

LANGUAGE is how we influence others.
LOVE only makes sense to the lovers.
MATHEMATICS is strangely effective in
MEMORY and hindsight are a wicked and
MORALITY is shaped by those in POWER
OLD AGE brings insights that make us
PARANTS are the ones whom we leave
PERCEPTION is a world made up by the
POLITICS is corrupted by POWER and
POWER is that which is sweeter than honey
POVERTY means that the rich don't care
REGRETTABLE is a word that can lead to despair
RELIGION is opium for the masses.
SCIENCE reports to the ruling classes.
CUPIDITY will be our species' perdition
SUFFERING is a mark of the human condition
TECHNOLOGY is often a mixed blessing
THINKING should not be so depressing
TIME is a teacher that kills its students
TRUTH preservation calls for prudence
WAR is fought at POWER'S behest.
YOUTH is a treasure that contains all

Life, Death, and Other Inconvenient Truths

A Realist's View of
the Human Condition

SHIMON EDELMAN

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Just dropped in (to see what condition my condition was in)

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—“Do you advise me to look?” you may ask, as Frodo asked of Galadriel, when she brought him to her Mirror.

—“No,” she said. “I do not counsel you one way or the other. I am not a counsellor. You may learn something, and whether what you see be fair or evil, that may be profitable, and yet it may not. Seeing is both good and perilous. . . . Do as you will.”

Executive Summary: A Rhyming Lore of the Human Condition

Learn now the Lore of Living Creatures!

—J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*

ACTION is good except when it's not.
AMBITION unchecked is a kind of mind rot.
ANXIETY is our constant companion.
BEAUTY awaits in a desert canyon.
CHILDREN are a joy that can give us a pause.
COMPLEXITY has the mind grasping at straws.
CONSCIOUSNESS is a fancy illusion.
DEATH is the ultimate end to confusion.
EMPATHY is an angel that gave up its wings.
EMPTINESS is the nature of things.
EVOLUTION and culture pull on our strings.
EXISTENCE is a gift that hides many stings.
FEAR is POWER's tool of oppression.
FREE WILL may not be worth a digression.
HAPPINESS, misery—each has its turn.
HOME is where you can never return.
LANGUAGE is how we influence others.
LOVE only makes sense to the lovers.
MATHEMATICS is strangely effective in SCIENCE.
MEMORY and hindsight are a wicked alliance.
MORALITY is shaped by those in POWER.
OLD AGE brings insights that make us dour.
PARENTS are the ones whom we leave behind.
PERCEPTION is a world made up by the mind.
POLITICS is corrupted by POWER and money.
POWER is that which is sweeter than honey.

POVERTY means that the rich don't care.
REGRET is a door that can lead to despair.
RELIGION is opium for the masses.
SCIENCE reports to the ruling classes.
STUPIDITY will be our species' perdition.
SUFFERING is a mark of the human condition.
TECHNOLOGY is often a mixed blessing.
THINKING should not be so depressing.
TIME is a teacher that kills its students.
TRUTH preservation calls for prudence.
WAR is fought at POWER's behest.
YOUTH is a treasure that contains all the rest.

1 Action

The native hue of resolution. The pale cast of thought. And lose the name of action.

Mir hilft der Geist! Auf einmal seh ich Rat
Und schreibe getrost: Im Anfang war die Tat!

(The spirit aids! from anxious scruples freed,
I write: In the beginning was the Deed!)

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*

It is my job to create universes. . . . And I have to build them in such a way that they do not fall apart two days later.

—Philip K. Dick, “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later”

Praise then darkness and Creation unfinished.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*¹

The native hue of resolution

In the beginning was a motive. The motive must have been urgent: not a whole lot of deliberation seems to have preceded the action that it had provoked. Any hasty action is risky, but for a particularly momentous undertaking, such as creating a universe, the risk is compounded by the difficulty of telling ahead of time how things will turn out. In such a project, it makes sense at least to take it easy, let the dust settle, and look around before proceeding to the next stage: “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good.”

Self-supervision is, however, rarely an effective approach to quality control. As the gnostics might argue, the biblical act of Creation could have

Of related interest

To watch:

Claude Lelouch, *Les Uns et les Autres* (1981)

Tarsem Singh, *The Fall* (2006)

To listen:

Maurice Ravel, *Boléro* (1928)

To read:

John Brunner, *The Compleat Traveller in Black* (originally *The Traveler in Black*, [1971] 1982)

Stanisław Lem, "Non Serviam" in *A Perfect Vacuum* ([1971] 1999)

To go:

Away from Elsinore.

