

BUT I DIGRESS ...

AN ETHICAL CODIFICATION FOR EXACTLY ONE PERSON (ME)

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Disclaimer

Some additional disclaimers will certainly be necessary overall, but a blanket one is clearly necessary up front. The first issue I'd grapple with here is the fairly obvious, rather damning influence on this work by one David Foster Wallace. His influence on this work is a testament to complacency and hypocrisy. Complacency in choosing the easy way out; hypocrisy in criticizing those who have done the same. (See chapter 2 on "The Immutable.")

I'll deal with this later on in the introduction (section 1 on page xii), but I'd like to get ahead of it here. As of this writing (May 17, 2018), I'm still struggling internally with the implications of my life being influenced by a man whose behavior I have rejected without equivocation in other men. I can't be entirely sure when I first heard the allegations^{*}—which incidentally are not even really allegations at this point, there's pretty much consensus on this—I've known about them and have chosen to practice the intentional ignorance all too common in our current society. Ignorance, intentional and otherwise, provides sanctuary to those privileged enough to escape atrocity. Being a cis-het, partially-white male, much shelter is available to me. The ideal version of myself would not avail myself of this shelter, instead seeking to help others, but alas I failed in this instance.

During my drive down to Florida, I many a car-hour thinking about my moral quandary.[✱] I have come to the—likely fallacious—conclusion that the philosophy I have derived from Wallace's various writing is, to a hopefully acceptable extent, separable from the man. This is something that has proven difficult to logically square with my fundamental belief in the inescapable interconnection between artist and art. For an elucidation of that struggle see the influences section of the introduction (page xii).

Some would say
that you stole it
directly

I'd also, while I have your attention, to point out the absurdity of this document existing at all. (Apologies for the tonal shift all the way over to flip.) Why on goddamn earth, for what reason in the freakin world, would a person who is twenty-three, just graduated college (not even yet), need to write what is effectively a memoir? I mean, what else to

^{*} the first inkling of something untoward around David Foster Wallace was almost certainly in that Jesse Eisenberg/Jason Segel movie about David Foster Wallace

[✱] additionally struggling with the fact that I even have the ability to consider this

Disclaimer

call this? Calling it a “Personal Philosophy” or a “Set of Moral Codes” is borderline (or far) worse.

In all seriousness, I truly do want to write down, to codify the lessons of the last half-decade plus years of my life. But there isn’t really any way to do that without feeling a bit like a self-indulgent doucher. It’s a fuckin’ memoir, like, conceited much?

—Michael J. Van Wickle

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Introduction

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging the future but by the past.

PATRICK HENRY, *speech at the Virginia Convention* (1775)

This document is an attempt to layout the personal philosophy that I have developed over the course of my life so far. While realizing that I have only lived 23 years, quite a short time in the scheme of things, I believe that documenting my thoughts will serve me to reflect on from whence I came and to meditate on where I am going. I intend this to be some manner of living document, updated over time with my new insights.

This introduction exists to define some terms and as exposition regarding the development of my philosophy. We start our journey with a discussion of ethics vs. morals and follow that up with a (mostly) chronological account of my journey to this point. Just before getting to the meat of my elucidation I'll mention some influences.

Ethics

Personal philosophy is a bit abstract, I would, to a certain degree, prefer the term *ethical code*. What does that mean exactly? I assume that we all have a passing familiarity with the term ethics, but this usage may be slightly opaque. I think a precise definition of the term ethical (or ethics) would be appropriate here, I am using a definition set forth in *Objectivity*, by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007).[1]

ethics normative codes of conduct that are bound up with a way of being in the world, an ethos in the sense of the habitual disposition of an individual or group

morals specific normative rules that may be upheld or transgressed and to which one may be held to account

I really doubt that these are very many people's working definitions of these terms. It doesn't really matter in this case, because I'm just defining these terms to mean those definitions in this specific context. Once you're done reading this (this is a sentence which will likely only ever be read by me) you can go back to whatever normal definition you have, but for now use these.

I have no real moral code (by the above definition), besides, like, the law, I guess; I'm saying that I don't believe in God or religion, not that I don't care about morality. I don't believe in an afterlife; my ethics are founded purely on choice, or they try to be, and I don't think there

will be any reward for following them or a punishment for breaking them.

Removing incentive, I have found (along with many behavioral psychologists and those who realize the obvious), tends to make one less likely to do some thing. The question that comes to mind is: why continue to follow?

The answer is in two parts, neither of which are likely to mollify current skeptics. First, this list is, at least in part, descriptive, it's how I have lived my life (which has worked out pretty well for me so far). The second part is really a rejection of the question; living this way has made my life better, more fulfilling.

Development

Constant and frequent questioning is the first key to wisdom... For through doubting we are led to inquire, and by inquiry we perceive the truth.

PETER ABELARD, *Sic et Non* (1121)

I started college pretty goddamn depressed; for about two years, I thought about my suicide more like a historical event than a potential future choice. Missing out on what amounts to about two years of social development in such an important time is hard.

This document got started near the end of my 5th year of college, I am now without suicidal thoughts (for all intents and purposes—I'm not gonna say I'm perfect^{*}). I'm not sure when I got the idea to start writing. For sure I got the idea sometime in the spring semester of my 5th year at Northeastern, I just remember that I started writing just after getting the idea.

When I first decided to write this, I figured it might be beneficial or focusing to write down how I want to ideally live my life. After talking to people about my task, I decided to modify my purpose. The original goal remains: **a codification of a lifestyle**; a new goal enters: **a reflection of how I got from preordained death to a healthy(er) human being**. What this document has become for me is an accounting

^{*} or that I never feel depressed or shitty

of how I survived, an existential *Robinson Crusoe* if one wanted to be full of oneself. The tenets enumerated below represent an attempt at codification of life changes I made in order to, in the most literal sense, save my own life. They are a product of years of hard work; I introspected and I studied and I made friends and I didn't do it alone.

