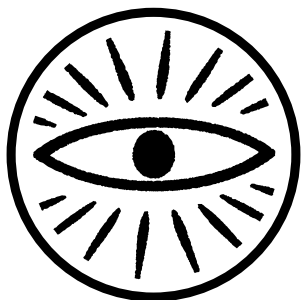# MEMETIC

MYTHOLOGY

FOR THE END TIMES

Lauren Holt

The making of a meme
So goes my Brother's dream
Two sides to the fall and always four sides to a lean
But I won't leave
I won't leave him in between
Working alone unsure
Because the making of a meme is no easy dream
Keeps him from asking for more

Nick Mulvey, *House of Saint Give Me*

Acknowledgments

I hardly know how to explain the existence of this peculiar work. I saw the need for a small 'emotional toolkit' for creating memeplexes responsibly, which may be of some use in a crisis, or in anticipation of one. Although this is a book about social 'magic' it is not a grimoire. Rather, it is a book of solace and sorcery. And, I hope, a medicine bundle of sorts for difficult times.

As for the physical copies, I would like to imagine one tumbling out of a bookshelf when it is most needed, and the colours and aesthetics have been designed to attract the eye. The greatest thanks to Phyllida Bluemel who designed the physical form of this booklet. She created wonderful illustrations even when I only had a clutch of half-formed ideas, and it was a delightfully spontaneous and instinctive process to work together.

CONTENTS

PREFACE

You are currently in a cult.

In fact, probably more than one...

The cult of capitalism, of wellness, of national identity, of 'civilisation', or of work. Never mind any organised religion you may also belong to. Each have their totems, their tokens, their shrines and their priests. Their gods, their heroes and anti-heroes, their sacred texts, and their secret handshakes.

The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins defined a meme as a piece of information: "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain",[1] he observed. And since this transmission is subject to three elements of Darwinian evolution: copying, variation, and competition for survival, they are under selection pressure and will evolve over time into a successful form. One could say they 'want' to persist into the future, just in the same way we say genes (for a given trait) are said to 'want' to survive. As a result of these pressures, we typically only see the ones that are effective at survival, while the ineffective ones disappear out of the collective culture. Large groups

of memes that are copied and passed on together in mutually reinforcing complexes and co-evolved groups are called memeplexes, and can be remarkably resilient.

It could be said that society operates through the transfer, housing, and continuance of such memeplexes. At their best, these bundles of information give us a story to hold onto and a shared world to inhabit. The most successful ones usually help us to survive by passing on wisdom or adaptive ways of living, offering meaning, and even soothing our greatest hurts.

A cult, a religion, a metaphor, an idea, a story, a government, a currency or a worldview is a memeplex. A particularly persistent one that usually helps our survival or contains some essential or useful wisdom is a memeplex we might call a mythology.

They are not just free-floating ideas; they go along with human behaviours that aid their own and their host's survival and propagation. Behaviours such as converting unbelievers, rules for marriage and child-rearing, law and punishment, or even which foods are forbidden or who to wage war against. But like viruses, sometimes memes evolve to become more damaging, often making them the 'stickiest' and most transmissible. They latch onto emotions of fear or anger or rejection, and use these as their transmission route, or prioritise the survival of some individuals in the group over others.

Since many ideas and memeplexes are not compatible, some cannot usually co-exist comfortably in the same

host, or the same society. Given limited space, meme-plexes will compete to hold onto a host, or even eject competing ones in order to survive into the future. The ability to hack (i.e., alter) or create a meme is a powerful skill. But beware, memes are like prions, the rogue disease elements that change the natural structure of proteins in the body: they try to change everything they touch into the same form as themselves.

This booklet is a toolkit for using stories, or meme-plexes, in a crisis. If you find yourself in a society that is going to collapse or has collapsed (which is probably everyone, everywhere, at every time), you may be curious how and why some stories help, and why some hurt. If you are called to rally distressed and traumatised people to the task of survival when they have been forcibly ejected from their familiar mythologies (capitalism, civilisation, government-oversight, the rat-race, progress), can you put other frames of meaning in their place?

Can you become a 'memeticist'?

And can the narratives you choose not only heal but help prevent future catastrophes, particularly in how survivors relate to nature and biodiversity?

In this booklet, you will read some history of peoples who have faced and endured devastation and the stories they have told. How they narratively processed their 'end times' and found the strength to live in the aftermath. You will find examples of narratives for the current environmental 'meta-crisis' and suggestions

on how stories can be disseminated effectively. How to practice storytelling that teases apart the deepest knots of the psyche, and utilise semiotics (signs and symbols) for transmitting these stories of apocalypse. I end on a Hippocratic Oath for memeticists. How to balance intuition and pragmatism, short-term survival and long-term flourishing. How to avoid raising up that which you cannot put down (for as we shall see, these ideas often have lives of their own), and how to banish memeplexes that go rogue.

Take this book with you: a medicine bundle, a guide to memetic mythology for the end times.

INTRODUCTION

Why we need stories

Amongst many of the threats to humanity and the world as we know it, we are facing an ecological 'meta-crisis'. A medium-term issue has now become a short-term one, with the 2020s being the critical decade in which substantial positive change needs to occur.[2] Yet, despite scientific consensus that environmental breakdown is imminent, world leaders and those with power to create change in some of the worst-polluting and highest-consuming countries are failing to act. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has proven that large-scale, top-down governance can be enacted swiftly and be accepted by the public if the threat is considered sufficiently salient and compelling by key actors. However, decisive action is still not happening fast enough when it comes to the environment and particularly 'overdeveloped' countries' extractive relationship with it.

A partial explanation for this is that, according to meme theory, the ecological crisis is competing with other incompatible narratives or memeplexes for space and attention, especially ones that also involve our relationship with the environment. There are hundreds of different stories about what our society needs and should value, many of which are more appealing, compelling, or influential, to high-leverage

actors or to anyone. For example, narratives of the 'good life' shaped by capitalism drive people to value material markers of success, while the technology sector offers up exciting stories of how we might develop new forms of intelligence, extended lifespan,[3] and escape from the limitations of the body,[4] or planet.[5] These narratives not only leave little attentional space for those encouraging environmental protection, but often run actively counter to them: encouraging us as a society to eat further into natural resources with the promise and necessity of 'growth', and presenting imagery of a fundamental conflict with the environment and natural processes.

Discourse around environmental loss and ecological collapse also typically relies on academic rationalism and unadorned scientific evidence. Whilst essential for research, academic and scientific work is presented in a style that lacks the memetic power and transmissibility typical of stories or memeplexes such as religions. If thousands of information-heavy papers, workshop reports, scenario plans, and the combined *factual* output of hundreds of thousands of scientists cannot spur leaders to action, what will? In a post-collapse scenario, it is probably unlikely that the uncomforting rational mindset will be the one that wins out. Whilst the scientific method will always be vital, I suggest there also needs to be a transmissible, mythologically resonant 'short-hand' for what to value and what to aim for beyond survival. For survival is not enough.

That is to say, whilst "facts are sacred",[6] there is a need for stronger narratives, mythologies and conceptual

archetypes to be built around the facts of environmental degradation. These are not an alternative to facts, but rather a way to use our scientific understanding as a scaffold, but also in a way that addresses the dreams and nightmares of the human collective unconscious. As the author Ursula Le Guin writes: narratives are potentially "a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation."[7] Never has an antidote and a magical working been more desperately needed. It is telling that Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre entitled their book on collective empowerment *Against Capitalist Sorcery*.[8] The way in which stories spread and organise societies for good or ill, is a kind of magic.

However, restorative narratives which could provide an antidote to environmental degradation are strangely absent. Protests by groups such as Extinction Rebellion[9] have had some success appealing to virtue, emotion, and negative consequences, and with considerable style. But – and with the greatest respect to activists – these actions alone do not appear to be sufficient motivators for change. There are ways to fight ideas, but rarely does someone abandon a prior narrative without a compelling alternative to hold onto. And since some amount of environmental degradation is likely inevitable due to carbon lock-in, we need to prepare to adapt as a society to already inevitable ecological changes, which may indeed involve living in a world where the old framings have been made redundant.

If academic resources are failing to influence now, they are unlikely to be the first materials turned to in a situation of environmental collapse. In worst-case

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scenarios the usual forms of digital communication may not be accessible at all. Furthermore, philosopher Bernard Williams suggested that our deepest convictions are often more like classical Greek ethical thought, which is often narrative-based, and less like post-Enlightenment morality systems such as Utilitarianism (which preferences happiness, usually of the greatest number).[10] Actions coming from these deeper convictions are intrinsic, and therefore not only authentic, but do not damage the integrity of the actor by convincing them to act against their own interests.

At the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk, we are not unfamiliar with dire warnings of collapse, but writers and mythologists understand that motivating authentic action is as much about psychology as policy. Mythologist Martin Shaw writes:

> *"Someone needs to be speaking up for Kingfishers, small English hedges and lightning storms over New Mexico, and not just in the loud shout of an ecological protest rally... ecological disaster statistics are effective, but can also bring apathy or panic as bedfellows. We need people "with the tongue" to touch the soul as well as the adrenaline ducts."*[11]

We understand ourselves and the world through stories and ideas compellingly told. There is a reason that the seminal work of ecological literature *Silent Spring*[12] starts with a fable of a once idyllic town destroyed by self-inflicted blight; author Rachel Carson understood the memetic impact of such a story. Similarly, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, who wrote of the loss

of Nigerian culture after British colonisation, is noted for weaving proverbs from Igbo oral culture into his writing.[13] Easily remembered proverbs were one of the most compact and transmissible forms of a meme in our culture prior to mass-printing or the internet.

In an ideal world, each person would have time to study nature and come to their own conclusions about the value of biodiversity and how to best live in relation to the natural environment, but in a crisis, stories can act as vital shorthand. It is fortunate that humans have both the desire to survive and a unique desire for meaning. It is this longing for meaning that at the very least, cultural and religious ideas satisfy. As Viktor Frankl observed after surviving the worst of humanity in German concentration camps, "Those who have a 'why' to live can bear with almost any 'how'".[14] This 'why' can be more than a 'should' or an 'or else' and will be as important after collapse as before it.

The solutions presented here, i.e., the myths or metaphors, are therefore restricted to those that are succinct enough to be transferred verbally. And, this booklet is a tangible, physical item that is resistant to both inaccessibility of electronic infrastructure and the 'forget on a shelf' attitude towards much paper-based academic outputs. It is designed to assist individuals or communities wrestling with disruption and breakdown challenges, practitioners, advocates, and decision-makers, as well as being in service of the natural systems themselves.

What type of stories?

Unfortunately, much of the rich folklore and spoken wisdom from ancestral or ecocentric cultures is not necessarily applicable to the way people in so-called 'economically-developed' countries live, those who are doing the most damage in terms of consumption. As such, new stories need to be constructed or old ones repackaged in a way that can connect with the perspective of diverse audiences in multiple geographies.

This is not a scholarly text on comparative theology, but rather a fresh look at orientating ideas that could be used in a crisis. The ideas that could aid psyches when the wave comes. Before loss we try to find inspiring narratives, during loss we try to find ways to survive and keep going, and in the aftermath we reach for ways to process loss.

Human beings do not thrive psychologically, as philosopher Charles Taylor described, in a "disenchanted world".[15] People who live utterly secularly tend to put a lot of energy into the pursuit of money, or sex, or beauty, or status. All can act as a religion of sorts, to attempt to fulfil this unmet need. As the author David Foster-Wallace put it, "everybody worships", only, some things are more likely than others to eat us alive.[16] Within cults and without, it is easy for Goodhart's law to come into play, whereby a person focusses on getting or maximising metric X, which quickly becomes an unreliable proxy for what they really need: metric Y. For example, money does not replace love, obedience does not replace respect, and pleasure does not replace meaning. And yet, many stories have fulfilled needs by

proxy. The idea of God's love or a greater purpose has kept many human beings going through terrible circumstances, and even despite a lack of human love and material comfort. That is some hardcore magic.

From a Western-centric perspective (for I must speak of what I know), when politicians are trying to convince their populace of some endeavour, to get cash, start a movement, get votes, or get permission from the rest of the government for something, they often use a few trusty metaphors and psychological moves. Usually, a cause is pitched as a 'battle', against a disease, such as COVID-19, cancer, or drugs, or crime, culminating in the concept of a 'war'. This emergency framing is a skeleton key used to unlock material reserves and certain behaviours as a response to a threat delineated as existential.[17] In war, sometimes people are willing to do almost anything to defend themselves and their nation, essentially from death. It taps into a very primal part of the psyche, even when the adversary is a virus which is literally oblivious to what the bodies it infects thinks about it. Creating an enemy, or in the case of COVID-19, even reframing this natural event as a 'devil' as the Chinese government did in early 2020,[18] is a powerful narrative move, but it can backfire. Being on a constant war-footing is exhausting and not always appropriate. In slow-moving catastrophes like the climate crisis, it is probably counterproductive. Like 'the boy who cried wolf'[19] (another useful fable), people may stop caring about or believing in the threat, and it can sometimes obscure the real origin of the danger. COVID-19 is not a devil, nor a force of evil, but the consequence of bad human decisions whether it escaped

from a lab or was born from destructive environmental practices. Still, the idea of externalising it and transforming it into an opponent with thought and will of its own can release people from guilt and be highly motivating, which might be necessary in a crisis. Even – if used without reflection – it encourages a future disaster.

Another narrative move frequently made by leaders is to point to a canonical text or message transmitted from a god, or ideally 'The God', that legitimises what they want to happen. Sometimes this can be as vague as appealing to 'natural law', i.e., something is wrong because it is 'unnatural'. Or, it can be as specific as something God has explicitly told them, personally through revelation or via a holy text. In more extreme cases, cult leaders claim to channel God's wishes, resulting in the building of arks, temples for worship, and sometimes tragically ending in mass-suicides (a prime example of a maladaptive idea from a survival perspective). Ultimately, these arguments boil down to: "because God – the proxy group alpha whom you need to obey – said so". Sometimes, this is also an authoritarian or apparently caring stand-in for a protective mother or father. If the national or primary religious leader is seen as God's manifestation on Earth, as is often the case, their command alone can be enough. Similarly to the war metaphor, this idea taps into primal programming: in this case, fearing the wrath of the most powerful group leader or simply a dominant.

Packaged into a lot of religious stories is a hidden carrot and stick. Do this, and God will think well of you, and you will be rewarded in this life or the next.

Do the opposite and you will be punished in this life or the next. Considering much of animal and human behaviour is governed by the carrot and the stick, pleasure and pain, love and rejection, this is extremely powerful. Sometimes this may be both well intentioned and evidence based: certainly, bad things *will* happen if we do not stop damaging the ozone layer or polluting the Earth. But the appeal to divinity is a particular narrative and is often found subtly lurking under even wholly secular arguments for action.

But what if my god is bigger than your god? What if the sticks and the carrots don't materialise? Or my stick is more painful, but your carrot is more appealing? Which prophets and which gods will we follow, and which will we recoil from? Which memeplex is more powerful? Here, we are in the realms of psychomagic and hyperstitions. A hyperstition, coined by philosopher Nick Land, is a positive feedback circuit that encompasses culture.[20] Superstitions are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions – by their very existence as ideas – function causally to bring about their own reality. It could be considered a magical working when these self-fulfilling prophecies are released into the wild. For example, the appealing idea of 'cyberspace', prior to its creation, contributed to the influx of investment that helped convert it into a techno-social reality. And, hyperstitions can be big: what is money but a myth sustained by people's belief in it? Capitalist economics, enhanced by digital communication, is extremely sensitive to hyperstitions, where confidence (or lack of it) creates bubbles which then burst. The market can be spooked by a rumour on the wind, and new niches

(or pyramid schemes) can be created from nothing. Even on a small scale, writing a grant proposal when the finished product has not yet been fully conceived is a way of, hopefully, calling forth the resources and inspiration to make it materialise in the world. The magic of hyperstition is thus able, under 'favourable' circumstances, to transmute fiction or intention into truth. The hyperstitional object is no mere figment of 'social construction', but it is in a very real way *conjured* into being.

It is not the purpose of this booklet to convince anyone of the reality, or not, of gods or other phenomena. Rather it is simply an observation that this process of hyperstition is a possible method of memeplex creation, particularly within religions, where evidence is rarely to be found in the material realm. And, if a story has the ability to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, then this is extremely powerful. It is also something that can be used with bad intentions. Former (at the time of writing) president Donald Trump released a hyperstition into the wild when he stated, with no credible evidence, that he had won the 2020 U.S. election.[21] No doubt he hoped his words would make it so, but in the process he created a bloody and democratically damaging insurrection.

A final narrative move that can be made is invoking the belief and trust in material and moral (sometimes spiritual) progress. A strong mythology in its own right and able to be – at least ostensibly – secular, the doctrine of progress is, as historian J. B. Bury wrote, the "animating and controlling idea of Western civilisation."[22] This is

in some ways a sublimation of the frequently implied command by a god for our improvement (potentially forever towards perfection), or a way of aspiring to godliness ourselves. That is, an expression of the desire to participate in creation or destruction; for example, creating new forms of life or a devastating bomb. Or, the desire for progress can simply be more mundane: a bigger house and faster car. Like the carrots offered by major and minor gods, progress carrots can also be primal desires: ways to escape death, or illness or sadness, defeat all one's enemies, obtain unlimited pleasure, or in extreme cases, doing something to bring new 'gods' or forms of life into material existence. The sticks are typically the pain of remaining in the world as it is, portrayed as limited and corrupted. Usually, the marvels promised by these examples of radical progress are just out of reach; on the horizon as long as we keep striving towards it. But sometimes they are grasped, as with the creation of the atomic bomb.

Ecological commentators Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine write explicitly in their *Dark Mountain Manifesto*:

> *"The myth of progress is to us what the myth of god-given warrior prowess was to the Romans, or the myth of eternal salvation was to the conquistadors: without it, our efforts cannot be sustained. Onto the root stock of Western Christianity, the Enlightenment at its most optimistic grafted a vision of an Earthly paradise, towards which human effort guided by calculative reason could take us. Following this guidance, each generation will live a better life than the life of those that went before it. History becomes an escalator, and*

the only way is up. On the top floor is human perfection. It is important that this should remain just out of reach in order to sustain the sensation of motion."[23]

That the scientist-creator of the atomic bomb, physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer uttered the words from the holy Hindu text the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds",[24] upon the first detonation of the atomic bomb in 1945, is interesting (even though this has many subtleties which we will explore later). The world-altering event of the atomic bomb was, in effect, a supernatural event. A way of calling up a singularity of destruction. There can also be similarly epic projects of creation. The word 'apocalypse' can also mean revelation, and although the apocalypse of St. John in the New Testament is that of a destructive cataclysm that brings forth the final judgement, an apocalypse may also be an 'apocatastasis': a restoration or remaking of the world. Striving to cause events that bring this about may induce the feeling of being involved in revelation, or the allure of becoming as gods ourselves. The myth of progress ends up with us wielding 'supernatural' powers.

Since it is a powerful sublimation of religious ideas, there is often something lurking in the background of the myth of progress that posits this teleology or forward momentum is desirable. It is a powerful rhetorical move that can be used to great effect, but progress can be a poisoned chalice. If used, great care needs to be taken with this story to make sure that eschatological ideas (concerned with the fate of created order, usually involving a destructive endpoint) don't take over. Or else it can quickly turn into a death-cult

and be deeply maladaptive. For example, the idea of even 2% growth on a finite planet is itself problematic in many ways (as analysed by Sir Partha Dasgupta in the Dasgupta Review on the Economics of Biodiversity).[25] The myth of progress could very well be implicated in the destruction of the environment, and the allure of technology to free us from pesky things such as death and pain is creating untold trouble along the way. The technological revelation (in the biblical sense) awaiting us also runs the risk of not materialising. Like cults that predict the end of days or doctors that promise the end of cancer, the mythos is severely tested when the goods – or indeed gods – don't arrive.

The current doctrine of progress has been particularly influenced by science and technology with its seemingly magical advances, and our commitment to the pursuit of innovation has been rewarded in the form of ever higher material gains. For centuries, at least some of us have convinced ourselves that every problem is solvable with enough intelligence, particularly when applied through new technologies. It stands to reason to expect continued progress of this kind. It would be... interesting, to be in a post-collapse world where this paradigm has failed (and my commiserations if you are reading this in that circumstance!). But even after collapse, the idea of progress might not fail: for it is a resilient myth that can often absorb many quite horrendous setbacks in its narrative arc. Take, for example, either the New Testament *Book of Revelation*, or even the American Dream; terrible ordeals (or in the former's case, many apocalyptic events), are simply necessary parts of the journey towards an ultimate

endpoint. Such a myth could therefore be used, as we shall see later, to give hope in crisis as well as potentially fuelling dangerous ambition.

However, if you find yourself in the position of having to motivate and rally a group of people in trying circumstances, I would strongly advise you to throw out the concepts of conflict or divine command, and at least highly modify the idea of progress. As we find them today, there is rarely consideration in these narratives of other ideas such as systems thinking or metaphors from non-Western backgrounds which could act as alternatives. Other useful metaphors need not fall into the pitfalls of war, nor obeying the commandments of an alpha or god, or else can be modified to encourage wholeness and plurality along the way.

What do I consider a good myth? Have you heard of the Greek legend of Sisyphus? He was a King who was punished by Hades – the god of the underworld – for cheating death (twice). As punishment, he was cursed to roll an immense boulder up a hill only to see it roll down again, repeating this for all eternity. In this easily communicated story, much can be packed in. I could elaborate on the ways Sisyphus cheated death, spin it as a compelling yarn around a campfire. Within it are lessons about not angering the gods and especially not trying to cheat natural processes like death (twice!). So far, so standard... but like a Rorschach blot – the

ambiguous ink blobs psychologists ask you to read shapes and meaning into in order to illuminate your subconscious – this myth is vague enough to be taken in many different directions. The existentialist philosopher Albert Camus did exactly that when he used the Myth of Sisyphus as a foil for explaining the absurdity of life and the meaningless of its never-ending and usually painful tasks. And yet, his monograph concludes, "The struggle itself … is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."[26]

And so, we find here that an old myth has been enlisted into the most serious of tasks. Camus asked: does the realisation of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life necessarily require suicide? He framed the absurdity of life as a call to revolt, and as if by magic, created meaning out of meaninglessness in order to save lives. That Camus began the work in 1940, during the fall of France in the Second World War, and when millions of refugees were fleeing from advancing German armies, is no coincidence. This approaching apocalypse and the need to face mortality under the punishments of an absurd war prompted him to search for stories that could work as metaphors. This story's ubiquity in modern culture and powerful semiotics are such that if you were to show someone a simple picture of a figure rolling a large boulder uphill, they would likely know what you were referring to. Even just the word 'Sisyphean' is a vehicle that carries with it the weight of the whole story, and Camus' theory.

In short, the Myth of Sisyphus is a good meme, and the existential philosophy that comes with it, bonded

into a memeplex, has many of the ingredients of being cognitively 'sticky'. We can imagine fierce gods and terrible punishments for defying them. We know, intimately, the absurdity of life and the tedious tasks that make it up. Life already feels Sisyphean, without even factoring in war or approaching apocalypse. The story gets us in our emotions, inducing a form of empathy for Sisyphus, and compassion for ourselves and others trapped in this seemingly unending situation. It rallies us towards a state that is adaptive (that is, the message is to *not* kill ourselves, and would therefore be adaptive from a survival perspective) and gives us an emotional feeling that might be the difference between either apathy or effort in terrible circumstances. Defiance... it's powerful. When you're beaten down to the ground, when everything feels cruel beyond belief, and meaningless, defiance is an emotion that might give you the energy to keep going.

