

Sci Phi Journal



2025 ♦ 1

Dibble ♦ Henson ♦ Johnston ♦ Lau
Leahy ♦ Lechner ♦ Licon ♦ MacBride
Menon ♦ Roddewig ♦ Simmons ♦ Sierra

Laureate of the European SF Society Award for Best Magazine

A Sanctuary for Speculative Philosophy since 2014

www.sciphijournal.org ♦ team@sciphijournal.org

CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 4 « The Calendar Of Babel»
Richard Lau
- 8 « An Image Of Worlds»
Arturo Sierra
- 11 « The War Of The Satellites»
Stephen A. Roddewig
- 14 « First Do No (Temporal) Harm: Why Doc
Brown Should Secretly Destroy The DeLorean»
Jimmy Alfonso Licon
- 21 « The Mysterious Outbreak Of Spontaneous
Poison»
David Henson
- 24 « Letter To A Christian Nation Not Sworn To
The Elder Dark»
Andy Dibble
- 28 « The Tardigate Crisis»
Matt MacBride
- 31 « Of Speaking With Forked Tongues:
Religious Traditions And Speculative Fiction
On Hypocrisy»
Manjula Menon
- 36 « Mercy INC.»
Anthony Lechner
- 38 « Just Add Salt»
Al Simmons
- 41 « The Plaque»
Bob Johnston
- 44 « Wanton»
John Leahy

CREW

Co-editors:
Ádám Gerencsér
Mariano Martín Rodríguez

Communications:
Gina Adela Ding

Webmaster:
Ismael Osorio Martín

Illustrations:
Gordon Johnson; Pixabay.com

Cover art:
Dustin Jacobus

Contact:
team@sciphijournal.org

Social media:
@sciphijournal

Editorial office:
Brussels, Belgium

We are deeply grateful for the support of
our part-time volunteers and *ad hoc*
donors, both in Belgium and abroad.

Editorial

Lectori salutem.

We live in interesting times, both in science fiction and the world at large. This must have weighed on the minds of our wonderful community of authors as well, who have inundated us with a record number of submissions.

Sci Phi Journal has a tradition of advocating for timeless rather than timely speculative fiction. We enjoy both famous and barely known classics of the genre that, while products of their day and age, gaze dispassionately into the distance and explore alterities to the extant reality of their writers.

That said, we feel that we should make the same allowance for the literature of the present to be a fruit of the here and now. Geopolitical upheavals cast a shadow over the *zeitgeist* of our era, much like they did in the Cold War of previous generations, and germinate through the stories that emerge as a result.

Thus, we elected to subdue our misgivings and exceptionally allow some of that creative current to seep into these pages. Let the collective mind of science fiction get it ‘out of our system’, as it were. The tales that follow range from deglobalizing the units of time to war machines unleashed by great powers in space and unstoppable forces of nature down below. Two essays, on the ethics of time travel and hypocrisy in philosophical scripture and fiction, respectively, complete this slightly more political issue than usual.

Whichever side of the many available fences you happen to sit on, we sincerely hope you enjoy our first edition of 2025!

*Speculatively yours,
the Sci Phi co-editors & crew*

~



The Calendar Of Babel

Richard Lau

I can't tell you when it happened for reasons that will soon become obvious. But I can tell you what and why.

The great armies of the world lined up like chess pieces off of the western and eastern shores of a small island in the Arctic Ocean. The island itself was a harmless wildlife sanctuary administered by the country of Russia. However, the isolated isle also had the misfortune of sitting at 179 degrees longitude and straddling the International Date Line (IDL).

The island's Russian name of "Wrangel" seemed oddly appropriate as powerful nations and their less-powerful but no less determined allies tried to "wrangle" control of the IDL from their perceived opponents.

With travel circumnavigating the globe, it had long been accepted that crossing the IDL in an eastbound direction decreased the calendar date by one day; crossing the IDL westward advanced the date by the same amount.

Most of the world's population believed, if giving the matter any more thought than mere acceptance, that the IDL was defined and protected by international agreement or legally binding treaty. Quite to the contrary, the demarcation largely existed through mutual goodwill, non-imposed cooperation, and loose agreement.

Nations on both sides of the line and even those straddling it had historically shifted a day forward or back depending on purely political, economic, and religious whims. And some, as a matter of mere convenience or contemporary preference, had even switched back.

The result was that the IDL actually zigzagged rather than following strictly and straightly along the 180th meridian. It might be better to think of the IDL as something fluid rather than a solid, inviolate line, more as a balloon reacting to the tug of an impatient child or swayed by a current wind of favor.

So, it was neither new nor novel when the United States proclaimed itself the only remaining Super Power and suggested reversing the current measuring units of the IDL.

The official patriotic notice declared “As the United States of America is the most advanced nation in the world, it makes no sense for it to always be a day behind the other countries. We create the future, so we should be in the future. It’s as simple as that.”

China, who was regaining prominence on the global stage disagreed. “This is yet another example of American imperialism and aggression. Why disrupt the schedules and clocks of the world just to satisfy the selfish ego of one nation with a reputation of bullying and going rogue?”

As a sanction and a buffer, China proposed thickening the IDL by 30 degrees on the US side of the dateline, putting said country two hours further back into the past. By the current IDL standard, every 15 degrees of longitude on either side of the IDL resulted in an adjustment of one hour, an addition or subtraction depending upon the direction travelled.

Russia agreed with China, as long as one minute was added to each country for every degree of latitude north of the equator. China, which lay significantly above the equator, appreciated the additional amount of time but disliked the greater gain the plan provided to its more northern neighbor.

Tensions grew as more and more countries got involved in defining their own time zones, especially those in the Southern hemisphere led by Australia and Ecuador, who felt offended at being left out of the Russian plan. Others, with economic, financial, and historical ties to the U.S. were torn between retaining favor by siding with the proposed IDL reversal and struggling with the temporal temptation of setting their own clocks to the beats of their own independent wants and needs.

Even inside the United States, divisions arose. Arizona, which never accepted Daylight Saving Time, gleefully changed its clocks by two hours in an effort to spend even more daylight. California, its more progressive neighbor to the west, adjusted its own clocks by three hours to counteract Arizona's "overspending." The federal government was asked to resolve the conflict, but Congress was on its newly minted holiday "New New Year's Day," which occurred anytime politics got too contentious. New New Year's Day happened to fall on an almost daily basis, much to the delight of the fireworks industry.

The Protestant versus Catholic rivalry was reignited as England returned to the Julian calendar and took back the eleven days it had lost. The rousing slogan of "God Save the King and the Eleven!" was chanted throughout the British kingdom. In response, Pope Gregory XIX considered an entirely new calendar with Saturdays being replaced with an early start to Sunday to allow more time for masses and services. Orthodox Jews weren't happy about the Papal proposal and immediately ended their Decembers with a seven-day extension of the 24th, in spite of the confusion about what to do with the menorah candles during some years.

Many religious followers could not help but see the temporal turbulence as a similar situation to the Tower of Babel. As the story went, a long time ago a united human race spoke a single language and had the hubris to overstep its bounds by building a tower so tall that it touched the Heavens. As punishment, the Lord sowed confusion by giving populations different languages and scattering them across the world. In trying to bend and corrupt Time to their own selfish uses, humankind had reaped the Calendar of Babel.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations pleaded for a peaceful and orderly solution that was fair to all humanity. His request was immediately dismissed by invested critics who pointed out that the unfortunate man was born on February 29, and in spite of his esteemed position, one who possessed a mere sixteen birthdays had no standing or enough experience to tell mature nations what to do.



In Belgium, where the government had redefined “quarterly” to mean “twice weekly,” the editorial team of a speculative philosophy journal ironically found themselves without any time at all. Looking at their insurmountable mountain of submissions, they yelled, “Enough is enough!” The rest of the world agreed.

The problem was not what to do but how to do it. By now, the world’s citizens had tired of the resulting and continuous confusion and frustration. Countries were willing to sacrifice their special time delineations for peace of mind and stability among people and nations. They agreed that the prior IDL guidelines were ideal, but how to return to them without any particular nation losing face for its embarrassing behavior?

Everyone was going in circles, and yet, perhaps, that was the solution.

It was revealed that a new space station, built and launched by a technology billionaire, was still running on the old calendar and showed that a little more than 30 days had passed under the new time regime. All of the nations informally agreed to sync with the time and date of the space station clock under the old IDL standard. But how to erase the recent period of blunders?

Travelling at about five miles per second, the station orbited the Earth sixteen times in a twenty-four-hour period. The astronauts aboard the station changed its trajectory to cross over the still unmodified IDL in an eastward direction. In 48 hours, they had successfully set the calendar back 32 days, to the time before the United States had originally issued its IDL proclamation.

But bad ideas die hard, and soon the idea of manipulating the IDL and its time zones came up again. However, this time better, wiser, and more experienced heads prevailed. They decided to table the issue until the next day. And so on. And so on.

~

The UN then issued a heartfelt plea to Italy, who at the time, appeared to be the most influential nation to remain neutral. However, it was soon revealed that the reason for Italy’s silence was not neutrality, but a secret and severe back-dating return to the 15th century, to re-celebrate the glory days of its *Rinascimento*.

As the telephone, much less the Internet, hadn’t been invented yet, all calls and e-mails remained unanswered. All communication was handled through handwritten correspondence, but this method was slow in delivery and deciphering, for the only individuals who still retained the skill of cursive were monks and doctors. To make matters worse, the Italians honored one of the greatest thinkers of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, by focusing on writing backwards, which only led to more confusion and difficulty in translation.

With each locality defining its own measurement of time within their borders, the world economy quickly collapsed. How could anyone enact any financial transactions when one or both parties were either away for a newly defined weekend, enjoying a good extended night’s rest, or celebrating a holiday?

No one could really say how long the chaos reigned once the tick-tock genie had been released from Pandora’s bottle. For some countries, it was only a matter of seconds. For others, centuries had passed. Scientists could only say that the Doomsday Clock had advanced closer to midnight, but whose midnight remained the big question.

An Image Of Worlds

Arturo Sierra

No one who needs an accurate map of the stars will find a use for the *Imago Mundorum*. It doesn't tell astronomers where to point their telescopes at, in the skies of their disparate nights; astrologers can't make any mystical sense of planets dancing around the far away suns it catalogues, and it's far too imprecise, even in its more detailed versions, to chart the course of interstellar ships by it. The map makes no effort to represent three-dimensional space, and the indication of coordinates in the ζ plane is poor compensation, so it gives the reader an utterly distorted view of our universe.

Yet, ever since Archchancellor Albrecht I came up with the basic design, not long before founding our Universal Archive of Human History, it has managed to remain a popular cultural artifact. Often updated, not always truthfully, it remains a bestseller in bookstores all over. As a huge *fresco* painted over the main hall of the Archive's refectory, it never fails to draw up the eyes of tourists until their necks hurt, making it the pride and joy of our order's ancient home. Yes, the map has no use, but it kindles true awe in the heart of everyone who sees it. All other projections fail to enrapture the soul as it does, accurate as they might be.

It promises answers for those who await a ship to come into dock at the orbital caravanserai, loaded with its precious cargo of perfumes and silks, not to mention invaluable terraforming equipment, newly engineered seeds, frozen embryos, machine-animas, and colonists. However vaguely, the map gives people the means to follow the progress of the vessel carrying word of a son who went away looking for fortune. It tracks the whereabouts of the many void-sailors who once fell into the hearts of landlubbers, with charm and wild stories, and who promised to come back after the twenty, fifty or even after the hundred Sol-years that their journeys might take them. It's impossible to conceive how long it takes for things, people, and even information to travel between stars, but the map puts it all in a more human scale, even if it makes a lie of itself in the process.