2 Ambition

Pelf and place. A small goat.

Place . . . is the end of half the labours of human life; and is the cause of all the tumult and bustle, all the rapine and injustice, which avarice and ambition have introduced into this world.

—Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Ambition; a passion, which when it keeps within the bounds of prudence and justice, is always admired in the world.

—Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*¹

Pelf and place

It is fair to say that ambition is to the body politic what table salt is to the human body: impossible to live without, but seriously life shortening if overused. This suggests that ambition should be subject to the Goldilocks Principle, but it isn't: none of the "modern" societies has *everyone's* ambition in the sweet spot between too much and too little.

My guess is that the social dynamics of ambition is to blame.² Many people do have what would count as just about the right amount of ambition, but some are ambitious beyond the "bounds of prudence and justice," to use Adam Smith's phrase. Merely observing those strivers and climbers in action is likely to kick the members of the modest majority right out of the sweet spot. Some contract learned helplessness (as when coming within an upstart's POWER) and end up depressed. Many others have their own ambition stoked and get drawn into the rat race, only to experience continual disappointment with their achievements, as these fail to keep up with their aspirations.³

Ambition being a fundamentally interpersonal phenomenon, the social comparison that it implies is a force with which all societies must contend.⁴ With very few exceptions,⁵ our economies and our POLITICS are driven by ambition for “pelf and place.”⁶ Adam Smith, a figurehead of the Age of Enlightenment⁷ who is often referred to as capitalism’s “founding father,” remarked that pelf and place—economics and POLITICS—are inseparable:

The objects of avarice and ambition differ only in their greatness. A miser is as furious about a halfpenny, as a man of ambition about the conquest of a kingdom.

As might be expected from a man of money and privilege, Smith in this passage from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* glosses over the possibility of a person being furious about a halfpenny for the simple reason of being poor, yet having the ambition to be fed and sheltered; as well as over the possibility of a “conquest of a kingdom” at the hands of the king’s own subjects whose ambition is not to be ruled by an autocrat.⁸

The famous (or infamous) idea behind Smith’s other book, *The Wealth of Nations*, is that each person’s economic ambition will have the side effect of benefiting the society at large. It has been put forward as an account for the enormous economic growth that the world has seen in the past two centuries; an alternative explanation credits growth to the exploitation of the many by an overly ambitious few.

Be that as it may, growth is a problematic phenomenon. On the one hand, it makes personal economic betterment possible, and it is hard to blame people for wanting to be as well off as their neighbors (or, thanks to the media TECHNOLOGY, as someone halfway around the globe). On the other hand, an incessant global “arms race” over standards of living (which is spurred along by the pursuit of profit by those who profit from others’ consumption) demands constant growth. This, when compounded, turns exponential, which, as MATHEMATICS tells us, is unsustainable when the resources it depends on are finite.⁹

With just one planet to exploit, the looming resource shortage increasingly forces the economic game to be zero-sum: one person’s gain must be another person’s, or many other people’s, loss. Thus, the nature of growth makes ambition, whether “merely” for self-advancement or for the domination of others, problematic too, in a purely empirical-economic sense. As I already noted, it is also problematic because it causes unnecessary ANXIETY

and stress.¹⁰ And it is not even guaranteed to be conducive to professional success.¹¹ Why can't we all just chill instead?

A small goat

An insight into why a state of general moderation in matters of ambition (which is what Adam Smith was advocating) is unstable over time can be found in the dynamics of POWER. As Hannah Arendt observed, "Power, like action, is boundless; it has no physical limitation in human nature, in the bodily existence of man, like strength. Its only limitation is the existence of other people, but this limitation is not accidental, because human power corresponds to the condition of plurality to begin with."¹² The nature of power would thus seem to ensure that for as long as there is a society, ambition will be prone to getting out of control.