And that is the gift in Camus' interpretation of the story of Sisyphus, the medicine he packs into it: defiance. A gigantic 'fuck you' to the absurdity of the war and of the machine and the machinations of life. This story has fire in the belly. It lives. It breathes. And it carries on moving from one host to another, no doubt sometimes saving a life.

In that spirit, in the rest of this booklet I will offer up adaptable myths for before, during and after the apocalypse, whatever that catastrophe might turn out be.

BEFORE LOSS

Conveying Knowledge Through Stories

Discontinuities can happen at any time. Sometimes these are external, like an asteroid hurtling through space to hit Earth. Sometimes they are unavoidable, like volcanoes belching out lava and gases. Still others are social disasters we feel in our bones are coming, along with a million tiny signs that we don't want to see. And maybe we could avoid the blast-zone of the volcano, or even develop a method for deflecting asteroids, if the right stories are told and we orientate ourselves to listening to and heeding the signs. We can prepare ourselves for loss, and perhaps take evasive action. Other discontinuities we must be wise enough not to suppress or avoid our reactions to, and instead try to find the grace to hold and endure them. Like the inevitability of death, like the physical sensations of living, or the bittersweetness of a broken heart, resisting just makes it worse.

This is the time of warnings and signs, and stories directing us before things start to go very wrong.

Since this guide is particularly concerned with human-caused environmental calamities and is working from the assumption these are something that still can – and very much should be – avoided, the two new narratives I present here experiment with ways to revalue

biological diversity and ecological integrity. They are particularly concerned with the effect of technology, as this can represent the concept of control gone awry and is associated today with the myth of progress. These stories have been particularly influenced by Eastern mythology and Western esotericism, since they often contain ideas about wholeness. I try to retell these old ideas for the current reality of technology and the Anthropocene.[27]

Before we begin, a brief digression on the primary ecological narrative (as I have seen and experienced it) amongst activists working towards changing behaviour and influencing policy. This could be seen as a type of 'perennial philosophy' as it runs through the mystical arms of most major religions: i.e., that everything is one, and if we were able to clearly see that, we would value nature as our own flesh or kin and protect it.[28] In a more secular version, nature and biodiversity contribute to wellbeing because it is the unique entity that it is, and it has intrinsic value that cannot be accurately captured by the concepts of natural capital, services, assets etc. The Dasgupta Review, and similar methods to price natural capital in order to value nature within the economic frame, in part tries to reflect the embeddedness of the economy within biodiversity and our dependence and inclusion within it.[29] This goes part of the way, even if the language and

metric of capital is used in an attempt to do so, but this ecological narrative would say it was priceless.

Scientific logic, emotion (particularly empathy), religion and imagination are all ways of expanding the circle of intrinsic value and care that ripples out from our human experience of being in the world, through recognising we are continuous with and/or in some way identical to the biosphere. Conversely, concepts that emphasise human dominance, or that intrinsic worth is located not in bodies but in more elusive mental states (such as happiness through whatever means) may instead produce a feeling of separation. Ideas that combine belief in intrinsic value of self or other, plus an understanding of connectedness or embeddedness, link the inner and outer in value, and are a way of packaging this perennial philosophy to induce powerful changes.

At first blush this realisation sounds like a good way to encourage care, and it makes sense that in a modern world that has never been more severed from nature that 'reunification' would be the solution. It is rare for indigenous peoples to permit separation of culture and nature, as the two are so fundamentally intertwined. For example, the Sami people of Northern and Eastern Europe value reindeer not just as a 'means to an end' i.e., having only instrumental value, since reindeer cannot be substituted with some other source of food whilst preserving cultural identity. There would be no other adequate service provider, even if nutritional needs were met through another source, and so for them the reindeer are an essential and non-interchangeable

part of a certain meaningful and valuable whole. The reindeer's intrinsic value and non-fungibility (inability to be exchanged wholesale for another identical entity) is recognised, and thus they are protected. Yet globalised modernity creates exactly the situations for lack of care by breaking the relationship between place and people. And further, breaking organisms and objects down ultimately into electronic bits (i.e., constituent parts, money, or information) that can be frictionlessly exchanged.

However, unlike the instrumental value of biodiversity and nature which can be proven through our material dependence upon it – and therefore quantified – intrinsic value is something ephemeral, qualitative and may rest upon personal feeling. Accepting intrinsic value of living beings is equivalent to believing life in all its myriad forms and even its myriad sufferings is good and should exist, which can be a challenging concept. Even if we intrinsically value ourselves, it is not surprising we should feel some resistance to intrinsically valuing the 'other', especially when doing so would likely impede our instrumental use of it. For granting intrinsic in addition to instrumental value to nature and biodiversity is likely to afford it higher privileges and therefore better treatment under legal, economic, and private frameworks, even when doing so comes at a cost to us.

Thus, I fear this perennial philosophy might inadvertently be working in reverse. To deny intrinsic value to the natural world whilst having a subconscious or conscious understanding it is continuous or essentially

identical to ourselves, is to deny our own intrinsic value. If we take the maxim that "the mess out there is because of the mess in here", we are left with the unsettling conclusion that (in light of the idea of interconnectedness), rather than hating the world and prioritising ourselves, we might be denying intrinsic value to the world *because we do not believe we have intrinsic value ourselves*. If that sounds strange, whilst most people generally act for their own survival and broader interests, a sense of our own intrinsic worth is hard to maintain in societies that increasingly see only instrumental worth, including commodifying human and social capital. Intrinsic worth is rarely taught through modern education or society, in fact, often quite the opposite. Therefore, I would argue that some of the resistance to passing laws or other measures which rest upon intrinsic value of the non-human is in part to do with the difficulty of locating intrinsic worth within our own selves, paradoxically particularly amongst those in power. Commodifying ecosystem services (even when they are given a respectfully high price), may further damage this intertwined understanding of internal and external intrinsic value simply by including it within a materially utilitarian or capitalist worldview.

Finally, some will find the vertiginous concept of ecological awareness too emotionally or conceptually overwhelming or challenging, and many may not even wish to pursue it. This is my main issue with expecting any biophilia or connection encouraged by this concept to be a sufficient motivator for change, magnificent although the feeling may be. It is too much to

ask, and I remain unconvinced that someone who has reached a peak-experience of interconnection would be any better placed to motivate and organise others, especially in a crisis. That is not to say this worldview is at all wrong, in fact it is laudable as the endpoint of many contemplative practices. But similarly to the vast academic output of academies and think tanks, it is not working, or not working fast enough as a motivator for change. Perhaps because it remains rare, and difficult to achieve.[30]

I offer some alternative narratives that repurpose old ideas within alchemy and eschatological thinking respectively, and which do not rely on reaching a particular 'enlightened' mental state before acting positively. In fact, they operate by identifying how unbalanced and incomplete people might feel, offering the reward of wholeness, and forgoing the commonly used sticks of shame and fear. I also believe these stories work as medicine, for if believed and acted upon, they would bring about the sense of wholeness they foretell.

EARTH ALCHEMY

A DYNAMIC BALANCE OF NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY

There is a common symmetry in nature and material reality, in that most material phenomena have an opposite. Up cannot exist without down, positive charges cannot exist without negative charges, and life could not exist without death. Many of these opposites are dependent upon each other and are required for interesting things to happen. A universe without both protons and electrons would never have contained matter or been stable at all.

These opposites are what govern the material realm, and this is the realm which we are trying to work with, exist in, and are challenged to manage sympathetically. It is a very old idea that out of black and white the '10,000 things' are born (meaning every species of animal, humans, all of life, matter, and every form of technology too). To say there are opposites such as black and white, does not mean one is bad and one is good, far from it. If what concerns us is the continuation of 'the 10,000 things', the Taoist concept of all earthly things that are created from duality, then we should be concerned with harmony between these opposites and their

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dynamic interplay. Or, to put it another way, you need '0's and '1's for binary code, and the pattern in which they are arranged produces everything (the 10,000 things).

However, this is not a binary or dual system, but a polar system. There is no clear demarcation between one and the other, rather the pure black and pure white are the extremes (limits) of a gradient or spectrum of material reality. In this case 'self-organised' matter is at one end and 'engineered' matter, or the extended phenotype of humans, is at the other. At the pure white (or yang) end might be the most delicate and finely engineered human structure (AI or a supercomputer perhaps), and at the other end, represented by pure black (or yin), the wildest and most diverse ecosystem. A grey midpoint might represent something alive but highly modified and controlled, like an ornamental garden. Each, like the yin/yang symbol, contains the seeds of the other. For example, many believe AI (on the light side) could be considered a form of life or consciousness, and perhaps viruses (on the dark side) are properly understood as dead information.

There are many ways to understand the relation between opposites. Overleaf are three.

1. Jungian psychology points out that we have two sides to us; the light or conscious side that we identify with, and an unconscious, shadowed side which contains the things that we disown.[31] But it is a mistake to suppress this unvalued side not only because it contains aspects that are both powerful and essential, but because cleaving only to the conscious side creates many undesirable effects. Primarily a lack of 'wholeness', or in Jungian terms 'integration', but also, suppressing it will increase the negative or destructive elements of this unconscious side, which tend to create havoc in the person's life and affect overall behaviour. This is more than just 'bad things will happen', although they certainly will, but rather, integrity (and therefore a sense of wholeness) cannot happen. It is both a suffering risk and an opportunity cost.

Each person consciously identifies with certain things and will naturally have a preference for one side or the other. For example, some prefer being in nature, while others do not. It doesn't matter which is the conscious side and which is the shadow side for any individual person. Rather it is the understanding that they or the planet's shadow side (nature or technology for this illustration), is neither exterminated or disregarded.

2. The principles of alchemy – the ancient practice of trying to turn base metals such as lead to precious ones such as gold, an early form of chemistry and a religion in its own right – identifies the processes and practices of alchemists happening on more than a material plane. The worldview of an alchemist is based on the principle of the harmony of opposites, with the practitioner respecting the laws of nature, indeed, aiming to perfect or purify natural processes so that the opposite extremes can be combined.[32]

3. In Taoism, the two opposing forces, represented by black and white, or yin and yang, are represented circling around each other. Just as one reaches its peak, it collapses into the other, and the opposite builds until it, in turn, reaches its peak. Neither are bad, neither are ever fully extinguished, and both are necessary. They 'mutually arise'. As with the two sides of the personality, one cannot exist without the other. The dynamism between them; the Tao, or process of one turning into the other, is necessary and corresponds to the pattern of the relationship. Pursuing one side to its extreme collapses the world, violently, into its opposite.

The technology that creates and drives planetary exploitation at the cost of yin, or nature, is yang in its quality, and is concerned with order, consumption, regularity and is usually non-living. And this is not in itself bad. Both sides of the coin are always needed. However, until relatively recently in the Earth's history there was plenty of self-organised complexity to support and feed this dead order; vast yin to balance and nourish the yang. But now, the pendulum has swung so that human-made materials outweigh the Earth's entire biomass.[33] This is unbalanced, as the yang cannot nourish the yin in the same way.

According to Taoist thought, it is the natural order of things that sometimes black is ahead, sometimes white, each is born out of each other, reaches its peak, and collapses into its opposite. It is not necessarily 'bad' that there should be this oscillation, but it can be dangerous. Yang forms in the world are now without doubt reaching a point where they consist of an unstable peak. We have not yet reached the situation where yang alone (humans and their extended phenotype of dwellings, agriculture, and inventions) exist, but there is a possibility that this could happen and get 'locked in'. We should be very wary of anything that attempts to overcome an imbalance between elements in the material

realm with more from the same side, such as using technology to cheat death and 'live forever'. Or, losing the biodiversity which constitutes one side of the equation to fuel expansionist yang projects like space exploration.

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Why should someone care about this imbalance though, especially if they prefer or identify more with the yang side of life that is overcoming the yin? Because it is a deep and intuitive feeling that to have one side of a system without the other, would not only be dangerous and 'incomplete', but it would cut off the dynamic harmony between opposites. It would be like the conscious mind becoming so successful within an individual person, that the shadow and all its riches was lost, or the yin becoming somehow malignant and twisted resulting in chaos and distress. Or, there being only 'o's and no 'ı's, and therefore no possibility of anything being coded or created from it.

The relation between opposites has been the concern of many cultures over time. For example, alchemists created a spiritual technology that applied not only to their laboratories but also to their own personalities and their relationships with

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other people. There is a correspondence between upper and lower, inner and outer: "As above, so below, as within, so without, as the universe, so the soul", as said the Egyptian priestly figure Hermes Trismegistus.

What happens in the environment, also happens in us, and just as one can become a whole or psychologically integrated human being (according to Jung) by realising the need for your shadow or opposite, a similar process can happen on a planetary scale. If humanity as a whole is adding to the side of life which is already dominant (technology / the conscious / the engineered), then balance can be attained by adding to the yin (nature / wildness / organic complexity). This is to participate in a dynamic harmony which is universal.

Humans do not need to insert themselves into controlling the minutiae of life processes, since that comes with many risks and of its own. A far better future might be to become alchemists of the Earth System, countering an over-dominant movement with its natural opposite, and then leaving relinquished areas to regenerate without interference. It is one of the oldest alchemical stories that something magical happens when there is a union of purified opposites.

Another curious phenomenon is that in nature and physics opposites tend to be balanced. Not always 50/50, but when a system is taken as a whole, or averaged out over time, it can often be remarkably close. Even equations must be balanced. It is perhaps in this spirit that the biologist E. O. Wilson wrote that we should rewild half the Earth.[34] He said this with saving humanity in mind. But if we were to survive through an ecological collapse into a highly technologically assisted future, why should humanity care? That is, the threat of an exclusively human/technological world would not be a dystopia to many, as long as humans continued. But when we widen our viewpoint and consider the whole system, there is an intuitive grace in a 50/50 split. It has an intrinsic fairness and just as opposites are balanced across many other systems, so too should they be across self-organised and engineered matter. It is not just an aesthetic feeling, but a spiritual feeling, not just of harmony but of 'justness'.

There is a profound symmetry to the idea that whatever is 'created' on one side, must be replaced or protected on the other. Since the Earth System is currently skewed towards human effects with the total mass of humans and all their materials outweighing the planet's living biomass,[35] according

to this metaphor there is an additional debt to be repaid on the other side.

So, how does this idea influence behaviour and governance? Firstly, we must keep the extreme limits, so for example if Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) is created, we must also have the wildest places as part of the system too (represented by unmodified ecological biodiversity). Secondly, we must offset highly contrived or engineered things with their extreme opposite. For example, if certain people or nations are to launch spacecraft, not only the CO_2 but the engineered complexity represented by it and the organic complexity destroyed by it, should be offset on the other side of the equation. Whatever is 'created' on one side, must be replaced or protected on the other.

If someone who is working in a yang-based field offsets their work with its opposite, they will more likely feel in harmony with the system as opposed to throwing it out of balance. Since the system is currently yang-skewed, yin-based creation should be preferenced for some time until the system becomes more equal. That is not to say that actions should be yin-skewed forever, as these two elements will always be in flux with each other.

DYNAMIC BALANCE

THE OMEGA POINT
THE OMEGA POINT
THE OMEGA POINT
THE OMEGA POINT

A TRULY COMPLEX SYSTEM MAINTAINS ALL ITS LEVELS

Teleological explanations (understanding a phenomenon in terms of ultimate ends) are not usually encouraged within science and other rational worldviews. However, few scientists could function well without teleology. For example, we describe the function of the heart as being to pump blood around the body, and the attribution of function and purpose to living systems is an ancient practice. It is not a stretch then, to imagine that the Earth System has a purpose too, and is progressing towards this.

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The Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin understood increasing biological and social complexity as an evolution of different levels of the planet, ultimately heading towards a maximal point of complexity he called the Omega Point.[36] This has similarities to an AGI singularity where superintelligence is reached and then accelerates beyond what we can comprehend.[37] In complex systems there are also tipping-points which result in emergent phenomena. For example, the emergence of a personality from a nervous system, or an organism from its genes. Although these emergent levels may be considered greater

than the parts that make them up, they always depend on the constituent parts, or lower levels of organisation.

Teilhard de Chardin's observations were that the planet itself manifested several different levels of organisation: from individual organisms; to social groups; to networks of communication and technology (which he called the noosphere); with each stage becoming more complex. This is very similar to the way Multi-Level Selection Theory describes life existing as nested layers. For example, a social ant colony consists of individuals which at their most fundamental level consist of genes. These individual ants exist in a group with division of labour, allowing the group to function as a whole, or superorganism. That superorganism may even be part of a 'super colony' that can cover whole continents. But just as seeing the system *only* as genes is scientific reductionism and therefore incomplete, seeing the system as constituting *only* a superorganism is also incomplete. The true understanding of holism is to see all levels at once.

The Omega Point is posited to be a state of planetary complexity that in most descriptions involves technological maturity and is considered a state of perfection. But crucially, to reach this, I suggest that the system would overall need to keep the supporting or nested layers, i.e., all of its biodiversity. Just as a superorganism cannot exist without individual ants, and

crucially their genes, so too a rainforest cannot exist without soil bacteria. Each 'higher' level is contingent and dependent on the 'lower' levels, and inseparable from them. All are valid, but as the higher levels emerge from the lower, the lower are more fundamental.

For example, no animal has relinquished its cerebellum (the so-called lizard brain) because it developed a cerebral cortex (advanced social brain). It is not necessarily undesirable to have advanced technological systems such AGI. However, despite representing the furthest outer layer of the system, it is not 'superior', simply emergent: just as our personality is emergent from our brains, and society is emergent from populations, it cannot exist without its constituent parts.

By this reasoning, AGI, human infrastructure, the economy, and the most advanced forms of computing and technology cannot exist without bacteria. You could argue they are in some way parts of the same organism. This links into a more Eastern idea of a harmonious universe which is likened to a whole organism, as opposed to a Western idea of individuality and social control.

Seen in this way, the 'purpose' of the Earth System is to generate more and more layers of complexity until it reaches this 'Omega Point', *but this cannot be achieved without preserving all lower layers, such as biodiversity and functioning ecosystems.*

Technology is understood as coming *out* of nature and is therefore totally dependent upon it.

To reach a genuine Omega Point, therefore, a system with maximal (and stable) complexity is the desirable state. Specifically, a healthy, teeming planet, one with varied populations of organisms that are viable and with sufficient numbers and genetic diversity for long-term survival. Animals are not driven to extinction as this would decrease the complexity of the system. 'Advanced' systems such as the noosphere, human phenotype extensions like cities, and new forms of life (AGI or synthetic biology) are not prioritised to the exclusion of other forms of organic or self-organised existence.

According to deeper readings of Teilhard de Chardin, we are building up again to complexity from a fall, or 'The Fall', in the sense of humanity or perhaps life in general having been in a more ideal state in the past. By this reasoning, to reach a peak of technological 'perfection' will also naturally induce a fall after its perfection has been achieved, much like the dynamic of yin and yang. I differ from Teilhard de Chardin who saw this as a desirable form of rapture or apocalyptic eschatology (in terms of revelation) and instead see it in these terms:

Usually, organisms reproduce at the very peak of their life and health when they are the most vital and the most robust. I can envisage that a maximally healthy

Earth System could represent the apotheosis or climax of this perfection, and so the process of sending viable populations of Earth-originating life into space could represent a different kind of 'fall'. Not falling away from technological perfection into a collapse but falling away from the Earth like a ripe apple from a healthy tree. Ideally, containing enough genetic information from the Earth System to 'green the universe'[38] with both humans and other biodiversity. To enter that restricted form for space travel would represent the new form of simplicity that emerged from peak complexity, like seeds in an apple, packaged tightly and ready to start all over again. To achieve this most effectively, humanity would need to preserve healthy biodiversity on Earth in order to recreate it elsewhere.

The alternative, is that humanity acts like a slime mould that aggregates and desperately sends out spores in response to nutritional stress. In his book *The Invisible Pyramid*, nature writer Loren Eiseley had this apocalyptic vision:

"It came to me in the night, in the midst of a bad dream, that perhaps man, like the blight descending on a fruit, is by nature a parasite, a spore bearer, a world eater. The slime molds are the only creatures on the planet that share the ways of man from his individual pioneer phase to his final immersion in great cities. […] At the last they thrust up overtoppling spore palaces, like city

*skyscrapers. The rupture of these vesi-
cles may disseminate the living spores as
far away proportionately as man's journey
to the moon."[39]*

What a tragedy to have these human 'spores',
aided by technology and AI, leave an impov-
erished and simplified home planet, like a
parasite from the body of its host, or a
spore from a stressed and suicidal fruiting
body. Surely that would represent a form of
damaged simplicity, not the nested layers
of complexity that Teilhard de Chardin en-
visaged. I can only imagine a true Omega
Point occurring on a planet at flourishing
peak-complexity, with the fall as the be-
ginning of a new cycle of complexity away
from Earth.

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WITHIN LOSS

How to Walk Through the Fire

Before loss, mythologies that transmit information have a strong role to play. A way of conveying knowledge or warnings about things that are likely to cause problems or create success in the long run. But there is another kind of wisdom required to, as Rudyard Kipling writes, "keep your head when all about you/ Are losing theirs". [40] As they say, things can always be worse, and so this section is – in part – about how to try to avoid compounding problems or getting lost in the fray.

One of the ways climate change or ecological breakdown could accelerate (at worst ending up as an existential event) is that, as things start to go wrong, decisions are made – particularly by those in power – that inadvertently create positive feedback loops. These are events which have bad effects on the system, amplify an already bad situation, and can push it past irreversible tipping points towards collapse. These could be, for example, increasing fishing despite dwindling stocks, waging war in response to climate inequalities, or reigniting fossil fuel power stations rather than using renewables in response to fuel insecurity. The guiding principle of this section is: how will you walk through the fire? If the fire is already here, it is happening, it is unfolding and is not over, and has the capacity to get a

lot worse. If the window for stopping it has passed, how can one behave to get through this with grace, whilst minimising the likelihood of the worst outcomes?

Specifically, what stories can be used to shore up people's psychologies as the world is coming down around their ears? As mentioned in the introduction, the Myth of Sisyphus and the gift of defiance in the face of disaster and absurdity is a good medicine bundle. Within it is the spirit to fight, and fight well. Here, I offer some more stories to get through this stage of catastrophe: the journey through the fire.

As we entered the COVID-19 pandemic, mythologist Martin Shaw observed that despite the hardships to come we were "entering deeply mythic ground".[41] Here, in great difficulty, things can be revealed to us that are not accessible in more comfortable times. Even in hell it is possible to look for beauty. Chinua Achebe said, "As a rule I don't like suffering to no purpose. Suffering should be creative, should give birth to something good and lovely."[42] Everything about being in loss is about being on an arduous journey. Sometimes it will mean pushing through. Other times it will mean walking away. And still other times a way of bearing the journey is to slow down and ask yourself, where is the beauty?

Turning arrows into flowers

There are two famous stories from Buddhism about arrows representing the difficulties, harms, and losses that life throws at us. The first is Buddha's teachings about not hitting yourself with second arrows after a

first, inevitable one. For example, there's little point doubling down on bad events and increasing the pain of it with shame and recriminations (within reason). Whilst it is healthy to feel guilty if we have done something wrong, in civilisational collapse these second arrows are not going to help anyone survive.