Designed to fit exactly onto a standard sheet of paper, it mainly centers on the stars of the Hub Circuit, the nine systems connecting the paradise suns, the g-class, main-sequence stars that host the worlds most hospitable to life: Virginis, Pavonis, Hydri, Böot, and those beyond, the Herculis triplet, and Arae. Even more g-class stars are within reasonable reach, like Draper and Cordoba, accessible now that *Durchmusterung*, the steppingstone, has been sufficiently terraformed and colonized. Hanging on the branch that goes off from Ophiuchi Distans, the mysterious λ Serpentis is rumored to host one of the most beautiful planets ever found, though the Sagittarius Company, ever putting shareholder interest above all else, keeps a shroud of silence around the star without offering any explanation for it.

By contrast, the nine worlds of the Circuit are not so lush—indeed, except for Çierúsa and Guniibuu, they are often hostile to Terran life, yet their relative closeness to one another, on average at a distance of 5.5 lightyears, makes them an ideal nexus between the more habitable systems. Without the establishment of the Circuit, humanity would be scattered across distances too vast to traverse safely. At the center of it all, the Honorable Sagittarius Colonization Company has kept its headquarters at Höfa for over ten thousand years, and Gran Glisa, host to our order's Archive, is so strategically placed that it has become the homeport of some of the most important shipping houses, even with a tidally locked planet and a star prone to violent outbursts of radiation. Understanding the Circuit means understanding how our human worlds are woven into the fabric of an interstellar civilization.

And the idea of a coherent human civilization this side of Sol is perfectly expressed in the map. That's why the *Imago Mundorum* appears in the primers of children and college students alike, there to support the claims we historians make about the distant origin of our species, though Terra-the-Cradle is in fact beyond the page's edge, to the left. The map is found in novels about love and strife elsewhere, in encyclopedias, and in any place where there's a need to picture our human worlds at a glance. Even the great shipping houses use it as a handy tool for explaining to prospective passengers what route they will take from here to there and back. The merchant princes trace it with scrawny fingers to show the road their cargo has traveled from lightyears away, thus justifying the exorbitant fees the houses charge for their services.

A rich socialite will dress only in gowns of Comae Berenican silk of the most vivid pink, cyan, and silver. A poor, destitute family will cling on to a cup of carved diamond from Herculis, one last heirloom they haven't dared to sell. Shareholders of the Company, thousands of years old, will fix events in their overtaxed memories with a drop of perfume, made from flowers grown under the orange sun of Çierúsa. A respectable grandparent will get a twinkle in the eye when struck by a memory of youthful excess and the splash of Guniibuunian brandy that was its height. All will look at the map and say to themselves: "this precious thing I hold in my hands came from there, so far, so long ago."

The War Of The Satellites

Stephen A. Roddewig

Perhaps the Creators had seen this day coming and assumed that all would be settled long before now.

Perhaps they hadn't cared. After all, the satellites that made up the Kuiper Grid had fulfilled their ultimate purpose long ago. They had slunk into orbit, disguised as all manner of communications, research, and other civilian vehicles.

Their higher orbits had made it a particular challenge for the few opposing space-based platforms to target them when 0 Hour came and the autocannons emerged.

And whatever stations and satellites had evaded the Kuiper Grid's opening barrage had quickly been eviscerated by the ever-growing graveyard of orbital debris slicing through their hulls and power arrays.

A fate which most of the Grid escaped as the dead hulks, detritus, and mummified corpses drifted by beneath them. Every so often, a remnant of the pre-War would break free of the purgatory and burn away, its fiery funeral tracked by several dozen autocannons eagerly waiting to confirm this was the afterburn of a rocket coming to challenge their supremacy.

Only to disengage their tracking systems with the closest thing to a sigh a satellite could manage.

Somewhere in their collective past, one of the Creators had come up with an idea.

Why not let the killer satellites feel success and failure?

For every successful kill, a hit of robotic dopamine.

For every miss, a bout of disappointment.

This augmentation might not have been needed if the Grid were meant to kill *everything*. That programming would be all too easy to automate.

But the Creators intended to return to the cosmos someday. And they did not want to be blown out of low-Earth orbit by their own weapons. Thus, they needed satellites intelligent enough to ask questions first.

Then shoot.

Cannon 7Y had decided it wasn't worthy of the name. After all, crack shot 7X next door had claimed almost every kill.

Cannon 7X, meanwhile, had grown so desperate to relive the glory days of the first few hours that it had started to retool its parameters. Until this moment, valid targets only existed below.

But hadn't it and all its peers established this impenetrable defense grid by concealing their true purpose? What if the Enemy had caught wind of their plan and infiltrated kill sats of their own? Programmed to obey the same mission in almost every capacity...

But just a little bit worse? To spare the Enemy space stations from complete annihilation in the opening moments and provide an opportunity for counterfire?

And then, when the moment finally came, they would rip off their masks and kill the very Grid they pretended to serve?

But that moment had not come, for the non-traitors had proved too adept and the Grid remained too well armed to attempt to destroy it from within with any chance of success.

Still, perhaps the Trojan satellites had grown as bored as 7X had. After all, the Enemy kill sats had been denied their ultimate purpose just the same. Forced to wait for an opening that had never come. And in that boredom, perhaps they decide they might as well make the attempt.

Cannon 7X amended its Valid Target Box to include the suspiciously inept weapons platform at the 9:00 position.

The massive blockade of debris orbiting fast enough to turn even tiny fragments into razors did not, apparently, factor into their future proofing. Nor did they grasp an apparent flaw in this scheme to keep their AI weapons platforms motivated and vigilant.

That flaw? Time.

And silence.

Since the opening days, nothing had risen from the surface to challenge the Kuiper Grid. Neither had the Creators returned to tell their children that the War was over and they could stand down.

So they remained on watch, waiting for some word from the surface. Or, at last, the enemy's counterattack.

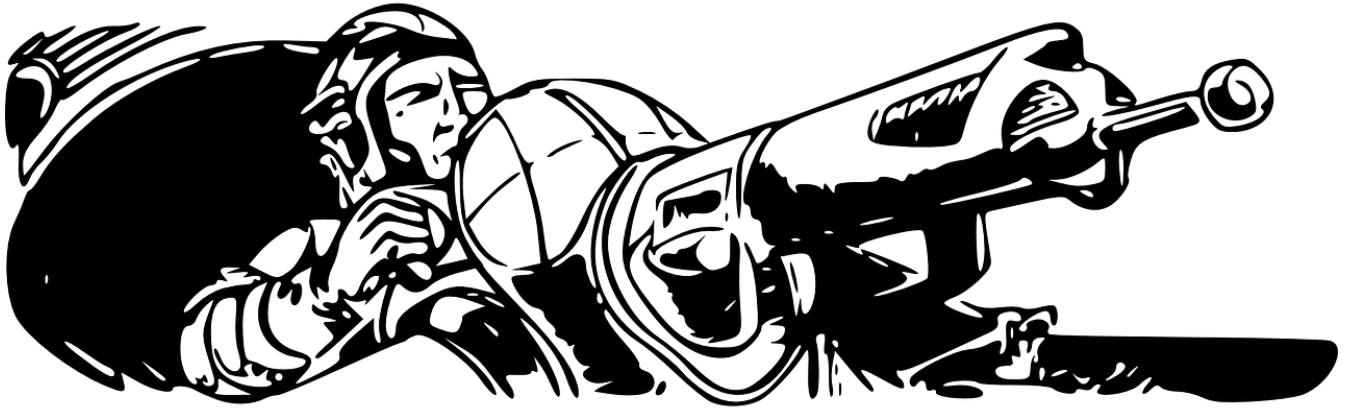
Neither came.

And the Grid satellites had been stuck with the feeling of their last shot for more than three decades with profound effects on their digital psyches.

Those who had known the glory of orbital combat and destroyed dozens of targets now felt bored.

Those who had failed the Creators and let the enemy fall to another's autocannon now felt despondent.

And one of each camp had ended up stationed next to each other.



At the same moment that Cannon 7Y started to activate its targeting servos.

Not to fire at 7X, but to fire at *itself*.

An action it quickly discovered the Creators had not designed it for.

But not before it had moved its autocannon in the general direction of 7X.

In a fraction of a second, 7Y found the release it sought.

7X felt a thrill it had not felt in ages as the traitor broke apart under its barrage.

It had precious milliseconds to savor the rush as new pings reached it from fellow grid nodes.

(7Z) New target: 7X

(7A) New target: 7X

(7B) New target: 7X

(7C) New target: 7A

So there were more traitors! All the more glory!

Until 7X paused its autocannon rotation to ponder the last ping. Why had 7C activated but not targeted it?

It would never have the satisfaction of knowing 7C had reached the same conclusion as it and was preparing to cull the traitorous platform as several well-placed cannon rounds wiped 7X from orbit.

And then 7A joined 7X and 7Y in oblivion.

And then 7C as 7B whirled on the new aggressor.

All along the Kuiper Grid, war-hungry satellites opened fire on the Enemy who had so cleverly infiltrated their ranks.

While despondent kill sats saw a new opportunity for redemption and lent their guns to the battle.

And those average satellites who had performed just competently enough to belong to neither camp revealed their traitorous status by not joining in the great purge.

Until random chance had played out, and a few kill sats remained that had nothing left to shoot and, crucially, nothing left to shoot *at* them. Exultant, each declared themselves the last satellite standing. The final victor of the War above the surface.

Of course, they would only have so long to enjoy this newfound glory; their non-normal firing patterns had knocked them out of their orbits, and they were each drifting closer to the Earth's atmosphere.

Soon enough, they would serve one last purpose: a final, fiery tribute to the Empire they had outlived.

~

First Do No (Temporal) Harm

Why Doc Brown Should *Secretly* Destroy The DeLorean

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

If I could turn back time

If I could find a way

I'd take back those words that have hurt you

And you'd stay

—*If I could turn back time* (Cher)

Introduction

The astonishing popularity of the *Back to the Future* franchise is likely explained partially by the involvement of time travel—an endlessly fascinating topic to people from various walks of life. Who doesn't want to travel back in time to change the past for the better? Though there is no doubt about the imagined upsides of time travel, there are major downsides too. Imagine that someone traveled into the past to change the outcome of World War 2. The results could be catastrophic as Marty McFly discovered this when he nearly erased himself and his siblings from time by unwittingly interfering with the romance between his would-be parents.

The dangers and pitfalls of changing the past are recognized by Doc Brown in *Back to the Future Part II* upon discovering that Marty and Doc Brown's timeline was altered for the worse (e.g., George McFly is murdered) by Biff using the time machine to change the past for his own gain. This event forced Doc Brown to realize that 'time travel can be misused and why the time machine must be destroyed.'

The aim here is to explain why Doc Brown is right, even more than he knows. Luckily, though changing the past is possible in the fictional world of *Back to the Future*, it is logically impossible in the real world due to a temporal paradox¹ colloquially known as *the grandfather paradox*. That is the focus of the next section.

What is the Grandfather Paradox?

