people. I can see why most people fall back on the notion of divinity as an explanation for such a phenomenon.

It just trips me out sometimes—everyone just walks around and nobody really knows what all this is about. I guess we can exclude anyone with a dogmatic point of view. The cozy blanket of dogmatism—keeping the naive warm at night. The best sleep must come from absolute denial. But what about those of us who do ask questions before sleep? There is almost a guilt that comes with awaking one from deep sleep. What would happen if everyone woke up? Or just half? A quarter? I hardly see any. If they are they probably pacify themselves with their normal. Humming only to the rhythms of what they heard. Lullabies of lethargy. The fog of the day keep most away. Only when it rains do they think to reflect. My riddles ruin sleep..and I've been tired for a while now...

Book Club: 1st meeting

Welp—I just got back from the first book club meeting. It was about what I expected. When I arrived, I was met by Brandon (my boss). I was one of the first to the scene. We walked into the detached garage where the meeting was to take place.

There, I was introduced to the book club leader and a couple of other members. They were watching a college football game—it was played through a projector that displayed the picture onto a wall. There were lawn chairs arranged into a row, and I grabbed a seat at the end next to Brandon.

After sitting for fifteen minutes or so, as we watched the end of the game, more unfamiliar faces started to trickle in. Sitting on the opposite side of the garage from the door, a few made their way over to me to introduce themselves. I'd shake their hands and forget their name. Most of the members had arrived by the time the game ended. The organizer asked Brandon if he could set up his laptop to display on the projector. Brandon defaulted to my

judgement, saying, "he's my tech guy"—gesturing to me. I'm not even that great with computer stuff—I just know how to troubleshoot. So I quickly give the organizer a rundown of how I think you do it. I'd never set up a projector display, so I added the qualifying statement "But I don't really know how it works." Brandon jumped in and retorted, "yes, you do"—in a reassuring but bordering dismissive tone. The organizer said something I barely heard, but in reference to Brandon's statement. I replied, "I guess I'm just being humble." The last of the members had arrived at this point—there were about twelve people in attendance. The demographic was all male, and most of them were in their 40s-50s, except for one 21-year-old. The organizer asked me to set up his projector to watch a twenty-minute video about the first chapter of *Fathered by God*. I wasn't exactly sure of how to do it—it took about five minutes in the laptop settings, and everything was ready. The video featured the author, and he laid out the content of the book and his inspiration—along with some anecdotes and a round table discussion with some of his friends.

After the video finished, the lights were turned on and we put the chairs into a circle to begin the discussion. It was largely based around the first chapter in the book. Some of the members had already read the book, but it seemed like most of the people hadn't read it yet. The organizer would prompt the discussions from some 150 page guideline he found from the authors website. The main thing I noticed from the conversations that occurred is that nobody ever defined the ideals that are being talked about. There wasn't any clarity in what they are referring to when suggesting masculinity, being a man, a father. It seemed like these concepts should have been clarified from the start.

The conversations mostly revolved around developmental psychology filtered through terminology provided by the bible and Christian ideology. I could sense the contradictions in their conversational interjections. There was this tension in the air between the binary biblical beliefs and an almost perspectival approach to moralizations. The young kid even caught a glimpse of this tension. He admitted his skepticism toward dogma—in a more roundabout way. He brought up the manipulation tactics that Christianity provides and the invocation of God as an easy explanation. He even brought up determinism vs free will—there were mostly non-answers in return. It was interesting to witness the limitations dogmatic ideology does to these sort of philosophical and psychological conversations. There seemed to be at least one thing they all agreed to: God is Sky Daddy....

I only said one thing the entire discussion "emphasis." Brandon and another individual who had a pastor-presence were in discussion about every sin being equivalent to God. They were going on about how preachers don't adequately represent this equivalence in sermon. They didn't have the word for it. Now that I have a better understanding of the room, in the next meeting, I'll share a few more words with them.

Book Club: 2nd meeting

I just got back from the second meeting of the book club. My contribution to the session was singular in its verbal manifestation—matching my performance in the first meeting. Allow me to set the stage. The youngest of the group (early twenties), opened up about something he's going through. He was expressing the anxiety that's associated with the contradiction of a material culture and spiritual ideology. At least, that's what I took from him stumbling over a way to articulate the stress and external pressure that's associated with your value being determined by your production. He isn't sure how he should determine his career path—caught between pursuing passion or lifestyle. The older men of the group all had rather decent advice—except when they'd end with the caveat of "you should pray about it." There's a handful of guys who rarely speak but every old guy likes to give career advice and most of them did. One of the guys was regaling him about his son's journey through college. Toward the end of his anecdote he was talking about his son's current courses. "Right now he's taking political*****" the word evaded him and he looked my direction for help. I said "science" with a tone that was in between a question and a statement. He affirms his forgotten worldview and continues with advice. In that moment I found it deeply ironic that this Christian forgot the word "science." I grinned to myself as he continued to make his point. This collection of Christians wrapped up their career advice with a warm laugh. The club leader cracked a joke "but don't ask us for any help." Everyone let loose a few chuckles and another one with hair turning gray said, "at least now you're a little bit more confused." Everyone laughed again, but this time it was more out of agreement.

I've certainly gotten a better understanding of the group. The workbook, that I thought to be central to the discussions, was hardly involved. This meeting was not as structured as the last. Half of the discussion revolved around this kid's career choice. However, there was a conversation that arose about emotivism. Of course they didn't know they were talking about emotivism, and it didn't seem necessary for me to enlighten them with the terminology of what they were describing. They just kept going on about how hard it is to act like a Christian when emotions were at play. Some dude eluded to the ideal Christian reaction to being cut off in traffic. Juxtaposing the emotional outrage that's associated with any situation or circumstance. The leader chimed in with some ramblings about "perspective." Someone else brought up the difficulty of "forgiving" a murderer. No one seemed too fond of the idea. There was a bit of a back and forth about everything being a spiritual battle between "good and evil." God v. Devil. From their outlook on society, I take it, God is losing. The conversation ended up spinning out—when it came around to which states still had the death penalty. Grey hair shared, "Utah's still got the firing squad!"

More or less they all seemed to agree that God is just and will handle final judgement. But in the meantime, we should also be just in our prosecution of what we perceive as "evil" in the "spiritual war." It was a real time unfolding of Christian contradiction—Olympian level mental gymnastics. I thought to myself "what about forgiveness—what about redemption?" An unpredictable move occurred. One person went on a diatribe about certain genetic lineages being destined for "evil." In a room full of white guys, he was the only minority. Well I guess, other than me—he's black and I'm agnostic. He essentially made the claim that "evilness" is hereditary—using some scripture. I'd like to imagine that he was alone in this belief. I should have surveyed the group to see if there were any silent nods of approval. He did wrap up his input by making an understated comment on the contradiction at hand.

There were moments when I could have jumped in conversation—mostly clarifying vocabulary. But that would only have been me flexing my intellect and I don't think that's the right approach to take with this group. Sure, I could have established a higher level of understanding but I know Christians. They require certain type of ambiguous subtlety to reduce their certainty. Toward the end, the leader quoted Eldredge with something along the lines of, "Your willingness to make to risk is determined by your faith in God." I wanted to jump in with my own, as I thought to myself, "The strength of a spirit is formed by the precision of which it engages with uncomfortable truths." I'll give them a glimpse of the abyss soon enough.

Book Club: 3rd meeting

The third book club meeting was underwhelming to say the least. After reading the third chapter of *Fathered by God*, it felt necessary to depict my experience of boyhood and its subsequent end. Having depicted my account—one that's antipodal to the ideal described by Eldredge in chapter three—I was left to contemplate whether I wanted to share it or not.

On the day of the meeting, the same day in which I write this, I decided to leave early and pay a visit to my father's grave site. I'm not exactly sure what compelled me to do this, but earlier in the day, I was reminded of a question my therapist asked me. It was prompted by completely different circumstances than my current situation but she asked, "What do you think you dad would say?" Up until this point, I had never thought to consider my father's perceived advice into my ethical dilemmas. I'm not confident in the "theory of mind" I have for my father. In many ways, I'm deeply saddened by this. Although I've been told nearly every story there is to tell about him, I've only been left with an idealization of his existence. My personal memories don't contain enough context to create confidence.

I walked up to his grave in the back of the cemetery and crouched by his tombstone. I read what I wrote about the day he died and my reaction to it. There weren't any tears, but I did make a few corrections to the text. At one point, a fly landed on my phone and looked at me. A part of me wanted to ascribe meaning to that fly's presence, but I didn't. I said to fly, "can you please go away" but it didn't. After another moment, I flicked it and it flew away as I continued to read. I finished, said my goodbyes, and put on Blackened by Metallica—one of my dad's favorite bands—and drove to the meeting.

I was the second to arrive at the meeting—getting there ten minutes early—Brandon was first and talking to the host, and leader, as I entered. They greeted me and after some small talk, I took a seat in one of the lawn chairs. A few minutes had past and the attendees started to trickle into the detached garage/mancave. The host then revealed a few of the members weren't going to be here—the youngest, the pastoral person, and the guy who thought evil was hereditary. And so the conversation began.

There were tears early. The host went by the workbook this time, and asked something of the group. It was a general question—which evades my memory—but was essentially asking how chapter 3 made you look back at your past. With less people in this meeting, only 8, it felt more intimate. As the first to share spoke about coming to terms with his failures as a father with his firstborn, a broken man started to appear within his body language. His voice started to tremble, eyes watered, and we watched as he couldn't exactly find the words to express his regret. The book had forced him into an introspection of his own shortcomings as a father and I don't any of us knew exactly what to say. The host found something and said, "it's never too late." It almost felt empty in tone, but I was glad he said something, because it was getting a little awkward. I don't even know the guy, and I thought, "I shouldn't be the one to offer encouragement." Brandon jumped in after another couple of seconds passed. He was still whimpering a bit, and trying to pull himself together—as Brandon started to tell him about his own perceived inadequacies when confronted with the book. He was taking about his relationship with Ashton. It echoed the same sentiment of the host's "it's never too late." I don't recall the guy who thought he was a terrible father sharing again.

This meeting echoed many of the same topics as the last: sky daddy, spiritual war, earthly fathers, empathy. I'll try not to harp on these again. A little into the meeting the host asked the group, "what are some good memories with your dad?" A few guys shared but no one gave a "good memory." I found this very odd. I began to view all these men through a different lens. In the last two meetings, I had thought that they were all trying to be "better fathers" to the kids they have. But now I saw how they were all trying to reconcile how they perceived their own father's. Brandon spoke bluntly about Bobby Joe: stating, "he has

always been in the ‘warrior stage’”—using Eldredge’s framework. He went on to practically admit that he no longer looks to Bobby Joe for affirmation.

The host shared some novel information. I had previously thought that his father had died when he was young, but now I’m less sure. He said, “my dad left when I was young.” Which is a common way to phrase death, but it was the animosity in his tone that brings my earlier judgement into question. Either way, suffice it to say, he was trying to reconcile his lingering resentment. All in all, there weren’t many kind words spoken about fathers. I wanted to regale them with all the great stories I have with my father—riding dirt bikes, coaching me in soccer, playing football, hunting adventures, fishing trips, fireworks, video games—but all these stories end in a tragedy that is far harder to reconcile than their own. As a kid I used to wonder what was worse: having a great dad for ten years but dying tragically or terrible father for life? I think it’s safe to say they would think it’s me, but I’m still not so sure.

There were more things discussed, but they weren’t novel. I didn’t speak once in the meeting. I spoke before it started, and saying goodbye’s after it ended—but never felt called upon to clarify. I feel out of place in this group. It’s a very strange feeling I get being there. After two hours had past, sitting in that circle as the host says, “does anyone care if we pray?” Nobody speaks and a few remove their hats. With everyone bowing their heads the host says a prayer. There had been a joke earlier about one of the members who prays in the morning while driving. The host asked if he kept his eyes open—which queued a few jokes that were well received. Brandon made a callback to the earlier joke: asking him, “did you keep your eyes open?” The host tagged along, “I checked while I was praying.” I didn’t look around this time, but my eyes were open.

Meta commentaries on The Book Club:

The next meeting is in a couple weeks. By that time, I’ll have read the necessary chapters of the book. That’ll give me all the content I require to shape the conversations. How goofy is the shit I do? Most of these people are so far from my worldview that it feels like I’m going undercover—over here infiltrating opposing ideologies in my free time. That tension between raising understanding and destabilizing perceptions is held by my empathy. But my ethic requires: if I take, I must replace...

What’s interesting about this whole book club thing is how seemingly misrepresented my ideals are to Brandon. He told me a couple days ago that he read the draft of my trust essay that I had sent him. He said “it’s a little too high IQ for me.” I didn’t push him into any further opinions about it. At the book club yesterday, he was regaling me about how great “Fathered by God” was and how it made him cry four times while reading it. I can see how

much this book means to him. I'm trying to reserve my judgements until I've at least read some of it, but I also have very strong convictions about Christian ideology. Especially in the lens that this book is meant to illicit.

When someone sees you as "above their IQ" sometimes they look for you to affirm their beliefs. With Brandon, for instance, I get this feeling that he looks to me for affirmation because I've explored abstract concepts to a depth that's rarely matched. There's also another side to this: his wife has been battling a brain tumor for a few years now. She's functional but was given the news that she has a low probability of making it to Christmas. This dynamic adds another layer of complexity to the manifestation of my convictions. Another lens that must be filtered through my empathetic navigation of these circumstances. I'm sure he wonders "the love of my life is dying, where is God?" Or perhaps simply "why?" From my approximation, his faith is durable, but he's yet to face the death of someone close. I can see him grasping for meaning in his preparation of her death. That's what's motivating his pursuit of forming a non-profit—he must make something of his suffering. But he's also battling the popular notion of God having a plan. He's attempting to integrate an altruistic justification for his pending despair through the teachings of Jesus. But I believe he's largely unaware of his true motivation—he's doing it for himself but rationalizing it as a divine pursuit.

