"And now I see with eye serene the very pulse of the machine..."

--William Wordsworth, *She Was a Phantom of Delight*, 1807

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INTRODUCTION

From the very first moment of life, human beings begin to learn something of critical importance: they look for, and find, that they can depend on something outside themselves. Every day, someone holds and feeds the infant. This continues for years, at almost every moment. It is the first and most fundamental characteristic of the world we find ourselves in--that we will be cared for. Babies become dependent on that care, and cry when they want or don't get it. Individuals that don't get enough care as infants or are mistreated develop abnormally, sometimes becoming sociopaths or psychopaths. It is one of our most basic traits as human beings to be able to depend on something outside ourselves. Children are raised into an environment where parental love is provided without conditions. Put another way, the first lesson of life is unconditional love.

Awareness of unconditional love closely resembles another human characteristic, one that is also developed in infancy: object permanence. Object permanence is the knowledge that a thing is still there even when hidden. It's a critical concept in developmental psychology. Only a few of the more intelligent animals can demonstrate awareness of object permanence. Science has yet to reveal whether the duration of human infancy, with its long period of learning to depend upon something--on unconditional love--is the reason why humans have a talent for object permanence. But they appear to be linked, and fundamental to our nature. We have a capacity for

believing that something we can not always see is nevertheless still there.

In fact, the very definition of belief is like that of object permanence: a thing held as a belief is held in the absence of sensory validation. Belief doesn't need proof. We received the first proof in infancy--proof of unconditional love. It is so ingrained that the concept of permanence permeates our psyche. We are capable of believing that things are there without being shown. In fact, we are not merely capable of believing in the unseen, it is a fundamental psychological need, as much a need as mother's milk.

Belief in the unseen leads directly to the unique human talent for abstract thought, particularly the ability to believe in ideals. What is the statement "people are fundamentally good" if not the expression of an abstract ideal? It is impossible to subject such a notion to proof, and thus for those who share this sentiment, it is a belief. All our political, economic, and religious institutions are based upon ideals which can only be conceptualized in the abstract. Our valuation of those in-stitutions is related to our need to have something to depend upon. The durability of the institutions has more psychological value for us than the ideals those institutions uphold because they reassure us that the abstract ideals are real, and still there. We can depend upon them.

As we look across the span of human history, religion, politics, and culture, there are countless examples of our efforts to replicate this kind of permanence in the larger world: monuments, words of great import carved in stone, architecture that lasts millennia, libraries filled with great books, dynasties, empires, religious doctrines of eternal principles (one of which promises unconditional love)...the list is endless. The values and the ideals change, but the need to believe in them is constant.

The acceptance of the transient nature of the universe, operationalized at a pragmatic level, is only found in religious or artistic extremes. It is never a force for unifying people into a group or cause. If you want to motivate them, you have to give them something they can believe in.

As human beings mature, the actual presence of unconditional love in their personal lives is likely to eventually decline, due to separation from parents, and their entry into the adult world of human affairs. Even with strong personal relationships, adulthood means striving for survival or success, and entails competition with others, perhaps even hostility. Having learned the first lesson of being able to depend on unconditional love, we quickly learn that there are many people upon whom we can not depend.

Conflict with others only intensifies the need for a permanent system of beliefs. A competing world-view threatens the universality of our dearly-held beliefs, and the mere existence of a diversity of views implies that any single view can not be the truth, inasmuch as it contradicts the others. Hostility, even competition, threatens the idea that we are loved because it eliminates the basis for it--the ability to depend upon others. Not because the hostile themselves don't love us, but because the hostility is a negation of the concept of the permanence of unconditional love. It demonstrates that many relationships are instead conditional. We need to believe that the things we hold dear will be there for us when we need them, not that we can trade for them. The alternatives, coercion through power, a negotiated transactional relationship, or being exploited by strangers, are too stressful. Which is to say, we like it when others share our beliefs. In fact, we may even impose our beliefs on them. We may need to impose those beliefs in order to preserve them in ourselves.