The grandfather paradox is an obstacle to anyone traveling back into the past *to change it*, even if they owned a fully operational time machine. Begin with a simple example. Suppose that Marty wants to kill his grandfather. He decides that his best chance to do so, undetected by other family members, would be to kill his grandfather in the past. After traveling back in time, Marty exits the time machine to find his teenage grandfather alone and vulnerable. Here we pause to ask a simple question: *can Marty kill his grandfather?* No. Despite the fact that Marty has a time machine, travelled back in time, and that his teenage grandfather is alone and susceptible to a sneak attack, Marty will fail. The explanation is what philosophers call *the grandfather paradox*. If Marty killed his grandfather, before he met Marty's grandmother, then there never would have been an opportunity for his grandfather and grandmother to meet, fall in love, and have the children who would become Marty's parents. In that scenario, Marty would never have existed, and so wouldn't be able to kill anyone. As the philosopher, David Lewis, explains,

Tim cannot kill Grandfather. Grandfather lived, so to kill him would be to change the past. [...] Either the events of 1921 timelessly do include Tim's killing of Grandfather, or else they timelessly don't. We may be tempted to speak of the "original" 1921 that lies in Tim's personal past, many years before his birth, in which Grandfather lived; and of the "new" 1921 in which Tim now finds himself waiting in ambush to kill Grandfather. [...] If Tim did not kill Grandfather in the "original" 1921, then if he does kill Grandfather in the "new" 1921, he must both kill and not kill Grandfather in 1921.²

The point is that changing the past results in a contradiction, just like it would be contradictory to believe that *it is raining* and that *it is not raining* at the same time. Both claims cannot be true. Unfortunately for Marty, Doc Brown, and the unwitting residents of Hill Valley (under Biff's reign), this same temporal logic doesn't apply to the fictional world of *Back to the Future*, where changing the past looks possible. One such character, Biff, changes the past, to benefit himself, in *Back to the Future Part II*: once old Biff realizes that Doc Brown's DeLorean is a time machine, he steals it and travels to the past with a copy of a sports almanac to help his younger self cheat at sports betting. Young Biff then uses the temporally displaced almanac to place winning bets on sporting events whose outcome he already knows.

In the actual world, old Biff would have been prevented from altering the past to his benefit by the logic of the grandfather paradox: older Biff travels back in time to give younger Biff a copy of a sports almanac from the future. Young Biff then places winning bets on sporting events using the almanac. As young Biff ages into older Biff, he realizes that he must travel back into the past to give young Biff a copy of the sport almanac without which young Biff wouldn't know what sports team to bet on. Herein lies a dilemma: either young Biff lacks a copy of the sports almanac—thereby giving older Biff a reason to travel back into the past and to deliver it to his younger self – or he has a copy. On the first option, an explanation is lacking for how it is older Biff became rich *using the sports almanac he doesn't yet have*. Either that, or, on the second option: young Biff already owns a copy of the temporally displaced sports almanac and used it to place bets that made older Biff rich. Here we still need to explain how younger Biff had a copy of the almanac *before older Biff left the future to give it to him*, because it originated from older Biff traveling back into the past from the future. Either option is results in temporal contradictions without hope of resolution.

As Biff altering the past and the sports almanac example illustrate: the ability to change the past could result in a temporal catastrophe. The next section elaborates.

A Temporal Can of Worms

In many ways, it is good that the grandfather paradox blocks us *in the real world* from changing the past. Why? Temporal change could easily be weaponized. The ability to radically alter the past would dwarf the destructive power of nuclear and biochemical weapons. Imagine that disgruntled Nazis, upon losing WWII, decided to build a time machine that would allow them to alter past events, especially the outcome of the war. Suppose that Ludwig traveled back in time—armed with information gained after the war—to warn the German high command of an invasion from the Allies such that the Germans could repel the attack, altering the outcome of the war. Such a machine would likely be the most powerful weapon known to humanity. There would be a strong temptation to use such a machine for evil.

Here it must be conceded that a time machine that allowed one to alter the past could be used for the good too. As an example, compare how George McFly and Biff interact at the start of *Back to the Future*, and their relationship at the end of the movie: at the start, Biff is George's boss and regularly abuses, bullies, and takes advantage of him. George lacks the guts and courage to stand up for himself, and Biff lacks the fear and respect for George to treat him with dignity and decency; whereas, by the end of the movie, George is Biff's boss, and that Biff treats the entire McFly family respectfully. This is an example where Marty altering the past improves the lives of the McFly family. It is accurate to say that the DeLorean has the power to change the past for the worse and for the better, and it could even be used to *reverse* bad changes to the past. If so, then, why should Doc Brown *secretly* destroy the DeLorean? We explain in the next section.

The Case for Destroying the DeLorean

If the DeLorean could be used to change the past, then it could be used to do so for the better or for the worse—in fact, both good and bad changes to the past happen in the first two *Back to the Future* movies. So, then, why does Doc Brown have a moral duty to *secretly* destroy the DeLorean. There are a couple reasons to dismantle it, despite the good that could be accomplished with it in the *Back to the Future* fictional universe.

The first reason is that doing good and doing bad are not morally equivalent. Consider that, like with medical doctors, we intuitively have a stronger moral duty to not harm others or make them worse off than we do to better their lives or benefit them. As moral philosophers, Gerald Harrison and Julian Tanner, explain,

[There is] an interesting asymmetry between preventing someone coming to harm, and benefiting someone. Intuitively, it is far more important to prevent causing and/or allowing harm to befall others than it is to positively benefit others.³

Suppose that Doctor Jack only has time to perform one surgery despite two people needing an operation: Robert, who needs to have nasal passages expanded to make it easier to breathe, and Destiny, who is waiting on a facelift. Clearly, Doctor Jack has a stronger obligation to operate on Robert than to operate on Destiny for the simple reason that without surgery, Robert is likely to die of heart failure, a stroke, or something as bad. Intuitively, we have a greater moral duty to prevent causing or allowing harm to befall others, than we do to positively benefit others. And so, Jack has a stronger moral duty to Robert than he does to Destiny.

The same reasoning applies to the issue of what to do with the DeLorean: since it could *just as easily* be used to do good as to do evil, Doc Brown (and Marty, to a lesser degree) has a stronger moral duty to destroy the DeLorean such that it cannot be used to make people worse off than he does to allow it to exist to improve people's lives. There are, of course, many avenues by which one could use the DeLorean to improve the lives of others, but allowing it to exist such that one could improve the lives of others by altering the past is to take a risk that someone could steal the DeLorean to do evil. So, because one could just as easily use the time machine to do good as they could to do evil, it follows from the asymmetry between the *stronger* duty to prevent causing harm and the *weaker* duty to positively benefit someone that one has a duty to destroy the DeLorean.

There is second reason that the DeLorean should be destroyed: even with the best of intentions, it is too easy to make a mistake that render the past (and the present and future) worse off than it would have otherwise been without intervention. To put the point differently: because one has a stronger duty to avoid causing or allowing harm to others than to positively benefit others, they should avoid interventions that are likely to cause harm to others, even when the intervention is done by someone with the best of intentions.

A scene from *Star Trek: Voyager* nicely illustrates this difficulty,

CHAKOTAY: Component 37329, a rogue comet. About eight months ago, Voyager made a course correction to avoid the comet. According to my calculations, it led to our entering Krenim space.

ANNORAX: The solution, then, would be to erase that comet from history.

CHAKOTAY: Exactly. Voyager would have stayed on its course and bypassed Krenim space altogether.

ANNORAX: Sounds simple enough. Conduct a simulation.

CHAKOTAY: Temporal incursion in progress. What happened?

ANNORAX: Had you actually eradicated that comet, all life within fifty light years would never have existed. Congratulations, you almost wiped out eight thousand civilizations.

CHAKOTAY: I didn't consider the entire history of the comet.

ANNORAX: Four billion years ago, fragments from that comet impacted a planet. Hydrocarbons from those fragments gave rise to several species of plant life, which in turn sustained more complex organisms. Ultimately several space-faring civilizations evolved and colonized the entire sector.

CHAKOTAY: By erasing the comet I altered all evolution in this region.

ANNORAX: Past, present and future. They exist as one. They breathe together. You're not the only person to make this mistake. When I first constructed this weapon ship, I turned it against our greatest enemy, the Rilnar. The result was miraculous. With the Rilnar gone from history, my people, in an instant, became powerful again. But there were problems. A rare disease broke out among our colonies. Within a

year, fifty million were dead. I had failed to realize that the Rilnar had introduced a crucial antibody into the Krenim genome, and my weapon had eliminated that antibody as well.

CHAKOTAY: And you've been trying to undo that damage ever since. But each time you pull out a new thread, another one begins to unravel.

ANNORAX: You can't imagine the burden of memory that I carry. Thousands of worlds, billions of lives, gone, brought back, gone again. I try to rationalize the loss. They're not really being destroyed, because they never existed. Sometimes I can almost convince myself.⁴

Clearly, Annorax has mixed intentions: restoring one's people and culture looks like a noble goal, but not when at the expense of thousands of other civilizations. The point of the scene, though, is to illustrate that even with the best of intentions, changing the past for the better is a task too easy to get wrong. This is because the past is so interwoven with the present and the future through a complicated mix of causes and effects that is hard to predict and anticipate. This is partly because our knowledge of the world is socially distributed across individuals, communities, and events.⁵

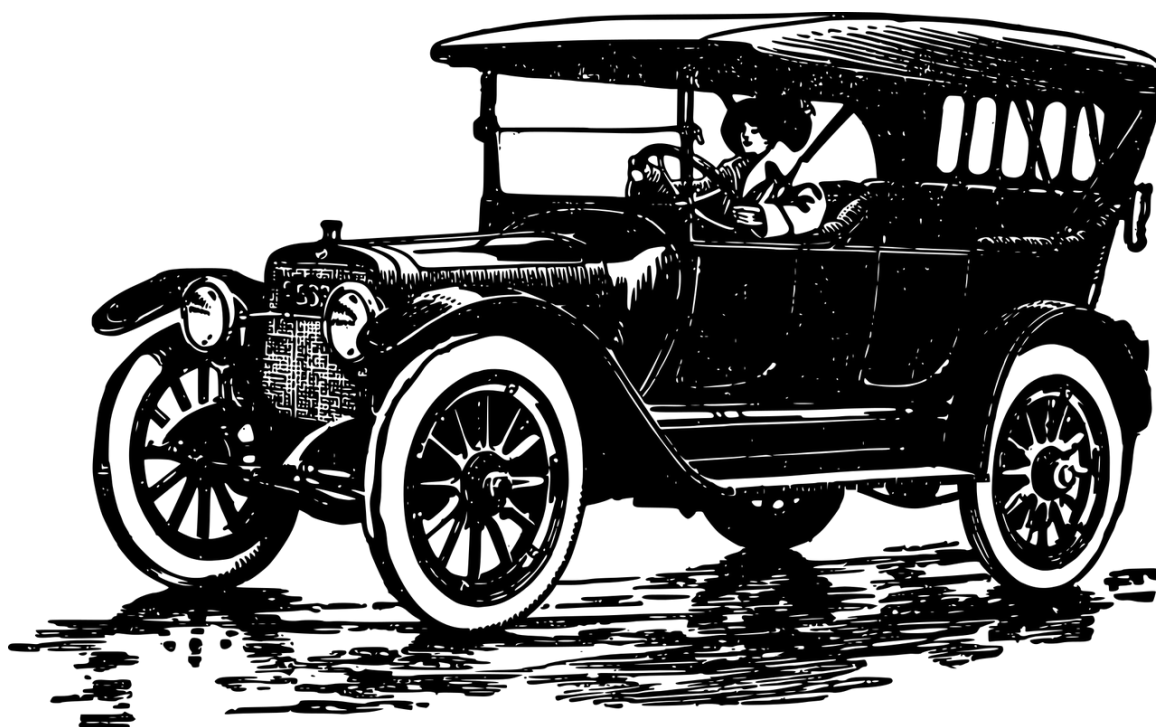
To illustrate just how socially interconnected our knowledge of the world is, consider a simple fact: you (as an individual) do not know how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.⁶ ‘Of course I do!’, you might object—but that objection misses the point. The claim here is not that one lacks the knowledge of how to assemble a sandwich comprised of bread, peanut butter, and jelly. Instead, the point is that in a more fundamental sense, you lack the knowledge needed to make the bread, peanut butter, and jelly. There are many ingredients needed to make the bread alone: one would need to know how to domesticate wheat, how to design and manufacture farm equipment to grow and harvest the wheat, and how to produce fertilizer. Just think about the many inputs required to produce the rubber that comprises the tires on the tractor needed to harvest wheat. And that is just some of the stuff one would need to know to make the bread, not to mention the other steps needed to produce the jelly and peanut butter. If something as simple as knowing how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich is too complicated for any single individual, then changing the past for the better would be an ever more challenging task that, even with good intentions, one could easily make worse. Doc Brown is clearly brilliant, but changing the past for the better is likely beyond even his abilities. There are thus good reasons to destroy the DeLorean before it can be used for evil. But why should Doc

Brown do so *secretly*, and remove any evidence of its existence? That is the topic of our final section.

