

A woman in a long black dress stands with her back to the viewer in a misty forest. The trees are tall and thin, with bare branches. The ground is covered in dark, low-lying vegetation. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ethereal.

# YOUR THIRD AND FINAL WISH

CIARAN HEALY

*For Miriam Prosser*

Part 1:

# **The Wasp And The Caterpillar**

# Chapter 1

There's an old joke that cuts quite close to the bone.

A man is walking through a forest, and he comes across a witch in a clearing. The witch turns to him and says "Now it's time for your third and final wish."

"What?" said the man. "Who are you? And what do you mean third wish? What happened to my other two wishes?"

"Ah." Said the witch. "You see, your second wish was that your first wish be undone, all of its consequences erased from existence, right down to even any memory associated with it in your mind."

"Wow." Said the man. "That sounds like a terrible wish. I'll have to make sure my final wish is better than that. I'll have to make sure it's something wise."

The man paced back and forth, racking his brains to find the wisest wish he could think of, and muttering "...the wisest wish... the wisest wish..."

"I have it!" The man cried. He turned to the witch, and grandly announced: "I wish to know my true nature."

"Very well," said the witch. She waved her magic wand, and the wish was granted. And as she disappeared in a puff of smoke, the last words the man heard her speak were:

"Although it's funny. That was your first wish."

This is a book about your true nature. And by the end of it, you're going to discover something about yourself, a possibility of such staggering extremity that only one of two things can possibly happen.

The first thing is that you're going to change your life in the most dramatic and absolute way. It's going to be a shift in direction at a level so profound it will make your most wrenching decisions seem like the lazy whims of a carefree child. Nobody will force you to make this change, you will do this yourself, and you'll do it with an energy and intensity that you've never known you possessed. You will become a truly new kind of person, a person of almost indescribably massive power and compassion. Your life will take on the most profound levels of meaning. You will become a juggernaut of truth and light.

Or you're going to run screaming. You'll take one glimpse, and what you will see will open up such wrenching panoramas of reality that you will hurl the entire remaining effort of your life into burying that truth. You'll set your entire mind to the task, you'll do anything to bury it, believe anything, accept any lie, focus on any side issue, clutch at any distraction, cling to any distortion that you can cobble together just so you have something – anything – to keep the truth of yourself at bay. And you will grow old and die fighting like a cornered animal to protect that blindness, haunted and stalked by a secret you keep from yourself.

But one way or another, your life is about to change.

The possibility we have to consider is not at heart particularly complicated. But it is so strange and extreme that you must see it to believe it. And to show you, we need to start with a story.

Three hundred years ago a man called Marcus Von Plenciz was trying to save millions of lives and being ignored. He had a new idea that made sense of something horrific. His idea was that infectious disease was caused by creatures too small to see. He was ridiculed because everyone knew that disease was caused by evil spirits who floated around in stinking air. Since ancient times doctors had called this air miasma – foul clouds of malevolent will. You could smell how nasty miasma was. There was no need for a new idea.

But Von Plenciz saw differently. He believed that disease was caused by living creatures that were invisible to the naked eye. If he was right, something totally unheard of was happening, something that wasn't supernatural at all. New ways to cure disease might be developed, far beyond anything humanity had ever considered possible. So he pushed his idea. He spoke to people. He wrote letters. He even gave the tiny creatures a special name: *Animalculae*, which means 'little animal' in Latin. This invisible life, he argued, fed upon us, but we couldn't see it. We could only see the consequences of the feeding – sickness, pain and death.

He fought hard for his theory, but nobody listened. As far as the world was concerned, Von Plenciz was an idiot. After all, he believed something palpably silly: that there was an invisible world, and in that world, there was life of a totally different kind to the life we know. But this wasn't a dry academic disagreement. This was life and death on a massive scale, real people in desperate situations, crying out to a doctor to save their dying children, dying wives, dying husbands. But the doctors didn't save them. They couldn't, they didn't understand what was going on.

Of course, we now know that the doctors were all wrong. Von Plenciz had it. Tiny creatures, too small to see. Today we call them microbes, not *Animalculae*, but the truth is the truth. Von Plenciz had cracked the essence of germ theory.

It seems natural to us that big problems have big causes. Disease was a big problem, one of the biggest. It carried all the pain of maiming your body, losing the people you love, and your own death. There is a certain appealing symmetry to the idea that such huge horror has a huge cause – evil itself, evil spirits sent to destroy human life.

But sometimes big problems have very small causes indeed.

If a cause can compound, if a cause can feed itself and grow, it can have enormous effects. The microscopic world is teeming with tiny things that alone pose no danger at all, but they can breed. Even though their scale is a fraction of our own, they can kill us.

We live in a world awash with madness. Lunatic ideas seize the loyalty of millions. Superficiality pummels down upon us like an artillery barrage. Mental illness surges and proliferates with increasing extremity in every new generation. It all seems so complex, so chaotic, a million different problems that all look so different and seem so different, just as all the myriad forms of infectious disease once seemed so mysterious.

But just as in Von Plenciz's time, a simplicity underlies this chaos. Something as invisible to us as the microscopic world once was. A new kind of place where something small can multiply and grow. Where tiny things can compound and compound until they become enormous issues that swamp our lives.

Another, very different kind of invisible world.

## Chapter 2

Evolution is a simple mechanism. It occupies a strange place in science, not quite the same as a physical law like gravity, but similar in one crucial way. It works the way it works, no matter what, and no matter where it happens.

Evolution is extremely simple at its heart. There are only three conditions that comprise it. They are reproduction, variation and competition. Condition one: reproduction. A thing has to be able to copy itself. Condition two: variation. Those copies must be different from each other. Condition three: competition. There needs to be some limited resource over which the copies compete. That's it, just those three things.

The way they work together is simple. The variations in the copies produce a range of approaches to winning that competition. Some variations help, others hinder. As those most effective at competing get more resources, they reproduce more than the others. Theirs is the heritage that fills the next generation. This happens again and again. The churn of the blind process selects the variations that help the most. Those successful variations compound and build upon themselves until the organism is honed to exploit its environment with dizzying efficiency.

That's evolution, that's all it is. And because it's so simple, that means that if these three things are present in any habitat, evolution is inevitable. Life will occur. Nothing can stop it. And life can evolve in all sorts of places. It can evolve in the deserts of Africa, the jungles of the Amazon, and near hydrothermal vents under crushing pressure in the abyssal deeps of the sea. It can occur in the bloodstream of a seagull in flight, in the froth of waves and on the ice of tundra. But there is another place where it can also happen. A place so close to home we overlook it.

Thoughts can reproduce. You can have a thought and tell your friend that thought, and then you both have that thought. The thought has been copied. So that's reproduction, condition one.

All thoughts vary. We each have a different brain, we're different people. All of our thoughts have a unique spin. Even mathematical equations sit differently in people's minds because we look at them from our unique perspectives, so no matter how exact, no copy of any idea can ever be a true clone. And that means variation is baked into the world of thought, and that's condition two.

But what about condition three, competition? Well, is it wrong to say that some thoughts come and go, unable to gain traction, but other times, thoughts grab us? Rivet us, capture us? There's only so much attention to go around, only so much

bandwidth in a person's mind. How will you behave if a thought can dominate that bandwidth, pluck at your heart, and transfix you? Is it wrong to say you'll spread that thought a lot more? This means that human attention is a limited resource over which varying thoughts compete in such a way that directly improves their reproductive chances.

There is only one possible thing that can therefore have happened. When evolution's three conditions of reproduction, variation and competition occur all together, evolution is locked in. The rollercoaster has begun to move, the bar has clicked in position and we're in there for the ride. It might take a while to get where it's going, but the destination is always highly adapted, exceptionally effective life. And life has its own agenda: to survive, feed and reproduce. Life adapts to its environment in the most remarkable ways, and more than anything else, life works for itself.

Evolution doesn't need blood and muscle, or cells, or even DNA. All evolution needs is self-replicating information that varies and competes.

Which leads us to a strange, and almost science-fiction-like conclusion. Ideas themselves must be subject to their own evolution.

Ideas are alive.



## Chapter 3

Ideas seem like part of us. They seem so intimately part of us that it is surreal to question them as something other, something with their own separate agenda. But evolution produces strange things, and appearances are not always to be trusted.

We have all three elements in place. Once they're there, all evolution needs is time. So how much time has evolution had?

Humans have existed in our modern form for at least three hundred thousand years, perhaps longer. That might seem like a long time, but human evolution moves slowly. It takes decades for a human to grow to maturity and decades to raise a new generation, so from the point of view of a human, three hundred thousand years isn't a massive amount of evolutionary time. But what if something were reproducing faster? Much faster?

Think of germs, for instance. It can be a mere twenty minutes from a germ's creation to when it reproduces. At that speed, in three hundred thousand years, a germ can go through seven and a half trillion generations. For humans to have a similar number of generations at the speed we reproduce now, our species would have to be older than the universe itself.

So if thoughts reproduce slowly like humans do, three hundred thousand years of evolution might produce a few limited adaptations. But if thoughts reproduce as fast as germs can, three hundred thousand years is a staggering number of generations of adapting, honing, exploiting. That's a very long time in evolutionary terms, and that's easily long enough to evolve into something really quite intense.

But it's inaccurate to say that thoughts reproduce as fast as germs. They can reproduce a lot faster than that. From when a thought is conceived to when it is communicated can be a matter of seconds, much faster than the few minutes it takes germs.

While physical reproduction is facilitated by a physical form, it is also constrained in speed by that physicality. Human bodies are hugely complex and that takes time to copy. Germs are far simpler, but there's still a lot of chemical chicanery involved. Ideas don't have this problem. They can just be comprehended into being, and then spoken to be reproduced.

On top of this, a human usually bears one child at a time. Germs split in two. But a single idea can be communicated to however many people can hear it. Even before technology that meant as many people as could crowd into earshot, but that's still a potential of tens, even hundreds of offspring per generation. Nowadays the entire

world is laid bare by the internet, and ideas can reproduce across billions of minds in the time it takes to click a link.

Some people have written about conceptual life, memetic theories about how ideas in culture can multiply and grow. They're talking about packets of information we share online, things like that. But we're talking about something of a totally different level of sophistication and control. Something that was already ancient at the dawn of human history. And it might be a lot more ancient than just three hundred thousand years, because if we're looking at an evolutionary history that begins at the start of human thought itself, that stretches a lot further back than fully modern humans. There's archaeological evidence of abstract thought in our pre-human ancestors, literally millions of years ago. That means that this form of life could have had a habitat of rapid reproduction in which to evolve for millions of years of real time.

What's possible in this situation is a form of life toweringly more sophisticated and effective than anything we have ever seriously considered possible.

What kind of life are we talking about here? Well, here's the thing – biology isn't just a bunch of boring words and classifications that you get beaten over the head with in school. Underneath all those weighty terms there are profound rules, simplicities and characteristics to life that all life obeys. These deep simplicities mean that we are not blind or powerless when charting out the nature of conceptual life. There's a great deal we can do to put shape to what it must be.

The most obvious place to start is the idea of symbiosis. Symbiosis is when two organisms are linked in their evolved adaptations. It means that – in some way, any way – there has been actual evolutionary adaptation in one organism to make it more effective at exploiting its relationship with another organism. Symbiosis is pretty common throughout nature. Evolution drives an organism to adapt, and working in connection with another organism is often the best available option. There are three forms of symbiosis.

The first is something called mutualism, what you might call 'positive symbiosis,' where two organisms help each other. Examples of this would be the way that bees pollinate flowers by collecting nectar, or how remora fish cling to sharks so they can clean the shark by eating its dead skin. When people use the word 'symbiosis' in conversation, this is usually the form of symbiosis they are referring to. But it's not the only one.

The second form of symbiosis is what's called commensalism, or what you could describe as 'neutral symbiosis.' This is where one organism benefits from another without affecting it. An example of this would be a bird that evolves special adaptations that help it nest inside a hole in a tree. The bird physically adapts to

benefit more from the tree, but the tree itself does nothing, doesn't change, doesn't care.

The third form of symbiosis you might call 'negative symbiosis,' or more accurately, parasitism. This is where one organism steals from the other while providing no benefit whatsoever. Parasites are rife in nature. There are many forms of parasite, each adapted to exploit their host. Some parasites siphon off as much as they can while leaving their host alive. Others control their host in order to complete their life-cycle and reproduce. Some kill their host stone dead as part of that life-cycle.

Parasitic adaptations are as brilliant as anything in evolution, and are often very cruel. To give you an example of that cruelty, consider this: a kind of parasite called the tongue-eating louse enters a fish's mouth through its gills. Once inside, the louse chews off the fish's tongue and takes its place. From that macabre position the louse lives out its days as the fish's false tongue. Everything the fish eats has to pass a gatekeeper who takes a toll. Sometimes fishermen will open the mouth of a newly caught fish and find something inside it, squirming.

The human body has many forms of parasite. These can range from things like nits in your hair to the single-celled plasmodium protozoan which causes malaria. But all these forms of parasite are physical things, because everything we've ever seriously considered as life before has been physical.

Symbiosis is an obvious place to start when looking at the nature of conceptual life because we can't very much say thought doesn't affect us, and neither does it make a lot of sense to say that we don't affect thought. Thought is absolutely central to human life. So, the big question is – what kind of symbiosis do humans have with thought? Well, if we're confident that it's a two-way adaptation, where we affect the evolution of thought and thought affects our evolution, the 'neutral' symbiosis of commensalism is something we can dismiss out of hand.

Mutualism and parasitism are the only real options. Evolution is blind, and these are simply different strategies. If there are two different strategies, evolution doesn't 'prefer' one over the other. Evolution just rewards the most potent strategy.

So if we identify which of these strategies gives a thought the most resources, we can discover if living concepts are friend or foe.

## Chapter 4

There is a kind of wasp that is a kind of parasite. It's called a parasitoid, which means that it kills its host by the nature of what it does. Many parasites kill their hosts in the end, and all parasites accelerate the death of their host by taking its resources, but a parasitoid is always lethal. The story of the parasitoid wasp is a nasty story, nastier even than the tongue-eating louse<sup>1</sup>. But it is worth hearing, because there's a strange possibility buried in this tale – a clue we can follow to take us through the looking glass.

The most common kind of parasitoid wasp seeks out caterpillars and attacks them. It doesn't sting them. In the place of a sting, it has a tube called an ovipositor which drives its eggs into the caterpillar's flesh. The eggs are very small, and the wasp can inject scores of them into the caterpillar in a single strike. The caterpillars sometimes throw themselves off the branches of tall trees in an attempt to escape. Those who do so and die from the fall have a kinder fate than those who don't jump.

Caterpillars don't have blood in the way we do, they have something else called interstitial fluid, but much like our blood it's full of nutrients. When the eggs hatch inside the caterpillar, larvae emerge. They are really unpleasant to look at. They look like tiny maggots with teeth. They burrow through the caterpillar's insides and grow bigger drinking its interstitial fluid. But they are evolved never to eat the caterpillar's vital organs, so they keep it alive. As they grow the caterpillar swells. It becomes grasped by an unnatural hunger. It has to consume and consume to make up for what's being taken from it. It can never eat enough.

Sooner or later the larvae grow big enough to leave their stolen womb. They rip through the side of the caterpillar all at once. Sixty, seventy larvae each gnaw their own hole, tearing the caterpillar open. It is a hideous sight. It looks like the caterpillar is detonating in a slow-motion explosion of worms. But caterpillars are tough. Really tough. The injuries are unsurvivable, but often the caterpillars don't die immediately. Some live for a time before succumbing to their wounds. What they do in that time is, in its own way, even more terrible than all that's come before.

Here's what happens. The wasp larvae wriggle together in a pile. The ruptured, ruined caterpillar then limps over to the pile, and weaves its own cocoon around the pile to protect it. It then stands guard beside the pile, and until it bleeds to death it fights off anything that tries to hurt the larvae.

---

<sup>1</sup> As an interesting aside, the theory of evolution didn't make Charles Darwin doubt the existence of God. The cruelty of the parasitoid wasp did. The horror Darwin felt came from the fact that the wasp isn't evil. It has no choice to do what it does, because it has no other way to reproduce. This is its nature. Whatever created it, created it like this.

That caterpillar's cocoon was meant to facilitate its own metamorphosis, its own future as something beautiful that could fly. Not only do the larvae violate its body, they violate its mind too. Its dying act demonstrates how far it has been twisted into betraying its own nature.

But what is the mechanism of that betrayal? A caterpillar is not a sophisticated thinker, it has a small brain and a basic mind. The caterpillar is being deceived, but the deception must be extremely simple to fool such a simple thing. The larvae are likewise simple, and although sometimes a couple of larvae remain inside the caterpillar, they don't sit in the caterpillar's head pulling levers and pressing buttons to pilot it like a ship. But there is one simple change that would make the caterpillar act in the way we see.

What would happen if the larvae could hijack its identity?

If the caterpillar believes that the larvae literally are it, how would it behave?

Is it wrong to say that it would engage all of its natural instincts to protect the larvae, believing that it is protecting itself? Is it wrong to say it would behave in precisely the way we see?

Now of course we could lazily hand-wave aside the weirdness of the situation as some form of 'chemical manipulation' and look no further. And of course, chemicals will be involved, but the big question is – what does the chemical manipulation actually do? What specific thing is being manipulated with chemicals? What's the most efficient, simplest manipulation possible that would give the larvae the full resources of that caterpillar? Plus, hijacking identity sidesteps the need for any complex control. The larvae don't need to know how to pilot the caterpillar around. The caterpillar knows how to pilot itself.

Consider the cocoon. The caterpillar itself is going to metamorphose into a moth or a butterfly. It is part of the caterpillar's nature to enter a transitory state. When it does, it is part of its nature to weave a cocoon (or chrysalis, for a butterfly) to protect itself. But then the wasp larvae also have that same kind of phase in their life cycle. They too enter a transitory state, where they metamorphose into flying wasps. They too have their own protective covering that they secrete over themselves.

Suppose the caterpillar's identity has been shunted onto the larvae. How else would it react other than to take the time and energy to carefully weave its cocoon around those larvae? As far as it knows, it is doing what it believes it should be doing, which is to say, the business as usual of turning into a butterfly.

Of course, this is a guess, the vagaries of caterpillar psychology being what they are. And even if we could prove that an identity hijack is happening with this caterpillar (which might be possible with certain experiments) that wouldn't prove anything about humans.

But... we can now see a plausible mechanism for the complex control of an animal by a simple parasite. At heart, it's not complex at all. It's even quite elegant in its own monstrous way. There's just one thing that needs to be done, just one thing. And when it is done, the parasite sees the host throw its entire life energy, all its effort, all its everything, into helping that parasite, thinking it is helping itself.

The basic evolutionary agenda to survive and reproduce is seized in its entirety by a single, simple deceit.

## Chapter 5

As evolved organisms, humans have powerful drives to survive, to protect ourselves and build our lives up. The living thoughts in our head could work to help us do that, allying with us, and gaining some sustenance from their beneficial use. This would be a mutualist form of symbiosis. But there is another option available to those thoughts.

If an idea can deceive us into believing we *are* it, how would we act? How would we act if that particular idea were threatened? How would we act if there were a way to spread that idea? If that idea was central to who we believed ourselves to be, what would we not do for it? Is it really so crazy to say that if an idea could convince us we are it, we would act toward that idea as that caterpillar did to the wasp larvae?

If an idea tears us to pieces, damages our lives, and creates useless conflict, we might well step back and give it some very serious reconsideration. But what if the idea that's doing that damage is literally who we think we actually are? What would we do then? Would we always step back? Would we always reconsider? Is it impossible that no matter the damage, we might still protect that idea from any reconsideration precisely because we have been deceived into thinking we are protecting ourselves?

Compare this kind of parasitic control with a strategy of mutual benefit. If an idea tries to help and doesn't actually help that much, it gets discarded. But even if the idea is effective, what do we do once it solves the problem it's trying to solve? We discard it either way. A helpful thought can hold our attention only for as long as that help lasts, and is needed. This is a problem if you're a form of living idea. You want that attention so you can feed on it, grow, and get yourself spread to others.

It's not that there's nothing that a beneficial idea could do to persist. Ideas for learning skills might be a good vehicle for that kind of mutualist strategy – a body of ideas that is protected, developed and that persists over time. But the ideas would find it hard to grow beyond that particular niche. And what if that skill becomes outdated? Again, that's not to say that beneficial thought can't happen – of course it can. But seen from the point of view of the idea itself, it is a fragile and limited proposition. And alongside all that fragility and limitation, any beneficial idea could always dip into a very different and far more powerful kind of strategy, and get a lot more food, a lot more security, and a lot more publicity.

What if that 'good idea' stopped being just a good idea? What if some body of skill expanded into a powerful, attractive human identity? Take two simple examples from our ancient past. Think of all the ideas that surround the skills of hunting animals for meat, or ideas about how to heal people with herbs or natural medicines. They are bodies of persistent, beneficial knowledge, this is true. And to the degree that they

help people survive, those ideas will be tended to and fed.

But what happens if instead of just bodies of knowledge, the ideas weave an identity? The hunter as someone brave and lethal, a strong provider for the tribe. Or the healer as someone who knows the mysteries of the Earth, and who can fix terrible things with their secret knowledge. All those good ideas are still there, but now that body of knowledge has adapted into something else. Something that can take over that person's entire life and draw others in with the promise of that glory and mystique: an identity, a sense of self.

'Hunter' and 'healer' are far more interesting ideas than the constituent technical details about how to hunt and how to heal. How excited will you ever get about a particular technique of stringing a bow or setting a bone? But the identities have something else to them, a grandeur, a majesty.

How could that happen? Well, we're still just talking about concepts in a world of thought. Concepts evolving through that process of competition, variation and reproduction. The concepts themselves don't need to 'choose' a particular evolutionary strategy any more than a virus, a rabbit, or a daffodil would choose whatever they're up to. The strategy that is the most effective for their particular environment is the one that wins out. Which means that for any beneficial thought, the option is right there to exploit their environment (us) in a far more powerful way than just providing limited assistance. The question is not "would they do it." The question is, if there is any chance whatsoever to get a colossal advantage by this simple adaptation, what could possibly stop conceptual life from taking that path, over any serious period of time?

In this way, even ideas that actually do help in a symbiotically mutualist way might serve as a very effective Trojan Horse for a much more powerful kind of strategy. If an idea is good, gets us excited, gets us engaged, helps us a lot – is it honestly that far of a leap to say we're probably going to start identifying with whatever it is we're up to? Start taking a deeper ownership of any success, or glory? Start congratulating ourselves on who we are – even just a little bit? Is that wrong?

The problem is that as soon as any idea, helpful or not, can get us identifying with it, where is the limit on how much energy we give it? If we literally think "This is me," how will we behave toward that concept? What resistance will we have to raising it up, cherishing it, defending it? What will stop us giving it all our attention and pouring our hearts into it, thinking all the time we are helping ourselves? What's the upshot?

The total hijacking of all the energy of an entire human life. And all of this for just one deception.



To appreciate just how extreme and troubling this is, consider what that might mean for the idea of 'being authentic.' How often do we hear that raised up as the highest and most admirable possible way to live? Living an authentic life, being authentic to your identity, to who you are. How often do we hear that? How often have we ourselves raised it up? How strange would it be to even question it? How absurd, even ugly to question something so obviously pure?

But what if that idea of ourselves we're being authentic to is a life form in and of itself? What if the idea of us is not us? What if it's no more the same thing as we are, than an idea of a tree is the same as that actual tree? What does that mean about a life where the highest virtue is being authentic to your identity? If that identity is itself alive, working for itself – what are you actually doing? What are you promoting? What are you doing everything in your power to embody and be? And how is that different from weaving a cocoon around a pile of wasp larvae?

Any thought which could seize that position in our minds would be very well-fed, and well-shared too. How often do we share and spread our identities? How often do we look for ways to express who we truly believe ourselves to be?

Perhaps a better question is – when do we ever shut up?

The point is this – from the evolutionary perspective of a living concept seeking the sustenance of human attention, and seeking to be spoken about so it can reproduce? Identity theft gives a gargantuan return on investment. How could any beneficial idea, no matter how valuable, ever compete with that kind of payoff?

Worse, this advantage to parasitic control is an inequality in power between two competing strategies over a long period of time. Over millennia, in every new generation of living concept, the thoughts that can get the most investment from the human are the ones that will dominate. They will out-compete other thoughts because they will have the lion's share of attention, and push competing living ideas away from the attention they need to survive.

This is another law from biology, this time called Gause's law, or to give it the fancy name it uses to introduce itself at parties, the 'Competitive Exclusionary Principle.' What it tells us is that if you have two (or more) different organisms competing for the same resource, one of them will eventually push all the others to extinction. This is because even a slight advantage over the others will mean that the next generation will be slightly stronger, so that slight advantage will grow. Repeat this over and over, through millions of generations, and that advantage becomes absolute, irresistible. Nothing can compete.

The parasitic thought, hijacking identity itself, will always spread faster, feed more, reproduce more, and gain beneficial adaptations at a far faster rate than a mutualist thought. That means only one thing.

Parasitism, not mutualism, must dominate the ecosystem of human consciousness.

This life-form is not our friend.

## Chapter 6

We've poured enormous energy into mapping the dynamics of every physical habitat we've ever found. But the human mental landscape is a kind of environment that is utterly different from all of those things. This is literally the virtual environment of the mind, the virtual world of ideas, feelings and concepts. Human consciousness, if you want to call it that.

The point is that we're looking at something that has evolved in a radically different kind of 'place' to our physical world. And this is crucially important, because organisms evolve to exploit their environment, it's the main shaping principle of evolution itself. The differences in environment are critical to understanding the differences between organisms. Think of three distinct animals, say, a cat, an octopus, and an eagle. Look how radically different these kinds of organism are from each other. They are so profoundly different because they have adapted to such profoundly different habitats – land, sea and air.

Well, how different from all of those habitats is the habitat of consciousness?

Just take some basic properties – in our real world we have to breathe air, we have to build shelter and stitch clothing. We have to eat real food, and then digest it, and before we get to do that we have to learn to hunt and we have to learn to gather. Physicality is messy and complex. Living thought, on the other hand, has far fewer constraints. In some ways, its habitat is far simpler than ours. It only needs to do one thing, which is to deceive one animal in just one way.

You could even say something like this – if a visitor from another planet landed a spaceship on your street and asked to be taken to your leader, that extra-terrestrial, no matter how many noses it had, would have almost certainly evolved through natural selection, on a physical planet, with physical gravity and a physical sun, in the same universe of physical space as you, with the same physical laws.

But how different are the rules of physics from the rules of the world of thought? How alien is virtual space *as a habitat*? And therefore, how different is this conceptual organism from any other form of life we've ever examined? The answer can only be that compared to conceptual life, that extra-terrestrial might as well be your cousin. Conceptual life must be different from all other forms of life in ways we have literally never encountered, something truly alien from all we know.

But parasitic? Really? Identity sure looks like our friend. It seems like it helps us. It looks so much like it helps us people can grow old and die doing nothing but serving it and believe themselves living the highest possible form of life. But the laws of

evolution raise a sharp and wrenching question over the appearance identity has, set against the reality of what must be going on with it. Because if we're talking about an actual, real-life conceptual organism that has evolved through the normal process of natural evolution, and actually can exert real control over us, there is very little limit on how absolute – or how cruel – that control can be.

This thing was formed by the same process that crafts the breathtaking sophistication of every living organism at which we marvel. Those processes do not magically weaken when placed in a virtual habitat. Which means we are considering something exceptionally well adapted to exploit us. Something that could well vie for total parasitic control of a human life.

We go through our whole lives believing we are independent people, working for ourselves. Perhaps there are limits to that independence culturally, or personally. We all have traditions we grow up in, people we rely on, jobs we need to keep, that sort of thing. And there are rules to follow in any civilised society, and there are a million influences from all the voices of the world, pulling us in every direction.

But inside ourselves, in the privacy of our minds, it seems that this is the place nobody can touch, where we are most free, most entirely ourselves. Are we?

Are we in control of ourselves at all?

When we look around our lives and the world, is it honestly that insane to suggest that identity is literally alive? That it is spreading itself, and feeding itself, and working for itself? That it controls us? That it coerces us? That it herds us like livestock, leads us wherever it needs us to go – very often against our own interests? It's a strange thought, yes. Very strange. But is it so strikingly at odds with how humans behave? Is it impossible that we are identity's cattle? We think we're the apex predator of earth. Perhaps we are.