Not content to simply take things as they come, we order the world around us with an endless array of belief systems. Those belief systems manifest themselves in institutions populated by people upon whom we can depend. Belief systems are the defining characteristic of all human fields of endeavor, the foundation of our enterprises, and the motivation for our efforts. From the dawn of human culture, when people first stared with awe into the night sky, they extended their belief systems into the heavens, populating the emptiness of space with their gods, myths, and legends. Single ideas were united into complex belief systems by thinkers who drew references from one point of insight to another, just as they envisioned lines between the stars to describe the constellations. Depending on the era in which one existed, the belief systems rested upon a mental superstructure of animism, superstition, or religion. More recently they rest upon politics, economics, science, conspiracy theories, propaganda, and religious or ethnic animosities.

As spiritually-based belief systems eroded, it is interesting to note that political and economic ideals were reinforced by factual information that emerged from an increasingly scientific culture. Scientific results are produced to show the validity of political or economic choices. As a result, there is considerable confusion today in everyday thinking about the difference between science and beliefs. We typically do not use our critical thinking skills to ask ourselves whether strongly-held beliefs about human institutions are derived from truly scientific practices, or whether those beliefs have simply congealed into a semi-permanent canon of socially accepted notions over time. What appear to be concrete truths may only be the calcification of thinking in the absence of fresh information--a stagnation that occurs in the absence of scientific practice, not with it. The

fact that it is impossible to conduct the most important step of the scientific method--validation of hypothesis through experimentation--upon social, political, and economic systems is the first clue that we should question how it is that we know what we think we know, and whether the validity of our favorite institutions has been proved, or is merely believed.

Benedict Anderson's classic *Imagined Communities* described the mechanism of socially constructed belief systems. He showed how the foundation of the modern nation-state was formed out of a shared set of ideas communicated through the media ("print capitalism" as he called it) and the local vernacular--how we talk. We like to think of the nation as ancient and enduring, but in fact we are continuously creating and recreating it through a constant regeneration of our shared belief in its values and ideals, expressed in print and voice. We think about it, therefore, it is. Without description by a human observer, the constellations are just so many dots. But with mediation from the believer, the random pattern of stars becomes a map of the belief system; the system that gave the constellations the role of preserving the mythology of the believer, and its permanence in the firmament. So it was with nations, and our other institutions. We wrote their permanence into the environment around us, and so were reassured. You might say our fate was written in the stars.

Whatever our perception of permanence, the reality is that nothing endures. Some day, the monuments will fall, and even the stars will fade. Few people remember today who Orion or Cassiopeia were, or why their names were given to those constellations. Things are in a constant state of flux; constantly being re-ordered. History is full of former nations and lost ideals. Our quest for permanence--for something or someone we can depend on--has become increasingly subject to spasms

of urgent intensity as traditional belief systems crumble, and we flail into the night in search of acceptable replacements, finding only competition and the contempt of strangers. Our media channels have become so many and so varied that we no longer share a common picture of the world, our nation, or even our own group. In some cases, we can not even control the public image of ourselves. Some can not even formulate a clear image of their own identity. Social construction of shared values becomes impossible, and our ability to mediate--to bring our own interpretation, our map of reality, our picture of the stars, to the group--is similarly cut off. Everyone has his own private world. However brightly that world may shine, it is alone in space. The loneliness of the inhabitant makes him question his place in society, and the process of social construction of a shared reality becomes chaotic and broken.