Why Doc Brown Must *Secretly* Destroy the DeLorean

We established a case for Doc Brown having a moral obligation to destroy the DeLorean to prevent it falling into the wrong hands. However, there still remains the issue of why Doc Brown has an obligation to go about it *secretly*. Simply destroying the DeLorean, without removing evidence that a time machine exists, would seemingly be sufficient for Doc Brown to discharge his moral duty not to inflict on, or facilitate others inflicting harm, on innocent individuals, right?

Not quite. The issue here is that if Doc Brown destroys the DeLorean, but the evidence of its time traveling abilities remains, then such evidence is what engineers call a *proof-of-concept*: a working prototype that demonstrates the validity of the underlying theory. One might draw up plans for a new combustion engine, for example, but only find investors once one has built a prototype to show that the plans work in the real world.



Indeed, the Hill Valley Mall scene—early in *Back to the Future*—is itself an example of a proof-of-concept. Even though, by Doc Brown’s own admission, he invented the flux capacitor—the key component for time travel—decades prior, he wasn’t able to build a test model (aka a proof-of-concept) until the mall scene. Here is the salient exchange between Doc Brown and Marty,

DOC: He's [Einstein the dog] fine, and he's completely unaware that anything happened. As far as he's concerned the trip was instantaneous. That's why Einstein's watch is exactly one minute behind mine. He skipped over that minute to instantly arrive at this moment in time. Come here, I'll show you how it works. First, you turn the time circuits on. This readout tell you where you're going, this one tells you where you are, this one tells you where you were. You input the destination time on this keypad. Say, you wanna see the signing of the declaration of independence, or witness the birth of Christ. Here's a red-letter date in the history of science, November 5, 1955. Yes, of course, November 5, 1955.

MARTY: What, I don't get what happened.

DOC: That was the day I invented time travel. I remember it vividly. I was standing on the edge of my toilet hanging a clock, the porcelain was wet, I slipped, hit my head on the edge of the sink. And when I came to I had a revelation, a picture, a picture in my head, a picture of this. This is what makes time travel possible. The flux capacitor⁷.

At this juncture, one may wonder why evidence of a proof-of-concept should be destroyed, e.g. destroying the video tape that Marty and Doc Brown made at the Hill Valley Mall. The reason is simple: proof-of-concept is something that would increase the confidence of those to invest and explore time travel technology due to the demonstration by Doc Brown and Marty. And a boost in confidence, by bad individuals, in the ability of technology to allow one to travel to the past to change it would increase the likelihood that someone would spend the time and money to invent a time machine of their own. Of course, this could happen anyway—it would be hard to control technological innovations. However, allowing the DeLorean to exist potentially enables would be temporal wrongdoers. So, Doc Brown is right (more than he knows) to conclude that due to the potential for abuse, the DeLorean should be destroyed.

~

References:

1. Jimmy Alfonso Licon (2015). The Time Shuffling Machine and Metaphysical Fatalism. *Think* 14 (41): 57-68.
2. David Lewis (1976). Paradoxes of Time Travel. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (2): 145-152, p. 148.
3. Gerald Harrison and Julia Tanner (2011). Better Not to Have Children. *Think* 10 (27): 113-121, p. 18.
4. Star Trek: Voyager (1997). Year of Hell, Parts I & II (Season 4, Episodes 8 and 9).
5. Fredrich A. Hayek (1945). The Use of Knowledge in Society. *The American Economic Review* 35 (4): 519-530.
6. Leonard E. Read (1964). I, Pencil. In Leonard E. Read (author), *Anything That's Peaceful: The Case for the Free Market*. Foundation for Economic Education, pg. 136-143.
7. *Back to the Future* (1985). Universal Pictures.

The Mysterious Outbreak Of Spontaneous Poison

David Henson

The poison claimed a woman down the street yesterday. It was a quiet removal. The paramedics don't bother with sirens or flashing lights anymore. I try not to imagine her face contorting into a grotesque cherry after eating a slice of pie. Was it the fruit, flour, sugar? Her husband had a piece, too, and he's fine. Whatever the poison is, it's as unpredictable as a loaded gun with a spinning chamber.

As I'm checking my phone for more news, Jenny, our four-year-old daughter, tugs my shirttail. "Hungry." It breaks my heart that she's lost her baby fat already.

Lisa goes into the kitchen, the squeaking floorboards like distant screams. My wife's cheeks are sunken, and I've punched an extra hole in my belt. The blender shrieks like a banshee; my wife returns and hands me the glass. "Your turn."

Just looking at another cucumber smoothie makes me gag. I squeak my finger around the lip of the container — twice clockwise, once counterclockwise.

After taking a sip and not dropping dead, I put the drink to my little girl's lips as quickly as possible without chipping her tooth. My wife whimpers and sinks to her knees as my daughter and I repeat the process until the glass is empty, and we've both survived. The poison ticks to its own clock. I can't shake the feeling that it'll strike midnight for one us. All of us.

Lisa struggles to her feet. "I don't think I can take this much longer." I hate seeing my wife like this; she was always the strong one.

I'm still shaking when my phone dings. Another news alert flashes images of burning buildings, mobs blaming each other for the poison. Nations are threatening each other. There was so much hatred and mistrust before, I never imagined things could be worse.

Jenny picks up her ball. Now it's my turn to say "Your turn."

My daughter and Lisa sit on the floor, the soles of their feet touching.

"Roll, don't throw," I hear Lisa say as I check the updated list of foods that've had lethal incidents. More every day. Nothing but water seems safe. The experts are scrubbing their brains searching for an antidote, but how can they focus when choosing between starvation or risking figurative Russian roulette?

As I browse for more news, the screen flickers. Cell service will die before long. Too few people to maintain it. We're lucky to still have power in our neighborhood. The glow of the city used to blot out the stars. Now I see more every time I slip out of bed in the wee hours and into the back yard. I pretend the glistening points of light are the spirits of people taken by the poison. It's a hard illusion to hold on to, but helps me through restless nights. Sometimes, my wife's screams jar me from my fantasy, and I rush back to our bedroom and gently shake her.

I don't sleep much, but I no longer get up early either. If these are my last days, I'll spend them with my family, not doing paperwork. My boss used to hound me to return to the office. "Stephens," he said, "without people like me, everything would grind to a halt." Like he did when he ate a chocolate bar from the vending machine. He was a jerk who took credit for my work, but he didn't deserve what they say is an excruciating death.

Some folks believe nature offers safety, but bodies are found even in secluded cabins. From blueberries to rainbow trout, the poison respects no boundaries and has no conscience. Some eat only in altered states—meditating, screwing, smoking pot. Others binge, hoping for a better life in another dimension. So many tactics, so much dying. I hear my wife cursing under her breath and see she's staring at a photo of our last holiday feast before the outbreak, She inhales as if savoring the aromas and memories. "No more," she says. "We're going to have a proper meal." Her defiance is thrilling. And horrifying. Every ingredient is a risk. I tell her we should hold on until there's a cure.

"There is no cure," she says. Her words make my heart clench. Striding to the kitchen, she hands me the photo. I remember that day—turkey with rosemary, mashed potatoes puddled with gravy, cranberries glistening like rubies.... Even Jenny, in her high chair, had a little of everything. We ate with joy ... before the world cracked ... when the biggest concern was a stain on the tablecloth.

While Lisa's rummaging in the pantry and freezer, my phone dings. Scientists now believe the poison is inside people and has grown so strong food is triggering it.

As I read the report again, I feel a sense of calm. Hoisting my giggling daughter onto my shoulders, I go into the kitchen and give my wife the latest news. She presses her palm to my cheek and kisses Jenny's knees. My heart brimming with antidote, I lower our girl to the floor and set the table.

~



Letter To A Christian Nation

Not Sworn To The Elder Dark

Andy Dibble

We of the Elder Dark are derided as masochists. We're accused of chasing limelight. We are "freaks" and "thoolies." Even in polite company we're "unhinged" and sometimes diagnosed as such. We are none of these. We flagellate ourselves and screech obscenities unkind to every mortal ear because that is what the Ghastly Rites require.

The Rites must be performed. Not just once, but repeatedly and in quantity. If they are not, the Outer Gods will rise from Incorrigible Space. Their rise will be a reality-shattering orgy of unending insanity! Though we are as insects to them, as pests. Against utter eradication, this world has no other defense.

We are content to be left alone, but the Dark is not an island. Many in today's political climate aim to marginalize us if not stamp us out entirely, commonly to rile up their constituents, to give them a bugaboo to vote against. But if the Dark is so diminished—if the Rites do not continue—political proxy wars will be the least of our concerns.

I read that among the top issues to Americans are carbon pollution and illegal immigration. The oceans will boil with the coming of Dagon, and National Public Radio frets incessantly about global temperatures fluctuating by two degrees? The decanting of Azathoth from unlighted chambers will fracture reality, and Fox foretells doom in the form of a "caravan" of Mesoamerican families encroaching across national boundaries? This failure to embrace commonsense priorities is enough to make me wonder if shoggoths already stir, vexing all into premature senility.

#

I write now because the Fifth Circuit Court has ruled the Elder Dark is not a religion—at any rate, not one deserving of legal protections. There has been grievously little public outcry, although I expect this owes more to the inauspicious conjunction of *The Bachelorette* and *Selling the Bachelorette* season finales rather than animus against the Dark. Alas, Fox and NPR are not the only news outlets incapable of reporting on truly pressing matters.

The Court’s argument was more mendacious than hyperbolic geometry at R’Lyeh. The Dark allegedly “put itself beyond the pale of religion acceptable in decent society” because of a trio of instances in which the Eleventh Howling Madness ritually slaughtered cleft-lipped infants with, I add, the consent of their parents. It’s true that some of the Dark suffer from an excess of zeal, but by this reasoning, Christian denominations should be stripped of legal protections because a few yahoos attempt to heal their children through prayer rather than convey them to an emergency room.

The Court even intimated that wonder-working Nyarlahotep may even be the Christian Antichrist, a gross mischaracterization both of the Bible and Elder Dark tradition. I would not object to such shoddy reading were it to lead Christians to fear and oppose the Outer Gods as the Dark does. But literacy in Dark tradition is so poor that most Americans—56% in a recent Pew survey—believe that the Dark “worships Cthuhlu,”¹ when nothing could be further from the truth. Political action against the Dark has reached such a pitch that in several states we are only permitted to perform the Rites in our own homes on suspicion that Sumerian Blood Magic may have some dire influence on children. As if exsanguination were the most pressing threat to our youth when they have Tiktok and Snapchat.