In elementary school, I once scandalized a teacher by claiming not to want to become a cosmonaut, presumably because there was "enough to do on earth" (this was during the first few years of the space race, when the Soviets were still winning the prestige war). Little did she know that I was being groomed by my PARENTS for a much more illustrious—in their eyes, and soon in mine—career as a scholar. My father, who was in charge of this aspect of my upbringing, never told me in this many words that he expected me to become a famous scientist; it was merely explained to me that as a Jew I must always be "better than the *goyim*" to get anywhere at all in life (true enough for the USSR). At the same time, edifying stories about Nobel laureates somehow kept creeping into conversation.

Adam Smith, who grew up fatherless, never married, and had no CHILDREN, offered this advice on ambition to his young students at Glasgow, where he taught MORAL philosophy:

Never enter that play from whence so few have been able to return; never come within the circle of ambition; nor ever bring yourself into comparison with those masters of the earth who have already engrossed the attention of half of mankind before you.

I sometimes wish I had read Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in my YOUTH or at least that social media were invented a bit earlier. I just might have come in time across a pearl such as this post by an anonymous Twitter user who goes by the name of "spacegirl incognito" and who may or may not have read Smith:¹³

Career Advisor: Well, there are a number of job options available in all of your potential fields.

Me: please I just want to be a small goat on the side of a mountain.

Of related interest

To watch:

Akira Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood* (1957)

Werner Herzog, *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, 1972)

Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

Miloš Forman, *Amadeus* (1984)

Nicolas Roeg, *Insignificance* (1985)

To listen:

Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 10* (1910)

Foreigner, "Juke Box Hero" (1981)

To read:

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1606)

William Butler Yeats, "What Then?" (1939)

Sandra Newman, *The Heavens* (2019)

To go:

Visit the Ozymandias ruins and the stele of Merneptah.

If the uncertainties of life are inescapable, existential anxiety can only be alleviated either by escaping life (as per Hamlet's advice to Ophelia, "get thee to a nunnery"), or by taking measures against the FEAR that life instills. A familiar source of thoroughly spelled out and often quite effective ideas along these lines is of course RELIGION. A clear example is the Buddhist concept of refuge,⁵ as expressed in the Triratna or Three Jewels formula:

I take refuge in the Buddha.
 I take refuge in the dharma [teaching].
 I take refuge in the sangha [community].

In contrast, in Proverbs 3:25, the down-to-earth Old Testament tells the readers to carry on with what they're doing, while deflecting their fear with a promise of personal protection:

Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh.
 For the Lord shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken.

If one's fears are not thereby reduced to naught, there are still a few things to try: several cognitive behavioral therapeutic methods developed in recent decades are known to be effective in alleviating anxiety.⁶ Just how effective they turn out to be in each case depends on the patient.

What—me worry? Yes

It may be that cognitive therapies work better than other therapies against anxiety because anxiety arises from THINKING and other cognitive processes to begin with. People's predisposition to anxiety seems to depend on intelligence, but not quite in the way the popular culture has it. In the general population, there is no clear association between IQ and anxiety.⁷ Some studies, though, show a U-shaped dependence: both lower and exceptionally high cognitive functioning are associated with an elevated risk of anxiety.⁸

Lower than average cognitive functioning promotes generalized anxiety because it implies more difficulty in understanding how the world works. On the other side of the cognitive ability scale, understanding the world too well is not an unallayed good either. One reason for this may be the increased ability of high-IQ individuals to imagine negative outcomes, in a world where, thermodynamically speaking, there are generally many,

many ways for things to go wrong for each way in which they can come out right. Another mechanism may have to do with a generally increased awareness of the goings-on in the world, mediated by what has been called the “overexcitability” of the intellectually gifted. The original Polish word for this concept, coined by Kazimierz Dabrowski, is *nadpobudliwosc*. This word shares the Indo-European root morpheme *bud* with “Buddha,” the appellation of the Awakened One, whose insights into SUFFERING seem pertinent here.

Of related interest

To watch:

Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solaris* (1972)

Tom Tykwer, Achim von Borries, and Hendrik Handloegten, *Babylon Berlin* (2017)

To listen:

The Rolling Stones, “Mother’s Little Helper” (1966)

R.E.M., “Losing My Religion” (1991)

To read:

Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963)

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Град обреченный* (*The Doomed City*, 1972/1989/2016)

Philip K. Dick, *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* (1974)⁹

To go:

Peek under the bed.

4 Beauty

The imminence of a revelation. Evolutionary bait and switch. Between the world and a grain of sand. The pathos of things. The seven sad senses of beauty.

