

*The Silver Lining*  
*Moral Deliberations in*  
*Modern Cinema*

2<sup>nd</sup> EDITION

Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.

Editing and Design:  
**Lidija Rangelovska**

*Lidija Rangelovska*  
*A Narcissus Publications Imprint, Skopje 2009*

*Not for Sale! Non-commercial edition.*

© 2002-9 Copyright Lidija Rangelovska.

All rights reserved. This book, or any part thereof, may not be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission from:

Lidija Rangelovska – write to:

[palma@unet.com.mk](mailto:palma@unet.com.mk)

**Philosophical Musings and Essays**

<http://samvak.tripod.com/culture.html>

**Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited**

<http://www.narcissistic-abuse.com>

Created by: LIDIJA RANGELOVSKA  
REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

# CONTENTS

- I. [The Talented Mr. Ripley](#)
- II. [The Truman Show](#)
- III. [The Matrix](#)
- IV. [Shattered](#)
- V. [Titanic](#)
- VI. [Being John Malkovich](#)
- VII. [Dreamcatcher – The Myth of Destructibility](#)
- VIII. [I, Robot – The Fourth Law of Robotics](#)
- IX. [Surrogates: The Interrupted Self](#)
- X. [Avatar: The Ecology of Environmentalism](#)
- XI. [The Invention of Lying: Fact and Truth](#)
- XII. [Hostel: The American Hostel](#)
- XIII. [The Author](#)
- XIV. [About "After the Rain"](#)

## *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

"The Talented Mr. Ripley" is an Hitchcockian and blood-curdling study of the psychopath and his victims. At the centre of this masterpiece, set in the exquisitely decadent scapes of Italy, is a titanic encounter between Ripley, the aforementioned psychopath protagonist and young Greenleaf, a consummate narcissist.

Ripley is a cartoonishly poor young adult whose overriding desire is to belong to a higher - or at least, richer - social class. While he waits upon the subjects of his not so hidden desires, he receives an offer he cannot refuse: to travel to Italy to retrieve the spoiled and hedonistic son of a shipbuilding magnate, Greenleaf Senior. He embarks upon a study of Junior's biography, personality, likes and hobbies. In a chillingly detailed process, he actually assumes Greenleaf's identity. Disembarking from a luxurious Cunard liner in his destination, Italy, he "confesses" to a gullible textile-heiress that he is the young Greenleaf, travelling incognito.

Thus, we are subtly introduced to the two over-riding themes of the antisocial personality disorder (still labelled by many professional authorities "psychopathy" and "sociopathy"): an overwhelming dysphoria and an even more overweening drive to assuage this angst by belonging. The psychopath is an unhappy person. He is besieged by recurrent depression bouts, hypochondria and an overpowering sense of alienation and drift. He is bored with his own life and is permeated by a seething and explosive envy of the lucky, the mighty, the clever, the have it alls, the know it alls, the handsome, the happy - in short: his opposites. He feels discriminated against and dealt a poor hand in the great poker game called life. He is driven obsessively to right these perceived wrongs and feels entirely justified in adopting whatever means he deems necessary in pursuing this goal.

Ripley's reality test is maintained throughout the film. In other words - while he gradually merges with the object of his admiring emulation, the young Greenleaf - Ripley can always tell the difference. After he kills Greenleaf in self-defense, he assumes his name, wears his clothes, cashes his checks and makes phone calls from his rooms. But he also murders - or tries to murder - those who suspect the truth. These acts of lethal self-preservation prove conclusively that he knows who he is and that he fully realizes that his acts are parlously illegal.

Young Greenleaf is young, captivatingly energetic, infinitely charming, breathtakingly handsome and deceptively emotional. He lacks real talents - he knows how to play only six jazz tunes, can't make up his musical mind between his faithful sax and a newly alluring drum kit and, an aspiring writer, can't even spell. These shortcomings and discrepancies are tucked under a glittering facade of nonchalance, refreshing spontaneity, an experimental spirit, unrepressed sexuality and unrestrained adventurism. But Greenleaf Jr. is a garden variety narcissist. He cheats on his lovely and loving girlfriend, Marge. He refuses to lend money - of which he seems to have an unlimited supply, courtesy his ever more disenchanted father - to a girl he impregnated. She commits suicide and he blames the primitiveness of the emergency services, sulks and kicks his precious record player. In the midst of this infantile temper tantrum the rudiments of a conscience are visible. He evidently feels guilty. At least for a while.