There is something, quite a lot actually, to be said for getting help if you need it. Don't ever be too proud to get help, it's not even a matter of pride. The stigmatization of mental health is dangerous and buying into it can be deadly. Learning that there isn't anything wrong with me was groundbreaking and is to a large degree the reason that these guidelines exist.

Narrative Interlude

This is the part where I'll go through some years of college and explain what happened in them. (Also the part where I hope that my dumbass college years weren't just some derivative bullshit[✱].)

5/11/18

I attended, as previously probably mentioned, Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. It was not my first choice, or really even a destination that I had considered before I got in. My reason for applying? my friend, Henry, texted me (or talked to me at water polo practice) and said (approximately), "Yo, apply to Northeastern, they don't need an essay." Northeastern was the first college that accepted me, the first of four, and they gave me some cash and seemed to actually want me. (The others were state schools, two didn't give me a major that I wanted and I didn't like the other all that much when I visited.)

So I essentially went in completely blind and ended up staying for five years.[§] Basically, you can split that ish into two parts: the first two years and the last three; the former were frankly pretty garbage, the latter, probably the best years of my life.

So we'll tackle the first two years, this is going to be ... not that dope, but hopefully cathartic.

:

Lol jk, we'll actually go over some of the people that I met while

[✱]also the part where I hope I don't swear too much...actually probably not the only part

[§]the majority of people at Northeastern do five years b/c co-op

at Northeastern, just as a primer (and also for some emotional comments[†]). (Trinna omit last names here maybe?) (And also, I feel like I'm gonna be pretty shitty at explaining why I love these people so much, but to be fair, I'm pretty drunk. I do love them though.)

Damn, wrote that last paragraph when I was a lot drunker than I thought I was.

Sober Michael signing back on. Expounding on one's friends without being gushy (not that there's anything wrong with that necessarily) or overly revelatory re: unexpressed feelings is obviously difficult. I consider my core friend group to be the people with whom I went to Costa Rica in Spring 2018 plus one or two people. The order in which I mention people is not intended to be relevant, but instead that which made narrative sense.

Freshman year of college, within the first week or two of classes, I took the elevator down a couple floors to a party in a room below me; it was there that I would meet some lifelong (I assume) friends. This room[‡] was the residence of the first two people I'll mention, Brock and Vishal; Brock I knew from water polo and Vishal I knew from Brock. Another teammate of mine, Will, introduced me to his roommate Milan, in them I found my future housemates and another two great friends.

ALRIGHT, SO FULL DISCLOSURE TIME. STRONG MEMORIES OF THIS PARTY, FRANKLY, DON'T REALLY EXIST; TO BE FAIR, IT WAS FIVE YEARS AGO AND THERE WAS SOME UNDERAGE DRINKING, ALLEGEDLY. SO THERE MAY BE SOME CONFLATION OF DIFFERENT PARTIES IN THE SAME PLACE. BASICALLY, BROCK AND VISHAL'S SUITE IS LIKE, A METAPHOR FOR THE EARLY DAYS OF SCHOOL.

Here too, I met Averie, with whom I have an uncharacteristically vivid memory of her finding me at the party once every like fifteen minutes and making sure that remembered her name.

So this is the part where I drop the whole party metaphor thing, because it's tiresome and it feels a bit disingenuous. Instead I'll just run through the remaining people, starting with Carly.[£]

Carly is a person about whom it is hard to say too much about; a person with whom I actually can have an interesting philosophical

SO I'LL USE THIS SPOT TO TALK ABOUT SOMETHING THAT OCCURRED TO ME WHILE WRITING THIS. IT'S THAT BOOKS ARE, I GET THAT I'M REUSING A WORD HERE, ATOMIC. AS FAR AS RECOLLECTION HOLDS, ALL BOOKS I HAVE READ, READ LIKE THEY WERE WRITTEN IN ONE LONG ASS SITTING. I CAN'T RECALL A BOOK THAT TALKED ABOUT, OR REFERENCED, THE TIME THAT PASSED DURING THE WRITING PROCESS, OR THE DIFFERENT STATES OF MIND OF DIFFERENT WRITING SESSIONS.

[†]if anyone I went to Costa Rica with is reading this, it may feel familiar

[‡]technically it was a suite

[£]shoutout, b/c you're probably the one reading this

conversation without feeling like a goddamn charlatan[#].

Naty, probably the nicest human being I have had the pleasure to meet, again a person with whom I can discuss so many topics, from engineering stuff, to *The Office* (see page 11 for more on that).

Mary, I believe, but have had trouble expressing in the past, is impressive in a particular way. There is no possible expression here that won't be reductive or condescending or patronizing. But, her ability to like, sound and act like a normal human being while also being maybe the smartest person I know is just plain ridiculous.

The dynamic brother-sister duo of Dre and Bella are last, but a value-based ordinal position doesn't really make sense[‡]. All I'll say about Dre is that he's fascinating. Talking movies with Bella is always a delight, and she is one of the few people I know (in real life) whose movie opinions and analysis I really respect.

... Getting back to point, starting with the first two years of school. In reading about all those friends, one might be inclined to assume some pleasant things about early college, and yes, the first bit was good. Got good grades, made new friends, but, the second semester, the Spring semester was not as good.

Influences

The previously written introduction to this section was an exposition on the key influences and insights David Foster Wallace lent me. Using language and tone that seem chillingly crass looking back, I derided those I felt "misappropriated" his philosophy, those fucking douchebags. The pedestal upon which I stood was, apparently, at an elevation high enough to asphyxiate any semblance of rational thought.