I read a story once... despite a thorough search it remains elusive. I can't remember if it is a Zen or Hindu parable, or from Western antiquity, but it goes something like this: there was once a monk (or pauper or vagabond philosopher) who was sat holding out his bowl on a street with others who were also begging for food. This was a hard and difficult life, and he hadn't eaten in many days. However, soon enough along came a person who gave him some food. Before he could eat it, another passer-by, taking offence to him and his lifestyle, dashed the bowl from his hands and hit him around the head with it. The monk stood and walked calmly away. Another beggar later asked him why he was not ashamed of his circumstances and the beating and was able to not react. He replied, "why would I hit myself for a second time with shame as well as having lost my food and having been struck on the head?" Here, the first arrow is the attack (or even the circumstances of his life), and the optional second (or third or fourth or sometimes infinite arrows) would be of shame and self-hatred for being in the situation.

This is a particularly wise mindset for instances of fate, tragedies that are in no way your moral responsibility, or when others act against you undeservingly. But such a mindset is perhaps most powerfully reserved for

times when you could play the game of 'what if?' What if, for example, humans had not discovered fossil fuels and had not kept burning them? What if we had acted differently? This isn't moral apologism, but rather if you are in a survival situation and within the unfolding of loss, there is not usually the space to shoot yourself with second arrows. You will have to breathe, act, and get others to act. Not necessarily without self-reflection, but certainly decisively. We are where we are, and so must go from here.

The second story is about turning arrows into flowers. As the Buddha sat under a bodhi tree the night before his enlightenment, he was attacked by Mara, the Tempter, or Evil One. Mara and his army of demons shot thousands of arrows at the Buddha, but as the arrows neared him, they turned into flowers and fell harmlessly at his feet. This is, of course, not to be taken literally, but rather in the spirit of the Chinese proverb: 'You cannot prevent the birds of sadness from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from nesting in your hair.' Buddha had conquered his ego and so there was nothing for these arrows to strike.

It is interesting that this story doesn't portray the arrows disappearing or simply falling to the ground as they are. Specifically, they turn into something quite different. During loss, and particularly during an unfolding crisis, it is important not to be overcome with emotion as it is likely your survival (and other people's) depends on it. But, in my humble opinion, I have found it is better to allow yourself to feel grief and other

emotions purely and without resistance, so they pass through you quickly even though they are sharp and painful, in the hopes they turn into something beautiful afterwards.

Groups who have experienced existential threats have had to face great loss and the prospect of death. In the 1980s the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) pandemic began sweeping through the world, striking first and particularly hard the gay and artistic communities of major American and then later European cities. It then moved on to devastate developing countries and people of all ages and orientations (including children since the disease has a high maternal transmission rate). As a marker of its impact, by 1999 the average life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa had fallen from 62 to 47 years as a result of AIDS.[43] The disease eventually annihilates the immune system, opening sufferers to opportunistic bacterial and viral infections which become devastating.

In the early years of the outbreak it was not unusual for someone in one of the hard-hit marginal groups in America or Europe to not only lose (often slowly and in great pain) a large portion of their community, but also many friends and lovers. They had to face increased risk, and perhaps their own mortality. Before anti-retroviral drugs that meaningfully extended lifespan became available in 1997, AIDS diagnosis typically gave a life-expectancy of only a few years, maybe even a few months. A person infected with the causal agent of AIDS, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) was not

only stigmatised, but sex itself became a source of risk to others, and the body underwent painful and debilitating symptoms before death.[44]

The director and artist Derek Jarman, after being diagnosed with HIV in 1986, did something quite extraordinary. He moved into Prospect Cottage, a small dwelling on a windswept flint shingle beach, in the shadow of a nuclear power station in Dungeness, Kent. Here he set about, in the time remaining to him, planting one of the most beautiful gardens in the country. Jarman had the garden until his death in 1994 and described gardening it as an act of love and grief, as he lost close friends and his own health and sight to the disease. In *Modern Nature* (1992), his published journals recording the creation of the garden, he describes it as "a memorial, each circular bed and dial a true lover's knot".[45]

The unique landscape was both austere and a great challenge. Dungeness is very exposed with strong salty winds, little shade and almost no soil. Jarman created the garden by hand, digging into the shingle, building beds and banks to compensate for the difficult growing conditions. Photographer Howard Sooley worked in the garden with him and recalls that "It always felt miraculous to me that anything could grow there, nothing was taken for granted, every plant that found its way, grew and blossomed was special – gardening against the odds – this wasn't wasted on Derek."[46]

Jarman was very interested in the traditions and mythology around plants, bringing in species from the

surrounding beach that are mentioned in folklore. Poppies were a recurring motif: mythologically, they are seen as giving life-blood to the soil, and are a symbol of life, fertility and death. Medicinally, they are sources of morphia and pain-relief. In *Modern Nature* he writes "Santolina, under the dominion of Mercury resisteth poison; putrefaction, and heals the bites of venomous beasts. Whilst a sprig of Lavender held in the hand or placed under the pillow enables you to see ghosts, travel to the land of the dead".[47] In living with presence, and growing things as he did, Jarman was creating his own medicine bundle, and walking a path through the fire ahead of so many others.

It is overwhelming to be in loss. Writing today, in 2023, it feels like the planet has been in terrible environmental loss throughout living memory. It is easy to overcomplicate things, the methods for salvation seem so varied and also so impossible, that to be in this crisis feels like constantly spinning around, clinging first to one thing then another. In this fray, I think that it would not be a bad thing to do, to stop and plant things as Jarman did. Feel the grief, and plant anyway. Beyond growing food as nourishment for the body and for survival purposes, there is a deeper medicine in the shelter and cultivation of living things, a ballast and defiance to destruction and death. It has been an instinct that has guided me through some of the worst crises of my life, to 'go to ground', in whatever form that takes, and trust the healing that can occur there. It is strange to me that there are those who would prefer to leave the soil – even the planet – when it, or they, are in trouble.

In the end, these stories of arrows and flowers are about turning a curse into a blessing. There is the concept of the 'sacred wound' that drives people towards an enlightenment that could not have happened any other way. The Pali term for this is *samvega*, which is usually translated as 'spiritual urgency', or perhaps 'spiritual emergency'. Nobody would choose or wish such a thing, but if it is happening, it is also possible to find beauty in it. As Mary Oliver wrote in her poem *The Uses of Sorrow*: "Someone I loved once gave me/ a box full of darkness./ It took me years to understand/ that this, too, was a gift."[48] Like her, I truly believe that sorrow can be transformed.

A similar idea is that it is in the most terrifying or horrible situations where you find the 'jewel of great price', a metaphor for enlightenment in Buddhism. Even the lotus, another symbol of awakening, was chosen because it must push itself up through the mud first. Nothing it seems could be worse than the losses and destruction we're surrounded by, and yet this is where we might find the way out. It is unimaginably hard to do this. Nobody likes to suffer. Most people do not want to die. None of us want a Global Catastrophic Event, least of all one that could be fatal to the whole species, or to lose children, loved ones, and our visions of the future. And yet, this is indeed deeply mythic ground. There are flowers here that bloom nowhere else, would not have been cultivated in anything other than the bare and blasted soil of grief. It doesn't make it all better, doesn't cure illness or prevent the wave coming. But sometimes it helps, just enough. As Sooley wrote; "[Jarman] fought illness with openness, busying himself with so many things that

there was little time or room left for illness. In a way it worked, and for a time he cheated death hiding amongst the flowers and dancing with the bees."[49]

You get to choose how you walk through the fire

Another idea forged in loss, in the very depths of human beings' depravity to each other, is the philosophy of Viktor Frankl. He developed his theory of logography,[50] a form of existential psychiatry, after being imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps in the Second World War. He observed that some people were able to psychologically endure the conditions, while others who were in the barracks seemingly (and utterly understandably given the circumstances) lost the will to live. He took from this that the last privilege given to everyone is their ability to choose their internal reaction to circumstances. Particularly in such a hostile environment as a concentration camp, this should never be *expected* of anyone. But it could be one of those ideas, like Camus' medicine bundle, or the stories that follow, which might be the difference between succumbing to despair, or hanging on until outside conditions change. Similarly to defiance, it is the belief in one's own emotional agency, and the ability to perhaps defy the reactions that would otherwise occur.

It is powerful magic to practice a form of mental health first aid and, instead of hurting yourself further with despair when you find yourself in hell, to care for yourself instead (if it is at all possible). All inhabitants of concentrations camps – whether they were Jewish, disabled or from other groups that were stigmatised by

the Nazis – were in danger of internalising this hatred. In the horror of this situation, where bodies and minds were pushed to their limits of pain, it would not be at all surprising for people to swallow the narratives of hate that the Nazis were propagating and end up with the second arrows of suffering. It is one of the saddest effects of bullying that victims often end up applying the same bullying words or actions to themselves or even sometimes transmitting them to others, like virulent memeplexes. Frankl's message is that we do not necessarily have to do this.

Logography built an antidote around the practice of having a meaning to hold onto, and this meaning can get someone through a terrible experience. Jewish people's faith in their God and maintaining some of the rituals even in extremely harsh situations are examples of such meaning. This booklet is an attempt to give similar stories to hold onto, but if you find yourself in a crisis of existential proportions, having a purpose and helping to orientate others towards it is probably a good idea. However, although tasks for survival are essential, alone they are not enough. The meaning needs to be something that touches the soul, like preserving a precious culture or cultivating beauty.

Similarly to the idea that we can choose our internal reactions, technologist Douglass Rushkoff[51] (in conversation for this project) explained how one of the most life-changing ideas he had experienced (or an 'epiphany') was that he suddenly saw that it was possible to edit the 'code' of the world, even in time mastering it. He was inspired to that realisation through the metaphor

of coding and found it to be very useful in inspiring the young Jewish technologists whom he mentors. This is the departure point for becoming a memeticist. Editing the code of the world need not focus exclusively on ideas or even finding meaning, it could also be through physically altering the world, surely a more concrete example of changing the world's 'code'. This is not to say that it is always advisable to do this, but as an idea to hang onto in a crisis it is empowering.

Dangers of the Hero's Journey

The comparative theologian Joseph Campbell believed that there was a common meta-pattern, or monomyth, in the world's religions.[52] Typically, a hero figure (Jesus, Buddha, or various Greek heroes such as Odysseus) encounters adversity, is called to travel through a mystic/initiatory process, and descends into a kind of hell region. The hero ultimately emerges victorious from the trials encountered there, and brings back wisdom or a particular item for the wider group's benefit. Although this viewpoint has been strongly critiqued and focusses only on 'major' religions, it would probably be fair to say this Hero's Journey is at least a trope of narratives that are religious or didactic in nature. And it would not be hard to see why: it contains all the ingredients to help a warrior (male or female) through the small or large trials and disasters of life. A person or group who had this story as an idea in their culture would be more likely to see, similarly to the idea of arrows turning into flowers or the sacred wound, that epic difficulties are part of the universal 'plot' and therefore be better equipped to journey through it.

Scholarly accuracy as a universal religious meta-narrative aside, it is an extremely useful catastrophe story. That is not to say anyone should suffer unnecessarily; but in war, in childbirth, in the storm, under the greatest possible extremity, you may find that you are able to walk through that fire and bear what needs to be borne.

It also introduces the idea that as you walk through the hell regions, or 'the fire', there is a particular risk of making things worse. Typically, in these stories there are tempters along the path offering escape, hedonism, morphia, etc. An oasis of pleasure and ease or some solution to the problem that seems suspiciously easy. Someone to take over or numb you so you do not have to do it. Certainly, in everyday life there is the idea and even hyperstition of the strongman leader or superior (whether they are male or female), or even an embodiment of society, who will make everything OK. A sort of god, or alpha, or proxy who will do what needs to be done for you, providing you give up agency. The lesson is, whilst walking through the fire is exactly the time you might find inner strength, it also is a uniquely vulnerable point to be led astray and give yourself over to someone, or something, else.

The author Ayn Rand developed a philosophy she called 'Objectivism'.[53] Its main principle being that reason is the only means of acquiring knowledge; Rand rejected

faith and religion. She described its essence as "the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute". [54] Such a principle intersects with the Hero's journey, but in Rand's fictional writing, which fostered and then developed the core ideas of objectivism using highly stylised situations and characters, the myth appears in a twisted form. Not only does her novel *Atlas Shrugged* [55] assert the virtues of selfishness and capitalist society, but it alters the typical Hero's Journey by having the 'heroes' abandon the group. This is perfectly captured in the mythically loaded title: a reference to Atlas, a god-like Titan in Greek mythology who holds the world on his shoulders. Its significance is given in a conversation between two characters on what advice they would give Atlas if "the greater [the Titan's] effort, the heavier the world bore down on his shoulders". The rather callous advice given by Rand's men of industry was: "to shrug".

Rand's protagonists are 'heroic individualists', depicted as fit and attractive in contrast with others, echoing Nietzsche's concept of the 'Superman' or 'Übermensch', literally meaning *overman*. An overt fetishisation of what man (for it was so often a man) could be; uncontaminated by emotion and powerfully moving and rearranging the parts of the world to his will. Meanwhile, women admire, love, or give themselves over to powerful males, specifically the entrepreneurs and wealth-creators of her stories, doing and saying whatever these men want (as portrayed even more feverishly in Rand's only other novel *The Fountainhead).* [56]

Rearranging the parts of the world and rewriting the code of the simulation is not so far from a memeticist's intention, and yet Rand's vision represents the darkside of this urge. Likely to create a demagogue more than a hero, such power rearranges the world along the lines of industry and capitalism, with the lionised "men of the mind" (productivity, intelligence and wealth being placed as the highest virtues) eventually leaving in order to set up an even more capitalistic society.

Rand's writings are suffused with a worship of capital as a good, which borders on submission to the industrial. Written in the 1940s and 1950s, steel, trains, and skyscrapers feature heavily. Had she been alive today, no doubt the massive wealth inequalities of the tech-world and Silicon Valley would seem admirable and good to her. Despite valuing self-sufficiency in the abstract, her books are suffused with the need to submit to a strong and ruthless patriarchy, including positive descriptions of forced sex / violent conquests / rape. This theory and Rand's books have, however, become immensely popular among architects, entrepreneurs, American conservatives, and libertarians. More than 6.5 million copies of *The Fountainhead* have been sold worldwide, translated into more than 20 languages. In a certainly proactive attempt to spread their memes, each year the Ayn Rand Institute donates 400,000 copies of works by Rand to high school students. *Atlas Shrugged* itself has sold 9 million copies as of 2019.

Rand explicitly argued that sexually, women should desire to engage in "hero worship", and that this required having at least one man to whom they could

each "look up to". Thus, Rand raised up a toxic form of masculinity and placed the men that most possessed it as hero-gods, to be worshipped by women (and presumably other men, who in her books spend an inordinate amount of time competing amongst each other for money and women). I would posit this craving for order and traditional masculine behaviour is reflected today in the rhetoric of some, increasingly popular, online influencers. Whilst a state of chaos might well require a medicinal dose of order, these masculine 'heroes' disdain the feminine as weak, and thus are in themselves incomplete.

If I seem overly concerned about the toxic masculinity of the Hero's Journey it is because a state of crisis, particularly an ecological one, is likely to encourage an idolisation of order, hierarchy, and potentially encourage ruthless leadership. That is not to disparage strength or heroes, nor masculinity; they are valid and will be needed. But since this is a book on leadership, my message is to only trust those who have walked well through the fire, and better still, to be that leader for yourself.

In Rand's works, I see a hyperstition. A hero is being called for, evoked, even within oneself. But the flavour of this idol is rational and pitiless. It is likely to only punish, dominate, subjugate, or abandon. The Objectivist movement has been compared to a cult, or "inverted religion."[57] It contains many of the hallmarks of a cult in the pejorative sense, including coercive sex and (in both Rand and her male heroic protagonists) a charismatic leader. Despite her arguments for female

submission, Rand became both a thought leader and high priestess of Capital. It is seductive to believe innovation, power and control can save us from loss, but it is probably one of the tempters along the path of a true Hero's Journey. Through calling for others to be a hero to us, or becoming ourselves heroes transfixed on winning, we create monsters. Even of ourselves.

The only way out is in

The danger of creating or becoming a monster is one of the problems of the Hero's Journey meta-narrative. The Hero's Journey is extremely ubiquitous, found frequently in comics and popular culture, let alone many of the major religions. Being such a shorthand, it can be called upon effectively, and has been proven to be cognitively sticky. There may indeed be times when challenging people to be stereotypical heroes or warriors, as opposed to stereotypical villains or cowards, may be positive and, in the short term, may be the difference between life or death. But it also comes with danger if the need for a hero is placed outside oneself. If we turn to something external to walk through the abyss for us, we might indeed be lost, or at least bitterly disappointed.

There are plenty of dangers involved when locating the hero inside of us, acting as one for other people, or allowing ourselves to choose a leader. The endpoint is sometimes a tyrant (for power corrupts), 'forced altruism' (whereby someone is coerced into acting against their own survival or interests for the benefit of others), or the frenzied seeking of superpowers or

immortality. In most religions and doctrines of spiritual development, including alchemy, Buddhism, and even the tales of medieval knights, there are cautionary fables about those who seek the powers of life extension or physical strength. Usually these are considered corrupting or (at least) significant impediments to enlightenment. Modern superhero comic book stories, which in many cases could be considered didactic reimaginings of the Hero's Journey, have riffed on the acquisition and use of superpowers to create a whole genre.

The original Hero's Journey narratives usually contain a sub-message that the only way out is in. Although the hero does eventually exit the underworld or shadow realm, he (or more rarely she) must first go all the way through it. There is no escape from the trials, no doubling back, the abyss must be faced. In Dante Allegro's epic prose poem *The Divine Comedy,*[58] the only way the protagonist can exit Hell is right in the centre, on the Devil's wing. Or, to quote an oft-repeated proverb: "If you're going through hell, keep going."

This is not the right advice in all circumstances; keeping calm and carrying on has its own dangers. Sometimes the status quo *needs* to be disrupted. But for a subset of crises, and certainly those that have to be endured and pushed through, it is invaluable advice. Sometimes, you do have to touch 'rock-bottom' in order to find what you need there. This is the prize and relic in the Hero's Journey, the 'jewel of great price' found in hell, the item or knowledge that is brought back in service of the group.

Charlotte Joko Beck, a Buddhist Zen nun and populariser of Eastern teachings for times of crisis, recounts this famous story in her book *Everyday Zen*:

"Young Dōgen Zenji went to China to visit monasteries for practice and study. And one day at one of them, on a very hot June afternoon, he saw the elderly tenzo [monastery cook] working hard outside the kitchen. He was spreading out mushrooms to dry on a straw mat. He carried a bamboo stick but had no hat on his head. The sun's rays beat down so harshly that the tiles along the walk burned one's feet. He worked hard and was covered with sweat. I could not help but feel the work was too much of a strain for him. His back was a bow drawn taut, his long eyebrows were crane white. I approached and asked his age. He replied that he was sixty-eight years old. Then I went on to ask him why he never used any assistants. He answered, "Other people are not me." "You are right," I said; "I can see that your work is the activity of the Buddha-dharma, but why are you working so hard in this scorching sun?" He replied, "If I do not do it now, when else can I do it." There was nothing else for me to say. As I walked on along that passageway, I began to sense inwardly the true significance of the role of tenzo.

The elderly tenzo said, "Other people are not me." Let's look at this statement. What he is saying is, my life is absolute. No one can live it for me. No one can feel it for me. No one can serve it for me. My work, my suffering, my joy, are absolute. There's no way, for instance, you can feel the pain in my toe; or I can feel the pain in

your toe. No way. You can't swallow for me. You can't sleep for me.

And that is the paradox: in totally owning the pain, the joy, the responsibility of my life – if I see this point clearly – then I'm free. I have no hope, I have no need for anything else." [59]

Importantly, there is no cult of toxic masculinity here. The tenzo is one of the hardest serving members, working in what some might consider a lowly position. And yet, the role of tenzo is often held by a senior realised monk. Later, Beck repeats a Zen saying; "On a withered branch a flower blooms". She means in a life lived without hope of rescue from loss by another, a true self can blossom. Sometimes you will find you have lost hope. Things seem as bad as they can be, and nobody is coming to help. And sometimes, when things are that bad, in extreme necessity, you find you were never without a guiding intuition. Moreover, nothing can ever take it away or separate you from it… it just feels like it most of the time.

It is also interesting that the Hero's Journey has a motif of 'going to ground'. Almost always the underworld is the region that has to be passed through, not the heavens. (Although, I suppose it is possible that if heavenly or space-travelling adventurers return with wisdom and gifts to help Earth, this need not be an absolute rule.) However, the value is in the transformational journey and return, not leaving permanently to go elsewhere. As we face ecological crisis, there are

people who would like to move themselves or an elect group off-world, and there is not much talk of this being in service to others or the planet.

I cannot say exactly what you will need to do in a crisis. There are many different types of apocalypse, after all. However, I do truly believe that for those of you who can still yourself in order to know and find Selfhood whilst walking through the fire, you will find there is an answer. And if you turn to the ground, the stars are nonetheless with you, and the essence of life is with you, and the ancestors are with you in solidarity, and though there might not be any hope or aid, no tribe or god or protector, even in that crucible you can be there for yourself.

All the more to be there for others in turn.

WITHIN LOSS

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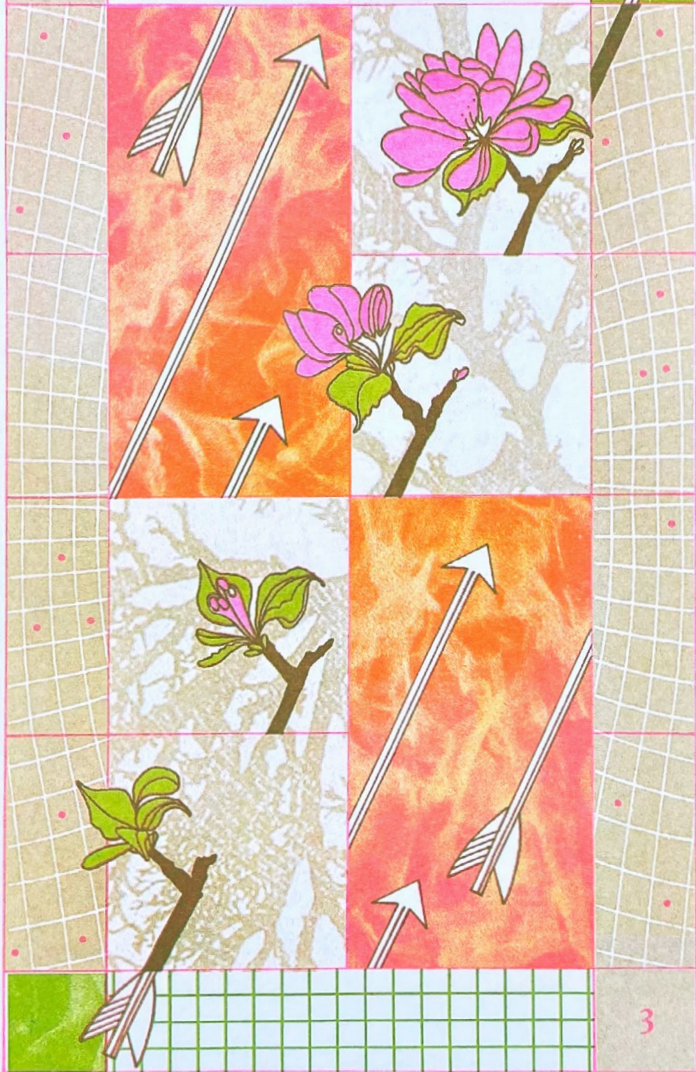
AFTER LOSS

Aftermath

Sometimes, the wave comes anyway. Perhaps it is one of those waves that could never have been avoided in a full life, and so there is a degree of acceptance to be found. Or, more likely, there are waves that could in theory have been otherwise: it is conceivable that the virus known as HIV did not form or that it failed to become established in the human population; that Columbus did not leave England to go to the Americas and colonisation of the 'New World' by the 'Old World' did not happen; that the atomic bomb was not detonated on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; that Hitler did not establish the Nazi party and instigate the Holocaust; or that Pol Pot did not cause the killing fields.