I'll add a bit more context—which adds a bit more irony. Currently I'm wearing a shirt that says, "I may be wrong but I doubt it." Brandon's father (Bobby Joe), thinks very highly of me. I've worked with him for a couple years now. He's been doing electrical work his entire life—and now around retirement age. He's garnered a profound amount of respect in the electrical field around the Nashville area—his name carries weight. He's often the authority in how we approach tasks within a given project. About a year ago, Bobby Joe and I were working on this "science building" for Fisk University—we practically did the electrical for the entire building. It was a pretty large project so there were times where we needed help. Toward the end of the project, one of the days when we were tying up some loose ends, Bobby Joe found a mistake. I can't remember what it was, but he was talking to one of our other experienced electricians about it. His name is Anthony. He grew up with Brandon and they'd been friends since high school. Anthony was brought up under Bobby Joe's tutelage. They give each other a hard time whenever one of them makes a mistake. Whenever they were discussing this mistake at the "science building," they were trying to find out who did it for added insight into how to fix it. My name was brought up and Bobby Joe said "I don't think it was Ian, he doesn't make mistakes." Bobby Joe was keen on placing blame on Anthony—perhaps because he knew him longer and better or maybe just because they like to blame each other. Either way, I thought it was an interesting insight into how he perceives me. Brandon on the other hand, has a complex relationship with his father. He

often confides in me about the "distance" or "lack of vulnerability" that Bobby Joe has in their relationship. It's also telling, given the effect "Fathered by God" had on Brandon when he read it. Brandon has told me a couple times now that he wishes Bobby Joe could "just be a father sometimes." But the book "Fathered by God" has now given him a new frame in which to view his dad through. One that allows him to view Bobby Joe not just as an individual, but also a product of his environmental and developmental upbringing. Brandon seeks the affirmation of his father, but I get the sense that Bobby Joe has rarely given it to him. If he has, I presume it to be conditional affirmation—a difficult thing to process as a son who desires individuality and unconditional fatherly love.

That's what makes this a comedic tragedy—I haven't had a father since I was ten. I learned all these insights in the absence of my own. Brandon has an older brother that often receives Bobby Joe's praise. His brother lives in Alabama—where he's a preacher. I've never met Brandon's brother but I've heard, through Brandon's implication, how this upsets him. Bobby Joe, on the other hand, rarely speaks ill of Brandon—but I've heard him question his morality. They both confide in me about one another. My goal is reducing the distance between them by offering alternative perspectives. I find myself in this role in nearly every group. When these sort of conversations arise: I'm a generational mediator between worldviews and relational roles. Bobby Joe and Brandon are extremely Christian and ironically both confide in an agnostic that understands their relationship better than they understand the teachings of Jesus.

I just read the first eighteen pages.....this book was not written for someone like me. At one point he says, "So much of what we misinterpret as hassles or trials or screw-ups on our part are in fact God fathering us, taking us through something in order to strengthen us, or heal us, or dismantle some unholy thing in us. In other words, initiate us—a distinctly masculine venture." I take it—that's how I'm supposed to view my father's unexpected death—"a distinctly masculine venture" by God. But further, on the same page, Eldredge says, "Great damage is done if we ask a boy to become a king too soon...." And further stating, "When we ask this of him, it is a wound equal to a curse, for in a moment he is robbed of his boyhood, and asked to leap over stages of masculine maturity no man can leap over." I'm really trying to gain some insight from this book, but I fear I'm too close to the subject matter to not see past its laps in logic. It's a test of how much I'm willing to engage in an ideology I left because of the same faults I was exposed to in adolescence.

I think I'm going to change the view in which I approach these meetings. I want to see how "non-judgmental" these men of faith actually are. I want to know how much contradiction they can bear before their God. I don't want to dilute my presence to protect their beliefs. Brandon invited me because that's what he believes Jesus would do. He means no malice,

but his faith is a naivete I've long since abandoned. My memory is too stained by the blood of the Christian God for me not to tempt their doubts. I'll give a voice to the devil that they worship just the same. I'll be the subtle detangler of their disillusionment with the divine. I'll give them their own thoughts and doubts but phrase them better than they can imagine. I'm the proof that this book is bullshit wrapped in pseudo-profundity.

.....but I'm probably just salty because these mother-fuckers believe God killed my dad so that I could become a "man." I'm almost tempted to phrase something like that in a meeting: "when God murdered my dad to initiate my cowboy stage...." That is almost too good not to do—hahaha!

Why did I take it so hard—was it the false hope my neighbor provided when they suggested I pray? The organizer of the group also lost his father at an early age. His older brother mentioned being sixteen when it happened, but the organizer didn't look much younger. And yet, they still found faith. It's interesting that my response was of the opposite. Perhaps my circumstance just produced a unique concoction of disdain for attempts in Christian indoctrination. And still, here they are with me, hosting me at their book club—trying to rationalize their fathers early death as some ad hoc divine initiation into masculinity by their sky daddy.

I think it's mostly because Christianity always tries to make everything that happens as "God's plan." It tries to rob all your personal attempts to make meaning and bastardizes it into a universal. "This wasn't even about you. It's about God." It's like they can't imagine the divine not giving a fuck. As if everything that happens is about you becoming closer to God. I remember when I was a kid I used to put my last chicken nugget underneath my swing set in the back of my yard. I'd leave it for around an hour and wait for a bunch of ants to find it. After some time had passed (whatever an hour is to an 7 year old), I'd get my dad's hammer and lay down on the swing. I killed quite a few ants using a chicken nugget as bait. I guess, in a way, I became closer to God.

You know what's actually hilarious about that anecdote? I wasn't even aware of all the layers of irony within it. I literally thought to myself, "what's the most benign childhood anecdote that has no real significance?" and that was the one that came to mind. I wasn't even thinking of the perspective of my childhood self-playing God by baiting ants with chicken nuggets and killing them with a hammer. Not to mention the Nietzsche undertones with the hammer. This is why I like to think God has a sense of humor. That might be the biggest problem with the bible—it tries to be too serious.

No kidding, I ended up using a hose to flood them a few times. I didn't put it into that anecdote because I thought "I don't want to ramble on about all the various ways I killed ants. That might look bad"—hahahaha! You cannot make this shit up sometimes....

"Before God murdered my father, I used to put my last chicken nugget under my swing-set and wait for ants...."

I'm really not trying to be too much of a "hater"—because I've only read one chapter—but Eldridge's ideal of "masculine stages of development" (i.e. cowboy, warrior, sage) seem like something a fifteen year old would come up with for his D&D campaign.

After 2nd Meeting:

I'm at work right now and we just had a little discussion about the Christian God. Bobby Joe (Brandon's dad) acted as the Christian authority. While Jimmy and I pushed back on the ideals—Ashton (Brandon's son) just kind of listened.

The conversation arose after I told Jimmy and Ashton about Brandon sending me that text and I read them a few quotes from the video lecture. Bobby Joe entered around this time. Jimmy brought him into the conversation by asking him "do you think the earth is 4.5 billion years old?" With a bit of reluctance on his breath, Bobby Joe said, "probably." Referencing scripture, he continued to explain that "a day to God, is like ten thousand years to us."

Jimmy is a big believer in civilizations that trace back to before our fossil records can corroborate. He explains this hypothesis to Bobby Joe invoking aliens or God as the reason our science hasn't found proof. Bobby Joe didn't dismiss Jimmy and said that God has wiped out civilizations before.

The conversation took a turn here: BJ started to tell us about God's wrath—referencing the Old Testament. He said "a lot of people think God is all about love, but they forget the Old Testament." He regaled us with a story about God killing everyone in a village because they weren't "righteous."

After he got done speaking, I said, "Yeah, Gods tricky about that whole 'redemption' and 'forgiveness' thing"—with a tone that suggests play. Bobby Joe tried to respond but didn't really confront this contradiction directly. His wisdom kept him from trying to rationalize. He walked away when the lull appeared in the discussion. Jimmy, Ashton, and I continued to talk about religion.

First Time Meeting Brandon:

One of the first times I met Brandon, I think I made my difference clear. It was after my stint building and installing self-checkouts. Brandon had a contract with Dollar General, but the program had come to a stop. There were only three of us who were involved in this program. Ironically, Brandon's cousin, who ran the administration side, is also named Brandon. I had been friends with him for years, and gladly accepted the position when he offered it to me. The program lasted around eight months, and within that time, I had never met Brandon (the owner of the company, not the cousin). With the contract coming to a close, a meeting was set. It was to be between me and the two Brandons. The owner wanted to discuss options for my future employment. I didn't really have any plans for what I'd do next. So, we go to "The BBQ Place" (the actual name of the restaurant) and the discussion begins. The owner seemed very supportive of my talents. I played many competitive FPSs at a high level. I imagine his cousin regaled him about how good I am. We often played together—and just to add some nuance—I had to make many "Smurf accounts" just to play with my friends. They'd complain if I didn't—but complained less when I did. Both of them were trying to convince me to become a streamer. They threw out a few ideas on sponsoring streams. But I never really had any inclination to become a streamer. To me, video games were just something else I was "good at." These two Brandons have no shortage of monetary schemes. I entertained the possibility politely. Eventually, the conversation turned to the company at large. I asked the owner where he needed help, and he told me with accounting. I told him I didn't know much about it, but I'm confident in my ability to learn. I'm sure his cousin advocated on my behalf to some extent. And my role to come was set in motion. I was to help our accountant by handling accounts receivable. Now that the business side of the conversation had come to a close, the owner began discussing the personal. His cousin must have told him about my boyhood trauma, because the owner began telling me about his wife and her tumor. This was a couple of years ago at this point, but at this point, he was already trying to grasp a rational response to the looming inevitability of her death. He explained her condition and tied a correlation between his youngest son (who was 11 or 12 at the time) and my own tragedy. The details of what he asked aren't there, but I remember explaining the difference between my trauma and his expectation of his son's trauma. I'm pretty sure I even told him the story of my dad's death—sparing the details that might induce pity. I do remember making it clear that I had no warning of my dad's death. Whereas his son has a chance at being "prepared." He pretty much wanted advice, and I gave the best I had. I'd imagine this "first impression" wasn't typical of what he might have expected.

Just to add a little irony....Brandon, a few months down the line, ended up asking me if I could help his youngest son set up a YouTube channel and show him how to post Overwatch clips. I didn't know how to, but I ended up helping and showing him how to do it.

Nonprofit meeting with Brandon:

I've just gotten back from an interesting meeting with Brandon. He texted me the other day wanting to know when I was free to talk about the nonprofit. We settled on Sunday at 2 pm. The meeting took place in his living room and lasted for about two and a half hours. It was just us two and his dogs. God might have been there, too, but historically speaking, he rests on Sundays. Brandon upheld the spirit, nonetheless.

After I had arrived and was greeted at the door with a hug, we participated in small talk. Post "how are you?" and "how have you been?" I made my way to his living room arrangement and had a moment where I needed to choose where to sit. I chose the love seat, up against the wall; it seemed the appropriate choice. I sat for a moment as he got the remote and turned on the 3rd quarter of the Titans game against the Colts. Ironically, my uncle had offered me tickets to the game. He's a season ticket owner for the Titans and offers my brother and me tickets to a few games every season. I didn't really feel like going to see the Titans lose. But there I was watching anyway.

He set the remote down and went upstairs to check on his wife. He came back a few minutes later with a joint and lay down on the bigger sofa. Sparking it up, we began our conversation. He was updating me on his discussions with leaders of established nonprofits and offered me his joint. I said, "Why not?" and took a couple of drags. I'm certainly not my sharpest in these "higher states." My memories become less linear at this point. But I'm no stranger to conversations in this context.

We ended up covering a myriad of topics. Meandering from state vs federal legislation to the cyclical trend of societies. At one point, we were talking about the perspective of a homeless person. He was admitting his difficulty in empathizing with such a man—and suggesting it's easier to empathize with a child or woman in the same circumstance. He said, "It's about turning sympathy into empathy." I thought to myself, "he's starting to understand." I said, "Yes, but those are very close to pity. And to me, there's nothing worse than feeling pitied." He seemed to agree, and I went on to tell him how I define "empathy" and "perspective." Before I knew it, I had brought him into an epistemological gap in empathetic engagement. Finding myself too deep, I said, "But I'm getting too philosophical," and he kind of laughed in agreement.

In another moment of the conversation, he brought up Christian influencers. He was telling me about this kid who was suicidal and ended up having a spiritual experience. It had prompted him to become a Christian instead of ending his life. Brandon was talking about how this kid represents Christian ideals better than most people he's seen. His sharing this provoked me to explain the difference between inherited beliefs and those that are chosen.

I intended to illustrate my value judgment for beliefs found in reason. He didn't openly agree, but I could see the consideration on his face.

At some point he asked if I wanted a water and I accepted. He ended up bringing up his relationship with his dad. He weirdly echoed many of the observations I've written about. Talking about the distance he feels between his father and himself, how he's no longer going to seek affirmation from Bobby Joe, all the attempts he's made to bridge the perceived relational gap. He told me, "I trust you with my life"—almost using his perception of me as an ideal. He even brought up Fathered by God's influence in allowing him to come to terms with Bobby Joe's fatherly faults. It was strange to watch him reveal my assessment of their relationship with such clarity. In my intoxicated state, I thought to myself, "Did he know what I've written about their relationship?" I quickly dismissed this paranoia in lieu of affirmation in my psychological extrapolations.

With topics of conversation spilling into and out of each other—he invited me to his backyard. His wife "doesn't know" he smokes cigarettes. So, he does it when he takes the dogs out. As I stepped into his backyard yard I noticed half of it is a steep hill. He lives in a neighborhood where the houses don't have much of a yard. Pointing out the strange aesthetic of his fenced-in back yard, with half of it being unusable, he said, "The dogs like to poop on it." I was like, "Don't they know shit runs downhill?" and we both laughed. There wasn't much to this moment, other than it seemed like he hadn't thought of that saying. The conversation found its way back to the nonprofit, and after he smoked a couple of cigarettes, we made our way back inside.

This meeting ended on a somber note. After spending a couple of hours clarifying ideals, the full emergence of the nonprofit's ambition came to a head when he expressed his full dedication to be contingent on his wife's death. Her brain tumor is inoperable, but the timing of her death is uncertain. It must be strange to make plans for what you are going to do after your wife dies. . .