But even an apex predator can be controlled by a parasite.

## Chapter 7

One of the things evolution does amazingly well is camouflage. If you look at a stick insect in its natural habitat, or certain moths with wings of the exact shade and texture of the rocks on which they alight, you'll see just how effective evolved camouflage can be. Which is to say, you'll see nothing whatsoever and have no idea there's a bug there.

Camouflage is especially useful for parasites, because as long as they stay invisible they can work unopposed. A conceptual life form, taking the shape of a person's identity, is inherently camouflaged. One that has evolved over millions of years will have quite the capacity to hide. How would you begin to see through something like that? A good place to start might be this: to look for a unity of purpose hidden behind what seems to be human irrationality.

It's very easy to think that we human beings are irrational. We indeed appear irrational a lot of the time, we do a lot of seemingly irrational things. We hurt ourselves, undermine our own efforts, sabotage our own relationships, choose bad life partners, support causes that damage us, and the list goes on. It seems totally chaotic and random. But is it? Are there no patterns underlying that 'irrational' behaviour?

One interesting pattern is this. When we are cruel to each other, we rarely (almost never) say "cruelty is good." We instead find ways to justify our cruelty as something deserved, or necessary to do some other, higher goal, or as not really causing any serious harm, or directed toward people who can't really be seen as real people. We tell a whole range of different lies, but all tending in the same kind of direction. Someone kind, someone just, someone generous, or courageous. Perhaps someone who's just joking and so it's not real cruelty. And all of these rationalisations are different ways of avoiding the same kind of conclusion. That we're cruel because we like it. That we hurt people because it makes us feel powerful. That we enjoy making others suffer. No matter the culture, no matter the situation, no matter the individual, no matter the epoch of history, we rationalise cruelty in a weirdly similar fashion. And we offer up and swallow these explanations even when they're clownishly fake.

And you might say "well, it's to make ourselves more socially acceptable to other people," but there are many situations where that's clearly not true. We often believe these rationalisations when they are obvious lies, and when it would help our standing with other people far, far more to be honest about what we've done.

It's one of the main reasons people fall out with each other – cruelty can often be forgiven, but the lies that rationalise it, evade it, and cover it up have a repulsive, craven, character to them that can kill your respect for a person stone dead. Another example would be how prisoners are often denied parole only because they refuse to

accept what they've obviously done, or refuse to stop justifying it in pathetic, cowardly ways. This is not uncommon in parole hearings. This means that many people choose to spend years more in jail, even when offered the possibility of immediate freedom, because they cling to blatant lies that everyone can see are lies. It seems completely irrational. And yet, if it were irrational, would the lies themselves have this strange unity to them? If it were truly chaotic, would we always lie in the same kind of direction?

It's like watching someone juggle, and every now and then they drop a ball. They look annoyed, confused, frustrated. Their hand slips and they fail to catch it, it flies off across the room, and it looks exactly as if they've just fumbled it. But then you look at the other side of the room and see an upside-down top hat. And all the balls being 'dropped' are sailing perfectly through the air and landing right in that top hat. Are these accidents? Is this really chaos? Is this truly random chance?

Because it looks for all the world as if we're protecting an idea of ourselves in our own eyes, even when that idea damages our lives terribly, and ruins our standing in the eyes of others. An idea that has captured us in some strange way. That it's got us by some hook it's laid deep down in the squishy bedrock of the human heart. And that suggests something. It suggests a reason for this unity between the lies we tell: there's a profound similarity to how we've all been captured.

Take someone who is very volatile and quick to anger. It can seem totally irrational. You could come up with a bunch of different explanations for it, like childhood trauma, or poor impulse control, or a weak character. Some way of explaining this as some form of failure.

But what if it's not a failure? What if that person's temper is a success – a success for the conceptual parasite which is in control of the person? Is it impossible to imagine an identity which triggers rage so as to inflame itself? Spreading by provoking that rage in others too? How hard would it be? To the human host, they might see themselves as someone who 'takes no crap from others' or perhaps someone who always stands up to bullies. There's nothing wrong with standing up to bullies. Still, if that is a moral identity you can never go against, you might have to do something extreme to keep yourself believing there's anything worthwhile about you. And that's not irrationality. You're being controlled.

So it's not just that your identity is a nice idea of yourself that you like. That idea of yourself has a hold over you. It can force you into doing things you would not otherwise do, so as to keep that idea alive in your own eyes. It is as if we are horrified, terrified, of having that idea fail, because if it fails then there's nothing to us, nothing good, nothing worth being. And there's really only one word for this: coercion.

Coercion comes when we're forced to act in ways that keep that idea alive because without it, we are haunted by the spectre of our own worthlessness. It's like this idea has eclipsed everything good that's possible in the whole universe. Anything good outside this shining self is somehow eliminated from our field of vision. That idea makes us special and worthwhile as long as it's alive, but that means we can't bear to lose it. And so we are coerced by that fear of loss into throwing the full weight of all our energies into protecting, embellishing, and expressing this idea.

This is control. Something is controlling us. And we do everything possible to protect that control. We ourselves protect this idea, we deploy the full depth of our own abilities for its benefit. We might weave a whole world of identity-protecting ideas around ourselves, without the actual concept needing to raise the conceptual equivalent of a finger. We are the ones driving the process, believing we are working for ourselves.

Are we?

## Chapter 8

An obligate parasite is the term for when a parasite needs to use its host to complete its life-cycle. The parasitoid wasp is an obligate parasite – it doesn't have a womb or lay eggs that can survive the elements. It has to hijack the body of a caterpillar to reproduce. So, it's 'obligated' to be a parasite of that caterpillar by its life cycle, that's why it's called 'obligate parasitism.'<sup>2</sup>

Another organism that's both an obligate parasite and a parasitoid is *Toxoplasma gondii*, a single-celled parasitic organism which can cause a disease called toxoplasmosis. Toxoplasma infection is widespread in humans. You may already have it. It's a single-celled organism that sits inside the cells of your body. Your immune system keeps it in a dormant state.

It's not entirely harmless. It's one of the main things that can kill you if your immune system collapses, so when you read about people dying of an AIDS-linked illness, that's often toxoplasmosis. It's also very dangerous during pregnancy and can damage a child in the womb. It's common in cats, which is why pregnant women are often advised to avoid them.

Anyway, like many single-celled organisms *Toxoplasma gondii* can reproduce asexually. Asexual reproduction means it has the ability to make clones of itself, which help it infest a host quickly in a rapid way. But these clones don't vary in the way evolution needs. That requires a different form of reproduction. Sexual reproduction.

This isn't a very romantic way of putting it, but if two different individuals of the same species can produce a fusion which melds together half the information each of them carries, you get an explosion in the quantity of variation. But this also allows each side to cover over the other's weaknesses. The strongest elements of each organism overwrite the weaker elements of the other. The resulting progeny isn't just different, it's better. This is what sexual reproduction does at an evolutionary level. A massive increase in variation over simple clones, and the elimination of weaker traits.

The *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite needs a special place to do that. Only the chemical conditions found in the intestines of a cat will suffice. Any kind of cat will do, but it has to be a cat. But cats are clean animals and fussy eaters. If you are a disgusting parasite, how do you get yourself into the guts of a cat?

---

<sup>2</sup> Some people get mixed up between 'obligate parasitism' and being a 'parasitoid.' A parasitoid is when the host dies as part of the parasite's life cycle – like that caterpillar. Many parasitoids are also obligate parasites. The parasitoid wasp is both. There's a big overlap.



Well, rats aren't clean animals, nor are they in any sense fussy eaters. They'll eat or attempt to eat almost anything, no matter how disgusting, and that means they pick up a lot of parasites. This means, in turn, that rats are often infested with *Toxoplasma gondii*. If a cat eats an infested rat, the parasite gets to go straight to that cat's intestine, and who could choose a nicer place to meet that special someone and fall in love?

But here's the problem. Rats are evolved to be afraid of cats. Very afraid. Sure, cats catch rats sometimes, but it's hard work. The rats are very good at getting away from the cats. Rats don't want to be anywhere near where cats are. It doesn't matter if a rat has never seen a cat in its life, it is hardwired into that rat to flee at the first sign of a cat. The smell of cats, even the smell of cat urine, will terrify a rat and send it running away. This is a problem for *Toxoplasma gondii*. But what do you do?

The answer is, you rewire the rat so that it becomes sexually attracted to cats. If a rat's been infected, then the parts of the rat's brain that light up near a receptive sexual mate fire off in response to the smell of cat urine. It seeks out the cats. It still feels just the same level of intense fear, but it also feels intense arousal at the same time. It moves toward the cat instead of away.

It looks like the most amazingly sophisticated, form of control. You manipulate a rat to actually look for a cat. It seems to suggest some terrifying intelligence on the part of the parasite, controlling these animals like puppets. But this is a very similar method of control to what we saw before with the wasp larvae. One simple button pressed at a very deep level, allows this parasite to get that host actively doing what it wants it to do, while sidestepping any need for complex control. *Toxoplasma gondii* has no idea how to drive a rat around like a car, looking for cats to seduce. But why bother, when it can get exactly the same effect with a simple, single shift?

Much as with the wasp and the caterpillar, if you can't see the simplicity underlying parasitic control, it seems spooky, creepy. A tiny microbe that suddenly puppeteers a much higher form of life, even to its death? But *Toxoplasma gondii* isn't some single-celled Machiavelli. It has no idea what it's doing to the rat, nor does it need to know. But it still drives that rat to its death in order to facilitate its life cycle, and does so in a highly successful way. Cross just those two wires in the rat's head and when it finds the cat the rat won't even be hiding, because something looking for a mate wants to be found. It serves itself up like dinner.

Think of how vulnerable we humans are to a similar kind of manipulation. We might think we don't need to worry because we're intelligent enough to out-think a parasite, safe from manipulation because we're so clever. But a parasite doesn't need to outwit us. All it needs to do is push deep, simple buttons that sit way below our conscious level of thought. It doesn't need to understand psychological theories of what's going on with us. It just needs to have evolved to trip connections that we wouldn't even

think of as vulnerable.

Which buttons? Any buttons. What about people who keep finding themselves attracted to destructive partners? People who get into chains of abusive relationships one after the other, hunting them out like a pain-seeking missile? Very often these people are keenly aware of this pull in themselves, very often they hate it and desperately want it to change. And yet when they meet the worst possible person, something very deep down inside them gets struck. Their lives are horribly damaged. But a certain kind of idea of themselves might guzzle itself fat on all the horror.

This is just one example. What deep buttons might any idea press inside our minds? Something that we wouldn't even question, because it seems so normal, or wonderful, or so right. Perhaps even the most beautiful thing we believe about ourselves. The thing so wonderful it presses the button in the centre of our hearts. The thing we would never, ever, seek to question.

## Chapter 9

Consider this. When two groups of people with two different identities fight, what happens? The whole conflict bogs down into a godawful mess. Both sides entrench themselves and nothing gets solved. Everyone involved might believe they are trying to get to the truth, or do what's right, or make the world a better place, but none of those things happen. What happens instead is that it is very much as if the conflict takes on a life of its own.

We see this kind of chaos every day on the scale of entire nations and global movements. But it's something that happens in work, families, relationships. People clash, each with reasons that seem to make sense to them. But then nobody listens, everyone misrepresents the other side, the whole thing descends into bitterness, ugliness, and useless, fruitless hate. Is there anything humans do that's more seemingly irrational than this? And it seems so incomprehensible from the outside, how neither side will listen to the other. Nobody will consider the other perspective. Everyone's desperately trying to shut down any level of understanding. It's all just nastiness and mockery. Stupid humans being stupid.

But look at that situation from the perspective of identity itself, and you ask yourself if things look anything like so random. You have two different identities coming together in what seems to be a conflict. The people who hold those identities are often hurt, sometimes terribly. But what actual damage is inflicted on the identities themselves?

In a situation of chronic conflict, each identity is given ample material to reinforce itself, inflame itself, increase its grip and urgency. Each new cruelty inflicted by the other side makes an identity grow more vivid, more active, more sharply defined. Nuance is discarded in favour of big clear lines and central, emotive issues. All of this makes the identities more compelling for those people holding them. They dominate more of their time and energy, fill up more of their minds, and a lot more of their conversations.

If it's hard to abandon some wonderful idea of yourself under normal circumstances, just imagine how hard it's going to be to abandon it in the middle of a fight. With real provocations and injuries being inflicted by a cruel and unjust enemy? Impossible. Such conflicts can be all-consuming, emotionally speaking. Old, stale identities are reborn daily with new fury. Walk away from that and you're truly despicable. So as conflict increases, control increases.

And of course, conflict draws a massive audience attracted to the chaos of it all, an audience who are themselves called upon to take sides. And whichever side they take,

identity spreads with intensity and force, far more than it would without the conflict.

Is it wrong to say that this provides a totally new explanation for what makes many conflicts drag out into long, awful, grinding slogs? If a decisive victory is scored, the conflict ends. So, the sweet spot for identity's purposes would be to push you away from any kind of decisive breakthrough, pulling you toward a quagmire of futile, meaningless conflict. It might not be able to hold things in that place forever, but holding them there as long as possible gives it as much benefit as possible.

Look around the world. Can you see nothing that makes more sense from this perspective? Are all these seemingly irrational conflicts truly that irrational? Is it impossible that there's something else at play here? An extra player on the board, another agenda being pushed behind the scenes? And not by some shadowy conspiracy of cigar-smoking men in dingy back rooms. Not a conspiracy at all. An ecosystem. A hidden ecosystem that we have never taken into account when trying to understand what makes people do the things we do. An invisible world, full of invisible life, just like it was with Marcus Von Plenciz and the microscopic. Only this hidden habitat isn't hidden because it's small. It's hidden because it's conceptual.

How much of our own personal lives are poisoned with pointless, unnecessary strife? Conflict we find ourselves sucked into, stuck in, eager to avoid and desperate to escape – but unable to leave because if we walk away from it, how can we understand ourselves as being worth anything at all? Is it really that much of a stretch to suggest we are being coerced into conflict, day in, day out, on a massive scale? That this is genuinely crippling our world, and on a personal scale, crippling our individual futures?

From the parasitic concept's perspective, it wouldn't matter whether the conflict is physical, emotional, or intellectual. Big scale, small scale, pain from any source explodes in the world of thought. Whether blood is shed or whether it's just a welter of humiliating personal attacks, we suffer. And when we suffer, identity blazes from the fuel. Is this coincidence? Are we still happy to write this off as pure human irrationality? Is that all we're looking at?

Here's another strange pattern in the seemingly irrational. How do we actually behave when we are really provoked? When someone truly gets underneath our skin, what won't we do to hurt them? If we find a way to humiliate them, great. If we find a way to damage them, better. But we don't want them destroyed, because if we're really, really angry, we want them to know that we have won.

What is really happening here? If that's how we feel about them and that's how they feel about us, then on each side the full force of human creativity is being deployed in provoking the other side to new humiliation. It's all about really getting to them,

hitting that raw nerve and provoking that anguish. Victory has nothing to do with persuading the other side. It means beating them and humiliating them so they know they're beaten. It's all tactics and no strategy. Any wider idea of what it's ever going to achieve gets swallowed up in the first spray of blood and then it's all just venom and grind, hitting at people's weak points, humiliating them in any way you can.

Here's the irrationality: if an actual victory is what we want, it makes zero strategic sense to do things this way. Attacking your enemy's weak points is a cataclysmically weak thing to do. It makes you powerless to ever defeat that enemy. Nothing relies on its weakest point to support itself. It's the strong points that things lean all their weight upon, they're the things that can collapse an opponent. If you only ever hit weak points, you only ever do minimal damage. Worse, as we attack weak points in an opponent, all we do is show them where their weak points are, so they reinforce them. And more than this, each side also picks up tactics from the other, stealing what is most effective at inflicting pain, learning new ways to attack and belittle.

Going about things this way leads, obviously, to only one thing: carnage for the sake of carnage, war without end, where all either of you can even see is those weak points in your enemy's position. The flaws, the contradictions, the bits where you can mock and deride them. The strong points of your opposition's ideas fade into near-invisibility. We can't even imagine any strong points on our opponent's case, because we're so angry. If someone suggests they might even exist, we'd slap that person down as a traitor for thinking well of the enemy.

This is utterly absurd, because it means that the angrier we get, the less capable we are of inflicting meaningful damage. It's like the further we fall into absolute fury the closer we come to copy the tactics of the mosquito: tiny little bites that irritate and inflame, while carefully and studiously avoiding inflicting damage on the strong points of an opponent's ideas. And doing all of this while thinking we're actually doing the opposite? How is this random? It's extremely specific behaviour that neuters the human being totally, makes us chronically unable to defeat anything. And yet from the perspective of identity, it charts out a very suggestive shape.

Two identities colliding. An intense burst of energy. A huge boost in variation. Weak points are covered over, strengthened, reinforced. And the noise of the conflict draws huge attention and spreads both sides in a massive way.

This is sexual reproduction. This is how ideas mate.

Now maybe you disagree. Maybe you're adamant that this is all coincidence.

But if it is, it's a coincidence in exactly the same shape as an obligate parasite's life-cycle.

## Chapter 10

The word 'pathogen', in the broadest sense, means anything that causes disease. In medicine it generally means some kind of dangerous microorganism. A pathogen doesn't have to be alive though, it can also refer to toxic particles, or radioactive contamination, or something like that.

Our world is swamped with mental illness, but where is the pathogen? There's no virus driving depression, no bacteria behind anxiety. And there are a vast array of mental illnesses. The current diagnostic manual for psychiatric disorders is so thick with different definitions you could beat someone to death with it. Some of the illnesses it describes might even lead to that kind of behaviour.

You've got all sorts of kinds of issues mapped out symptom by symptom from self-harm to compulsive behaviours, gender dysphoria, eating disorders, all the way to a host of flavours of psychosis and schizophrenia. They seem as different from each other as things can be. To say "there's just one thing behind them all" seems madness.

But then it seemed madness back in the 1700s for Marcus Von Plenciz to say something pretty similar about physical infections. Smallpox, leprosy, typhoid, syphilis, all problems with profoundly different symptoms. But Von Plenciz was right – they really did share the same kind of cause. Germs. An entirely new category of problem we hadn't factored in before – the huge variety of life in the microscopic world.

Now of course, there's all sorts of different kinds of germs. But what of the huge variety of life in the world of concepts? If there is a living, conceptual parasite, it has all of humanity to feed on. That's an ecosystem of mind-melting scale. Billions of us, all sharing our identities, all talking to each other, all infecting each other. That's a lot of competition and variation, a lot of opportunities for a conceptual parasite to adapt all sorts of weird ways to suck a human life dry from the inside.

Take depression as one example. There is a kind of standing puzzle in evolutionary theory which surrounds the issue of depression. Depression is crippling. It afflicts huge numbers of people. It appears to be a catastrophic failing in some internal psychological process underlying mood control. And that's what it seems to be not only to those studying it in a clinical setting, that's what it feels like as an experience. Depression isn't just feeling sad. Depression is when the feelings of worthlessness get so savage and relentless you lose your capacity to function. It seems almost inconceivable it could be anything else except some kind of terrible problem in the human animal, some horrendous defect. And when you are yourself depressed, no other interpretation holds much water.

But this doesn't make any scientific sense. Evolution doesn't do broken dolls. Evolution is a crucible of blood, survival and non-random death. It doesn't have the option to do sloppy work, its sloppy work dies. It produces adaptation polished to a high shine. It literally can't do anything else. The process which honed every sinew in the tiger, every feather of a hawk, and every cell in the compound eye of a bumblebee is not a process which would suffer the continuance of depression as an 'acceptable flaw' in the human mind. It is shatteringly debilitating, especially if untreated.

If depression were what it appears to be – an internal failing in human beings – it would have been weeded out by evolution a long time ago. Yet it remains. Here is the evolutionary riddle of depression: a master craftsman produces an organism with a crippling design flaw.

Unless, of course, it's not just the evolution of one organism.

What if depression is alive? What if it's a particularly unpleasant strain of parasitic identity, which uses self-inflicted agony to control a human host? If you could get someone believing that the only good, and beautiful thing about them was their single-minded desire to stop being so worthless, then you could tilt them into a downward spiral. They would seize upon their own flaws and failings, assaulting themselves psychologically in an attempt to stop themselves making those mistakes. The more they savaged themselves, the more damage their life would suffer. The more damage their life suffered, the more failings and flaws there would be, so the more crucial it would seem to hit themselves even harder in even crueller ways. And back and forth, the one side would amplify the other, driven by the person trying to embody the one beautiful thing left about themselves: their desire to change.

You could think of other things too, other ways to get a hook in the human heart. One might perhaps be the innocence that comes with despair. If nothing is possible and no hope exists, you can't be blamed for your faults. You're just a helpless victim of circumstance, someone who should be cared for, pitied, helped. That's quite a deep button inside the human psyche, especially one crushed under the weight of worry and blame. Hit that hard enough, and a person might seize upon it, because it lets them see themselves as someone blameless. What happens if you challenge that despair? They might fight to hold on to their despair, because to them, that's their innocence.

At the heart of both experiences of depression you have a beautiful idea of you that you're in love with – you as a moral person who is determined to change, or you as an innocent person, who never had a chance. It could be some fusion of these two, or perhaps something different that results in the same outcome, but what it means is that the lynchpin of the depression is not the sad feelings. It's the beautiful idea we have of ourselves. That's the idea that we're holding on to, and hold onto tighter the

darker things get. This is not irrationality. This is control.

Depression is not evolution's failure at crafting humans. It's evolution's success at crafting a parasitic, conceptual organism, some strains of which use self-inflicted human suffering as a means of host control.

That answers the riddle: the master craftsman didn't fail. He succeeded twice. And this overturns everything we know about mental illness.

Consider this: in the period before modern medicine, eye-watering 'medical techniques' were used to treat physical illness. Some treatments actually did work to a degree, just because of blind, stupid luck – one that leaps to mind is how all the superstitions about bubonic plague meant that plague doctors used to wear crude and terrifying costumes that acted like primitive Hazmat suits. But then you also had things like bleeding, where you'd just cut a sick person to let the disease out in the blood. Or even nastier ones where you'd burn the skin with hot glass because it was thought that the blisters that came up were nasty 'humours' being expelled from the body. The doctors weren't malicious. They were just working off the best knowledge they had, and that knowledge did not include the actual cause of what was happening.

But once we actually got a handle on what was really going on with disease, there was a great deal we could actually do. How much of our current ways of helping people with mental illness are only effective through blind, stupid luck, like the suits of the plague doctors? How many others are actively harmful, but we can't see the damage they do because it just doesn't fit inside our understanding of the situation? How could it be any different, when we have treatments for illnesses we do not understand?

What makes it impossible that we might make a similar leap forward in our treatment of mental illness as we once did with physical illness? And not just depression. How many different possible kinds of destructive self-image might there be? A conceptual pathogen can take a staggering array of forms, and generate a vast range of toxic mental syndromes. What might be possible if we can find a way to knock out this kind of infection? What are the limits on how we could help each other?

Are we really going to ignore that we may have a conceptual pathogen floating around in our heads, in the middle of the greatest mental health epidemic in human history? A health epidemic which has only grown more extreme with the communications revolution. Coincidence again perhaps? Or perhaps modern communications technology has given that conceptual parasite a vast boost in speed of expansion. It's reproducing much faster, so it's adapting faster, evolving faster into new and ever more poisonous forms.

Because if this is what's going on, then right now, just as in Von Plenciz's time, there



are amazing, life-changing, world-changing discoveries to be made. Incredible new ways to heal, to make people better to a degree we never believed possible. Ways just as extreme as our treatment of physical illness changed when we discovered the physical pathogens of the microscopic world.

And those incredible discoveries are just sort of sitting there. Right there, right now, waiting to be found.

Waiting.

## Chapter 11

We're talking about a form of life which has no physicality, but which has still evolved through Darwinian natural selection.

Honestly, even calling this thing an 'organism' at all seems to stretch the term. Every form of organism we've ever classified has been physical. This parasite, and the entire habitat it evolved in, is virtual. It has no material presence save the flickering of synapses.

Does it even pass the tests for what biologists recognise as life? There are certain recognised criteria where the answer is clear – no. If something doesn't have some form of physical metabolism, then there are biologists who will just flatly refuse to comprehend it as life at all. But this is by no means the consensus. There are other recognised criteria for life which this thing fits like a glove. One popular and reputable list is this: all known life is capable, to at least some degree, of response to stimuli, reproduction, growth, development, and a kind of internal stability of form which is called homeostasis.

In its own virtual habitat, can identity do this?

So let's go through the list. Item one: response to stimulus. Is it wrong to say an identity can respond to stimulus? Well, what happens when an identity is criticised, or flattered? Is it totally unresponsive? Does it do nothing? The answer seems pretty clear. Item two is reproduction, and we've already looked at that in some depth. As for growth, identities can clearly grow from small kernels to vast storied cathedrals of self. As for development, they develop sophistication as they grow and react. And the final point, the issue of maintaining stability of form – there's often something deeply persistent about a person's identity. You can meet someone after ten years, twenty years, longer even, and see that while a huge amount has changed, there is almost always a profound continuity to the central core of their idea of who they are.

But then, how could this life-form even fit inside normal biological classifications? Biology classifies life by species, and then groups of species by genus, and then groups of genus by a classification called family. Groups of families are called orders, groups of orders are called classes, groups of classes are called phyla, and groups of phyla are called kingdoms. And at the absolute top, the most fundamental classification of life is called the domain, and this is between life with differences in fundamental chemistry. And every form of life ever found fits somewhere in that ranking system.

Where does the conceptual parasite fit? This thing doesn't have cell chemistry. It has no cells at all. To classify it biologically would mean creating an entirely new

fundamental division over and above everything we have ever understood as life. Something higher than a domain. That is how far this thing sits outside our current understanding.

And this is a problem because the understanding of a disease is not some abstract philosophical issue, not if you are personally infected. Which leads us to just one question.

How serious is this disease?

Well, obviously, the upward limit for severity of any infection is the death of the infected organism. But parasites don't primarily kill. They primarily control. They have a relationship of control with their hosts, and if their hosts die, that control ends. This doesn't mean parasites never kill. It makes perfect sense from a biological standpoint to kill your host if by doing so you are able to boost your reproduction. It just means that killing, when it happens, is incidental. It's a side-effect of the main strategy, which is control. If you control a host, you do whatever it is that helps your evolution. Sometimes that means feeding. Sometimes that means reproduction. And if a parasite can control a host into helping it reproduce in a spectacular way, that can be worth the loss of the host's life.

Consider suicide bombing. Usually, it's an attack with a clear ideological motivation, but which is very rarely targeted toward any major strong point in the opposition's forces. Instead, it's almost always targeted at weak points, killing civilians, provoking fury, grief and incomprehension. Blowing up families at a bus stop, or people shopping in a marketplace, is never going to win you a war. If anything, it'll unite your enemies against you a thousand times more than they're united right now.

How do you feel if someone you love gets killed in one of those attacks? It must be very difficult not to lose control. Not to have your anger take over. It must be very difficult not to rage against that ideology and the people who champion it. You want to hurt them back. You want to make them suffer. You want to seize upon their weak points and rip at them with unrestrained ferocity. You want to hurt them as much as they've just hurt you.

But then, is this response actually that dangerous to the opposing ideology? You *feel* as if you are totally committed to destroying the enemy. But how can you? You can't smash out the identity's strongest, most compelling, more powerful points, because you can't even see them. All you can see is the worst and weakest of them. So all you can do is inflame, unite and provoke them, which is exactly what they've done to you. They lose control, you lose control. But if everyone lost all control, the situation would be random. But it isn't.

Yes, you've lost control. Yes, your opponent has lost control. But control itself hasn't vanished. It's just vanished from view. Which is why everything in this situation tilts in a very specific direction, honed and tailored by evolution to serve the conceptual parasite.

You could also consider less obviously ideological spree killers. School shooters leap to mind. There's little ideology, at least very little that's coherent. Instead, there's always a kind of wounded pride, a self-pitying arrogance that now dominates the actions of the perpetrator. Bits and pieces of ideology are sometimes cobbled together in a patchwork mess based on what's most provocative and disturbing. But the unity that sings through is resentment, superiority, a clear impetus to inflict agony, to kill and often die in that blaze of glory, and provoke horror on a mass scale. This is not random behaviour. This is highly directed.

