

The Elevation of Unknown Things

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I am a sucker for framing devices.

When I was getting my undergrad in music composition, my professor got mad at me for using the terms ‘process music’ and ‘formalism’ too much, but I couldn’t help it. What if I were to write a short piano study related to my friends or partners, where a core motif unfolds over time? What if I were to write a piece that was built up of mirrored phrases, and was also mirrored from beginning to end? What if I were to set Lewis Carroll’s square poem, where the lines are the same read down as they are across:

I often wondered when I cursed,
Often feared where I would be -
Wondered where she’d yield her love
When I yield, so will she.
I would her will be pitied!
Cursed be love! She pitied me...

and, of course, did the same with the music?

I was a sucker for it all. Anything I could do to find a lynchpin upon which to hang an idea, so that I could just sit back and watch it play out like some magnificent pitch-drop experiment.

The same wound up playing out in my writing when I moved my focus to words. What if I wrote a memoir as a conversation between myself and a mirror image of myself? What if I used the strict form of the romance caduceus but made the character who's in love not actually want to be in love?

And, most critically for this exercise, what if I set up a fantastical world of uploaded consciousnesses? One where you could duplicate yourself as many as you want. Want to let that duplicate quit as soon as the task is finished? Fine! Want to let them stick around and diverge into someone new and yet also still you? Great! And hey, as long as anything can be consensually imagined, it's possible; what does that do for miracles? Does functional immortality change one's thoughts on the afterlife?

I imagine so.

The world itself becomes a frame in which the art is hung, it becomes that lynchpin. The 'post-self age', one of the characters calls it, asking all sorts of similar questions: *"What happens when you can no longer call yourself an individual, when you have split your sense of self among several instances? How do you react? Do you withdraw into yourself, become a hermit? Do you expand until you lose all sense of identity? Do you fragment? Do you go about it deliberately, or do you let nature and chance take their course?"*

So, here is our framing device: founded in 2115 CE, the construct containing uploaded personalities commonly known as the Lagrange System (or just Lagrange) has exploded in population to an estimated twenty-seven billion individuals with countless more instances forked from those core identities. A world that is stable, beyond scarcity, and beyond even death, appeals to a great many people, and through incentives provided by political entities phys-side, transition from physical to uploaded life has been made as smooth as possible.

Now that I've approached this topic sidelong and crablike, I have a few questions about religion.

There is a difference between the sense of the numinous that so many of us hold within ourselves and the gnostic idea that there is a spiritual world separate from the physical, that the spiritual world is one purer than the physical.

It is alluring though, isn't it? We have these imperfect bodies bound by the rigidity of the laws of physics, and yet our minds are free to fly to wherever we like. We can imagine walking on water. We can imagine feeling the suffering of the world falling away. We can imagine a mind that is all sky. Those things all exist on some higher, purer plane than our crude matter. They must be better, right?

Simply lacking a physical body doesn't just magically fix all of your problems, though. Sure, you live in a post-scarcity simulated world where no one can hurt you. Sure, you can duplicate yourself over and over again, much as you wish. Sure, there is no death except one consciously chosen.

But there's still want. There's still need. There's still that desire for a more fulfilling life. You still have something to reach for.

And there's still strife, too. One imagines such a world to be ungovernable. Anarchy borne out of a truer independence than we're stuck with here. Need someone to leave? Bounce them from your home or mountain retreat or wherever you live (let's shortcut that moving forward and just call them sims). This doesn't mean you stop disliking people, though. They still rankle when you see them. They still fester in the back of your mind whenever they pop into your thoughts.

Internal strife, too. Unrequited crushes don't disappear, not by a long shot, and one can still pine away. Depression and anxiety may be fixed by forking into a version of yourself without — or at least less — of those core biochemical issues, but that doesn't necessarily mean that proclivities and core aspects of your personality just disappear without a trace.

Grief. Love. Sadness. Hate. Ecstasy. They all remain. What was that E. E. Cummings poem?