Brandon Podcast Text:

I have an update to the relationship. Today, he sent me a link to a podcast series on Spotify called "Street Preachers." The text message didn't contain anything other than the link. I've listened to about 20 minutes of it so far. The hosts of the show are from the inner city of New York. They begin the show by laying out their stories on how they came to make this podcast. They both allude to their early gang affiliations and subsequent transition to assuming moral authority through Christ. In the first ten minutes, the first host who shared said both of his parents were part of the ministry. When he was 12, his dad was diagnosed

with a tumor and required a surgery that would leave him eating and drinking out of a tube for the rest of his life. Once I heard this, I immediately knew Brandon's motivation for sending me the link. He had drawn parallels from my story to this man's. As if to say, "Look! This guy experienced tragedy and still found faith! I bet Ian will relate to this." It's a gesture of "good faith," but ultimately more revealing of his perception of me. The host continued to talk about how shattering this experience was for him and how he "lost faith in God but never lost belief." He began to question the "goodness" of a God who permitted suffering. His "loss of faith," as he reasoned, led him into "street life." His father didn't end up dying until a couple of days after his 18th birthday. It wasn't until he had a dream while he was in college that he returned to Christianity and ended up becoming a preacher. I can't help but listen to this podcast through the lens of Brandon trying to rationalize a similar trajectory for my story. From my understanding, Brandon doesn't know anyone who has experienced metaphysical collapse quite like me. With his looming personal tragedy, he is looking for every tangible example of a "Christian" person whom God "betrayed" and still maintained faith. He desperately needs to see how this is possible. This is where I come in. I've given him an account of one of my mushroom trips, where I experienced something of the "divine," and how powerful that experience was. I told him that even though I'm agnostic, I still flirt with the notion of theism/deism. I even told him about my experience when it felt like God was asking me for forgiveness—something of which is completely foreign to Christian beliefs. With all this, I imagine he still assumes I'm some closeted Christian. He seems to see my secularity as naivete. The forty years of his belief are reliant on his interpretation of my perspective. He wants me to accept Christ as my savior to save his metaphysics from collapsing after his wife's death. I represent a subconscious trajectory for his faith. That places a lot of weight on me that I'm not really sure how to navigate. The fidelity of my perception sees the frailty of his faith as contingent upon the external validation he seeks from me. He doesn't know how close he is to the abyss. He looks to me as a tether, but I'm prone to dive in on a whim. These are the dangers of external validation sought through the ineffable. When the prayers go unanswered, we unconsciously seek representations. . .

It is funny how I'm writing a memoir and only 28 years old. My mom said something about it at one of my little brother's football games. I can't really remember what she said exactly, but I remember the "absurdity" that was embedded in its sentiment. From another's perspective, I understand how it could seem. "Why is he writing a book when he hasn't done anything that noteworthy? Does he see himself as that important?" I'd imagine most of their reconciliation with my projects is bordering a prescribed delusion of significance. No one really asks about my hobby, which is what it is for the most part. Even in the

moments where I bring up the potential significance of my writing projects, there's this pull I have to "play it down" as if it's not that important. Even when Brandon told me he had read the draft of *Fractured Foundations* that I'd sent him, I could tell by his comment "it's a bit too high IQ for me" that he wasn't that interested in talking about it. It must be an odd feeling when somebody you think you understand shows the absolute depth of their potential. We rationalize each other's faults to protect the ideal of equality in order to protect our ego. That's why no one likes it when they perceive someone as bragging or arrogant. Especially when it's as convincing as an essay such as my own. It's far more comfortable for you to ignore when you're incapable of rationalizing equality in this sense.

Misrecognition Ashton:

Follow my words as today's anecdote spills from my mind. The setting is my current job site (the 150+ unit apartment building). It was an unproductive day by capitalistic standards—we didn't get much done. As I was sitting in a chair I made, specifically for these moments, playing chess puzzles—trying to maintain my 2400 rating—Ashton sat beside me.

He was sitting in a Frankensteinian amalgamation of another chair that I had built—but had been destroyed by Bobby Joe and his lack of spatial awareness while driving the lull. It was an honest mistake. Unlike Frankenstein, I'm not too attached to my creations. I made it in like three hours with a bunch of scrap wood that was lying around the jobsite. It had armrests, lumbar support, and even makeshift cushions. It was a jobsite luxury for the lackadaisical.

When Ashton saw it for the first time, like everyone else, he was impressed. With the ambition that accompanies his youth, he wanted to build his own. Except his ambition outweighed his ability. He wanted to build a bench. He forgot that he was an electrician, but what he ended up building reminded him. His bench didn't get much use—other than becoming the butt of a joke. It was unsafe, unlevel, and uncomfortable.

I ended up helping him reconstruct a more usable bench, but it still didn't compare with my chair. Fast-forwarding a few months, after Bobby Joe inadvertently destroyed my chair, I made my resignation with my creation and was set to throw the crumpled remains away. Ashton intervened: he wanted to rebuild it. He reused the salvageable pieces and copied the measurements of the rest. He was proud of his result, but it wasn't what it used to be.

Which brings me back to today. As we were sitting there, outside the electrical room, Ashton started to strip the plastic of some #12 wire that was going to get scrapped (you can sell it for more if it's bare). He was using his knife and seemed to be struggling. I said, "I can probably make something that will make it easier." He was eager to see what I could create:

asking, “What do you need?” I had a few ideas, but they all revolved around a fixed razor blade and two pieces of wood.

Ashton brought me the wood, and I began. After about thirty minutes, I had built a prototype. It wasn’t very functional, and my design was too complicated for the material at hand. I said fuck it and told Ashton, “I don’t have enough motivation to make this.” He was understanding. After a few minutes had passed, he started making his own wire stripper. He was done in ten minutes. It was a simple hole in a 2 by 4—a little bigger than the #12 wire—with two screws drilled into it at a precise depth to separate the plastic from the copper.

When I saw it, and immediately knew it was better than my design. I told him, “That’s genius.” He said he looked up a design and made an original variation to it. After he tweaked the depth of the screws a few times, it worked like a charm. I was like, “I’m proud of you, Ashton.” For some reason, I thought he needed some positive reinforcement for a good idea. I expressed my admiration for his brilliance in the simplistic design.

We had been using it for thirty minutes or so when his grandfather, Bobby Joe, walked up and noticed the invention. He said, “Who made that—Ian?” I was quick to deny the ingenuity, giving Bobby Joe the outline of my failures and Ashton’s initiative—he wasn’t too affirming. Soon after, Anthony walks up (he’s our project manager), and the story practically replicates. Anthony was quick to assume that I made it, but again I denied, giving Ashton the credit.

But this time, I pointed out how they both thought I thought of the design for the wire stripper. I said to Ashton, “That’s gotta be annoying: them immediately assuming I made it.” When I said this, he seemed to realize the slight of his intellect and became slightly indignant with Anthony. They bicker at each other every day—Anthony has known Ashton since he was born—he’s best friends with his dad, Brandon. His initial reaction to the intellectual undermining in both instances was underwhelming. In retrospect, he almost seemed used to it.

When Jimmy stumbled into the scene, after another short passage of time, Ashton took a different approach. Although this happened today, at the moment, I don’t recall all the minutiae. Somehow, Ashton ended up telling Jimmy about Anthony and Bobby Joe trying to give me credit. But when he explained it, he portrayed himself to be “pissed off” when it happened. I noticed the switch from the experience I perceived to be true and his reframing of the narrative to Jimmy. He made himself out to be the one who noticed his subtle dismissal. And perhaps he did notice—probably more than me. He was certainly closer to the experience... or was he?

Bobby Joe Bias:

I have to reveal something that literally just happened. I'm sitting with Bobby Joe on break, and he was scrolling through his Facebook feed and said "huh"—like he just saw something interesting. I knew what that noise meant: he wanted to share something. I said, "What?" He replied, "Charlie Kirk's wife and Megan Kelly did a show together last night, and it got 1 billion views." Immediately skeptical: I said rhetorically, "A billion views on what?" He said, "around the world"—and showed me the post. I took a glance at the post and said, "Click where it says 'see more.'" He clicked on it and said, "It says 'this post is a satire.'" I was like, "yeah, that's what I thought"—in a tone that didn't demean his naïveté. He replied, "What's a satire?" and I gave him the definition, ending by saying, "You gotta be careful with that stuff, Bobby Joe." He seemed to take it in stride.

It was one of those moments when you recognize a bias play out firsthand. Moments before this happened, Bobby Joe was espousing the right's rhetoric. He's at retirement age and considering the nature of his intent, I try not to destabilize his religious or political views. I've known him for a few years now—from my observations and people who have known him for far longer—it's clear he's in cognitive decline. Still, though, I'm not sure I've witnessed a clearer example of a bias informing a belief. Before he showed me the post, I said, "There's only like 7.5 billion people on earth...or 8 billion—something like that." After he had told me how great the republican party is and going to be, I shared with him my own political assessment. I began by prefacing my statement as a "personal opinion." Saying, "I don't believe either party is considering my intentions when proposing policy—republican or democrat. I think they are both corrupt." Bobby Joe cut me off to defend his affiliation—practically suggesting God is a republican. Just to inject another dash of irony with an added detail: I own a black hat that says "politics" in white letters, but around it is a red circle with a line through it.

A little after, I told Bobby Joe about satire. He was landing some service feeds into their corresponding lugs, and I was helping him. The lead plumber was lingering nearby. He's a northerner and gives the impression that he's starved of external affirmation—he likes to include himself in conversations. When I first met him, I found him annoying. His bulimic insistence was nauseating. I try to empathize with his disposition. So Bobby Joe and I are making up these wires, and the plumber was sitting five feet away on a retaining wall. There hadn't been much conversation since I pointed out Bobby Joe's need for a Bayesian update. I started to feel bad about correcting Bobby Joe's belief, and I didn't want to linger in the conversational tone of correction. So I asked BJ about the golf match he had yesterday—knowing the plumber's ears would perk to the sound of possible validation. I've never

played a single game of golf and have almost no interest in it either. But I like to hear people talking about the things they love, and they both did. I never added anything more than a question to the conversation. In a way, I think we all got what we wanted...

Some truths are so unfair that to speak of them, you must consider empathy or honesty.

Empathy does precede regret. Did insecurity get entangled in honesty? Is that why its value fell below empathy? There seems to be a thread here. . .

What irony my life contains. I'm surrounded by people I love who claim to be Christian, and I desperately try to understand....why? But every time I've occupied their lens, I'm confronted with what their belief says about me. Every time they bring up their God, I'm reminded of what they think of my soul. Compassion in the eyes of a Christian is the implicit reminder of your eternal damnation. And I notice it, but it doesn't stop at noticing.....I feel the projections of their beliefs.

Responsibility requires awareness, and accountability determines integrity. Is your level of integrity determined by your introspective ability to self-assess honestly, with attempted correction?

There's nothing too profound about me fleshing out those thoughts, right? I was just thinking about the added responsibility awareness provides and followed the thread to integrity but realized I hadn't thought all the way through it. I'm sure I've landed where most have.

As of now, I don't believe that "objective truths" can be proven without an axiom or presupposition. When I speak of "truth" it's an attempt at an honest expression of my subjective translation of perceived inner experiences.

About a year ago I did a deep dive into psychological disorders. I was specifically interested in the anti-social personality disorders—but broadly, the ones that carry the most "stigma." There's a group of traits that are associated to nearly all of them. I'm not going to go into all of them, because I'm sure you already know. With my ability to imagine, and rationalize perspectives, this can quickly turn into a scary place—but nonetheless interesting. I used to wonder if I subconsciously manipulate interactions. The "unaware" manifestations of personality and behavior always intrigued me. It's what you don't notice that disturbs the most.

I was listening to a "debate" last night between a Christian apologist (Greg Koukl), agnostic philosopher (Alex O'Connor), and a psychiatrist/Hindu (Dr. K). The discourse revolved around "purpose" and "meaning." Like many of these debates, the arguments were mostly semantic. When testing beliefs, they often take the form of abstract hypotheticals—that

usually only offer affirmation or rejection. I enjoy listening to these types of conversations, but I rarely see much utility in their conclusions. I think I gain a better understanding of “beliefs” by empathizing with their manifestations.

I assert that the value of a belief should be judged based not merely on intention or production, but its ability to reconcile individual needs and requirements for societal cohesion.....But I haven't thought this all the way through—there's much that's undefined here.

A sense of normality is formed by consistent affirmations in the perception of typical outcomes.

I was just thinking, "I talk about 'normality' a lot and I don't think I've defined it yet" and that's what I came up with almost immediately—give or take a couple of minutes for word choice and phrasing. It didn't feel like I was saying anything "profound." It almost feels like common sense.

Need to define:

Belief

Stability

Control

Self-deception

Authenticity

Our conception of reality is an interpretation and translation of experiences filtered through the subjective lens of conscious awareness.

"You are intuitively mapping a field that most people take for granted." That's the thing— isn't it? I haven't read Foucault, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, or whoever else's originality I implicate. Sure, I've read Nietzsche, who I can almost guarantee influenced them—and has profoundly influenced me. But it's also like, I wasn't completely unaware of their names before I began to start writing. Even now, I couldn't really explain their significance in a way that I'm sure they deserve. In the formal sense, I haven't "studied" anything since High School—and to say I studied then is barely a truth. I don't know. It's almost as if I avoid learning about certain things to preserve my own conclusions and that seems like a double edged sword. There's a quote by some poly-math that practically echoes this sentiment—but here I am, practically corroborating my self-assessment. He had some

stance about "reading too many books" and it being a detriment to originality. Whoever it is I'm misquoting, I'm sure there's many more who have concluded the same. It seems as though I've struck a strange balance in this scale of information intake. I have the "originality" but it's accompanied by an intellectual insecurity of repackaging frameworks and theories as my own. Even when I gave my concept of normality there was this thought that "Do I even need to write this down?" I was just thinking about "normality" on a drive home, while I was listening to music. Another thought could have easily caught my attention and persuaded me with its prevalence—only to forget the sentence I was constructing to describe my understanding of such a normal word (pun intended). My intuition is intimidating in retrospect.