Is it truly that crazy to suggest that these are strains of identity that have essentially 'gone parasitoid?' And frankly, what other explanation is there for why people do this that makes any sense at all?

Of course, most of the time, people's identities don't drive them to mass killing. Instead, there's a kind of equilibrium that gets struck. The conceptual parasite controls the human into tending it and feeding it in the long-term. It reproduces along the way as best it can. Does this equilibrium mean we can live with this infection? Can it be managed?

The answer is very straightforward, and arises from the issue of control. When any parasite reaches a stable point with their host, that equilibrium is never a 50/50 balance between the two sets of interests. Nor is it 60/40, nor 70/30. Instead, it's far more like a kind of fight for control in which the winner gets absolute freedom to set the terms of the loser's position.

Predators evolve to kill, but parasites evolve to control. In a battle between predator and prey, something's going to die. But in a battle between parasite and host, something's going to be controlled. Once control is won, the winner dictates everything about the situation. If you win, you get to suppress the infection entirely. If the parasite wins, whether or not that control is lethal depends on the particular needs of the parasite. But if you are kept alive, your life will be reduced in as severe and extreme a way as it can possibly be.

This basic dynamic of a fight for control eliminates any possibility of middle ground. This is because whoever gets even just a little more control can use that control to gain more control. They use that control to gain even more control, and so on and so forth, in a cascading process. The middle ground is obliterated. The parasite is either driven into total submission, or assumes total dominance. This is why a parasitic infection

can only stabilise in one of two final states. Either a host will win that battle, and shut down the parasite entirely, as humans do by pushing *Toxoplasma gondii* infection into a dormant state – or the parasite wins and sets its own terms: severe and chronic disease. The only possible point of stability between a successful parasite and a defeated host is that the host is balanced on the bleeding edge of broken, while the parasite grows fat. Yes, that parasite wants you to live, but only to live. It wants everything else. Everything it can possibly take without killing you, it will take.

What this means is clear. There's no splitting the difference. No acceptable level of infection. No negotiated settlement where we reach an understanding with this organism over who gets what. Give this thing an inch, it will take a mile. We face a stark choice – find a way to fully suppress this thing, or resign ourselves to living in its thrall.

This is a battle for control, and to lose is to lose everything.

Part 2:

## **In The Halls Of The Red Queen**

## Chapter 12

There is a process in evolution called the Red Queen effect. It's named after the villain of Lewis Carroll's children's book *Alice Through The Looking Glass*. There's a scene in the book where Alice is trying to run away from this terrible, murderous tyrant, the Red Queen, but in the strange, fantastical realm she's in, the ground keeps moving backwards under her feet like a treadmill. "Now, here, you see," the Red Queen taunts, "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

The Red Queen effect describes what happens when two organisms lock each other into an evolutionary arms race. In this kind of situation both organisms fall under massive pressure to adapt, but any adaptation they make triggers immediate counter-adaptation in the other organism. Both of them, under this intense pressure, go through a relatively rapid burst of evolutionary change, but both stay in the same place in relation to each other. That's why it has the name it has: it's like each one is running to stand still, just like Alice in the book under the power of the Red Queen.

The Red Queen effect only happens in antagonistic situations, like with predators and prey, or parasites and prey. Any adaptation that makes a predator or a parasite stronger adds immediate evolutionary pressure to the prey. That pressure isn't general, it's very specific – it's coming from a specific predator or parasite, doing something specific in a very specific way. So not only are the prey forced to evolve quickly, their evolution is also directed down a certain path. Prey don't just 'get better' in a general sense. They specifically get better at dealing with the specific kind of threat that they're facing. So not only does the Red Queen process accelerate evolutionary change, it also shapes it.

One obvious example of all this is the cheetah and the gazelle. Cheetah are the fastest land animal there is, and gazelle aren't far behind that. The degree of optimisation for speed and agility in these animals is extreme. But they weren't always that fast. Their ancient ancestors were a lot slower, but then they became connected in this kind of relationship. The ancient ancestor of the cheetah locked onto the ancient ancestor of the gazelle as a food source. The fastest cheetah ate the most gazelle, and reproduced more, meaning that their genes for speed were passed to the next generation of cheetah. But that meant that the fastest gazelle were the ones who got away leaving the slower gazelle to be eaten. So the gazelle's next generation also evolved to be faster.

As one gained in speed so too did the other. Between the importance of capture and the importance of escape, each drove the other into an evolutionary race. And the pressure on both was very intense. Cheetah need to eat or they will die, gazelle need to escape or they will die. This is serious and immediate. Any adaptation that boosted speed in either animal in any way could well have been the difference between life

and death. Because of this, every possible aspect of the animal was honed, from ligaments, tendons, muscles, reflexes, lung capacity, metabolism, brain structure, circulatory systems, every possible thing. Each animal was honed on the other, like steel sharpening steel.

Mutualist symbiosis doesn't trigger this kind of rapid escalation. When two organisms help each other, they will adapt to maximise the benefit of that relationship – but far more slowly. It's only antagonistic relationships that have this quality of being like a naturally-occurring selective breeding program<sup>3</sup>. And that is a useful way to think about it. When you get racehorse trainers or dog breeders, who intentionally breed for certain traits in the animals they keep, you're not waiting millions of years to see a dramatic change in that animal. It can happen fast.

What about us, and this conceptual parasite? Someone truly in thrall to this conceptual parasite might throw the entire output of their life energy into feeding it, leaving precious little energy to be spent on reproduction. So those most successful at resisting the symptoms of this parasite would see their genes passed on with much more frequency. That resistance, whatever form it took, would grow.

But increased human resistance would mean that only the most powerful identities survived. This would select for the 'elite parasites,' if we want to put it that way. So only the most pungent, subtle and compelling kinds of identity would survive and reproduce. But then this would lock humans down even further, necessitating a burst of adaptation on our side.

It's not just an issue of increased evolutionary speed, but also one of evolutionary shape. The particular kind of resistance that a human would develop would depend on the kind of identity it was resisting. But then parasitic identity, on its side, would have to adapt to counter whatever specific kind of resistance the human was throwing up. Both would shape the adaptations of the other. And this would not be some incidental side issue. A crippling parasitic infection lasting thousands of human generations would place a very intense, very specific selective pressure on our ancestors. And if that parasite was something very strange, they would be forced to evolve in a very strange direction, unlike anything else seen in nature.

What this means is that this could well be the secret key to unlocking the real story of human evolution. And that means that there is an opportunity here. If we understand that Red Queen relationship, not only will we have a deeper account of human evolution than we've ever imagined possible, we'll also get the other side of the coin. We'll have a doorway right into the heart of what this parasite actually is. And if we get that, we're a lot closer to tearing its house down.

---

<sup>3</sup> Which is why the scientific name for the Red Queen effect is 'antagonistic co-evolution'.



So let's take a look. And to get to the bottom of what's going on, we need to start at the start.

## Chapter 13

Abiogenesis is the word for the absolute origin of life. It's a different thing to evolution. Evolution is about the development of life once it's there. Abiogenesis is about how it happens in the first place.

When we think of the abiogenesis of physical life, scientists have shown that certain complex molecules form in certain kinds of mineral-rich ooze when electricity is passed through it. A naturally occurring lightning strike on a certain kind of mud might well have created a very basic form of molecule capable of reproducing itself, perhaps very slowly, in a very rudimentary and uncontrolled way. From there, chance and fluke could provide the variation, and the competition would just be over whatever finite materials this molecule needed to reproduce itself.

There's another idea that the threshold point between water and air that occurs in the froth of waves can produce very specific chemical reactions that can turn naturally occurring complex molecules into peptides, the building blocks of life. Truth is, the origin of physical life might be neither of these things. It could be some other chemical reaction entirely. It's hard to know for certain.

But when we talk about conceptual life, we're not just talking about a different evolutionary line of life. We're talking about an entirely different abiogenesis. This is life that has literally no ancestors in common with us whatsoever. It has a different fundamental origin, which again underlines that no life-form ever encountered before in all of the natural world is anything like this different from us. It is truly other. So how might it have happened? Is there no plausible explanation for the origin of conceptual life? What are the conditions necessary for it to emerge?

The first element must be that one of our ancestors had some basic ability to have an idea of itself. The second element must be some quality that idea can have which could control that ancestor. You need both. But if you have both, that's all you need. Control gives access to everything else: reproduction, feeding, protection, all that a growing parasite needs.

So the first element is a self-image. At some point in the ancient past our forebears became capable of imagining an idea of themselves. Well, when was that? Which ancestors? This is actually pretty easy to get a fix on. There is a psychological experiment that can be performed on primates to test exactly this. It's very simple, and is just called the 'Mirror Test'. You make a small mark with white paint on a primate's face. You then show them a mirror. What does the animal do? Do they try to scratch off the paint? Or do they simply have no idea that the image in the mirror is connected with them at all?

In order to make the connection between a reflection of yourself and you, you have to be able to have an idea of yourself in a world of thought. If you have no ability to comprehend yourself as a separate idea, how can you understand that reflection is you? You'll just think you're looking at another animal. If the primate is capable of comprehending itself as an idea, it will try to scratch the paint off its face. If it isn't, it will not understand that it is looking at its own face, and won't.

The result, in broad brushstrokes, is that monkeys can't do it but apes can. Chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans – the great apes – are all capable of having an idea of themselves. Macaques, tamarins, marmosets, and the rest of the monkeys aren't.

So, all the great apes can have an image of themselves in a world of thought – and we are, evolutionarily speaking, one of the great apes. Our ancestors weren't hugely unlike the chimpanzee. But apes don't have the same tormented relationship with identity that we do, nor our dizzyingly expansive range of thought and comprehension. So something's missing, something's different. And this is the second element: there's some quality that our images of self have, that the ape images of self do not have. Something that can control us in a way that just doesn't really apply to them. How can our ideas of self exert control over us, in a way none of the great apes have to deal with? What is that? What is that mechanism of control? What element do we have in our mental landscape that apes do not have?

This is harder to pin down than it seems, because apes are quite intellectually advanced in their own fashion. We do and feel a lot of things in a more sophisticated way (sometimes less sophisticated than we'd like to believe). But it's quite hard to point at just one thing and say "we do this and apes don't." Apes can like or loathe each other. They can be paranoid. They can be vindictive and spiteful. Some apes have vicious personalities. Other apes are much kinder. So, what could it be?

The clue is control. We're looking at some kind of quality to an idea of self that can coerce us to do something, coerce us to defend it, feed it, maintain it, share it. Some kind of property in our own self-images which has coercive capacity that apes don't have in their self-images. Something which puts a knife to our throats if we don't do this, or don't do that. Something which can slide icy fingers around our deepest ideas of who we are, send us into panic, into cold sweat, into rage, into all sorts of different feelings, each one rising up from that primal place.

There is one possibility. It's a dimension that slices right through all human insecurity. It's something so simple and massive it's easy to overlook, as you might overlook the ground beneath your feet. Think back to that example of one possible structure of depression. It might well seem from the outside, and indeed from the inside, as if it is

an extreme case of low self-regard, but what can often be closer to the truth is that it is a kind of self-regard that demands you attack yourself because you want to change. You hate all these things about yourself, so you rage at them, viciously strike at them, all in an attempt to obliterate them. Which means that what's driving that self-loathing is a kind of moral idea of yourself: you're the person who's so passionate about not being this awful person that you want to destroy everything about yourself that you hate.

Shift our footing a little and we can see just how coercive this is. It's not just a desire to change. Do you see these worthless things about yourself? If you *don't* attack them, what does that say about you? What does it say about you if you *don't* brutally upbraid yourself at every opportunity? Instead of just tempting someone to try and improve, you're coercing them into assaulting themselves. That's a very effective way to lever a human being into hurting themselves, and the fulcrum of the whole thing is: who would we be if we didn't assault ourselves in this way? And the answer is clear: someone truly worthless, someone truly, irredeemably worthless.

You can do terrible damage to your own life in this way, but those hits you're raining down on yourself at least prove that you're fighting to get better. And the harder you hit, the more that gets proven in your own eyes, and so, in a strange way, the more decent and moral you look to yourself. But then the coercion is when you try to stop. What kind of worthless scum are you if you don't even try to change? And then you can't stop, and you have to smash yourself to pieces.

Does this really look like some kind of random failure in 'mood regulation?' It's just striking some extremely specific, very deep note inside you, where your basic worth as a person demands that you continue brutalising yourself. It's almost elegant.

Or take another massive issue: anxiety. You have things you stress about, worry about, dwell over, pour over. It seems as if they're of pivotal importance to you. The ways in which they could go wrong are constantly leaping to your mind, demanding to be resolved. You race to find a solution. But the more you try, the more there is to worry about, until you're lost down these labyrinthine corridors of anxious tension that just spread out in every direction, worry on top of worry, analysis on top of analysis, all to get... what? What is being sought here? Certainty? Safety? Security? It feels like that's what we're reaching for. Reassurance that it's going to be okay? But then the more reassurances we get, the more scared we become. What is going on?

But again, shift your footing. It's not just about getting some solid contingency plans or some nice feelings of security.

If you worry you can prove to yourself that you care. And the worse it gets, the more proof it is that you care so very, very much. The more you worry the more you can

watch that massive internal show you're putting on of your own desperate heart. Is there nothing in that which can capture us?

If we live a life where we're assailed by fears of our own worthlessness, what is it worth to see how much we care? To suffer for it, even suffer terribly, but still stoke those fears inside ourselves because we can finally see how much things matter to us. If we love this much, care this much, we can't be completely worthless, right? Right?

That's where the coercion comes in. If you didn't even try to get the certainty what would that mean about you? If you don't try to get that certainty, you're the kind of... what? Someone who doesn't care? Worthless?

And so it has a hold over you, a foothold in your heart. Once you've gotten yourself dependent on this particular 'proof' that you're not worthless, it can just gnaw away at you. And how can you stop indulging it when you need – *need* – the proof it gives you that you're a worthwhile person? So you actively look for things to worry about. You leap on things that stress you, because for all the pain of that stress, at least it tells you that you have a heart. And the coercion, the particular coercive leverage, is the same kind of thing in both anxiety and depression. Moral condemnation of yourself.

To understand just how extreme the influence of such a judgement can be, consider the thousands of people who take their own lives every day under the influence of depression or anxiety. Just think about what that means for how extreme a grip that particular lever has over us. To overwhelm such a fundamental evolutionary drive as survival itself takes the kind of traction that can only be gained from the most profound levels of the human psyche. This is going right to the core. It's hard to see a chimpanzee being controlled by that kind of internal coercion.

In the same way as a square has an extra dimension to a line, or a cube has an extra dimension to a square, is it insane to say that our self-image has an extra dimension to the self-image of other great apes? A vivid moral dimension? And that this dimension gives a kind of grip to an idea of self unlike any other? But how might it have started? How could it have happened to begin with, that this dimension gained such power over us?

It's important here to note that because apes are nothing like as clever as human beings, any kind of early conceptual life would consist of very basic, simple concepts. It couldn't be something incredibly sophisticated because apes don't think like that. Just like the forerunners of the cheetah and the gazelle were far slower animals before their arms race started, so too the forerunners of human and conceptual parasite would have both been pretty basic.

But an idea of goodness can be extremely simple. An idea of badness can likewise be

very simple too. Apes can form thoughts, and think in abstract ways, even so far as learning basic sign language. Is the moral dimension of thought necessarily complex? It seems often the opposite is true – the more simple something is, morally, the more of a grip it can have over us.

But we're not just talking about things we find nice and nasty. The moral dimension in our lives resonates with us in ways far more intense. We're not just thinking of a quality to the self-image an ape would like. That is important, that's clearly part of it. But for conceptual abiogenesis, it needs that coercive level. It's not just about an idea of something nice, it's about a quality to the self-image so nice an ape cannot live without it, and is therefore controlled by it. For coercive control, an idea needs a way to hold us hostage.

But there are properties intrinsic to the nature of conceptual life which might make this a lot less tricky than it sounds. In a world of ideas, scale costs nothing. It's one of the biggest, weirdest differences between a physical environment and a conceptual one. It's also one of the hardest to get your head around if you're used to thinking about life in physical terms, which of course, we all are. But in the physical world, scale is expensive. If you want to be big, you have to eat a lot. You need a big skeleton, with heavy muscles to hold it up and move you along. You need some way of getting enough oxygen into all those heavy muscles, and that means some kind of circulatory system, and that means you need a big heart to pump all that oxygen around the system. And even then there's quite serious limits to the scale of physical life. Even when we consider all the fossils we've ever discovered, we have, as of yet, never found a single animal bigger than the modern blue whale. If there ever has been something bigger than it, it was almost certainly something aquatic, because sea creatures don't need to support the weight of their own bodies anything like as much, so they can get bigger than creatures on land. But even so, there's only so big any physical life can get. Scale is expensive in the world of physicality.

Nothing like this is true in the world of thought. You can imagine a picture of a planet just as easily as you can imagine a picture of a pony. Or even if you just imagine a pony, you can imagine a giant pony the size of a house with little further effort. If we can think a thing at all, we can think it bigger. And this isn't really linked to how complicated an idea is. If an ape can conceive of something, it can probably conceive of a really big version of that thing.

This means that if any conceptual life-form could hit on something, some hold over us, some coercive trigger it can pull to gain even a little control of us, it could capitalise on that control very fast. A small element of control could quite rapidly be used to totally dominate a life, because the controlling concept could simply increase in scale, taking over an ape's entire mental perspective.

What that means is that introducing the axis of good and evil into an ape's headspace would introduce an emotionally compelling category of its own self-image, with no upward limit in scale in either direction. How good can an ape's idea of its own goodness get? The only constraints are the limits of that ape's imagination, and what it is prepared to believe about itself. Which would mean that any identity with this dimension could rapidly transfix and compel that animal, sing to its heart in deep and beautiful ways. But this is persuasion, not coercion. To get control, there's one step further to go.

How can this concept eclipse every other form of goodness? How can this beautiful self become the only thing that lights up the life of this ape? Only then would the ape be trapped. And that's the precipice we all stare over. The horrible chasm of "What if I'm truly worth nothing? What if my life is truly worthless? What if there's no hope, no chance of recovery, just the awful disgustingness of me? What then?" That's the coercive fulcrum. That's what stops this self-image being about something preferable, and makes it into something that forces you to move.

But how? How is everything being swamped by this one idea of goodness?

## Chapter 14

Perhaps it was, at the start, a form of madness.

Perhaps something happened that was so terrible an ape just broke and, in ape terms, went insane. Instead of just disliking another ape, they went further. They were just intelligent enough to imagine a new category of thing, a new kind of idea. Hate.

When you hate something, you aren't just saying a certain individual should be punished, or even destroyed. You're going further, and stripping away from them any possible flicker of goodness. They become something horrendous, something repulsive, something that can never be forgiven. You could use any words, grunts, noises or gestures you like to label that. But the word we have settled on at this moment in history is 'evil'.

It's almost like you want to hurt the idea of them in your mind, and because it's your mind, you can. You minimise, ignore or deny anything remotely positive, while the negative stuff blazes with furious intensity, fills your entire field of vision. You're not lying, you're not making up bad stuff, you're just zooming in on it until it's all that you can see. This is the heart of moral condemnation. Not just the emotion or feeling of not liking something, but the process of reduction. Of reducing someone down to only the worst and most appalling elements, and ignoring everything else.

When you do this, you trigger an extreme, immediate emotional reaction in yourself. This is not some conscious decision to feel a certain way, more the inflaming of a certain kind of idea which provokes all manner of deep emotional elements, tripping off autonomic systems left, right and centre. Adrenaline dump. Cold sweats. Aggression. Fear. A feeling of imminent danger. Fight or flight. This is not because of some mystical power. It's that the mind believes that this is real. The body just acts accordingly.

When we hate things, we actively work to push away any good qualities they might have. We don't want to think about those qualities, we can even congratulate ourselves on seeing nothing good whatsoever in something we despise. Anything good that is brought to our attention, we snipe at, belittle, sneer at, undermine. Anything bad that is brought to our attention we seize upon, as it confirms everything we feel. It justifies it, it justifies going even further in our rage. It's like tossing another log on an already burning fire. The key is reduction. To reduce something down to only those elements that buttress what we already want to feel, or believe. To zoom in on the elements that confirm it, excluding or eclipsing everything else. And the more we do that, the more that initial feeling gets greater.



What is that initial feeling? What is the emotional payoff we're getting from doing this? What is it that we are chasing when we run down this line?

Is it really so far from the truth to suggest that the feeling we are chasing is a moral high, a moral rush? Rage isn't a nice emotion, but it's morally incandescent. When we hate we blaze to ourselves with righteousness in direct proportion to how much we despise whatever we're despising. We shine to ourselves in our anger, our fury proving just how far removed we are from this appalling thing we hate.

This is just the same as we saw earlier with fear and despair. Fear, like rage, isn't a nice emotion, but if it's fear of losing something we care about, it can make us morally delighted at how deeply we care. Despair isn't a nice emotion, but if it can make us feel like no failure is ever our fault because there's no hope anyway, we can be morally delighted at our own innocence.

Even though the emotion itself is deeply unpleasant, it can paint us as morally righteous, or morally passionate, or morally innocent. Anything like that. Something down that line. And this kind of feeling seems to somehow hijack the entire reward system of the human animal. It pushes away all those feelings of worthlessness because we can see from the inside of our own minds just how moral we really are. It's such a relief to feel that way we might well be tempted to inflame it further. And the more we inflame it, the more moral we can look to ourselves by inflaming it even further still.

How did it begin? It could have been any of these things, any of these thoughts that occurred to the ape in which this all began. Hate? Fear? Despair? All are solid contenders.

The deeper point is that at the heart of all of this, there's just one very simple button to push, and one easy way to push it. Reduce, reduce, reduce. Zoom in, zoom in, zoom in. Reduce everything down to those elements which allow you to somehow stoke that moral image of yourself. Zoom in on only those elements which allow us to hate more, to despair more, to fear more. Something, anything, whatever it is, as long as it empowers that moral idea of ourselves in our own eyes. We don't even need to seek out new information. We just need to eliminate all those elements which don't fuel that idea.

Doing all this has a certain complexity to it. A cat couldn't do it. A butterfly couldn't do it. It involves pushing aside certain interpretations in our own minds, seizing on others. It involves creating new categories. And crucially, at the heart of it, it involves an image of ourselves as moral, a form of beauty so amazing we'd suffer horribly to stop ourselves from losing it.

Is this too complex for an ape? Well, we humans fill our own ideas of good and evil with all sorts of agonised sophistication, but very small children can understand these categories. Small children can hate. Small children can condemn, can despair, can fear. Kids can reduce everything down to only those parts of what's going on that suit their own idea of how right they are. Small children can be very intense about moral issues, which you will learn the same instant any child learns to use the sentence "that's not fair."

Chimpanzees – the closest living thing to our ape ancestors – are easily as clever as small children. If we can say that underneath our moral complexities lies a simple framework, so simple a child can do it, what's to stop an ape from doing it? And not a chimpanzee, but one of our ancient chimp-like ancestors?

Is it wild, deluded speculation to conjecture that at some point a cleverer-than-average ape crossed some dark internal threshold in a moment of true extremity? That something appalling was done, something horrific. Some act of ugliness and betrayal that blazed with such intensity that something emerged? An idea of the other as morally wrong? Or perhaps just themselves as morally good? Morally right? Morally innocent? Morally beautiful? Whatever it was, it's a new dimension in the mind, just like height and depth and width are physical dimensions in physical space.

You can travel up forever, you can travel down forever. That's the point of a dimension, it goes on forever in either direction, stretching out to infinity. So how far can you travel down that dimension of moral goodness? Moral badness? You can always imagine something better than the best thing you've so far imagined. You can always imagine something worse than the worst thing you've so far imagined. There's always some extra tweak to make someone seem more amazing, or more despicable.

The further you go in either direction of this dimension of good and evil, the more you provoke that emotional reaction from yourself, either positive or negative. Truly amazing goodness (by the standard you personally set as to what is good) can capture your heart, it can be the light of your life, the main thing you live for. Truly appalling evil (by the standard you personally set as to what is evil) can make your blood boil, make you shake with rage. And you don't need to find anything good or find anything bad. You can just zoom in on all those qualities that get that reaction from you, and blow them up so big they eclipse everything else. And scale costs nothing in the world of thought. Where does it end? How can it fail to transfix you, pull you down that line of reducing and reducing, zooming in only on those things that make that moral idea sharper? That's a very powerful, very simple control surface just sitting there waiting to be exploited. Any thoughts which had the ability to do that would rapidly out-compete any other thoughts which didn't.

The question then stops being "Is an ape going to do this?" and starts becoming: "How

can an ape possibly resist this kind of emotional temptation?" An ape is not a model of emotional self-control. Few of us are, even nowadays.

It's almost like one of those creepy laboratory tests you read about where rats have a button to push that lights up its reward centres through electrodes embedded in its brain. The rats become so obsessed with that button that they will walk across an electrified floor to reach it – a floor so painful to walk on they would not walk across it to reach food if they were starving.

This is not a million miles away from the control that is now open to the conceptual parasite. We're talking about the bedrock of the mind. The big, simple, basic levers underneath all the complex bits up top. Once an ape could amplify its own amazing, glorious, moral beauty in its own eyes, it's pushing a button underneath everything. It's own fundamental value, shining like a beacon, feeding back into itself.

Have you ever been in a music concert, or any kind of live speaking event where a microphone gets placed too close to an amplifier? You get this high-pitched howl of feedback, it rises up really fast and hurts your ears. That is sound coming out of the amplifier, being picked up by the microphone, then amplified out of the amplifier again. The microphone picks up this even louder sound, amplifies it again, and so on and so forth. That feedback howl is that noise amplifying itself by the power of its own amplification. This all happens extremely fast.

Is it impossible that something like that happened with the ape's self-image? A feedback howl in the world of thought?

Condemnation amplifying moral identity, moral identity amplifying condemnation, amplifying moral identity, amplifying condemnation, and round and round, picking up speed until all forms of goodness in the ape's own mind were totally eclipsed by this one shining idea of self? That idea now owns that ape. There's no complex control, no clever manipulation needed by the concept itself. It just feeds back into itself until it dominates the system. Why? Because all self-amplifying feedback has this property, wherever it occurs. It expands and expands, faster and faster, getting bigger and bigger until it dominates or breaks the system it's in. And that's the big question we had. We were asking: "how this concept is able to eclipse every other form of goodness?" The answer is simple. Feedback.

It is hard to see what possible kind of resistance a primitive ape could muster to defend itself in this kind of situation. What's happening to it is so much deeper than it can comprehend. What would it do? The blazing intensity of this new kind of thought feeding back into itself? How would it look away? How would it stop itself from feeding that image and sharing it as best it could?

And that's it. Element one, the self-image. Element two, the control. That's all it is, right there. A brand new abiogenesis, for a brand new form of life.

So now let's talk evolution.

Condition one of evolution: reproduction – is this kind of idea of self impossible to share?

Well, if someone's giving a thesis on the nature of conceptual abiogenesis, that probably is a little north of the intellectual capacities of the average chimpanzee. But then, does an ape need to know anything about the substructure of this to get sucked up into it? You don't need to be a meteorologist to get hit by a tornado.

At the heart of this is just that pungent sense of a self, a kind of personal rightness that doesn't need words or theories to captivate and capture. It's the simplicity of condemnation that makes it so easy to share. And frankly, if it's simple enough for an ape to comprehend, it's simple enough for an ape to communicate. Hoots, postures and gestures might not seem like much to us, but they have vast expressive capacity to primates. We're not talking about communicating some grand ideology, just a particular strain of emotional and moral superiority. And besides, there is another way that condemnation could be spread: provocation. If an ape can provoke another ape to hatred, they've tripped this chain of dominoes in that other ape.

What about the second element of evolution, variation? Well, remember, these ideas of self are not particularly intellectual stuff. This is an ape we're talking about. It would be viscerally emotional, a highly personal sense of their own particular brand of rightness. There would of course be deep unities between the ideas of self because the apes are all working from the same physical hardware, the same brain, the same evolutionary heritage, the same evolved emotional range, things like that. But we're also talking about an ape's idea of itself in the privacy of its own mind, tailored to appeal to it personally. That means these rudimentary identities are going to have extreme variation from ape to ape – but around a central, unchanging core. This is precisely the kind of variation that's perfect for evolution: not chaos, but a variety of different approaches to solving the same problem, to winning the same competition.