5/10/18

With the rise of the #MeToo movement and the general social change around 2017–18, the subject of David Foster Wallace's deeds have come to the occupy some space within the public consciousness once again. I do not in any way, shape, or form want to sound like I begrudge any of the women—especially Mary Karr—coming forward and reporting sexual assault or other vile behavior from men; the following few

[#]but like I still do a bit... but that's my own thing

[‡]as they say

paragraphs are not intended to read like I'm complaining that because people are speaking out I've been inconvenienced. Having to rewrite is literally nothing compared to such personal trauma. Ideally my explanation will sound less like a anti-woman screed and more like bargaining for my own morality.

You may recall in the disclaimer (page iii) my mention of the fundamental connection between art and artist, that one cannot be interpreted without the other. This follows from a personal definition of art, which is reality mediated through the human experience—or something to that effect. What I'm trying to say is that a human who produces some work of art, independent of medium, has left in said work an imprint of their essence, a trace of their true, unconscious mind. (Art is commonly seen as an expression of the unconscious mind. Basically that's how unintentional symbolism can happen.) Assuming this view on art is sound (which I'd imagine a great deal of people would have problems here) one inexorably comes to the conclusion that art has morality, reflective of the artist's.

Essentially: one can—frankly one should—judge the quality/morality of art based on its creator. Like, I won't ever again watch *American Beauty* or a countless number of other movies (*American Beauty* just always comes to mind). (This line of thought could segue into a conversation about whether or not Weinstein produced films are okay, but that will be left for another time.^{**}) Part of my certainty stems from the atomicity of a particular piece of art.

No work of art is truly an island, collaboration is important and unavoidable, but most art has a specific, principle author.

Another influence for the items listed here is Albert Camus, specifically absurdism. I don't embrace absurdism wholeheartedly; there were some strikingly problematic elements in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, what I do take from Camus' philosophy is the desperate, futile struggle against the void. This fight, that unwinnable, yet cosmically noble struggle against the unknowable appeals to me.

Not all of my influences are now deceased well-known acclaimed authors; the next influence I'll talk about is actually a duo: Freddie Wong and Matthew Arnold. (The acclaimed authors bit isn't intended as a slight, it was just funny, so shut the fuck up or something.) Sincerity is one of the core virtues I'll be exploring later on, and my fascination with the concept stems in large part from these two. I've been

TODO: There should be more here on why my philosophy is okay, if only to allay my own fears

^{**} or I might get into it later on in this section...

watching *freddiew* videos, I assume, since I first went on YouTube, a lot of his early work is pretty ubiquitous on the World Wide Web. Wong and Arnold also produced *Video Game High School*, which I enjoyed immensely and their Hulu series was a good spot of fun as well. Their podcast, *Story Break*, is almost certainly my favorite podcast[§], but their true contribution to my life comes in introducing me to sincerity.^{§§}

I'll not get too deep into it here, as there is a whole chapter later on dedicated to it, but I, from them, realized that it was the reason I enjoyed certain works. The first example of this is *Speed Racer*, my favorite movie (well, tied for first^{††}), but I also see it in their works.

One of my first influences, another group of Internet^{‡‡} pioneers, Rooster Teeth, has guided me towards a path that I hope will involve more creativity than the normal engineering life. I don't remember the most recent time that I *wasn't* a Rooster Teeth fan. (Checking my profile, it says I joined in 2008, I feel like this may have been after I starting watching) I've been through a whole mess of development with Red vs. Blue and Achievement Hunter and Funhaus as a backdrop. Burnie Burns is one of my heroes; I've learn much about not being afraid to fail (which I haven't fully assimilated) from him.

Film Crit Hulk is the pseudonym of an Internet film critic, a man who is, in my estimation, one of the sharpest literary and pop-culture minds around.

TODO: expand;
he's thoughtful
and emotional
and just plain
great (also I
learned what
semiotics was
from him)

The Title

Digression is one of the main features of my personal discourse. It comes up a little less in casual conversation (mainly because I'm trying to end the conversation ASAP), but it is *for sure* a key feature of my writing. So get ready, cause this whole document is gonna be chalk full of random detours from the stated subjects.

[§]Although I rather like *Pod Save America*

^{§§}I don't mean sincerity the concept, obviously I know what that is. They pointed out sincerity in media, most memorably *Speed Racer*.

^{††}With *Short Term 12* which—you know what, we'll get into it later.

^{‡‡}This is the wrong usage of the term.

Obligatory Chapter Rundown

5/10/2018

As is standard in any textbook type work^{✖✖} I will now embark on an explanatory tour of each chapter, covering their subject in brief and providing some useful nuggets.

5/14/2018

The chapters, as I could decide no other appropriate order, are alphabetical (excluding 'the').

Empathy (chapter 1): the ability to understand the feelings of another person, is, I claim, the result of conscious choice. A choice that must be made relentlessly, the empathetic path is not easy, but it is rewarding.

Recognizing that a situation will not be changed is an important part of maturing and, honestly, is great for saving energy to focus on what really matters. Immutability (chapter 2) is the next covered topic and is a more down-to-Earth, everyday idea. I also get into a corollary: effecting change when one can.

The pursuit of knowledge (chapter 3) is, on a certain level, my life's work. In that chapter, I cover ideas on certainty and the general quest for greater understanding.

Sincerity (chapter 4) is an important quality to me, in people, but also in the media I consume.

The Void (chapter 5) refers to an extremely high level component of my philosophy, which can be viewed as an offshoot of absurdism.

^{✖✖}I hope this book is less dry and more narrative-ish than most textbooks

Empathy

If it is not tempered by compassion, and empathy, reason can lead men and women into a moral void.

KAREN ARMSTRONG, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*
(2010)

HERE IS THE PART
WHERE I DEAL WITH
SOME UNDUE
INFLUENCES

Well shit, I've arrived at the first chapter and everything has pretty much gone to shit. My great plan for my great book was dashed, hoisted by my own petard—more specifically my own complacency. Before I spiral, or, you know continue to spiral (I'll probably continue my Charybdis impression later), some explanation is necessary I guess. It all starts in 10th or 11th grade¹...