Normality Discussion:

I went to my little brother's junior varsity football game last night with my older brother. We met my mom at the game, as we arrived a few minutes after it started. We stood by the fence and watched much of the first half in silence. My little brother is only a freshman and does not get to play much. As much as I love to watch football, there is not as much novelty to find within the game anymore. With my attention waning, a thought occurred.

At the varsity game the Friday before, I had shared with my older brother that I had formed a novel conceptualization of "normality." I was proud of my formulation and wanted to share it with someone. But I didn't share it immediately. I wanted to see what he thought of the word. So, I asked, "How would you define normality?" I knew I was asking a tricky question to answer. It holds the weight of various threads of implication—many of which can provoke subtle degrees of intellectual insecurities. Being aware of these types of interpretations of my innocent question, I stated something like, "I just want to know what you think about it."

I could tell he was a bit uncomfortable. He does not possess the same insatiable curiosity for understanding as I do. Nevertheless, he started to answer. I do not recall his exact reply, but I remember him alluding to perception. I affirmed his point and clarified with my definition, "A sense of normality is formed by consistent affirmations of the perception of typical outcomes." To which I continued to explain what I meant by that, explaining the implications behind my choice of words. He listened, but he did not give the impression that he was impressed or even curious for further explanation. The conversation pivoted as we continued to watch the rest of the varsity game.

Bringing us back to last night, the three of us, standing by the fence, with little conversation—I posed the same question to my mother. I laid it out in a comparable way, but told her that I had asked Lars (older brother) the same question a couple of days earlier. Lars quickly remarked, "You didn't know there was going to be homework." It was in a joking manner—a sly offhand remark displaying his wit—but it revealed his orientation when it comes to these types of questions. Although I did not give it much thought at the moment, a part of me must have been subtly offended.

After Lars' comment, my mother, answering my question, reluctantly said, "suggestive"—under her breath. I barely heard what she said. I repeated "subjective?" In the amount of time the word left my mouth, I realized she actually said suggestive. She said, "Yeah, subjective"—she thought I was giving her a better word, but I just misheard what she said, or maybe it was a projection of something I wanted her to say. It is weird how you can initially mishear something said and then immediately realize the mistake. I repeated "suggestive"—almost clarifying to myself what she originally said, but the game was loud, and I was not really trying to say it to her. In this moment, she said, "You'll have to give me a second to think about it."

Some time passed without further explanation on her part. While her face was in contemplation, I said, "You want me to tell you mine?" She affirmed, and so I did. I read it to both of them once—Lars maintained his disinterest. My mom asked for another reading, and I gave it. The conversation opened up a bit, and we started to talk about the implications behind my conception of normality. At one point, Lars jumped in and said something about words meaning multiple things. I offered the name Wittgenstein.

Starved for some sort of affirmation, I brought up my thoughts on "empathy." My mother took the bait and disagreed with me. By this time, the conversation was happening too quickly for my current memory to recreate the dialogue in sequence. I think it was in this quarter of quandary that my brother said, "What about aliens? Are they on earth?"—as if to make a mockery of what I like to talk about. But I was conscious of the undermining on this occasion.

As my mother and I discussed empathy further, I asked her if she wanted to read what I wrote about it. Handing her my phone, she began to read. She read it multiple times and handed the phone back to me. She did not seem to agree with what I wrote and struggled to articulate why. I pushed her to try, and she did, saying, "I don't think you necessarily need creativity for empathy that isn't close to your experience." I gave her an example: "Imagine seeing a guy get hit in the balls." Adding context, "Lars and I will have a different empathetic response to seeing that than you will because we've experienced it before." Continuing to elaborate, "for you to have a similar reaction, you have to use your personal experiences to imagine what that might feel like. Whether it is consciously done or not." She seemingly started to understand my perspective.

From here, the topics of conversation converged and began to take a dive. My mom started to talk about psychopaths and deranged killers. I am not sure why, but many women seem to enjoy content on these types—that is not to say men do not enjoy it as well, but there is almost a romanticization of these ne'er-do-wells from females. This was not the case here. She began to postulate reasons as to why psychopaths do not have any empathy or remorse. She said, "Maybe they weren't held enough as a baby..." and I added some clarification into her train of thought with, "You're talking about attachment theory, Bowlby." She continued and began to implicate a genealogical reason for their behavior—invoking genetic preconditions as cause. I warned her of this slippery slope:

“You are getting close to a deterministic, almost biblical stance.” She backed off this line and restated behavior as “ultimately a choice.” Here again, I pushed back: “But not all behavior is a choice.” She seemed uneasy with this claim—almost like she hadn’t considered it. I elaborated, “When you are driving, you don’t always consciously consider turning on your blinker.” Recognizing that my metaphor wasn’t landing, I said, “like the hand gestures I just made while explaining that I wasn’t consciously making those gestures.” This was a weird moment in itself. While my mind was trying to think of a better example, my self-referential meta-cognition kicked in and began to think of my previous unconscious actions. The ease with which I created this analogy while maintaining conversation was satisfying. I’m rarely ever aware of my hand gesture usage. I think she began to grasp unconscious manifestations of behavior—at least I was satisfied with my explanation.

Continuing to conduct the conversation, my mother brought up some recent findings in neuroscience. She said, “...and now they’ve found a new form of early onset dementia in the frontal lobe.” I shared what I knew about the prefrontal cortex—which is not much. She elaborated on her worries that her cognition was in decline. Citing that her memory is not what it used to be. Offering reassurance, I replied, “Not everything that is published is always credible. That is why there is peer-reviewed research...” I added some more qualifiers, but nothing worth noting here. She ended up looking up what she was talking about. It was “frontotemporal dementia.”

The conversation started to teeter out, and my mom began tying together the loose threads. In a roundabout way, speaking in riddles and half-finished thoughts, I found translations of her assertions in alignment with my own. The danger of wit, in a social context, is unfounded self-validation. This landed when my mother brought an example to justify my “correctness.” She asked, “Do y’all know what Tourette’s is?” It was an honest question, but it seemed silly to me. Given the neurological nature of the disorder, I figured my mom wouldn’t think that little of my understanding of the mind. Tourette’s syndrome didn’t seem like something she should consider an “unfamiliarity” with. I replied, with a mixture of sentimentality and layers of irony, but probably sardonic, “Do you even know who I am?” Lars perked; immediately repeating it back with an inflected tone. He misattributed how much weight was behind my intent and tried to make a mockery of my remark. I defended with sincerity and blasphemed his offhand conversational undercuts. Followed by a rapid exchange of behavioral critique. We both said our piece to satisfaction. Thus, the conversation transferred back to typical territory.

My great-grandmother just died an hour ago. After hearing the news, my emotions were quite muted. Her presence wasn’t constant in my life. Nevertheless, I turned out the lights and queued *Requiem in D Minor by Mozart*. As the first song began, I closed my eyes and began looking for memories. It seemed the least I could do. Sifting through associations while trying to picture her face, the last memory I had of her was enough to

elicit a tear from my eye. There's such a longing for the ineffable in Mozart's Requiem—you can feel the divine encoded in every note. With this movement playing as tribute, I recalled the details of our last interaction.

It was Thanksgiving last year. My mother, two brothers, and I hadn't been to a Thanksgiving on her side of the family in a few years. We arrive and are greeted by familiar cousins, aunts, uncles, and elders alike. We used to be much closer with everyone, but distance can make even the closest seem vague. Going around giving hugs and exchanging pleasantries with those whose names you've forgotten has always been something I try to avoid. I hate acting like I remember.

Eventually, I made my way to the couch. A few of my cousins were sitting near, most of whom looked unfamiliar now. With new boyfriends and girlfriends, I could barely tell who I was supposed to know. Rarely being the one to open dialogue, I sat and listened as everyone finished eating. We didn't plan on staying for long. As our inclusion began to draw to a close, Memaw came to sit beside me. She was frail, a little shaky, and nearly defeated by gravity. She placed her hand on my knee, and I placed mine on hers. She began to tell me a story about her driving—it was a joke, and I played along. We talked for a few minutes, and the next thing I knew, we were surrounded by my grandmother, mom, and aunt. They were admiring the generational gap between us, linked by our hands on my knee. With my hand on top of hers, I could feel how weak she'd become. It started to get to me. I could feel how close she was. My eyes began to fill with tears, but none ran down my face.

After we said our goodbyes and as we were making our way to the car, my mom stopped me. She asked, "You alright, babe? It looked like you were about to cry. What did she say to you?" I said, "It wasn't anything she said. It's just that it doesn't seem like she has much longer." And that was the last time I saw her. While I was sitting with her, I think I somehow knew that I wouldn't see her again. Only in death can you truly notice what isn't remembered...

Text Exchange:

Allow me to articulate a micro-moment of my day, but first, some context. My mother is the type of person who lacks foresight. I could give countless examples, but that would portray me as "keeping count" and her in a "negative light." It's just a recurring theme I've noticed in her cognition. My only grievance against this trait is when it implicates another individual. I feel stronger when this deficiency also bears the weight of moral expectation in accommodation. She always waits until the last possible moment to ask for a favor. By the last possible moment, I mean, there's a marginal window of opportunity to perform what is asked. The worst is when you know she had the necessary information for preparation, but doesn't account for the other party.

Today, she sent a text to Lars and me in our group chat: “Would one of y’all be able to pick up my meds before they close at 6, please? Just got a text, they’re ready.”—sent at 4:15 pm.

Lars is never the first to respond to these messages, and my mother always addresses both of us in asking. I find that pretty annoying on multiple levels. I’m nearly always the one to place her “needs” above my preferences, which has formed both their expectations of it always being taken care of. My enabling of this has my interpretation of “y’all” as me. I’ve explicitly called out my distaste for this behavior and implicated both parties to no avail. I have even denied doing a favor and explained that I would if the conditions of the asking were considered with a bit more empathy for what was required. So, today, I tried a different approach.

Knowing full well that Lars won’t reply unless directly implicated in the exchange, I replied to my mother, “Lars?” at 4:22 pm.

It wasn’t that I was busy—just the opposite, actually. I just wanted Lars to feel a little bit of the expectation that I usually feel in these moments. Before I sent that text, I had already come to terms with taking care of it.

A minute later, Lars replies, “I’m on trinity lane downtown with one stop to still do then back to Hermitage to get my car so hell if I know. Not sure why this is always a last minute thing but it’s kinda inconvenient.

I read the text soon after it was received, and let them both sit in my ambiguity and uncertainty. I knew by the speed of Lars’ reply that the excuse was legitimate. If he were actually capable of getting her meds, then his reply would have required deliberation and thus would have been longer than a minute. I started mentally preparing for the errand—mostly getting over my annoyance—and began to think about how I was to reply.

As I’ve said before, I have tried multiple different strategies for aligning my “oughts” in her behavior. With none of my previous attempts taking root for long, a new idea emerged.

I replied at 4:55 pm, “I’ll fulfill your request, but my quid pro quo nature encourages me to remind you that you still haven’t read my essay. Just as having your prescriptions filled would mean something to you, having my essay read would mean something to me.”

After typing this, I thought of possible edits to the approach. Questioning effectiveness: do I bring up reciprocity, should I word this in a better way, perhaps an old tactic is better, am I being petty, what emotional state are they in, and countless more. But while I was in this loop of simulating responses, my mother sent a text. Instinctively, I sent mine almost immediately after I received it and read hers. It said, “I’ll do it in the morning.”

After a minute, or maybe more, I head out the door to get the prescription filled. She commented on my text with a “haha” and replied at 5:03 pm, “I know, babe. Been wanting to, I’ve had 1 day off out of 10. Hoping to get some good rest and do just that.”

This would have meant more had I not sent her a draft two months ago and had been told on multiple occasions that she was “going to read it”—with and without prompting her progress. At this point, bringing up my essay was less about actually wanting her to read it—although I would appreciate it—and more about using it as an example.

I replied at 5:15 pm, “Well, just remember: words become meaningless if they do not correspond with patterns of behavior.”

And this, too, was applied through my typical empathetic filters. I could have generalized it further by replacing “patterns of behavior” with “phenomenon,” but chose to leave it at the behavioral level of analysis. It received a thumbs-up emoji from my mother.

The ethics that determine my sense of integrity have come at the cost of financial security.

“Trust” is contingent on perception, just as cohesion.