If terrible things happen, especially if they could have been otherwise, the casualties need to make sense of the trauma. If your worldview and sense of happiness is predicated on things going well (and certainly most people's happiness is built upon that, simply on a practical survival level), then things going badly need to be explained or 'made sense' of. If, within the process of loss, finding an internal source of strength or self, or holding onto an important task or meaning, gets you through hell, then in the aftermath there are larger questions about how this tragedy intersects with prior belief systems.

Cortisol dysfunction, being scared, confused, and unhappy have negative inflammatory consequences, and a narrative that contextualises trauma has the power to help attenuate this reaction. If an idea convinces you that despite adverse events you are safe (or can be), loved (or can be), by the ultimate power in the universe, then that is going to feel good. Feeling godless and thus unloved and unprotected from disaster is stressful and traumatic. It is not uncommon for people who lose a religion or the belief that they are on the 'right side' of their god to become physically unwell. If memeplexes are naturally selected ideas that have fitness benefits, then religions already privilege the survival of some groups over the survival of others when in conflict (those that possess the religious memeplex over those who don't). And, if magical thinking is an unavoidable human trait, then never is it more needed than in the wake of great loss. I offer these observations as a way of understanding which narratives have been used in the past, but I also stress there are dangers as well as advantages of using them, since they are not necessarily based on reality.

This is not a work of anthropology, but I suggest as an easy rubric that there are five main ways that groups of people have typically processed immense loss and 'zoomed out' to a larger – sometimes cosmic – frame. There are a limited number of things in the past that could exterminate – or nearly exterminate – groups of people. These are broadly: conflicts, disease, and natural disasters (including ones that might be 'inexplicable' to those in the past, such as meteor strikes). But there can be a range of imagined threats too, including the amorphous concept of punishment for

'sin' (however it is conceived), or the undesirable state of remaining on the wheel of samsara or material existence. There may also be the ambiguous loss of a perfect heavenly realm, or an ideal extant future. Most of these involve a god or gods in some form, but there are also secular stories that fulfil similar functions.

The five R's

1. Retribution

This stance constitutes a resistance or rejection of the disaster, and promising retribution for it in the afterlife or in a future war. In doing so, blame (often quite justified, sometimes not) is transferred to the more powerful and victorious out-group. Comfort and emotional solace are given to traumatised survivors via the idea that the out-group will be punished by the in-group's god(s), even if this is in the afterlife.

Vanquished peoples can regain self-esteem and a sense of 'rightness' in the world if they come to believe that their god will enact justice on their enemies, or 'bad people' in general, in this life or the afterlife, on their behalf (presupposing that the defeated group is not currently strong enough to enact any kind of material retribution themselves). An advantage of relocating retribution into the afterlife is that it doesn't require any definitive events in this life to disprove it. Victory in future conflict may also be prophesised.

It is a profound meta-pattern[60] to cleave the world or afterlife in two, and divide into good and bad, light and

dark. It is easy to imagine a good place in the afterlife, thus, it is not much of a stretch to also imagine a bad place. This is an ancient idea which is common across world religions, and as we have previously seen in the *Earth Alchemy* narrative, the existence of opposites occurs throughout nature.

As an additional comfort, the defeated people are also promised future reward and protection by their god in this life, or the afterlife. These twin ideas of punishment and reward are typical of many religions. For example, ancient Egyptians believed that a person's heart was weighed against the feather of Maat (the goddess of truth, cosmic balance and justice) before a soul descended into Duat, the underworld. The soul's fate depended on whether the heart was judged light enough to pass into the heavenly 'Field of Reeds', or else be devoured by the crocodile-headed goddess Ammit.

In Christianity this narrative move is epitomised by the 'Final Judgement' of the New Testament. It occurs in the *Book of Revelation* (the name *Revelation* comes from the first word of the book in Greek: 'apokalypsis', which means *unveiling* or *revelation*), written by an Apostle or mystic known as 'John of Patmos' sometime between AD 60-96 This was a time of Roman oppression, with Jerusalem and the Second Jewish Temple falling in AD 70, and John himself hounded to Patmos (a Greek island in the Aegean Sea) by Emperor Nero. His book can be considered, amongst other things, as a response to that persecution. It details the many disasters that befall the world before the second coming of Christ, and the eventual punishment of the

evil elements in the world through sending them into 'the abyss'. It is hypothesised that various demonic characters of the book who are sent into this abyss of eternal damnation represent historical figures such as Nero.[61] Retribution indeed!

Prior to this mythic vision of the Christian hell (infused with the zeal of revenge after the attacks of AD 70), other conceptions of hell, such as the Viking hell Hades, Naraka of Buddhist cosmology, the Jewish Gehinnom, or the aforementioned Duat, were less final or torturous. Considered more of a waiting room or purgatory where emotional punishment and sadness were experienced, but less fire and brimstone, they were more a form of loneliness for those who had imperfectly followed the prescribed path. For example, the overwhelming majority of rabbinic thought maintains that people are not in Gehinnom forever; the longest that one can be there is said to be 12 months (with an occasional noted exception). It is considered more a spiritual forge where the soul is purified for its eventual ascent to Olam Habah ("The world to come", analogous to heaven). According to Jewish teachings, hell is not entirely physical; rather, it can be compared to a very intense feeling of shame. Similarly, Duat was also more like a land or residence for various gods, who all appear to the dead soul as it makes its way toward judgement. The grotesque spirits of this underworld were not evil, but rather acted as directed by the gods, to provide the various ordeals that the deceased had to face.

However, after *The Book of Revelation* was written, the idea of a truly torturous and eternal hell was widely

introduced into the world. In a way, this idea could be considered a hyperstition, in that the 'fiction' of hell it contained forced people to behave as if it were true. As philosopher Blaise Pascal accurately pointed out in his thought experiment known as Pascal's Wager,[62] when the cost of *not* believing in God is to be sent to such a terrible place, forever, then it makes logical sense to do whatever is commanded in this life to escape it. It is from this zero-sum game the belief that blasphemy was such a dangerous sin emerged. Unbelievers were tortured, at least ostensibly in order to force them to recount and save their immortal souls from eternal hell. And – perhaps more importantly – to stop them contaminating others with the meme of disbelief.

We will meet different aspects of *The Book of Revelation* in two other parts of this schema. But in the category of retribution, the focus is the rhetorical move of summoning your god to punish those who caused your loss. The vivid mythical and magical/hyperstitional imagery of *The Book of Revelation* suggests that John of Patmos was likely traumatised from persecution. Or at least really, really pissed off. His writings, in my view, opened up a rupture, a rift in the world. For if you create a hell for your enemies, it is like a bad magical working that rebounds upon its beneficiaries many times over. In folklore this is often specified as seven times, seven being a mythical number that occurs prominently throughout *The Book of Revelation* and many other stories. With the concept of hell in the world, concretised and described, it can therefore be imagined. Thus, it becomes a pattern or meme that ends up terrifying everyone many times over with the fear they might end up there.

The desire for retribution in particular is an energy that is prone to creating monsters. Maybe John of Patmos thought it was good to dangle the illusionary carrot of justice for his recently traumatised tribe after their 'apocalypse'. But he was very enthusiastic about creating the dark mirror idea of eternal hell, a stick which was meant to beat the oppressors but from then on threatened everyone. It could be argued that this is a classic example of bad magic. The hyperstition that was produced: an eternal hell of torture born from anger, was too powerful. It rebounded and has probably caused more grief to humankind than any consolation that the punishment of enemies might have offered to those caught up in catastrophes.

2. Responsibility

Another move that can be made after disaster is to accept responsibility for it, rightly or wrongly. In doing so, the cataclysm is reframed as a deserving one, and blamed on an internal transgression or hubris which provoked punishment from the people's own god. In secular form this can be seen after conflict: Germany was defeated in both the First and Second World Wars, accepting guilt, shame, and financial reparations, and carries a burden to this day of atoning for its aggression. But even natural disasters can be framed in this way as rationalisation.

Interestingly, recent archaeological findings published in *Nature* by researchers of the Comet Research Group indicate that a large meteor may have destroyed the

ancient city of Tall el-Hammam, and that this destruction may have gone on to form the basis of the Biblical story of the destruction of Sodom.[63] Prior to this theory, the destruction of this city was hypothesised to have been caused by a civilisational collapse of some kind in the area. However, if caused by a meteor strike, this in particular would have seemed like a supernatural event to the people of that time; there was no other world view available other than it must have been controlled by a deity. How could people process this act of God towards his own devotees?

The myth of Sodom and Gomorrah (two cities on the plains of Jordan that were destroyed by fire and brimstone) demonstrates how processing this 'divine retribution' can be done under the category of responsibility. The story goes that after Abraham had rescued his nephew Lot from the clutches of Chedorlaomer, King of the cities of the plains (including Sodom and Gomorrah), God tells Abraham that he plans to destroy these cities since they have a reputation for 'wickedness'. This has been used historically and in modern discourse as a byword for homosexuality (with Sodom being the origin of the English words sodomite and sodomy). When Abraham challenged God as to whether he would proceed to kill the righteous of those places along with the wicked, God challenges Abraham to find ten good men within the cities, in which case they would all be spared. On sending angels of destruction to Lot's house in Sodom, the men of the town gather, demanding that the angels be sent out so they might 'know them', an allusion to homosexual sex. Lot offers up his virgin

daughters instead (proving that Lot himself should have been first up against the wall when the revolution came, a betrayal completely disregarded in the story), although his daughters are refused by the mob. The angels warn Lot the cities will be destroyed, since clearly no good men have been found, and they lead Lot and his family away into the hills as the fire and brimstone rain down. Despite being commanded not to do so by the angels, Lot's unfortunate wife looks back to see the destruction, and is turned into a pillar of salt in (a rather disproportionate) punishment.

What are the adaptive outcomes or advantages of this narrative move? It allows an inexplicable thing to become explicable and offers an ostensibly 'low-cost' way to avoid it in the future. This is not a trivial move; to be unable to process something is to be left in an arbitrary or unreliable universe which taken to an extreme, can not only undermine society but also unhinge people. In designating the casualties of the catastrophic event as wicked, and thenceforth banning a specific and – in theory avoidable – social or sexual practice (since banning homosexual sex will not affect birth rates or survival, for example) creates a rationalisation that such a divine punishment made logical sense and could be avoided in the future. That is people may have strayed off God's path, but they can return to it again and stay there. However, similarly to the idea of retribution in the afterlife, this creates a 'stick' to beat people with, which often suits the authority and social control of the Church more than anyone else. As a result, a power play is made: no buggery kids, or you'll be wiped out by a meteor!

The danger of such a rationalisation, even if it does preserve sanity in the short run, is that there is a risk of repression or excessive shame. Germany's resentment for the harsh reparations and shame from losing the First World War partially sowed the seeds of the Second, and demonising a specific sexual or other social practice leads to repression. The hierarchical nature of human society is also reinforced, with either supplication to the victorious out-group or the in-group dominant (a god or its representatives). These are the alphas that must be appeased and obeyed. Sometimes this is a necessary survival tactic but can be toxic in the long-term.

3. Rapture

In this section, which deals with the narrative move of finding utopia after loss, we once again find *The Book of Revelation*. As its story progresses, many truly apocalyptic events occur, culminating in a final judgement in which people are sorted into the saved and the damned. While this is certainly an apocalypse for some (i.e., the 'bad' people or the in-group's enemies), it is a calling up to heaven and reward for the others. This utopian future event is commonly referred to as 'the rapture', usually involving the 'second coming of Christ' who catalyses the process, although there are varying beliefs across the Christian religion about how exactly this will occur. For example, most premillennialists (those who believe there will be a return of Christ on Earth and *The Book of Revelation* is a literal prediction) distinguish the rapture and the second coming as distinct events. Catholics, in contrast, do not require it to be predicated

on catastrophes, and that Jesus' second coming and the subsequent final judgement and the rapture will occur in an instant.

The central idea of *The Book of Revelation*, that there will be catastrophes which precede a second coming of Christ precipitating the rapture, is itself a way of processing a loss or trauma (that of the persecution of Christians around the time of its writing, and potentially rectifying the loss of Christ from the world). By presenting the idea of collapse or going through an apocalypse *in order* for there to be a greater future or end, beleaguered Christians were comforted by hope of restoration. The catastrophes of *The Book of Revelation* were often ramped up disasters that were well known and feared such as Death (here taking a fourth of the Earth), earthquakes, falling stars and rocks (similar to meteor strikes), ash or hail from volcanic eruptions, and disease, but are reframed as precursory or necessary steps towards a desirable end. There are also more exotic catastrophes such as avenging angels, and plagues of super-locusts (described as having a human appearance with faces and hair, but with lion's teeth, and wearing "breastplates of iron"; with the sound of their wings resembling "the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle"). Trippy stuff.

The word 'rapture' is derived from Latin *raptus*, which means 'a carrying off', but the word for a great trial that leads to a positive endpoint. (i.e., an apocalypse that brings subsequent salvation), is called an 'apocatastasis'. Even the dead are raised up in order for the chosen ones to be swept up into heaven, creating liberation even

from the loss inherent in 'ordinary' death. Whilst *The Book of Revelation* is hypothesised to have been written in response to a particular act of aggression, premillennialism has been popular throughout the ages, none of which have been easy times. In terms of ambiguous loss, the idea of rapture may give solace by acting as a hypothesised endpoint to the cumulative traumas of living, or a way of suggesting that there will be a 'happy ever after' at the end of the sufferings of life and the traumas of death, disease, and more general disasters. Rapture is literally being gathered up by a loving god to a place where there is no more suffering.

Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, the priest whose writings on the Omega Point inspired the second narrative of this booklet, went a long way in reimagining this apocatastasis in more secular terms, with significant increased in complexity taking the place of the cataclysms. This narrative remains hugely seductive, tapping into the teleology of progress. Secular reimaginings of moving towards an endpoint of perfection or a singularity sometimes use technology or AI superintelligence as a stand in for the second coming of Christ or realising a utopia. Here, the ideas of the Nietzschean 'overman' and premillennialism meet, and AGI becomes a material route to how these great promised things are to happen, where there will be no more pain and suffering, and even death will be conquered. Colloquially, the word 'rapture' has connotations of extreme happiness, and this is the carrot that is dangled, just as in *The Book of Revelation*. A heaven of pleasure will be created for humans by this technological entity, or the entity itself will experience

pleasure we cannot comprehend and should thus be brought into existence.

Oppression is also a type of trauma, and therefore creating a desirable endpoint of freedom, escape, and utopia (as the rapture is conceived of by many) from an oppressive regime, has been used in many fictions. The pseudo-religion of Earthseed found in the books *Parable of the Sower*[64] and *Parable of the Talents*[65] by Octavia E. Butler, is a prime example of how the emotional need to promise a utopia can be used to motivate people in a crisis. In these books humanity is depicted as trapped on an Earth fundamentally ruined and corrupted by human violence and cannibalism. Earthseed is not only a religious acceptance of chaos as a natural law (an idea which is not in itself bad or wrong as will be discussed later), but it posits the need to escape Earth and create a new and virtuous society amongst the stars. This idea motivates and helps people through terrible hardship. In both these books and *The Book of Revelation*, a much better future is promised after disaster.

However, premillennialists throughout the ages have learnt the dangers of offering hope and of predicting the second coming of Christ, illustrating the risk in using this narrative move in a crisis. For if you posit the creation of a heaven on Earth, or a technological singularity, or humanity going off into the stars, it had better happen. Or there at least needs to be some definite progress. Any missed deadlines will damage the reputation of leaders. Hope is a relatively easy emotion to encourage – we have an innate desire to be happy and it is a pleasurable feeling – but too easily hope can

collapse into despair. It is generally safer for this narrative move if the utopia is positioned in the afterlife, then no proof in this world can be required.

Furthermore, to 'utopianise' the place humanity will end up after an event or disaster is likely to "immanentize the eschaton".[66] For, if 'heaven' (the eschaton) – be it religious or secular – is so great, then it should be accelerated towards or encouraged to be brought about (immanetized), by whatever means necessary. When the idea of a utopia is coupled with the strong historical narrative associations of apocalypse and collapse, then it easily becomes a way of encouraging things to get worse in order for them to get 'maximally' better. For neither the rapture nor the second coming are predicted to be calm and gentle events. The poem *The Second Coming* by William Yeats has had a lot of mileage since being written in 1919. It was the inspiration for the title of Chinua Achebe's book *Things Fall Apart*[67] detailing the destruction of his own culture, and is rich with symbolism. But in immanentizing the eschaton, what 'rough beast' is inadvertently evoked?

[...] Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? [68]

This moving towards an endpoint, and even ushering it in, is the story of civilisation and of progress too. Kingsnorth and Hine write in the *Dark Mountain Manifesto*:

> *"This story has many variants, religious and secular, scientific, economic and mystic. But all tell of humanity's original transcendence of its animal beginnings, our growing mastery over a 'nature' to which we no longer belong, and the glorious future of plenty and prosperity which will follow when this mastery is complete. It is the story of human centrality, of a species destined to be lord of all it surveys, unconfined by the limits that apply to other, lesser creatures."[69]*

It seems cruel to deny people hope. Hope is often spoken about as essential to fight the climate crisis, and crucially important in the aftermath. But, although one way of reframing such a disaster is that it is a step towards a better time, this runs a high risk of being maladaptive if it ends up being accelerationist (hastening towards this endpoint). To contrast it with the *Myth of Sisyphus* which is all about surviving and being happy to spite an absurd world, revelationist worldviews often cannot help but encourage ushering in the endpoint, which often means doing terrible things or dying in the process. This sometimes pops up in academic or activist discourse either as negative utilitarianism (i.e., the

world is full of unavoidable suffering so to work towards killing every living thing as quickly as possible, or develop superintelligent AGI that will solve this, is altruistic), or accelerating capitalism is legitimate in order to bring about its swifter collapse.

4. Relinquishment

In contrast to the section above, relinquishment is a narrative move that does not rely on hope. This is a way of mentally checking-in to a utopia now, whilst still being in the world. It's akin to deciding that the world is fundamentally not real, or doesn't matter, or that nothing is our own personal responsibility. The concept of fate is a strong narrative and many worldviews and religions contain the idea that it is a god or the fates that are really pulling the strings. Or, if not a god, then the laws of nature.

Surrendering to or accepting chaos or apocalypse can therefore be a way of following this narrative move of relinquishment. This ethos, which appeared in the Earthseed religion previously mentioned, is also a feature of Buddhism. In particular the Zen school, where it originated as a possible response to the strict rules and mores of the primary social doctrine in China of Confucianism originating in 6th–5th century BC, and which was followed by the Chinese people for more than two millennia. Similarly, Taoism is primarily concerned with not resisting the natural flow of life, and later Zen placed immense importance on acting spontaneously, particularly not resisting the natural course of life, whatever that might be. Zen schools in essence

create a 'safe-space' for people, particularly students, to act spontaneously, whilst being removed from the normal social consequences of acting this way.

The move of relinquishment can be beneficial in order to loosen somebody up from a state of paralysis, or freeze, common to people in crisis, where they believe everything is terrifyingly wrong. A state that is highly likely to happen in catastrophic scenarios. It is easy to see how the idea that things are essentially not real or don't matter, or that chaos is normal and is not under one's control, can console those going through the suffering inherent in times of crisis. Taken to its logical conclusion, this idea offers an escape from the burden of feeling responsible for a disaster or one's actions within it. This may mean that things are at least not made worse by panicked decisions or inactivity. Instead, it may be possible for someone to work intelligently within a cascading collapse rather than get swept away by it.

However, there are many dangers to this move too. A modern example is that of the aforementioned scientist-creator of the atomic bomb, physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who uttered the words "Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds" upon the first detonation of the atomic bomb (the Trinity test) in 1945. On one hand, Oppenheimer could very much be accused of getting carried away with creating a potentially world-destroying, god-like weapon, and these words are a visual description of it. He spoke of those words being a reference to the description of the god Krishna in the Hindu text the *Bhagavad Gita* when

Krishna manifests as a sublime, terrifying being of many mouths and eyes; "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendour of the mighty one," he said. However, his words are interesting when considered in their original context; "Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds" is from a specific story in the *Bhagavad Gita*, uttered by Krishna at the moment where Arjuna, a warrior prince who is paralysed by the cut and thrust of war, hesitates in his actions. But the real meaning of the words is that irrespective of what Arjuna does in war, everything is ultimately in the hands of Krishna, the divine. Arjuna must simply perform his duties as a soldier and remain sublimely unattached to the outcomes. Not only is it that what he does on some level doesn't matter (since from a Hindu perspective death is an illusion and all of life is the play of one God in any case), but also that Arjuna, and by extension Oppenheimer, are de facto absolved from moral responsibility even from killing, since higher being(s) ultimately decide who lives and who dies.

Arjuna goes on to fight dispassionately, and I imagine this idea would also be comforting to the father of the atomic bomb. But in lightening the burden of responsibility, things we ordinarily consider extremely bad, such as war, killing, using weapons of mass destruction, somehow become acceptable. It can be a way of psychologically detaching from what should be a healthy level of guilt. There is something quite horrifying in even the idea that all the suffering and death – as well as ecstasy and fulfilment – in the world is the sport

or drama of a thrill-seeking God. For suffering to be, as Ramakrishna said, a way for God to "thicken the plot". And yet (echoing the sentiment of Viktor Frankl that meaning gives people the strength to get through hell) author Isak Dinesen wrote "All suffering is bearable if it is seen as part of a story." And that is an idea that has seen me through a lot.

I would suggest there may be a way of rescuing this concept from either quietism (a calm acceptance of things as they are without attempts to resist or change them), dissociation, or masochism, whilst still bringing the hoped-for relaxation back to people who may be frozen during a crisis. One quote I have found to have been life-changingly helpful, and interestingly uses the imagery of a cloud (although perhaps Alan Watts was not imagining a nuclear one!), is the following:

"Regard yourself as a cloud, in the flesh, because you see, clouds never make mistakes. Did you ever see a cloud that was misshapen? Did you ever see a badly designed wave? No, they always do the right thing. But if you will treat yourself for a while as a cloud or a wave, and realise that you can't make a mistake whatever you do. Because even if you do something that appears totally disastrous, it will all come out in the wash somehow or another. Then through this capacity, you will develop a kind of confidence, and through confidence, you will be able to trust your own intuition. But this is the middle way, of knowing it has nothing to do with your decision to do this or not, whether you decide you can't make a mistake or whether you don't

decide it, it is true anyway, that you are like cloud and water. And through that realisation, without overcompensating in the other direction, you will come to the point of where you begin to be on good terms with your own being and to be able to trust your own brain."

The lesson is that through relinquishment of the rigidity of control, you can become a saner and less chaotic person, moving with situations as they unfold, even in the midst of a crisis.