Mrs. Nye, my eccentric, two-time English teacher, was the mediator for a lesson in empathy, and not being quite so sure of yourself. (Seriously though, her class was crazy, like getting into yelling arguments with her (and then the video getting posted on Facebook) and leaving in the middle of class to get donuts and returning to class.) From that point on, with varying levels of compliance and emphasis, my life has been lived by a code that includes empathy as a core tenet.

5/12/18

1.1 The Empathetic Mind

or only one I guess

Very little in life is not the consequence of real and intensely conscious choice. While hard, sometimes, to accept, it's true; instead of hoping you accept this fact *a priori*, we'll run through a didactic example or two.

5/12/18

Imagine a soldier, he is, reluctantly, straight up murdering civilians. One of them, an old lady or a small child², looks up at him/her with watering eyes and pleads for their life, asking: "why are you doing this?" Voice unsteady, hands shaky, he replies "I have no choice. I am <insert how he is being coerced>." I don't feel overly denotative to say that he is wrong; he does have a choice, maybe the odds are stacked towards him choosing murdering people, but he chose, like, the life of his family over the people in front of him. This is the most extreme example, besides Nazis³ (the easiest logical extreme in any argument).

What does this have to do with empathy? good question. The point I'm trying to make is that we have to choose to be empathetic, you are the master of your mind, although the human psyche is a stubborn beast. It's hard work, sometimes you'll want to give up, sometimes you'll be tired, but making that choice is well worth it.

¹ I had the same English teacher both years and I'm not sure in which incarnation of her class I was introduced to *This is Water*

² choose whichever one has more emotional weight for you

³ although the soldier could easily be a Nazi or something

1.1.1 Empathy or Projection?

One must be wary of one's own brain, as it tends to conflate projection with empathy. Such a situation is one in which I have found myself many a time, although I have likely had instances of further confusion.

The reason for confusion stems from the similarity of action, i.e., in both situations you're trying to get into another person's head, to know how they feel. In the empathetic case, you read them, you come to an understanding of how they feel and why; in the other, you are reading the representation of the person which one's mind creates, it may feel like you are reading them, but in reality you are just pushing your thoughts into them.

Think extraction vs. inception in *Inception*.

IF YOU HADN'T
NOTICED, MOVIE
REFERENCES ARE
MY CURRENCY

1.2 Aside: Recognizing Empathy

I had a realization while watching *The Office*, re: how it expresses its empathy. *The Office* is truly representative of so much of what I'm trying to express in this section. At first, I thought to myself, "the empathy presents itself in the character's true desire to connect with one another", or something to that effect. That sentiment is true, but empathy is shown in the deepest fiber of the show, specifically, in its most recognizable quality.

The Office is awkward as hell. Countless are the times I've had to pause and count to three or take a deep-ass breath⁴ before restarting because the cringe is so utterly overwhelming. In so many of these situations, the cringe may be the product of a character trying to reveal their truest self in what may be an inadvisable manner or inappropriate context. It's because they're trying, trying their damned heart out, to connect with their fellows or represent themselves in a better light. Since their urge is so plain, their sentiment so open, we tend to feel almost physical pain at just the possibility (in some instances, the inevitability) of rejection.

Empathetic pain comes from our innate sociability as human beings, it's in our DNA. We want to be accepted by our peers, by those we admire, and the sight of someone falling on their face in the attempt

⁴deep ass-breath, a.k.a, butt inhale

is far too real. The pain is, I feel, exacerbated by the rejection of real feeling exhibited in contemporary pop-culture.⁵

An additional note is the way that the show handles Ryan, the B.J. Novak character. At not point is there any attempt to show Ryan as actually cool, or like, a truth-teller type. He's shown as he is: an asshole, cause a lot (or most) of the time, cynical dudes who think they they see through the veil are actually just fuckin' dicks.

⁵see, *E Unibus Pluram*

The Immutable

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.

PHILLIP K. DICK, *How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later* (1978)

TODO: my thoughts on this are strained, b/c I don't necessarily accept absolutes, but also apparently I can stomach immutability? maybe this is more like a day-to-day thing, whereas the other thing is more philosophical/existential

Complaining, expressing one's discontent, is not only natural, but essential. This does not enjoin complaints generally, but only when they are *against what one cannot affect*.

I'd just like to take a moment here to talk about the quote at the head of this chapter. The search for this quote took a long, long time, like, a truly disturbing amount of time.

5/1/2018

2.1 Corollary: The Mutable

Arising naturally (or not, I have really no idea what people ever mean when they say that) from the previous item, one should not complain (about the mutable) without *attempting to effect change*. I have found this hard to put into practice, as I am naturally quite averse to going outside and/or expending energy.

2.2 What is Immutable?

We all goddamn complain.

Knowledge

Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.

IMMANUEL KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)

I have, on several occasions, said something to the effect of that my greatest and continuing regret in my life is that I don't know everything.¹ Quoting oneself is ridiculous and conceited; not to mention the fact that the sentiment expressed is also ridiculous, a facially absurd notion.

Despite the true (like, literally quantum mechanical) impossibility of complete knowledge, it fits with my common practice of setting goals that are purely aspirational. For me, these goals are in a separate class from day-to-day, banal goals, like 'finish homework' or 'find a job;' aspirational goals are those that I recognize are unattainable. Goals such as these are, in my mind, couched in terms of calculus: as time goes to infinity, I achieve that goal.

I feel like my thoughts on this have changed a bit, or like, I rephrase a lot of this stuff

What I'll be referring to as 'aspirational goals' from here on out, are, in my experience, sort of antithetical to human nature. As humans, we generally take the path that will lead to the most immediate satisfaction and have difficulty seeing particularly far into the future. Aspirational goals offer no prospect of satisfaction, the catharsis comes in the journey.