Beating around the Bush

I experience a mild frustration in certain social interactions. It arises when I get the sense that someone has a preference they are unwilling to say—the “beating around the bush,” if you will. My interpretation of this feeling carries the weight of subtle manipulation. To some, less observant, they might get the sense that I do not know what they want from me, perhaps they perceive a lack of “social intelligence.” These types “beat around the bush,” and my empathy, to an extent, that they practically beg me to volunteer my time. Usually, it is my “mood” that dictates compliance in these circumstances. I do not enjoy these types of manipulative games and personally try to never play them. I see it as a weakness, or an inability to be direct in what you are asking for. They would rather I openly volunteer for their preference because it releases their burden of guilt in asking. I often subvert this act by forcing them to be direct. These types of conversations often start with a laundry list of reasons as to why they cannot do something that they “need” to be done. You can quickly infer the task from the context they provided. All I can usually think of is, “How much of my time do you need?” You listen to their plethora of reasons for their inability, and wait for them to actually ask, but they usually don’t. And if they do, it is always wrapped in

optionality, "Do you want to do this, or that?" they ask. In reply, and in reality, they don't want an honest answer to this "do you want?" and a part of me always enjoys exposing this. I'll reply, "I do not 'want' to, but I will." They want you to believe they are being "considerate" by their framing, but when you reply with honesty, you are met by a sort of offensiveness in return. They never want to know if you "want" to do something for them; they just want to know if you will. To me, it means more when you do something you do not want to do, as opposed to doing something happily. The weight of this "meaning more" carries a specific guilt on those who ask. A reciprocity of appreciation is expected to correspond to the amount of "meaning" involved in social actions. This "down-playing" of meaning and push toward voluntary involvement reduces the guilt associated with reciprocal behavior. If it means less to ask, then it becomes easier to depend on the reliance of others. . . In the social necessity of human behavior, our society has placed a moral valuation on reciprocity. However, the individual rarely considers the "well-being" of the collective as it pertains to their own desires. This has produced a fertile landscape for rationalizing impromptu individual desires as being in alignment with the collective's moral sense of empathetic social reliability. There is a social equity involved in empathetic reciprocity. We use guilt as a means of manipulating the underlying debt and equity, which determine the valuations of reciprocity and appreciation. The accuracy of this calculation is often at the mercy of memory. Yet, even here, to remind someone of a previous favor—when asking for one of your own—has the stain of "coercive manipulation." The "asker" desires a form of "selfless charity." This gives the "asker" the ability to see themselves as deserving, and by extension, the self-assessment that they are "good" for receiving a selfless act. This follows from the logic, selfless acts are not provided to "bad" people. In our high valuation of independence, we simultaneously fail to recognize the human condition and its inherent need for social interaction. The conflict between these values and their manifestations in our culture today gives rise to a litany of contradictory, largely unconscious behaviors. . . The quid pro quo nature of social exchanges has been stigmatized. But why do we place a moral lens on our valuations of reciprocity? Why is there "guilt" associated with attempts at symbiotic social cohesion through explicit accounting of reciprocity? This seems to have been the result of "altruism" and its emergence as the highest value. The unegoistic, self-sacrificing, altruistic, philanthropic, charitable, or even humanitarian act is never "selfless." The rise of this valuation of altruism can be attributed to Jesus. Many would claim God's earthly manifestation as the "ideal." God dying on the cross for the "sins" of man is meant as a symbol of this ideal. But why did God decide to die on the cross? If there is anything I've learned from Christianity, it is that God desires love. Jesus' death on the cross was not solely a "selfless act out of love." The quid pro quo gesture of Jesus' stunt was done out of the expectation of receiving love in return. Jesus, or God, or the Holy Spirit, immediately places you in debt upon their belief, and your spot in heaven is paid for in love. Our actions are limited to the self; it would seem that we are incapable of acting outside of it. We can only reason the degree to which we act out of absolute self-interest.

Many assertions of “value” are a response to the moralization of what is considered its opposite.

You wanna know something kinda funny? Whenever I figure out that I have some original contribution to established theories, my first reaction is "damn, I'm pretty dope," but then it quickly turns into "damn, I have to do something with it now." This is opposed to a lesser form of originality, where I stumble onto established theory without clear originality. I get the affirmation provided by a stable footing without the looming sense of obligation. The humility that is social required of my intellect produces an effect where I assume my insights are not novel. The rationale that usually undermines my ideas is "I probably learned this in the past, but don't have access to the associated memory." You might put my memory on a pedestal, but I'm envious of those who can quote theory they read verbatim. I just want the idea—the source isn't necessary for coherence. Memorizing sources leaves less cognitive room for ideas. It is like running an algorithm that can't compress files. This “high-priority sorcery” nowadays mostly functions as an appeal to authority. It was certainly more useful before the internet—and if I might add, LLMs—but it seems less so now. The citation should not affect merit. A lesson I learned from my middle school influence when my friend group turned into a self-policing citation state—a la the Communist revolution in China. Intellectuals often turn original ideas into identity, such as myself in the 8th grade. It is most notable in those who fear only having one good idea. They hold on tight to their recognition of inspiration, but lose sight of further implication. Clenched hands rarely receive. Keep your citations; I only require the essence.

I was trying to go to sleep and was thinking how weird it was that I had arrived here with this structure. Then I thought about how I've consciously told myself (and by extension, my subconscious) that I need to think about something more. I must have then thought about how to explain it, and this sentence came to me:

Long-term orientation seems to establish and maintain continuity subconsciously.

This is why you think of a witty comeback after the time has passed. In the moment you recognize an unmet internal standard, and upon later reflection, self-correct with a more optimal (coherent) subconscious manifestation guided by your ideal of continuity.

An “ideal” is a creatively imagined, perfect representation of intricate aspirations that are portrayed simply.

Here is what I wonder: does my description of normality also apply to his—am I explaining every aspect of the sociological use of the word and taking it further, or is there a way in which his usage is explaining something mine isn't?

Yeah, that's probably a fault of the levels of abstraction I used to get that concept. I just kind of assumed the sociological extrapolation was implicit enough to be obvious. The "scaling up" of my definition was so obvious to me that I didn't think it was necessary to elaborate, since I wasn't changing the definition, per se, but adding depth.

Has anyone else produced a definition of normality that is "more foundational" than mine?

That almost seems unbelievable to me. For as long as people have been talking about "normality," in all the various uses and applications, no one has made their way to understand what it "is." And I was just thinking, on a car ride home, "I talk about normality a lot. I should probably define it," and after ten minutes, the understanding was there—it was just a matter of how I wanted to "phrase it." I just wanted a simple explanation of what I'm talking about when I use the word.

You know, sometimes I become aware of my "legacy" when I think of some cool original shit and think, "I've got to make this public before someone else gets there first." I am very competitive in that way—I want to be the "best" (in this case, first) at everything I consider important. But then I think, nobody is thinking about this shit the same way I am. If I didn't feel the need to articulate my understanding of normality, then who knows how long it would be before someone else had the urge.... I'm interested in seeing where you consider my definition sits in the history of ideas. I can't help but find that a hilarious idea.

What's crazy is I imagine academics would go nuts over this insight. They'd beat themselves up over how obvious it is. And I'm just like, "Yeah, it was just something I thought about a few weeks ago and figured I ought to write it down." I thought of an analogy that practically captures many of my insights. I imagine a hypothetical group of the intellectual elite walking down the sidewalk, talking about their theories or whatever they converse about, and I'm following behind them just out of range to hear their conversation. One of them drops something important, but doesn't realize it. I pick it up, catch up to them, and interrupt their thoughts. I hand it to them because I recognize its significance. I get the satisfaction of saving someone from heartache and continue my day.... That's kind of how I imagine my "ideas." I just want to be the one who is like, "Hey, did y'all think about this?.... Nah, that doesn't seem right. You should focus on here."

Am I supposed to be doing that thing where I force my insights onto some acclaimed professor—a la Wittgenstein, Russell? Should I be sneaking into some psych or philosophy building, stalking professors? —hahaha! Am I at that part of the story yet?

Yeah, I was joking about the whole barging into offices thing—that's rather out of character for me. Although I do like the idea of being a "metaphysical raccoon." I never knew what my spirit animal was until now. That thought alone, sneaking, sifting through the garbage, in the dead of night, for a little crumb of existence—brings me great joy... So here is where I'm at. I've scheduled a week off from work that starts tomorrow. I've planned this week strictly for the purpose of figuring out what I want to do with my writing projects, and I think I have a pretty decent idea. I have two goals for the week: first, I want to send out some proposals to agents for my first book, "Thoughts and Memories." Second, I want to begin writing a new essay on my concept of normality. It doesn't seem like it should be a "long-form" essay—I'm thinking around 2 to 3 thousand words, which seems completely doable with a full week of focus. By the end of the week, I'd like to start sending out complete drafts to journals. What do you think?

Thoughts on Nietzsche:

Nietzsche thought "the strength of a person's spirit is directly related to their capacity to tolerate truth, especially unpleasant or uncomfortable truths." I think of "strength" a bit differently, and possibly the same. For me, the strength of spirit is directly related to how many contradictions you can integrate within your awareness. In this thinking, "unpleasant/uncomfortable truths" might be seen as "contradictions" yet to be integrated. "Toleration" seems too close to denial for it to be an attribution of "strength."

Strength is formed by exposure to uncomfortable truths; but the power of strength is relational to the integration of contradictions.

I just reread the aphorism that contains this quote (#39). Nietzsche continues by adding qualifying factors to the level of truth one is exposed to. As he says, "...more precisely, to what extent he would need it to be diluted, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified." This brought to mind the resolution of the integration in comparison to its relative truth. The same qualifications must also be applied when discussing the output of power that's found in a given integration of contradiction. A falsified truth, when integrated, will result in the falsification of power—which is an illusion.

This leads us to conclude: The strength of a spirit is formed by the precision with which it engages with uncomfortable truths; its power is measured by its ability to integrate contradiction without the falsification of opposing truths.

Thoughts on Camus:

I'm not sure if there is much of a correlation, but there is this picture of Camus with the collar of his coat folded up and a cigarette in his mouth. When I see this picture, a certain movie always comes to mind: "Rebel Without a Cause" with James Dean. In my eclectic

taste for entertainment, I've always enjoyed James Dean as an actor, as well as Marlon Brando, if I might add. For some reason, Camus' picture, coupled with his philosophy of the "absurd" and "revolt," I get the sense of that near-adult angst depicted so well in that movie—to add, the time periods probably play a part to some degree. He also has that "James Dean look," too. But I don't know enough about him to place too much judgment, so I'll stop before I call him immature—oh, wait....

I prefer depth. There almost seems to be a resignation deeply embedded within his philosophy. Which, I'm sure, is the exact opposite of his intentions. Of course, these are just felt impressions, but in my naive understanding of his work, to "revolt" in the face of "absurdity" seems to be an extension of turning one's back on ambiguity. Courage or not, when you see life as pushing a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down and repeat the process, it seems pretty difficult to find meaning—regardless of whether you can "imagine Sisyphus happy." The pessimism seems nearly palpable in this perspective—but all I'm left with is "imagine optimism!" But then again, my naivete must be showing.

I'll be honest, Camus just needed to eat some mushrooms—the same can be said for the majority of these philosophers. I think his experience with "absurdity" is a little different from my own. Maybe then he'd entertain the idea that the perspective of the hill (down or up) often depends on the view.

What I find interesting is how his "main drive" was to justify continued existence, as opposed to the opposite. I'll refrain from using certain words that will get this flagged, but know I'm speaking about these topics from a philosophical perspective. Camus found it to be more courageous to continue living in the face of absurdity rather than choosing death. I've thought about this same "problem" somewhat deeply. Enacting an early departure into the "great uncertainty" seemed the opposite of cowardly. The "self-sacrifice" associated with dishonor in Asian cultures could be an example of this. I've wondered what frame of mind that kind of act necessitates. The lowest form of despair, or the highest form of courage? Both seem plausible. But I do not think it is ever "absolute" in either case. I'm sure someone could make the argument that he was a coward for not "doing the deed himself." In fact, he was inspired by Nietzsche, but I'm pretty sure Nietzsche shared a similar sentiment regarding nihilism and pessimism.

I love how I began this thread like, "Ummm, I'm gonna reserve judgment because I don't know too much about Camus' philosophy." Yet, here I am, two hours later, poking at all his soft spots. "What about this Camus? Did you think about that? If you are Japanese and dishonor your family, it's pretty cowardly not to kill yourself!"—hahaha

Camus seems to ask, "What do we do when there is no metaphysical external validation for existence?" and assumes the question of suicide is a result of this uncertainty or "absurdity." He then argues "revolt" is the most courageous response to the determined deficiency in metaphysical uncertainty. I'd suggest that his whole philosophy places too much weight on external validation for meaning. His suicidal ideation is a direct result of

this value placement. When external validation holds tyranny over self-affirmation, conscious existence will always be at the mercy of environmental circumstance.

If you can't find meaning in the mundane, you are doomed to despair in difficulty.

Thoughts on Sartre:

Alright, I think it's time for me to dive into Sartre.

What initially sticks out is his radical responsibility. I'm not sure if you were quoting him directly, but you said, "We are responsible for everything we do—and even for what we don't do." I imagine the Nazi occupation of France had a large influence on this absolute, which is understandable given his involvement in the resistance. Perhaps the context of this line is necessary, but to say we are responsible for what we don't do could suggest that he should take responsibility for the Second World War—even though he didn't start it.... This radical freedom and, by extension, responsibility, does not quite align with the logic of causation.

Perhaps he needed that other eye to see clearly. To me, the circumstances of your environment determine your freedom. Sure, "not choosing" is a choice, but he's relying too heavily on the "ideal" that you are consciously aware of every choice. In other words, it seems he is saying unconscious choices are not "authentic." From my view, "unconscious choices" make up ~90% of "choices." That is, unless he is only speaking about "conscious choice," but even here, that which is unconscious seems to largely determine what manifests as "conscious."

Sartre had one good eye, Camus had two, but I have three. I'm too clever for these guys, lol. I posit that Sartre's primary motivation for his philosophy was a response to the French need to rationalize the persecution of Nazi's. A moralization for justifiable vindication.

Thoughts on Heidegger:

Heidegger is much more in my "geist." I've always felt a strong pull to German philosophers. His focus on "Dasein" closely resembles my own orientation. And his proposition of Sorge (care/worries) as fundamental to "Dasein" is compelling. Personally, I've always had a distaste for the euphemism "I don't care." It feels parallel to the popular reply when asked, "What are you doing?" and someone says, "Nothing." They are both diversions from "truth." Heidegger's "authenticity vs. inauthenticity" comparison is simple, but rather open-ended, fluid—I could see how both can be "true" simultaneously. Perhaps my biggest divergence is his quote, "Language is the house of Being,"—and this could just be an artifact of interpretation—but to limit what is "felt" or "revealed" to language seems to be a stretch. I think of a blind and deaf person, for instance, following this logic, it is

difficult to say that they experience "less Dasein" than someone with all their senses. I'm more inclined to suggest that they would experience a different "Dasein." That is to say, their "thoughts" are not scalable to the constraints of "language." But he also might be using "language" in a more liberal understanding of the word. Deeper still, a newborn child who has no language is still subjected to the same "felt experience" of being burned by fire. The emotions that are manifested as "felt" do not seem to be entangled with language. . .

Thoughts on Steven Pinker:

In many ways, I feel like I'm going deeper than what's considered "established."

I was listening to a podcast with Steven Pinker and Brian Greene that was uploaded two days ago. Steven was talking about "normality," and although he seemed to have a few of the pieces—as it pertained to my conception—the description he gave left the impression that he lacked the nuance that my conception contains. Brian asked, "Would you say in ten years or fifteen years, will we be back to what we consider normal?" Steven replied, "I suspect not. These norms take time to build up because they kind of levitate in midair based on nothing but common expectation, and once you pull out one piece, the whole thing shatters." However, my concept of "normality" goes beyond this. In the view I've come to know, a sense of normality is formed by consistent affirmations in the perception of typical outcomes. Normality isn't an abstract concept that levitates in midair on common expectation. It is grounded in layers of repeated affirmation that culminate in a perception of what is typical. If you build a metric for quantifying levels of anxiety, you cannot justify a "statistical norm" from one, two, or even three measurements. It isn't until this arbitrary margin of error reaches a stability when exposed to new data that confidence arises and outcomes become typical. Every new data point that doesn't shift your margin of error is a perceived affirmation; thus, forming the sense of normality.