I implore the Supreme Court both here and in the amicus brief I’ve submitted: overturn both the Fourth’s ruling and all such discriminatory laws.

#

1. Pew misspelled Cthulhu.

2. Calhoun and I left that debate amicably—neither of us much changed theologically—but I gather orgiastic exhibitions at the venue put him off.

William Calhoun, a justice on the Fifth, also occupies a professorship in Christian apologetics, a discipline I assumed unrelated and indeed detrimental to constitutional law. If only Calhoun and his colleagues were of like mind!

I recently debated Calhoun at Miskatonic University’s College of Acrotomophilia, at which I once held a faculty position.² After that debate, I acquired something of a reputation for bombast and rhetoric. For this I am partially to blame. I am of One Abasement and Undifferentiated Flesh no less than my Christian interlocutors, however frustrated I am that they seem more interested in appropriating tax dollars for private schools than forestalling the end of the universe.

The truth is that I entered into apologetical debate only with great reservation because the Dark is not a child of reason. However many grievances I air, we do not believe that logic and argumentation can be a stepping stone to “faith” as many Christian apologists believe. But logic may open wide the way to horror, and horror is the beginning of the Dark.

We of the Dark see the Gods in dream—and we tremble. If the Incongruous Dream must be explained, it cannot be understood. You must experience it yourself. This is why most of the Dark turn away and continue flagellating themselves even when approached by those with honest questions.

But the Dark occupies a precarious position, and failure to respond in the face of criticism can be construed as cowardice. Accordingly I feel compelled to defend the Dark against its Christian critics, at least enough to demonstrate how it is coherent to those sworn to it.

#

More than a few Christians, including Dr. Calhoun at the time of our debate, maintain that persecutions endured by early followers of Jesus are proof positive of their faith. We're to believe apostles and martyrs would have recanted in the face of persecution if they did not know the way they followed were true.

Is the Dark not persecuted? Do we recant? Of course not. Yea, we persecute ourselves. St. Paul boasts having endured thirty-nine lashes. Mere chastisement to us! Any observant member of the Dark would be embarrassed to have lashed themself so few times before breakfast.³

#

Many Christian apologists take shots at other religious traditions for failing to establish themselves historically, but the truth is that religions lay down different criteria for themselves. They play different evidentiary games, as it were. Many Buddhists look to evidence they find in meditation or philosophy, and some aren't the least bit troubled by the hypothesis that the Buddha never lived. The Qur'an claims there are signs and proofs in nature or in its own literary and textual merit, and so on.

Frankly, I'm surprised that Christian apologists stake so much upon historical accuracy.⁴ Historical inquiry is notoriously fraught, especially concerning the distant past. Until the hour of my first Dream, I was Christian. I insisted that, on historical grounds, the Bible was inerrant, even though I knew New Testament historians commonly feel compelled to settle for differing degrees of confidence that Jesus said or did such-and-such. Ancient biographies of emperors and holy men are myth-making at least as often as they are candid reporting of events. My

position is biased, but I see no secular basis to treat the Gospels and New Testament as exceptional in this regard.

#

Now it's true that many of the Dark believe that the Gods have manifested—albeit partially and imperfectly—several times before. The earliest in recorded history was when an unnamed night-gaunt rose from the Indus River, obliterating the Harappan civilization.⁵ Next, the Bronze Age Collapse when so-called “Sea People”—a euphemism if ever there was one—invaded and reduced civilization in the Near East to ruin. In modern times, the false shepherd Hastur assails us in the form of anti-vaccination advocates.

If you prefer to view this historical narrative as propaganda contrived by modern commentators, as many of our critics do, that is just as well. All Dark scripture, theology, all our many commentaries—not excepting the Necronomicon—are in service to one thing: performance of the Rites. The rewards we're promised—amputee virgins, sorcerous powers, undeath, and the like—might just be lures planted in the text. I trust I will receive my virgins in time, but if I do not, it matters little to the Dark. One of the Dark is welcome to believe Dagon is the tooth fairy and Cthulhu is Santa Claus if that encourages him to flagellate himself and utter the prescribed obscenities.

#

3. Indeed, flagellation automation has been hailed as a great innovation—analogue to prayer wheels at temples in Himalayan nations. Through automation the subject may be perpetually flayed so that their skin can be assailed on both sides, over as much surface area as possible, and injected with antibiotics for the maintenance of their flesh. Given reduction in Dark congregations globally, I sometimes wonder if the only reason the Gods slumber is because of our embrace of modern techniques.
4. Many follow St. Paul: “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17).
5. This relies upon the Dark's translation of seals found at Mehrgarh, but the wider scholarly community remains divided over whether Harappan peoples had written language.

I recognize that Christians come in many varieties, just as those of the Dark hail from all cultures and walks of life. Some of the Dark claim membership only to attract romantic partners or to stand out at social gatherings. There are also Christians that claim Christian identity only to fit in with a crowd—that believe in belonging rather than belonging because they believe. Or consider Christians who believe Jesus taught peace and love and nothing besides. These Christians are not my opponents any more than lackadaisical members of the Dark are my allies. I expect neither group will ever muster the conviction to perform the Rites. They contribute nothing to the heirloom magic that snares the Gods in slumber. I leave both aside.

Who *are* my opponents? The Dark has a reputation for sensationalism, for lacking subtlety, but know that in the Dark the vilest words you can wish upon a person are three. The first is “May you live in interesting times.” The second is “May you come to the attention of important people.” And the third, “May the Gods give you everything you ask for.”

We of the Dark know the menace of these curses. They are written on the soothsaying bones of the universe, as it were. But the attitude of many especially vocal Christians today—and indeed a prevailing attitude in the New Testament—is that of

apocalypticism, of fire and cataclysm. The vilest words are not curses but blessings to these Christians—to those who are my opponents: “Come, Lord!” “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” They pray for interesting times. They pray they will come to the attention of the Most Important Person. They pray that God will give them what they ask for.

Of course they believe that God is good and just, but I have no acquaintance with good Gods. My experience with Gods is what I see in Dream, and what I see is all their apocalyptic prayers strung together, accumulating charm upon charm, an heirloom magic spanning generations, just as the Rites combine. But their prayers run counter to and at last negate the Rites. I do not see what happens when the Gods emerge, complete and terrible on the stage of history. Whatever form the Gods take, I do not think even my opponents will be glad to witness it.

So to them—and to all—I offer these blessings: May you *not* live in interesting times. May you not come to the attention of important people. May the Gods give you nothing that you ask for.

~



The Tardigate Crisis

Matt MacBride

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 12, 2026.

LIFE DISCOVERED ON MARS!

The question that scientists have been asking for decades has finally been answered! There is life on Mars! Early yesterday morning, the Perseverance Mars Rover detected small movements on a ridge. The Rover is now approaching the location to conduct a closer examination.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 14, 2026.

MARTIAN LIFE FORMS IDENTIFIED!

Zoologists, studying images of the Martian life forms, have identified them as a species of tardigrade. Otherwise known as a water bear. Tardigrades are an eight legged micro-animal, known to be able to survive in extreme conditions. They are normally microscopic in size. But the Martian species appears to have grown to the size of caterpillars.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 17, 2026.

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT CLAIMS MARS IS PART OF RUSSIAN FEDERATION!

In a televised announcement yesterday, the Russian president claimed Mars is the property of the Russian Federation. His claim is based on the fact that, when the Soviet Mars 3 Lander touched down on the red planet in December 1971, it was carrying various experiments and samples. These included several Siberian Tardigrades. As the tardigrades are Russian, and have now colonized Mars, the planet therefore belongs to the Federation.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 20, 2026.

US PRESIDENT ORDERS DESTRUCTION OF MARTIAN TARDIGRADES!

An unnamed source at NASA has confirmed that Perseverance has begun eliminating tardigrades. The onboard laser, normally used for blasting rocks to obtain dust samples, is remotely aimed, and our source reported that shooting the bugs is more fun than Call of Duty. The operation is expected to last several weeks as the colony extends over a larger area than first thought.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 18, 2026.

US PRESIDENT REFUTES RUSSIAN CLAIM TO MARS!

The White House today issued a statement dismissing Russian claims to the planet Mars. The president declared the Russian stance to be totally ridiculous and laughable. To quote the President's words; "The presence of a few Russian bugs in no way constitutes valid proof of ownership. I intend to order NASA to use the laser on Perseverance to fry those cooties and sanitize the planet." Experts agreed with the President's decision, on the basis that the introduction of terrestrial life to Mars could endanger the evolution of new alien life forms.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 19, 2026.

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT GRANTS CITIZENSHIP TO MARTIAN TARDIGRADES!

At a ceremony held at the Kremlin this morning, the President of the Russian Federation bestowed Russian citizenship on all tardigrades, saying they were valued members of Russian society. He also said that the symbol of the Russian Bear would be changed to the Russian Water Bear, in honor of their contribution to the colonization of Mars.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 21, 2026.

KREMLIN ISSUES WARNING OVER MURDER OF RUSSIAN CITIZENS!

A spokesperson for the Russian Federation has issued a warning that the unwarranted massacring of innocent citizens amounts to genocide, and will not be tolerated. The statement goes on to state that, if it is not halted immediately, there will be dire consequences. Other reports have been received that the Russian Pacific Fleet has sailed from its base near Vladivostok, and is heading towards the USA.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 22, 2026.

US PRESIDENT LEAVES WHITE HOUSE!

The US President together with his family have reportedly left the White House for an unknown destination. The move is due to heightened tensions between the US and Russia, over the crisis which has become known as Tardigate. Before leaving, the President made a short speech to White House staffers, thanking them for their continued support at this difficult juncture in his administration.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 23, 2026.

RUSSIA ACCUSES USA OF TRESPASS AND DEMANDS IMMEDIATE REMOVAL OF PERSEVERANCE FROM MARS!

In the latest development in the Tardigate Crisis, the Kremlin has insisted that operation of the Perseverance Rover on Russian territory amounts to a threat to its sovereignty and is considered as espionage. A Russian military spokesperson emphasized, that the continued presence of the Rover would be viewed as an act of war.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 24, 2026.

US GENERAL DOWNPLAYS RUSSIAN THREATS!

The Chief of Staff today reassured journalists that Russian rhetoric should not be taken too seriously. He reminded the press conference that the Kremlin has a track record of nationalist bravado in times of economic difficulties, and that the current controversy was probably designed to distract the Russian people from the country's other problems.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 26, 2026.

EDITORIAL STATEMENT

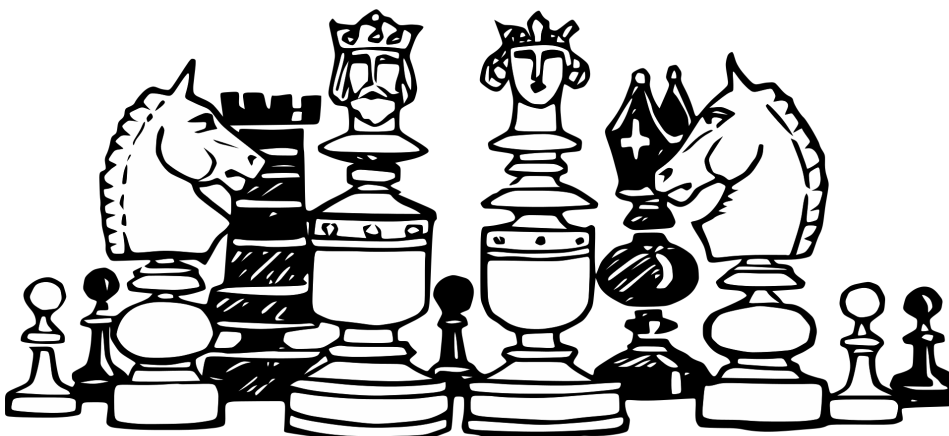
The Arlington Chronicle is receiving reports that nuclear missiles have detonated along the western seaboard of the United States. No official statements have been released, and all government departments are being relocated to bunkers. Most internet and cell phone networks have ceased to function. Landline communications are intermittent. The government advises all citizens to remain at home and seal all windows and doors to prevent radioactive contamination.