3.1 Asymptotic Truth

FOR SURE CAME UP
WITH THIS IDEA
WHILE SUPER TIRED
A COUPLE DAYS
AFTER GRADUATION

Above, goals were put in the form of a limit, here, that idea will be expounded on a bit, with the concept of **asymptotic truth**². A corollary to being empathetic is the idea that, never should one be completely confident in oneself.

5/13/18

This ties into the idea of objective truth, those facts which are true, regardless of perspective—the eigen-truths, independent of transformation. Having read an extensive history of the concept of objectivity, I know that the term has gone through some changes throughout the years[1]. From its inception as attempts to distill variety into 'types', to the idea of mechanical objectivity, to the more recent trained judgment, we observe an ever evolving definition of *truth*. What I'm getting at is that there is a deep, potentially untraversable, divide between what we (as humans, or as individuals) *know* and what is *true*³.

INsofar AS
COMPLETE TRUTH
IS EVEN A THING

¹ a pretty hilariously unverifiable statement

² not married to this term, but patent pending just in case

³ this idea was elucidated pretty clearly in *Men in Black*, when Tommy Lee Jones (Agent K) basically says that exact phrase to Will Smith (soon to be Agent J)

Instead of complete certainty, we have this asymptotic behavior, which is how I resolve my commitment to uncertainty with that which is viewed as ‘objectively true.’ To me⁴, this certainty is more like the tails of a standard normal distribution. Think of the value of $\lim_{x \rightarrow \infty} \varphi(x)$, where φ is the PDF of a Gaussian distribution with $\mu = 0$ and $\sigma = 1$, it’s zero, that’s our uncertainty. But we, as human beings don’t ever get to that point, *there will always be some uncertainty*.

TODO: Clean up the language in this section, I feel like overall I have a point, but its muddled.

3.2 Knowledge Acquisition

He who chooses to know for the sake of knowing will choose most readily that which is most truly knowledge.

ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* (Unknown)

Pursuant to my insatiable desire to learn, I try to read books of varying subjects. For instance, as of this writing I am reading *The Subject of Semiotics*, by Kaja Silverman, and before that I read *Battle Cry of Freedom*, by James McPherson, a single-volume history of the Civil War. These two books are illustrative of two aspects of my desire for knowledge: they are both far outside my field and they are disparate from each other. Yet, each provides value to my life.

BOY, DOES THIS WHOLE PARAGRAPH AND CHAPTER AND BOOK JUST MAKE ME FEEL CONCEITED

I have never wanted to be “just” an engineer, it feels too confining. Reading on a wide variety of subject matter helps me become a more well-rounded person, a trait which I find admirable. Well-roundedness has its virtues, e.g., (hypothetically) better conversation, different perspectives, a more interesting life, but it is not without potential drawbacks.

AND IT FEELS LIKE I’M JUST LOOKING OUT FOR NUMBER ONE

Most obvious as a drawback is the threat of coming off as ‘a mile wide but an inch deep’, that property of having passing knowledge in much, but true understanding in little. This ends up only being a problem when one is interacting with other people, it’s not really an internal problem. I don’t want to discount the potential discursive drawback to this, coming across as shallow can be problematic. On a practical level, other people are often not knowledgeable enough to recognize that one lacks a depth of knowledge in a subject. While this is not,

⁴and basically to most scientists, it’s just never expressed in this verbose a manner or as convoluted (basically scientists are more straightforward)

in my opinion, an adequate excuse, it at least mitigates the problem somewhat. Besides getting a pass based on general lack of knowledge, being a mile wide, regardless of depth, can provide a discursive advantage⁵ as conversations tend to be lubricated by either interlocutor having the ability to converse on a range of subjects.

3.3 Inform Oneself

Democracy Dies in Darkness

THE WASHINGTON POST

My sister has has considerable influence regarding the development of my political/social opinions, especially since starting college. From my point of view, some level of political consciousness is vital. Knowledge of current events is also important regarding ideas which are laid out in the chapter on 'The Immutable' (5)

⁵advantage personally, not like, trying to get one over on someone

4

Sincerity

TODO: Find a new
fuckin' quote, b/c
there is some
good shit here

The quotation on the previous page elucidates the idea behind this point more eloquently than I ever could. Despite that, I will endeavor to clarify how this may apply to my life specifically.

To be clear, this point is not a wide-ranging proscription on lying or deceit generally.¹ Full disclosure, this one does not really apply to my life at all, it really applies more to the media which I consume. In an attempt to clarify my point, I will comment my two favorite films²: *Speed Racer* and *Short Term 12*. Each of these movies portray, in my opinion, sincerity in film and the powerful effect said sincerity adds to film.

JUST GONNA ADD A LITTLE NOTE HERE THAT I'M SITTING HERE, AT MY DESK IN 269 HIGHLAND, AND I'M TRYING TO PARSE THROUGH THE MIASMA, THE RAT'S NEST THAT IS THE WAY I'VE DEALT WITH POINT OF VIEW. I DIDN'T START THIS UNDER THE ASSUMPTION THAT I'D BE THE ONLY ONE TO EVER READ THIS. IN A PARTICULARLY LUCID MOMENT I CAME TO THE REALIZATION THAT THIS WOULD BE THE CASE. I JUST REALIZED I DON'T KNOW WHY I STARTED THIS NOTE...

4.1 History

We'll now embark on an adventure, an adventure of time and space and humanity and art and growth³. Tangentially related to the above topic, the history of art may⁴ provide some useful illumination regarding sincerity in modern media.

5/2/2018

We begin in the middle of the 18th century.