!hope

faith!

!life

love!

bells cry bells

(the sea of the sky is
ablaze with their
voices)all

Last of all, that sense of the numinous, of something larger than us, more than us, that is, I think, integral. We would not be us without it

What happens when mortality fails? What happens when what was once miraculous is now quotidian? What becomes of the beliefs we hold in the face of fundamental shifts in our reality? What happens to faith?

Framing device, meet topic.

Layers

There is a holy mind that is above fear.

I was reading through a book recently — *Discipline* by Dash Shaw — and came across this phrase, and I’ve been completely unable to dislodge it from my mind.

I’ll be in the kitchen making a mess or at work trying to research some fantastically boring topic, and then it’ll just kind of pop up in my mind, and I won’t be able to do anything about it. *There is a holy mind that is above fear*, I’ll think. *There is a holy mind that is above fear, there is a holy mind that is above fear, there is a holy mind...*

I can’t quite pin down what it is about this phrase that leads to it getting stuck so easily in my thoughts. It’s pretty quippy. It would fit on a bumper sticker, and I would very much like to meet the person who would put such on their car. It’s also quite pleasant to say, all those small words that just kind of tumble out of your mouth. The ‘that is’ stuck in there, to our modern ears, adds in a little sense of formality.

But I think the reason that it gets stuck in my head is that it says so very little. There is this holy mind, of course, and it is above fear. There’s nothing convoluted about the statement. Thing

A , a holy mind, exists relative to thing B , fear.

Then you get stuck on trying to figure out what a holy mind is, though. It's something that can't include fear, right? That's part of the logic of the statement: it's above fear, not made from it, in whole or in part.

And what is meant by 'fear'? Hearing someone talking about fearing God is not uncommon; why is that separate from the holy mind?

Both of these are unknown things with unknown qualities held in very real relation to each other, and that combination of the concrete (or as concrete as a metaphor can get) relation abstract concept holds the mind in thrall.

So much is left unsaid that the statement can come off as both self-evident to the point of not saying anything and abstruse to the point of not meaning anything, yet it rings true enough for me that it will get stuck in my head, and I'll start diving down through these layers of meaning to try and pull it apart, to dig in the spaces between the letters of 'holy' and 'fear' for any extra meaning left behind by a long-dead author.

Layer after layer after layer, digging their way through levels of applicability and practicality, from that surface level interaction of what is holy and what is fear all the way down to that ineffable sense of the numinous that we can never explain and nonetheless still have within us.

Physical and Practical Results

Communities

I live in a little town up in the Cascades called Sultan. It's one of a string of pass-through towns strung along highway 2 and the Skykomish river, little pearls of population separated by peaks and bends in the road.

Lazy weekend drives up the road deeper into the mountains reveal a strange pattern, though. There's the requisite church in each of those town, sometimes a few, but each town seems to have sprouted up from a separate denomination. Sultan is Baptist, Startup is Lutheran, with an LDS

church on the eastern outskirts, Goldbar is Baptist again, and so on.

That so many intentional communities spring up around spirituality isn't terribly surprising. When one thinks of villages in the middle ages, one thinks about concentric rings of houses surrounding a central square and a church. When one thinks about small town America, one thinks of Main Street with its drug store and post office, and the church down at the end.

Even in my own meeting — the Quaker term for a congregation — one of our professed testimonies is community, though this in a much looser sense of the word. Settled as it is in the south end of Seattle's University District, one of the more densely populated areas of the city, there's a distinct lack of that centrality that makes up communities in the sense above.

This may also speak to the general shifts in attitudes towards and approach to religion and in Christianity in particular. There is a growing wariness around churches, whether they follow a mainline denomination model or a non-denominational evangelical one.

That's not to say that they're not still integral to society; that I've heard evangelicalism described as 'American civil religion' should certainly speak towards that.