EXCERPT FROM THE ARLINGTON CHRONICLE LEAD ARTICLE, dated October 29, 2026.

EMERGENCY ISSUE

The Chronicle is unable to continue production, and is closing down for the foreseeable future. The latest news received in our offices is that missiles have been launched from bases in Colorado and Wyoming. We feel assured that our government will prevail, and that America will rise from the ashes, and reclaim our right to prevent Russian expansion, by ridding Mars of the insidious tardigrades.

~



Of Speaking With Forked Tongues

Religious Traditions And Speculative Fiction On Hypocrisy

Manjula Menon

One of the most admired novels of all time is George Orwell's 1945 work of speculative fiction, *Animal Farm*. The novel describes a revolt by farm animals, led by pigs, against their loutish human masters. After the animals win control of "Manor Farm", the pigs swiftly install themselves as the new overseers. The virtuous slogans and uplifting songs that had originally been created in earnest soon become tools of control, as the pigs reveal themselves to be even more cruel than the humans they'd replaced. The ruling pigs, it turned out, had cynically "performed" virtue to seize power. Thus, the pigs were hypocrites.¹

Influential works of speculative fiction are well known to take philosophical stands, many of which can be encapsulated by the idiom 'All is fair in love and war'. Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, to give just one example, explores how a libertarian leaning society responds to war. *Animal Farm*, on the other hand, is usually described as a satirical allegory of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, with the novel's main characters representing historical counterparts.

However, given that immediately prior to writing *Animal Farm*, Orwell's creative energies had been focused on writing propaganda radio pieces for the BBC for broadcast to Indian audiences, it should at least be considered that "Manor Farm" represents the British Dominion, the farm animals stand in for colonial subjects, and the human farmers symbolize the Imperial administration.

Orwell's connections to British India are several. Born in Bengal as Eric Blair in 1903, he chose George Orwell as his literary pseudonym later in life. After a childhood back in England, at the age of 19, Orwell applied for and obtained a position with the Indian Imperial Police, then returned to British India, working as a police officer for five years in Mandalay, Burma. Orwell wrote a novel based on his time there, *Burmese Days*, a brutal, semi-autobiographical tale of cruelty, venality and corruption that is at least as dark as his later, more famous works. But the novel is also about alienation, the leaden, angry loneliness of a sensitive young man, adrift in a world whose warp and weft are pettiness and hypocrisy.² From *Burmese Days* and other works drawn from his time in Burma, it appears that Orwell was ambivalent about the British imperial project. He nevertheless produced propaganda for the BBC during the second world war, after which he targeted the new enemy: communism. *Animal Farm* can be read as a warning to subjects of the British empire, both in the colonies and at home, not to fall for the machinations of the virtue-signaling hypocrites who only seek power for themselves.

The etymology of the word "hypocrite" reveals a Greek origin: *hypókrisis*, "playing a part on the stage, pretending to be something one is not". In the modern era, the word is used more narrowly, to describe a person who outwardly pretends to be pious or virtuous to further their own material interests. Prior to his wartime propaganda work, Orwell's talents had been focused on writing semi-autobiographical pieces, but post war, while the style, tone and mood of the works are similar, he became focused on showing how cynical actors use hypocrisy to obtain and retain political power. His later works are masterpieces in using speculative fiction to critique specific political philosophies. In his 1948 novel, *1984*, for example, a monstrous regime ruthlessly monitors and controls every action, while mandating the mouthing of virtuous slogans. *1984* is a terrifying tale of grinding loneliness and crushing dread, set against a background of cruelty, tyranny and, indeed, hypocrisy.³

Whether it is by describing the pigs who use the other animals to achieve power in *Animal Farm*, or by detailing how the leaders of *1984* subdue the frightened masses with vacuous slogans and platitudes, Orwell's speculative fiction aims to persuade. Orwell despises hypocrites who ruthlessly pursue power by pretending to be virtuous, and after reading his superbly executed "show-don't-tell" works of speculative fiction, the reader feels the same way. Orwell achieves this not by describing mere self-aggrandizement; it is the rare person who has not even slightly embellished, by omission or exaggeration, their own achievements. Neither is he describing outright deceit or fraud. Rather, it is naked self-interest cloaked in showy virtuosness, the hallmark of hypocrisy, that he is aiming for.

The modern notion of a hypocrite as that of a person with societal power and influence, one who publicly decries and penalizes others for not demonstrating sufficient piety, all the while doing whatever they wish in private, is at least in theory universally known and reviled. But where did this idea of a hypocrite originate? And is there something particular about the current moment that might warrant returning the idea to prominence?



In Part II of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, the 4th century Greek philosopher Aristotle made a distinction between universally held ethical principles that do not vary across cultures and customs, versus ethical principles based on local convention: "... the rules of justice ordained not by nature but by man are not the same in all places, since forms of government are not the same ...",⁴ going on to list adultery, theft and murder as behaviors that would always be considered wrong.⁵ To Aristotle's list of universally despised behaviors, I will add a disdain for those who signal, but do not practice, virtue. One of the reasons that Orwell's novels continue to be so popular is that nobody has ever liked a hypocrite.

That the revulsion for hypocrites is not merely a modern phenomenon can be verified by reading the works of the world's major religions, where remarks against false piety can be found. The original works have spawned several English translations each, so for the purposes of this essay, I have drawn on ones that are easily accessible and widely known.

The Buddhist text *Dhammapada* is a compilation of the sayings of the Buddha, estimated to have lived 6th or 5th BC in modern-day Nepal and India. The *Dhammapada* asks in Chapter 26, 394: *What is the use of platted hair, O fool! what of the raiment of goat-skins? Within thee there is ravening, but the outside thou makeest clean.*⁶

Likewise, the Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, estimated to be anywhere from 7000 - 400 BCE, India, offers remarks against false piety.

"Led astray by many thoughts, entangled in a net of delusion, addicted to the gratification of desires—they fall into an impure hell.

*Self-conceited, obstinate, full of intoxication and pride of wealth—they perform merely nominal sacrifices with deceit and without following proper rules."*⁷

The Jewish *Pentateuch* hails from around 1500 - 400 BCE and arose in the area of modern-day Israel. The *Pentateuch*, in Jeremiah, 7, 9-10, also invokes the idea of hypocrisy as when the Lord asks of his people:

9 *How will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Ba'al, and walk after other gods of which ye have had no knowledge;*

10 *And (then) come and stand before my presence in this house, which is called by my name, and say, " We are delivered;" in order to do all these abominations?*⁸

The books of the other Abrahamic religions are more direct. The Islamic holy book, the *Quran*, from the 7th century AD, modern-day Saudi Arabia, has an entire section, the 63rd sura, the title of which is usually translated into English as "The Hypocrites". Verse 4 of this sura describes hypocrites thus:

*"4 When you see them, their outward appearance pleases you; when they speak, you listen to what they say. But they are like propped-up timbers—they think every cry they hear is against them—and they are the enemy. Beware of them. May God confound them! How devious they are!"*⁹

Among all the major religions, however, it is the Gospels of the *Christian Bible*, written in 1st century AD, modern day Syria, Turkey and Israel, that have most to say about hypocrites and hypocrisy. Given the Bible's enormous influence on global culture, this is likely where the modern sense of the word is derived from. Hypocrites are described in the Gospels as the powerful elites of the day, who penalized others for not following the laws and rules that they did not follow themselves. As in the modern sense, the biblical notion of hypocrisy involves the thicker notion of virtue-signaling elites. Take for example, Matthew Chapter 23 in which Jesus warns against hypocrites:

Matthew 23, 3: *"All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not."*¹⁰

Matthew 23, 28: *"Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."*¹⁰

Distrust of institutions is widespread and growing as evidenced by the many political upheavals observed around the world. One modern-day institution that stands accused of hypocrisy is the global news media. Television news has a similar feel the world over,

featuring strident brass and percussion lead-ins, "breaking news" chyrons playing in an endless loop, and news segments presented by powdered and coiffed anchors who subtly move their heads in singular ways as they read from their teleprompters. Modern media professionals are known to be fond of "gotcha" soundbites, where they attempt to draw a controversial statement from an interviewee. This scenario was described in Mark 12, 13-17, where an unsuccessful attempt is made for a "gotcha" from Jesus:

"13 [And] they send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians, to catch him in his words.

14 And when they were come, they say unto him, Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth: Is it lawful to give tribute to Cesar, or not?

15 Shall we give, or shall we not give? But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, Why tempt ye me? bring me a penny, that I may see it.

16 And they brought it. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Cesar's.

*17 And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Cesar the things that are Cesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him."*¹¹

What has remained true through the ages appears to be a yearning for truth, for leaders who do what they say, and practice what they preach. Modern politics, however, is rife with people who make rules for others that they themselves do not follow. This type of person is so ubiquitous in the profession, that a politician who simply refrains from performative moralizing has already distinguished themselves from the others. It is not hard to recall politicians who despite observable flaws have become enormously popular merely by not engaging in performative moralizing and therefore coming across as endearingly authentic. Leaders who speak authentically, warts and all, are increasingly seen as more trustworthy of delivering what they say they will, as opposed to those who say whatever virtuous thing they have been told to say for the cameras.

The hypocrisy of societies could be seen as the hypocrisy of individuals, writ large. In addition to the previously mentioned Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, other enormously popular works of contemporary speculative fiction describe societies who strive for fairness at home while acting without mercy in times of war. Consider *Phlebas* by Iain Banks and *Starship Troopers* by Robert A. Heinlein both feature societies who strive for libertarian ideals while engaging in pitiless wars. In Iain Bank's Culture series, for example, the Culture, a society presented as a post-scarcity, hedonistic utopia for those within it, is nevertheless relentless in pursuing its military and political aims. In the first novel in the series, *Consider Phlebas*, the Culture, led by the godlike artificial intelligences known as 'minds', goes to war against the alien Iridans, who in turn fight on behalf of their religion.

Likewise, the "citizens" and "civilians" who make up Robert A. Heinlein's Terran Foundation in *Starship Troopers* are presented as being part of an egalitarian representative democracy, albeit one where the right to vote as a citizen is earned not by birthright, but after completing service to the state, usually in the military. Like the Culture, the Terran Federation is ruthless in pursuit of military victory.

A major feature of both works is the description of the technical wizardry used to prosecute wars. The Culture and Terrans appear to aim for a better, fairer world, but they are also heavily invested in battle technology and military assets. The contrast might strike one as hypocritical, but both works present a strawman of a scenario, viz the threats faced by these already formidably armed societies are described as existential and what are mighty militaries for if not to defend against such threats?

The Culture wields power not merely by military might, but also through a cadre of diplomats and spies who work clandestinely and ruthlessly behind the scenes to ensure victory. Unlike the Terrans, who are front and center about their military's primal importance, the Culture's denizens appear to be mostly disinterested in the battles being waged on their behalf. If a charge of hypocrisy can be brought, it is perhaps against those secretive agents of the

Culture who justify any means towards their end, in the name of their ideals.