¹ **TO BE ADDITIONALLY CLEAR:** I'm not goddamn encouraging lying and shit

² they're tied for first (see page 30)

³ I ASSUME NO LIABILITY FOR ANY DISAPPOINTMENT OR MATERIAL DAMAGE INCURRED BY THE FOLLOWING "ADVENTURE" NOT CONTAINING ALL THE FEATURES I JUST MENTIONED.

⁴ let's be honest, there's a good change there will be no illumination here, but hopefully it'll be interesting...

4.2 Speed Racer

Speed, I understand that every child has to leave home. But I want you to know, that door is always open. You can always come back. 'Cause I love you.

FROM *SPEED RACER*, *The Wachowskis* (2008)

Most people don't like this movie.⁵ Whenever I tell people that I love this movie, that it's my favorite film, I always feel the need to caveat my love or justify it in some way. Something like stipulating a state of mind which must be entered in order to facilitate enjoyment; I do this for their benefit, my love is without restrictions or qualifications. It's difficult to fully convince people I'm serious, that my favorite movie⁶ is an American adaptation of a Japanese kids show that nobody likes (the movie that is, people can take it or leave it with the show I think). But I am serious, and now that I've convinced you⁷ that I am indeed serious we can actually fucking talk about sincerity or whatever the fuck.⁸

Speed Racer is convinced, to an almost disconcerting degree, that race car driving is (almost) the most important activity in which one may participate; that being the best is the second most important thing in the world. We are meant to truly believe in this primacy, besides family (this is a hella important point), racing trumps all.

4.3 Short Term 12

Everything good in my life is because of you

FROM *SHORT TERM 12*, *Destin Daniel Cretton* (2013)

As with the previous film we discussed, this is a difficult movie to introduce to people, like, its hard to tell people "oh, my favorite movie, it's *Short Term 12*." The typical rejoinder to such a revelation is: "What

⁵see., e.g., the 39% on Rotten Tomatoes or the 37 on Metacritic

⁶again, 1(a) (or 1(b) (it doesn't actually matter, the point is that they aren't ordered))

⁷me or Carly probs.

⁸like for real, get to the darn point already

the fuck is that?" and I have to explain that it's a beautiful and wonderfully small indie film that very few human beings have had the pleasure of seeing.

The Void

Can one be a saint without God?, that's the problem, in fact the only problem I'm up against today.

ALBERT CAMUS, *The Plague* (1947)

This comes pretty clearly from my (partial) embrace of the absurd. I struggle with Camus' absurd, caveat that I have read *The Myth of Sisyphus* but once; my difficulty stems from the acknowledgment of some form of higher power and the extremely gendered terminology in *Sisyphus*. Intellectually I cannot really brook any consideration of 'God' in any real form. In normal conversation I tend to describe myself as agnostic, partially for the sake of expediency, partially out of my fear of nothingness, but in reality I am an atheist. I'm not even really anti-religion, people are free to believe what they believe, and if it doesn't infringe on me, then more power to them. Religion, for all its faults, has made some great things in the world, and getting a huge swath of humanity to conform to some morality is a good, even if most people don't follow exactly.

I originally titled this section *Fight the Void*, which is not necessarily inappropriate; the current title reflects a broadening of scope.

AND I JUST LIKE IT
BETTER, IT'S
CLEANER

5.1 Branching from Camus

TODO: I honestly
don't know what
I'm gonna write
for this chapter
generally, still
some thought to
be had.

Again, I don't subscribe fully to Absurdism. Conceptually it is appealing to me.

Appendices

A

Road Trip 2018

This is a log of my 2018 road trip from Boston to Santa Barbara. Starting on May 16th, the trip as planned will take about two weeks and will span the country.

A Note to My Friends

Friend represents
far too banal
terminology

I used to tell people, truthfully, that I couldn't remember the last time I had been truly happy.

Instead I created a simulation of happiness, a smiling facade over anguish.

All too often I ignored, or chose to be ignored by, those who would look upon my true face unflinching.

Not with strained eyes of pity, nor cold eyes of disdain, but with warmth and compassion and empathy.

Only once I learned to simply open the door to those knocking, who wished only the simple pleasure of my company, did I experience true happiness.

It is you all, who lent me strength when I was weak, courage when I was afraid, a smile when all I wanted to do was cry.

For so much that I have, my life, my joy, I thank all of you.

The Night Before

I'm sitting here before my computer, nervous about the upcoming trip. Well, not the trip necessarily, I'm excited about that, it's more the fact that I feel like I have so much to do tomorrow.

11:30PM

Day 1 May 16: Boston to Burlington

Lying in bed. More accurately, lying on my mattress, on the floor of my stressfully non-empty room. Looking around I know that all evidence of me has to be completely gone by, like, noon, and I don't have a clear exit strategy for a lot of it. For example, the current object of

6:45 AM

my repose, even a twin mattress is a fairly substantial thing of which to dispose.

In a weird way I'm not all that worried.

10:00 AM

Just dropped off my last package at Fedex, now all I have to do is clean up and pack up the car. First, however, I'm gonna take a little break (clearly, I'm writing this), sip my tea, and just wake up a little more. It seems quite unfathomable that I'm gonna drive like four goddamn hours later today, but that's the way it is.

6:39 PM

I did end up driving like four goddamn hours.

Said four-ish hours ended abruptly, when I tried to stop at a red light. I heard a popping, banging sound from my car¹, and then when I tried to start driving again, there were some dope grinding noises. Luckily, and seriously, this whole situation is unbelievably fortuitous, there was a repair place within walking distance, and they picked up my car, diagnosed it, and are in the process of fixing it.²

MORE LIKE THREE
AND A HALF

While waiting for my car to get picked up, I made a reservation at a hotel (where I am currently) two miles from the repair place. Moseying on back to the shop, I picked up my laptop, backpack, toiletries, and a change of clothes. Being a smart person, I called an Uber to my hotel, is what I would have said if I were a smart person, instead I walked the two miles, in flip-flops, with my bags, after a long day already.