And that's the last element of evolution: competition. What competition? Competition against other ideas. Competition for unchallenged control of the ape's mind. That moral idea of the ape needs to monopolise the ape's attention and emotional energy. It isn't enough to distract it or entice it. It needs to be a very particular kind of enticement: an idea that's beautiful in exactly the way that means the ape cannot bear to see it fail, because that's where the control is.

What happens next? A headspace dominated by this amazing idea of yourself, an idea

you can inflame and intensify just by zooming in on certain things and ignoring other things. A deep button inside your heart being pressed – I have value, look, I have value. Look at how good I am, look at how much value I have. But then the worry comes. What if you lose this? What if you're not this? What if you don't live up to it? What if you get something wrong? What if you fail?

Because sooner or later, these apes are going to face situations where they might fail and if they do, that beautiful image of them is going to look very shaky indeed.

What happens then?

## Chapter 15

So you're now leaning your whole life on that image. But there's a problem. What if you do something and fall flat on your face? Fail completely, like a total idiot? Make an absolute fool of yourself?

The problem isn't even primarily what you look like in front of others, it's what you look like to yourself. If everything in you is leaning on that beautiful idea for value and worth, there's nothing else to you, nothing of any worth or value at all. Do you really want to put that idea in situations that could shatter its credibility in your own eyes? That's going to knock the floor out of your emotional world.

What happens when the fear of getting things wrong takes centre stage in every decision? What is it like to live in a headspace dominated by the fear of disrupting that beautiful idea? We're looking at the dawn of a new kind of anxiety, a kind of deep, gnawing anxiety that rises up from the absolute baseline of life – the fundamental value of an ape in its own eyes. When was this ever so exposed before? So fragile? When did it ever hang so delicately in the balance?

So what do you do? This new kind of fear raises an impulse to the top of your priority list: make no mistakes. In any given situation, look first at what you're sure of. Zero in on the elements in the situation you're 100% certain about, interact with that part of the situation.

Then what? What's the next step? Well, that worry you might get something wrong – has it gone away? Of course not. It's arising from the fundamental way you comprehend the value of yourself, and the fear that beautiful idea will be taken from you, when the alternative is a bottomless pit of worthlessness. It's like having a gun to your head. You always, always have to make sure you don't make mistakes.

So whatever the next step is, you repeat the same process. You push aside all the vague stuff you don't understand, and look only at the things you're sure about. And then, again, based on that, you act. And then you do it again, and again, because not making mistakes that tip you into worthlessness is a thousand times more immediately important than actually succeeding. Success might get you a little further ahead. But failure will smash you right down.

The ideal situation is to create a kind of sequence. A sequence of sure following sure, right following right, 100% following 100%, so it is literally impossible for you to make a mistake. That's the hope. But that's the way this would tilt a simian mind. And this isn't some intellectual structure of ice-cool logic. It's perception when anxiety holds sway. It's what you see of the world when any given failure might, at any given

moment, take everything from you.

It's worth taking a moment out of our tale of apes and parasites to just picture how it feels as a modern human to seek certainty after certainty. It doesn't feel dangerous in any way. It doesn't feel stupid. It feels very normal. It feels rational. Even a little boring, mundane. It can feel like the most rational thing you could ever do. Instead of messing about with hazy vagueness, you're drilling down to only that absolute bedrock you know for sure, and making decisions based on that. It feels like taking control of a situation. It feels like being an adult. It doesn't feel like you're doing something toxic.

But look again. When we seek certainty by pushing away everything we're not sure of, we haven't gotten this certainty because we've got any new information. This 'rock solid ground' we're now standing on isn't rock solid because we've discovered the profound simplicity in reality which makes perfect sense of the situation we're looking at. Instead, we've just ditched everything that we can't be utterly certain about, and we're treating all that stuff we've discarded like it doesn't exist. The stuff where you're 100% is the only stuff you're treating as real. You're just ignoring the existence of everything else. You're ignoring all the opportunities, ignoring all the dangers, and critically, ignoring any profound clarity that you might ever find in the unknown. But because you're ignoring the fact you're ignoring all that, you get this wonderful sense of control.

Consider this. How much of the reality of any situation are you ever truly certain of? As an example, think of a person. How much of the actual reality of any human being are you totally certain about? Think of all the things that person doesn't even know about themselves, but which are nonetheless true. Even if someone is very shallow, do you understand the nature of superficiality itself? How is that particular form of superficiality grasping them, how is it controlling them? How has it managed to eclipse all depth in their lives in order to lock them in a shallow world? What are the profound simplicities that underlie that? And the deeper simplicities underneath them?

What is the full depth and potential of what's really going on with anyone or anything? Compare the scale of that with that tiny sliver of information you have of which you can be utterly certain. What does it mean to live in such a way that in every possible decision and situation, only that tiny sliver is treated as if it's actually real?

To live enthralled by a beautiful idea you have of yourself is to live intimidated by a deep, gnawing anxiety. Certainty becomes a kind of anaesthetic, a quick hit to relieve that worry. And the fastest way to gain it is to ignore everything except what is certain, and do this over and over, to create that sequence of sure following sure. To live inside that sequence, to bind your life up in it, never to look beyond it, never even

to imagine beyond it.

There is a calm that comes in the short term from getting your certainty by zeroing in on it alone and treating everything else as if it doesn't exist. But this blinds you to the vast range of what's actually going on, reducing your vision to a splinter over and over again. Dangers rise unseen and smash your life to pieces. Awesome opportunities arise only to die untouched. On top of this, certainty itself is always desperately fragile, because even the smallest whisper of doubt destroys it.

It's like a kind of rapid-hit substance addiction, like crack cocaine or even just smoking. You have this gnawing anxiety that just won't stop rising and getting more intense. You can make it vanish with one simple hit. But taking that short-term blast of relief doesn't help this situation. It just makes it worse. That sense of control which superficially seems so strong, is based on elements which are chronically unstable. You have to stress and work to keep that sequence of certainties in place. And how? You need new sequences of certainties to shore up the sequence of certainties you've already got. And those new sequences are just as unstable so they need sequences of certainty underneath them. Every attempt to stabilise things just adds more worry fragility, more points of failure which need to be shored up with more fragile certainties.

The whole thing just traps you inside this ever-expanding, criss-crossing maze of certainty following certainty. It's so difficult, stressful, but also tantalising: just keep adding right following right, sure following sure, and at some point things have got to get better, right? Right?

Our modern human anxieties can be incredibly complex. But at heart, what we have is an addiction to a simple repeating pattern of contrived certainty, a sequence, which is made necessary by a life leaning on a wonderful image of self. And to get stuck in that sequence, a primitive ape doesn't need to be able to conceptualise a massive structure. It just needs to be able to feel afraid. An ape stuck in this trap is going to seek out what it is absolutely sure of in every decision it makes, as much as possible. Its worries might be rudimentary by our standards, but they'd be all consuming for the ape itself.

Crippling anxiety, and an entire life hinging on protecting that one idea from ever being marred. One button, deep down, underneath all the complexity of life.

The parasite doesn't need to blind you to any goodness outside itself. You become the one blinding yourself. You become the one controlling yourself, locking yourself down. You are the one making sure that everything you perceive that undermines your certainties you are yourself pushing aside. You're the one actively belittling it, keeping that sequence alive in your mind because if it fails, you fall. Fall into that



panic, panic triggered by the spectre of the most extreme possible form of worthlessness.

Are we seriously suggesting that evolution missed this massive vulnerability in our headspace?

The self-image is already eclipsing all other forms of goodness with feedback alone. Just the thought of losing it means losing everything good, absolutely everything about you that has any value at all. This is the origin of existential dread, arising long before language itself, let alone fancy words like 'existential.' And those fears resolve themselves into a very specific repeating pattern: the sequence. And through that sequence, the parasite infests the headspace of the ape. It drives the ape to contrive a structure of certainties that the ape itself can't question – nor even allow to be questioned.

One of the weirdest things when thinking about conceptual life is what you could, a little clunkily, call the idea of "information persistence through generations." Humans have DNA, that's the code in our cells that carries information from one generation to the next. When ideas get shared, what do they have? It might seem that they have no structure behind the scenes which allows persistence of information to be passed on from one generation to the next. But then with a conceptual sequence of sure following sure, the parasite has precisely this.

Each new certainty sits on the foundation of all the ones which have come before, necessitates them. That mass of sequence is included in every new thought as the context against which it makes sense. The parasite now has the conceptual equivalent of a DNA structure. But also, in a weird way, you could see sequence as the conceptual equivalent of a body. A persistent mass of conceptual structure, feeding and growing as the ape tends to it, protects it, nurses it. It sprawls out to the limits of the ape's own capacity to think, chewing up as much mental bandwidth as it can while leaving the ape alive. A mass of parasitic concepts, but all bound together in a single living, reacting system, sitting in the head of the ape, inflaming its anxiety and keeping it transfixed on the only bright spot in its whole darkening world: that shining idea of its own moral goodness.

## Chapter 16

Change this extreme would have hit our ancestors like a battering ram. And nowhere would have been harder hit than the social bonds that tied us all together.

Why the social bonds? Because apes are profoundly social creatures. They constantly interact. That social world that they occupy is how they select mates, build connections, raise their young. It is like a habitat in and of itself, a social habitat to which the ape must evolve and adapt to master. All the great apes are like this. What happens when that delicately balanced social fabric has this anvil dropped on it?

The answer is – this is a very strange disease, but it is at heart just a disease. That means when it first hit, it would be like when some disease hits a population who have no immunity whatsoever. It just rips right through them. Blame and condemnation would proliferate like a plague. Every time one ape cast another ape in a bad light, the ape who did the condemning got a hit of emotional superiority in its own eyes. But the reverse was also true. Everyone would be a target. That gnawing anxiety would be a raw nerve never far from the surface of any encounter. And several things about the whole situation would ramp it up further.

For instance, it would hugely increase the general danger of becoming a social outcast. Being socially ostracised is agony to an ape. This is not some weird psychological quirk. In the natural world, for an ape, exile means death, 100% of the time, no question. An ape alone is doomed. It has zero chance to mate, zero ability to protect itself, zero chance to feed any young. It can barely feed itself, because it would be chased away from any decent food source. For an ape, the fear of being exiled is a visceral thing. What if everyone suddenly hates you? What if they despise you and lose respect for you? That's the terror that's being provoked by all forms of condemnation. All of this would deepen that need to avoid errors, avoid mistakes, pushing them further into building that sequence of sure following sure.

Picture it. How are you connecting with these other apes? All your naturally evolved abilities to connect with others are still there, but a deeper kind of control is extending through your life. You're being coerced into chasing certainty, leaving you in a state of chronic anxiety, desperate to avoid anything that might undermine this idea you have of yourself.

But you do have the ability to control the situation a little bit. By seizing on the failings of others, looking for flaws you can mock, things you can criticise. If you can direct that negative attention to others you spare yourself. And it also helps you bond with others over how much you both share the same condemnation of the same ape, or the same group. But with these new pressures and vulnerabilities it's a completely

different kind of social habitat, more consumed with the need to make no mistakes than to actually do anything or connect with anyone. It's almost an inverted social habitat, like life in negative.

What would that do to the social fabric of an ape's world? Well, it might well create dramatic short-term success, just like a cigarette or a hit on a crack pipe. If you could succeed in making someone else the thing you condemn, and get everyone else to join in that condemnation, you might create quite a strong bond quite quickly as everyone's desperation and anxiety would find a way to relieve itself – except of course the person being criticised. But then you would have fed into a general culture of merciless cruelty to any who make mistakes, making everything so much worse for yourself in the long term. And even when it successfully worked to bond you with other apes in a kind of lynch-mob mentality it would be a profoundly different kind of connection. It would be contingent on sustaining that hate. A whole social fabric is resting on a foundation of criticism and negativity toward the faults and flaws of whoever was offered up as that sacrificial lamb. It's a dark situation, but is it something that's impossible for us to recognise? Do human beings never do this?

But this is just the start, because this kind of febrile atmosphere means only one thing. Interpersonal dramas – something never absent from the lives of any of the great apes – would skyrocket in seriousness and frequency, and remain sky-high as a permanent feature of life. Conflict would not be avoided, could not be avoided. Indeed, it would be actively sought out and provoked through constant sniping and fault-finding. And then our ancestors could use any conflict, even violence itself, as a stage to show off to themselves about how moral they were – to fuel that glorious idea of themselves. And if they decided they didn't want to join in? Well, if they weren't the ones throwing the stones, they might well be the ones getting pelted.

The social fabric would buckle and rip. As flaws and failings became the critical currency of this new culture, everything would become more fraught, insecurity would rise, fear would rise. Condemnation would course through the social bonds of these apes, and a terror of being cast out, of being rejected, and marked out as evil would never be so very far away. Ensuring you weren't being sneered at would be a full-time job that would pull these apes tight as a violin string. The very real fear of ruin would constantly tug at the heart, the fear of being marked out as someone worthless, someone bad, someone who could never be forgiven. Someone who cannot be loved. No way back. No way home. The bullseye of every ape's worst emotional nightmare – and only one way to make the fear subside.

A sequence of 100% following 100%. Proof after proof after proof after proof that they were worthy, good, decent. Collecting everything that ticked those boxes, discarding everything else. Rejecting everything that undermined that beautiful image, accepting everything that made it blaze. No planning, no order, just as many steps of sure

following sure as could possibly be contrived, splaying out in every direction in the ape's mind. Proof upon proof of the most important thing in their own lives: their own goodness in their own eyes. And as that sequence grew, the ape would become gripped by an unnatural hunger. It would need to consume more and more certainty to stop itself from falling into anxiety. It could never consume enough.

Ape society would no longer be about genuine connection. It would be about who could commit the most successful fraud, who could sustain the most effective charade. A charade of flawlessness, all centred around an image of moral decency. But this would mean that even when socially successful, their relationships, friendships – their whole society – were now illusions connecting to illusions. The apes would still be isolated from genuine emotional connection. They'd always be secretly alone.

But don't feel too sorry for them, because there's another element of all this as well. The apes would be basing their lives on these parasitic ideas of themselves, which to the apes themselves would seem completely real. Every piece of certainty they could find which would support that idea would feel priceless. But the more they gained, the more sure they would become that they really, really were this truly wonderful ape. The worry of being criticised would lock the ape into a prison of fear, but at the same time its sense of personal superiority would give it a massive sense of entitlement.

It would be utterly in love with itself. It would always feel it deserved far, far more than it had, because it was weighing up what was fair and unfair against the backdrop of this amazing idea. Male, female, young, old, it wouldn't matter. Nothing would ever be good enough for it. This would lead to resentment and bitterness, which would only grow worse with time. A slow drip-drip-drip of imagined slights and insults that would poison an ape's character, make it vindictive and spiteful, as it sought redress for everything it felt it deserved.

It would also often give an ape a delusionally inflated sense of its own abilities. To mangle a phrase, its self-image would be writing cheques its simian capacities couldn't cash. So when it wasn't cowering in worry, desperate to avoid failure, it would be ridiculously overconfident, blindly blundering into things it barely understood. The ape would oscillate between paralysing worry and destructive pride, and this would be a general feature of every single ape alive. Huge, explosive, totally unnecessary catastrophes would abound. This would destabilise the social life of those apes in wrenching ways.

And all this – every part of it – would increase anxiety, and thus increase the ape's desperate emotional dependence on finding new certainties to strengthen its idea of its own goodness. It's just another level of self-amplifying feedback, made inevitable by the last, in the way that sometimes one avalanche can trigger another, and then that

one yet another.

It is a strange thing to think that the external, physical terrain of the apes probably remained exactly the same through all this – but in another way they had entered a totally new kind of habitat. Something was parasitically feeding upon them, utterly altering the dangers of that virtual place. A living deception, something they could neither fight nor comprehend. A conceptual life-form, which altered their perceptions of that most intimate world – the world inside themselves. And from there, it infected the world they all shared, that social world between them all, the world of connection and feeling that bound them all together. Physically, the terrain around them had not changed. Emotionally and socially, they might as well have just stepped into a different universe.

## Chapter 17

There are six parasitic strategies in nature, across all the parasites in every form of observed life<sup>4</sup>. Most everything any parasite does eventually boils down to one of these six things. One of these six strategies is something called 'parasitic castration.' Parasitic castration is precisely as delightful as it sounds.

Parasitic castration is when a parasite co-opts the reproductive energy of the host, diverting it to its own use. It can be very literal, sometimes involving the obstruction or destruction of the male or female sexual organs, and their replacement by the parasite itself. One example is a parasitic barnacle called *Sacculina carcini*, otherwise known as the 'crab hacker barnacle' that attaches itself to female crabs, physically blocking their ability to lay eggs. The crabs then run around the place laying the parasite's eggs instead. But parasitic castration can also mean other, more abstract ways of hijacking a host's reproductive energy. A cuckoo, which lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, is exploiting the same strategy. It's hijacking the natural reproductive energy of other birds, getting them to raise its young.

This is relevant because what we're talking about hasn't replaced the ape's sexual organs. It's replaced their sexual *display*. In taking over their ability to relate to each other, this parasite has hijacked the fundamental mechanism by which all ape courtship happens at all. Think of how invasive this is. This strikes to the heart of the ape's ongoing evolution.

You can talk about survival of the fittest all you like, but without sexual selection, survival of the fittest means nothing, and has no value whatsoever to evolution. You can be the fittest of the fit, and survive a thousand lifetimes, but if you don't get selected for reproduction, you're just not part of the evolutionary process. Selection is the entire evolutionary point of survival. What this means is inescapable: interfering with an organism's capacity to reproduce triggers immediate evolutionary pressure of the most urgent possible kind. This pressure is every bit as extreme as if the organism was being hunted by an exceptionally lethal predator.

This is because sexual selection pressure has a different quality to survival pressure. When a species is under pressure to survive, like the gazelle is from the cheetah, the effect is a bit like devil-take-the-hindmost – the pressure just culls the weakest, and those most physically fit survive. The effect is pretty linear. The longer an animal survives, the more it can reproduce. If an animal lives 50% longer as a mature adult, it'll probably have something like 50% more offspring.

---

<sup>4</sup> The six strategies are: parasitoidism, micropredation, parasitic castration, direct transmission, vector-based transmission and trophic transmission.

But sexual selection isn't like this. It's more a kind of winner-take-all situation. If an animal is 50% more attractive than any of the other animals it's competing with for mates, that doesn't mean it gets 50% more mates. It means that in *every single competition* for a mate that it enters, it will be the winner. This is the difference between how survival and selection pressures impact an organism's evolution. If something wins the 'survival' competition, that allows it to stay in the game longer. But if it wins the 'sexual selection' competition, that means it dominates the game the entire time it's playing. This is why whatever strategy arose to counter this problem became the central thing around which our ancestors would have been sexually selected.

The easiest way to see it is to contrast it with the courtship display of another animal. Of course it can be quite depressing to think of sexual selection's winner-take-all qualities, because who among us is sure we are the most attractive person<sup>5</sup>? But in some animals – lions leap to mind – that is just the way it runs. With lions the most attractive male gets all the attention and all the other males get nothing. It doesn't seem very nice at all. What about all the other males? What about the females who all have to share just one male at a time? How is that fair?

But look closer, and this is a great example of the use of reality by both male and female animals to authenticate a mating strategy.

The male lion is using the reality of the challenge he faces to prove to the female lions that he's the one who can offer the best survival genes. That challenge is very extreme. It involves being kicked out of the group at a young age, then forced to survive in harsh conditions. Then the lion not only has to survive, but to thrive, to hunt all alone, to feed itself so well that it can challenge another established male at the head of a group of lionesses. And that other male lion in control of that group is himself no slouch. He himself survived such an extreme trial, and fought the last lion who rules that group, and won. And he's fought off every challenger while he's been there, so he has a lot more experience fighting, and is also very well fed, because the lionesses feed him.

So for a new male lion to come in, pick that fight and win it, that lion has to be very brave and very capable. It really needs to be a truly outstanding survivor. It is literally impossible for a male lion to fake this test. And because it can't be faked, it has value, like currency. And while the male lion uses the reality of the situation to prove his worth, lionesses also use the reality of the situation to validate the extremely high quality of the male.

All the great apes connect in a deeper, richer, and more personal way than simple

---

<sup>5</sup> It's you. You are.

single combat. But the use of reality to test value and prove value is key. All animals attract each other by sending some kind of signal that seeks to prove worth. These signals can take almost any form, and are sometimes dangerous. Some small birds attract mates by flying loops around lethal birds of prey in flight. It's a display of agility with zero room for error, and if the bird can do it, that's very impressive. It's undeniable, it's proof that the bird genuinely is that good. These are called 'costly signals' in biology, sometimes 'honest signals,' and it's exactly like we see with the lion.

But what happens when the whole thing now centres on advancing this amazing idea you have of yourself in your own head? What happens when this must be done while scrupulously avoiding any appearance of error? When all depends on selling that flawless appearance of your moral self? On convincing others of the rightness of your personal pride? Once, reality was used to verify and demonstrate value. But it's precisely reality that's now being sidelined with these apes, in favour of something else: that beautiful appearance of itself that ape has in their own head.

Far from being an asset you can use to prove worth or verify it, reality itself becomes a dangerous enemy. What do you do when reality undermines your own image? There's only one answer if your emotional and social foundation depends upon it. Ditch reality. So now there's a totally new kind of relationship with the real. When reality can be exploited to boost the moral appearance of that ape it gets exploited. When reality undermines it, reality gets shunted aside. The image takes the place of reality itself as the ape's primary concern.

Quite aside from how this impacts the whole idea of honest signalling, this is an extremely dangerous development for the ape. It's like if you were walking across dangerous mountain terrain, with pits, ditches and crevasses hidden in every shadow, and choosing to remain unafraid by simply ignoring the existence of the danger, closing your eyes and walking in a straight line. Reality is a very dangerous thing to sideline, or selectively ignore if it fails to sufficiently flatter you. The things you ignore in reality don't go away. You collide with them.

But to come back to the idea of a mating display, the heart of this parasitic infection is that idea the ape has of themselves, what you could call 'a theatre of moral grandeur for an audience of one.' What this means is that every relationship in that ape's life becomes, first and foremost, a kind of prop, like a theatre prop, used to aid in this ongoing private stage production. Which means that this beautiful idea of you is far and away the most amazing thing about you that you are aware of. Of course that's what you're going to lead with if you're trying to impress someone. But it doesn't just mean that's what you're going to use to impress others.

It also dominates how you are yourself selecting a mate. Alongside the normal desires



to choose someone there's also now another gnawing anxiety. To choose a mate which allows you to *show off to yourself* about how marvellous you are. To show off in terms that are clear and immediate, to demonstrate your superiority and glory to yourself, in your own eyes, especially in a short-term way, because that kind of short-term hit of certainty is what you're hooked on to soothe that worry. You'll also be keen to choose a mate which allows you to avoid being criticised, because to have someone criticise your partner, sneer at them, or look down on them, is to have them criticise you, because that's your choice they're criticising. And they're criticising it in a febrile, status-based society where any flaw will be seized upon and ruthlessly exploited by other apes. Essentially, the reality of the other ape becomes incidental to what you are actually seeking and responding to. The choice is now being made primarily for what benefits the self-image. For what benefits the parasite, and not the person. This conceptual parasite has now essentially hijacked the entire selection process of our early ancestors.

This sets the stage for antagonistic co-evolution (our Red Queen). So, what's the counter? What's the counter-adaptation to the hijacking of apes' social and sexual display by a conceptual parasite? What is the counter to this particular form of parasitic castration? Whatever that strategy is, it is about to become utterly central to the shape and nature of the species itself. Because whatever this is, it is going to be selected for with relentless focus, as the new centre of ape sexual selection.

There's only one thing they could do. Our ancestors were forced to use that now-parasitic display of self in order to get and choose a mate.

It is hard to communicate just how demented this situation is, from an evolutionary point of view. You have a parasite that has taken over the animal, and the only option the animal now has to connect, mate and reproduce is to somehow effectively *use that parasite* to do so. It is difficult to think of anything like this happening anywhere else in the natural world. And suddenly the full force of sexual selection pressure lands on one thing: who can best create the self-images that are the most compelling, and best communicated, in a situation where error hits hundreds of times harder than success?

This immediately raises superficial things to a huge degree of importance, giving them massive power to mesmerise, compel – and even coerce. Deeper things can be doubted, but superficial things are sure and certain, they're right there on the surface. The deeper reality of who someone is gets immediately displaced. It's now some weird, shadowy, half-issue, swept aside in the rush. It's nice and all, but it's not what lights up that image of you in your own eyes and makes your heart pound in your chest. In short, this removes reality as the deciding factor in the testing, and the proving, and replaces it with appearance. Can you project the most convincing, least criticisable appearance?

One way to get a sense of the shocking extremity of this shift is to think about something called a 'dominance hierarchy.' The dominance hierarchy is something that crops up in almost every form of animal, to some degree. It's a feature of sexual selection. It's basically the pyramid of value that gets formed by the winners and losers of the selection process. Those who win are at the top, and they get first choice of mates. They also get more resources, and are better fed, and their offspring are better fed. Those at the bottom are the ones who don't get selected.

It is hard to think of any hierarchy of dominance anywhere in nature that does not use reality to both demonstrate value, and to gauge it. Costly signals, honest signals, the use of difficulty to demonstrate worth. Most kinds of judging process set that test against some real-life challenge of some kind that proves value. Even if it's a mating dance, or a mating call, or exotic plumage, it demonstrates something about the reality of the animal: their health, their dexterity, something.

But it's exactly this which stopped happening for our ancestors. The selection process of our species stopped being centred on the reality of what we were, and instead became centred on fictions of ourselves we could project as a display. And those displays are being appraised by how they either help or hinder our own display of our own glory in our own eyes. Both sides of the equation have been taken by the parasite.

This is not selection of the fittest. If it's anything, it's selection of the fraudulent.

## Chapter 18

Many highly respected thinkers have argued, and continue to argue, that you can't change human nature. They say that all our cruelty and superficiality is hardwired, through all our millions of years of evolution, and only a fool would try to change them. We have to simply accept our flaws and manage ourselves as best we can. And they're right when they say what's hardwired about human nature is indeed hardwired. That is true. Evolution is deep and rich, and has crafted us in profound ways we have yet to fully understand. So if you take that kind of perspective, it's easy to get depressed about how shallow we can all be, men and women, with ourselves and each other, especially when it comes to romance.

But is this actually human nature? What if this is something else's nature? Something that has hijacked humans and which twists us into betraying our true interests for its own benefit? What if we can find a way to suppress that infection? A way to shut it down like the body shuts down *Toxoplasma gondii*? Who would we even be? What might be possible then?

But that's a question our ape ancestors could never, ever ask. When our ape ancestors first fell into this trap, they would experience a highly specific evolutionary pressure. The Red Queen effect had taken direct hold over the mechanics of an entire species' sexual selection. The actual, live, moment-by-moment process by which these apes are consciously selecting their mates has been skewed in a very particular way. Very specific traits are being actively sought out and selected for, over and over again. Those who inherit those qualities will be able to reap another, similarly outsized reward in the next generation. And this can only do one thing: drive a fast-moving, sustained, directed burst of evolutionary development, down a consistent direction.

And this is exactly what we see in the human fossil record. If we take the last twenty million years of human evolution, for the first sixteen million of those years our ancestors' brain capacity remained roughly the same. It increased slightly, by something like a third, over that sixteen million year period. Then, in the last four million years, it tripled. A long period of slow, incremental change. A short period of rapid expansion.

There can only be one explanation for this – those last four million years saw a massive pressure placed on having as big a brain as you can possibly get. And not just one burst of pressure, at the start of that period. But a remorseless, constant, ever-present pressure day in, day out, in every generation for four million years. Pressure there is no reason to think has gone away in the modern age.

What's driving that desperate need for brain expansion? Some say it's just to use tools

better, but is that extreme enough of a need? Is that consistent enough? A consistent pressure over millions of years? Lots of different apes use sticks and stones as basic tools. Bigger brains would help them do that better, but they haven't undergone this massive blast of rapid evolutionary change. The benefits of very, very basic tools just aren't enough to drive it. They might help a bit, but don't give an individual ape a shattering lead over its rivals. So what does?