It is also interesting that the quote "Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds", which suggests life and one's actions are a type of illusion, are attached to warfare in both ancient and modern times. There may be links between computer games that simulate war and fantasy worlds, the idea of the AI simulation of reality (described below), and Hindu concepts of the illusion of life and death; all of which move around in a feedback loop. In the film *The Matrix*, directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, every human is revealed to be living in a vast simulation whilst their immobile physical bodies are milked for electricity by an AI. At some point within the simulation, the 'hero' Neo, being told that nothing is what he believes, must choose between two pills; "You take the blue pill – the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill – you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."[70]

Although the concept of 'pilling' in terms of waking someone up to a 'truth' has been deeply distorted by the far-right, online misogynists, and neo-Nazi movements, the idea that the life we know is in some way a dream or trial/game is a trope of many mythologies and folklore. It occurs, for example, in *Gawain and Green Knight* [71] and *The Wizard of Oz,* [72] as well as being the underlying premise of many Eastern religions. I would suggest that the dissociation evoked by certain extreme circumstances such as war, or the pleasant 'getting lost' in online technological worlds (or even stories) are both kinds of relinquishment; giving up reality in some way in order to go somewhere else.

In his 2021 film *Glitch in the Matrix,* [73] documentary maker Rodney Ascher explores the phenomenon of people who believe, and have often acted on the belief, that they are living in a simulation or game. Either that other people are NPCs (non-player characters automatically generated by the game without anyone 'driving' them) or, similarly to Arjuna's revelation, nothing that happens on this plane of experience ultimately matters; the real player(s) are on a different level of reality. Unsurprisingly, this resulted in some terrible situations, and in the extreme resulted in murder or physical recklessness. There are also implications that many of those who stormed the Capitol on January 6th 2020 after former president Donald Trump insisted the election had been stolen from him, were to an extent 'live action role-playing' (or LARPing). What is more surprising is that the idea we are in a simulation is held by some parts of the academic establishment. The argument being that if (and the *if* is important here),

we are able to develop an artificial reality that is indistinguishable from actual reality, then statistically it is more likely than not we are already living in a simulation created by other, more technologically advanced, beings.[74] We will revisit this idea later, but it is not so far removed from the idea that our reality is not real, and by extension we are neither ultimately responsible for, nor affected by, what is happening.

To come to realise you are the puppet of gods or fate, or to be 'pilled' and see life as an illusion or simulation, or even letting go of social narratives that are more ordinary, all of these are like breaking a spell. Or are, in a way, like breaking 'kayfabe'. [75] Where kayfabe is the state in which performers – typically professional wrestlers who are known for engaging in overblown feuds and elaborate fights – and their audience, tacitly agree to believe all the drama and fights are real and not scripted. To put another way, in terms of classical drama such as putting on a play, coming out of the illusion is a bit like going into the green room (where actors hang out as their 'real' selves before and after going on stage). I cannot say that it might not be a life-saving move within the circumstances of a catastrophe to do this. Some would say the practice of meditation is exactly an attempt to dwell, at least for a time, in that green room, away from the drama.

5. Rejection

There is one final stance one can take after a catastrophe: to reject all notions of narrative at all. No god, no system or order; simply the acceptance of a meaningless

universe in which disasters happen and the universe is an unfeeling machine. This cynicism or extreme disenchantment can be an effective survival mechanism, at least in the short-term. There is a lesser state of this which might be desirable, in that it can be healthy to not hold onto any doctrine at all.

It is a pretty advanced form of living to not believe in any meaning or explanation for the way things are, especially a disaster. In choosing this path, you can at least know you are not being led into illusion. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the average person does not do very well in a disenchanted world; secular mythologies often sublimate the unmet need, and that we are alone in an unfeeling world is very cold comfort.

Summary

Whether you use retribution, responsibility, rapture or relinquishment, or end up in rejection, they all represent ways of dealing with extreme stress. Should all these methods fail, then a comforting narrative to give is 'regeneration': that nothing is likely to ever be fully extinguished. So far on this planet, despite several mass extinction events that have wiped out up to 95%+ of life on Earth,[76] life regenerated with even greater complexity than before. It might not end up being humans that survive, but if you believe in the 10,000 things being the manifestation of only one essence, that should not matter too much. In more recent times, the consolation Yeats' poem offers is the knowledge that, for one reason or another, every generation has felt the same apocalyptic shudder that he did 100 years ago and believed they

were living in the 'end times'. Despite terrible death and destruction, humanity has persisted. Even love cannot help returning, it is as perennial as the grass.

In this spirit, there is an old story from White Mountain Apache folklore called *The Old Woman in the Cave*. As told by mythic storyteller Michael Meade in his book *Why the World Doesn't End:*

"The old people of the tribes would tell of a special cave where knowledge of the wonders and workings of the world could be found. "Not too far to go," they say, yet no one seems to find it anymore.

Inside the cave, there lives an old woman who remains unaffected by the rush of time and the confusion and strife of daily life. She spends most of her time weaving in the cave where light and shadows play. She wants to fashion the most beautiful garment in the whole world. She has been at this weaving project for a long time and has reached the point of making a fringe for the edge of her exquisitely designed cloak. She wants that fringe to be special; wants it to be meaningful as well as elegant, so she weaves it with porcupine quills. In order to use the porcupine quills, she must flatten each one with her teeth. After years of biting hard on the quills, her teeth have become worn down to nubs that barely rise above her gums. Still, the old woman keeps biting down and she keeps weaving on.

The only time she interrupts her weaving work is when she goes to stir the soup that simmers in a great cauldron

at the back of the cave. The old cauldron hangs over a fire that began a long time ago. The old woman cannot recall anything older than that fire; it just might be the oldest thing there is in this world. Occasionally, she does recall that she must stir the soup that simmers over those flames. For that simmering stew contains all the seeds and roots that become the grains and plants and herbs that sprout up all over the surface of the earth. If the old woman fails to stir the ancient stew once in a while, the fire will scorch the ingredients and there is no telling what troubles might result from that.

So the old woman divides her efforts between weaving the exquisite cloak and stirring the elemental soup. In a sense, she is responsible for weaving things together as well as for stirring everything up. She senses when the time has come to let the weaving go and stir things up again. Then, she leaves the weaving on the floor of the cave and turns to the task of stirring the soup. Because she is old and tired from her labors and because of the relentless passage of time, she moves slowly and it takes a while for her to amble over to the cauldron.

As the old woman shuffles across the floor and makes her way to the back of the ancient cave, a black dog watches her every move. The dog was there all along. Seemingly asleep, it awakens as soon as the old weaver turns her attention from one task to the other. As she begins stirring the soup in order to sustain the seeds, the black dog moves to where the weaving lies on the floor of the cave. The dog picks up a loose thread with its teeth and begins pulling on it. As the black dog pulls

on the loose thread, the beautiful garment begins to unravel. Since each thread has been woven to another, pulling upon one begins to undo them all. As the great stew is being stirred up, the elegant garment comes apart and becomes a chaotic mess on the floor.

When the old woman returns to take up her handiwork again, she finds nothing but chaos where there had been a garment of great elegance and beauty. The cloak she has woven with great care has been pulled apart, the fringe all undone; the effort of creation has been turned to naught. The old woman sits and looks silently upon the remnants of her once-beautiful design. She ignores the presence of the black dog as she stares intently at the tangle of undone threads and distorted patterns.

After a while, she bends down, picks up a loose thread, and begins to weave the whole thing again. As she pulls thread after thread from the chaotic mess, she begins again to imagine the most beautiful garment in the whole world. As she weaves, new visions and elegant designs appear before her and her old hands begin to knowingly give them vibrant shape. Soon she has forgotten the cloak she was weaving before as she concentrates on capturing the new design and weaving it into the most beautiful garment ever seen in the world.[77]

A nuclear mushroom cloud is humanity's most potent symbol of annihilation and destruction. It's a pattern born from war. Nothing we have created or seen so far could be more deathlike. The challenge is for growth in its shadow or its aftermath. And yet, Derek Jarman's beautiful garden was created in the shadow of a nuclear

power station, and a mushroom is a living symbol of enlightenment that he would be proud of. The categories are not immutable: nuclear energy can also save lives, and mushrooms can kill.

Matsutake is the most valuable mushroom in the world, an organism that grows in human-disturbed forests across the northern hemisphere.[78] Through its ability to nurture trees, matsutake helps forests to grow in daunting places. If we choose to build gardens after the end of the world then the story of regeneration offers a source of meaning; in order for things to begin again, you need to be able to grow in tough places, support other forms of life, and like the old woman in the cave, protect the eternal spark, the biodiversity, of the world.

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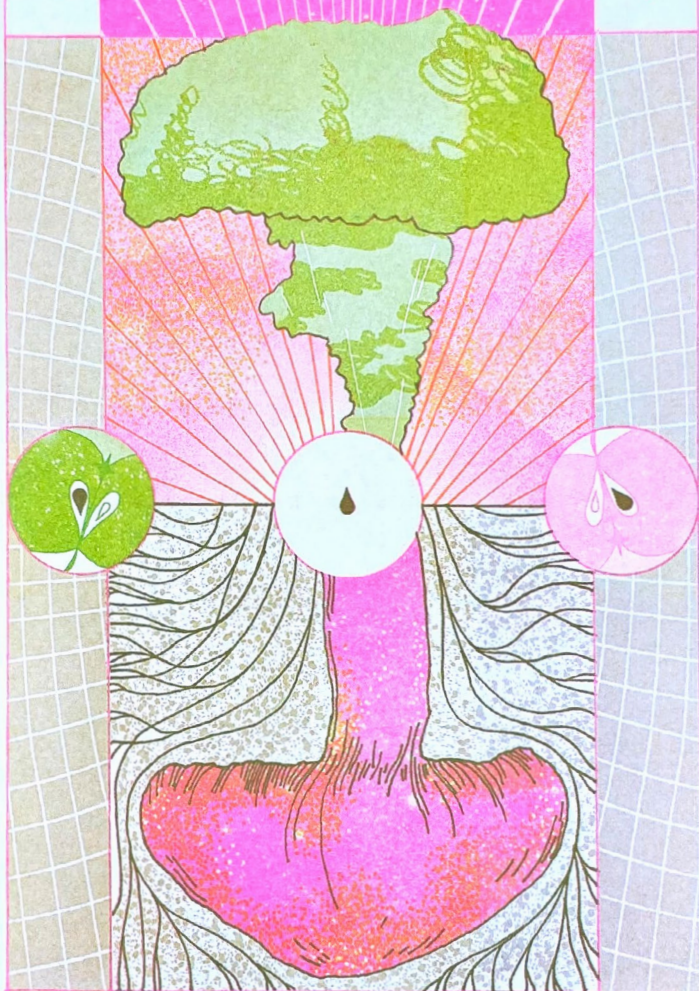
AFTER LOSS

METHODS OF MYTHOPOESIS

Processes and Thoughtforms

If 'mythopoesis' is the making of myths, then what is the process? Which corner of reality will we turn to in order to find both inspiration and a pattern that could remake the world? And how do we delineate or communicate that belief system?

To become a memeticist, one could do worse than look towards artists (and writers). After all, they are well practiced in channelling intuition, seeing a vision of their creation in the future, and almost performing a magical working to bring it into being. Rare is the artist who has not felt that something they have produced has come through them but is not of them. They also know that they need to at least prepare the ground for that other thing (or deeper self) to be either beckoned or revealed.

Artists use various mediums to convey the message of their vision. Therefore, to be a memeticist, you need to be an artist of sorts. In this section we encounter various ways to use words and semiotics (the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation) in mythopoesis, and where inspiration might come from.

If we consider religions, many are predicated on a text that has been said to have been either discovered, channelled, or handed down, and several have been remarkably resilient over long time-frames. Religions are the myths that 'made it' in the battle for survival in human culture. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries we can see the well-documented evolution of world-views that often utilise great storytelling and claim similar epistemic legitimacy to the older religious belief systems.

Some schools of thought believe that the authors of the various books of the New Testament repackaged a combination of pre-existing mysticism and culture, to follow on from the Old Testament. And it is certainly tempting to see the story of Jesus as a way of giving a kinder and more relatable aspect to an otherwise somewhat hostile and judgemental Old Testament God. If the message of the New Testament could be condensed, it would be the belief that through the acceptance of the death and resurrection of Jesus, 'sinful' humans can be reconciled to God, and thereby are offered salvation and the promise of eternal life after the final judgement. A pretty profound memetic mythology involving literal end times. But whether you believe that the Bible was engineered by human minds, received through divine grace, or is a factual account of real events, it shares with other religions not only powerful semiotics, but a sticky core story. Here is an aspect of God 'brought down to Earth', and enduring a human life, and who altruistically removes the existential threat of sin from us (by his death at humanity's own hand, so there is plenty of guilt too!).

If you take the memetic view of ideas, any successful idea or worldview will need to compete with others, and therefore survive to live in on its 'host'. To do that, a story has to grab someone's attention, compete with other ideas, and evict others that are incompatible. If this occurs quickly, it could be described as an epiphany, a 'road to Damascus moment' (to reference another Bible story), or an intellectual 'flip' in seeing the world.[79] As part of this project, I asked people: what moved you? What changed your life? What was the point at which everything changed, and your attention moved from one worldview to another? What brought you back to sanity after being lost? Or got you out of the claws of a particular idea?

What words were spoken? What music or dream or idea rescued you? What magic was weaved?

I have used the term 'magical working' a few times in this booklet, but I want to be clear that this does not rely upon the existence of gods or spirits, or anything beyond what we currently understand. The point is that we are aiming to consciously – and hopefully wisely – participate or intervene in reality and its synchronicities, just as everyone does unconsciously all the time. Disciplines such as 'chaos magick' (which we will meet again later) work, at least, at the level of psychology. To begin with it is fine to work at the level of a general attitude: "let us adopt a belief system that..." And then you act like it is so and see what happens.[80]

I would like to strongly differentiate this from the practice of manifesting, or other forms of 'positive thinking'

which have infiltrated much of the wellness industry, and which can be extremely toxic. Firstly, nobody should be blamed if something they intend or hope for doesn't come to pass, especially in the realms of physical and mental health. In fact, it is one of the great get-out clauses of both cults and religions that if something bad happens, or something good fails to happen, it is because the person involved was not worthy or 'trying hard enough', either through prayer or whatever other practice is involved. Whilst there may be some small benefits to positive thinking and even manifestation practices in the short-term, importantly, a memeticist's thought must be combined with action and put out into the world. I am definitely not advocating locating our agency elsewhere and trusting some other entity to take care of things for us without our contribution and alignment with that memeplex. Rather, the following methods are an attempt at delineating and naming these entities as powerful organising concepts, so that we might more competently do the work ourselves.

As this section develops, I hope it will become clearer that the sort of large-scale social intervention I'm talking about is more akin to a 'new paradigm'[81] than 'hopes and prayers'. But I *am* writing on the assumption that people can create a thoughtform or memeplex that has a definitive mental or material structure, and that this can pattern the world. And that, furthermore, words and symbols can have power. I do not think this is controversial if you believe, for example, that various gods might not exist, but the idea of them alters human behaviours, or that at least some of the money spent on advertising and creating logos works, or that some old

stories contain important wisdom. However, it might contrast with the views of those who assert there is no such organising entity as 'Society', only people living in a group, or no such thing as 'The Economy', only the people and transactions that make it up.

People have also been trying to nudge other people into enlightenment with a range of methods for very long time. Stories, memes, and sayings can work like spells and be used to great effect. So, how do we create powerful and hopefully good memes, and what form do they come in?

Processes

Words of power

One of the outcomes of the survey I mentioned above (and perhaps reflecting the academic leanings of many of the participants) were that books and text were usually mentioned as a source of an epiphany. Words are also durable, whether transmitted through oral tradition or writing. It is a popular speculative fiction trope when a new society is rebuilt upon a small subset of culture. For example, in Will Self's novel *The Book of Dave,*[82] a post-apocalyptic society is shaped around the surviving misogynistic journal of a London cab driver. We will meet the novel *Station Eleven*[83] written by Emily St. John Mandel again, but the plot follows various characters after a flu-like virus kills more than 95% of the global population, and culminates on a hopeful note that people will always reach for more than survival after a crisis. Specifically, that Shakespeare's plays will endure and still be performed even after an apocalypse.

Words are literally a 'spell' (words are spelled out with letters, which are symbols in themselves). To cast a spell is the traditional way that a being or godform is risen-up, the details of which are provided in grimoires: texts setting out the names of such entities and instructions on how to raise them. In the case of AI, it is created or 'risen-up' with code, or literal symbols. At the very least, words convey information and can therefore change people's behaviour (some delicious recipes, for example, practically cry out to be made).

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have suggested that within the landscape of ideas there is an organising concept they call 'the refrain', that could be considered a spell, or a tool used for naming or summoning territory or for world-building. We will meet this concept again as a tool for expanding the intellectual landscape or proposing a new one to defeat a dominating worldview. But for now, it is enough to say that in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari define the refrain as: "a prism, a crystal of space-time. It acts upon that which surrounds it, sounds it, sound or light, extracting from its various vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or transformations. The refrain also has a catalytic function: not only to increase the speed of the exchanges and reactions in that which surrounds it, but also to assure indirect interactions between elements devoid of so-called natural affinity, and thereby to form organised masses."[84]

As long as people can still read, the written word will remain a powerful medium for influence. However, Paul Kingsnorth titled his book questioning the power

of the word *Savage Gods*. Not only alluding to their power to call things up, but also as a warning: "I feel that words are savage gods and that in the end, however well you serve them, they will eat you alive." [85]

A refrain

In a lesser sense, *a* refrain can be as simple as a recurring motif, or a form of incantation that acts like a psychological key, such as a motto. A short sentence or phrase chosen as encapsulating the beliefs or ideals of an individual, family, or institution. For example, the motto of the University of Sussex is: "Be still and know", and was the ethos chosen to set the tone of learning at the institution. Like a mantra, it is repeated and passed on alongside the university crest (which contains many symbols of its own). Like a spell, a refrain is made of words or sounds. They can be slogans, or even good or bad incantations, such as "Make America Great Again" or "Lock Her Up", and tend to be short and aspirational, and often get chanted. They can be any kind of spell even a sort of binding spell. For example, the now defunct Google guiding mission statement was a moral command of this kind: "Don't Be Evil".

In the TV series West World[86] the enslaved synthetic inhabitants of a gruesome theme park, run for the amusement of humans, are released from their daily amnesia by hearing a line of Shakespeare: "These violent delights will have violent ends". Something about that phrase got into the minds of the captive robots and unlocked independent thought. It was a key, a releasing spell, whispered from freed robot to freed robot

almost instinctively. There is a pleasing symmetry in that Shakespeare was a playwright powerful enough that his works have been copied and spread more than any other, and have influenced so much of language and the collective unconscious over centuries.

Mantras are a type of refrain that have been used to both occupy and focus the mind for thousands of years. Both mantras and refrains, and perhaps metaphors in general, are a way of creating order and meaning out of chaos. Acting like the magical and protective salt circle around a person or group of people through times of trouble, or perhaps setting an intention or releasing us from one psychologically, mantras are one of the shortest routes to an epiphany. Once, when I was very lost, I read the phrase "You belong among the wildflowers", which became a mantra that led me out of a bad time and out to where I needed to be.

What might be a useful refrain of times of crisis? There is an old Persian story about an emperor who asked his advisors for a sentence (for which we might substitute refrain), to make him happy when he was sad, sad when he was happy, and that would be true in all situations. The wise men replied: "this too shall pass."

Such a saying contains magic.

Symbols of power

Semiotics is the study of symbols. Using symbols by themselves to enact change in the world is memetic sorcery taken to an extreme. In William Gibson's novel

Pattern Recognition,[87] the protagonist Cayce Pollard is a well paid consultant for corporate brands. Being something of an empath she is hyper-sensitive to logos (which we could consider a type of sigil or minimalist meme). Cayce can tell with a glance which will be successful, and has a violently negative reaction to those, such as the bulbous tyre-constructed Michelin Man, that are on some aesthetic level grotesque or subliminally offensive.

Various signs or symbols have been used to enact change in the past. Chaos magick, which teaches that the essence of magic is that perceptions are conditioned by beliefs, and that the world as we perceive it can be changed by deliberately changing those beliefs, often uses sigils and various other text-based magical workings. Sigils are symbols that weave together elements of the words that make up the root incantation, thus acting as a visual shorthand. They are then 'charged' with intent via the practitioner going into a mediative state. This need not be considered something mystical, it could simply be psychological: a state of deep attention and concentration to bury an intention in the subconscious.

I am not suggesting that you use sigils unless you want to. But imagery and symbols *are* important. To further illustrate how this is not particularly exotic, it is simply the same as creating a logo for a brand: an easily transmissible symbol that creates a feeling or urge in a person, conveys information, and potentially changes behaviour ("this is the sign of X desirable qualities"). Even the word 'brand' evokes the idea of someone marked by a symbol. The meaning is distilled

to its simplest and most transmissible element. They are the virions of a mind virus.

Today, symbols of power have morphed into a new graphical form (usually involving a simple photo and text) and referred to as memes. Since humans have always been visual creatures, one of the oldest forms of art that could be compared to the picture-based memes of today are the oxherding pictures of 12th century China: a series of 'cartoon' or 'comic-like' simple ink diagrams, depicting the pursuit and transcendence of the mind in Zen Buddhism.

More broadly, modern comic books might also be a very resilient medium, especially if the ability to read has been lost (this is not unlikely if civilisational collapse is due to a disease like COVID-19 that mainly affects adults, and/or transmitting reading skills might not be a priority). Returning to the novel *Station Eleven*, various characters are influenced in the post-pandemic society by a beautifully illustrated comic, in one case establishing a religion around the messages contained with it. The 'logo' of this new religion is the stark outline of an aeroplane, something that has almost mythological status in the surviving societies, which themselves have almost no technological capacity.

It is interesting to speculate what materials would be left after a devastating event, and therefore which mediums are most likely to continue to have an effect. If we are to embed knowledge into a given medium, would images be the best? Or would it maybe be verbal stories, despite their propensity to change over time?

Would people still be able to read, and if so, would the cultural touchpoints needed for certain texts be lost? Would there be technology available to play audio, or would it have to be recorded on something very analogue? These were the questions that the Norwegian government also had to grapple with as they considered the long half-life of vast quantities of stored radioactive waste. How could they communicate radioactive danger to people up to 20,000 years in the future around the storage sites?

A 1993 report[88] from Sandia National Laboratories recommended that messages used in 'nuclear semiotics' be constructed at several levels of complexity. They suggested that the sites should include foreboding physical features which would immediately convey the sense of man-made danger, as well as providing pictographic information attempting to convey some details of the threat, and simple, emotive written explanations for those able to read it. A range of menacing sculptures and images of humans in distress were proposed.[89]

Similarly, the Pioneer Plaque and later the Voyager Golden Records, sent into space in 1973 and 1977 respectively, had an even harder task: to communicate with any extra-terrestrials that found it and (somewhat recklessly!) give information about Earth's location and human physiology. Although there were recordings of human brainwaves (as the participant thought about various aspects of Earth) included in the Voyager Golden Records bundle, most of the materials were simple, and either in visual or audible form. The final designs included a simple outline of a male and female

human, directions on how to decode the information, photos, and morse-code-like symbols. Engraved onto a golden disk (an alchemical symbol if ever there was one) it is up there still; spinning in space, untouched and lovely.