Society is now what Nietzsche called "atomized" when his dark philosophy of nothingness ushered in the 20th century. Hannah Arendt noted halfway through that century that "social atomization and extreme individualization preceded the movements"[1] of the 20th century, and that such movements (namely Fascism and Communism) "grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership"[2] in a class, or group. We can think of those groups as constellations of meaningfulness. Individuals in competition, cut off from the ideals and groups they are used to depending upon, lose their sense of meaningfulness, and seek relief from their loneliness and isolation. Arendt's contemporary, Jacques Ellul, wrote "that loneliness inside the

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[1] Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace & World, 1968, p.14-15.
[2] Ibid, p. 15

crowd is perhaps the most terrible ordeal of modern man..."[3] As a result, the masses are easy to manipulate. In fact, Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a classic on the subject of how demagogues can exploit the masses of isolated individuals for political purposes by giving them something to believe in. As Eric Hoffer similarly noted in *The True Believer,* "faith in a holy cause...is a substitute for the faith lost in ourselves."[4] The Nazis, communists, and others showed us how belief systems based on misplaced faith end.

Even as we lose our ability to depend on human institutions, we have conjured a complex of inhuman institutions, and they are increasingly harder to ignore. Our globalized world is made up of systems that are larger than us, larger than one nation, complex beyond individual understanding, and over which we exert little or no control as individuals. Some are beginning to question whether humanity itself exerts any control over things like technology, capitalism, conflict, and propaganda. There have never been so many people on Earth as now, and they have never been wealthier. We have more, live longer, and suffer (materially) less than at any time in history. And yet, contentment escapes our grasp. Even among the well-to-do, there is a malaise, a "sense of distant catastrophe...fears of a new 'dark age'."[5] We are not happy, and no longer know upon what

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[3] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*, Vintage Books 1973, p. 148

[4] Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer*, Harper and Row, 1951, p. 14.

[5] George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, Yale University Press, 1971, p. 4. Here, the distant catastrophe is in the past, not the future, and the fact of its occurrence is what will bring on the new dark age. It is the notion that human beings deviated from their natural state, and are going against the grain. The Biblical analogy is the fall from grace, the acquisition of worldly knowledge (i.e. technical ability) by Adam via the apple. Humanity has ever since been on a technological treadmill, and it's coming to an end.

we can depend. This malaise has spread like a sickness in recent decades, a sickness that may be fatal.

Our wealth and prosperity come at a high price. We have lost our values, civility, and culture. They are not erased, but direct access to them is lost to us because, despite our need to believe in intangibles, as abstract ideals they escape the sort of quantification our scientific minds require. Without quantification, our highly technical society has no mechanism for their valuation, and they fall to the side, uncounted, unused, and unloved. In the last century we've seen wars, terrorism, and murder on a massive scale, and nearly continuously. There is a creeping sense that our freedom, our choices, and our progress are illusory. There is constant violent conflict, the environment is choking with pollution, homes are stuffed with consumer goods, the value of which decreases in proportion to their volume, and our days are filled with frantic work and errands just to keep it all going. There is a cognitive dissonance between the message of progress and prosperity on the one hand, and our own sense of emptiness and lack of purpose and meaning on the other. We work to make money so we can buy more stuff; we sell more stuff in order to make more money...and so on, in endless repetition. We escape into entertainment and sports, drugs and alcohol, extreme individuation and identities, political extremism, psychiatry, conspiracies, cults, crimes, and apathy. We are living with the "profound boredom of an existence devoid of challenge,"[6] and "the sensation of history gone absurdly wrong."[7] Rather than enjoying our mastery of the world, we are

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[6] Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capitalism*, Polity Press, 2014, p. 172

[7] George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle,* Yale University Press, 1971, p. 17

refugees from the omnipotence of our knowledge and the superiority of our methods.

The ultimate price is not simply the atomization of society and its resulting loneliness. It is not just the growing frustration, driving the true believers to join the cause, or the alienated to lash out in acts of terror and violence. It is not even the looming collapse of institutions, and the threat of holocaust or apocalypse if things spiral out of control. These are threatening enough in themselves, to be sure, and we live under their cloud daily. Their impact on our individual and collective psyches sickens the mind. The true price is that our current hemorrhage of production and our desperate innovation as we seek to arrange the world to the advantage of our group and the protection of Our Way of Life (whatever that may mean to one's own group, if it still means anything at all) produces increasing destruction of individual dignity, civil society, and the natural world, and yields a political malaise that gives increasingly deadly results. Many begin to question the purpose of continuing on in this way and, in the absence of an answer, the doubt about our "progress" begins to grow to monstrous proportions and gnaw at its own tail, like Jormungander encircling the world, herald of Ragnarok,[8] and the final battle.