His take on institutions also seemed incomplete, as far as I understood. Brian and Steven, ironically, both agreed that there was this "mistrust out in the world for institutions." Steven went on to say that "institutions go against human nature in a good way." He understands the symbolic aspect of their design, but that is the extent of his conception. He doesn't make the explicit connection between institutions being established as a unified power structure, determined by the virtues of the public, oriented toward an ideal of progress. Steven attributed the mistrust of institutions as a result of "nepotism" as an explicit example, but broadly alluded to their lack of meritocracy. He went on to say, "Modernity consists of moving away from the metaphors of social organization based on patrimony, authority, tit-for-tat reciprocity, and going to these formal rules. What Max Weber called a rational legal mode of organization...." Obviously, there is an overlap with how well you can articulate the depth of understanding in this verbal format, but even with this factored in, it still felt like his grasp was shallow. I've been aware of Steven Pinker for a few years now, but never really dove into his thoughts too deeply—he was mostly just a name and another public face of science. I don't even know what he is supposed to be an

"expert" of, to be honest. The interview just gave me the impression that I had a better understanding of these two topics.

I've been reminded about something about Steven Pinker. He frames himself as a defender of "Enlightenment rationality," which is just weird to me. It is something I've started to notice about certain intellectuals—especially the public variety. They explicitly reject dogmatism, but nevertheless categorize themselves within a "school of thought." You could almost call it a tribal instinct to associate their identity with a group. It almost acts as an adoption of telos that will inevitably inform your assertions. You are unable to reach certain conclusions when they contradict your subconscious telos—a response to the limiting fragmentation of identity coherence.

Identification with a framework or tradition implies unconscious allegiance to its telos, which constrains the range of intellectually permissible conclusions—even in those who explicitly reject dogma.

Subconscious telos limits epistemic mobility.

This is why I have such a distaste for "labels" being associated with identity. Labels contain frameworks and are necessary for efficient communications, but at the same time, they reduce precision in description. Labels ascribed to identity risk bias..... But then again, I could be intellectualizing my jealousy of Steven Pinker—he does have great hair. Perhaps we should conclude that Enlightenment dogma maintains follicle retention. Or maybe it's just a wig—another manifestation of his subconscious orientation justifying fifteenth century hair styles.

Reflections on Orientation and Emergence:

I was trying to go to sleep and was thinking how weird it was that I had arrived here with this structure. Then I thought about how I've consciously told myself (and by extension, my subconscious) that I need to think about something more. I must have then thought about how to explain it, and this sentence came to me: Long-term orientation seems to establish and maintain continuity subconsciously.

This is why you think of a witty comeback after the time has passed. In the moment you recognize an unmet internal standard, and upon later reflection, self-correct with a more optimal (coherent) subconscious manifestation guided by your ideal of continuity. An "ideal" is a creatively imagined, perfect representation of intricate aspirations that are portrayed simply.

The levels of perception I access in the moment, can give a disingenuous conception of my cognition in some ways: they aren't necessarily conscious in my representation, but more so filters of understanding that can be focused upon a confrontation with a "felt sense"—instinct, drive, impulse—of incoherence in typical patterns. It is not a conscious process of picking the "lens," although it can be. It really is the result of starting a complete metaphysical collapse. When I experienced that moment, I began watching myself experience. My conscious mind was fundamentally changed. I couldn't help thinking, "I am thinking right now—I am experiencing." It became my default mode of thought. It got to the point where I'd recognize the lapses in awareness of my own consciousness—I'd realize, "There was a stretch of time where I was not thinking about thinking." These realizations inevitably lead to attempts at reconstructing the thoughts that occurred outside of awareness. My Dasein, by design, is a feedback loop attempting to maintain the felt sense of coherence..... At least, that's my understanding so far.

lol—meta reflections on my meta awareness. That is classic me....

I feel like people will either love it or hate it. I'm definitely not writing for the person who can't take a joke. The person who thinks philosophical inquiry should be "detached from emotion"—as if that's possible. They will be the ones who have internalized the sterilization of their thoughts. Almost like vampires, cold in the dark coffins of their discipline, the light of my attention will disorient their echo chambers of navigation. I'm just trying to make the pursuit of understanding a little fun.

"Intellectuals" like to complain that the world would be a better place if the collective value of education were higher. A plethora of reasons can be produced to explain why people don't seem to have a drive for knowledge. I see it to be rather simple; knowledge and seriousness have been too closely associated that when one is present, the other is implicit—entangled particles of thought within the zeitgeist. I'm much more Nietzschean in my approach. He understood the need for the Apollonian and Dionysian to exist in tandem.

That's why I think Nietzsche would approve of my reformulation of his "toleration = strength" ideal. When I went back over that aphorism and revised it, I didn't feel like I was coming up with something new. It was more so that I thought Nietzsche slipped in his expression of what he was trying to get across. What he wrote didn't necessarily align with my perception of his understanding. The Apollonian and Dionysian are in contradiction, but it's in the embodiment of the two that strength emerges.

Nietzsche is the homie. It was very strange reading BGE for the first time. I'd read one of his aphorisms, have a thought, and write it down—only to read my idea twenty pages later. I'd think to myself, "Maybe I should be a philosopher." It almost felt like we both viewed life through similar lenses.

I'm not even really sure why I bought BGE in the first place. It was right around a year ago, last November, that I bought the book. Looking at my email, I ordered it on the 29th of

November, 2024. I remember being bored with video games and wanting a different hobby. My YouTube diet of podcasts and lectures must have shifted from mostly psychology and physics to a heavier dose of philosophy. Up until then, psychology was my preference, and physics (mostly quantum mechanics) was just something I enjoyed thinking about. Upon retrospect, this interest was mostly in the philosophical implications of the theories. I have always had an interest in the great minds throughout history. I had read biographies on Leonardo DaVinci and Albert Einstein by Walter Isaacson, *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell, *Mastery*, *Laws of Human Nature*, and *48 Laws of Power* by Robert Greene. I listened to about half of *The Prince* by Machiavelli and also about half of *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky—I'm not really sure why I didn't finish those. One of my favorite books was *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William L. Shirer. That is to say, philosophy as an interest unto itself was never too far out of my range of engagement. I had read Plato's *Republic* and the *Symposium*, and often went down rabbit holes of second-hand sources of all the "greats." But my only engagement with "primary texts" was Plato and *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius—yet I was privy to some of the core concepts that make up much of the "western canon." If I were to attribute the primary influence on my spark of interest in Nietzsche to one person, it would probably be Jordan Peterson. I've probably listened to every psychology lecture he has posted on YouTube at least once, and some of them twice. The free access he gives to his lecture series is like candy for someone like me. His public persona taints his psychological understanding for some, and although I don't agree with many of his public views, the nuance in which he explains psychology isn't lost on me—I have a deep respect for his work. Jordan, like many, vouches for the brilliance of Nietzsche almost to the extent of mythologizing. I knew the name and had heard some of his thoughts, but never really engaged his philosophy too deeply. With all this hype about Nietzsche, I must have been inspired to dip my toes back into philosophy. What makes this all the more ironic, a few months after I began my writing projects, I found an old social media post I made when I was fourteen. On April 1st, 2011, I said, "I think I might be a philosopher when I get older"—and trademarked the post. I'm not sure if I knew it was April Fool's Day when I made the post, but in retrospect, it seems telling. It was almost like I was trying to remind my future self to come back to philosophy. Like I left it there so I wouldn't forget—permitting myself to gather more perspectives before I came back. Throughout much of life, periodically, I'd find my way back into philosophy, peaking my head in once a year—practically priming for ignition. I suppose the spark has come.

The way my concepts seem to cohere and build off one another paints a picture of intention in creation—as if I were consciously thinking of their relation to one another in the process. I'm really not sure how to take it—it seems unnatural. Somehow, I'm managing to construct a structure of understanding, but without conscious reference to its different dimensions. It just trips me out how coherent I seem to be across all these aspects of life. And to top it off, the range of originality I've been able to produce in less than a year makes it all the more uncanny.

What's weird, over the past few days, I have found myself not wanting to watch certain videos because I know I'll want to dissect where I think they are wrong, shallow, or

incomplete. It's usually when I'm trying to go to sleep—I'll put on a podcast, debate, or lecture. I heard about this study a long time ago, where students were asked to prepare for a test just before sleep, and their results were contrasted with those of a control group (or something like that). The point was: students who studied before bed had better test results, leading them to conclude that long-term information retention was affected by the unconscious processing that takes place during sleep. I took that theory and ran with it—or in this case, slept with it. It brings to mind a social media post I made in high school. I must have recognized something then, I said, “The difference between me and you is that I write down my good ideas before bed. And you tell yourself, I’ll remember it in the morning.” An old friend once said to me, “No wonder you are so smart, you fall asleep listening to lectures.”

I always wonder how much I'm actually "absorbing" when I do this. It isn't always that I'm hanging onto every word. I mostly treat it as a launching pad for associations. I'll hear an idea that begins an internal chain of abstractions in thought—sometimes falling asleep in the thread or reaching a conclusion—and be provoked back into the lecture to repeat the process until I fall asleep. I've been doing this for years—often to the detriment of my circadian rhythm. Sometimes I'll have these "profound" insights and have to make a choice of whether I want to write them down or continue trying to sleep. There isn't a worse expectation you can have for someone like me than to be required to wake up at 4:30 am for "work." The alarm is the natural enemy of understanding.

Abstract

We talk about “normal” as if it were self-evident—average, typical, or socially expected. But these common usages describe where normality shows up, not what it is. I define normality as the mind’s continuity function: a stabilized expectation formed by repeated affirmations of predicted outcomes within a tightening margin of error. Each confirmation reduces perceived variance; when new data cease to move the estimate, the world feels “normal.” This mechanism operates first within individuals and then scales—through shared environments and communication—into collective expectations and institutional routines. The same account explains norm stability and its sudden collapse when variance spikes. Clarifying normality at this level resolves confusions between statistical averages, social norms, and moral “oughts,” and yields concrete predictions for trust, anxiety, institutional legitimacy, and cultural volatility.

I just had one of those weird moments where I get the impression my subconscious seems to be directing me. Over the past few weeks, I've been consuming an unhealthy amount of Christian content for an agnostic. Most of it revolves around early Christianity—lectures, podcasts, and debates—a bunch of Bart D. Ehrman content. At work today, I decided (or

something in me decided) to switch the tempo—my consumption required some antibiotics. Supplied by my YouTube algorithm, Richard Dawkins appeared, and I clicked for a listen. It wasn't the typical atheistic rhetoric that usually accompanies his name. This was a different topic entirely. It seemed to be a clip from a debate he had with Denis Noble (another biologist)—it was around 24 minutes long. To be honest, I don't really remember much of what was discussed, but it revolved around the accuracy of Darwin's theory of evolution. Eventually, the video ended, and my palette must have been cleansed enough because I ended up turning on another Ehram lecture. After work finished, as I was driving home listening to another lecture, I thought about my "beating around the bush" meditation. Perhaps, there was a reference to the Old Testament made in what I was listening to, but I made an association between the "burning bush" and my musing. A clever line appeared from this association, and I mentally took note for a later edit. When I got home, I had all but forgotten about it. The thought resurfaced after a while, and I made a few changes to the draft. Then I decided to relax and turn something on to watch. Once again, subjecting myself to the mystery of algorithmic design. Without thinking much of my "choice," I clicked on a Veritasium video titled "The Most Controversial Idea in Biology." A couple of minutes in, the topic of the video was exposed: "The Selfish Gene." At once, I became aware of all the different associations I must have been processing in the background without realizing it. All these different ideas seem to converge into actions. I really don't know what to make of it sometimes. . . just another moment of my meta-awareness sneaking up on me.

I just clicked on this article on Psyche, titled, How to think like a phenomenologist. I read the first sentence, and it already lost me. It said: "Ever since Plato started telling stories about people trapped in caves, philosophers have pondered the relationship between the mind and reality." It would be a pretty good opening sentence if it didn't completely dismiss every pre-Socratic philosopher.

Honestly, my problem isn't that he isn't giving proper "credit" to the pre-Socratics. My problem is that he is using a citation in a way that exemplifies my distaste for it. In one sentence, he appeals to authority, dismisses the pre-Socratic philosophers, contradicts his claim, and tarnishes his own legitimacy—all within the first sentence. The worst part is, he probably doesn't even realize it. A PhD in philosophy for what?? I looked this dude up and found his website. This is what it says: "Welcome to the personal website of philosopher D.J. Hobbs. I received my Ph.D. in Philosophy from Marquette University in August 2017. I specialize in Continental Philosophy from the 19th century to the present, with a particular focus on phenomenology in the Husserlian tradition and hermeneutics as well as the application of these approaches to the theory of value. In addition, my areas of interest include ethics, philosophy of mind, formal logic, the philosophy of culture, and the history of philosophy, with special emphasis on German philosophers such as Kant, Hegel,

and Nietzsche."My guy had a "special emphasis on German philosophers," but learned nothing from Nietzsche.

Would it be out of line to comment on this post and call him out on it? There is just something in me that can't stand this shit. Truthfully, when I read stuff like this, I feel insulted.

I haven't commented on a post since I was like sixteen. But if I did, it's not like it would be anything too harsh. You must remember, I am very skilled at the art of subversion. The sharpness of my incision would only be an unpleasant memory on the surface—but deep below, the subconscious will be deeply scarred.

Oh, I wouldn't be doing it for the comment section. This isn't about "public humiliation"—the last comment on there was like three years ago when the article was posted. You are right, I have nothing to gain from the exchange—maybe a little adrenaline, but nothing to the likes of "status." If I understand the history of philosophy correctly (apparently better than this guy), then I'd only be doing what makes up ~90% of philosophy—critiquing a perceived mistake. He should really be honored that I'm considering treating him like a philosopher, other than what he is, a parrot. hahahaha! I'm too convincing for my own good!