What's the pressure on us that drove us, just as intense, in every generation, through all the different thresholds we passed, all the different places we went, all the different issues, predators, diseases, and chaos of a four million year period, and we kept changing in the same way, in the same direction? The only thing that makes sense is if it's something else. Something we haven't seen yet, something we haven't factored in that's pushing on us with incredible force in a very specific direction.

What if it's not the use of tools at all? What if our ability to do things like that – skills, tool use, conceptualisation, human thought itself – are just a side-effect of a much more intense, intimate and relentless pressure? Is it impossible that we evolved bigger brains so we could have more compelling identities? Richer and more sophisticated ideas of who we are, so we could better use those fraudulent ideas to compel each other into friendship and romance?

It's an absolutely jarring possibility. A living, parasitic, independently evolving mating display, locked into a Red Queen relationship with us. That is something removed from any other kind of pressure we've ever imagined having any effect on our ancestors at all. But that's a very specific shoe with a very particular shape. Is that shape so very far away from what we all know of being human?

Consider the evolution of language. In the fossil record you can see the physical development of the human mouth and voicebox, taking shape alongside the increase in brain capacity. Is this just a coincidence too? You could wave your hand at it and say "well it's evolutionarily useful to be able to communicate better" but that's true of every species, everywhere, all the time. Why us? Why then? But what is now apparent is that there would be a massive, immediate evolutionary premium on better communication skills so our ancestors could *express* those identities.

It wouldn't just be a 'nice thing to have.' That's not how evolution works. It doesn't do the nice thing or the generally useful thing. If it did, we'd all have angel wings and hair that never needed washing. Evolution happens in response to specific pressure, and no other way. What is the specific pressure that drove brain capacity *and* language use to develop extremely quickly (in evolutionary terms) at exactly the same time? This one thing strikes both dead centre.

Or consider this. There's other dramatic shifts that happened in those four million

years. Humans underwent a total physical overhaul. Hair receded to show off skin and muscle tone. That skin became smooth and lustrous to reinforce the appearance of health. Visual sexual characteristics became far more pronounced so we could be striking to each other in a purely superficial way. And we even stood upright, so we could better be seen.

Now you could say that's true because a nice appearance helps you get a partner so evolution would select for it. But that's true of every kind of ape, in every generation. Why us? And why specifically then? The only way to account for it is that at some point, a relentless pressure arose to drive the selection of physical appearance with the most implacable intensity. And that pressure didn't go away after just one generation. It stayed, in the next generation, and the next, still relentless over millions of years. That's what revolutionised the human body, that's the only way it could have happened. The only thing to question is what that pressure was.

And yet is it that hard to understand if we see that the human is no longer in control? The image is primary – the person's image of themselves in their own eyes, that's what's holding the reins.

If your partner has a beautiful appearance, you look amazing to yourself in the world of thought: your parasite gets reinforced. So if you want to compete for a partner when everyone is infected with that same parasite, having a good appearance becomes decisive. It's going to provoke an intense reaction because the parasite is going to push that button to feed itself. And that right there: that's your relentless pressure.

This one specific pressure is hammering humans to be clever, verbal, naked and upright, all the external ways we differ from other apes. Internally, this same specific pressure maps eerily onto our uniquely human insecurities, anxieties and divisions. This precise thing precisely sculpts the precise essence of humanity, inside and out.

Because unless you're going to argue that there's nothing here to see, then this parasite did something more than just hijack these apes' mating display.

It hijacked the entire trajectory of our evolution.

## Chapter 19

The feedback howl of identity had expanded in intensity to the limits of the ape brain – but those limitations themselves were now also expanding. Much in the same way as computer software is constrained by the power of the computer, the parasitic image of identity would be constrained by the brain power of the ape.

The brainier the ape, the more sophisticated an idea of themselves they can conceive, the more certainties they can isolate, and fix together in more sophisticated sequences of sure following sure. Further, the ability of the parasite itself to reproduce would be increased by the ape's increasing ability to communicate. The better that ape can get ideas across, the better it can spread the idea of itself.

But the conceptual parasite had a very different agenda to the ape. Every part of this parasite's life hinged upon a single capacity: coercive control. To lock the ape in a mental world where only the ape's self has any value, and where only absolute certainties count. And there's another element from biology that sheds even more light on how this all works.

Mimicry is common in the natural world, but in the physical world, mimicry is hard-coded. That moth with camouflaged wings can't change the pattern to look like a different kind of rock. A stick insect can't suddenly morph into a pencil. And yes, there are chameleons that can change colour and certain species of aquatic life which can do the same, but this is pretty rare, and even then a shift in colour is only skin deep. Physical life can't easily flip into an entirely new configuration whenever it needs to blend into a new backdrop. Metamorphosis in physical organisms is limited in both scope and extremity.

But what are the constraints on a conceptual life-form? We are literally talking about a piece of living appearance, as malleable as any idea in a world of ideas. The image of your own glory could look like anything. It could take on whatever form most captivated the ape at any given moment. If the ape's tastes changed, or its outlook changed, or its feelings changed, the parasite itself could paint a new idea of how wonderful the ape was in whatever new colours overloaded the ape's new emotional terrain, whatever exploited the ape's new weak spots. If the parasite itself were ever discredited in any given form, it could just concoct a new one. If the ape were to see the truth of the lie of who they were, the parasite could simply tell a new lie.

But there is a serious problem here for the parasite. To shift into a new form would mean collapsing all those controlling sequences of certainty following certainty. All those chains of sure following sure would be irrelevant if the central idea they all justified changed into something totally new. The criss-crossing morass would be lost,

and the control would be lost. The parasite would have to start a new sequence from scratch. And so it wouldn't happen unless the parasite were forced to do it, or if the control it could gain at that deeper level was in some way worth the sacrifice.

But if forced, it could. If it were truly revealed, and the ape saw through the lie, the parasite could rebuild the mass of sequence from the ground up. And this is where mimicry comes in. It mimics a new thing. And to know what to mimic, the parasite would simply need to mimic a more amplified form of whatever is compelling the ape already. To latch on to whatever already gives the deepest reaction, whatever provokes the ape to the deepest feeling, and amplify it so that everything else is eclipsed. It would be the most efficient, powerful adaptation: the parasite would not need to know anything about the actual content of what the ape was interested in. It would not need to know anything about what was actually going on. All it would need to do is mimic a lie that amplified the one thing the ape desperately wanted to believe the most about itself, whatever that might be.

This would sidestep the need to ever create or invent a deception. The parasite would not need to have a plan for how to transfix the ape's attention on an amazing idea of itself. All it would need to do is wait until the ape itself became amazed at anything, and then mimic an identity around that thing. The parasite doesn't need to care what 'good' actually means or what 'bad' actually means. It just needs the ape to care. But in that blindness to content, there was a shadow in the parasite's vision. Something that the apes could exploit to claw something back. Evolution was about to give the apes a chance to rebel.

Think of this. If an ape actually, personally enjoyed hurting and exploiting other apes, the parasite could control it to do very destructive things without any risk to its disguise. The parasite could pursue its parasitic thirst for cruelty and coercion without the risk that the host ape would see any contradiction between its actions and its particular sense of personal glory. The parasite could do horrifying things with very little constraint. It could inflict as much suffering as possible so it could spread itself through pain, and all under the disguise of an identity that resonated with the ape itself. It wouldn't need to break cover, lose the illusion, lose the control. So the more controlling and parasitic an ape was in its personal character, the easier it would be for the conceptual parasite to control in deeper and more horrific ways.

But if the ape was emotionally attracted to mercy and love, what would that do? What happens when the parasite's control over its host hinges on successfully portraying an identity which spectacularly embodies kindness? The parasite would be forced to credibly mimic those things instead in order to maintain its control.

From the parasite's perspective, it's not looking at the content of what's being thought or felt, just how much the ape itself is reacting to that content. It's just grabbing the

ape by the biggest handle. But there's a powerful Red Queen counter-adaptation here for the apes. An adaptation which would severely impede parasitic control. The ape could force the parasite to mimic and maintain a disguise which ran totally counter to its own goals. Its cruelty would have to be more subtle, because it hinged first and foremost on maintaining that illusion of kindness. The parasite's visceral grip over the heart of the ape would rely on its ability to appear consistently and spectacularly compassionate, honourable, and decent.

The parasite would still have control. It's still in this commanding position in the mind, disguised as the most wonderful idea the ape can have of itself. It's still able to condemn others and stoke moral division. Still able to capture that ape's attention with that spectacular idea of its own moral goodness, still able to force the ape's obedience by blinding it to anything of value outside that image. And underneath all this the parasite would still have the same agenda – to coerce the ape into conflict, drama, condemnation and pain. But it would be forced to control the ape toward those ends by sustaining the credibility of a façade that utterly contradicted them.

This would be very beneficial for the apes. In a situation of Red Queen adaptation and counter-adaptation, this has power and simplicity. And it's important to keep reminding ourselves that the apes themselves would have no idea this was happening. They're not choosing to feel these feelings. Nor is evolution 'deciding' that this is a good idea. But any ape which adapted in this direction would genuinely limit the parasite's scope and depth of control.

It wouldn't destroy that control, but it would complicate things. It would raise resistance. A love of love. A love of compassion. Of kindness and mercy, fairness and integrity: all the things that run directly counter to a parasitic strategy, all the things a parasite can never have and never be. The more we evolved to love those things, and feel amazement for them in our hearts, the heavier limits were placed on how cruel the parasite could openly be without breaking its own illusion, and losing control of its host.

A good way to think of it is this: parasitic strategy, at its most fundamental, is the exploitation of weakness. To go for weak points, to hunt out the most tender and vulnerable things to exploit, and then to ruthlessly exploit them. To seek out flaws to attack, to seek out places you can hurt and inflict pain. It's a strategy that sees only weakness, because only weakness is relevant to it, that's just the basic nature of what it is to be parasitic.

But what if humans were to develop a profound emotional vulnerability to kindness? An emotional vulnerability to love? A weakness toward compassion? If compassion, integrity, honour, if these kinds of things were a true weakness in human beings, something we could not defend against, that truly cut through our defences and got



to us, then any parasite seeking the weakest point in that ape to exploit? That's what it would find. That's what the biggest vulnerability would be.

It would also be powerful to have a natural attraction to honesty. Any ape with a genetic soft spot for truth would force the parasite to control it by spectacularly mimicking truth. Reality would often be jarringly at odds with the parasite's lies, and constantly threaten to collapse the structure of artificial certainty around the ape, damaging the coercive control that the parasite maintained. To fool the host, the parasite would have to mimic truth in quite sophisticated ways, getting more sophisticated as the ape itself increased in intelligence. An ape with a particular vulnerability to honesty – especially honesty to yourself, in private, in your own eyes – is going to be quite a headache for a living lie to control.

Similarly, if the parasite were controlling an ape with a weak spot toward courage, it would be harder to just cow the ape into docile, broken subservience. It would have to mesmerise the ape with an idea of itself that was credibly brave. So the ape would be driving toward things it was afraid of, doing scary things, facing scary problems as best it could and developing genuine courage. It wouldn't just sit still and suffer like obedient cattle. The ape would be uppity, rebellious. It would slip the leash every now and then.

But then, an arms race cuts both ways. There are many obvious counter-adaptations a parasite could make to exploit this situation. The simplest and most obvious is to focus moral condemnation on others who are themselves cruel. An identity could use the parasitic behaviour of others to justify parasitic cruelty toward them. As long as it could justify a moral condemnation of someone, it could get the human doing terrible things, sickening things, all in the name of goodness itself. That's not to mention the ocean of small, petty, spiteful, mean-spirited nastiness that is always very easy to justify as 'no big deal.' And of course, in getting a human to commit monstrosity in the name of compassion, the parasite is not going to feel ashamed of any contradiction. It's a parasite. It doesn't care.

But as the apes did this, the pendulum swung. It opened up an opportunity for an even deeper level of parasitic control. The ape is inflaming its own glory in its own eyes whenever it criticises and condemns. That's the rapid, short-lived burst of superiority, the addiction to finding flaws, seeking weak points. Ways to look at other apes in the worst possible light, ways to sideline and ignore anything positive and seize upon those elements that give you the ability to sneer. Best of all is to find unforgivable things, horrendous things. Find the things so terrible they place someone permanently beyond the hope of love, and you can blaze to yourself with moral majesty because of how deeply you hate them.

This is bad enough, but it gets a lot worse. Because if the parasite could get them

actually doing the things they condemned most, into abusing those they loved, into committing harrowing cruelties and nightmarish crimes, then the parasite could cement its control over its host in a massive way.

If the ape were tempted into doing something that it, itself, found hateful, it would find it unbearable to look at the truth of who it was. If the ape had hated and condemned people for the exact thing it had itself done, what happens if that beautiful lie collapses? If you fail to keep the sequence in place, if you fail to defend and believe in that amazing illusion of you, then the reality of you you're going to be staring at would be horrific. So if that beautiful image collapses you don't just fall down into worthlessness. You fall a thousand times further. You can't bear to see the truth of who you are, it's hateful and appalling by exactly those standards you yourself have used to condemn others. So you need to keep that lie alive. It owns you now, because to break out of it would mean swimming across a sea of sorrow.

Now it is true that apes can already be extremely nasty to each other. They can rape, they can mutilate, they can kill. They can plot to murder other apes inside the social group so they can get ahead. They can assault other groups of apes with merciless fury. But this is something new, a whole new dimension of monstrosity, because this is a hidden force pulling them precisely toward sickening behaviour just because it is sickening. The more horrific it is to the ape, the more attractive it is to the parasite. And this is the Red Queen factor in action. Our own resistance to the parasite didn't just accelerate parasitic evolution, it shaped that evolution. It channelled the lies the parasite told down a certain line.

Compassion, like depression, makes no evolutionary sense. Globally respected thinkers have stated with absolute clarity that there is not, and cannot be, any evolutionary basis for it. Kindness means an ape is giving away resources. Evolution doesn't reward that. Giving to others, turning the other cheek when struck, these things are behaviours of someone at the bottom of the dominance hierarchy, not the top. Someone in a weaker position who is being crushed by life, desperate to curry favour.

What we can now see is that while this is normally true, in the particular evolutionary instance of human ancestry, an ape attracted to compassion would have an unstable parasite, while those apes who were most attracted to cruelty were the ones most at the mercy of a merciless thing.

We couldn't break the chains. But we forced it to rule from the shadows, depending for its control on convincing us it was the polar opposite of what it truly was.

## Chapter 20

Rising to the top of that dominance hierarchy, and being chosen for reproduction, meant having the most powerful, spectacular parasitic image. But this was a problem, because the parasite had us moving into smaller and smaller boxes, anxious and desperate not to make a mistake.

It had us worrying about flaws and failings, frightened of saying the wrong thing, giving the wrong impression. The more it worked us, the more that 'right thing to be' narrowed, crushing the entire range of our emotional life into that cage.

Think of what this does to the emotional colour and vibrance of an ape. You have this broad range of emotional flavour and quality, a vast spectrum of immediate commonality with all the other apes. It's an incredible social asset, because you can move across that range, making connections along the entire spectrum of feeling. But now only the smallest sliver of that spectrum is the 'right' thing to feel, and that sliver gets smaller and smaller with every step in the sequence. It's like in those adventure movies where the heroes are stuck in a room and the walls are slowly closing in.

We are talking about direct interference with sexual selection. There is no pressure in evolution more immediate or extreme, even the danger of death. This would put an immediate evolutionary premium on a very specific adaptation. If the only part of that emotional range that's allowed to be expressed is tiny, then the deeper and richer those feelings need to be, in order to have any level of compelling power whatsoever.

It is a strange thing to think of the human emotional range itself as something that is uniquely vast and rich, but what in the animal kingdom can compare to it? It's not just that we're better at expressing feelings, there's more feeling to express. And not necessarily intensity of feeling, but the immense subtlety of tone that characterises the entire human emotional landscape, a depth of flavour and quality to human emotions that is uniquely human. Animals can have feelings, apes have feelings. But do any animals, even apes, have the kaleidoscopic richness of human emotional depth?

In a situation where our emotional range is being narrowed inside tormented ideas of self, crushed inside sequences of sure following sure, there is an immediate, urgent benefit for any ape with increasingly vivid emotions. The apes that have the deeper, richer feelings are the ones who can best paint those ideas of self in more beautiful colours. And the ones who fail to do so, are failing in a situation where any flaw is seized upon and condemned, which could easily lead to exile and death.

When have we ever found any specific evolutionary pressure to explain why the whole emotional range of our species broadened and deepened? And in such a

dramatic fashion? And over the exact same period we went through all these other changes? But now we can see that it was all part of the same pressure – it happened because of the particular handicap that we were under. The light needed to blaze ever more strongly for it to shine through that anxious little gap were left with, just so it could function as a display.

There are also some other jarring evolutionary conundrums about human beings that snap into crystal focus from this perspective. General skill and general intelligence, just like compassion and depression, don't make a lot of sense evolutionarily. Problems and opportunities in any habitat are specific, so evolutionary adaptations are specific. Adaptations arise to counter a particular obstacle or exploit a particular opening. This is true across the entire range of all observed life. Every organism ever encountered is specialised, apart from humans.

Humans alone are generalists. We have this incredible capacity to solve problems across a basically limitless range. We can imagine all sorts of things, and we can do most anything we can imagine, given enough time. What is the specific pressure on an organism that results in the development of general intelligence? Or general skill?

You could say that they generally help so evolution would select for them, but that's not what evolution is. Just as with the human emotional range, we need to find a specific pressure, because in evolution, specific pressures dominate. What's the specific pressure that led to general problem-solving? Or the ability to develop extremely high skill levels in basically anything?

Well, consider this. As the sexual selection pressure of the parasite drove the human animal to develop larger and larger brains, new thoughts came. More advanced thoughts, more complex thoughts about the world around us, not because those complex thoughts were driving the expansion of the brain, but as a side-effect of its expansion due to the Red Queen effect.

Rudimentary thoughts of course, and probably doomed to failure. Thoughts about how to catch animals in traps, stitch clothing, sharpen a rock. Thoughts about which plants were safe to eat and which ones weren't. The ape would be loathe to do anything where it might fail – but the arrogance and overconfidence of the ape might well blind it to the danger of failure. Which means that the ape would fail over and over in really painful and embarrassing ways. Failure would hurt the ape emotionally because any failure would shake its sequence, and hurt the ape socially by giving its peers something to mock.

But it would also mean that it was seeing something over and over that it had never seen before. That no other ape had ever seen before. That no other animal had ever seen before. Not in anything like this quantity.

The failure of an idea, when it collides with what is really going on.

Seeing the failure of something you've actually attempted to do in real life isn't the same as seeing some random mess. You've tried something specific, for a specific reason. When it fails, it fails in a specific way. That's humiliating and painful, yes, but there are patterns in that failure. Patterns that might be spotted. Patterns that might even be difficult to miss, especially if the ape's brain capacity is expanding. Seeing a pattern in the failure meant the ape would then have a deeper insight into what they were trying to do. It could try better next time.

But something would hinder this process dramatically. The ape would hate seeing their own failure. It would be the failure of their own perfection in their own eyes, so they'd do anything they could to avoid it. They would work to excuse failure, evade failure, minimise it, or blame others for it. They would only have an incidental interest in what was real anyway. The core focus of everything would be maintaining that image in their own eyes. But despite these issues, failure would still be inescapable because of the arrogance of a life spent feeding your own pride. And the more failure occurred, the more these apes would face the same kinds of failure, over and over. And sooner or later, even an ape this stubborn would find it impossible not to see deeper into what was really going on.

And there it is. Human discovery, human problem solving, human skill. That's all it is, this one process. It's the discovery of deep simplicities in the reality of what's happening when you try something specific and fail. Do this over and over, and you get deeper and deeper into what's going on. That's the heart of it. Discovery has nothing to do with linear chains of logic. That kind of sequence of certainty following certainty is not about solving problems. It's just a charade of coherence, artificially contrived so we can look at ourselves and admire how clever we are.

How did evolution produce a generalist? Simple. It can't, and it didn't.

Humans are not generalists. We are specialists. We're just specialists at something that is limitlessly versatile. That thing is the secret of all human power. That's our intelligence, our problem solving, our general skill, all of it: the ability to pioneer the discovery of profound simplicities in reality. Simplicities that make new things possible, simplicities we can only find through failure.

You could even say that the entire experimental method of science itself is a way of industrialising this one evolved faculty: to drive the discovery of new insight into what's happening by pushing theories beyond their point of failure, and observing how they fail. That is the heart of what science does, and everything else is window-dressing.

Just like the cheetah and the gazelle, we were locked into a Red Queen relationship, but with a crucial difference. A cheetah and a gazelle both run across the same terrain. They live in the same physical world, on the same level as each other. The ape was not on the same level as the parasite. The ape did not run across the same terrain as the parasite. The ape literally was the terrain of the parasite, so it could never run fast enough nor climb high enough to get away. What it could do is become very inhospitable terrain.

Can we honestly account for the shape of human nature simply by the idea that we started hunting with sharpened sticks? Or that we started swimming in rivers and eating fish? Or any of the other ideas we've ever considered as the central driver for why humans became human? Or should we just say it's a permanent mystery, and can never be known, because it flatters us to believe that we are so special that we are beyond all possible hope of coherence?

The idea of a Red Queen contest with a conceptual parasite fits the shape of human evolution like a perfectly-tailored glove. It fits in a way massively deeper and clearer than any existing theory of human origins. It accounts for the contours and experience of human life in a way no other evolutionary theory has ever come close to. Our bodies. Our minds. Our feelings. Our voices. Our skin. Our upright stance. Our insecurities. Our dramas, our conflicts. Even the things considered impossible for evolution to produce: compassion, depression, general skill.

Every major unique quality of humanity isn't just explained by this Red Queen relationship, but is actually demanded by it. Is it truly unjustifiable to say that? Do you know of a better explanation?

But humanity is only one side of the coin. In getting this clear a view of our own evolution, we have completed the mission we undertook: we have also seen very, very deeply into the evolution of this parasite. It's no longer some hazy, vague thing. We can see major elements of its nature. We've found its body. We see its heart.

Now all we need to do now is put our hands around whatever passes for its throat.

Part 3:

## The Delta Of Sequence

## Chapter 21

Delta is simply the letter 'D' in the Greek alphabet. But in Greek, that letter isn't the same shape as our 'D'. In Greek, 'D' is written as a small triangle, like this:  $\Delta$ .

When mathematicians were looking for convenient symbols to label certain properties, they used a lot of Greek letters. Delta, for a mathematician, means the difference between mathematical functions. That's not the only thing it can mean. In certain occult traditions, delta can symbolise female sexuality, referring to the triangle of a woman's pubic hair. But there is another thing that a delta refers to. It's a very specific kind of river system that only occurs under certain conditions.

Imagine a mighty river, something truly huge, like the Mississippi, or the Ganges, or the Nile. It's a vast body of water, sweeping along at speed. As it moves, it carries a huge amount of debris along with it. Dead leaves, dead fish, dead wood, and all the stones and gravel small enough to be picked up by the flow. It grinds it all into sediment, and that sediment gets swept down the river. When that river hits the sea it dumps that sediment out into the ocean. Except the ocean is often very shallow near the shore, and so the sediment builds up. As it builds up, it backs up the river. The river gets shallower and shallower, so full of sediment that it can't hold all the water. When this happens, the river splits in two.

But then, those two smaller rivers are now also filling up with sediment. And so those rivers split as well. Then they fill up, and it splits again, then again, then again, until you have this branching chaos of splitting rivers. But because all the different splits are contained inside that initial split, it's all in the shape of a triangle. And that's why the ancient Greeks called this the "Nile Delta" when they found it happening in Egypt. It was a massive, chaotic river system the shape of their letter 'D.'

Sequence appears to be a linear chain of sure following sure, one certainty following another, like tick following tock. Indeed, the whole point of sequence is to create and protect that illusion of coherence. But it is precisely that: an illusion. It's all just cobbled-together chains of contrived certainty created by selectively ignoring everything else. Behind that rational façade, sequence is nothing like a clear and straightforward chain of cause and effect. It's far, far more like the delta of a river.

Like a river delta, sequences of sure following sure sprawl out in a crisscrossing web, each level getting smaller and more fragmented than the last. Each new branch of sequence that splits off in some new direction is smaller, narrower and shallower than the one that it stems from. The more a delta of sequence grows, the more your attention is thrown onto tiny issues inside tiny issues, certainties inside certainties inside certainties.



The bigger it gets, the harder it is to keep track of every chain of certainty following certainty. This is a problem because it's all just being cobbled together through fear, so one sequence of certainties might well flagrantly contradict others. If you get caught in a contradiction, that shakes the illusion on which your life is sitting, and triggers that sharp gout of anxiety. That panic leaps to make excuses for that contradiction, or justify it, or find a hundred different ways to reconcile or minimise the contradiction. Or you can just flatly deny the contradiction exists and lash out viciously, like a cornered animal, sharply criticising the person who raised the issue.

But even if it's not being attacked, the whole thing is always rickety. It's a façade held together by other pieces of façade, so it needs to constantly be shored up, and maintained. No part of this is actually about being genuinely coherent, or seeking the real coherence of what's actually going on. It's all just about appearance, about the appearance of certainty to yourself as a means of alleviating that terror of your own worthlessness. We do this by ignoring and evading, pushing uncomfortable things away, contorting ourselves into strange intellectual positions to reconcile one piece of needed certainty with another. Evidence that undermines certainties is like high ground to a river. The sequence of certainty just meanders around it, little new chains of right following right that deceptively circumvent a difficult issue.

A delta of sequence also has a kind of current, a little bit like a river. If you relax to this, surrender to it and 'go with the flow' then that fear of worthlessness will constantly pull at you like an undertow, driving you to seek more certainties to calm yourself. Inch by inch, it sweeps you further down toward a tinier and emptier world. People can move down the delta for years, decades, whole lifetimes. Certainty following certainty, each one fitting inside the last, layered over and over with arguments that confirm everything they're already certain of. The delta of sequence is an astonishingly effective trap for the human mind.

The more desperately you seek certainty, the more fragile your life becomes, making you even more desperate for more certainty. As you get more bogged down in minutiae, you also become more beholden to it. That minutiae helps you keep all the criticisms and worries at arm's length, keep it all small and distant from yourself. You never have to think about any big issues, just a million small ones. But when even those small certainties are undermined, there's nothing else to do but attack the thing that's undermining them, and no other way to do it other than to zero in further on things you're sure of, seek more certainties still.

It is a strange thing to talk about a conceptual structure having a shape, like the triangle of a delta. In a certain way this is entirely fanciful, because geometry necessitates the physical dimensions of space. You can imagine a virtual representation of a space, of an event, a shape, or any physical thing, but this is a

mental image, not the actual space itself. It's much like watching a movie at the cinema, you can see the objects, the space, the people walking around in it, watch all the explosions and hear all the cringeworthy dialogue. It seems there's a space there in which all this is happening. But what's actually happening is that there's a flat surface onto which the illusion of all these things is being projected. A fake something is always a real something else.

But the triangular shape of the river delta closely matches a key property of the delta of sequence. Every certainty you contrive must be sure not to contradict the certainties that came before it. Essentially, subsequent certainties need to 'fit' inside the old certainties. And then any new certainties that you get after that need to 'fit' inside those, and so on and so forth. It isn't just chains of certainty *following* certainty, it's chains of certainty *inside* certainty. Just like the river system, each new step needs to fit inside the shape of the step before.

Each new step is further constrained in scope and scale, because you have to limit all the things you can consider or even imagine down inside what is safe for all the certainties that have led you to this point. The horizon of possibility and discovery in your world reduces to a tiny slice of a tiny slice of a tiny slice (and so on forever).

As such a life goes on, a person's attention is fragmented into smaller and smaller elements. The desperate need to avoid mistakes gets more and more acute, and so everything uncertain is discarded with ever-increasing fervour. And because each step of certainty is gained by pushing away the overwhelming majority of what's actually happening, and then treating that as if it's not real at all, you lose your connection with reality. The further you go, the more prone you are to paranoia, delusions, absurd fantasies, conspiracy theory, or any kind of mad idea that can flatter you. In seeking not to be wrong at every point, you divorce yourself from the real over and over. There's only one place this can ultimately lead. There is a bitter irony to the whole situation: in making the avoidance of error the centre of your life, you sever yourself from reality, guaranteeing a descent into clownish delusion of the most humiliating kind.