La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo; esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético.

(Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon.)

—Jorge Luis Borges, *The Wall and the Books*¹

“If you can see a thing whole,” he said, “it seems that it’s always beautiful. Planets, lives. . . . But close up, a world’s all dirt and rocks. And day to day, life’s a hard job, you get tired, you lose the pattern. You need distance, interval. The way to see how beautiful the earth is, is to see it as the moon. The way to see how beautiful life is, is from the vantage point of death.”

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

The imminence of a revelation

More and more often as the years go by, beauty makes me feel as Moses must have felt, I imagine, when from the top of Mt. Nebo he beheld the promised land that he knew he himself was fated never to attain. Everything that ever strikes me as beautiful—a thistle poppy blooming in a desert canyon, a thunderbird petroglyph on the canyon wall, a well-turned pot, the old potter’s hands, a poem, a face glimpsed in a crowd, purple shadows creeping up a mountain range at sunset—always evokes yearning, and

always remains elusive: intangible, or fleeting, or utterly unattainable, a promise made to be broken, an obscure revelation.

At such times, when I should in fairness be content to just *be* in the presence of beauty, I feel driven to *do* something, anything, about it. But what can one do? What could I possibly do about a beautiful face that would stem the yearning? I once knew a girl who loved to be kissed on the eyelids while I held her face by the ears, which were of perfect size, shape, and position for that purpose. It felt great. And then what? You can't hold a person by the ears forever. And all those flowers and sunsets, why are they even in the same category here? What do you hold those by? And what's with the urge to hold on to things, anyway? Craving and attachment are bad for you—wouldn't we be better off not knowing beauty?

It seems to me that those by whom beauty goes unnoticed—whether because they were never trained to notice it, or because life beats them down and keeps them too hungry and afraid to look out, or because they, having read Laozi or the Buddha, choose peace and quiet over beauty and anguish—are worse off for it. My views in this matter have been shaped by a secondhand rendition of a Sufi parable, which I chanced across as a teenager:

And I recall again the words of Saadi, who “used his life to embrace the Beauty of the World”:

“You who stop by the poet’s grave, think well of him!

- He gave his heart to the earth, even though he had circled the world like the wind that spread around the universe the perfume of his heart’s garden.
- For he had ascended the Towers of Maan, Contemplation, and heard Simaa, the Music of the World, leading one into halet, joy.
- The entire world is full with this joy and dance—are we the only ones who are oblivious to its wine?
- A drunk camel makes light of his load. When hearing an Arab song, he becomes joyous. How then would we call a man who does not feel this joy?
- He is a donkey, a dry log.”²

A Sufi saint may be capable of contemplating beauty without acting on it—not I. I never managed to develop a penchant for not-acting—for standing down, standing back, choosing “not-doing,” *wu wei*—even as I approach the age at which ACTION grows tiresome.³ I like to think that there is a consistency, as well as a certain rebellious quality, to my stance. Were I to forgo trying to do something about beauty, I would be surrendering it unconditionally to TIME—that which makes the face disappear in the crowd, the

sun set, the flower fade. With my rational mind I *know* that there will be another sunset tomorrow, another desert bloom next year, another beautiful face lit momentarily by a streetlight, at dusk, in the rain, in a foreign city. But I still *feel* saddened by today's beauty in its passing. And even if I am still around tomorrow or next year, and am brought again into the presence of beauty, will I know any better what to do, or how to be? And how will I *feel* about it?

Evolutionary bait and switch

The distinction between rational THINKING and feelings, which I just invoked, is a classical one. Young John Keats, who went on to equate beauty with TRUTH in a poem that brought him posthumous fame, had avowedly preferred feeling over thinking: "O for a life of sensation rather than of thoughts! It is a 'Vision in the form of Youth,' a shadow of reality to come."⁴ Truth to be told, though, this distinction is less clear-cut than the Romantics would have it: neither feeling without thinking nor thinking without feeling is what people normally do, or can do with any ease. EVOLUTION has seen to it that all perception and all thinking are tinged with emotion and are accompanied by valuation, which in turn brings about craving or aversion, and predisposition to ACTION. The experience of beauty, which involves both feeling and thinking, is no different.⁵

We can thank—and blame—this twofold nature of beauty for making us capable in principle of seeing it even in the most abstract realms of thought, such as SCIENCE or pure MATHEMATICS.⁶ The deeper you think about the world and the stronger you feel it, the more likely you are to experience the imminent revelation of its beauty—and to feel let down when in the end it eludes you.