If our existence is to have any meaning whatsoever, that meaning must transcend our transitory human institutions, with their conflicts and consensus. It must transcend even the destruction of the environment, and the destruction of ourselves, whether that destruction be by quotidian casualties, or by holocaust and apocalypse. To be capable of that, the

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[8] The end of the world in Viking mythology. Jormungander was a titanic serpent. He flooded the earth and released poison into the air. He was killed by Thor, but Thor died in the process.

meaningfulness of our existence must transcend scientific proofs, and extend beyond ideologies. We must accept the simple fact, as we did so easily in the beginning of life, that our sense of meaningfulness derives from that first fundamental need, the need to believe, to depend on something outside the self, thus giving continuity of the self beyond the shell of our physical reality, into the universe itself, whence both body and soul first came.

Our failure to preserve belief systems that are not trammeled by the narrowness of science, and the elevation of scientism as a belief system in itself (as distinct from the practice of the actual scientific method), are extraordinary obstacles on the path toward meaningfulness. Our inability to reconcile the need to believe with the transitory nature of existence is a fundamental failure of Western philosophy. Witness the analytically smug surrender of those who simply choose to believe in nothing at all, having abandoned the quest for meaningfulness. The willing embrace of nothingness is a surrender that abandons all human dignity, and leaves the door open to whatever may emerge out of the darkness. As Prince Feisal warned Lawrence in *Lawrence of Arabia*, "there is nothing in the desert, and no man needs nothing."[9]

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[9] *Lawrence of Arabia,* directed by David Lean, Horizon Pictures, 1962. In the movie, Feisal is critical of Lawrence's romantic notions toward the harsh beauty and isolation of the desert, but Lawrence is intent on his quest to bring meaningfulness to the Arabs (in the Western context) by uniting them to aid in the war effort. Lawrence exemplified the Western trait of expansion, pressing into the void or across the frontier, and projecting one's belief system throughout. This characteristic ("extension") is at the heart of Oswald Spengler's analysis of Western civilization. Its precursor is the loss of unconditional love. The resulting quest to replace what was lost drives Western expansionism and its embrace of technology, which Spengler describes in masterful detail.

Religion has typically fulfilled the role of the provision of meaningfulness, but regardless of one's personal beliefs, religious institutions no longer shape the process by which we socially construct the meaningfulness of our societies, and by extension, our own lives within the social context. The job of religion, (*re + legio, legio* meaning "to connect"--this is where Legos get their name) was to reconnect the isolated individual, trapped in his bodily shell, with the universe outside himself, and to connect people together into constellations of meaningfulness (i.e. a congregation). But now we have learned that the universe is just a big black void full of little white dots. God, after all, is dead, according to Nietzsche, and "Does not empty space breathe upon us?"[10]

During God's decline, the laws of Man came to replace God's law, and we founded our belief upon reason and science, resulting in an explosion of expansion and discovery, and the creation of a globalized (or conquered) world.

Whether religious or secular, the laws of God and those of Man, and their institutions, served for millennia as centers for the deposit of our beliefs, and the center of gravity for the formation of our social groups. We could depend upon them, invest ourselves in them, and withdraw meaningfulness from them through our collective or individual service to those institutions, whether that was fighting for one's people, advancing knowledge, or expanding wealth and security. They provided a (relatively) stable backdrop that helped us structure our own constellations of meaningfulness within those societies, and the groups that made them up.

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[10] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom*, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Oscar Levy, editor, Macmillan, 1924, Aphorism 125.