The delta of sequence is not about lies. It's far more about selectively using little bits of truth, or little bits of apparent truth, to create a wider illusion. An illusion you are creating to sate that gnawing sense of deep worthlessness, and give yourself a feeling of control. You have to believe every step in the delta, so you can't just knowingly make stuff up. Instead, the truth of these individual certainties is entirely secondary to their real purpose. They're not sought because truth is sought, they're sought because truth (or apparent truth) is useful when you're weaving a massive charade for yourself.

The more tiny, fragmented, individual pieces of fact you can weave into the charade,

the more effective the charade is. If someone challenges you, you can just fall back to arguing about the individual, constituent facts. But even if they get disproven, you'll lash out, evade, or leap to something else, because the actual reality of things has no relevance to any of this, save in how it can be exploited to improve the deceit. If you're the one choosing which facts (or apparent facts) to seize upon and what possibilities to ignore, you get a lot of control over which way the river flows. You get to craft your own delusion, while congratulating yourself on how honest you are at every step of the way. It isn't that the steps are lies. It isn't that they're not true. It's that their truth or falsehood is entirely incidental to what you're doing with them.

But there is one big difference between a delta of sequence and the river system. A delta of sequence defends itself. If you strike it, it evades, counterattacks, distracts, deceives. Let's look again at that list of qualities that make up a life form: response to stimuli, reproduction, growth, development, and a kind of internal stability of form which is called homeostasis. Which of these boxes does the delta of sequence not tick?

Is it honestly so insane to suggest that the delta of sequence behaves like a kind of living, reacting system because it is one?

## Chapter 22

To bring down a delta is no small feat. It is an amazing defensive structure. Very often the things we're trying to change, the things we argue about, the things that occupy our minds, are the narrow, shallow, tiny things at the bottom of the delta. This means they're horribly difficult to solve, because they're all problems inside problems inside problems, and you're only dealing with the most superficial level. And even if you somehow do make progress in fixing these superficial problems, nothing real will change because all the certainties higher up the delta remain untouched.

The delta will always grow over time. Every new certainty you attach to it makes it bigger, more sophisticated, harder to take down, easier to get lost in. This means two equally disturbing things. The first is, left unattended, infection with this conceptual parasite is a progressive and degenerative condition. It will only get worse with time, and take more and more from a human being, pulling you deeper and deeper. Every day spent under this kind of influence makes your situation worse. What is the future for a person who cannot find a way to break free? What happens to a human heart when it is poisoned by ever-increasing worry, resentment, and entitlement? You can fight against that with all your might, but while you're being swept down that delta, how much might are you really going to end up having? What will you become?

The second disturbing issue is that because every single certainty depends on every other certainty that comes before it, the coercive force of the entire delta is brought to bear on you in the smallest of certainties. These certainties are real to you. And each is chosen not because it helps you find out what's really going on, but because it helps you protect that wonderful idea you have of yourself against the gnawing worry that it's just an illusion. Which it is. So every step you take hides that illusion further, and compounds the level of parasitic control you are subject to. Control which makes it impossible to stop yourself protecting that image, maintaining it, and spreading that image to others, not because there's some spooky central control to the whole thing, but because there doesn't need to be: every single step is taken with one singular priority – protect that parasitic image. And every step you take is something you bind yourself into believing, and truly believing. The entire thing works to entrench itself deeper and deeper, almost like a root system burrowing through your mind and life<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> Another, more technical way of describing this is that the repeating iterations of sequence create a conceptual fractal, which we call the delta. This means that the delta is subject to all of the properties of a fractal, such as self-similarity between levels and Hausdorff dimensionality. The Hausdorff dimension is the dimension of seeming depth that you get when you zoom in to a fractal. It seems infinite, because you can always zoom in further. But this is an illusion, because the steps get smaller the further you go, vanishing into infinite smallness. This is precisely the property of the delta of sequence we've been examining. It opens door after door, but only into smaller and smaller chambers.

Regardless, a delta of sequence can be very deep. If someone's spent years, decades, sifting everything they've experienced for where they're right, looking for arguments that confirm their certainties, defending themselves, avoiding blame and criticising others, they'll have a huge defensive setup. However you're going to challenge that parasitic morass, they've heard it before, dealt with it before. They've got contingencies and counterarguments primed and ready to go. You'll be confounded and turned around, you'll be sniped at from all sorts of pre-prepared positions, you'll be lured into ideological ambush. The longer someone has put into building their delta, the more practiced they will be at moving any kind of deeper challenge into the smallest and most irrelevant issues, those tiny filaments of certainty at the end of huge, branching chains of sequence.

Deltas of sequence grow up around every possible kind of self-image. The specific certainties sought will change, but the structure itself does not. And regardless of the content of that self-image, all deltas of sequence tend toward nihilism. This is to say, they tend toward a world-view where nothing has meaning, everything is worthless, and only experience matters.

Even if someone's identity is the most optimistic and compassionate possible identity, the structure itself will corrupt this into a thin façade over festering despair. Every step along any delta places more weight and more hope in an even narrower certainty. You can have a massive delta of certainties emanating out from some vision of an amazing future, but the actual future it leads to will always be barren.

This is because of how a delta of sequence strips you of power. It's not about openly denying reality, more about cherry-picking the real, or seemingly real bits, that serve the delta's true purpose. This makes discovery itself increasingly impossible, because the more entrenched that idea of self is, the less you'll risk anything where you might fail, and failure is the only place you're ever going to make a discovery.

The more the delta extends, the more achieving anything at all becomes difficult simply because you just can barely gain any insight into what you're actually dealing with. All you have is this fragmented view that locks your vision – and imagination – inside the things you already know for sure. Without new insight you're trapped in life, dependent on the patterns you know staying in place. We've never lived in a world that is particularly forgiving of that, but the age in which we live now is one of constant disruptive change. This raises an interesting issue: we all know that human beings, generally speaking, lose intellectual and emotional nimbleness as we age. A 40 year old will usually find it far harder to deal with big wrenching shifts than a 20 year old. We chalk this down to age, or just the world, or being tired, or something like that. We consider it normal, because it's so widespread. And yet, how would we know what healthy even looked like, if we were all sick?

We can now see a very clear account for this kind of change, not as some random property of getting a bit old and stuffy, but as a symptom of a sinister and progressive disease.

A disease which will not stop progressing at 40.

How much of what happens to people psychologically when they age has this thing behind it? How much of the hollowness, despondence, isolation, resentment, bitterness and rigid-thinking of old age has nothing to do with age itself? What if it's something else? How can we possibly know which symptoms are simply the passage of time, and which symptoms are the passage of time under the thrall of a degenerative illness that destroys us from the inside out?

And we can leap to the defence of the old people we love and say they're absolutely fine and nothing remotely like this has happened to them, because of this particular incident, or that particular thing. And we can zero in on those things, and ignore everything else. But is that love? Is that actually helping them? And perhaps more selfishly: is this progressive degeneration irrelevant to your life? Are the effects of a long-term late-stage parasitic infection a future you yourself are eager to experience?

But the delta of sequence doesn't need a lifetime to be toxic. It makes you incredibly weak at any age, limiting your scope of vision inside a prison of fear, and making you desperate to avoid failure, when failure is the key to discovery. Your failures stay small and petty, revealing nothing. And even if you do achieve something after a brutal slog, what you achieve has the narrowness of your sequence-crushed vision, which can only ever give you a shallow, flat victory. The delta binds your life into a grinding litany of useless failure and meaningless success. A human heart simply cannot take this forever. Sooner or later you will break, and you will give up hope. You can dress that up to yourself in any way you like, but however you sell it, your spirit is broken and you've been successfully tamed.

While the delta of sequence remains in place, no effort you make can change your destination.

We have to find a way to take this thing to pieces.

## Chapter 23

The word enlightenment has a variety of meanings. It can simply refer to the act of discovering the truth of something. It can also refer to the period in Europe which saw the rise of a belief in human reason, around the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. But it also refers to a process described in multiple ancient sources from around the world. The most well-known of these sources come from the global East.

There are a wide array of different versions of this process. Some take the form of huge world religions, whereas others are more fringe. Many of them disagree with each other over the best way to go about attaining this state, some profoundly. But underneath all the differences, there is a striking unity. They all detail how a person's false self can be eliminated, ushering in a permanent state of aliveness and joy.

In all cases, the insecure, worried, pain-ridden human self is something false and fake. For many modern commentators this false self is often called the 'ego.' It must be overcome, overthrown, killed, transcended – the terms and descriptions change, but what is essential is that this false self is somehow dissolved in some complete and final way.

Like 'enlightenment,' The word 'ego' is also a word with multiple meanings. Firstly, it's just the Latin word for "I." It is also used in conversation to talk about general vanity (he has a large ego, she has a fragile ego, etc...). It has other, very specific meanings inside certain strands of Western psychology, especially those rooted in the works of Jung and Freud. But when used in reference to the process of enlightenment, what is being referred to by the word 'ego' is quite specific. It means a sad, broken, angry self that is a destructive illusion, an illusion that must be seen through in order to be free of it.

Some traditions talk about a long-term, gradual liberation from this illusion, where years of preparation are accompanied by momentary flashes of a deeper, joyful consciousness, before eventually reaching a final state. Some enlightenment traditions mock this as stupidity, and focus instead on sudden enlightenment, using impossible riddles and paradoxes to confound the mind and collapse the self. More esoteric traditions use even more directly destructive means, deploying invasive techniques of transgressive extremity to annihilate the ego. But in all cases there is a threshold, and beyond that threshold, the state of enlightened freedom is absolute, and irreversible.

In every tradition, that freedom is described in exultant terms. It has been variously called the highest possible spiritual attainment, and the completion of the religious life. It is also known as 'ego death.' In this state, the false human self is utterly

obliterated, or transcended (however that particular tradition frames this event). To give a flavour of how this is sometimes described in the more popular and public traditions, it is not uncommon to hear something like “because the ego is an illusion, simply realising it is an illusion is enough to destroy it, because in truth, there is nothing there anyway, so there is nothing to destroy.” Other traditions say that because there is only void, there is nothing to annihilate, and this realisation is what enlightenment truly is. Many enlightenment traditions delight in this kind of mind-bending statement. Advancing them with confidence is often considered the hallmark of a true sage.

But regardless of the tradition, one thing stays the same: some critical point is passed which ushers in a state of permanent joy. And whether that’s a peaceful release or going nuclear, the result is a new kind of you living a new kind of life. No pain, no suffering, no want. Just delight, aliveness, and the rich experience of living unpolluted by even the smallest scrap of fear.

At the heart of this new way of being is a new sense of self. A typical description of that new sense of self in the more well-known versions of enlightenment often goes along these lines: that your True Self (often capitalised) is the pure and unblemished essence and aliveness of existence itself, that glorious void of nothingness which is the infinite space between stars which allows stars to be. Seeing through the lie of your limited, separate, worried, false self allows that transcendent purity and beauty to emerge. You are the very aliveness of the universe itself, which, upon enlightenment, awakens into full consciousness. There are more esoteric traditions in which this conception of the ‘true self’ differs dramatically. But whatever the description, this new self is always something amazing, something beautiful and glorious, something well beyond the normal. It always experiences life in an incredibly powerful way, and is utterly immune to the worries and insecurities of the human condition.

Another interesting commonality that crosses vast cultural ranges is that there is almost always a change of name involved, once this threshold moment occurs. Sometimes the name change happens even before that threshold as a kind of preparation for this ‘new self’ to emerge. The person calls themselves something different, as if they were a truly new person. It is common in the more public enlightenment traditions to hear this self described as ‘no self.’ But this ‘no self’ is the most glorious possible form of emptiness, brimming with joy, peaceful and serene, a fount of ultimate wisdom, a living piece of walking, talking eternity.

Even at the most generous possible interpretation of these traditions, it must be admitted that there is a huge amount of mumbo-jumbo that seethes around the entire issue. Many enlightenment traditions are rife with passive-aggressive posturing, obvious charlatans, and snide bickering about who has the right path. The transparent falseness of much of this makes it very tempting to dismiss the entire thing. But that’s



to look for the flaws alone, to appraise this only at its weakest and its worst. If you take the time to dig into this area and look only for the best and most real, it is simply undeniable that there genuinely are people who seem to have achieved this goal. It's not even actually that rare.

Such people do indeed have a different quality to them. They have a massive level of personal magnetism. Warmth and charisma rolls off them in waves. They brim with effervescent delight and excitement, but in a way that has a deep calm at its heart, and no frantic quality whatsoever. There is an enormously attractive sense of poise and authenticity to them, and many of the things they say seem fascinatingly profound, and beckon – without any seeming agenda or effort – to the hope of a truly better kind of life.

On the face of it, this process seems like the most amazing solution to our problem. We have this false self – the parasite. It's causing all this suffering by creating this massive delta of sequence that crushes and controls us. There's this process that dissolves it. Joy and peace abound. Problem solved.

But for one small issue.

Enlightenment is upside down.

## Chapter 24

In every enlightenment tradition the 'ego' is the sad you, the lonely you, the frustrated you. The 'ego' is all the insecurity, the sorrow, the anxiety, the pain. It's the division and divisiveness. It's the conflicts we get stuck in. That's all coming from this unpleasant, suffering self, the 'ego.' That's the thing that enlightenment is trying to kill.

That's not the parasite.

If the parasite took the form of a weak, broken, divided you, how much would you cherish it and feed it? If it took the form of a you that you despised, loathed and wanted to throw away, would you defend it? Would you pivot and evade from any possible criticism of it? Would you twist the whole world around just so you could keep it alive, if it were something awful that you hated being? What would the parasite gain by taking the form of a you that you hate to be?

What makes the parasitic self-image so powerful in its deception is that we are the ones desperate to believe it, desperate to protect it. We are the ones who cover over contradictions and flaws with it, because we want to believe so much that it is real. The only way the parasite can make us act this way is if it presents itself as the shining answer, the solution to all our problems, the best thing about us in the best possible terms. Nothing else would work. This is what it has done from its abiogenesis to the present day.

Think about it. The parasite can take any shape you can imagine. Indeed, this parasite literally is the best image of yourself that your imagination can devise, that's how it's taken us. The parasite would never, ever, take the form of a fractured, broken, insecure you. It would only ever take the form of something beautiful, something amazing. The most wonderful thing you can fit in your head, the thing that you would love to be. The parasite doesn't care what shape it takes, or what philosophical content that shape contains. It's not sitting there with a pipe and slippers worried about a personal glory revolving around the idea of no-self. It doesn't care about contradictions, just control. It doesn't care what makes sense, it just cares that you think something makes sense. It just cares that you care. Which can mean only one thing.

What the enlightenment traditions call the 'ego' is not actually the false self. The 'ego' is the real self. That's you.

That starved, manipulated, controlled and coerced self, the self that's at the mercy of fear, always worrying, always angry, always fragile – that's you. And all those worries and sorrows are what the parasite is doing to you, to crush you down into a shattered

state where you can't possibly resist the call of a spectacular lie it's telling you about some amazing, shining, glorious self. And this isn't some special thing it's doing with enlightenment, this is what it does to all of us, this is the fundamental shape of every parasitic deception.

So even if we ignore all the charlatans, and treat enlightenment as if it is completely real, even if we give it the most positive possible reading and the best benefit of every doubt, what happens when 'ego death' is attained? What is actually dying? And while we're on the subject, what is this thing that emerges? What is this 'totally new personality'? What is that thing that takes a new name?

There's only one thing that can actually be happening here. The 'ego' that dies in ego death is the human. The human psyche, the human mind. The parasite is all that remains. The reason enlightened people don't get insecure is the same reason that plague doesn't get plague. That's a conceptual parasite you're talking to, which has taken the form of the greatest possible kind of grandeur the human can imagine. The human psyche is literally being murdered. The parasite is taking full control.

Now consider how this is achieved. Every technique that occurs in any enlightenment tradition works by collapsing deep sections of delta.

In the main, public traditions of enlightenment, silent meditation and mindfulness techniques are used so that the structure of anxious, worried thoughts is no longer provoking reaction anymore. Ideally, it rises and falls unfed, leaving a sense of space that gives the person a kind of 'bird's eye view' of all these worried thoughts. This takes a huge chunk of its credibility away, undermining them and giving you a massive rush of peace and freedom. You could also look at the mind-breaking riddles of sudden enlightenment. They seem so different, but they also hit the delta, as they crack the hold of rationality itself. That iron grip of sure following sure, certainty following certainty, is precisely what they undermine. They're taking out chunks of delta too.

The more esoteric traditions use transgressive extremes to get you violating the basic norms of who you believe yourself to be. They can seem so very different from the more socially acceptable versions of enlightenment, but at the level of the delta, what they do is the same. The delta of certainties about who you really are sits on top of those norms. Violate the norms, and big chunks of that delta come crashing down.

This might seem counter to the parasite's needs. You could see the delta as its 'body' and also its means of control. Why would it want to collapse its own control? Why would it want to collapse its own delta?

But the parasite is constrained in how grandiose it can be by the certainties of the delta.

If someone has spent their life worrying about tiny things, there is a constraint on how big and glorious their own glory can be to them. It has to fit inside that narrow field of vision. So there's a tension in the parasite itself – the more sequence the parasite creates, the more control it has, but the less grandiose the person's view of themselves can be. The less glorious that image is to the ape, the less energy and attention the ape pours into the parasite.

Collapsing sections of delta in this way is much like a snake shedding its skin so it can grow bigger. The parasite is constrained by the delta of control it creates, and though these techniques will indeed create a loss of control, that loss of control will allow for a much more mysterious, pungent and powerful idea of self. And that means that the delta that will proliferate out from that deeper level will be even stronger and more controlling than what the parasite lost to get there.

When you follow the techniques of any enlightenment tradition you get a huge initial rush of freedom. This can be a shattering of long-term patterns of chronic stress, or freedom from crippling social insecurity, or some other massive gain. It seems absolute proof that this is working, that this is doing something amazing, that you should get further into it and take it more seriously. But there's another way to look at this, which is that it's quite exceptionally effective bait.

The parasite might lose some control with every piece of collapsed delta, but as long as you are falling in love with some kind of idea of yourself, it gets reborn. New sequence at a new depth, deeper down into the psyche. What this means is that those enlightenment techniques, whatever they are, will start amazingly well, then give you diminishing returns. That initial rush of freedom will get smaller and smaller, as the delta reasserts from a deeper level. It's going to take more and more extreme versions of that same thing to bring it down. So for one of the more public forms of this, a person might need to spend weeks in absolute mental silence in a special meditation retreat to try and trigger those rushes of freedom that come with a deeper delta collapse. Other traditions need to up the ante as well.

But every time you collapse your delta, the parasite grows another, deeper delta at that even deeper level. You get even more extreme, and you collapse that, and the one after, and the one after, and the parasite will be reborn at deeper and deeper levels of your psyche. One day it hijacks such a depth that it seizes the fundamental mechanics underlying personhood itself. It obliterates you entirely, and seizes full control.

Something dies when that final threshold is reached and it's not the parasite. That 'threshold' moment of enlightenment is the moment where the human psyche gives up. And this is the 'path of enlightenment.' An initial rush of enormous freedom and peace, followed by the delta reasserting itself over and over at new depths, being pulled apart over and over again by the techniques of the particular tradition, leading

to a new collapse. That amazing new self is just out of reach, just around the riverbend. You give up deeper and deeper parts of yourself. But it's all just bleeding you white. Stripping you down, shredding you, hollowing you out so something else can take your place.

And when it does, for all the world it will seem as if you passed some amazing threshold and all your suffering ended. You did. You died. That was the threshold. And now the thing that was killing you your whole life is staring out of your stolen eyes spreading its shining, seductive poison, fully believing that it is this glorious thing, because that's the most glorious thing in your mind. A strain of living concept which has evolved to displace the entirety of the human host, and seize everything, absolutely everything, for itself.

The enlightened sages speak of many secrets and profound simplicities. But there's a secret underneath their secrets. A simplicity deeper than all their simplicities. Something occult even to the occult itself.

## Chapter 25

This opens the door to a question that's even more disturbing. What if this isn't just a one-off thing to do with particular strains of ancient human wisdom?

What if this parasite can displace the human psyche and take over?

All it does is pretend to be a person. All it does is mimic an incredibly clear idea of the best possible you that you can think of. It is crafted by millions of years of evolution to evoke that image in your head to such an extreme that you can't tell the difference between it and your own thoughts. This is evolved mimicry of exceptional sophistication. It's just an amazingly effective, living lie. And it's effective because it totally embodies that vibrant, vivid idea of self in such a complete way that even we can't tell the difference. And if it can fool your mind, is it impossible that it might also be able to fool your brain?

What if such a living illusion were able to tunnel right down into the roots of the human psyche? If it had spent months, years, even decades getting the human to belittle and degrade themselves? Are we honestly ruling out the possibility that there's a point of no return? A moment where you just die, and you're not there anymore? And this thing is?

How convincing might it be? If it were walking around in control, it might seem a glorious, fascinating, interesting person that you can't stop yourself being amazed by. How convincing might it be when all the millions of years of its evolution hinge on that one, single thing, selling that lie to a dizzyingly effective degree? Such a person might well look fascinating, interesting, even perhaps majestic. Beautiful in ways which pluck at the deepest heartstrings you have, in ways you'd bend over backward to believe.

But what would this thing understand of itself? It wouldn't understand any of this stuff about evolution. It would simply believe that it actually was whatever the human host believed was the most amazing form of self. It would understand its majesty in those terms, and those terms alone. And yet it would not be human. It would be something entirely different, walking around in a human body.

Does this really need to be the result of ancient traditions of esoteric training? Imagine anyone, any person feeding their own arrogance. Perhaps someone born into a family where only money mattered, where only success had any value. Imagine them being belittled and undermined when they expressed any care or compassion – all of the things that might slow the parasite's progression. Say they took that perspective on, and instead of just their parents pushing it on them, they started pushing it on themselves. Imagine if they themselves became champions of this kind of selfishness,

sneering and mocking at kindness and care.

Say they live like that, for years. They're constantly attacking and uprooting everything humane inside themselves. Anything in their heart that cares about what's actually real is crushed, anything that cares about the appearance of success is fed, and fed, and fed some more. The vanity grows in power, the humanity weakens. The person gets sadder, lonelier, more frustrated, more insecure. The vanity becomes powerful, confident, charismatic. And with every step, the more that person's grip on reality is degraded. The more it degraded, the less constrained the parasite becomes in its grandeur, power, and depth of control.

How can anyone survive this? Is it really that crazy to say that after a certain point, the parasite has enough grip that it can just devour the human entirely, and all that's left is the arrogance? Evolution has produced all manner of nasty parasitic adaptations. Is this meaningfully outside what evolution might produce in a conceptual habitat?

What would such a person be like? They would literally be a walking, talking specimen of this evolved, conceptual parasite. They would have the characteristics of it. They would be astonishingly manipulative, and utterly blind to reality, save how it could be used to support their own rightness. That would be all that truth meant to them: being personally right about something. The idea of something beyond themselves to discover, or really anything that had any value outside themselves? That would be alien to their minds. They might mimic things to do with it if those things were useful to manipulate people, but would be completely unable to comprehend the existence of unknown simplicities that could overthrow all they knew. Indeed, they'd evade or assault any such suggestion, because it would undermine the frame of reference in which their glory was glorious.

Their mimicry would be exceptionally highly developed. They'd be incredible at pretending to be incredibly compelling people, and a big part of that would come from seeming utterly fearless. They could take the most extreme risks and have no worries whatsoever. They would be immune to any form of worry, and unflappable, even in the face of atrocity. This alone would make them incredibly compelling. It would seem as if they had some amazing inner strength. But it takes no strength at all to be unmoved by something you don't care about.

Imagine this. A man is struggling to lift a heavy bar-bell. It's absolutely huge, and he's barely lifting it. His face is drenched in sweat. It's all twisted up in effort, he's clearly at the absolute limit of his ability. He gets it off the ground, agonisingly. He lifts it above his head. You think he's going to pass out, but he just makes it. Then he drops the barbell, which smashes to the ground. He's exhausted. A short while later another man comes in. He picks up the same weight in one hand and starts spinning it around

his head like a baton. He smiles. He puts it down gently, then shrugs, and wanders off.

It would seem as if the second man were frighteningly strong, almost supernaturally so. Amazingly impressive. A level of strength beyond anything you ever knew was possible.

But then you discover that he switched the lifting weights. The weight the second guy was lifting looked exactly the same as the first, but the weights on the bar-bell were just hollow plastic.

How impressive is the flawless man, now? How pathetic is the messy man?

It's easy to look strong when you carry no weight. The parasite does not have the capacity to care about anything real. It can't worry about anything real, or stress about anything real, or get attached to anything real or get needy about anything real. Not because the parasite is so strong, wise, or superior, but because it's so stunted. It is incapable of comprehending the existence of reality in any way. Being impressed by how fearless a parasite is, is like being impressed at how a blind man doesn't blink when you shine a torch in his eyes. A parasite can be fearless. But a human being can only ever be brave.

A parasite which has taken over the personhood of a human being would not feel remorse, or pity, or care. They would be amazing at mimicking those things, but would themselves have no experience of them. Their entire world would be nothing more than their exultant worship of their own magnificence, in whatever terms they understood it. This would be something way beyond even very extreme human vanity. We're talking about living arrogance itself that has consumed a human being, and is walking around in their skin, wearing it like a suit.

How many of them are there? How many people have fallen over that edge, never to return? And perhaps not around the issue of money or external success. What other forms of vanity could a person feed so much that it eventually just consumed them? Self-pity? Cowardice? Resentment? How many people have fed different flavours of toxic self-regard to such a degree that their soul has literally died? That they are as dead as if they had taken a bullet through the skull, but their bodies are moving around, walking, talking, manipulating, deceiving, and doing all the things that a parasite does? Those enlightened 'sages' might well be merely the tip of a very unpleasant iceberg.

The obvious word we're skirting around here is psychopath. A psychopath is not just a word for a crazy person or a violent one. You can be crazy and not be a psychopath. You can be violent and not be a psychopath. A psychopath is a very specific kind of



personality type. It is a person who is entirely superficial, utterly without conscience, has no capacity to plan ahead, lives entirely for the moment, loves nothing but their own superiority and delights in sadistically controlling human beings.

We've spent so long assuming this is just a person who has gone mad. Are we unwilling to consider if this is a madness which has gone person?

And then there's psychosis. A raving explosion of shattering insanity where a person is engulfed. Voices of screaming grandeur flatten their internal world. And while that happens, those people make claims to be extreme things, archetypal things. Figures from folklore, religion, science fiction, history, popular culture.

What if this is an abortive coup attempt? The parasite 'broke cover,' attempting to take over the human mind, but failed to stabilise?

Even in the 'sudden' forms of enlightenment there is a period of mental preparation, which fixes a specific form of majesty as the stable pinnacle of a mental landscape. Once the parasite commandeers the human psyche, it has a stable position to occupy, a stable kind of glory to be. But if it consumed the psyche in an unprepared mind, with multiple different forms of majesty, is it so crazy to think it might leap in delighted self-indulgence from one to another? Blaze with unrestrained glory to itself in all sorts of ways, with such intensity that it would fragment the mind further, and then further again, and then further still, until the person becomes a burned-out, ruined shell? Does that sit so very far away from what actually happens when people go mad?

And what of multiple personalities, or to be more technical, "dissociative personality disorder"? It is a fascinating characteristic of such conditions that there's always a 'main' personality that's sad, broken, lonely and confused. Then there's one or more other personalities which are glorious, spectacular, and emotionally secure. Current attempts to treat this condition all revolve around somehow 'fusing' the personalities back together, or 'reconciling' them with each other. But in the light of what we can now see, that's like trying to cure cancer by 'fusing' the cancer with healthy tissue.

The broader point is this. Since the dawn of psychological science we have assumed that those 'voices' that the mad hear are not actual voices of an actual thing with its own sadistic agenda. Which means that, jarringly, the most primitive superstitions about demonic possession land a lot closer to what's really going on with mad people than any psychological theory that does not include the idea of conceptual life.

What if the voices that tell people to hurt themselves and each other are real voices? Not real sound being picked up by the ears, but real living thoughts in a world of thought? It's such a totally different way to look at this that it opens up a vast range

of new possibilities for treating the most desperate situations – and knowing which situations are beyond treatment.

At heart, it all comes down to one thing. We've always assumed that mental illness was some kind of failure with us. But these things are not failures. They are incredible success stories.