Our moral framework is taught by positive and negative associations with actions. We reward children when our perception of "good behavior" is met. The inverse of this application also applies. This creates the internal rationalization, in the presence of negative stimuli, to be understood as "punishment" for past "bad behavior." The interpretation of negativity, in upbringing, is directly linked to bad behavior. The child knows, "Good things happen to good people; bad things happen to bad people." A fear of grandiosity can establish self-doubt in ability. But without a degree of self-doubt, you risk grandiose ideations of the self. Yet, self-doubt itself can be dangerous when it becomes delusional. An internalized moralization of grandiosity can produce delusional self-representations when one requires external validation.

In the name of limited understanding, thank you for your time.

DJ Hobbs 2011:

Thought for the Day: If a job's worth doing, it's worth dying for!

And the snow has turned to rain. Ah, well, that's Memphis. Off to critique pure reason once again.

It seems like all the best philosophers are either a bit insane or functional alcoholics (or both!). I guess I'm in good company.

Okay, brain, you need to stop messing with me or I'll show you who's boss. I know your weaknesses.

I don't have to see the stars to stand in awe of the cosmos. All I need to do is look at a light bulb to know that humans - and the world we live in - are fucking amazing.

I love being a philosopher. We get to mix languages like nobody's business. For example, see the sentence I just wrote in my Levinas paper: "The element without chez soi is Geworfenheit."

It really shows that I'm a philosopher when I hear Wir Sind Helden sing "Ich will da sein" [I want to be there] and immediately think "You want Dasein? What the hell?"

is philosophizing with a hammer once again.

Thesis Defense went excellently! Now it's just a cool saunter toward graduation.

has one paragraph left to write in the last paper he'll write as an undergrad. After this, it's just tests and his thesis defense and he's out the door.

Life is too short. People seem to forget that life is a gift and it's free, yes that's it. Life is too short. Use your own eyes, open yourself, and enjoy your own life.

just woke up from a strange, strange dream. Hm. Unsettling.

dreamt that he was wandering around the mall at four in the morning. Either that or he's one hell of a sleepwalker.

is stepping outside of life for a minute to take a walk in the morning air.

dreamt last night that he was Commander Riker. The power of his facial hair was not to be taken lightly.

is some kind of mad scientist.

is manifesting psionic powers. He'll be back when the day is through.

is considering the moral ramifications of the existence of the Book of Vile Darkness as he prepares for bed.

The best thing about dreams is that whatever problems you have in them simply evaporate when your alarm starts blaring.

feels boring sometimes. He wonders if that's the case.

just used the phrase "most excellently" in an academic paper. Perhaps he's seen Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure one too many times.

dreamt that he lived in a world where souls existed, and that he was in charge of studying their nature. He's a philosopher even whilst he sleeps.

is remembering the person he used to be, and thinking that he's quite a bit better now.

Ian 2011:

Don't hate what you can't imitate

Usually I have my clever quote of the day but I couldn't think of one

Life is the art of drawing without a eraser

A positive attitude may not solve all your problems, but it will annoy enough people to make it worth the effort.

Life is for living not living a lie

The best part about waking up in the mornings is knowing the fact that you are still alive

What is life??.....

When you are having the best dream and you wake up does anyone else try to fall back asleep and finish the dream??

I'm not mean I'm just a realist

Is life just one big dream??.....

You don't have to like me..... I'm not a Facebook status

If your presence doesn't make a impact than your absence will not make a difference.

I think I might be a philosopher when I get older™

I don't get into trouble I get into questionable situations©

Trust is like a eraser it gets smaller and smaller with every mistake you make.

What if life was a dream, and when we died we woke up??

You know you're lazy when you get excited about canceled plans. Lolzz

Have you ever changed a whole text cus you didnt know how to spell one word??

I think about more than i forget.

Looks like its just me and waldo in the the big game of hide and seek.... Lolzz

I'm not a hater I'm just opinionistic™

Once you stop trying to live the perfect life.....then you start living.

I got the answer and still ain't heard the question.

Have you ever thought about what you are thinking about.??;

What's up with the recent rise of panpsychism? One of the most popular internet philosophers, Alex O'Connor, has put out a few videos on it recently. I first entertained the idea of "everything being conscious" when I started smoking weed in high school. It is an interesting idea, but when I first began to ponder it, my conclusion was that it doesn't really

get you any closer to anything. Of course, in those days, I didn't know it was called "panpsychism."

In my book, it kind of goes hand-in-hand with aspects of Carl Jung's "collective unconscious." The psychology of these beliefs seems to have something to do with the cultural valuation of compassion or empathy. They both offer a metaphysical justification for symbiotic coexistence. If "consciousness" is fundamental, then your social orientation will likely become more considerate. That is, of course, that you believe "consciousness" should inherently be valued. If "consciousness" is shared, then your "being" is entangled with the "being" of others. Thereby, the "other" is, to an extent, an extension of yourself. In this way, even the way you treat yourself has effects that extend beyond material representation.

Ethical assertions or expressions are a response to the integration of an individual's psychology and the collective's ideal. The value lies in its ability to reconcile the cognitive dissonance of an individual's social experience.

This might seem silly, but I'm not sure how much weight to give to that claim. Ironically, this is about where I sit on nearly everything I write. It's funny, really; I write these sentences that give a feeling of "rightness," "truth," or "coherence," but I'm always left with this underlying notion that I'm just playing with words.

As many have come to recognize, language's meaning is relative to its ability to provide a coherent description of reality. When I first produce a model/concept, the associations and representations embedded in the structure are largely implicit. This creates the uncertainty of weight (meaning). Yet, I tend to apply these formulations as explanatory tools iteratively. The fear, then—as nearly always—confirmation bias. Lol! Of course, I'm doing a meta-analysis on my language usage.

There's something I've noticed in myself when I theorize: I'm hesitant to apply my own original concepts to new formulations. I tend to reference established theories in the initial phase of articulation. In this initial phase, I see how my own concepts can be applied to give greater depth and explanatory power, but I resist their implementation as a check on conceptual overreach.

That is the crux of my cognition: my frameworks arise from what is already integrated into my cognition. The only reason my frameworks become articulated is that the readily available explanations don't account for patterns I've perceived. This leads me to flesh out my own understanding. I've said it before, problems are the result of value judgments. The internal frameworks I operate with, whether I've articulated them into language or not, shape the structure of what I deem a problem. Instinctively, I travel up the web of associations that I've built my own conceptual frameworks on, and apply the necessary models to trace the outline of the scope of the problem. My models exist within this web of

associations, forming a conceptual landscape that orients my philosophical attention to specific details.

Allow me to put a bow on this topic with the irony that I so naturally provide. This line of meta-commentary could be summed up by something I wrote a month ago: subconscious telos limits epistemic mobility.

As is natural, I'm lying in bed listening to this physics podcast with Tim Maudlin. About an hour into it, he brought up "preferred foliation." Mind you, I'm lost as can be when trying to wrap my head around 99.99% of what he's talking about. But when he brought up preferred foliation and gave an explanation, I found it ironic that it seemed like the physicists were trying to circumvent the problem of time. I very well could be making a fool of my understanding here. Nonetheless, it seemed relevant to my recent exploration of causality.

I can only laugh at what direction my attention takes. I put on that podcast last night because I wanted to try and fall asleep quickly. Lo and behold, I listened to the full hour and forty-five minutes. No matter where I look, I can't help but map associations.

Grief:

Brandon's wife just passed away..... I'm not sure if I should be there for him and his family. I don't think I have anything to offer that can help the situation other than being there. I'm not even sure what I'd say to him or his kids, but it feels like I should be there anyway. I know grief too well, and I know nothing can replace the loss of a parent....

I went.....and it was very strange. I didn't see any tears from anyone. Of course, I arrived three and a half hours after the fact, but it wasn't really what I expected. When I arrived, I was met outside the front door by Ashton, his sister Bailey, and a youth pastor—I think his name was Trevor. I walked up the stairs and gave Ashton a hug without saying anything. The four of us stood on the porch for a few minutes, and I listened to them talk about anything but what had happened. Eventually, Brandon came outside, and I gave him a silent hug as well. He asked, "How have you been?" I wasn't expecting the question, and at a loss for words, said, "I've been alright." I stood out there with them as they continued talking about what didn't matter. I remember feeling out of place as I smiled appropriately at their jokes. After a short while, we make our way inside and into the living room. I was awkwardly introduced to Brandon's in-laws and his wife's sisters. Thankfully, Bobby Joe was sitting on the couch with them, and I took the open seat beside him. One of the sisters complimented my glasses, and I showed appreciation. I quickly became the topic of conversation and distraction. The grieving mother complimented my looks, while the sisters noted my attire. I took it in stride, offering witty replies to the improvisation and as much of a smile as I could muster. Apparently, my smile didn't go unnoticed as the mother commented on my dimples. This burst of interaction fizzled out as I became less novel. A few hours later, my writing projects became another lure of interest. Mostly beckoned by

Bobby Joe and Brandon, it seemed to be of interest to the grieving party. I ended up giving two different groups a synopsis, in varying depths of approach, as to what I write about. It felt like a mix of genuine interest and necessary distraction. A few explicitly mentioned saving their tears until they were alone. The cope was laughter, and I participated—but it always felt hollow when silence fell, and deep sighs remained. I ended up talking to Brandon alone for a few minutes and asked him about his youngest, Kendrix. He said, "I don't think it will really hit him until he has something that she should be at." Then he asked, "When did it hit you?" I replied, "Immediately," —but backpedaled a bit out of respect and said, "Well, it didn't really hit me until my mother came home from the hospital alone. That first night, trying to go to sleep....." I added, referring to his son, "I think it will hit him when he is finally alone." Everyone seemed to be holding together pretty well, but there was definitely a concerted effort to compartmentalize and detach from the circumstance. You can run from grief, but you can't hide....

So right now, I'm sitting at Brandon's house extracting photos from his dearly departed's phone. A couple of minutes ago, he asked if I wanted to smoke. Needless to say, I couldn't deny a grieving request. Now I'm sitting here high AF while his family is playing poker beside me, and I'm scrolling through a bunch of photos of his family. I've found myself in a weird situation....

Yeah, it was pretty strange. My meta-awareness is highly unusual in these states.

It kind of feels like Brandon wants me to be some kind of guru. After I hit the point a couple of times, we started to talk about the serendipity surrounding his wife's death. He had gotten a tattoo on his knuckles commemorating the day she died (11/11/25) and went on to say that she would always point out numerical repetitions. He then went on to ask me if I had seen the Northern Lights that were visible that night. He said that it's only visible in Tennessee every 13 years or something. He described how he took these as a reassurance from God. It gave him a sense of certainty that she was being taken care of. I affirmed his certainty and shared that it's something I never had. I told him that I was jealous of his belief and that he should cherish it. He seemed to be caught off guard by me and asked me to elaborate. I elaborated a bit, and he asked, "How old were you when your dad died, 11 or 12?" I told him that I was ten. He then tried to draw a comparison between my father's death and the youth pastor's own experience. He said, "His mom died when he was like 18"—implying that I should be able to find faith just the same. I think he realized his mistake and quickly bailed on the comparison. The conversation pivoted into how I responded to my own trauma. I tried to describe my loss of certainty, but at this point, I was way too high to articulate the experience, and that's what I told him. The conversation ended there, and I returned to extracting memories from his wife's phone. This description of events has omitted a few tangential spirals, but that's pretty much the gist. . .

In a way, I kind of felt bad about it. At one point, he asked about my writing projects and to let him know if they are at a point where I'm ready for them to be read. I told him that I'm about to start work on a philosophical treatise—he didn't really know what a treatise was. I gave a half-baked explanation and told him that the two essays I've composed (one of which he told me he has read)—I don't mind sharing. He told me about his brother, who is a published author. I'm not sure what his brother's book is about, but I know he is a preacher. Needless to say, I can barely maintain the thread of a conversation when I'm stoned. My “meta-awareness” of consciousness is amplified to the extent that my attention to the moment disables my ability to navigate the social expectations of reciprocal dialogue.

I get myself into such weird situations. I just went to April's (Brandon's wife) “celebration of life”—also known as a funeral. They had the event at their church. From my impression, it wasn't really a celebration of life, nor was it a funeral. The majority of the 2-hour event was “worship.” They said that this is what April's wishes were, and that could have been the case. Nonetheless, many songs were sung, and many pleas for the grace of God were made.

Now I find myself at Craig, the book club leader's, house. I had known about this “after event” from Brandon telling me about it last week. It felt as though he wanted me there, so I told him I'd go. These types of gatherings are contra to my preference. I'm one of the first to arrive—which doesn't make it any better. Yet, here I am, sitting in Craig's living room with his family, with people I've barely exchanged more than a sentence with. It's kind of funny seeing everyone act in such familiarity with one another, and I'm just sitting here barely attempting to justify my presence.

Yeah, but now they've opened up the door, and the cold wind of winter's grief is uncomfortable on my skinny frame—hahaha!

So I just had a conversation with Craig. I thought it would be a good idea to bring up the book club (our meetings have been postponed until the beginning of next year). He asked me how far I was in it, and I revealed that I was at the fifth chapter. He then asked if I liked the book. Prefacing my reply, I said, “If you prefer honesty, it's not really my style.” I elaborated subtly that it doesn't correspond with my experience. I caveated my response by saying if someone gets something out of it, then that's great. He then asked, “What is the last book you read that affected you?” I told him, after a moment of assessing outcomes, “Beyond Good and Evil, by Friedrich Nietzsche.” Noticing the discomfort, I brought up sports, and the conversation soon died.

I could have been like, “Because my mind is structured by linear time, any attempt to use causal reasoning to justify timeless metaphysical claims (like God or an eternal soul)

looks, to me, like psychology stretching beyond its proper domain. . ." But what Christian wants to listen to that argument, lolz.