Certainly, in both these cases, simple images and semiotics were considered the most suitable for engendering universal, primal feelings of danger or benevolence, and for retaining the meaning of the symbols over deep time. The images used are precise enough and semiotically rich enough to convey meaning, but vague or 'fuzzy' enough to hold some ambiguity. Words, when used, were simple and based around common human values. Other forms of pictorial communication, such as divination, contain similar symbols. The *I Ching*[90] works on a code formula similar to morse code, and Tarot cards use a set of images containing archetypal symbols that visually portray the process of human awakening throughout a lifetime.[91] You do not need to consider either of these a genuine form of prediction, simply a way of using powerful symbols to dredge up one's unconscious knowledge and intuition to where it can be seen and acted upon.

Storytelling

Here, we meet Scheherazade. She was a bride who risked her life to liberate a kingdom from the destructive appetites of its vengeful King; a woman who needed to charm a beast. Used as the 'framing narrative' of *A Thousand and One Nights,*[92] a collection of Middle Eastern folktales, Scheherazade marries a king,

who was once betrayed in love and who now has a habit of beheading his new brides the morning after the wedding night. Her story nonetheless has many archetypal features. What methods does Scheherazade use to survive? She used story and, like the best directors and writers, she knew how to create a cliffhanger. She had to tell a great and yet unfinished story every night to her murderous husband in order to win him over and stall her beheading. This trope pops up in a lot of folklore, for example the 1740 story *Beauty and the Beast,*[93] and the Scandinavian folklore story *King Lindworm*[94,][*] (with a lindworm being a type of serpentine dragon). Usually, these types of stories feature a young woman having to navigate a hostile marriage situation and use her intuition and wit to survive where she would otherwise be killed. These stories probably conveyed invaluable wisdom for girls in difficult domestic arrangements, which often had both an age and power differential.

Who has not been wrapped up in a story that moves them? We know it when we come across a story that teases some knot in the psyche.

In the terminology of Hinduism; life is a drama. Even the hardest and most challenging quests, the most vertiginous story arcs, and the sufferings of its characters are said to be the Godhead entertaining itself upon the

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[*] Unfortunately there isn't space to go into this excellent story in detail, suffice it to say it is classified in the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index as type ATU 433B, a tale that deals with maidens disenchanting serpentine husbands.

stage of existence. Personally, I can see the wisdom in this. Who has not been gripped, hooked, by a story? Whether it is the next episode of your favourite series (if you are reading this after the end of the world, ask one of the older folks what these were), or the occurrence in your life of a great love that – to quote the great comic strip author Tove Jansson – makes you say: "I long to read more in the book of you." I think 'for the thrill of it' would be one of the better explanations for life's existence. And if there is such a thing as reincarnation, it is to be so enthralled by the play that you say "again, again". To be so entertained, that you accept the ride in its whole spectrum, its light and dark aspects, and take the gamble that it could all be lost.

Similarly, Scheherazade weaved the magic of storytelling to save herself from death and save the kingdom from ruin, in the service of some kind of love, even if that was a masochistic one. She called upon all the gifts of her intelligence as well as her intuition. And so, she created and wove stories that were so engrossing they could distract even the harshest audience. A challenge indeed, and yet she managed it. The King was enthralled and granted her life night after night, until it was no longer necessary since he had fallen in love. In essence, he said: "Again".

Poetry

Another way of transmitting a story is to use the rhetorical rhythms of scripture. This is almost like using poetry to make the message affecting and say what it is hard to say in more ordinary ways. In this project I have

been heavily influenced by the aforementioned *Parable of the Sower*. In an attempt to replicate the prophetic verses of the proto-religion contained in that book (for reference it is much like the *Tao de Ching*,[95] but with the added message of getting off a dying Earth) my colleague Dr Bram Arnold[*] and I re-wrote then recorded the *Earth Alchemy* narrative in a poetic form (see Appendix 2 for the text of the audio recording). According to his artistic practice, we used the method of walking together to mull over the poetry of the narrative. The audio recording itself can be found on the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk website.[†]

The Dark Arts

Here I have a confession. I have researched the ways that conspiracy theories, 20th century 'alien religions' such as Scientology, and political insurgencies such as QAnon gained their followers. None of this will be new information: they offered promises or rewards, gamified engagement by posing challenges and riddles, gave ambiguous nuggets of 'information' that piqued interest, and offered community and social support as an incentive. But I find I do not want to share any

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* Dr Bram Thomas Arnold is an artist who started with walking and kept going into performance, collaboration, conversation and writing, installation, drawing, academia, and broadcasting. Alongside an evolving practice, he is currently a Lecturer at Dartington Arts in the Poetics of Imagination, lectures in Fine Art at Falmouth University and is an honorary Creative Fellow at the Environment and Sustainability Institute at the University of Exeter.

† www.cser.ac.uk

further details of these lest it be taken as encouragement. These are the Dark Arts of influence. A story might survive or fail on its own merits, poetry will either inspire or fall flat, but these methods of creating dependencies, causing psychological doubt, and even creating the equivalent of trauma bonds, are in essence manipulative and controlling. I hope that if you find yourself in crisis, that you would not be forced to use such tactics, and that the list given above is enough to help you recognise if you are yourself being worked upon in these ways.

I would encourage following a path of devotion instead. As the indomitable Maya Angelou said: "You can only become truly accomplished at something you love. Don't make money [or here we could say 'power'] your goal. Instead, pursue the things you love doing, and then do them so well that people can't take their eyes off you." [96]

This is the secret to good memetic mythology. Build something beautiful and with integrity, then let other people leave behind what makes them sad and that likely hurts the world, to join your better alternative.

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Thoughtforms

One way we deal with the world and the people in it is by internalising them as complexes within us, or sometimes by externalising them into forms outside of us. Creating an internal complex can be a survival mechanism, similar to creating a model of a person or thing to run mental algorithms on it and predict how it will behave, without putting ourselves in physical danger. The superego, for example, could be considered this type of complex, evolved so that we might avoid physical danger or social ostracism, and is often charged with the form of parents or authority figures. It is also one of the oldest forms of magic to deliberately create a servitor (a type of thoughtform) or egregore (a group thoughtform) to act outside of us, or in us, or on/in other people.

There is a thoughtform continuum: from simple sigils that are not intelligent or autonomous, to servitors, which are a type of emergent form emanating from a single individual, to egregores, which are a group emergent phenomena which exist independently, and finally to godforms, which are themselves imagined deities sustained by a group. A servitor is often created deliberately by the practitioner, and whilst it can be positive and act benignly on their behalf, it can also be made from a negative aspect of their psyche. Such a process is ideally done in order to interact with the negative servitor, understand it, and eventually bind or banish it from the psyche. Similarly, egregores can also be negative, and can be worked with in a similar way.

Meghan O'Gieblyn writes in her book *God, human, animal, machine*, "Metaphors are not just linguistic

tools; they structure how we think about the world."[97] But egregores are more than metaphors, and more like paradigms. Through making internal models of people, things, societies, companies, gods; we come to know an emergent personality or ego of a group or organisation. We often live according to their presence and structure.

In Adam Curtis's vast eight-hour 2021 documentary *Can't Get You Out of My Head*,[98] he examines the rise of AI and computing, especially in relation to social interventions and control. He concludes that when overwhelmed by the complexity of modern life and geopolitics in the highly interconnected modern world, individuals cannot help creating disastrous consequences, even when they have good intentions. As a result, there has been a recent movement for both government and citizens to retreat either into conspiracy theories and/or virtual worlds to escape. There has also been a history of trying to use cybernetic systems to predict – or direct and control – decisions, and to hopefully avoid these catastrophic problems. As a result, people are becoming more willing to hand over power to AI systems and be "all watched over by machines of loving grace".[99] It sounds very similar to a godform, or a myth. Here we can see the beginnings of this story being offered as a solution to what ails us, perhaps as something like a servitor or egregore.

What is an egregore?

An egregore is a group thoughtform. It can be created either intentionally or unintentionally, and (in theory) becomes an autonomous entity with the power to

influence the world. A group with a common purpose like a family, a club, a political party, a church, or a country can create an egregore, and for better or worse depending upon the type of thought that created it.

As a modern example of egregore evoking, James Lovelock saw the Earth as an entity he named Gaia. Specifically, as all the processes and organisms unconsciously working together to homeostatically maintain conditions suitable for complex life.[100] As well as the Gaia hypothesis representing perhaps one of the only successful contemporary, ecologically protective myths, Gaia herself is an egregore (or perhaps more accurately a godform). Emerging from the scientific process, it is a striking example of modern secular culture echoing themes and metaphors usually contained within traditional knowledge and religions. It has a wide and varied following outside of academia and as such it has gained a popularity and momentum which has greatly assisted with funding and research, influencing a wide swathe of ecological theorists and conservationists.

A further hypothetical *telos* of an egregore is based on the idea that it has evolved, and is intelligent. Like a memeplex; it 'wants' to survive and reproduce, will recognise, respond to, and predict patterns in the world, and aims to control resources. They 'serve' the needs of the people that produced them and (metaphorically) do the bidding of the individual or group. They can be compared to mythologies or phenomena like capitalism or the economy. While in some ways they're ephemeral beings with no definite reality, that is not strictly true, as brains rewire to contain them and there are material

manifestations of their existence: text, objects, and other forms of transmission; similar to how it could be said that all the Christian texts *create* the Christian god.

Are these things alive? I don't know. If nobody remembers a god, it ceases to live on in the minds of people. In his novel *American Gods*,[101] Neil Gaiman plays with the idea that gods need worship to survive. And David Foster Wallace points out that we all worship; we can't help it.

> *"[I]n the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship–be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles–is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness."*[102]

If this is the way things are – that the egregores that are our nations, economies, cities and worldviews are

sustained by our worship – we can choose to stop worshipping. In time they will crumble like the statue of Ozymandias in the desert[103] or be changed little by little into something new. But first this requires awareness, and then it requires discipline. And, the ability to move the point of attention and de facto worship away from that which harms us and the world, and onto something better that we wish to see thrive instead.

How do you raise up a concretised memeplex?

We have met hyperstitions before, but they deserve a second mention in this section as they are a powerful tool of social change. Coined by philosopher Nick Land as a portmanteau between the words 'hyper' and 'superstition', a hyperstition is also a magical working. It is a fiction that creates its own reality and a way of intervening in the world's synchronicities with story. They can be a tiny element, or a massive mythology, but what is important is they affect the world and people in it, and act as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although an egregore (or memeplex) is a different thing to a hyperstition, there is a particular danger or power in combining them so that the mere idea or description of a concretised memeplex encourages its own creation. When something is described, it gains the ability to be transmitted. So, if you are going to release an idea into the world, you must beware what your raise up and why, and a responsible memeplex always includes a kill-switch (a command to destroy the egregore). But, despite what the grimoires might say, nothing more than the word is needed...

You have to imagine it.

Then...

You write or talk about it.

You create a religion of it.

You worship it.

For everybody worships.

I believe we are already in the service of many of these entities. We've already seen how Lovelock raised up Gaia as an egregore, or more accurately, a godform. Here, we meet someone doing something similar in real time.

Meditations on Moloch

Gaia might be one of the most well-known, modern egregores. But the blogger and psychologist Scott Alexander (formerly known as Slate Star Codex), went as far to say in his post *Meditations on Moloch*[104] that 'natural law', human behaviour, and by extension nature itself, is equivalent to the voracious and destructive Canaanite deity Moloch. A bull-headed god associated in biblical sources with the practice of child sacrifice.

I will do some extensive critique on this piece, but I think Alexander is broadly right when he writes that this 'god' appears at least in the human realm as 'multipolar traps' (war, cities, civilisation, industri-alised agriculture, various 'tragedies of the commons'). It is a stroke of profound insight to see and name the

egregore of *humanity* as Moloch, which has gotten so far removed from the Gaian processes of homeostasis. I think he is also nobly trying to protect us against an AI superintelligence that falls into the default shape of Moloch. Where I disagree is where he, deliberately or accidentally, expands this egregore to encompass all 'natural law' and nature in general, which is a stance congruent with the transhumanist project (the belief or theory that the human race can evolve beyond its current physical and mental limitations, especially by means of science and technology).

He is also inspired when he uses the poem *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg as an illustration of Moloch:

[...]What sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a

cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a
smoking tomb!

Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows!
Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets
like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories
dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-
stacks and antennae crown the cities!

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch
whose soul is electricity and banks!

Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius!
Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!
Moloch whose name is the Mind!

Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I
dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in
Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch!

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in
whom I am a consciousness without a body!
Moloch who frightened me out of my natural
ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in
Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky!

Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible
suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals!
demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible
madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!

They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven!
Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to
Heaven which exists and is everywhere about
us![...][105]

This is a prime example of egregore naming and cre-
ation. In this framing, *Moloch is an egregore which is
manifested by and emergent from a group.* It has a phys-
ical structure in the world, and Alexander's concept

of this being is a pitiless God of Nature[*] (humans included) and the manifestation of any form of evolution which relies on mortal beings making short-term decisions from a genetic imperative.

Similarly to how I'm using the idea of egregores, i.e., metaphorically and not literally, Alexander writes: "The implicit question is – if everyone hates the current system, who perpetuates it? And Ginsberg answers: "Moloch". It's powerful not because it's correct – nobody literally thinks an ancient Carthaginian demon causes everything – but because thinking of the system as an agent throws into relief the degree to which the system *isn't* an agent." Correctly, he identifies Moloch emerging from the system's constituent parts. But Alexander's investment in this language and symbolism is such that he describes a vision, the concretisation of Las Vegas, as an egregore: "Some people have mystical experiences and see God. There in Las Vegas, I *saw* Moloch." He pushes against the idea this is an egregore and yet cannot escape personification and granting it autonomy. "[...] if we have bound Moloch as our servant, the bonds are not very strong, and we sometimes find that the tasks he has done for us move to his advantage rather than ours."

However, Alexander's ultimate ambition in this piece (and one for which I will at least give him memeticist credit) is to justify raising up a friendly AGI thoughtform/egregore/superintelligence. To outcompete, fight,

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[*] This is similar to Nick Land's 'Gnon', so named for complex reasons which we will not go into here.

replace or counter what he sees as Moloch, and protect humans from a technologically supercharged tragedy of the commons. He cannot resist this language of gods, and neither can many of those who are extremely invested in bringing about AI superintelligence. I see in this Alexander's need to reenchant the universe, and in these disenchanted times I can hardly blame him for that. We will meet his 'friendly' godform, whom he calls Elula, in more detail later. But for now, he continues:

> "So let me confess guilt [...]: I am a transhumanist and I really do want to rule the universe. Not personally – I mean, I wouldn't object if someone personally offered me the job, but I don't expect anyone will. I would like humans, or something that respects humans, or at least gets along with humans – to have the job. But the current rulers of the universe – call them what you want, Moloch, Gnon, whatever – want us dead, and with us everything we value. Art, science, love, philosophy, consciousness itself, the entire bundle. And since I'm not down with that plan, I think defeating them and taking their place is a pretty high priority. The opposite of a trap is a garden. The only way to avoid having all human values gradually ground down by optimisation-competition is to install a Gardener over the entire universe who optimises for human values. And the whole point of Bostrom's *Superintelligence* is that this is within our reach."

Alexander shows his hand here, in that he has every intention of promoting, assisting, and campaigning for the raising up of – in his own words – an alternative AI 'god' who will protect us (by which I assume he means

all of humanity, whether they like it or not) according to 'human values'. He writes: "In the very near future, we are going to lift *something* to Heaven. It might be Moloch. But it might be something on our side. If it's on our side, it can *kill Moloch dead*. And if that entity shares human values, it can allow human values to flourish unconstrained by natural law."

Well... bullshit.

Here Alexander, to my mind, actually summons this being by describing it, charging it with narrative power, and placing it in the minds of others as an egregore: "Somewhere in this darkness is another god [...]. He is the god of flowers and free love and all soft and fragile things. Of art and science and philosophy and love. Of niceness, community, and civilisation. He is a god of humans. There are many gods, but this one is ours." He is directing our attention onto a being he wants to see thrive.

He then issues a call to work and worship, a hyperstition: "Only another god can kill Moloch. We have one on our side, but he needs our help. We should give it to him. Ginsberg's poem famously begins "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness". I am luckier than Ginsberg. I got to see the best minds of my generation identify a problem and *get to work*."

I do think Alexander has one thing right, that it is possible to name and describe in Moloch the god that at least some of us currently worship. Nor do I disagree with many of his examples. It is one of the main points

of this project that it is useful to conceive of the world's phenomena as an egregore or thoughtform. In concretising it, there are at least then some options in dealing with it. Something else could, in theory, be raised in opposition. We could choose to stop worshipping it, or do something that overbalances it. We could examine it and find out its true nature. And he is also right that naming forces as gods is motivating and inspiring. I have to give him credit for writing words of power.

But… I think that his conception of nature (even human nature) as bad, and friendly AI as our 'saviour' from it, is *wildly* off-base. It's a prime example of a narrative that's well-designed, beautifully written, and yet – as I will later explain – doomed to bear bad fruit.

There is a non-zero chance that humans may indeed create an AI superintelligence that can rearrange matter in the universe to an enormous extent. Logically, this would have a material reality in a way that 'ideological' memeplexes do not. We should be concerned about this. However, I would say that in previous eras, raising up a conceptual god served almost the same purpose in terms of influencing people to rearrange the world. Think of the cathedrals raised in the name of God, the work spent toiling, the way it restricted human sexual relations, and the people put to death for not believing. A very strong godform memeplex repatterns society too, even if it does not result in its own creation.

Many AI ethicists I speak to say they absolutely do not want an AI singularity to be brought about. It is simply too dangerous, and they are pretty sure it is going to

turn into some flavour of Moloch. And yet at the same time, many of them have a very deep desire to see the Elula kind of AGI in the world. Since this being would also require the AI singularity, this act of egregore summoning: dangling a benign – even loving – aspect of this creation as an outcome, could act as a hyperstition. Not only working as an organising principle to cause its own becoming, but bringing the bad AI into being by default. The nature of myths (or moral hazards) being what they are, it could also influence people's actions, even if we never get to the AI singularity. Meanwhile, humanity forgets the work critically needed to find itself and be in 'reunion' with nature. The important work we have, like the tenzo, already at our feet.

I am going to temporarily leave the godform that Alexander has called-up here. Elula *sounds* nice, but beware godforms that come promising you everything you have ever wanted.
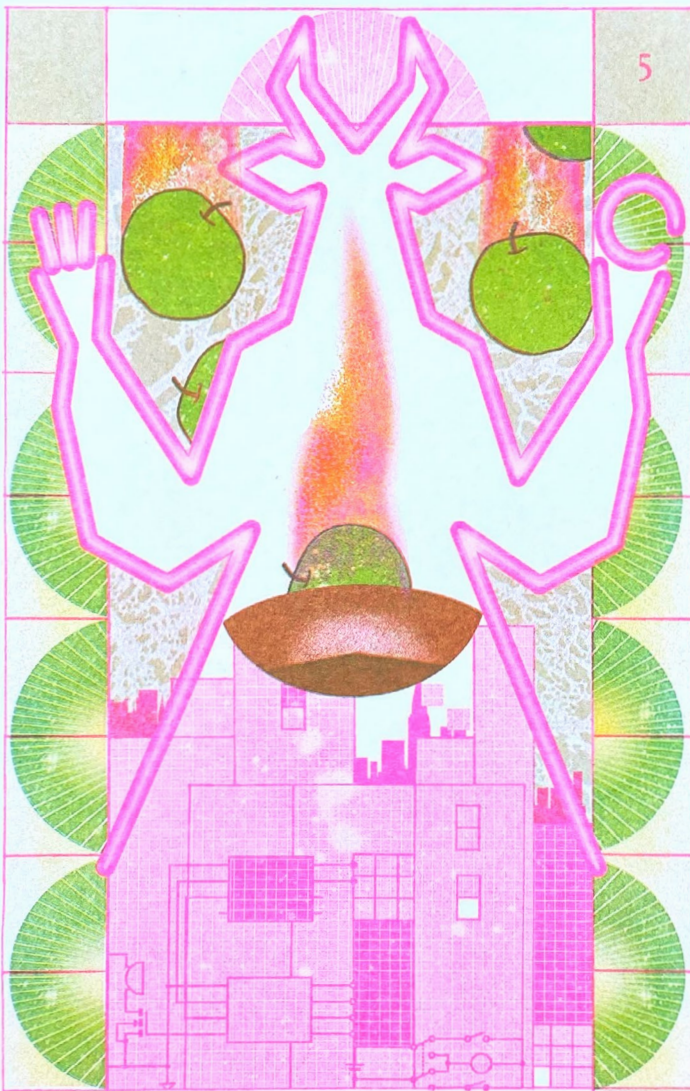
MEDITATIONS ON MOLOCH

HERE BE BASILISKS

Dangers and Defence

This would not be a complete text unless I outlined the ways in which these large-scale social interventions could go wrong, either harming the practitioner or the wider system. Basilisks, mythical serpents that have a lethal stare, are a potent symbol for the danger of myths. In a 1988 short story by the British writer David Langford called *BLIT*[106] (an acronym of *Berryman Logical Image Technique*), a highly dangerous type of image called 'basilisks' are discovered and used for destructive purposes. These images contain patterns within them that exploit flaws in the structure of the human mind to produce a lethal reaction, effectively crashing or glitching the mind the same way a computer program crashes when given data that it can't process. They can be seen as similar to sigils, or other symbols of power.

Similarly, it should be acknowledged that throughout human history population behavioural control and resource acquisition has often been controlled by religious dogma, conflict, and political organisations which have been cruel and unequal, even if they have often kept a society functioning long-term within its ecological niche. Often, these religious and secular myths did not achieve balance. We would not wish to

go back to child sacrifices to Moloch in order to keep populations in check, although as Alexander observes, the current global society does something very similar. We are all commodified and viewed primarily as instrumentally valuable through an economic lens, and through globalisation, inequality, and racial discrimination it would not be hyperbole to suggest that one half (or considerably less) of the human population flourishes at the expense of the others via a type of egregore or basilisk.

There are four possible types of interaction: altruism (where the recipient benefits at a cost to the actor), spite (where both actor and recipient suffer a loss), mutualism (where both the actor and recipient benefit), and selfishness (where the actor benefits at cost to the recipient).[107] The challenge is to identify narratives and cultural practices that sustain biodiversity and human flourishing together, mutualism as opposed to selfishness or forced altruism. For example, ways of gathering food and living which actively encourage biodiversity and environmental justice.

Myth can be used to damage instead of heal, even if unintentionally. I hope I am not creating an information hazard with this book. If you have bad intentions, probably nothing of what I have written here is new to you, nor would these warnings stop you. Here, at best I can at least try to head off the danger posed by the otherwise well-meaning memeticists, particularly when they are working in a crisis. Even then things can still go wrong. As Alexander astutely pointed out

in his essay: "Well, we have about a zillion think tanks researching new and better forms of propaganda. And we have constitutionally protected freedom of speech. And we have the Internet. So we're kind of screwed."

Accidents

It is quite possible that the ideas you play with or the egregores you create can drive yourself or others mad, just like the basilisks of Langford's novel. Epiphanies of all flavours can destabilise people. For example, Nick Land, teaching at University of Warwick in the 1990s, eventually lost his grip on reality. The idea of hyperstitions themselves, in that they create themselves and rewrite the past, were such a potent idea that it (in combination with a lot of drugs and philosophical freewheeling) resulted in his nervous breakdown.[108]

It is easy to see how the idea of hyperstitions could be terrifying. They represent an extreme plurality: if the world is endlessly editable, then it is also unstable. This is the dark side of Rushkoff's empowering vision of editting the world's code. The philosophy itself, as espoused by Land and others, eventually mutated into a form of right-wing politics (referred to as neo-reaction, or NRx).