Greenleaf Jr. falls in and out of love and friendship in a predictable pendulous rhythm. He idealizes his beaux and then devalues them. He finds them to be the quiddity of fascination one moment - and the distilled essence of boredom the next. And he is not shy about expressing his distaste and disenchantment. He is savagely cruel as he calls Ripley a leach who has taken over his life and his possessions (having previously invited him to do so in no uncertain terms). He says that he is relieved to see him go and he cancels off-handedly elaborate plans they made together. Greenleaf Jr. maintains a poor record of keeping promises and a rich record of violence, as we discover towards the end of this suspenseful, taut yarn.

Ripley himself lacks an identity. He is a binary automaton driven by a set of two instructions - become someone and overcome resistance. He feels like a nobody and his overriding ambition is to be somebody, even if he has to fake it, or steal it. His only talents, he openly admits, are to fake both personalities and papers. He is a predator and he hunts for congruence, cohesion and meaning. He is in constant search of a family. Greenleaf Jr., he declares festively, is the older brother he never had. Together with the long suffering fiancée in waiting, Marge, they are a family. Hasn't Greenleaf Sr. actually adopted him?

This identity disturbance, which is at the psychodynamic root of both pathological narcissism and rapacious psychopathy, is all-pervasive. Both Ripley and Greenleaf Jr. are not sure who they are. Ripley wants to be Greenleaf Jr. - not because of the latter's admirable personality, but because of his money. Greenleaf Jr. cultivates a False Self of a jazz giant in the making and the author of the Great American Novel but he is neither and he bitterly knows it. Even their sexual identity is not fully formed. Ripley is at once homoerotic, autoerotic and heteroerotic. He has a succession of homosexual lovers (though apparently only platonic ones). Yet, he is attracted to women. He falls desperately in love with Greenleaf's False Self and it is the revelation of the latter's dilapidated True Self that leads to the atavistically bloody scene in the boat.

But Ripley is a different -and more ominous - beast altogether. He rambles on about the metaphorical dark chamber of his secrets, the key to which he wishes to share with a "loved" one. But this act of sharing (which never materializes) is intended merely to alleviate the constant pressure of the hot pursuit he is subjected to by the police and others. He disposes with equal equanimity of both loved ones and the occasional prying acquaintance. At least twice he utters words of love as he actually strangles his newfound inamorato and tries to slash an old and rekindled flame. He hesitates not a split second when confronted with an offer to betray Greenleaf Sr., his nominal employer and benefactor, and abscond with his money. He falsifies signatures with ease, makes eye contact convincingly, flashes the most heart rending smile when embarrassed or endangered. He is a caricature of the American dream: ambitious, driven, winsome, well versed in the mantras of the bourgeoisie. But beneath this thin veneer of hard learned, self-conscious and uneasy civility - lurks a beast of prey best characterized by the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistics Manual):

"Failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviour, deceitfulness as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others to personal profit or pleasure, impulsivity or failure to plan ahead... reckless disregard for safety of self or others ...(and above all) lack of remorse." (From the criteria of the Antisocial Personality Disorder).

But perhaps the most intriguing portraits are those of the victims. Marge insists, in the face of the most callous and abusive behaviour, that there is something "tender" in Greenleaf Jr. When she confronts the beguiling monster, Ripley, she encounters the fate of all victims of psychopaths: disbelief, pity and ridicule. The truth is too horrible to contemplate, let alone comprehend.

Psychopaths are inhuman in the most profound sense of this compounded word. Their emotions and conscience have been amputated and replaced by phantom imitations. But it is rare to pierce their meticulously crafted facade. They more often than not go on to great success and social acceptance while their detractors are relegated to the fringes of society. Both Meredith and Peter, who had the misfortune of falling in deep, unrequited love with Ripley, are punished. One by losing his life, the other by losing Ripley time and again, mysteriously, capriciously, cruelly.