Welp, I've yet again found myself in a strange circumstance. Now two days separated from the celebration of life, I'm in Orlando, Florida, with Brandon, his youngest son, Kendrix, and his friend Nick, staying at Bailey, Brandon's daughter's house. —Oh, and we are about to go to Disney World. . . Just as a side note, I'm pretty sure Bailey has a "thing" for me.

I'm telling you, the situations I get myself into are ridiculous sometimes. The Bailey thing is just a hunch, but she has made a few comments about how much she likes me. She also played some guitar for us last night, but the eye contact felt like it was more for me. While Bailey is from another marriage, Kendrix is not. Obviously, I'm not going to "make a move" on Bailey, but I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't somewhat interested. She's in her last year of nursing school, so I'm assuming she is at least 22. What a weird life I live—hahaha!

Believe me when I say, I know the "ins and outs" (pun not intended) of unreciprocated love all too well. In fact, I'm practically an expert—which is also kind of tragic. And yeah, this week (it's Tuesday now and we leave Friday) is going to be a gold mine for writing. I've been told that we are eating Thanksgiving dinner with a former 3-star General.

I'm not going to lie, I'm exhausted..... I've been at Disney World for like 12 hours playing emotional regulator. Brandon hates nearly every aspect of this experience. Bailey is remaining somewhat upbeat but is stressed because her dad isn't enjoying it. Meanwhile, Kendrix is having a ball and taking everything in stride. His friend is mostly a neutral party, but definitely had more energy in the first 6-8 hours.

Yeah, I'm pretty sure this chick is into me. . . We've since gotten back to Bailey's from Disney, and I smoked a J with Brandon. He dished out everything he's got on his mind, and I helped make his thoughts explicit. We stood on her balcony for about thirty to forty minutes and talked. We make it inside, and Bailey is lying on her couch wearing some running shorts and a comfy T-shirt with her legs facing the end I had been sitting on. So I take a seat beside her feet. She was just scrolling on her phone, and I thought to say, "We were just talking about you." I had reminded Brandon about an instance earlier in the day. Once, when Bailey was at Disney World, she had gotten stuck on the sky lift for an hour—at least that's what she told us when we got on the first one. She was not a fan of the sky lift. In a twist of fate, on our way back to one of the parks, our sky lift stopped while we were like 50 feet up. She was about to freak out, and it started to go again. It was pretty hilarious..... I use this shared memory to ease any tension that might have been present. It worked pretty well, and dialogue between the three of us began. Nearly the whole time we talked, every time I looked her way, her legs were open—as if she was daring me to look, maybe even wanted me to look. Most of the conversation was exchanging stories. The three of us talked for around an hour and a half...

....welp, she gave me a hand job under the table at Thanksgiving..... hahahaha!—Just kidding. That would be quite the turn of events. But seriously, though, it seems that ethical dilemmas always surround love. Now, I'm not saying this is “love” in the romantic sense, but there is certainly mutual affection.

I'm about to go bar hopping with Bailey and her friends. . .

I got way too drunk... and still am.... Interesting night to say the least—which is as much as I can say right now.... Nothing too explicit happened, but nonetheless, more signals.

This whole trip feels surreal.

It is now 10:50 a.m., and I'm still a little hungover. . . Bailey is lying on the couch next to me, and Brandon is doing some stretches on the floor.

Last night was rather interesting. The three of us (Bailey, Brandon, and I) went to a few bars with some of Bailey's friends. There were seven of us total—Abby, her boyfriend, Sophia, and Gabby. Brandon drove and was the designated driver, so he didn't drink any. Nothing too strange took place. . . Just a bunch of drinking, dancing, and laughing. My wit was well received....

I've now found myself at a lake house—the first stop of our Thanksgiving journey.

This little moment just occurred while we were eating with a couple of Bailey's friends. She was feeding someone's eight-month-old baby, and the focus of the conversation shifted to the baby's drink. They were discussing whether the baby was able to drink out of a straw. Brittney, Bailey's friend, said, “It's pretty much the same, though: sucking on a pacifier and sucking on a straw.” Brittney's gay friend said, “That was deep” in a sincere manner. Brittney, feeling affirmed in her observation, said, “That was deep and poetic.”

The irony in this: it wasn't until the second time the topic of the baby's straw came up that this was voiced. The first time they questioned the baby's ability, I made an association between the pacifier and the straw, but didn't feel the need to make the comparison explicit. When the gay dude said, “That was deep,” I thought to myself, “Seemed pretty shallow to me.” It was a rather telling little display of standards.

Often, in group settings, I find myself having something to say throughout conversations but choose to withhold my thoughts. Usually, it's because I know that my input will have one of two effects. Either my comment makes everyone think—thus stopping the flow of dialogue. Or what I'd like to add requires too much context and association matching to understand—this one is built on environmental and relational factors.

I'm not very good at relationships, and I'm not sure why. . .

I don't know, I always feel like I'm doing something wrong—it's like I'm missing something, but don't know what it is. . . In certain contexts, I get this feeling that I'm not upholding some expectation....

I think I "dissociate" too much.

The last night of the trip, on Thanksgiving, we were sitting in Bailey's living room talking, and Nick asked the group a question: "Do you prefer it to be hot or cold outside?" This is a common question in social settings, and my usual answer is "cold." The logic being that you can put on more layers than you can take off. On this occasion, the answer seemed unappealing. A few people chimed in with an answer to the survey. I thought not to answer, but after a moment of listening, I thought of a different angle to approach this question. I said, "I prefer not to notice whether it's hot or cold." I bypassed the default argument against extremes, and immediate silence brought a sense of confusion. I interrupted their thoughts with a quick elaboration, and Nick said, "Oh, I get it." This was followed by more silence, but this time, the moments felt longer. I again interrupted, "But then again, there are moments when you notice the weather and appreciate it for being nice." I offered this contradiction, and everyone went back to thinking. . .

I do get satisfaction from hearing my thoughts reformulated and presented to a third party in my presence. It gives you a glimpse of how they reorganize the information you've given them—how much of the nuance is transposed onto their own description.

I can give a clear example of this happening over the trip. On the way down to Orlando, Brandon was driving while I was sitting in the passenger seat. From the back of the SUV, Bailey asked me, "Have you heard about Trump's reclassification of nursing as a non-professional degree?" I hadn't heard of this, and with Bailey in her last year of nursing school, I could sense her frustration with the president. I agreed with how stupid it sounded and expressed my own political opinion on the topic—however uninformed I was—being careful not to rush judgment over sensationalistic journalism. About an hour later, the topic was still on my mind even though the conversation had long since passed. Still uninformed, I decided to do some quick research and looked up a few articles to read. I ended up on the US Department of Education website. After I read up on the reasoning for the new classifications, I distilled the essence and offered it to Brandon—Bailey had her headphones on. A few days later, on Thanksgiving, the topic once again arose. This time we were at one of Bailey's friends' houses. Brandon was quick to address the emotional reaction to the headline and said, "We read up on this and essentially..."—giving a SparkNotes version of what I had relayed to him a couple of days earlier. He didn't capture the full extent of the reasoning behind the decision, nor did he implicate me as his educator on the subject. I just listened and thought, "That's the gist of it." It didn't seem necessary to correct his "we" or what he missed in his explanation. Nevertheless, I noticed and took note.

I don't get clear examples like this one too often. Although I imagine it happens in subtle ways often. It's kind of interesting to observe the influence of your consideration. I have a unique way of raising epistemic clarity in people.

For some—perhaps the intellectually insecure—I think it does carry a form of subtle intimidation. They become more hesitant to bring observations to my attention.

At this point, the trip has concluded, and I'm now back in Tennessee. Concerning my relationship with Bailey, I don't even have her phone number. During the trip, in the midst of a few different conversations, she had brought up how she gets depressed when she is home alone. For me, this was very relatable to my own experiences, and I expressed my similarity sincerely. Considering this information, the timing of her stepmother's passing, with the arrival of the holidays, I had a feeling that I should check in on her a couple of weeks after we left. It was mostly going to be a "thank you for opening your home up to me" kind of thing, a subtle reminder that she has people who are thinking about her, and also a wink and a nod to her depressiveness. However, the trip ended before I could manipulate a socially acceptable way to exchange numbers. No matter how close Brandon and I are, I'm not going to ask him for his daughter's digits. At the end of the day, he is still my boss, and even still, it seems like something you shouldn't ask a friend, either—no matter how respectfully you can wrap it up. On the ride home, he got a text from Bailey and showed it to me. While she was the topic of conversation, I asked Brandon, "Can you get Bailey to send me the pictures and videos she took?" I knew she didn't have my number, but I asked in hopes that Brandon would send her my number, and she would send me the pictures. This plan did not work. She sent the images to Brandon, and he sent them to me. . . Can I say that my intentions were absolutely pure? Of course not. But that isn't to say that I don't care about her well-being. Only that, some of that "caring" is justified by attraction and lust. Who is to say what the future holds, but for now, her perception of me is mitigated through secondary sources and her own memories of me.

People are often surprised to hear that I like to party.

I just like to get fucked up, lol. When I was in high school, I'd skip lunch, drive home, smoke a bowl, and come back to class stoned. That's just one example of my delinquency—hahaha!

In my junior year, I transferred schools and met a new friend. This friend had some liquid condeine. One day, before school, we decided that we were going to mix it with McDonald's Sprite and Jolly Ranchers and take our drinks to class with us. . . So there I was, sitting in a health science class—adding more Jolly Ranchers to my sizzurp—when the teacher saw what I was doing. She asked, "What are you doing?" I replied, "I'm just putting some Jolly Ranchers in my Sprite. It makes it taste better." Everyone in class now had their attention on me. The girls in front of me took my drink and tasted the concoction. I was stunned—playing out the worst-case scenario of her reaction. By this point, a crowd had formed around my desk. After stealing a sip, she said, "Yeah, it's just Sprite and Jolly

Ranchers.” To my relief, everyone went back to what they were doing. Long story short, I never told her everything that was in that Sprite.....

I do play into my innocent appearance a bit.

I'll share the reason I went into this thought. This morning, like most mornings, when we arrive at the jobsite, everyone meets in the temporary office to do a little bullshitting before the day begins. While we were all sitting in there—some talking, others staring at their phone—I became the subject of conversation. For the past two days, we have been trying to diagnose a problem in the patio lights. Ashton and I were the ones who ran the circuitry and made the joints in the lights, but at this point, it has been around four months since we did it, so neither one of our memories was of much help. I could spend an hour laying out exactly what was wrong, but I'll spare the technicalities. . . It took the collective minds of Bobby Joe, Anthony, and me to finally understand how it needs to be rewired without cutting a bunch of drywall and running more Romex. In hindsight, I should have double-checked Ashton's work when we first did it. I'm not saying he is at fault, because I could have very well told him to do it wrong. Nevertheless, the collective blame from Bobby Joe, Anthony, and Jimmy was falling at Ashton's feet. So, this morning, when the patio lights came up in conversation, Bobby Joe made the comment, "Whoever did it must have been drunk or something"—indeed, it did seem that way. In my experience, I've never had such a hard time troubleshooting a problem such as that one. After Bobby Joe made his comment, he added, "And if they were drunk, it was probably Ian." I smiled as everyone laughed. The foreman for the general contractor (I have previously referred to him as the "safety guy") was sitting at his desk, listening to the conversation, and jumped in, "He drinks?"—inquiring to the room about me. Bobby Joe replied, "Oh yeah, Ian likes to party a little bit." He seemed surprised by the answer. Bobby Joe, always ready to share, "I got a video of him dancing with Santa Claus." He proceeded to pull up the video on his phone to show the foreman (Mike). . .

The video was from last week when I was in Florida. It was taken the night I went out with Bailey, her friends, and Brandon. I was a little drunk at some bar and spotted a Santa decoration in the corner. 'Tis the season, unencumbered and in a tipsy state, I started to dance with it. This drew the attention of the group, and Abby joined the dance session. Bailey pulled out her phone and took a video of us showing Father Christmas a good time. At some point, Bailey must have sent it to Ashton. Ashton then showed it to Bobby Joe, and he asked if Ashton could send it to him. . . When you appear innocent, certain people take pleasure in getting a peek through the window of that illusion. And some take pleasure in playing with illusions.

. . . One time, I ate shrooms with my mom and our neighbors. My mom peed herself laughing so hard.....three times in one night—hahahahaha! I told this story, as well as some of my other party stories, to Bailey while we were on the trip. She had a similar reaction to Mike's—except with a bit more interest.

These stories are just another testament to my experiential versatility.

It all started with the telos I found in myself when I was in middle school. My best friend asked what I wanted in life, and I said something like, "I want perspective. From the bottom to the top." The birthplace of my range can be attributed to this underlying motivation..... I wanted to say that I've "partied" more than any other philosopher, but caught myself—I'm sure there have been a few that have outdone me in that regard. But now I venture to say, I'm definitely one of the "coolest."

Well, I'm heading to Brandon's house. He wants to talk about some nonprofit stuff.

He's not ready for an actual structure yet—mission statement, purpose, philosophical foundation. He has ideas for programs, but they are all presented in a rather speculative way. He leans heavily toward mapping contingencies, but lacks the nuance of defining a telos and describing the ideal. His thought processes are mostly monetarily motivated. Currently, he's focused on board members, and he wants them to help him sketch out the core of the nonprofit. It's a careful game I'm playing here: I'm trying not to give suggestions on structure because I'll likely contradict his religious convictions. My role is to facilitate, clarify, and assemble his ideas into something tangible. He told me this anecdote while I was over there about this guy (Peter Stoner), who calculated the probability of Jesus fulfilling prophecy. I stood there while he was telling me that it was a 10^{17} chance of that happening. All I could do was smile and say things like, "I can't even imagine a billion of anything." All the while, I'm thinking—as he's describing various analogies of scale—"I just watched a lecture last night on the historicity of Matthew's Gospel." I could have challenged the assumption embedded in the narrative, but of what good? I suppose I could have brought up the counter and exposed the irony of the previous night's recollection. Who wants to be handed a blade that cuts into their hope?

What I dislike is allowing him the opportunity to misperceive my restraint in expressing difference as agreement. Misrepresentations can soon become masks, and if you are not careful, a mask turns into a cage of deferred expression.