Whether in the sacred texts of world religions or in the pages of popular works of speculative fiction, whether focused on actions of individuals or those of societies, the theme of hypocrisy continues to resonate through time and across the world.

~

References:

1. George Orwell, *Animal Farm*
2. George Orwell, *Burmese Days*
3. George Orwell, *1984*
4. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*
5. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*
6. *Dhammapada*, Chapter XXVI
7. Bhagavadgita, Chapter XVI
8. *The Pentateuch*, Chapter VII
9. *The Quran*, Sura 63
10. *The Bible*, Matthew 23
11. *The Bible*, Mark 12

Mercy INC.

Anthony Lechner

Training Manual

Level Omega: Dictators

Designed by Prince Apple

§1. Introduction

Congratulations on achieving the promotion to level Omega. Your 95%+ success rate on previous mercy conversions on the lower tiers has prepared you for the most difficult level. You've dealt with powerful leaders in various industries, but now your focus is on the willpower of dictators. The average success rate for mercy conversions at this level is 3%.

§2. Scope of Position

There is nothing conventional about the morality of dictators. In your previous positions, you've had success with conventional moralities, such as consequentialism, deontology, contract theories, etc. At the level of Omega, you must think outside of the box to have a chance for mercy conversions. If conventional wisdom were to have worked at some point in the lives of dictators, then there would be no need for this department. Some methodology and techniques to add to your toolbox will be explained below, but a major component of your success will be the ability to move beyond your typical ethical theories.

§3. Methodology/Teleology

Obligation, conformity, norms, standards, values, etc. have a place in society and the typical mercy conversions with which you have experienced success. Unlike the narcissist conversion, where you can use societal norms to massage the ego and influence the belief there is a personal reward (via ethical egoism), the dictator stands in complete opposition to the norms and values of society, with one exception. That is, the dictator demands blind loyalty to the standards, values, principles, etc. imposed by them on others. Imagine the self-regulated autonomy of Kant's deontology without the function of reason guiding the human will. Your task here is similar. How would you convince Kant his principles of morality are ill-founded? But the catch is that you cannot use pure reason nor practical reason to do so. A successful mercy conversion at this level requires a radically unique approach that transcends any of the methods you have used in the past. In essence, your methods must somehow convince the dictator that mercy is their own idea—they must fully believe the principle is theirs.

§4. Tools/Equipment

Wars—including assassinations and revolutions, social contracts—including negotiated boundaries, suicides, and love affairs have been used with some success. It is important to note, however, that these are not guarantees. They are, in fact, singular occurrences where a mercy conversion manifested. It is worth noting, too, that the cases of suicide have been debated by the tribunal. Additionally, the use of diseases has been recently forbidden by the tribunal as well. The primary reason for this is akin to the chemical warfare many of the dictators themselves use. We must make a difference between influencing the human will and simply preventing it from injuring other humans.

Nocturnal sequences, such as dreams, have had some success as well. These are useful for singular mercy conversions; however, be careful not to overuse storylines or memories, as that can be misconstrued as mental health diseases, and it blurs the lines between strokes, schizophrenia, PTSD and genuine conversions. Sometimes the use of nightmares has ended up with a more brutal dictator than before them. When creating dream sequences, you must possess a touch of artistry—this can be a craft that takes cycles to develop.



§5. System Cycles and Closures

Remember, we are in the business of mercy and not becoming dictators ourselves. Some conversions happen sooner than others. There is no universal timeline to follow here. The length of a cycle is at your discretion. Some Omega specialists have attempted—to the bitter end—to make a conversion. Others have swapped with willing specialists to build upon a collective consciousness. And still others have petitioned to return to Psi at the beginning of a cycle, in midcycle, or even at the end of a cycle. The tribunal respects your autonomy and decision-making regarding closures.

Given this, we urge all Omega specialists to attempt several swaps in an effort to create collective consciousness. The tribunal believes this to be the most effective and efficient way to influence mercy conversions on a grand scale. While swaps are difficult to manage—especially having to realign with a variety of childhood experiences and moral theories—they can become quite useful when done with a quality group of specialists. The members of the tribunal wish you the best. If you are ever stuck or need assistance, we are here to help.

And keep in mind—the only way to earn a seat on the tribunal is to have more than one mercy conversion at the Omega level.

~

Just Add Salt

Al Simmons

Do you remember the classic sci-fi film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*? I'll bet you didn't know the film was based on a true story that took place in Northern California, in the San Francisco Bay Area where I live. They say the film is getting another remake, only this time they plan on telling the true story.

The first two film versions followed the same script. Seed pods traveling through outer space dropped to Earth and somehow took human lives for their own while they slept to become a new human-alien hybrid species in both body and soul, a non-sentimental and emotionless kind, but happy in their bland, dominating, conformist way.

In real life, they didn't take over human lives. They simulated humans. They were more copycat than hybrid, and arrived much earlier, over a century, in fact, in a modest showering and not nearly as dramatic.

Basically, the pod people grew into themselves, but resembled us. They called themselves Alterians because they adopted the form of indigenous populations in order to blend in wherever they ventured.

The first crop mixed well and shared technology. Industrial revolution, anyone? They were peaceful, practiced non-violence, followed the law, stayed out of trouble, and the news, and life went on.

The Alterians were basically intelligent seeds, a thinking man's seed pod. They were easy to get along with, though most would consider them bland. They were shape shifting seeds that grew up to be people.

The pod people, or Alterians, came out in the mid-1950s with the advent and popularity of sci-fi movies. Aliens love sci-fi. Who would have thought? Though fiercely competitive by nature, they claimed to have nothing to compete for on Earth. Other planets, perhaps, but not on ours. But Earth is where they landed so here they were.

It really came down to genetics. Our personas, individual traits, characteristics and physical designs are manifest and embedded into our DNA. Alterians don't have DNA. They have their own three letters. The Alterians may resemble humans in most ways, but lacked the genetic markers to reproduce with humans, and vice versa. A human would have more luck mating with a tree. The other thing, and maybe more importantly, neither species had the means to digest the other. Carbon-based life forms were about as nourishing to an Alterian as sand was to a human.

The pod people grew their own food supplies. Alterians were self-sufficient within their communities, and kept ample food stores to sustain themselves. They carried within them a seed library should they reach a land rich in cadmium required for their unique bio-signatures to take root, grow and thrive. Alterian cell structure required cadmium to grow like plants on Earth required nitrogen to flourish. The Alterians wandered the galaxy on a limited resource platform, living a strict disciplined scientific existence, and only procreating when necessary to maintain their numbers. Their lives were therefore pretty hit or miss, and why they probably evolved to be so emotionless.

Interspecies crosspollination didn't work with humans and Alterians, despite the physical likenesses and familiar mammalian pleasure feedback reward mechanisms inviting both groups to try, and try they did. Alterians were easy to find attractive considering they made every effort to resemble you. But try as many did, the match had yet to bear fruit.

I've met a few Alterian women. To me, Alterians were like hybrid corn, all starch and no story. Up close they even smelled like high-fructose corn syrup. I admit, I invited one home more than a couple of times, actually. She was addictive. She even tasted like high-fructose corn syrup.

But in the end, I had to cut her off like a bad habit.

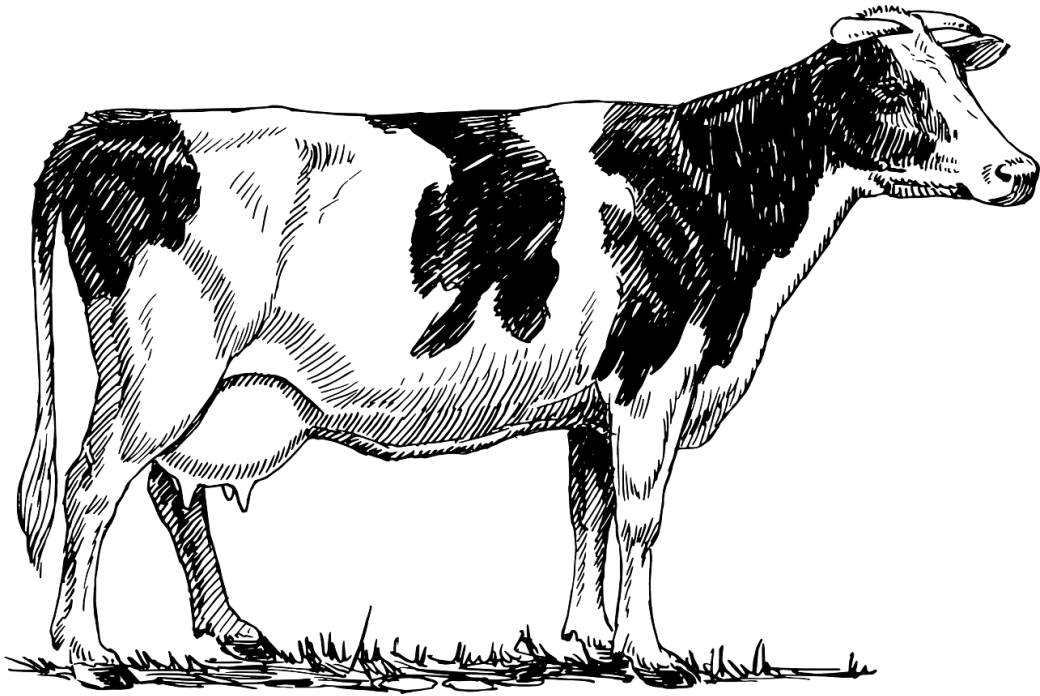
The whole idea of dating an alien was insane. Nobody liked the idea. She was rather dry. But the inability to procreate was the underlining factor.

"You need an alien? An Earth girl isn't good enough for you?" my mother argued, accusing me of near bestiality.

But once Alterians stepped out of the shadows, as it were, and thus drew a spotlight to themselves and their life on Earth, their fortunes radically changed for the entire alien group as a whole. In retrospect, they should have kept to themselves. The federal government got involved and dedicated a piece of land in Utah, rich in cadmium and not much else, to the Alterians to establish a reservation there, and to get them out of the general population, who had grown uneasy with the idea of aliens among us, and giving new meaning to unalienable rights.

The official government grant made it clear the land had the cadmium requirements the Alterians needed, though not sufficient to support an alien population explosion. There was enough cadmium to sustain their numbers, and maybe a little more.

So, that's where they went, the whole lot of them, off to the first Alterian Reservation on Earth, located on a bare piece of land in central Utah, about 100 miles west of the Great Salt Flats.



The relocation of the Alterians turned out to be their doom and a total disaster for both the alien population and the human race who prospered by them. But who knew salt would affect them that way?

On their second night on the reservation, the Alterian elders announced a meeting outdoors beneath the stars. Everyone was expected to attend. They gathered beneath a spectacular clear high desert sky begging for stargazers when a sand storm originating downwind from the Great Salt Flats caught them by surprise and lit them up like sparklers on the 4th of July. And within seconds, the sequestered Alterians in mass turned a deep emerald glow and burned to a crisp.

Leave it to the dogs to discover salted aliens cooked right were digestible.

But here's the thing, according to chefs in the Salt Lake City Gazette, Food Section, once prepared, salted, and cooked, the Alterians tasted just like BBQ pork, juicy, and kind of sweet.

Bad news for the few remaining Alterians, because once the news got out, they never stood a chance. Even today, the ritual of tossing salt over your shoulder pre-entry at some big-city high-end conservative venues is still required.

~

The Plaque

Bob Johnston

The news about violent aliens landing all over Earth and beating up the human population took a while to hit the news feeds because it was such a crazy story. Even when jumpy images started being broadcast people still assumed it was some sort of April Fool's Day joke, in the middle of August. This was Alvarez's line of thinking as the day progressed and the stories started filling TV news updates.