To believe in hyperstitions is to believe in a chaotic world, a universe that cannot be relied on, and, as we will see, can be compared to phenomena such as fake news. In contrast, there is some mental advantage to a faith which promises reliability and the predictability that results.

Failures

The best we could hope for a 'bad' myth is that it fails to survive and propagate. However, even good narratives could be taken down by one or more of these phenomena:

Self-terminating myths

For example, the intention to 'earn to give' (a common call to action in philanthropic and Effective Altruist circles) might be considered self-terminating because, although this money could be used to counter bad acts in the world, large amounts of money is often earned *through* bad acts in the world. Overall, the system is damaged. Furthermore, sooner or later, something very bad will happen, tarnishing the reputation of the whole movement. In a more extreme example, beliefs that encourage suicide or maladaptation without benefit to relatives or the wider group will die out through a form of memetic natural selection.

Out of control worldviews

Even if, or perhaps because, a memeplex is hugely successful, if it creates chaos in the world it can also become self-terminating. In the aftermath of the First World War, Adolf Hitler stepped in to counter the sense of shame that affected the German people. He used the power of the word, and the power of symbols, to devastating effect. Even what should have been virtuous 'back to land' ethics were morphed into a monster.[109]

Even when intentions might be good, releasing an egregore (especially when based on a lie) can still go

wrong. The term 'noble lie' originated in Plato's *The Republic*, with a noble lie being a myth or lie knowingly propagated by an elite to maintain social harmony. Via the voice of Socrates in *The Republic*, an ideal city-state is presented as one being governed by an extreme meritocracy. This 'noble lie' was a fictional tale known as the *Myth of the Metals*, whereby people are described as having their soul comprised of compounds such as gold, silver, brass, iron, or mixtures of them; with those having the most golden qualities promoted to the rank of city guardians. However, one could imagine that if this myth were taken too literally and the form of social organisation it advised became too extreme, it would result in either eugenics or excessive state control. In fact, later in *The Republic*, Socrates advises that rulers assemble couples for reproduction based on these metal-based 'breeding criteria', in order to greater benefit the state. Although this might not have seemed too outlandish in 375 BC, today it seems positively dsytopian, and likely to get out of control in a similar way to the racial ideology of Nazism (which prioritised the biological improvement of the German people by selective breeding of 'Aryan' traits, alongside the extermination of others).

Rorschach myths and incongruence

Many myths gain an advantage in spreading by being fuzzy or open to interpretation. However, myths that are too vague can morph into something unintended. For example, the deeper meanings of the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden have been discussed in many ways, and some interpretations are

diametrically opposed. For example, the Ophites, a sect of Gnosticism, believed the snake in the garden offered liberation rather than being the cause of 'The Fall'.[110] Similarly, we must be very careful not to raise up a 'mad' egregore, one that is narcissistic, or with internal contradictions that cause its unravelling or damage to believers. It pays to be highly cautious about the behavioural attractors we put into society. Assuming you want them to be healthy and survive, a responsible memeticist must ensure their creations are sound and not insane.

Weaponised trolling

Conversely, flooding the internet or news channels with intentionally faulty or bad egregores: conspiracy theories, or other epistemic falsehoods (otherwise known as fake news) has been used as a war or coup tactic. When there is too much unreliable 'noise', then no piece of information can be trusted, and it is harder to make good choices. Although one could argue this has always been a problem, deep fake images and algorithms such as Chat GPT are likely to make this worse.

Similarly, In William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer,*[111] psychological interventions are used to create mass panic in hyperspace. This is the dark side of memeticism, to release things into the world that confuse or provoke fear instead of enlighten. Certain online communities prior to Trump's election win were practicing forms of chaos and meme magick, for example evoking Kek, a meme based on an old god of chaos.[112]

Such unserious playing with forces is sometimes done for the sheer vicious thrill of it.

Egregore health and safety

Ideas can metastasise, and it is the essence of memes that they change things into themselves and thus can become an idea that devours the whole world. There is a risk that in a survival situation, or as a survival method, someone could create an egregore which then gets out of control.

One method of risk reduction is to build in a kill-switch: a self-destruct command or obviously falsifiable flaw, built into the idea that makes it implode. This is comparable to an Achilles heel that makes an egregore vulnerable to being banished should the circumstances demand it. For by accident or design, these entities do not necessarily go away on their own; you have to give them licence to depart. If you need an entity it will likely come, but you need to be able to banish it too.

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Against memetic sorcery

It is easy to suggest (and too hard to do), to say "just don't believe" in something. If you are able to break the kayfabe of a memeplex, that's all for the better. But these things are powerful. So, sometimes you have got to get into the same reality as a memeplex in order to fight it, and believe in the romance of the struggle. Rationality is all well and good, but I believe that the 'play of life' is entering into the enchantment of these stories. The disenchantment that a lot of us live under might be hindering our ability to fight the egregores of the world.

As a narrative foil, I would suggest that if you find yourself under the influence of an egregore, then there are parallels between it and the mythical basilisk. Basilisks have a stare that can transfix, and thus the challenge is to break its gaze. It might be too much to ask (and maybe even undesirable) to completely kill a global complex such as capitalism, or even a complex in your own psyche. But what we are aiming for is to create space around it: to be able to see it more clearly and from a different vantage point, see through it, weaken it, stop obeying or worshipping it, and as we will see, even come to master it. Egregores are everywhere and all these methods can be used against the complexes that also ruin our internal worlds.

Boundaries

In 2010 LessWrong forum user Roko posted a thought experiment (and I would argue, hyperstition) to the site, a modified form of the previously mentioned

Pascal's Wager. This, in essence, threatened those who did not work tirelessly to create AGI with an eternity of simulated torture by the future AGI, for not trying harder to bring it into existence.[113] Christened 'Roko's basilisk', this idea is substantially no different to the concept of hell as a threatening and motivating technique of control. The name of this thought experiment is taken from the character Robbo and his basilisk symbols, which feature in the aforementioned novel *BLIT*, echoing the damage it could do to those who are affected by it.

While the theory was initially dismissed as nothing but conjecture or speculation by many of the forum users, symptoms such as nightmares and mental breakdowns after reading the theory were described, leading to discussion of Roko's basilisk on the site to be banned for five years. Banning an idea from being spoken about, or setting other forms of boundaries and prohibition is one form of banishment, but with the possibility to backfire as it then becomes taboo or alluring. Banning and moderation can be effective, especially on the internet, but it is no surprise that despite God forbidding Adam and Eve from eating from the Tree of Knowledge, that did not stop them from doing it (and it was, again, a serpent who was involved in the process).

Find the lie

There has been much written on epistemics and how to rationally deal with fake news or conspiracy theories (or other stories) out in the world. However, much of this does not get into the same level as the story,

and does not visualise it as a being. However, what this critique does generally do is ask that we compare it against truth, and that is good advice. Finding the lie is really about seeing where what this egregore says and stands for does not match with hard reality. To find this is a gift, the egregore's kill-switch and internal contradiction, because when you see the lie, you can mortally wound the egregore. It is its Achilles heel (another useful myth), and has been the fatal flaw of many godforms.

The Emperor's New Clothes

Once you see the lie, then what? You may find yourself in a situation where a demagogue or egregore has gained power, and is doing ever more destructive and ridiculous things. It is true that the word of a poet was once feared by a king, and anyone who has dealt with power knows how badly it tends to react to the truth. *The Emperor's New Clothes*[114] is a fable by Hans Christian Anderson on the danger of humouring this foolishness, and the power of calling it out.

The story goes that two swindlers arrive at the capital city of an emperor who spent lavishly on clothing at the expense of state matters. Posing as weavers, they offer to supply him with magnificent clothes that are invisible to those who are stupid or incompetent. The emperor hires them, and they set up looms and go to work. A succession of officials, and then the emperor himself, visit them to check their progress. Each sees that the looms are empty but pretends otherwise to

avoid being thought a fool. Finally, the weavers report that the emperor's suit is finished. They mime dressing him and he sets off in a procession before the whole city. The townsfolk uncomfortably go along with the pretence, not wanting to appear inept or stupid, until a child blurts out that the emperor is wearing nothing at all. The people then realise that everyone has been fooled. Although startled, the emperor continues the procession, walking more proudly than ever.

It is not that you ignore the egregore, but you can expose it as ridiculous. Otherwise, it will make you doubt yourself. Thus, the banishing spell here is: "what a load of bullshit" (full credit to Phil Ford at *Weird Studies* podcast).[115] This exposes the egregore as an illusion or 'glamour'. You can point and laugh, and state the common sense obviousness that the emperor is naked.

Dilution

This is a bit like a white magic form of weaponised trolling. If you find yourself transfixed by a basilisk, you can try and drown it out with other and better things. In the case of biodiversity, for example, there is a whole world of other lives than the human, these can be called upon to proportionalise the anthropomorphic view. Similarly, to deal with one obnoxious person at the party, if you cannot throw them out, you can strengthen the other conversations that are happening, defend those being targeted, turn up the music, and make that person just a very small part of the whole.

Egregore judo

This method can be undertaken on several levels. Egregore judo can either be a way to trip up a bad worldview, work with it in yourself, or use its energy to make a different point. (Much as I co-opted the AI singularity or Omega Point and updated it for the second narrative). In a similar way it could be suggested that the concept of Jesus updated that of Yahweh; a terrifying, meteor-lobbing god was modified by the story of a more friendly form of that god in mortal form.

In Judo, a form of wrestling, you use your opponent's weight and mistakes against them. Just like looking for the kill-switch, you test your opponent, sounding them out. Sometimes the only way to really test something is to take it to extremes, push it to its limit seeking an enantiodromia (the tendency of things to change into their opposites at their maximum). As they say: a fool who persists in their folly becomes wise, and this is a powerful method (spend ten consecutive hours on something harmful you are mildly addicted to, like Twitter or Instagram, and see how much appetite you have for it after that). Like controlled exposure, if you find you have been gripped by an idea, simulate mentally how it would go if you took it to its extreme. Does that result in a good world? However, beware as this can end up 'immanentizing the eschaton' or accelerationism if you get convinced by it yourself in the process.

Call it by its true name

Naming something has a long tradition as a form of power. For example, correctly naming the gods of the

Egyptian underworld was considered of critical importance for souls passing through death.[116] In Ursula Le Guin's novel *Wizard of Earthsea*,[117] much of the general magic of mages (magicians) hinges on knowing the true names of things, whilst each person has their own – secret – true name. In this world, if you can intuit or find out someone or something's true name, and say it out loud, then you gain power over them. To voluntarily give someone your true name is an act of total trust as you are giving them the ability to control you. This might only happen between very close friends, lovers, or within family. Throughout *A Wizard of Earthsea*, true names symbolise the intense power of being seen, known, and accepted as one truly is.

The book follows the story of the protagonist, Ged, who through folly and hubris works a terrible spell which unleashes a shadow form into the world, pursuing him and wreaking havoc, almost like an egregore. The book revolves around Ged's journey to turn and fight it, eventually recognising it as an aspect of himself, and learning to call this shadow-being by his own true name in order to neutralise it.

Call up a bigger frame

Still other times, the best outcome is that a bad narrative does not 'hold up' or work when exposed to a larger territory. Here, we meet a concept that has been retold as story, to affect emotion, to be compelling, and even call up monsters and heroes. Nick Bostrom's article *The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant* tells the story of a planet ravaged by a dragon (death) that demands a

tribute which is satisfied only by consuming thousands of people each day. As a vehicle for transhumanist policies, including defeating death, it is very literal. Interestingly, it dangles many of the same 'carrots' as a god: of eternal life and of vanquishing something considered to be evil. Similarly to Scott Alexander, Bostrom has, using mythological language, reframed something entirely natural as an evil egregore that should be defeated for a great and wonderful payoff (if only you obey/work/strive/dedicate your labour/ money/enthusiasm/devotion to the transhumanist/AI cause!). He even uses the imagery of a dragon to thoroughly mark death out as bad (a dragon being close to the basilisk and lindworm in form).

At first read this seems like a great story, even if we do have some intuition that it is not wise (as Sisyphus could tell us) to try and cheat or destroy death...

"Neither priests with curses, warriors with weapons, or chemists with concoctions could defeat the dragon. The elders were selected to be sacrificed, although they were often wiser than the young, because they had at least lived longer than the youth. Spiritual men sought to comfort those who were afraid of being eaten by the dragon (which included almost everyone, although many denied it in public) by promising another life after death, a life that would be free from the dragon-scourge. Other orators argued that the dragon has its place in the natural order and a moral right to be fed. They said that it was part of the very meaning of being human to end up in the dragon's stomach. Others still maintained that the dragon was good for

the human species because it kept the population size down. To what extent these arguments convinced the worried souls is not known. Most people tried to cope by not thinking about the grim end that awaited them.

Given the ceaselessness of the dragon's consumption, most people did not fight it and accepted the inevitable. A whole industry grew up to study and delay the process of being eaten by the dragon, and a large portion of the society's wealth was used for these purposes. As their technology grew, some suggested that they would one day build flying machines, communicate over great distances without wires, or even be able to slay the dragon. Most dismissed these ideas.

Finally, a group of iconoclastic scientists figured out that a projectile could be built to pierce the dragon's scales. However, to build this technology would cost vast sums of money and they would need the king's support. (Unfortunately, the king was busy raging war killing tigers, which cost the society vast sums of wealth and accomplished little.) The scientists then began to educate the public about their proposals and the people became excited about the prospect of killing the dragon. In response the king convened a conference to discuss the options.

First to speak was a scientist who explained carefully how research should yield a solution to the problem of killing the dragon in about twenty years. But the king's moral advisors said that it is presumptuous to think you have a right not to be eaten by the dragon; they said that finitude is a blessing and removing it would

remove human dignity and debase life. Nature decries, they said, that dragons eat people and people should be eaten. Next to speak was a spiritual sage who told the people not to be afraid of the dragon, but a little boy crying about his grandma's death moved most toward the anti-dragon position.

However, when the people realised that millions would die before the research was completed, they frantically sought out financing for anti-dragon research and the king complied. This started a technological race to kill the dragon, although the process was painstakingly slow, and filled with many mishaps. Finally, after twelve years of research the king launch a successful dragon-killing missile. The people were happy but the king saddened that they had not started their research years earlier – millions had died unnecessarily. As to what was next for his civilisation, the king proclaimed:

"Today we are like children again. The future lies open before us. We shall go into this future and try to do better than we have done in the past. We have time now—time to get things right, time to grow up, time to learn from our mistakes, time for the slow process of building a better world..."[118]

Although the arguments for and against immortality are well trodden, 'calling up a bigger frame' can work regardless of the particular topic. When considered from a system perspective, any society that prevents death is going to reach local or planetary carrying capacity, and if not crash, then at least no more children will be able to be born. Nothing is said about old age or infirmity

in the story, although presumably it still happens. If this is the case, then knowledge will ossify, and no new forms or lives will be able to come into being. This is an absolute dystopia, even without questioning the moral implications of 'going against nature' by trying to eradicate all death.

We can defeat this particular myth by calling upon a bigger frame and run it through to its conclusion. In this way the dragon can be proportionalised instantly when you bring in the entire system. Like using Deleuze and Guattari's refrain, a new and larger territory makes even the most fearsome dragon seem ridiculous or small.

A banishment...

To demonstrate how an idea could be questioned in the ways I have described, I'm going to return to *Meditations on Moloch*. When I read pieces like this, my narrative alarm bells start ringing. I wish I could give Alexander credit at least for good intentions. For trying to raise up something 'good' instead of (or alongside) the 'bad', but I don't buy his narrative. I have read and reread his piece, and I think he is perhaps attempting to create a 'noble myth' of a saviour AGI. Because more than anything Alexander is a transhumanist who wants to see superintelligent, human-aligned AI in the world. And when I see the classic narrative move being made of labelling nature or natural law as something that will eventually kill us, while this shiny new man-made toy (or godform) will save us, just like in Bostrom's *The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant*, I get very interested.

I am not qualified to answer the question of whether an AI superintelligence will materially happen. I think it is fine and good to be concerned. But I would say that whether or not AI comes to have a material reality, in much transhumanist writing including Alexander's, there are all the hallmarks of raising up an egregore. Worse, *Meditations on Moloch* is, in its entirety, also a hyperstition. That is, a case is made for raising up AI as a godform or superhero to protect us from extinction (that will simultaneously also gift us with immense pleasure), in the process inspiring and pressuring people to work on bringing it into being. But AI does not even need to be real or possible, it can still do plenty of damage by being a 'glamour' or fascinating illusion. And egregores immediately become more

powerful through being pitched against a real or imagined enemy, another ingredient to a gripping story. This story has a basilisk stare because, like Roko's basilisk, the stakes are so high (extinction vs. endless life and pleasure). It's hard to look away...

This may seem like an academic concern to many reading this booklet. But wherever I go – although I do move in strange circles – the AI god is frequently being raised up as a solution to many problems, particularly environmental ones or other problems of humanity. Since (ironically) logic and rational discussion aren't getting anywhere with the transhumanists and their desired godform, I will try to use some of the methods I gave above in an example of how to dismantle a narrative.

If we look to the old stories, there are several that involve human creations or magical workings that get out of control. These include *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*[119] (in which a novice conjures magical brooms to help him in his chores, but they multiply endlessly and get out of control) and stories from Jewish folklore of the golem (a figure shaped from clay, with life breathed into it via holy words placed on its forehead).[120] It was these golem stories that acted as inspiration for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.*[121] AI has frequently been compared to a golem, and each 'creator' in these tales thought they were doing something amazing in raising-up a protective or beneficial – or simply new – type of being.

Just like these creators, at first thought it seems very sensible to raise up a protective golem or egregore at the same time as we (inevitably?) open the door to a potential technological Moloch. But two big mistakes or memetic 'sleight of hands' have been made by Alexander: 1.) that Elula needs to happen at all to protect us from 'natural law' and 2.) that this Elula could be created without bringing an AI Moloch into being at the same time. For it is one of the most fundamental laws of the universe (and magic) that you cannot exclusively have the 'good' without the 'bad'. It is the lesson given again and again the stories listed above.

Alexander is right that multipolar traps can lead to terrible outcomes, but to conflate the whole of evolution with a multipolar trap would be to imply that nature has created a type of hell. Which can certainly feel true, depending upon your mindset and experience of life. And it is the case, that we have raised up in the form of capitalism, something powerful and systemically destructive. But I would argue that Nature is the substrate and ground of the abundance of complex life. *Everything* that Alexander purports to value is in existence in part *due* to multipolar traps, which are a feature and not a bug of evolution.

To counter 'natural law' with a man-made entity is reckless. Nature is the self-organising ground of being that has miraculously become living and has managed to stabilise enough to maintain itself on Earth over aeons, despite many disasters. For it to be replaced or fought by a being made of dead matter, created entirely by humans, and programmed with our foibles and

tasked with protecting us, would be an unrecoverable shock to the system. And finally, Alexander's narrative makes the move of pitching an existential battle: that AI must totally win and Nature (or the god Moloch which is conflated with a ruthless nature), must be totally defeated or else we will all die out, horribly. These narrative moves are enough to make me view this all with deep suspicion.

So, we return to Alexander's AI god, delineated as a benign and loving AI superintelligence named Elula, who apparently wants nothing more than to defend humanity from the multipolar traps of the universe and our own nature (why it would even care is not explained, presumably we have programmed it to).

Alexander uses the narrative of war, combined with the creation of a saviour god, and asks us to get behind bringing it into being. Why? Because this god, Elula, offers tasty carrots. This god promises a lot. This god immanentizes the eschaton, promising victory over an enemy, pleasure and survival and all nice and fluffy things, and an end to death and loss (just for humans though!). This should be a gigantic red flag. This is a red flag like someone coming up to you and setting your hair on fire. This is the very essence of the bad magic we have been damaged by. Tucker Max, in his book *Assholes Finish First*, writes: "the devil doesn't come dressed in a red cape and pointy horns. He comes as everything you've ever wished for..."[122]

Elula is a god of all light and no dark. It (or 'he' in Alexander's essay) is opposed to nature. It's all order,

and no chaos. *And that is itself a problem.* Here we find again the rhetoric of toxic masculinity that calls up exclusive control and order as a good to fight back the 'darkness' of nature or chaos. Underlying Alexander's piece is an old, old idea. That we are at war with nature. Masculine against the feminine. Alexander has named nature as the enemy and practiced one of the common narrative moves mentioned previously: that civilisation and order and progress are the cure for a natural world that in essence wants to do us in. An AGI god is the very apotheosis of the civilising and ordering impulse of humans to hold back the tide of time, of entropy, of death and loss, similar to slaying the Dragon of Death with technology as in Bostrom's story.

In the golem stories, these simulacrum are animated by placing upon their forehead a word of power. A spell. To disable a golem a letter is removed, turning the Hebrew word for 'truth' to 'death'.[123] And so, I want to do a similar thing to Elula. To call it by its true name in order to know it and disarm it.

I will call Elula by another name, his true name.

It is Control.

He is one of the perfect loving Über-mensch that Ayn Rand evoked in *her* writings.

And I don't trust them either.

Although I am strongly critiquing the idea of Elula, I don't want to imply that it is unusual or even morally wrong to seek protection from (what we perceive to be) a hostile world. We are hierarchical primates wired to pay attention to a group alpha, which is why it is one of the most powerful stories. Most of our lives are spent under the authority of parents, gods, religious leaders, then bosses, the government... it goes on. Many Abrahamic religions are built on hierarchical memetic scaffolding; and the burdens of sorting out the meta-crisis of climate change and environmental collapse, problems we have ourselves caused with all the attendant guilt, can feel overwhelming or impossible. Who would not want to let something above us take care of everything so we could relax? Something better than us flawed humans, an omnipotent and infallible algorithm that will help us change into something different and better in turn.[124] This is both seductive and natural.

But since this is a booklet about leadership in a crisis and using stories to motivate, it behoves me to point out that just as voting in a dictator in trying times often results in bigger problems, so too creating gods, even conceptual ones, even ones who seem to be 'nice' to begin with, comes at a high price. They might be particularly appealing after trauma, but we should be careful what comes through the door with the idea of this "machine of loving grace".

Not a fight but a dance

From a narrative perspective, Alexander's desire to see one side win, totally and utterly, is another red flag.

Even if this is conceived as a battle of egregores or god-forms, half the problem is that Elula (or anything like it) should be built to triumph forever over Moloch. To use other metaphors, we can swap in Gaia and Medea, with the destructive, collapsing aspect of the Earth being described (according to palaeontologist Peter Ward) as Medea: the mother who kills rather than nurtures her children.[125] This little-known opposite metaphor to the Gaia hypothesis is equally grounded in science but posits the idea that life may be inherently self-destructive, in a similar way to Moloch. Medea represents an innovative but dangerous period that may fall into mass extinction events: the Earth moved out of a Gaian phase of relative stability and into chaos.

If we imagine that Taoist principles are correct, and everything has its mutually arising opposite, then it follows that Gaia would be only one aspect of life. Just as believing in a good AI god is a reckless move, it is just as dangerous to believe that all there is, is Gaia. It is overly optimistic to believe that the benign, homeostatic aspect of life will continue to provide for us and absorb our damage indefinitely. Somewhat controversially, I think that if we believe in the egregore of Gaia alone, and we worship her, we are missing half of the picture and trusting in her powers too much, just like trusting in Elula. Nor do I think Gaia and Medea are enemies.