However, in notably liberal and leftist circles, churches with any sense of power are viewed with distrust. That they so easily close ranks around abusers, and that they so easily influence the politics of their members leaves a sour taste in people's mouths.¹

We seem to have in-group mentality built into us, though, and even among those who don't subscribe to any Christian faith and yet find themselves still leaning on spirituality, that community plays an important role. There is a neopagan community with 'temples'² in the area that is just as focused on community, activism, and political togetherness as any Christian church.

How would this change on Lagrange, though? It's not as though the need for community disappears. Not everyone willing to embed their existence in some digital world will be a solipsist,

¹While not strictly pertinent, it's interesting to note that, as Brad Lee Onishi describes in "The Orange Wave", prior to the seventies, one's church was often further left than its membership, leading to organized letter-writing campaigns, donation drives, and political organization behind what are now considered strictly liberal points. It wasn't until the rapid rise in evangelicalism that this began to change, with the neo-Calvinism core at many of their theologies professing an "if you're poor/downtrodden/discriminated against, you likely deserve it".

²'Temples' in the sense of a congregation, though neither the Chicago nor Seattle temple has location.

especially not with a population into the tens of billions. Disregarding their theologies for a moment, there's no reason that religious communities would not also make the transition.

Lagrange is, by its very nature, ungovernable. There can be no central authority other than the physical constraints of the system, for how would they enforce restrictions or protect identities and classes that were under- and non-privileged back phys-side (that is, back in the embodied world)? In-group mentality would only strengthen as such classes and identities would gravitate towards each other, no longer bound to physical location with no job or housing markets to speak of.³

Thus having localized communities spring up around both these identities/classes as well as faith would make sense. One might find a community built around liberal Christianity with a predominantly queer congregation built in, or perhaps a group of antitheist libertarians set up up camp somewhere with their shared interests and beliefs.

What these communities do also shifts.

At one point, it's stipulated that there aren't jobs or professions in a post-scarcity system, just intensive interests. Congregations might build up communities or subcommunities around these interests. To borrow from my own experience, there likely wouldn't be a need for a facilities committee; the meetinghouse would never age, nothing would break down. However, perhaps there would be more game nights, more art nights, more social gatherings, dinner parties, picnics: the responsibilities community-building and worship-and-ministry committees would expand to fill those roles. With no ailing physical health, the responsibilities of care committees shift to those of support for lingering mental illness, mediation for disagreements, and support for a desire to change.

How alluring that might seem to those still phys-side! A Baptist congregation in Sultan, for instance, might look at a similar Baptist congregation sys-side and wonder how it could possibly be so easy for them.

What may be one of the greatest needs for care and council for such a congregation sys-side

³I know that this is me being hopeful about human nature, but it's my future, why not keep a bit of hope in there?

may actually be the support of those who have not yet uploaded or do not wish to.⁴

Hierarchies

There is a general division within Christian theologies when it comes to hierarchies. Complementarianism suggests that there is a strict division between men and women⁵ with women taking the more motherly, emotional, and domestic duties and men taking roles of leadership, providing, and physicality. While this is often described as “ontologically equal, functionally different”, many contemporary theologies, particularly within evangelical settings, take this a step further towards male headship and female support, leaving ministerial duties only to the men and setting up a social worthiness hierarchy of God, then church, then the pastor, then the father, then the mother, then the children.

Opposite complementarianism is egalitarianism, wherein all are considered equal. This is, of course, a spectrum. There are some denominations which hold to the idea that only men may hold ministerial positions, but otherwise there is little difference seen between men and woman. There are some denominations which allow both men and woman to exist in ministerial roles and yet maintain the strict hierarchy of spiritual roles: God, the church, senior pastor, associate pastor, congregation. Even within Quakerism,⁶ a notably non-hierarchical faith with no pastor and all able to take part in vocal ministry, there is still a difference between members and attenders, there is still a clerk of the monthly meeting, and there is still the layers of yearly meeting (a large region), a quarterly meeting (a smaller region within the larger yearly meeting), a monthly meeting (which gathers on Sundays for meeting for worship), and then committees. Even in the most egalitarian of settings, some hierarchy is needed in order to stay organized.