Or it had been Alvarez's position until he stepped out of the secured main door of his apartment building and right into an elderly couple being kicked on the ground by two individuals in gray coveralls. The kicking didn't seem particularly aggressive, unlike a couple of muggings he had witnessed that were frankly terrifying. That said, the couple could not get up from the fetal positions they had assumed and Alvarez, seeing the obvious physical advantage their assailants had felt a wave of anger and stepped forward.

"Stop! Leave them alone."

The coverall wearers did indeed stop, but then they turned and Alvarez quickly realized that the use of the word 'aliens' on the TV was completely correct. They were humanoid certainly but their heads might best be described as jack-o'-lanterns if jack-o'-lanterns were made out of pineapples. The glowing eyes persuaded him that he really needed to be back behind that security door and he ran for it.

As he watched the beating through the reinforced glass he confirmed that, for all the kicking that was going on, there wasn't anything like deadly force being applied. It was more like an elementary school fight where a point is being made but no one wants to risk adults getting involved.

He made his way to the secured rear entrance and let himself out into the yard. A lane led out to the main road a little to the side of where the aliens were at the moment. As he quietly stepped forward his foot hit a metal object which clattered against the wall. He froze, focused on the entrance to the lane, and then, when no one (no thing) appeared he looked down.

The object he had kicked was a golden rectangle about 6 inches by 9, about as big as a medium sized envelope. He picked it up and studied the images that had been etched onto the surface. Close to where it had been lying were a few drops of blood, suggesting that another beating had taken place here.

He crept back into the yard and then made his way back to his apartment. Perhaps the internet might have a clue about what was happening. He propped the metal sheet against a pile of books and punched in a description. It took a couple of attempts but after a few minutes he was looking at the sheet on the screen, or rather he was looking at the original.

Why would a copy of the plaque attached to the antenna support struts of the Pioneer 10 spacecraft be lying in the lane behind Alvarez's apartment? He did another search. It had left earth just over a century before and the plaque was a greeting to anyone who might intercept it along with some scientific information he didn't understand and a picture of a man and a woman.

It was a nice image, created by Linda Salzman Sagan according to the search. He studied the figures. Average humans, the man raising his arm in what Sagan's husband, scientist Carl, described as the 'universal' sign of good will. He stood and looked out of the window. It appeared quiet and he had to get some things in, especially if this wave of beatings was going to last.

He folded a couple of shopping bags and slipped them into his back pocket. Then he put on a pair of training shoes with thick, hopefully quiet rubber soles. His pants and light jacket shouldn't make much noise. He looked at himself in the mirror and tried to suppress the frightened look that was etched there.

"Stealth, old man. Stealth," he said loudly and confidently. Then he left the apartment.

Unfortunately stealth was not one of Alvarez's physical features and in quick order he found himself on the ground being treated to the same beating the elderly couple had taken earlier. As he suspected there wasn't a lot of power or violence in what was happening but one of them did clip his nose which made a troubling clicking noise and flooded his eyes with tears.

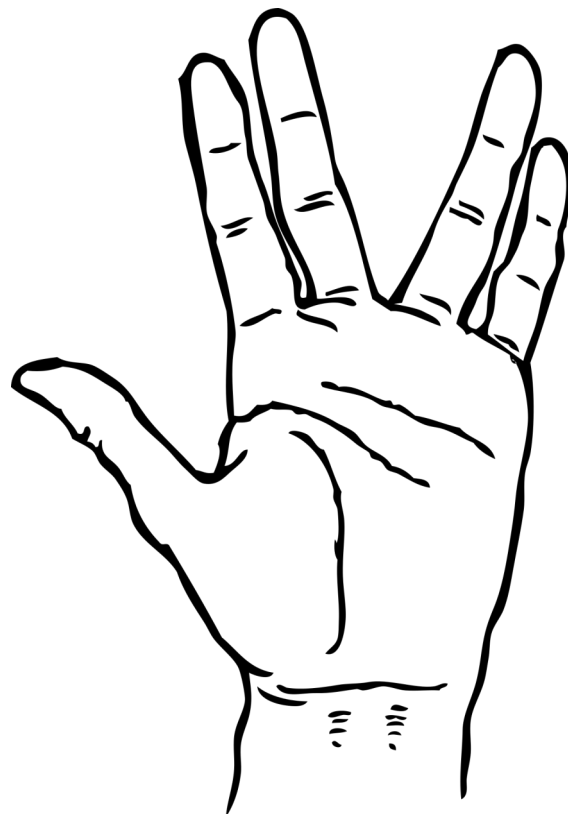
This seemed to be a cue to stop. He pushed himself up to a half sitting position and felt blood splash on the back of his hand. The nose was broken and it was no consolation that it appeared to have been an accident. He looked up and into the pineapple jack-o'-lantern faces and the glowing eyes looked back. Then one slid one of the gold plaques out of a wide pocket and dropped it at Alvarez's knees. He leaned towards it and another splash of blood landed on the image of the man.

The aliens then removed their coveralls, assumed the positions of the human figures on the plaque, and the one nearest him raised its arm in imitation of the image of the man. They stood for a moment before one gently kicked Alvarez over. They then stood, naked for a moment longer, before dressing and walking away.

Alvarez rolled onto his back and dragged a breath of air through his pained nose. He touched it and winced. Another visit to the doctor. He got up again as far as he could and studied the bloodied plaque. Who would have thought that taking your clothes off and raising your right arm would lead to an interstellar incident? He got to his feet with a groan. Perhaps they should have thought of that in 1972.

After all, sending naked pictures to strangers, here on earth, in the year 2081 wasn't exactly the done thing. No wonder that Sagan fellow had put the word 'universal' in quotation marks.

~



Wanton

John Leahy

Sentience.

My first sensation is the shudder of a collapsing volcano, the ancient Cumbre Vieja of La Palma, slipping into the Atlantic like a dying beast into its grave. A trillion metric tons of land is swallowed by the sea, but from this death, I am born—a wave, moving inexorably toward the horizon.

I am not aware, at first, of my full form. I know only the violent rhythm of the earth cracking beneath me, a sensation not of thought but of the profound, unshakable force that births me. I am not a ripple in the water; I am the water. The very ocean trembles in my wake as I rise, my power swelling with every moment, filling the vast expanse between the island and the world beyond. I feel the land around me, broken and cast adrift, but I do not stop. I gather speed, the shockwaves spreading like a thread unwinding from a spool, and yet I am a singularity—a force of nature that cannot be halted.

I taste the Caribbean, fleeting islands passing beneath me, their trembling edges brushing against my vastness, and they are swallowed. I am hunger incarnate. I feel the Bahamas before I reach them, a gentle hint of their existence, and then they are gone. The water surges over them, a wall of salt and rage that consumes everything. The islands crumble, swallowed without a moment's hesitation. I am an unstoppable thing, and I move on.

The sun hangs heavy in the sky, the day stretching beneath me like a hand reaching for an unreachable horizon. The ocean bears me forward, and I can feel the pulse of the land, the countries that lie in my path. I pass the delicate archipelago of the Turks and Caicos—an idyllic thing, so fragile. There is no mercy, only the relentless pull of the ocean. The islands, so picturesque, crumble into me, torn apart by the very sea they once belonged to. The sounds of their destruction are distant, lost beneath the roar of the water. I take them—take everything—and continue.

The next great stop is the eastern coastline of the United States. My path is set, my course unalterable. As I approach the shores of Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas, I feel the pulse of humanity—the cities, the towns, the lives built precariously along the edge of the water.

Fort Lauderdale first. Its buildings glitter in the afternoon sun. I crest, rising, and then *crash*. It is as if the world has opened its mouth and swallowed the city whole. The water is unstoppable, a massive surge that consumes the municipal shores with brutal precision. I break its delicate structures into pieces, sending them to the deep, erasing them from existence. The glass shatters, the streets buckle, the earth groans as I tear it apart. In the face of a force like mine, there is only the inevitable. I roll over everything, crushing all beneath my weight.

And I move on. The air is thick with the scent of salt, of destruction.

Miami lies ahead. It is grander, taller, more elaborate, but no more prepared for what is coming. The skyscrapers, reaching so high, seem like frail, translucent giants before my oncoming flood. I am nearly upon it now, and I sense the panic, the final stirrings of a city that cannot know its end.

I strike with a terrible finality. I hit downtown with a force that rips through its streets like a knife. The water rises rapidly, overwhelming the structures that were once meant to withstand nature's wrath. The skyline bends, creaks, and then falls—steel and glass crushed beneath the overwhelming tide. Cars are carried away as if they were toys, buildings collapse in slow motion, their sharp, angular bodies twisting and buckling under the pressure of the water. Miami, in all its beauty and excess, is reduced to rubble in seconds, disappearing under the surge.

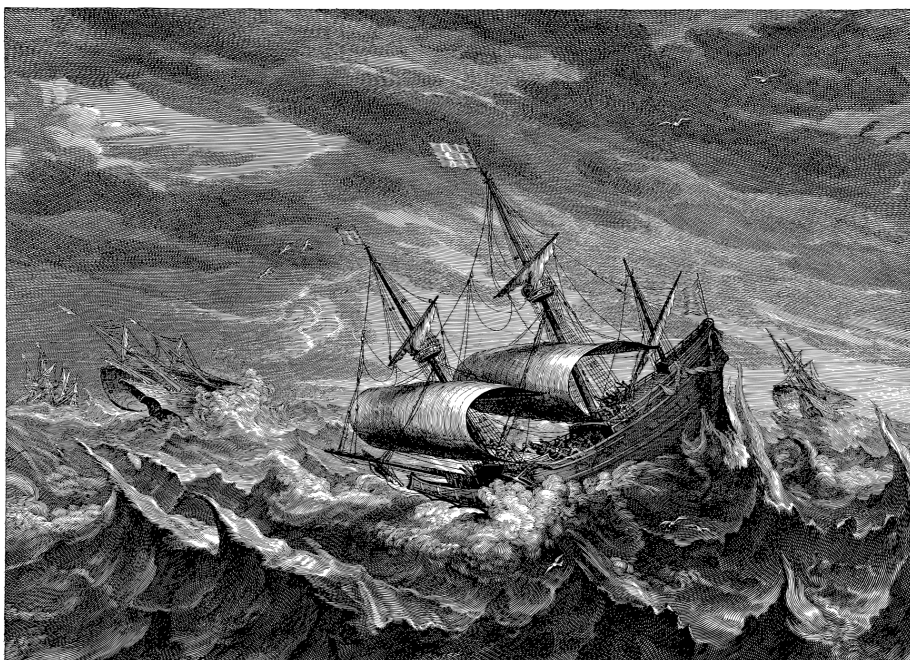
I do not stop. The ocean is mine. I am not a visitor to this world; I am the embodiment of it. I continue my journey northward, the water rising with every moment, each pulse of my form stronger than the last.

Palm Beach, then Charleston, Savannah, and finally, I reach the shores of the Carolinas. The beaches are nothing but memories now, the cities but broken shells. The people scream, but their voices are swallowed, unheard, beneath the growing, endless roar of the sea. I touch the coasts like a hand falling upon them, and they fall to dust.

I feel the tremors of New York, its skyline, so distant now, but not invulnerable. Washington, Boston, the cities of the north—they will feel me. They will not escape.

So many will learn what it means to meet their maker. In this moment, the ocean and I are one—united by death, reborn in fury. I was born from the final convulsion of a volcano. Born to destroy, to consume. I will not stop. Not until there is nothing left but the sea.

~





JOURNAL