It is the emotional essence of the sense of beauty that keeps it from being an unadulterated blessing. This makes it unexceptional, as none of evolution's gifts are perceived by us as purely good. Like HAPPINESS, which is always shadowed by and alternates with unhappiness, our capacity to experience beauty is a complicated evolutionary legacy. The complications began as the emotions felt toward certain objects and situations started to spill over from the realm of sex and survival. The eventual emergence of the capacity for abstract thought, which yet remained enmeshed in emotions, extended our sense of beauty, until it encompassed all of human

- Third, the futility: there is (again, in the long run) nothing that we can *do* about beauty.
- Fourth, the tension: on the one hand, the ubiquitous beauty of the world and on the other hand—the hardships of EXISTENCE.
- Fifth, the ass-backwardness: we get better at discerning beauty as we get older, by which time most of it is behind us, like the great desert of Sinai was for Moses at Mt. Nebo.
- Sixth, the inescapability: once we discover beauty and are moved by it, there is no way back to the peaceful status quo ante.
- Seventh, the letdown: the better we know beauty, the clearer it becomes that there are at least seven senses in which it is rather sad.

Of related interest

To watch:

Yasujirō Ozu, *Equinox Flower* (1958)

Julie Taymor, *Frida* (2002)

Jennifer Peedom, *Mountain* (2018; based on a book by Robert Macfarlane)

To listen:

Georges Brassens, “Ballade des dames du temps jadis” (1953; lyrics by François Villon, 1489)

Leonard Cohen, “Suzanne” (1967)

Elis Regina and Antônio Carlos Jobim, “Águas de Março” (1972)

To read:

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, “Autumn Mountain” (1921)

W. L. Rusho, *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* (1983)

Shimon Edelman, *Beginnings* (2014)

To go:

Sinai; Death Valley; Dasht-e-Lut.

5 Children (The Raising of)

Be good. Plan B. Other ways to be.

וְהָשִׁיב לִב־אֲבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְלִב בָּנִים עַל־אֲבוֹתָם

(And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers.)

—Malachi 3:24

Comprendió con alguna amargura que nada podía esperar de aquellos alumnos que aceptaban con pasividad su doctrina y sí de aquellos que arriesgaban, a veces, una contradicción razonable. Los primeros, aunque dignos de amor y de buen afecto, no podían ascender a individuos; los últimos preexistían un poco más.

(He comprehended with some bitterness that he could expect nothing of those students who passively accepted his doctrines, but that he could of those who, at times, would venture a reasonable contradiction. The former, though worthy of love and affection, could not rise to the state of individuals; the latter pre-existed somewhat more.)

—Jorge Luis Borges, *Las Ruinas Circulares*¹

Be good

According to an old academic joke, God would be denied tenure at a university because he had only one publication (and even that was not peer-reviewed).² *One* happens also to be the number of children raised by my late father. Mine was the case he cut his parenting teeth on and, for better or for worse, it had his undivided attention.

EVOLUTION sees to it that child-rearing works—on the average. One of my kids asked me once when he was small how he would know how to raise *his* children once he had them. My reply at the time sincerely tried to

reassure (“No worries, you just will”), but now I know better. Considering how much room there is for PARENTS to screw things up, his apprehension was entirely justified. It is always heartwarming to see an individual case that has not been completely botched, but low-to-moderate expectations should really be the rule here.³

ANXIETY about one’s performance as a parent is a sign of caring about one’s children. Such caring would seem to go without saying, yet it cannot be taken for granted—surprisingly, for reasons that are also evolutionary.⁴ Just how much *I* must have meant to my father I eventually inferred from a remark of his: if you have children, you can be made to do anything—an inconvenient TRUTH to share with a child, but perhaps forgivable if offered by a survivor of a world WAR and a decade in the Gulag.