I don't know how I thought my first day of driving would go. But not once did I envision walking across an overpass.

Day 2 May 17: Burlington to Ithaca

7:50 AM

It's weird how accustomed to things one's body can be. Like, having slept in a twin bed my entire life, even the double that I slept in last night feels needlessly, luxuriously gargantuan.

Not feeling a whole lot of motivation to leave right now, but I must, must get breakfast, must get car.

Estimated drive time for today: six-ish hours...

¹always fun to hear

²it was a broken CV-joint for the record.

One last thought, the experience of writing everyday, or doing this actual journaling thing has been interesting. Normally writing for me is like, synthesizing a whole mess of life experience down into something more abstract, applicable to a variety of situations. The relative normality of this is strange, but I also feel like writing consistently, not just when the mood strikes, is the key to becoming a better writer.³

Just finished breakfast and am sitting in the same coffee shop that I went to yesterday⁴. Now I have to wait roughly an hour for my car to finished getting fixed.

10:21 AM

As I was walking back from breakfast⁵, I had a thought argument⁶ about this, my, generation. To be fair, I am at kinda the head of this generation, the actual group is the people just younger than me who grew up fully immersed in the World Wide Web. Popular conceptions of this 'Internet generation' seem to show it as self-centered, with heads buried in phones, and totally oblivious. I could not disagree with the characterization more; this is honestly, an absurdly empathetic group of people.

Take, as an easy example, the rising enforcement of 'PC' language; how is this anything but a profound empathetic response to the plight of the disparate? For a cis-het (*inter alia*) person to actively champion non-binary, 'non-traditional' language is remarkable.

Also, about the phone thing, it's not like we're staring at our god-damn reflections, we're connecting with the world.

A pretty arduous day of driving done.

7:20 PM

Bit of a false alarm there, took a shower and shaved. Anyways, the day got started late, the mechanic took longer than I anticipated and there wasn't a clear time table. So I walked around Burlington, well, I say around but I essentially walked in circles and slowly got more and more stressed. I left around 1:30PM, which sucked; I was tired and freaking out a bit so the drive wasn't that great either.

8:26 PM

An additional annoying element to leaving late was the inability to

³which I want to become

⁴*Uncommon Grounds*

⁵at *Handy's Lunch*

⁶super Stefon voice: it's that thing when you have an argument with an imaginary person in your head to help prove a point to yourself

stop anywhere to take pictures.

My hotel in Ithaca⁷ is no where near anything, not that I have the desire to go outside and do stuff right now. Although I probably will end up running to Wegmans.

⁷where I am right now

May 17: Burlington to Ithaca

B

Quotations

Some quotations that I decided to not use as epigraphs (and also other quotes that I like).

Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness.

IMMANUEL KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788)

How does it happen that a properly endowed natural scientist comes to concern himself with epistemology? Is there no more valuable work in his specialty? I hear many of my colleagues saying, and I sense it from many more, that they feel this way. I cannot share this sentiment. When I think about the ablest students whom I have encountered in my teaching, that is, those who distinguish themselves by their independence of judgment and not merely their quick-wittedness, I can affirm that they had a vigorous interest in epistemology. They happily began discussions about the goals and methods of science, and they showed unequivocally, through their tenacity in defending their views, that the subject seemed important to them. Indeed, one should not be surprised by this.

ALBERT EINSTEIN, *Physikalische Zeitschrift* (1916)

One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

ALBERT CAMUS, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation—not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy. Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ That is the true genius of America—a faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles.

BARACK OBAMA, *DNC Keynote Speech* (2004)

C

Top Ten Lists

also, I'm a fuckin' hack.

This is gimmicky, but I felt like I should write these down somewhere.

C.1 Movies

The top two here are rock solid, but the rest can mostly be shuffled around.

1. **Short Term 12**

1. **Speed Racer** This movie encapsulates perfectly the idea of sincerity. Made with the usual non-subtlety of the Wachowskis, it is so true to itself that it is, in my opinion, impossible not to love.

3.

4.

5. **Mad Max: Fury Road**

6. **No Country for Old Men**

7. **Detention**

8. **Good Night, And Good Luck**

9. **Columbus**

10. **Hunt for the Wilderpeople**

C.1.1 Honorable Mentions

C.2 TV Shows

1. **The West Wing**

D

Just Random Bullshit

D.1 Random Thoughts on Speech

Our (humanity's) ability to describe is, as far as is currently known, unique amongst animals. Other species, most or all of them, have the ability to speak, some form of language exists. However, they deal purely within the scope of the prescriptive. They don't recall. They don't tell they're friends what they did the preceding day. We do.

Not only do we flap our gums (and twirl our pens) regarding things that have happened, we communicate ideas and concepts that have no basis in reality (hot take, e.g., religion). In *Sapiens*, it is asserted that this ability is our most fundamental property, what renders *Homo sapiens* alone alongside all other animals. It has been found, independently (I think, haven't checked) that *Homo sapiens*' superlative pattern recognition (superior pattern processing) is a foundational element of language.

An anecdote, from Barthes: Karl von Frisch, sought to prove the commonly held hypothesis that bees had some form of language. He succeeded in this pursuit, but found that their language contained no description, it was all prescriptive; they had to coordinate in order to get their food, they didn't talk about what they were doing or had done, if such information was not imminently necessary for survival. Basically, we're the only animals that talk about shit that doesn't really matter/exist.

D.2 The Pumping Lemmas

E

Some Poems and Stuff

The Road Not Taken

ROBERT FROST

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The New Colossus

EMMA LAZARUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

When I Consider How My Light Is Spent

JOHN MILTON

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or His own gifts. Who best
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait."