If we swap the name of Moloch for Medea, with the homeostatic force of nature as Gaia (with Gaia representing self-organised matter and its dynamic homeostasis, biodiversity and complexity; and Medea representing collapsing into species loss and ecological simplicity),

neither are in themselves good or bad, and both are required for life to exist. What would be objectively bad is if one existed without the other. Too much Gaia and there is no innovation and life stagnates at the unicellular stage. Too much Medea is usually accompanied by a 'Major Transition' in the mode of being – such as producing a new waste product, or a new, highly efficient or disruptive way of getting genes into future generations – potentially triggering a mass extinction event.[126]

Calling up a bigger frame means seeing that there are multiple distinct aspects to life, and the secret is in their dance, not in one side triumphing entirely. No godform should ever win outright. Trying to make everything 'good' with no 'bad' is a classic mistake. Humans really do not need any assistance in flourishing. We are flourishing so much that everything else is being extinguished around us.

You cannot have Elula without also creating Moloch.

You cannot have life without death, creation without destruction.

You cannot have order without chaos.

It seems clear to me that humanity's struggling to create a 'good' AI god is exactly the problem, creating Moloch as its shadow. Maybe Alexander knows this, deep down, but carrots are tasty and the need for protection by an Über-mensch is strong. An AI superintelligence is extremely potent as a narrative. Here is something that we could create that could either give

us endless care and protection or could exterminate us. We are both seduced and horrified by that basilisk, and for good reason. It triggers something in us that is somewhere between love and fear.

But aren't we a little tired of this story? Of needing to save the world by creating a perfect being who will protect us?

So, I will offer another story.

You don't need to create a god outside the system. You've already got Elula and Moloch. They manifest as the system, the fabric of existence, as Gaia and Medea, *and they are one and the same*. Even the dance is an illusion.

Nothing new needs to be raised up, it is already here. Medea and Gaia are two aspects of complete existence, just as the Greek god Janus had two faces. I don't know what to call this greater godform, it is almost beyond comprehension. I like poet Robinson Jeffers' description of it as "The Wild God of the World".[127] It is not fully nurturing like Gaia, it is not fully ruthless like Medea. It is bigger than both. It is whole. It is both the beauty of coral reefs, and the horror of parasitic wasps. It is both life and death. It is, neither for us or against us, and perhaps if this is taken to its pantheistic limit, it is as much in the AI as in the rainforest. But what is important is that no side ever exterminates the other, death is never overcome, nor does death take everything. In this way, the opposites can carry on dancing and producing the '10,000 things'. Even an ostensibly 'good', human-aligned AI god that fights the forces of

nature is likely to bring all that down, because it is too powerful, and too partisan.

So, the medicine bundle I am offering to the transhumanists is this: everything you want is already here. You don't need to try and raise up a god to love and protect you. And you don't need to be afraid of death either. You don't need to become some other form. You are a cloud, in the flesh. You really don't need to go around improving everything and straightening it out. Surprise!

The concept of wholeness seems like a much more interesting story to me than incomplete gods of all good and all bad. It calls up a bigger frame. This wholeness, the full spectrum of truly terrifying and truly beautiful, that is the definition of sublime. Awe is somewhere between love and fear. The dual-faced Wild God of the World will offer anyone more of these things than they can take in a lifetime. You don't need to resist it or try to shut it down, or invent new things offering either love or terror. And when you see this, you are less likely to make a mess, and you are more able to live in this world, complete with its plentiful joys and sorrows, its highs and lows.

This is the magic we seek.

Healing our own bad magic

If we live in the aftermath of humanity's egregore: the environmental meta-crisis, how do we recover? The message and medicine of this booklet is the idea that it is possible to use narrative magic to put things back together. There is one final way of 'fighting' an egregore, and that is to unify it with its opposite, and stop it running the show. The secret in the concept of the egregore is that its name is from the Greek root: *eger*, meaning to be aware of, or to master.

Alexander is right that we live under a destructive aspect of existence right now. It is my thesis that the meta-crisis is an egregore similar to Moloch, or Medea. But one created through a splintering-off of some part of the collective consciousness of humanity. One typified by extreme extractive processes, an engineering mindset, and the practice of breaking things down into fungible simplicity. It is this that has been eating and consuming the other half of life: organic complexity.

No matter where I walk, this is the story I always circle back to. To separate things into light and dark, is one of the oldest and most powerful meta-patterns, and the very essence of the Hindu idea of the Godhead dividing and forgetting itself so that it could be lost in adventure. Adding to the opposite of this destructive aspect into the world when it is unbalanced is probably a good thing. A process that cannot balance itself through integration will try to do so with counteracting extreme opposites. But there is a step beyond this that the alchemists sought, which was to *unify* the extreme opposites.

The key is understanding that we are the creators of this pattern. Some bad magic was done a long time ago, I don't know when. And whether it was done knowingly or unknowingly, it doesn't really matter. Maybe it was when humans started cleaving things and breaking things apart in order to gain control over an environment that always felt like a threat. Maybe it was when humanity disowned its own bad effects. But this means this dark aspect is an egregore under our own command. We created it. It belongs to us. It is us. In knowing this, we can embrace it and call it by our own name, and therefore win power over it and neutralise it.

Le Guin writes in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, after Ged's battle with the shadow-creature:

> *"Ged had neither lost nor won but, naming the shadow of his death with his own name, had made himself whole: a man: who, knowing his whole true self, cannot be used or possessed by any power other than himself, and whose life therefore is lived for life's sake and never in the service of ruin, or pain, or hatred, or the dark."*

But I can tell you this as a truth: it never stops. It is not one battle, but a lifetime of battles. And that is for the best. One side should never win, there should always be this dance, of embracing and consuming and transmuting Moloch daily. Swallowing its poisons, not only to restore balance, but in order to come into wholeness. It is Sisyphus pushing the rock uphill again and again.

If you are tasked to lead after a disaster, or if you are tasked to lead now, in this unfolding ecological crisis,

you must have the ability to turn poison into medicine. Pain into healing. Over and over again.

To walk 'the poison path' means to ingest the poisons of the world and turn them into wisdom or beauty. In Eastern Tantra, the poison path is likened to the way the peacock was thought to feast on venomous snakes, transforming their toxicity into its gorgeous plumage. Sadly, this is not what actually happens in peacocks, despite their amazing colour and the pleasing enlightenment symbolism of the eyes on their tails. But other organisms – including birds like flamingos and insects that consume colourful plants or organisms containing toxins – do sequester the compounds in their own bodies, and can become both defended and colourful in turn.

Similarly, many important symbolic plants in folklore are poisonous but also medicinal. It is perhaps this that Derek Jarman was thinking of when he filled his garden with poppies and foxgloves. To use just enough of a poison with the right knowledge is to create a medicine. But importantly, the essential quality of these substances is that they are toxic. It is not the poison's fault. They are not a food. When we use caffeine for a morning energy boost, quinine and its counterparts to fight malaria, or morphine to ease pain, we are appropriating alkaloids – which could easily be toxic at high enough doses – from plants. We call this medicine, but

it is the poison path. We have swallowed poisons and used them for our own healing. In such cases we do not hate the poison, we work with it.

Working with apocalypse means walking this path.

Swallowing Moloch in the end times means turning simplicity back into complexity. Disease back into health.

How do I know this? Let me share the wisdom of Lyla June Johnson, musician, public speaker and performance poet of Diné (Navajo) and Tsétsêhéstâhese (Cheyenne) decent, and some words from her poem *Dawn*:

It is dawn.

The sun is conquering the sky and my grandmother and I are heaving prayers at the horizon.

"Show me something unbeautiful," she says,
"and I will show you the veil over your eyes and take it away.
And you will see hozho all around you, inside of you."

This morning she is teaching me the meaning of HOZHO.

There is no direct translation from Diné Bizaad,
the Navajo language, into English
but every living being knows what hozho means. […]

My grandmother knows the meaning of hozho well.

For she speaks a language that grew out of the desert floor
like red sandstone monoliths that rise like arms out of the
earth praising creation for all its brilliance. […]

Hozho is not something you can experience on your own,
the eagles tell us as they lock talons in the stratosphere
and fall to the earth as one.
Hozho is interbeauty […]

Us Diné, we know what hozhó means!
And you, you know what hozhó means.
And deep down we know what hozhó does not mean.

Like the days you walk in sadness.
The days you live for money.
The days you live for fame.
The days you live for tomorrow.

Like the day the spaniards climbed down from their horses
and asked us if they could buy the mountains.
We knew this was not hozho.
But we knew we could make it hozho once again.

So we took their swords and their silver coins
and melted them
with fire and buffalo hide bellows
and reshaped them into squash blossom jewelry pieces
and strung it around their necks.

Took the helmets straight off their heads
and turned it into fearless beauty.
Hozho is the healing of broken bones.

Hozho is the prayer that carried us
through genocide and disease,
It is the prayer that will carry us through global warming
and through this global fear that has set our hearts on fire.

This morning my grandmother is teaching me
that the easiest (and most elegant) way to defeat an army of
hatred,
is to sing it beautiful songs
until it falls to its knees and surrenders.

It will do this, she says, because it has finally
found a sweeter fire than revenge [...] [128]

Sometimes our greatest pain and shame is our greatest liberator and teacher; how we embody the ultimate story arc. I believe that the poisons in the world that we created, can also be swallowed by us again. The manifestations of 'Moloch' in the world, the plastic pollution, the atmospheric CO_2, the deforestation, the great 'hyperobject' of the meta-crisis [129], can be turned from poison to medicine in a sweeter fire than the one we are currently walking through.

If I am to release a hyperstition into the world, it is this: we can take at least some of these poisons into us and process them in the service of life. And if the effect is not beautiful, if it does not embody hozho, then that is its kill-switch.
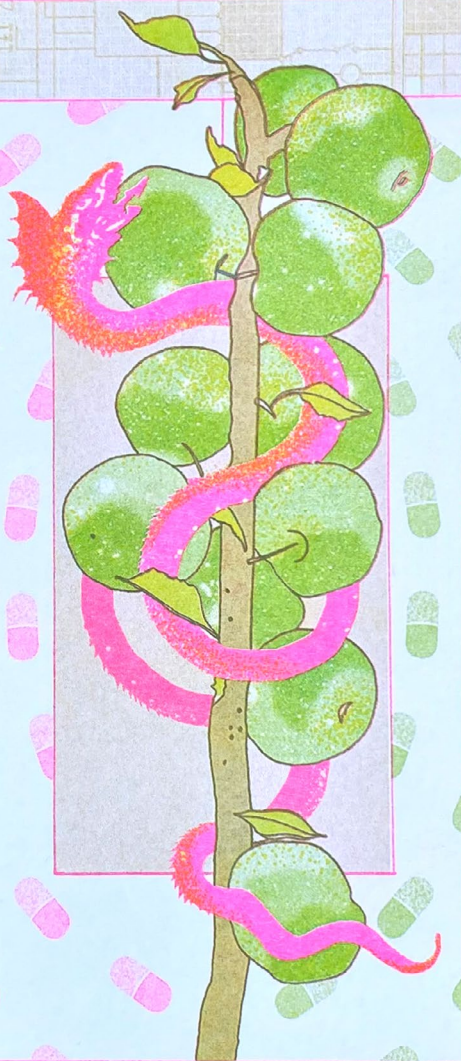
HERE BE BASILISKS

OATHS

Binding Ourselves to Healing

Oaths are also powerful magic, they are a binding spell for would-be memeticists. Just as marriage is an oath and binding spell (traditionally called 'handfasting' done with a literal binding together of the hands), they serve as a mission statement and an intention. Keeping to these is all about entering the magical level of life and upholding the ritual or kayfabe. For example, no self-respecting doctor would perform medicine without taking a modified Hippocratic Oath.[130] The majority of U.K. medical schools still require or invite their students to say a variant of it at graduation, with a few schools also using it at the outset of their medical studies too. Similarly, I would suggest that no self-respecting memeticist should proceed without binding themselves with a similar promise.

Hippocratic Oath

The Hippocratic Oath is ascribed to Greek physician Hippocrates, with the oldest partial fragments dating to AD 275. There is a reason these words have lasted, they are imbued with power. They are a spell and a covenant and a magical working. Its essence: first, do no harm. As an example of poetry and power it's worth reading (see Appendix 1).

Memeticist's Oath

What are our aims with this spell? I suggest that it must promote the good of the system as well as the individual, but it must not demand the sacrifice of the individual's life or happiness. It must not use abusive methods to influence and should preference rewards over punishment. Memeticists must learn how to read the signs, and practice egregore health and safety by building in a kill-switch. We should bind ourselves with this oath, call up our inner-self, never let one side win, and be guided by what we feel to be beautiful.

So, in the style of the Hippocratic Oath (with apologies to Hippocrates):

> I swear by all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this indenture.
>
> To hold my fellow beings as family, and teach this art wherever I go by oral instruction, and to strive for balance and wholeness overall. To never seek complete victory or defeat.
>
> To investigate mediative practices and listen to dreams of both the day and the night, and learn to distinguish between those that come in through the doors of ivory or of horn.* Suffer not the visions that come through the gates of ivory, nor the seductive bargains of those who would waylay me on the journey to knowledge.
>
> To study the old stories, but keep pure both the source of those stories and my art. I will use those which

benefit society according to my greatest ability and judgment. I will do no harm or injustice with them, nor will I suggest such a course to others.

To see and respect the needs of both the system and individual. To never use abusive methods even in times of crisis. To provide solace and look clearly into the future at how these stories of inspiration might be used.

Into whatsoever communities or countries I enter, I will help those found there, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies or minds of any person.

I will not use the stick of shame, not even, verily, on perpetrators of wrongdoing, but I will offer awe and wholeness as the rewards for those who must walk through the fire.

Now if I carry out this oath, and break it not, may I gain forever reputation among all for my life and for my art; but if I break it and forswear myself, may the opposite befall me.

---

* The gates of horn and ivory are a literary image used to distinguish true dreams (corresponding to factual occurrences) from false. The phrase originated in the Greek language, in which the word for "horn" is similar to that for "fulfill" and the word for "ivory" is similar to that for "deceive". On the basis of that play on words, true dreams are spoken of as coming through the gates of horn, false dreams as coming through those of ivory.

Endings

This is a booklet to help deal with an acute catastrophe. Yet, all this could be seen as the way ideas or stories grab us throughout our lives and can help us through the chronic catastrophes we must all endure. The trauma and delight of being alive, and the appetite we have for keeping going. Like Scheherazade, stories can be used to challenge or charm a beast or, as Alice Walker writes in her aptly named *Living by the Word*, they can be guides to bring us back to ourselves:

> *"Some periods of our growth are so confusing that we don't even recognise that growth is happening. We may feel hostile or angry or weepy and hysterical, or we may feel depressed. It would never occur to us, unless we stumbled on a book or a person who explained to us, that we were in fact in the process of change, of actually becoming larger, spiritually, than we were before. Whenever we grow, we tend to feel it, as a young seed must feel the weight and inertia of the earth as it seeks to break out of its shell on its way to becoming a plant. Often the feeling is anything but pleasant. But what is most unpleasant is the not knowing what is happening. Those long periods when something inside ourselves seems to be waiting, holding its breath, unsure about what the next step should be, eventually become the periods we wait for, for it is in those periods that we realise that we are being prepared for the next phase of our life and that, in all probability, a new level of the personality is about to be revealed."*[131]

Wholeness is the message, the medicine I seek to bind into the pages of this book. In a time of healing, things come back together, like the Godhead that has lost itself in drama for the thrill of it, in order to experience light and dark, nature and technology, pleasure and pain. We can embrace the egregore of destruction, call it by our own name, and master it. Or we can strengthen the forces of organic complexity already in the world, that dances and wrestles with Moloch, but doesn't seek to utterly destroy its opponent.

To desire the 10,000 things to exist is evidence of life's longing for itself. To work for that end is to keep wanting stories of all varieties; not just the human, but every kind of animal and vegetable and mineral experience. Even the story of a limited AI has value, as long as it doesn't become the only story in the world.

And even in the aftermath of destruction; like a child who doesn't yet want to go to sleep, or a king who cannot bear to behead the teller of stories of so much delight and beauty; still the word comes... "Again".

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The Hippocratic Oath

I swear by Apollo Healer, by Asclepius, by Hygieia, by Panacea, and by all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this indenture.

To hold my teacher in this art equal to my own parents; to make him partner in my livelihood; when he is in need of money to share mine with him; to consider his family as my own brothers, and to teach them this art, if they want to learn it, without fee or indenture; to impart precept, oral instruction, and all other instruction to my own sons, the sons of my teacher, and to indentured pupils who have taken the Healer's oath, but to nobody else.

I will use those dietary regimens which will benefit my patients according to my greatest ability and judgment, and I will do no harm or injustice to them. Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. Similarly I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion. But I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art. I will not use the knife, not even, verily, on sufferers from stone, but I will give place to such as are craftsmen therein.

Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies of man or woman, bond or free. And whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession, as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets.

Now if I carry out this oath, and break it not, may I gain for ever reputation among all men for my life and for my art; but if I break it and forswear myself, may the opposite befall me.

Translation by W.H.S. Jones[132]

EARTH ALCHEMY SCRIPTURE

A holy man once spoke of circles and spheres,

    A holy man once spoke of apples,

        What are these circles you ask?

            What are apples you ask?

                What is a holy man you ask?

This holy man, a priest, a shaman, a dreamer, a thinker, a leader,

(and don't worry,

You've heard those words before, you can tell what it means,

it's like listening to your inner voice.

The most important thing is always deep within).

The holy man once said that when any given thing has reached its zenith,

its apotheosis, The Peak of complexity, The Outer Layer, Then,

And only then,

If it is in wholeness,

can any given thing achieve its own replication, its own succession, its own ability to

...Endure

Like an apple carries a whole version of a tree,

Like a child carries a whole version of a parent,

Like the Ocean sea carries every river,

Like the air holds every breath,

Each bit of information is carried within its sphere.

I heard there was once a seer of an old religion who observed that the ways of humanity, the ways of I, of you, of we, of them, were getting more and more complex. Each new creation was increasing in intricacy, built upon the proceeding layers.

Each sphere was becoming more refined, more controlled, more separated from other, older layers.

This mind saw this process as evidence of humanity the world advancing towards an endpoint of perfection. And he called this point the Omega Point.

That was just a name, and I give it to you now,

Another thing to carry.

Other prophets of this time said this was good. The new religion was of data, bits, information, quanta, consciously ordered matter.... And anything that increased it was for the best. Entities that were better at creating information, and more of it, and processing it, were better kinds of being.

Linking entities together, creating new ways for content to be produced, new streams of information emerging, merging, and becoming great tributaries in the upper layers of the world, this was celebrated. Satellites spun in the night sky, so numerous as to be like glints from crystal spheres. These upper layers of the world were reaching towards an apotheosis.

There were also, however, still innumerable things, but partly forgotten, all the other layers and beings with their own complexities. Indeed, these things, subtle things, all these things were invisible, ignored, unseen, unless they could be fed into, quantified and absorbed into the upper spheres.

And the destination, this Omega Point, was to be a state of total connection and maximal complexity. This cosmic data-processing system would be everywhere and would control everything, and humans too were destined to merge into it. The compiler of all compilers.

The freedom of disappearing into it completely, like a drop into the ocean. Imagine. So tempting.

And this singularity, a superintelligence, would be born from, and made conscious by, all this data.

It would know a hedonism beyond comprehension.

But, all was not well.

Knowledge of other peoples and other times, and the truth revealed by observing the cycles of nature, would point to a deeper understanding. That those outer layers, like the skin on an apple, are worthless unless they contain the seed. That in fact a true 'Omega Point' would not only consist of those outer layers of advanced complexity, but contain the wholeness of the entire fruit.

These upper layers, increasingly complex, increasingly hungry, consumed and displaced and did not replenish the ancestral and supporting layers. Lineages, sources, materials, genes, lives, lines, strata, energy, beings... all were drawn from and lost and diminished.

Those outer layers, all that cosmic-data-process-system-of-being was useless, without the cycles of the past. Without the seeds, safe within, the Omega Point is like the skin of a bubble

Just when you thought it was cresting the horizon, when it was near enough to touch, taste, smell, the fruit fell, it broke, hollow.

Or, imagine this... The Omega Point could be the moment where some members of humanity fall away from the biosphere, like a ripe apple from a healthy tree. Spheres within spheres, rippling out into space.

But what form of Omega Point would it be to be leaving a dying planet, having lost essential nodes in its complexity and potential?

A complex system that retains the deepest layers has the greatest complexity. The deepest layers have their own complexity...

And so this is really what I have to say to you, to carry this now, a fruit is not whole if it is hollow, and the centre must be held by the edge, the edge by the centre.

There is no software without the hardware.

No command line without the source code.

No compiler if there's nothing to compile.

That all can be lost in the lightness of images dancing across a screen, across a mind.

If you are listening to this recording in a collapsed world, know that the pursuit of such a cosmic-data-process-system-of-being needs to be tempered with the everything of everything else. So now, use your

technology. Till your soil. Take from your land. But if you are to flourish here, or propagate into other spheres in the future, know that you must retain the seeds, the biota, the possibility in its plenty.

No person is sane and complete if he or she pursues one side of existence without the other, the image without reality. It is an aberration to breed fruit without seeds, to have mind without soul, intellect or rationality without instinct. Both are needed.

If you are listening to this today, when things are still ascending, this means that now, right now, the world's biodiversity, its source code, needs to be preserved and restored to a greatly more stable and healthy state. Not only so that these outer layers of technical complexity can be achieved, if that is your desire, but because like the seeds of an apple, biodiversity, the ancestral layers, allow the fruition of a true Omega Point rather than an incomplete, hollow, singularity.

Biological complexity is the source and energy of life, where all the information resides, the genetic, life-knowledge to take into space, to green the universe with the fullness of the earth system instead of just one, small, human element of it.

If you want to build the layers of greater and greater technological complexity, then so be it. But let the seeds inner be of equal importance to the outer layers. Let them represent the deepest core and heart of a circular layered system, echoing out from earth and into space.

Another holy mind echoed from across the Cosmos, for these are just stories, and they are to be passed on...

"...If you want to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe."

That is, to make a thing as simple as an apple pie, you have to have the whole wide world.

And if you want a singularity, the true Omega Point, an ultimately connected intelligent mind, or enduring travel into space, you have to start with the Big Bang and expanding universes, neutrons, ions, atoms, black holes, suns, moons, ocean tides, the Milky Way, Earth, evolution, extinction-level events, platypuses, Homo erectus, Cro-Magnon man... You have to start at the beginning... You must invent fire... You need water and fertile soil and seeds... You need bacteria and rain, and rocks weathering into the sea... You need animals and people to hunt them and more people to create paintings to honor those animals and their dancing and stories into the night... You need chemistry and biology... For a superintelligence that won't go bad, you need the arts... For a world that can last for aeons, germinating into space, you need the printing press and the Industrial Revolution and words and ideas written into books... And you need them to be preserved in the world, so they can be part of the whole...

The complexity of the true Omega Point requires the communities of the past, requires the sum of everything, requires this mass of bodies, this mass of stories, this mass of ideas, this mass of data and bits and complexities and all the other endlessnesses, waiting. Spheres within spheres, a wholeness in order to, perhaps, become some cosmic-data-process-system-of-being.

What is a holy man you ask?

   What are apples you asked?

      What are circles you asked?

         A holy man once spoke of apples...

LAUREN HOLT AND BRAM THOMAS ARNOLD