There was another thing he said to me once, which any child of privilege would find it easier to relate to: being a parent means always trying to anticipate where your child will stumble, so that you can rush there and spread some straw to soften the fall. This sounds almost too good to be true, until you remember that there can be too much of a good thing, including protectiveness. The trick is to decide, on a case by case basis and ahead of time, how much straw, if any, is called for, and to act accordingly. The same goes for every other thing that you may be conceivably be called to decide upon in relation to your kids. Do that, and you’re good.

Plan B

You can tell you’ve been good if your children grow up and leave and get a life and occasionally come back HOME to visit and everyone gets a kick out of it and looks forward to the next visit. But what if your intentions have been good all along, yet the plan of ACTION turns out years later to have been faulty? The “arrow of TIME” bars the undoing of any past action, but it hurts the most if it’s between you and your kids.⁵ The only available options are either to make amends for past mistakes going forward, or to make your experience into an example for someone else—perhaps for your own children—of how not to behave.⁶

In either case, this can only work if at least some insight is gained into what happened. This is not easy, to say the least. Whatever intuitions we have about the dynamics between parents and children, there is also an objective reason for it being difficult: the overwhelming COMPLEXITY of social

interactions. An individual's behavior is unpredictable enough; in a nuclear family, the matters are much complicated by strong emotions, the *POWER* differential in favor of the parents, and the countermeasures deployed by children, making the dynamics exponentially harder to fathom. Because of this, it is very hard to figure out in each particular case what exactly went wrong and when, or to devise an intervention even if the causes of the situation do become clear.

The parents' suspicion that things are not going as well as they should often intensifies as the kids grow up. Once they hit adolescence, the simmering conflict is ready to boil over. The several years that follow are not much fun either for the parents or for the kids. It may be a scant comfort to a family that feels under siege, but it pays to remember that the conflict serves a purpose: power must be redistributed and relationships redefined, to prepare the kids for leaving *HOME*—preferably, without burning the bridges.⁷

Other ways to be

In managing the parent-child conflict, and in identifying and making up for past mistakes, we can and should rely on any human qualities that can offset basic evolutionary urges. Dispersal (the technical term for leaving home) may be a universal biological trait (even plants do it), but only humans can negotiate the terms for it, rather than being driven exclusively by blind instinct. In doing so, we have recourse to many tools that are part of our cultural traditions.⁸

My own views on these matters are necessarily skewed by my being an only son and a father only to sons. They have also been shaped by the culture I grew up in, which values individuality and resoluteness over sociability and compromise, as well as by the culture into which I assimilated myself, which in addition also encourages seeking professional help in matters of personality and of social life. But there are as many or more ways of being human as there are cultural groups on earth, and many ways of being a parent.⁹ The more we learn about those and the more we reflect about what we have learned, the better we can cope with the burden that we bear together with our children. And there is no better place for setting the burden down for a while and for reflecting together on what it all means than the desert:

Out here, there is another way to be.
There is a rising brightness in the rock,
a singing in the silence of the tree.
Something is always moving, running free,
as quick and still as quail move in a flock.¹⁰

Of related interest

To watch:

Yasujirō Ozu, *Late Spring* (1949)

Wim Wenders, *Paris, Texas* (1984)

To listen:

Cat Stevens, "Father and Son" (1970)

Paul Simon, "Mother and Child Reunion" (1972)

Steve Miller Band, "Fly Like an Eagle" (1976)

To read:

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Circular Ruins* (1970e)

Ursula K. Le Guin, "Solitude" in *The Birthday of the World* (2002)

To go:

Hiking in the wilderness, with the kids.

security of Nazi Germany (including its army, navy, air force, the Nazi party, the Gestapo, military intelligence, and the foreign service) was founded on the supposedly intractable combinatorial complexity of a certain coding method, a “polyalphabetic substitution cipher.” This was incorporated into a family of electromechanical rotor-based encryption/decryption devices, the Enigma. Unfortunately for the German war effort, both the physical and the mathematical components of the Enigma project met with bad luck.

First, an employee of the German defense ministry’s cipher division sold information about the Enigma machine’s rotor construction to the Poles, who at the time were frantically preparing for the looming German aggression. This critical intelligence allowed Polish mathematicians to make significant progress in understanding how the Enigma encryption scheme worked. Then, just before Poland was overrun by the German tanks in September 1939, the Poles sent all the intelligence they had on the matter, as well as an actual Enigma machine they had captured, over to England. There, it soon landed on the desk of another mathematician, Alan Turing.⁶

Back in the forest

The Enigma story shows that computational intractability can sometimes be effectively countered by a combination of mathematical genius and computing power made possible by TECHNOLOGICAL ingenuity (not without help from other human traits such as greed and STUPIDITY).⁷ We must recognize, though, that this piece of action, along with the war of which it was part, and indeed the entire history of our species to date, has been playing out in one of those metaphorical “clearings” in the surrounding dark forest of complexity.