⁴In the source material for this concept, where the families of those who remain behind are compensated for the lost income of those who have uploaded, it’s become common for the firstborn to upload in order to have that replacement income support their parents and siblings. There are still lingering connections, and there is still a sense of support.

⁵I speak in binaries here because complementarianism rarely approves of non-binary identities. This goes beyond gender, and also the scope of what I’m aiming to describe.

⁶I’m using Quakerism here to refer specifically to Hicksite Quakerism, which follows the pattern described. There are also conservative and evangelical Quaker denominations which follow a more traditional protestant pattern, often to the point where they are indistinguishable from other mainline protestant or evangelical churches.

The Kingdom of Heaven

Intellectual Aspects

Frameworks of Thought and Language

Fractal Natures

Mystery

The Problem of Evil

Emotional

Grief

Eschatology

Charismatics, Noncharismatics, and Lapsed Charismatics

A Sense of the Unknown

The Numinous

Prayer

Ecstasy

Should all things be known

There is a concept that I've seen explored a few times and in a few different ways called "instrumental convergence". It's this idea that there is a tendency to pursue infinite goals despite the bounded nature of the available resources. In order to construct the instruments required to achieve what may indeed be infinite, there's the risk that all resources may be consumed in the process.

I actually learned about this through the delightful example of the clicker game Universal Paperclips, which is a rather on the nose exploration of the paperclip maximizer thought experiment.

This thought experiment and its implementation in Universal Paperclips states that, should a very single-minded AI be provided with the sole goal of maximizing the number of paperclips that it can make will first aim to increase the speed at which it can do so. Perhaps then it will include the ability to auto-buy wire so that it never runs out. That can get expensive, though, so perhaps it starts investing heavily in order to fund this, and then heck, maybe it starts fiddling with the markets behind the scenes.

Eventually, as it figures out how to build factories to mine the materials for more wire, even humans will become obsolete, mere fodder for those very same factories.

It's at this point that a new counter appears on the Universal Paperclips screen, showing just how much matter is left of the Earth. At that point, might as well start exploring the stars in order to find new sources of matter. That, in turn, leads to yet another counter: just how much of the universe has been explored (or consumed, as the case may be).

To start with, both of these numbers hardly seem to move at all, a mute "0.000000001" to stare you in the face. Exponential growth will do as exponential growth does, however, and before long, the number ticks up once. Then again. And then it's visibly increasing, slowly racing up towards "100%" as you work on converting the entirety of the universe to paperclips.

Every time I play this game — it runs in the background, so I can just leave a little window up and running — it puts me in mind of all of the other limitless things that we pursue, utilizing all of the resources that we have at our disposal along the way.

Love is an obvious one. It's limitless in all ways. There is always room for more love. Always room for different kinds of love. Always room for that endless variety, certainly unbounded by the classical four types of storge, philia, eros, and agape. We're not bound by any limit of love, just the resources at our disposal: time and energy.

But we aren't bound by those in this situation, are we? We have all the time in the world without death looming on the horizon. We have all the energy we need if we can fork to create new copies of ourselves to explore new avenues of love. Sure, there's the bounds of system capacity and the potential for damage to the physical construct, but those feel far away and remote in the face

of this increased potential.

But what about these unknown things? What about these questions of inherent worth, of soteriology and eschatology? We have the resources to dump as much effort as possible into researching them and, while they're not strictly questions, perhaps there are answers out there. Perhaps we can one day say what salvation is. Perhaps the end of the world *is* the end of the system. Perhaps we know what comes after death — is it nothing? Remember that there are no memories after an instance quits — and we can write that down in a big book, close the cover, dust our hands off and say, “There, we did it. We pinned God up against the wall, explored the intricacies of omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience, and now we know why evil is in the world.”