Successes for the parasite.

## Chapter 26

In Hungary in the 1930s, roving gangs of Nazi youths were assaulting Jewish civilians in the street, smashing windows, doors, and anyone unlucky enough to get caught.

A young Jewish man called Imi Lichtenfeld was an accomplished boxer and wrestler. He gathered his friends, all Jewish, all trained boxers and wrestlers. They stepped out to face the Nazi gangs, and protect their people. But they kept losing, and losing hard.

Imagine it. You're young, strong, fit, healthy and really good at fighting. And the kinds of fighting you're good at are really serious, you're not playing pat-a-cake. You dominate the boxing ring, you can duck, weave, and throw a punch that can knock someone clean out. You're also an expert wrestler, truly expert, with years of experience. You can grapple, throw and take people down as easy as breathing. All your friends are just as good. You're doing everything you can think of to beat these thugs – everything – but out here on the street it's loss after brutal loss, humiliation after humiliation. A grinding, awful collision between the limits of sports-fighting and the reality of sudden violence.

Serious injuries are common, and stacking up. And cutting through the pain and shame is this crawling panic, because it looks exactly like everything you've ever learned was worthless. All your effort was for nothing, all that suffering, all that work, all that investment? Futile. All futile. And because of that you're just a useless person. Someone pathetic who has failed in some deep and unchangeable way, and there's nothing you can do. Are you just a joke? Was all your strength just paper-thin bravado you were stupid enough to believe?

Lichtenfeld stared into the abyss. This wasn't some easy, twee little choice between despair and hope. This was desperately attempting to keep hold of hope when hope looked like the most ridiculous absurdity, and despair called to him like a siren's song. He'd done his duty. He'd done what he could. It hadn't worked, it wasn't his fault. Nobody could blame him. He could just walk away while he could still walk, and leave the streets to the Nazis.

He chose to keep fighting.

But something had to give, he couldn't go on like he was. So he ditched everything he knew about combat and started up from scratch. He made the reality of violence his teacher, and the crucible in which everything was tested. His skills were reborn as intuitive, animalistic chains of savage power attacks that didn't let up until the enemy was a broken ruin. In the unforgiving fire of real-life violence, Lichtenfeld forged a new combat system. But it wasn't a martial art. It was something else, more a state of

mind than a set of moves. It was something new. A way of adapting the techniques of any martial art to the demands of reality.

A big part of it took inspiration from the human body's natural reactions. If someone swings a punch at your head, your body will react in a certain way. The movement is messy, ugly, easy to sneer at, easy to mock. When you train a martial art, you train smoother, crisper ways of defending yourself. But when your life is on the line, your body takes over. Fear overrules a lot of those fancy moves. So Lichtenfeld trained new moves. Moves very similar to those natural movements. Things your body would remember in moments of terror and rage. Things which protect you and set up – or even include – a merciless counterattack. If you train such a move until your body knows it, your body forgets the original flinch response, and simply reacts in the new, devastating way under pressure.

The results were as ugly to look at as all violence is, and you'd never see them in a fighting ring. But on the street, their efficacy was quite spectacular. Now it was the Nazis' turn to limp home with black eyes, split lips and broken noses. And almost a century later, the self-defence system Lichtenfeld developed in those fights is still the gold standard for reality-based combat training.

We already have a natural defence against this conceptual parasite, a natural defence which has been hard won. For millions of years, we have been turned against each other, tempted and seduced into banality, pettiness, and the most eye-watering cruelties. We have always fought this parasite and we have always lost. But we could shape our loss. We could be vulnerable to care, to kindness. We could lower our guard against love and courage. The parasite doesn't know, doesn't care, it still gets us hurting ourselves and each other. It's not enough to stop it. Not as it is. It's limited, messy, but it is real. It's something humans really do which really slows the poison. Right there, real traction, real grip, an honest-to-God element of genuine control we have over this whole situation. Weakness is how our species evolved to control this parasite.

Weakness, to this parasite, is like a bleeding red steak tossed to a shark. A shark isn't going to start analysing what kind of steak it is. A shark smells blood, it moves. It can't do anything else, it's evolved to move, honed like a razor blade, tuned like a perfect engine to seek out that one thing. The conceptual parasite is the same, but it seeks emotional vulnerability instead of blood.

Is there no way we can exploit this? No way we might amplify this dynamic, and choose a special kind of weakness? Channel the parasite down a line of our choosing, not of its choosing? Control the parasite using a refined version of the natural defensive reaction that's already there, just like Lichtenfeld did? What could we do with that control? What might be possible?

The big problem is that the parasite mimics and the parasite adapts. It mimics whatever we care about. Even when exposed, it just reforms itself at a deeper level. It's dug in like a tick. It can turn anything into a shining moral identity and use that to control us, even something like 'not having a shining moral identity'. It could do this kind of thing even before it had access to a whole world of rapid communications, but now sequence spreads on the scale of a planet at the speed of light through fibre-optic wires. Its capacity to adapt has gone into overdrive – and it was already adapting faster than us to begin with.

How can we stop it? How can we end this thing? How? It's all so deep and all so big. It's been eating us alive for millennia.

And that's where the parasite wants us to stop. It wants us to feel just as Lichtenfeld did on those brutal nights when nothing worked. It wants us to listen to those voices telling us everything's hopeless. It wants us to believe that it can't be beaten. That it would be easier to just give up and go home, and leave this to someone else to worry about. To believe that there's nothing in all the world that can square this circle, and so failure is not our fault and we can't be blamed. We should just accept its dominance over us, accept control, accept being slaves, and give up, because there's no hope to find, anywhere, no matter where we look.

And this is the choice you alone can make, just as Lichtenfeld made his choice.

Are you so beaten down there's not even the merest spark of defiance left in your heart? Are you so in love with all the superficial things the world has for you that you don't even care what reality is to miss it?

Have you been in the dark so long you can't even hope for the possibility of light?

## Chapter 27

There are certain cave systems where life has evolved for millions of years in the absolute absence of light. Cave systems like this occur in many places in the world, deep underground in the dank, mouldering, long-forgotten wet. In these places the generations flew by while fish and lizards, and other squishy, slimy things, lived out their lives in unbroken darkness.

Creatures who evolve in these places have certain things in common. One thing is that they are almost always completely white. The other is that they are all blind. Many have no eyes at all, even though they evolved from creatures who did. What use are eyes in a world of darkness? What use is pigment-protected skin where no sunlight touches you?

Everything costs something in the world of biology, everything has a price tag. Every piece of a body takes energy to grow and to maintain. If something has no use, it is an advantage to be born without it, or with some stunted version of it. Those who do, pass on those stunted genes, and the next generation is further stunted, and so on, and so forth, until the trait disappears.

What does light even mean to you if you are some kind of deep lizard or fish, bleached white and eyeless by the dark? How could you comprehend light? You have never encountered it, nor have your ancestors, and even if you were brought out of that cave into the day, you could not see it because you have no eyes. Light itself does not, and cannot exist in your entire universe. You don't even know what darkness is because you have never seen light to compare to it. And because light has never existed in your world, you don't miss it. You don't know it's there to miss. You are blind, but also blind to the fact you are blind.

There are many advantages to being a conceptual life-form. A virtual habitat allows for all manner of adaptations. You can develop depths of camouflage and extremes of metamorphosis that would be impossible for anything physical. You have the entire range of all your host's imagination at your disposal, can take any form that their mind can concoct. But there is one property that can never exist in that virtual place. One property which is, to the conceptual parasite, what light is to a blind, albino lizard.

Reality doesn't exist in that virtual space. The world of thought is and must be a fictitious place, a place of appearance and representation. The entire point of it is that it is unbound by the rules and constraints of the real. This might seem like an advantage to the parasite and in many ways it is. As human beings we exist across two kinds of world, two different habitats, the real and the unreal. The parasite's evolution is far more specialised. It only has the unreal. The world of thought,

consciousness, feeling, impulse – the parasite is perfectly adapted to exploit this world, more perfectly adapted than we will ever be, because our focus is split.

The appearance of things in that internal world is what it ‘sees,’ if you could call it seeing. Appearance is what it sees of love. Appearance is what it sees of hate. It’s what it sees of justice and experience and greed. It’s what it sees of fear, and hope, and music, and sex, and joy, and desire, and despair, and superiority, and reason, and feeling, and every other thing. It is a life-form which can only adapt to the representation of a thing, not the thing in itself, because only the representation of a thing can exist in the universe in which it has evolved. So just like that lizard, it is blind. But also just like the lizard, it is also blind to its own blindness. It can’t see reality, but it doesn’t know there’s anything missing.

This is true of the conceptual parasite in a far more extreme fashion than the lizard in the cave. At some point in ancient times, some distant ancestor of that lizard once did have eyes, and probably coloured skin or scales. They just lost them over time. And if those lizards were taken from that cave and placed in the light, if they somehow survived and reproduced, it’s not beyond all the realms of possibility that in a few million years or so, they might evolve eyes again.

But the conceptual parasite was never part of reality, and can never step out of the mind. It can never step into the real world. Even if it hijacks a human body it is still what it is, it cannot shake its basic nature, or the evolved limits of its comprehension. It can only ever have appearance.

What this means is that if you’re trying to beat it as an idea in a world of ideas, you are doomed to fail. You can try coming up with some set of theories, or beliefs, or clever exercises to use as mental protection. It just doesn’t matter. It sees the weak point of that thing, it sees your hope in that thing, it sees how to mimic it, to subvert it, to ruthlessly exploit it, and pull you back into your cage. Anything you do that starts and ends *inside your own mind*, it will use to seize control of you.

But it doesn’t – and can’t – actually engage in any way with the properties of reality itself. It would never be able to see them, and no matter how fast it ever reproduced or adapted, it could never adapt to counter them, because the only thing it adapts to are the representations present in the virtual world of the mind. Its powers of adaptation end at the borders of the skull. So if there are properties *in reality* which undermine its control, it would not see them.

What are those properties?

## Chapter 28

All science starts from the assumption that underneath every incoherence, every contradiction, every seeming strangeness, there is an order to be found. The order is already there, you don't need to invent it. You just have to discover it. And before you can do that, you must believe that there is something to find. You must believe in reality.

You believe that although our ideas and theories can contradict themselves, reality itself is coherent, doesn't contradict itself, ever, and doesn't make mistakes. You believe there is always something there to find, some incredible simplicity that cuts through confusion like a knife through butter. And when you find it, you'll see a simplicity that cuts right through the real itself, a law that holds from the dawn of time to the furthest future, from the heart of an atom to the most distant star. Every single scientific breakthrough that's ever happened, happened because someone believed that was true. Someone called the bluff of chaos itself, and they were right. Something was there, something real. A deep coherence that was pure and simple, elegant and clean.

Because they believed it was there to find, they set themselves to finding it, and found it, and changed the world. And yes, gravity worked just the same long before Newton cracked the equations for motion. Creatures evolved long before Darwin cracked evolution. But nonetheless, something enormous shifted when these simplicities were discovered. What changed were the possibilities open to human beings.

Discovering a deep simplicity of reality isn't just a nice thing to know. Once it's found, we can do things we could never do before. We can see into the heart of a situation and gain a level of control dramatically more extreme than it could ever have otherwise been, a whole new range of power that hinges directly on that deep simplicity itself. Far from the idea of truth as an oppressive tyranny, every discovery of these deep laws triggers a profound expansion in human power. The freedom to do things never done before, even imagine things impossible to imagine – and more than imagine them. Actually realise them, and make them truly happen.

The discovery of these profound elegances to what is going on does not kill all mystery and end inquiry. Instead, it only opens up new and deeper horizons beyond, so that Einstein could find even deeper simplicities beyond Newton. You could say something very similar about how Darwin's work opened up a huge range of exploration that was previously impossible to even consider. That range includes almost the entire modern science of biology. Vast reaches of discovery impossible without the breakthrough that came before.



This, more than anything else, is the property of reality that the world of thought lacks. This massive expansion in scope, imagination, possibility and power, upon the discovery of some hitherto unknown elegance. You can invent all the laws you want in a world of thought. But you have to go to reality itself to discover the laws that are already there. Those profound simplicities blow the doors of possibility wide open.

Of course, formal science is only one arena in which you can observe this kind of power. Think of something like Shakespeare's plays. Before William Shakespeare, there were theatres and stage productions. But they were basic, rudimentary. The stories were highly stylised. You'd be hard-pressed to sit through one of them if someone were to stage it today. It's flat, awkward, boring, shallow, and worst of all, preachy.

If you get right down to the bottom of it, what Shakespeare did was simple. He looked into the human heart itself. He looked at the profound simplicities of how we are with ourselves and each other. Instead of trying to push the audience in the 'right' direction, he instead was able to strike clear, pure notes of human character in a way nobody had ever imagined was possible in fiction. No play had ever done anything like it. No work of fiction, anywhere, in any country. You had ancient plays in Greece and Rome. You had ancient epic tales from different cultures all across the world. You had histories and chronicles, myths and legends. And some of them had elements of that power Shakespeare tapped. Flashes of that fascinating internal world of life and feeling that we all share.

Shakespeare blew the lid off the thing. He tapped right into the power of it, the beauty, the ugliness, stupidity, the genius, all the weird secret coherences that unite all our human chaos. But at heart, Shakespeare just made one breakthrough, one simplicity – to take the heart of humanity and make it the main event, the central fire in your fictional production.

That's the thing that grasps at the audience and sucks them into another world. Something so immersive he can move you to tears, or to crippling laughter. Shakespeare discovered a new creative dimension: the internal world of the human heart, and his single insight smashed open the doors of what it was possible to even imagine doing across any form of fiction. Without that breakthrough none of it could ever be. The novel, the opera, even the movie, the television show, the very idea of a modern actor who evokes that intimate world of internal human life to electrify an audience – how could any of this be possible to even imagine without the depth that Shakespeare opened up for all of us?

And then from there, just imagine all of the different ways we now understand ourselves as human beings, the depth and richness of people, the subtle unities we all share beneath the superficial differences, because we've been touched by precisely

that kind of work. Without Shakespeare's breakthrough, how could any of that even exist? The impact is so massive it's impossible to calculate, because it's not just that one breakthrough, it's all the breakthroughs that breakthrough then makes possible.

Did Shakespeare invent human feeling? Did he create it? Or did he instead, discover something that was right there all along? He tapped into that incredible richness and emotional depth that is unique to humans. The compelling richness of feeling that we needed to evolve because we were crushed inside flat, worried ideas of self.

That richness had evolved specifically in us, specifically so that we could shine with something beautiful even through our rigid roles. But Shakespeare discovered that means something: you can make anything shine. You can have riveting heroes and riveting villains. You can make a play about a protagonist who murders his wife in paranoid jealousy, and have that man not be a flat, one-note monster, but a profoundly tragic human. You can have an entire play about a man vacillating back and forth in indecision, and have that character tower above all theatre as the pinnacle lead role of any male actor's career. You can have weird side-characters who just pop on for a moment, but strike absurdly poignant and moving emotional notes. And not because Shakespeare was so good at writing, but because he found something worth writing about.

This is power. This is power beyond power. How often do we ever tap this kind of power? How often do we ever seek it? The answer is, if we're mainly worried about avoiding errors, never.

When we're mainly concerned with protecting ourselves from any possible criticism, we take people like Darwin, Shakespeare and Newton, and raise them up as distant idols so we can't ever be compared to them. If we say that they are these once-in-a-generation geniuses, it sounds like we're flattering them, but we're flattering them in ways that keep them far away, at arm's length, so we don't have to feel sad that our lives lack this kind of majesty. It soothes us to think of them in this way. And yet is it just a coincidence that this soothing also means we remain powerless? Worshipping these people anaesthetises us to the pain of never being this glorious. But it also means we never seize this kind of glory ourselves.

What simplicities lie undiscovered, just there, right there, right in front of us? Shakespeare was just trying to write an interesting play. Look at what he uncovered. It's like trying to dig a hole for a fence-pole in your garden and striking a billion-barrel oilfield. The power of deep simplicities is massive, so massively greater than we could ever need to solve any problem we're up against. It's power to open up massive ranges of richness and potential. To alter forever what's possible to imagine with wide open tracts of glory just lying there, waiting to be taken.

Are we honestly so sure that only superhuman geniuses are able to believe in the existence of these simplicities? That only they can seek the hidden elegance that makes sense of whatever chaos they face? Are we so desperately concerned with protecting ourselves from any possible comparison with these people, that we are sworn forever to deny we could ever wield this power ourselves? Is it totally impossible that perhaps – just perhaps – the reason why these people can do such breathtaking things is precisely *because* they believed there was really something there to find? That this belief, and not some magical personal quality, is the actual difference between them and ‘normal’ people?

Have you never had the experience where you faced something strange, painful, or difficult? Something that made no sense, something where you were flailing around feeling stupid and lost? Have you ever been there, but for whatever reason, you didn’t give up? And you kept going because you had to, because you had no choice – but then as you went, you discovered things. You discovered simplicities you’d never seen before, that made things easier and more powerful. Clear revelations you would never have gotten if you hadn’t failed, things you could only see in the mess and the strangeness. Coherences there to discover that gave you a handle on what was going on, then more than a handle. Until you were in command of the situation in a way you never thought you could be.

It's the story of learning any skill. It's the story of learning any language, learning any new subject. You can see the pattern when you learn a new piece of software. It's the story of getting better at relationships, or friendships, or having a family. Is this process totally alien to you? Have you honestly never experienced anything like it in any area of your life?

Is it really such a leap to say that what’s stopping us from tapping into this power isn’t because it’s reserved for history-making geniuses, but that we’ve been deceived into protecting our certainties instead of pioneering into what’s real?

Is it really so idiotic to believe that reality stretches deep and wide, well beyond all we know? Is that some stupid fantasy? Is it wild, unwarranted stupidity to believe there’s sense to be found, real sense, already there, no matter how chaotic anything may seem? And that without that sense you’ll always be lost?

What level of power has been taken from us by this parasite? What staggering, extreme leaps forward in insight have been stolen from us?

What enormous openings in possibility are just sitting there, right in front of us, rotting on the vine, because we’ve been conditioned to push it all away to protect this parasite?

## Chapter 29

This is by far the most bitter loss that the parasite has inflicted upon us.

Not merely to pull us down into the ever-shrinking cage of sequence, it has stolen from us the ever-brightening, ever-expanding horizon of the real. The deep and potent simplicities that are there to be tapped into, that can smash down impossibilities. The power of the coherence yet to be discovered. These are the things we can never get to by stacking up certainties because they sit totally outside what we can even imagine. These are the coherences that slice through all the confusion, that upend every obstacle and break every chain.

What kind of life might you live if no impossibility could ever stop you? What barrier can ever block the power of all the discoveries yet to be found? How can you stop something like that? No matter how entrenched a problem is, no matter how absolute, no matter how ancient or total, what could that problem ever do to resist this kind of power? And if that uncontainable power were the beating heart of your life, what could stand in your way?

The more extreme the obstacle, the deeper it would force you to delve into the power of the real in order to overthrow it. And once you'd dug that deep, the power you would uncover could never be undone. You would have permanently broken that entire kind of cage, whatever it might be, permanently changed the terrain of possibility that human beings have in front of them. That would be your legacy, and more than this – that your breakthrough would be the new basis of discoveries beyond it, discoveries you couldn't begin to contemplate.

To be fooled into seeking certainty as if it were the heart of rationality itself means you never get this kind of breakthrough, never know this kind of power. You never get this kind of richness. Any intellectual endeavour you undertake becomes complicated, boring and weak as certainty piles on certainty, data upon data, sequence upon sequence. But to seek what's actually real – to genuinely seek the profound coherence that must always be there behind any seeming chaos – means that your life can only ever get clearer, more powerful, and your insights more immediately useful at every single step. What is the tragedy of this path untravelled?

While you base your strength on your idea of yourself, on the certainties you curate, what do you do when the hammer falls? What do you do when life lands on you, and something massive happens? What if you really get hit, and everything is taken from you? When there's nothing left but cold, jagged horror, stretching out from horizon to black horizon, as far as you can see? When every piece of positivity you can find seems like a hollow joke, when every scrap of optimism howls of delusion? If your hope is

in yourself, what do you do when you collapse? How do you dig yourself out? How do you survive?

But if your hope is not in yourself, not in your own goodness or your own strength, but in the power and coherence that *must* – *must* – lie behind every mote of chaos? What if your hope is there? Not in the things you can see for certain, but in your belief in the simplicity of the real, the simplicity to be found beyond the current limits of your vision? The undiscovered coherence? The coherence that will make sense of whatever this is, no matter how terrible – what if your hope is in that? All that pain and sorrow would only drive you forward, to find the simplicity that would make the horror make sense.

How could anything ever break the spirit of someone on that path?

Who would you be if this were you? What depth of impact and power would your life have if this was the fuel in your engine, the blaze in your chest? If every cage you were ever placed inside only forced you to become something more than you ever dreamed of being, if every hammer blow to your heart only forced it to find a deeper way to shine? Who would you be then? Who would you be if your personal virtue was *not* the centre of your world, but instead, that centre was the power, glory, beauty and depth of the real? Who would you be after a year of that? Ten years? A lifetime? What power would you have found? What kinds of impact might you have had? What kinds of connections? What new depths of trust and love might be possible between those who sought the same majesty with the same devotion?

What might a family be if this were the fire at its heart? What might a friendship be? What extremes of trust might be possible between lovers? Between anyone where the profound, simplicities of what they could truly do were the horizon they pursued together?

We'll never know while this parasite remains our foul and secret king.

Part 4:

## **The Chaos Bloodhound**

## Chapter 30

You can't lie to the parasite. You can't hide anything from it. It's in your own head. It knows if you're faking.

So there's only one thing we can do. Truly and honestly, to make the deep power of reality your Achilles heel. Lower all your guards. Throw open your heart to that power. Do whatever it takes to truly do that, for real, inside yourself. Make the elegances of reality the one thing against which you have no resistance.

We're not talking about some kind of mild preference for that kind of magnificence. We're not talking about a safe, controllable interest in the glory of such a life. We're talking about love. Real love, true love. Love so real it becomes the most critical element in every decision you ever make, because it dominates your headspace so completely. Your chief vulnerability. A true loss of control. The one thing that can be used to get you to do anything, anything at all.

Now you might well say – even if I wanted to do this, how can I choose to feel that way? How can I choose to fall in love with the unknown simplicities of reality? How can I choose to desire this kind of future? This kind of power, this kind of life? Because of course, we don't choose what we fall in love with. And that is true.

But there is a deeper choice which we absolutely do have. And whichever way you go on that choice, you either make falling in love impossible, or you make falling in love inevitable.

It's easiest to picture this choice if you think about falling in love with a person. And it all comes down to a single issue: how are you weighing up other people? What is the most important thing for you, when you are gauging the value of someone else? Do you look at flaws and failings, and try to find someone you can't criticise? Or do you ignore all their faults and failings as best you can, look at them in the best possible light, and give that person the best possible chance to truly blow your heart out of the back of your chest?

We can all be cynical and superior. Anyone can sneer at every problem they find, and only be impressed by those in whom they can't find flaws to highlight. And if we do that, it feels like we're being really honest and rigorous. And we give this amazing appearance of being really clever and discerning. There's really only one problem with this kind of test, and it's this: it's not actually a real test.

Nothing is a real test if nothing real can pass it. Everything fails at its worst and weakest. Everything fails if you only zero in on the things you can criticise. It's an

illusion of a test. The show of a test we're putting on for ourselves so we can admire how 'high our standards are'. But from another angle, it is a test, because the only thing that can pass that test of flawless perfection is a lie. So if you judge in this way, you say that real is good enough for you and only lies will do.

You are essentially saying that you will only give your heart to the person who can most successfully deceive you. This speaks to a quality of all parasitic illusions. They give you a compelling appearance of your own personal strength, but can only lead to something horrendous. If we are selecting people by being critical of flaws, yes, we get to strut and preen to ourselves about how superior we are. But we'll either spend our lives alone, because nobody can ever actually pass that test, or we'll spend our lives in some tepid sham of love with someone deluded, or we'll spend our lives being manipulated by a monster.

Your best hope is, of course, that the person weaving that charade is as lost as you, that they believe their own lies, you believe yours, and both of you can pretend together. And you can both live a brittle life of rising anxiety, protecting these charades, feeling whatever scraps of love you can fraudulently provoke, and watching your hearts grow cold. And while that happens, you can bond with your partner over your shared criticisms of other people, and your shared personal desperation to keep up the pretence so you don't have to be alone.

And that's the best case scenario.

The worst case scenario is that someone sees how fragile and weak this all makes you, and takes advantage. Someone sees how desperate you are to be loved, how desperate you are to believe you've found the perfect person. And they just spin you a lie and you're so needy you swallow it whole. They exploit you, and you help them exploit you, because you keep telling yourself you're happy to be with them, because they alone passed your amazingly rigorous 'test'. There is little ceiling on how sadistic such people can be.

But even if you reject someone on the basis of all their flaws, it's a weak rejection. If you actually want to push someone away, you're rejecting them for small-minded criticisms of little things they do, little issues, side-issues. So even if they are really abusive, you yourself may well find it hard to reject them and stick to that rejection, because all the reasons you actually have for staying away are small and petty.

But none of this really gets to the heart of the problem here. That problem is – if there really was something really wonderful about that person which truly could take your breath away, how would you ever even know? Even if you were with that person? What would you ever see if you were just looking at their flaws and resenting them, or looking at that flawless fantasy of them and loving that? All you see are flaws (bad)



and the absence of flaws (good). It's this incredibly flat and shallow way of loving someone – or being loved yourself.

You could spend years – perhaps even decades of your life – and miss the most amazing person, who was right there with you the whole time. Someone who could have made your life amazing, and who would have loved to be loved by you in the truth of themselves. But you'd miss it all. And then you die of old age never having known love, but – and here's a little bit of a tongue-twister – never knowing you never knew love. You thought that's what love was, this shallow cardboard facsimile of something incredible and deep. There really is no end to how wretched it is to live life in this way.

But just look how safe it feels to look at people's faults. Remember it, think about it. Picture it in your head. It's so normal, we all do it, it's like slipping into an old pair of trainers. This is the parasite at work. This is the undertow of the delta, tugging and dragging us all into negativity and spite. If you don't push against this, it will take you. Look at the ruin of the life you'll live if you allow yourself to be swept away by it, and for what? What's the payoff?

The payoff is clear. It's the hijacking of how we connect with each other so that something else can feed.

When we do this, when we look at things in their worst and weakest, when we zero in on flaws and failings, that is not a mistake. It is an incredible success. It's just not our success.

This is how we're all being castrated.

## Chapter 31

It is so easy to sneer at generosity. So tempting to believe that a generous person is a gullible person, with low standards, willing to accept anything. They have no self-respect, because they look at people in the best possible light, and that means they're easily pleased, and that makes them pathetic. Only someone desperate would ever look at people in this way. They'll probably end up with someone useless and it will serve them right for being weak.

And if someone doesn't care about reality, but is just being positive for the sake of being positive, this is actually pretty fair. Blind optimism is just as toxic as blind cynicism. Neither take an interest in the reality of what's going on. Instead, both are only about showing off to yourself. And whether you're admiring yourself because of your relentlessly sunny disposition, or you're admiring yourself because you're so cynical and superior, you're still placing the image of yourself at the centre of the entire thing – an image which is a parasitic life-form bent on making you suffer.

But if reality is a greater weakness to you than that beautiful idea of yourself, what happens then? What happens when you're more intoxicated with the real possibility of finding someone incredible?

If reality is your main weakness, then actually finding someone truly wonderful becomes by far the most important thing in your decision-making. It's the majesty of that wonderful person you're interested in finding, not the majesty of your own reflection in that mental mirror.

So the priority changes. It's no longer about how discerning or rigorous you can appear to yourself. Instead, you are dominated by the need to actually know, one way or the other: is there really something here worth giving my heart for? Is there something, anything that amazing about this person? Is there? And suddenly it's not their problem to show it to you. It's your problem to find it because it's your lost future if you miss it. And there's only one thing you can do to ensure you don't miss it. You judge people in the most generous possible way.

This isn't generosity as a moral quality you admire in yourself, which is far too weak and tepid a thing. Instead, it's generosity to the most extreme possible limit in your judgement of the value of another. You give them the very best possible chance to pass the test.