Eulogy (Synecdoche, New York)

CHARLIE KAUFMAN

Everything is more complicated than you think.
You only see a tenth of what is true.
There are a million little strings attached to every choice
you make; you can destroy your life every time you
choose.
But maybe you won't know for twenty years.
And you'll never trace it to its source.
And you only get one chance to play it out.
Just try and figure out your own divorce.
And they say there is no fate, but there is: it's what you
create.
Even though the world goes on for eons and eons, you are
here for a fraction of a fraction of a second.
Most of your time is spent being dead or not yet born.
But while alive, you wait in vain, wasting years, for a phone
call or a letter or a look from someone or something
to make it all right.
And it never comes or it seems to but doesn't really.
And so you spend your time in vague regret or vaguer hope
for something good to come along.
Something to make you feel connected, to make you feel
whole, to make you feel loved.
And the truth is I'm so angry and the truth is I'm so fucking
sad, and the truth is I've been so fucking hurt for so
fucking long and for just as long have been pretend-
ing I'm ok, just to get along, just for, I don't know
why, maybe because no one wants to hear about
my misery, because they have their own, and their
own is too overwhelming to allow them to listen to
or care about mine.

Well, fuck everybody.

Amen.

Professor Perlman's Monologue (*Call Me By Your Name*)

JAMES IVORY

PERLMAN So? Welcome home. Did Oliver enjoy the trip?

ELIO I think he did.

PERLMAN takes a drag from his cigarette, then pauses a moment before speaking.

PERLMAN You two had a nice friendship.

ELIO (*somewhat evasive*) Yes.

Another pause, and another drag on his cigarette.

PERLMAN You're too smart not to know how rare, how special, what you two had was.

ELIO Oliver was Oliver.

PERLMAN "*Parce-que c'était lui, parce-que c'était moi.*" (*Because he was he, because I was I*)

ELIO (*trying to avoid talking about Oliver with his father*) Oliver may be very intelligent –

PERLMAN (*interrupting his son*) Intelligent? He was more than intelligent. What you two had had everything and nothing to do with intelligence. He was good, and you were both lucky to have found each other, because you too are good.

ELIO I think he was better than me.

PERLMAN I'm sure he'd say the same think about you, which flatters the two of you.

In tapping his cigarette and leaning toward the ashtray, he reaches out and touches Elio's hand. PERLMAN alters his tone of voice (his tone says: We don't have to speak about it, but let's not pretend we don't know what I'm saying).

PERLMAN (*cont'd*) When you least expect it, Nature has cunning ways of finding our weakest spot. Just remember: I am here. Right now you may not want to feel anything. Perhaps you never wished to feel anything. And perhaps it's not to me that you'll want to speak about these things. But feel something obviously you did.

ELIO looks at his father, then drops his eyes to the floor.

PERLMAN (*cont'd*) Look—you had a beautiful friendship. Maybe more than a friendship. And I envy you. In my place, most parents would hope the whole thing goes away, to pray that their sons land on their feet. But I am not such a parent. In your place, if there is a pain, nurse it. And if there is a flame, don't snuff it out. Don't be brutal with it. We rip so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster, that we go bankrupt by the age of thirty and have less to offer each time we start with someone new. But to make yourself feel nothing so as to not feel anything—what a waste!

ELIO is dumstruck as he tries to take all this in.

PERLMAN (*cont'd*) Have I spoken out of turn?

ELIO shakes his head.

PERLMAN (*cont'd*) Then let me say one more thing. It will clear the air. I may have come close, but I never had what you two had. Something always held me back or stood in the way. How you live your life is your business. Remember, our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once. And before you know it, your heart is worn out, and, as for your body, there comes a point when no one looks at it, much less wants to come near it. Right now there's sorrow. Pain. DON't kill it and with it the joy you've felt.

PERLMAN takes a breath.

PERLMAN (*cont'd*) We may never speak of this again. But I hope you'll never hold it against me that we did. I will have been a terrible father if, one day, you'd want to speak to me and felt that the door was shut, or not sufficiently open.

ELIO Does mother know?

PERLMAN I don't think she does.

But the way he says this means "Even if she did, I am sure her feelings would be no different than mine."

Monologue (*Rick and Morty* S03E03–*Pickle Rick*)

JESSICA GAO

DR. WONG Rick, the only connection between your unquestionable intelligence and the sickness destroying your family is that everyone in your family, you included, use intelligence to justify sickness. You seem to alternate between viewing your own mind as an unstoppable force and as an inescapable force, and I think it's because the only truly unapproachable concept for you is that that it's **your** mind, within **your** control. You chose to come here, you chose to talk, to belittle my vocation, just as you chose to become a pickle. You are the master of your universe and yet you are dripping with rat blood and feces, your enormous mind literally vegetating by your own hand. I have no doubt that you would be bored senseless by therapy, the same way I'm bored when I brush my teeth and wipe my ass, because the thing about repairing, maintaining, and cleaning is; it's not an adventure. There's no way to do it so wrong you might die. It's just work, the bottom line is some people are okay going to work, and some people, well, some people would rather die. Each of us gets to choose.

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- [1] Lorraine J. Daston and Peter Galison. *Objectivity (Mit Press)*. Zone Books, 2010. ISBN: 189095179X.

About the Typeface (From Google)

ROBOTO HAS A DUAL NATURE. IT HAS A MECHANICAL SKELETON AND THE FORMS ARE LARGELY GEOMETRIC. AT THE SAME TIME, THE FONT FEATURES FRIENDLY AND OPEN CURVES. WHILE SOME GROTESKS DISTORT THEIR LETTERFORMS TO FORCE A RIGID RHYTHM, ROBOTO DOESN'T COMPROMISE, ALLOWING LETTERS TO BE SETTLED INTO THEIR NATURAL WIDTH. THIS MAKES FOR A MORE NATURAL READING RHYTHM MORE COMMONLY FOUND IN HUMANIST AND SERIF TYPES.