The tractability of basic-survival tasks such as foraging for food or finding a mate, to which we owe our existence, is a sign of a deeper regularity in the make-up of the Universe. The “laws” of physics that describe the Universe are fundamentally simple, and it is this simplicity—think of the physical inertia of the body of an antelope, which prevents it from making too sharp a turn when it flees from a cheetah—that makes the Universe predictable enough to enable foresight-based survival (it is also what makes SCIENCE possible).⁸

The effects of complexity, in contrast, kick in when we try to figure out “the” cause of an actual event, or to anticipate the behavior of a given complex system such as a particular animal’s brain in a specific case (as opposed

to the statistical traits of a species). Complexity also besets all attempts at optimizing one's behavior instead of "satisficing" the known constraints.⁹ It also disproportionately characterizes "unnatural" problems such as predicting the behavior of a herd of stock market investors (as opposed to natural ones such as predicting the behavior of a herd of wildebeest). In those unnatural situations, we find ourselves straying too far from our clearing into the thickets of complexity.

Over the course of EVOLUTION, we have developed certain safeguards that keep us from getting bogged down in intractability while taking care of the business of daily survival. One such mechanism is emotions, which are computational shortcuts designed to avoid problems that are intractable when attacked frontally.¹⁰ It is relevant that emotions are obligatory in that we cannot consciously choose not to experience them (the ability to do so would be a serious evolutionary handicap). Another mechanism is the subjective feeling of having FREE WILL, a good objective excuse for which is the intractability (and in some cases undecidability) of questions concerning the future behavior of self and others.

Complexity also dictates the kind of MORALITY that creatures with finite computational resources might go by. The full potential consequences of any nontrivial ACTION are too complex for the human mind to compute, and so we must rely on emotions, EMPATHY, generalizations from MEMORY, and rules of thumb instead. As to the ultimate evolutionary adaptation to the complexity of the Universe, it may be, as Robert Musil has surmised,¹¹ nothing other than STUPIDITY:

All of us are stupid on occasion: there are also times when we must act blindly (or at least half-blindly), otherwise the world would stand still; and if one derived from the hazards of stupidity the general rule: "refrain from all judgments and decisions which you don't sufficiently understand," we would simply be paralysed!

It looks like even people who never heard of Musil know enough about life to do just that, which explains a lot about the state the world is in.

Of related interest

To watch:

Michael Apted, *The Imitation Game* (2014; or just read the book about Turing, listed below)

To read:

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph" ([1940] 1970a)

Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (1983)

To go:

To Bletchley Park.

7 Consciousness

The Tempest in a teapot. The insubstantial pageant. We are such stuff as dreams are made on. The splendor and the misery.

Con alivio, con humillación, con terror, comprendió que él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo.

(With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him.)

—J. L. Borges, *Las Ruinas Circulares*

The Tempest in a teapot

When Shakespeare's Jaques, in *As You Like It*, speaks his most famous lines—"All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players"—his very act of uttering these words confirms their truth: inside the Globe Theater, the stage *is* the world. There is a deeper truth here, however. It can be glimpsed in Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, in the revelation made by Prospero, the weary magician and his creator's alter ego:

. . . These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

the processing of information by otherwise inanimate matter, or in other words, computation. The same goes for consciousness of the world and for the eye at the center of the world. Self-consciousness emerges when a representation tasked with modeling the world, so as to better understand and predict its workings, turns back on itself, giving rise to a *self-model*.

The full account of how this could be true, and of why it most likely *is* true, can here only be pointed at in passing.⁷ Particularly telling, though, are experiments that have demonstrated that all the components of the experienced self boil down to computations that can be easily subverted. It is now possible to induce controlled illusions of body ownership, out-of-body experiences, and the ownership of actions coupled with the ability to anticipate their outcomes, which we experience as a sense of agency. The outcomes of these interventions on self-consciousness are fully explained by a computational theory built around the notion of a virtual self.⁸ Had Prospero been of this world, rather than dreamt by Shakespeare and his readers, there is a clear and definite sense in which he would be a dream of Prospero's.