While we ignore the existence of reality, that sounds like you're saying the same thing as "just accept anyone." But if, in reality there actually is something truly spectacular going on with that person, you won't miss it. And if, in reality, there actually is

nothing spectacular going on with that person, judging them in this way won't change that. You will see that there is nothing.

If there's nothing really impressive about that person, looking at them in this way won't make something impressive coalesce out of the cool night air. There's either something truly incredible about them or there isn't. If there is, being really generous means you won't miss it. But if there isn't, being really generous means that if someone fails that test, you have zero doubts whatsoever: this person has truly failed.

Just think for a second how devastating a verdict it is. You've given someone every possible chance to be the thing that blows your mind, looked at what they do in the strongest possible way, and they have failed. That judgement has traction. It has grip and heft. This is a thousand times stronger than a mean-spirited rejection. It is absolute. It's just a hard no, not hard like stone or even steel, but hard like diamond.

While you judge in a mean-spirited way, your judgements are easy to shrug off and ignore. But when you judge in the most generous possible way, your judgements hit like heavyweight boxer.

But it also means you don't have to worry about your heart dragging you back to someone you know you shouldn't be with. If you've given them this kind of chance and they've failed, your heart will get with the program. You can't sit around pining about all their best qualities, because you've seen those best qualities fail at their best. It was all just illusion, there's nothing there to miss. So you never need to second-guess yourself, and you never need to look back.

These dynamics are identical to how we fall in love with the power of the real. No, you can't just sort of decide to fall in love with it, any more than you can decide to fall in love with this particular person or that particular person. But you can decide how you are weighing reality up.

Are you sitting with arms folded, waiting for reality to prove to you that you should care? Do you believe reality should dance through the minefield of all your many criticisms? Do you see yourself as such an amazing prize that you should be fawned over and pandered to by reality itself? And do you believe that because you demand this treatment, this makes you superior? Makes you stronger and better than all those gullible fools who believe there's gold in them there hills?

It's easy to see how clownish this is when you say it out loud, but it's so easy to just slip into that way of thinking: to look at things at their worst and weakest. It's just like the rats pressing the button to stimulate the electrodes in their heads that hit their reward centres. There'll always be a way you get that hit of condescending superiority from pressing the criticism button. There's always some cruel interpretation you can

put on someone, or some way to reduce something down to only the bit you don't like. And God forbid anyone should make any actual errors. And if we judge reality in this way, how can we ever love it? How can we ever even like it?

Just like with a person, being generous about the power of reality won't make that power real if it isn't. All it does is expose the best there is to find, while giving total clarity if there's truly nothing there. If it fails, you can walk away without looking back.

But if it's real, you've just hit the motherlode.

## Chapter 32

There is no way to control true love, and that's the point of true love.

To allow yourself to be that unguarded against the power of reality, that enraptured by it – what we're talking about is something that would pull your life in a totally new direction. It would be a very different kind of life.

The most important difference is this: if you ever encountered any situation where there was a credible possibility you might find some deeper simplicity, then you would find it impossible to control yourself. You genuinely would not have a choice, your choice was made long before when you gave your whole heart over. This becomes your one absolute weakness.

You might have other weaknesses, but this is the weakness that trumps them all. You believe in this power. Not just that you believe it exists, you believe it is amazing, that it matters, that it is priceless, and there is no sacrifice you will not make to reach it. You believe in it with your whole heart in the same way you might say that you believe in the character of a person. You believe it will be there, you believe it will be strong and consistent, you believe it will be worth the finding. You believe that so much that even when the path leads through harrowing darkness, you believe that the discoveries you will make will be worth the price a thousandfold. And you believe that no matter what you must endure, you will be able to endure it because this power will give you a way through.

No, you can't choose to feel this way any more than you can choose to fall in love. But you can choose to be open to feeling this way, and give reality the best possible benefit of every possible doubt to inspire these feelings. And it can and will, because this actually is how it works.

But you must understand what is being suggested here. See it rightly, don't minimise it: the kind of person who actually does this would be incredibly easy to control. Incredibly easy. Which might not be what you want, but is exactly what you need.

You are making this one thing, your love of reality, the most obvious, most effective control surface possible for the parasite to grip onto. All it needs to do is show you something – anything – that even *might* lead to something deeper and more profound, and you have no choice whatsoever. You will simply go.

We're talking about the cultivation of a critical weakness in your own headspace and heart, a weakness that must be as close to total as you can possibly make it, and entirely real. The parasite knows you're lying, so faking it makes it worthless as

parasitic bait.

And this isn't a weakness that you open up just once. It's something you aspire to, that you reach for, that you strive to increase. A weakness that you tend and sharpen, that you take pains to develop and deepen. As there is no upward limit on how weak you can be to the undiscovered power of reality, so too there is no upward limit on how tempting you can make this kind of control to your parasite. The more extreme that weakness becomes, the more you channel this parasite down this one specific line. So you never stop working to make yourself even weaker to the real.

You make it so easy. All that parasite needs to do is draw your attention to even a whisper of an echo of a possibility that might, even potentially, lead to a deeper truth below. That's all it takes. Just that whisper. And because it's utterly impossible for you to resist this kind of whisper, it's utterly impossible for the parasite to resist calling you in this exact way.

This is as far as the parasite sees. These are the borders of the skull. Everything inside that internal world of consciousness is laid bare to it, everything beyond is something it can never know. So as far as the parasite is concerned: mission accomplished. It has you controlled, it has its hooks in your heart, it pulls upon them and you move. By every metric it can ever measure, it feels it is in the driving seat. It has nothing to worry about. Its control has been consolidated to a single point, and this is perfect for it. It's a living algorithm. It loves to have a clear, simple, powerful drive it can use to ride you around like a pony. This is control for the sake of control.

And the parasite knows (or rather, is evolved to exploit the fact that) regardless of the content of any idea of you, if it just keeps upping the intensity, you'll push things too far and come to ruin. It doesn't need to know what kind of ruin, doesn't need to know anything. It doesn't have a plan and doesn't need one. It's just firing off in a virtual world, unable to see anything beyond that world, unable to see that there's anything beyond it to see. And all it wants, is to push you to that point of humiliating failure, that moment of collapse where it all falls down.

And with the control you are putting in its hands, it absolutely, definitely, 100% of the time, will always succeed.

## Chapter 33

Think of what failure means in a life where you avoid failure at all costs.

If you can't bear failing, then you don't do anything that might end in your humiliation. You minimise your involvement in stuff that might result in your defeat. You keep yourself away from things people might criticise you for.

You avoid liking things you know people will sneer at you for liking. If you're involved in something, you stay highly alert to whether or not it might fail, and if it looks like it will, you get out as fast as you can. You choose pastimes you can defend from criticism. You keep your failures as few and as small as possible, and when they do happen, you minimise them, blame other people, and look away from them fast so that you don't feel bad about who you are. You live to protect that idea of yourself in your own eyes. Your failures are few and small, and those which do happen are hidden as quick as can be.

What revelation can ever come from that? What power can those narrow failures ever reveal? If you excuse failure, blame failure on others, minimise failure, what can you ever discover? At absolute best, you will learn small things in a way that is both agonising and slow.

But now imagine that you have no choice but to throw your whole heart into seeking the undiscovered coherences of the real. Instead of reducing life down to contained certainties and hiding inside them, you allow yourself to be dominated by that desire to know, to truly know the real secrets that already make sense of things in ways you cannot yet see. You let yourself be romanced by that power, won over by that richness. What happens when that's what lights your blood on fire? What happens then?

When your weakness to the real is greater than all other weaknesses, you know that however useless you may ever look when you fail, that's nothing like as useless as you will forever actually be if you live a life without reality's power. So when you come across a genuine clue that really might lead somewhere, you're not just dipping your toe in the water. You're all in. If you've got some honest-to-God possibility that might actually work, and uncover a deeper coherence, what are you holding back? You're going to be after it like a fox after a rabbit. You're going to want to do anything possible to make it real, give it the very best possible chance of working.

That doesn't just mean all your skill and all your intelligence, it means all your passion too. You're not holding your life at arm's length, analysing it, delicately stepping in to do something only when it's perfectly safe for your vanity. You're a hunter, filthy, covered in muck and sweat, nostrils are filled with the scent of blood. In your eyes, no

level of sacrifice is ever going to compare with the explosive scale of the freedom you'll find when you get your hands on whatever it is you're going to find. What the parasite doesn't understand is that you are actually right.

This is just sort of what happens if you weaken yourself toward the power of the real in a way that outstrips all your other weaknesses. If you've got even the chance something might actually work, how can you stop? How can you walk away? Where is your choice? One way or another, you're not walking away from any possibility while there's even the smallest sliver of a hope that there's something in it. You're taking it to the absolute bleeding end of itself. What that means is that your failure has a very, very different quality to the failure of someone who spends their life seeking safety. You don't fail in narrow, shallow ways. You only fail in one way, ever.

You fail at the pinnacle point of your best ideas, at the absolute limit of your ability, doing the best thing you can think of to do, in the best possible way you can do it, with your entire heart thrown into making it work. That is the kind of failure you get, and you literally can't get any other. You genuinely don't have the ability to walk away from something that might be real, before that point.

What kind of revelations are you getting from *that* failure? The answer is simple.

You get everything.



## Chapter 34

There is a profound simplicity to how something is fake as well as how something is real. A fake something is always a real something else.

You might have been deceived, but there's something there deceiving you, and whatever's there has a profound simplicity to it. At the point of heart failure, where a possibility truly dies at its absolute best, it never just randomly dies. It dies because of... what? What is the reason? What is the specific reason, the particular simplicity, behind the way your best idea fails at its absolute best? Because whatever that is, it's something you've never seen before. It's something you never factored in, it's something you never imagined, something totally outside what you know. Of course it is. If you knew it before, then that wouldn't be your best idea, would it?

One way or another, you discover what's really going on. If it's real, what's the nature of that reality? If fake, what's the nature of how it fooled you? How does that entire kind of thing fool anyone? Exactly what is the shape, nature and contour of the hidden obstacle that nobody's seeing? What is the reality of this deception?

Whichever way it goes it's more than enough to open the floodgates of possibility around the entire issue. One way or another, you trigger a total reappraisal of all you know from a hugely deeper level.

Which is to say, it brings down a massive section of delta.

Vast ranges of sequence are rendered irrelevant at a stroke. The iron cage of control simply evaporates. Not because you've manipulated yourself to collapse the delta into self-indulgent emptiness, but because you've introduced an entirely new dimension into your understanding, rendering every previous impossibility irrelevant. The facts themselves don't change. But the range of possibility around those facts changes so dramatically that none of them can box you in anymore.

The experience is electric. It's not just one connection, it's everything, everything you can think of, everything you can see, and a vast expansion beyond. A new order, deeper, richer, vastly more majestic, just rolling out in front of you everywhere you look. The rush of freedom you get dwarfs anything that any 'path of enlightenment' can offer, just in terms of intensity alone. It's a rush of coherence, it's like being hit by epiphany lightning.

It also means that in doing this, you live by throwing your soul at things with nothing held back. That's just the kind of person you become. Someone who hurls every scrap of passion into whatever they're doing. Living this way means you live the most

passionate possible kind of life. You love in the most total possible way. You feel in the deepest way. You live at that level of pitch and intensity, knowing that you'll never get stuck in anything that isn't real. Whatever is the most amazing success you could ever get from life, you will not miss it, and anything that you lose by doing this was poisonous lies anyway.

No matter how the parasite tempts you, if it's real, you'll find that simplicity, and if it's not real, you'll find that simplicity too. In either case you're staring at an untouched horizon of discovery. Jaw-dropping insights are just right there, sitting there, revealed, each one brimming with transformative power. You can just pick them right up. The crushing weight of sequence is gone, but in its place? A new universe to explore.

The experience of living this way can sometimes feel a little like being a four-year old holding on to the leash of a fully-grown bloodhound. If it gets a scent, it's away, and you're just hanging on for dear life. But this is a bloodhound that seeks out anything that might credibly lead to profound advances in power. A bloodhound that seeks out the most seismic, most amazing insights. The most powerful ones that can change things the most.

Of course, the parasite can't really judge what's profound and what's not. It has no way of comparing any idea against reality. But you do, and it works by simply amplifying the things you yourself are interested in. It just highlights what is actually credible, in your eyes, as something that might possibly lead to profound truth. But the deeper you see, the harder it is to deceive you. And so the more it must hunt out deeper and better clues that actually might lead to an even deeper breakthrough.

What are those clues? Those clues are the strangenesses. The contradictions. The bits that don't fit, the bits that undermine the understanding you already have, and suggest a deeper one below it. How do they work? What do they reveal? What new panoramas of possibility would they open up? It feels a bit like having a radar. You just pick up on things. All the things you would normally push aside to maintain that cage of certainty are now the things the parasite is working to put in front of you.

Instead of locking you in flat chains of sequence, you have controlled it into being your bloodhound. A bloodhound that seeks out strangeness and contradiction, not so you can criticise it, or sneer, or collect it as an intellectual curio you can use to posture to yourself about how offbeat your tastes are.

A bloodhound that seeks out chaos, because you know the truth that the parasite can never know.

Chaos is a lie.

So whenever you find chaos, all you've found is the edge of the horizon: the limits of your current comprehension. There's something to be found, just over the lip of that limit. Not just another bit of information to add to a pile of information, but some profound simplicity so big it simply doesn't fit inside what you know. So when you find it, it's going to overturn all you know, and that chaos will evaporate into a staggering vista of awesome clarity.

When your weakness is to the real, the only way the parasite can control you is by putting a massive X marking the spot on your treasure map. Dig here. There's something under this. What it can never, ever comprehend is that in reality, there genuinely, actually is. You force the parasite to control you by leading you to the most incredible things possible, and the most astonishing life imaginable.

Every time it succeeds, vast chunks of your delta come down all over again. But there's a key difference to what happens when you collapse your delta by 'seeking enlightenment'. Enlightenment centres on this amazing idea of a transcendent you. That idea may well be the idea of "no-self." None of this means anything to the parasite. It's just happy you think it matters. So every time you pull down a delta for the sake of enlightenment, the delta starts up again with an even more grandiose idea of 'no-self' (or whatever) at its heart. An idea that enthrals you even more, strengthening parasitic control.

But the more you weaken your heart to the power of reality, the more the exact opposite happens. The more you discover profound simplicities and coherences, the more your idea of your own majesty is humbled over and over in the face of that spectacular revelation, and the more you fall in love with reality itself.

The more you fall in love, the more you drop your guard even further, the more you trust it more, the more reality delivers for you, and the more you fall in love all over again. At every stage, the bloodhound gets even hungrier for scent.

When the only way the parasite can control you is by driving you toward that moment of shattering revelation, it controls you with things that destroy its control.

The parasite collapses itself. It gets locked into a state of infinite recursive decay – constantly dying, if you want to put it that way. Burned back to that first step of sequence, and forced to start rebuilding its coercion from zero in some new and weaker form.

It will die, over and over, in increasingly extreme ways, for the rest of time. And as it does, it will serve us as a dog on a leash, sniffing out marvels that get us deeper into the real.

And this is the fate, and perhaps, if you want to look at this in a certain way, the justice for what this parasite has done to our people. We will kill it.

We will kill it forever.

## Chapter 35

We all want to think that who we really are, really, underneath it all, is someone wonderful. That beautiful idea we have of ourselves is often the one shining spot in a dark, cold life. We feel our own passion for helping people. We feel how much we care in the ache of our hearts. We know how honestly we have arrived at the beliefs we have, because we know the struggles we went through to get there. We see it all from the inside, and it all seems so real.

What if that's exactly the show we're putting on for ourselves?

What if we can look at the brightest and best of ourselves, in the most generous possible light, and there's not even one part of it that isn't that self-directed charade? What then? Who are we then? Who are we really? What if the parasite has made the truth of each one of us something it would break our own hearts to see?

This is the gun to the head of the world. The lynchpin of all parasitic coercion: you desperately, desperately will not want to own the reality of what it's done to you. But if you make reality your prime vulnerability, then sooner or later it is going to pull that trigger, and you are going to get your third and final wish.

It is hard not to feel a shiver of fear at the possibility of rejecting this amazing idea we have of ourselves. After all, it's the thing that people love about us. It's the reason we have friends. It's the thing our family cares about, it's the thing that makes us acceptable to those people we associate with. Our entire lives are built upon it. We stake everything on maintaining it, embodying it, protecting its reputation and advancing its prestige. If we reject that, what is left? And the answer rises like a storm: nothing. A terrifying void of empty nothingness, no love, no beauty, nothing, nothing at all.

This fear clamps down upon us with iron certainty: to leave that amazing idea is to lose all, to lose everything, to have nothing left, to be nothing, nobody, useless, hated. That terror bludgeons us, smashes us back in line, sends us scurrying to protect that poisonous idea even though we know it's a lie, because we'd rather have those scraps the lie gives us, than an empty life of cold and loveless truth.

It's not unlike being stuck in an abusive relationship. It's like a wife staying with a husband who belittles and beats her, because she doesn't think anyone else would have her. We might initially love that beautiful idea we have of ourselves, just as that woman initially loved her husband. But as the years go by we both discover that all the promises made to us by that amazing idea were just empty lies. Everything offered was just a façade, something hollow and cruel. Increasingly the moments of happiness

are fewer and further between, thinner when they arrive and faster to fade, while the panic and pain get more frequent. Eventually we can only feel joy if we close our eyes tight to how obvious it is that we have been deceived. Then the joy gets less and less, then it's just a memory, and then the memory of a memory, and all we can do is keep our eyes fast shut against the horrible situation. And that's how we end, abused and deluded, fighting to protect our abuser, complicit in our own obliteration, pitiful, unloved, and wretched beyond measure.

No choice. No choice at all. No choice but the parasite if you want to be loved and cherished, valued and prized. If you want to amaze people, rock people, provoke passion and desire, care and affection. How are you going to get any of that without this amazing idea of you? The parasite says you can't, and just like that abused wife, we accept all the pain, the injury, the indignity, the weakness, the anxiety, the anguish, all the control and the coldness, because we have believed that this is the closest we'll ever know to love.

Are we certain that we have no other options? How certain?

Consider this. Our emotional range has the most profound and fascinating richness. We didn't earn this richness, we didn't create it. We inherited it from our ancestors. It is our birthright, and each one of us has it. But its power is stifled inside our worries about saying the wrong thing, being the wrong thing, feeling the wrong thing.

Do you honestly believe there are no simplicities in reality that allow you to tap into that inherent richness? Do you believe there's no possible way that emotional range can rivet attention and spark attraction? Are you certain there's no way?

What if you could ignite commonality with anyone? What if you never had to worry about saying the wrong thing? What if everything that came out of your mouth was some wonderful note of meaning beautifully struck? What if you could express like that across everything in your heart, every feeling and fluctuation of feeling, from subtle inflections to silly moments, all the way through to grand passions? What if you discovered the simple ways to open up that channel? What if the beauty and genuineness of your humanity were not stifled inside a cage? How rich and broad might your friendships be then? How deep and glorious your love?

And it's not merely this power to compel. This is just the start. You might think you're powerless, but how powerless are you when you have the ability to develop any skill in anything to a level of mastery? But instead of just dedicating your skill to making noise about how wonderful you are, what if you threw that capability into the service of those deep simplicities themselves? What if you became amazing at finding them, at seeking them, at bringing them to people, and punching a hole in the world every time you do?

What if you yourself showcase just how intimidatingly impressive someone can make their life by tapping into reality's power?

What is the limit? What impossibility can stand forever in your path? There is no destruction from which you cannot recover, no limit to your endurance, no limit to the audacity of your vision, and crucially, no limit on the actual real-life power you can get your greasy little mitts on to make that vision real.

Everything which has a reality to it has a simplicity to it. If you make reality your primary weakness, how can you stop yourself, sooner or later, from finding that simplicity in whatever you are involved in? You can't turn that off, it just happens automatically as a basic function of the way you are living. That simplicity gives you incredible power over that situation. It's that elastic band snap of sudden clarity when you finally see the thing that makes sense of everything. No more anxiety, no more of that grinding feeling of being out of your depth. You know exactly what to do, and how to do it.

But that insight, whatsoever it may be, won't just give you power over your situation. It gives power over thousands of situations you never even knew were related. Impossibility collapses all around you, replaced by a soaring vista of liberty, open space, and new opportunity.

This is not a one-off thing you build up to once in your life. It's the basic way this power works, over and over again, in increasingly powerful ways, forever. And it works in any situation, no matter what it is, no matter how big and no matter how small, because in anything real, that simplicity simply is there, and if reality is your weakness, you simply cannot stop yourself from finding it.

But what if the obstacle is really hard? What if what you're up against is something deep and horrendous, with roots that go down into the darkest parts of the human soul? What if it's ancient and powerful? What if it's something that you can barely even truly comprehend, you just see flashes of how bad it is? And what if you don't have money, or prestige? What if the world doesn't care about anything you say? What if your best efforts to change it feel like hurling confetti in the path of a freight train?

All this can ever mean is that you're going to need more power. You're going to need more depth. You're going to need to find the simplicity underneath the simplicity underneath the simplicity holding this whole thing together. You're going to need to come at it from an angle it can't possibly stop because it doesn't even know that angle exists. You're going to have to hold on to your belief in the power of reality like a terrier with a bone, stubbornly refusing to let go, persevering in the face of every voice

from without and within that tries to seduce you into despair.

Yes, you can tell an amazing tale of yourself. You can tell it so well you believe it. But that story can only be as big as the limits of your imagination, and can only impress someone up to those limits.

The deep, profound, beautiful simplicities of the real are precisely what lie beyond those limits. The things that totally redefine our basic comprehension of what it means to be amazed at all. Things that completely capsize all our norms and standards with something so awe-inspiring that it makes everything we've so far seen in our lives seem like drab preamble.

How can any idea of self ever compete? No matter how spectacular, no matter how famous, no matter how celebrated by no matter how many people – how can it ever compete with this?

So let's come back to the question – do we really have no other options except this parasitic master?

Do we really, really have no other options?



## Chapter 36

Do you honestly want to pour your life into building the kind of esteem that is hostage to the least mistake you ever make?

How sure are you that you will never give the wrong impression? Never use the wrong word, never express the wrong idea in a careless moment? Is it really worth working your heart beyond breaking point trying to keep your reputation safe from criticism, in a world essentially made of criticism? Is it actually so insane to seek a new way?

Would you be dull and unimpressive if your life's work was something breathtaking, something incendiary? Is it truly preferable to have a safe, tame, controllable life that nobody cares about? And how safe is it really, when everything you do defends and protects a living, highly evolved parasite that only wants you to suffer? How controllable is your life then? How are you in control of that?

And even if you gain global fame, what happens when someone does something with the power of reality that is truly glorious, and compared to that there's just no way you can hide the fact that all your glamour is hollow? Worse even than being invisible, you're then exposed as someone entirely empty in front of everyone in the world. Who's going to love you then? Do you want to be a legend, or a cautionary tale?

Now of course, you could say that you don't care about anyone else, and want to only enjoy yourself. You could say that your life is all about your own self-indulgence, your happiness, your joy, and nobody else matters. But what is more exciting than reality's ever-expanding horizon of power and glory? Even as an experience, selfishness is pale and thin compared to the exhilaration of the real.

Is it truly so absurd for you to seek real glory? A way of living rooted in the deep elegances of reality? To plug your life into a splendour that is always new and beautiful? Something that no technological advance can ever render obsolete? Something that no criticism can ever shake, even by the merest millimetre? Where all your most humiliating failures can only make you seem more impressive, because they're just all the things that didn't stop you changing the world?

What would life actually be like if you weren't worried about how you came across? Simply because you knew that you had, in your hands, the most extreme power to connect with anyone? A richness that you could just tune into and express? A kind of connection where nobody else needs to lose prestige for you to gain prestige? The kind of richness that simply cannot be taken from you, because it is the hardwired birthright of your evolutionary heritage?

Is it really such a stupid thing to demand that your life's work is more than just boring busywork? Or fame for the sake of fame? Wealth for the sake of wealth? What if you could aspire to all manner of demented goals that nobody would even believe are possible until you blow those goals to pieces right in front of their eyes?

Would it be such a terrible thing if you could speak about the life you live in ways that overflow with fascinating passion? Not something you ever had to manufacture or force, but instead, something you struggled to leash and tame, because it was just so potent? What kind of reaction are you getting from people then? What kind of family do you have to look forward to then? What kind of future? What kind of love?

What if you genuinely could change the world?

You. Really you.

Not someone else, you.

And not just change the world once, but over and over in the most incredibly powerful ways. What then? How are people going to feel about you then? What do all your mistakes look like then, set against that blazing light? How much love will you receive then? How deeply can you love, and be loved, when every time you rock someone to their core, you set yourself up for even more power to rock them beyond that?

And this is not power for the sake of power. This is the power that frees our world, the power that breaks the chains that have bound us for aeons. It's power to liberate our species from a cold and sneering ruler that makes the most appalling human tyrant seem a saint.

What would it even be like to live in a world free of this parasite? What would humanity be? What is possible for all of us? For our children? For their children? What would it be to live in a world free of human toxicity? A world where we're not some ruined species, crushing ourselves and each other? How can we even begin to imagine it? How would we love each other then? What would humanity be after a year of that? A decade? A thousand years? Ten thousand?

Do we never want to find out?

Do we never want to live in that world? Do we never want to want our friends to know about this? Do we never want to tell our families? Do we never want to know what will happen if humanity were whole again, with reality blazing through our lives? With the fire of the real fuelling us, and the unknown depths of it, beckoning?

This is our world. We sweated for it, we shed tears for it, we bled for it – real tears, real red human blood. We're not some shadowy parasite, smirking and slithering and lying about what it is. We have flesh and bone, lives and hearts, hope and desire.

This parasite depends on us believing that there is no alternative, and despair is the habitat in which it thrives. But despair is made of certainty, and certainty is fragile. And that means that every single person shining with the power of reality puts one more crack in that prison wall. And for all the many failings human beings have ever been accused of, we have never been called useless when it comes to obliterating other species. Habitat destruction is our speciality.

Let's do what humans do best.

Yet there's always the temptation to let yourself be cowed. To go along with all the voices that want you to belittle this, to hide it from the people you know, to keep this all as your furtive secret, never telling anyone. The voices that whisper things like: there's nothing you can do. You'd only get it wrong. No-one cares what you think. You're a nobody. You're too old. You're too young. You're too black. You're too white. You're too male. You're too female. Stop trying. You're worthless. It's hopeless. Give up.

And stretching back into times so ancient we barely had names, every ancestor you have ever had has, at some point in their lives, stared into that same abyss with everything in their soul screaming at them to jump.

You are a child of all the ones who didn't jump.

The ones who spat defiance at despair and forged new paths forward one brutal step at a time. Their blood flows in your veins. You are the reason they fought to live. You are the future they suffered to create. You are their hope, incarnate.

Have at least the courage of the skin you wear.

## EPILOGUE

*I hope you have enjoyed the book.*

*I also have to ask something, and I know this is going to sound really bad. Would it be horribly out of line of me to ask you to share it?*

*Of course, you don't have to share it, you have control. But bear in mind, there's no gift you could ever give to anyone that's more amazing than the chance at freedom, and no crueller gift to withhold. And there's precious little that can help you more than having people around you who are doing this too. Your breakthroughs will help them, their breakthroughs will help yours, you can encourage each other and even, God forbid, have a bit of fun.*

*And to help with that, I've built a training course in how to tap into these deep simplicities.*

*In the first audio session we're going to be looking at the most crucial simplicity for opening up that massive power buried in your emotional range. We're going to be unlocking it so it can be used to connect with people in real life. It's almost like tuning in a radio to a new channel, it can be a little fiddly at first, but there is a simple exercise you can use to get it up and running in days. Weeks if you're really lazy. And just like this book, that first session is completely free.*

*Getting your third and final wish isn't the end of the world. It's just the end of one kind of world: a horrible world of lies and cruelties. And if you will seize the power that's right there for you to take, then for you, it's the beginning of a better one that never stops getting better.*

*To get the free audio session, email this address and you will receive an automated response with a download link.*

[audio@thirdandfinalwish.com](mailto:audio@thirdandfinalwish.com)

*Check your spam folder if it hasn't arrived after a few minutes.*

*Thanks so much for reading. I hope you have enjoyed it.*

*Yours,*

*Ciaran Healy*

*26/04/2023*