Thus, ultimately, the film is an intricate study of the pernicious ways of psychopathology. Mental disorder is a venom not confined to its source. It spreads and affects its environment in a myriad surreptitiously subtle forms. It is a hydra, growing one hundred heads where one was severed. Its victims writhe and as abuse is piled upon trauma - they turn to stone, the mute witnesses of horror, the stalactites and stalagmites of pain untold and unrecountable. For their tormentors are often as talented as Mr. Ripley is and they are as helpless and as clueless as his victims are.

[Return](#)

## *The Truman Show*

"The Truman Show" is a profoundly disturbing movie. On the surface, it deals with the worn out issue of the intermingling of life and the media.

Examples for such incestuous relationships abound:

Ronald Reagan, the cinematic president was also a presidential movie star. In another movie ("The Philadelphia Experiment") a defrosted Rip Van Winkle exclaims upon seeing Reagan on television (40 years after his forced hibernation started): "I know this guy, he used to play Cowboys in the movies".

Candid cameras monitor the lives of webmasters (website owners) almost 24 hours a day. The resulting images are continuously posted on the Web and are available to anyone with a computer.

The last decade witnessed a spate of films, all concerned with the confusion between life and the imitations of life, the media. The ingenious "Capitan Fracasse", "Capricorn One", "Sliver", "Wag the Dog" and many lesser films have all tried to tackle this (un)fortunate state of things and its moral and practical implications.

The blurring line between life and its representation in the arts is arguably the main theme of "The Truman Show". The hero, Truman, lives in an artificial world, constructed especially for him. He was born and raised there. He knows no other place. The people around him – unbeknownst to him – are all actors. His life is monitored by 5000 cameras and broadcast live to the world, 24 hours a day, every day. He is spontaneous and funny because he is unaware of the monstrosity of which he is the main cogwheel.

But Peter Weir, the movie's director, takes this issue one step further by perpetrating a massive act of immorality on screen. Truman is lied to, cheated, deprived of his ability to make choices, controlled and manipulated by sinister, half-mad Shylocks. As I said, he is unwittingly the only spontaneous, non-scripted, "actor" in the on-going soap of his own life. All the other figures in his life, including his parents, are actors. Hundreds of millions of viewers and voyeurs plug in to take a peep, to intrude upon what Truman innocently and honestly believes to be his privacy. They are shown responding to various dramatic or anti-climactic events in Truman's life. That we are the moral equivalent of these viewers-voyeurs, accomplices to the same crimes, comes as a shocking realization to us. We are (live) viewers and they are (celluloid) viewers. We both enjoy Truman's inadvertent, non-consenting, exhibitionism. We know the truth about Truman and so do they. Of course, we are in a privileged moral position because we know it is a movie and they know it is a piece of raw life that they are watching.

But moviegoers throughout Hollywood's history have willingly and insatiably participated in numerous "Truman Shows". The lives (real or concocted) of the studio stars were brutally exploited and incorporated in their films. Jean Harlow, Barbara Stanwyck, James Cagney all were forced to spill their guts in cathartic acts of on camera repentance and not so symbolic humiliation. "Truman Shows" is the more common phenomenon in the movie industry.

Then there is the question of the director of the movie as God and of God as the director of a movie. The members of his team – technical and non-technical alike – obey Christoff, the director, almost blindly. They suspend their better moral judgement and succumb to his whims and to the brutal and vulgar aspects of his pervasive dishonesty and sadism. The torturer loves his victims. They define him and infuse his life with meaning. Caught in a narrative, the movie says, people act immorally.

(IN)famous psychological experiments support this assertion. Students were led to administer what they thought were "deadly" electric shocks to their colleagues or to treat them bestially in simulated prisons. They obeyed orders. So did all the hideous genocidal criminals in history. The Director Weir asks: should God be allowed to be immoral or should he be bound by morality and ethics? Should his decisions and actions be constrained by an over-riding code of right and wrong? Should we obey his commandments blindly or should we exercise judgement?