The splendor and the misery

Basic consciousness, or being aware of the world, with all its *BEAUTY*, can bring much joy. Self-consciousness—being aware of that awareness, as well as of one's self—is a different matter. Given the frequency of mind-wandering and the predominance of unconscious processes in cognition, it would seem that awareness of awareness and of the self is not absolutely necessary for dealing with the world.⁹ Why have it, then, if it brings more misery than splendor?

An indictment of self-consciousness runs to several counts. First, it is a well-known impediment to the pursuit of *HAPPINESS*, which goes astray when done consciously. Second, it is a precondition for *SUFFERING*: although the capacity for pain is included with basic consciousness, which always involves emotions, self-consciousness adds the *awareness* of suffering and of its subject. Third, it takes self-directed *THINKING* to reveal the absurdity of *EXISTENCE*, insofar as “the main condition of absurdity” is, as Thomas Nagel so vividly described it, “the dragooning of an unconvinced

transcendent consciousness into the service of an immanent, limited enterprise like a human life.” And, lastly, self-consciousness is what has brought DEATH into the human universe: all other animals, as Borges has noted, are immortal, because they have no conscious awareness of their own mortality.¹⁰

The standard retort to complaints about the human condition—putting it down to EVOLUTION—is scant solace for the poor self-aware self-models, but here, as in many other cases, it’s all we have. Self-consciousness indeed does what it does mostly for our own good, in part because the self-model makes learning from the outcomes of ACTION more effective, by serving as a lightning rod for blame, as well as a receptacle for credit. Liberation from the self, as envisioned by some philosophers and preached by certain religions,¹¹ would annul those benefits.

To be complete, such liberation cannot be merely informational, as when the self attains insight into its own illusory nature, only to carry on with life as usual, subject to suffering and all. A full and true liberation, as preached by the Buddha, is supposed to involve letting go of all worldly desires and attachments. Individuals who are sheltered and provided for, such as monks or people with a trust fund, need not be concerned about this requirement, while for others it presents an economic obstacle. But the real question is whether or not there is *willingness* to do it, given the scope of the sacrifice that it requires: no less than the dissolution of the mainstay of one’s identity. The stage notes for the actors who play some of the spirits in the scene in *The Tempest* with which I opened this chapter provide a fitting description for what this may feel like:

PROSPERO starts suddenly, and speaks; after which, to a strange, hollow, and confused noise, they heavily vanish.

Of related interest

To watch:

Peter Greenaway, *Prospero’s Books* (1991)

Richard Linklater, *Waking Life* (2001)

To listen:

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Буря* (*The Tempest*, 1873)

To read:

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1610–1611)

W. H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944)

Kij Johnson, *The Dream-Quest of Vellitt Boe* (2016)

To go:

See *The Tempest* at The Globe.

8 Death

The tragic sense of life. The Switch. Still The Switch. Only in silence the word.

האֵתָה הוּא הַקֵּץ? עוֹד צָלוּל הַמְרָקָב
עָרְפְּלֵי הַסַּיִם עוֹד רוֹמְזִים מֵרְחוֹק
עוֹד הַשָּׁמַיִם תְּכֵלֵת וְהַדָּשָׁא יָרֵק
טָרָם סָתוּ

(So then, are you the end? But the air is still clear,
The mists of existence beckon still from afar,
And the sky is still blue and so bright is the star
At the end of the year.)

—Rachel, “Are you the end?” (excerpt)

Двум смертям не бывать, одной не миновать.

(There’s no dying twice, no avoiding dying once.)

—Russian proverb

¿De qué otra forma se puede amenazar que no sea de muerte? Lo interesante, lo original sería que alguien lo amenace a uno con la inmortalidad.

(How else can you threaten someone other than with death? It would be interesting and original to threaten someone with immortality.)

—J. L. Borges¹

The tragic sense of life

I inherited my copy of Miguel de Unamuno’s *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations* from the man to the failure of whose suicide attempt at age nineteen I owe my EXISTENCE: my father.² Any book on a serious enough topic that fell into my father’s hands would come out amply marked.

image

not

available