But the foundations of these institutions have cracked and strained under the weight of modernity, the acceleration of change, atomization of social structures, and the erosive force of new systems of knowledge (i.e. science and technology). We have seen behind the curtain, glimpsing the irony of our existence. Our nations, our science, and perhaps most specifically, our technology--the things which gave us meaning and made us great--are sustained by techniques that make us, the planet, and most importantly, our souls, sick.

Some aspects of modernity are ludicrously fatal--ludicrous in that we have elected efficiency over humanity (if doing so was in fact a choice). We routinely endorse death in defense of technologies and techniques that increase our efficiency and competitive advantage. Death and sickness, again ironically, have become the leitmotif of the current age of health, wealth, and progress. By scientific measures, we are better off. Humanity should be celebrating its arrival at the peak of its development. But in our souls, we are not happy. We are increasingly suspicious of our circumstances, and of ourselves as the cause of our predicament. "More and more people are beginning to realize that the modern experiment has failed."[11]

Even science itself has betrayed us--the scientific evidence of our capacity to sicken and kill ourselves and the planet is piling up, pointing the finger at itself, and at us. Lately we have witnessed the beginning of a reactionary retreat from science, but that, alongside the social death of God, the impotence of religion, the decline of democracy, and the lack of other sources of meaningfulness, leave us nowhere to turn. The nihilists could almost be forgiven when we consider the featureless flatness of our spiritual horizon, what Jean Baudrillard, a famous nihilist

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[11] E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed,* Harper Collins Publishers, 1977, p. 139

of the twentieth century, called "the desert of the real."[12] We have become dependent upon, and believe in, a system which is bent toward the long arc of our ultimate destruction; a system that forces us to confront our own deaths, and the meaninglessness of our lives. Today, we continue to believe in this system reflexively, perhaps even desperately, as our doubts about it mount.

Eventually, the tension is too great. Our awareness that we have misplaced our faith in a system that no longer cares for us begins to overwhelm our ability to believe. We can grind along as we are for some time--another century, perhaps more--and we may evolve our way out through changes in our institutions and ways of thinking and feeling that we have yet to imagine. More likely is revolution, and those occur now from time to time locally with disturbing frequency. Revolution on a global scale is increasingly anticipated by many thinkers, and could emerge through artificial intelligence or critical cyber failure, the decline of a system of nation-states in favor of supra-national technocratic conglomerates, reorientation of the world order away from post-War Western values, globalized totalitarian socialism...etc. Imagining 'The End' has been such a staple of the entertainment industry for decades that is has become a cliche, but now it gets attention from more serious observers. Such a revolution could spiral out of control, leading to environmental catastrophe, nuclear war, plague, the rise of the machines, etc. Choose the form of the apocalypse. Short of that, we are likely to continue to witness regionally limited holocausts of the kind that defined the 20th and 21st centuries,

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[12] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* University of Michigan, English edition, 1994, p.1. This line was quoted in the movie *The Matrix,* when Morpheus shows the destroyed real world to Neo.

such as those of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Pinochet, Amin, Saddam, the Taliban, Unit 731, Nanjing, Bataan, Armenia, Iran, Bosnia, Apartheid, Rwanda, East Timor, South Sudan.

As things are now, people, particularly in Western civilization, are clutching at intellectual and spiritual straws, and are increasingly drowning in technological, scientismic, and pseudo-ideological noise. Neither the science nor the spirituality that are on offer suffice as a basis to socially construct a shared belief system that imparts meaningfulness to the whole group. Some cope, some succumb, others lash out. The degree of our ability to resist the pressure and preserve our dignity will largely determine where the future lands upon a spectrum that ranges from evolution, revolution, holocaust, or to total apocalypse. Where the needle falls on that scale will be a question of the speed and violence of the coming change. As we continue to sense actual, national, cultural, environmental, and spiritual death, the pressure will continue to build.

This is death sickness. The only way out is to fulfill the need to believe, and restore meaningfulness and dignity to our lives.