If we do exercise judgement are we then being immoral because God (and the Director Christoff) know more (about the world, about us, the viewers and about Truman), know better, are omnipotent? Is the exercise of judgement the usurpation of divine powers and attributes? Isn't this act of rebelliousness bound to lead us down the path of apocalypse?

It all boils down to the question of free choice and free will versus the benevolent determinism imposed by an omniscient and omnipotent being. What is better: to have the choice and be damned (almost inevitably, as in the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden) – or to succumb to the superior wisdom of a supreme being? A choice always involves a dilemma. It is the conflict between two equivalent states, two weighty decisions whose outcomes are equally desirable and two identically-preferable courses of action. Where there is no such equivalence – there is no choice, merely the pre-ordained (given full knowledge) exercise of a preference or inclination. Bees do not choose to make honey. A fan of football does not choose to watch a football game. He is motivated by a clear inequity between the choices that he faces. He can read a book or go to the game. His decision is clear and pre-determined by his predilection and by the inevitable and invariable implementation of the principle of pleasure. There is no choice here. It is all rather automatic. But compare this to the choice some victims had to make between two of their children in the face of Nazi brutality. Which child to sentence to death – which one to sentence to life? Now, this is a real choice. It involves conflicting emotions of equal strength. One must not confuse decisions, opportunities and choice.

Decisions are the mere selection of courses of action. This selection can be the result of a choice or the result of a tendency (conscious, unconscious, or biological-genetic). Opportunities are current states of the world, which allow for a decision to be made and to affect the future state of the world. Choices are our conscious experience of moral or other dilemmas.

Christoff finds it strange that Truman – having discovered the truth – insists upon his right to make choices, i.e., upon his right to experience dilemmas. To the Director, dilemmas are painful, unnecessary, destructive, or at best disruptive. His utopian world – the one he constructed for Truman – is choice-free and dilemma-free. Truman is programmed not in the sense that his spontaneity is extinguished. Truman is wrong when, in one of the scenes, he keeps shouting: "Be careful, I am spontaneous". The Director and fat-cat capitalistic producers want him to be spontaneous, they want him to make decisions. But they do not want him to make choices. So they influence his preferences and predilections by providing him with an absolutely totalitarian, micro-controlled, repetitive environment. Such an environment reduces the set of possible decisions so that there is only one favourable or acceptable decision (outcome) at any junction. Truman does decide whether to walk down a certain path or not. But when he does decide to walk – only one path is available to him. His world is constrained and limited – not his actions.

Actually, Truman's only choice in the movie leads to an arguably immoral decision. He abandons ship. He walks out on the whole project. He destroys an investment of billions of dollars, people's lives and careers. He turns his back on some of the actors who seem to really be emotionally attached to him. He ignores the good and pleasure that the show has brought to the lives of millions of people (the viewers). He selfishly and vengefully goes away. He knows all this. By the time he makes his decision, he is fully informed. He knows that some people may commit suicide, go bankrupt, endure major depressive episodes, do drugs. But this massive landscape of resulting devastation does not deter him. He prefers his narrow, personal, interest. He walks.

But Truman did not ask or choose to be put in his position. He found himself responsible for all these people without being consulted. There was no consent or act of choice involved. How can anyone be responsible for the well-being and lives of other people – if he did not CHOOSE to be so responsible? Moreover, Truman had the perfect moral right to think that these people wronged him. Are we morally responsible and accountable for the well-being and lives of those who wrong us? True Christians are, for instance.

Moreover, most of us, most of the time, find ourselves in situations which we did not help mould by our decisions. We are unwillingly cast into the world. We do not provide prior consent to being born. This fundamental decision is made for us, forced upon us. This pattern persists throughout our childhood and adolescence: decisions are made elsewhere by others and influence our lives profoundly.

As adults we are the objects – often the victims – of the decisions of corrupt politicians, mad scientists, megalomaniac media barons, gung-ho generals and demented artists. This world is not of our making and our ability to shape and influence it is very limited and rather illusory. We live in our own "Truman Show". Does this mean that we are not morally responsible for others?

We are morally responsible even if we did not choose the circumstances and the parameters and characteristics of the universe that we inhabit. The Swedish Count Wallenberg imperilled his life (and lost it) smuggling hunted Jews out of Nazi occupied Europe. He did not choose, or helped to shape Nazi Europe. It was the brainchild of the deranged Director Hitler. Having found himself an unwilling participant in Hitler's horror show, Wallenberg did not turn his back and opted out. He remained within the bloody and horrific set and did his best. Truman should have done the same. Jesus said that he should have loved his enemies. He should have felt and acted with responsibility towards his fellow human beings, even towards those who wronged him greatly.

But this may be an inhuman demand. Such forgiveness and magnanimity are the reserve of God. And the fact that Truman's tormentors did not see themselves as such and believed that they were acting in his best interests and that they were catering to his every need – does not absolve them from their crimes. Truman should have maintained a fine balance between his responsibility to the show, its creators and its viewers and his natural drive to get back at his tormentors. The source of the dilemma (which led to his act of choosing) is that the two groups overlap.

Truman found himself in the impossible position of being the sole guarantor of the well-being and lives of his tormentors. To put the question in sharper relief: are we morally obliged to save the life and livelihood of someone who greatly wronged us? Or is vengeance justified in such a case?

A very problematic figure in this respect is that of Truman's best and childhood friend. They grew up together, shared secrets, emotions and adventures. Yet he lies to Truman constantly and under the Director's instructions. Everything he says is part of a script. It is this disinformation that convinces us that he is not Truman's true friend. A real friend is expected, above all, to provide us with full and true information and, thereby, to enhance our ability to choose. Truman's true love in the Show tried to do it. She paid the price: she was ousted from the show. But she tried to provide Truman with a choice. It is not sufficient to say the right things and make the right moves. Inner drive and motivation are required and the willingness to take risks (such as the risk of providing Truman with full information about his condition). All the actors who played Truman's parents, loving wife, friends and colleagues, miserably failed on this score.

It is in this mimicry that the philosophical key to the whole movie rests. A Utopia cannot be faked. Captain Nemo's utopian underwater city was a real Utopia because everyone knew everything about it. People were given a choice (though an irreversible and irrevocable one). They chose to become lifetime members of the reclusive Captain's colony and to abide by its (overly rational) rules.

The Utopia came closest to extinction when a group of stray survivors of a maritime accident were imprisoned in it against their expressed will. In the absence of choice, no utopia can exist. In the absence of full, timely and accurate information, no choice can exist. Actually, the availability of choice is so crucial that even when it is prevented by nature itself – and not by the designs of more or less sinister or monomaniac people – there can be no Utopia. In H.G. Wells' book "The Time Machine", the hero wanders off to the third millennium only to come across a peaceful Utopia. Its members are immortal, don't have to work, or think in order to survive. Sophisticated machines take care of all their needs. No one forbids them to make choices. There simply is no need to make them. So the Utopia is fake and indeed ends badly.

Finally, the "Truman Show" encapsulates the most virulent attack on capitalism in a long time. Greedy, thoughtless money machines in the form of billionaire tycoon-producers exploit Truman's life shamelessly and remorselessly in the ugliest display of human vices possible. The Director indulges in his control-mania. The producers indulge in their monetary obsession. The viewers (on both sides of the silver screen) indulge in voyeurism. The actors vie and compete in the compulsive activity of furthering their petty careers. It is a repulsive canvas of a disintegrating world. Perhaps Christoff is right after all when he warns Truman about the true nature of the world. But Truman chooses. He chooses the exit door leading to the outer darkness over the false sunlight in the Utopia that he leaves behind.

[Return](#)

## *The Matrix*

It is easy to confuse the concepts of "virtual reality" and a "computerized model of reality (simulation)". The former is a self-contained Universe, replete with its "laws of physics" and "logic". It can bear resemblance to the real world or not. It can be consistent or not. It can interact with the real world or not. In short, it is an arbitrary environment. In contrast, a model of reality must have a direct and strong relationship to the world. It must obey the rules of physics and of logic. The absence of such a relationship renders it meaningless. A flight simulator is not much good in a world without aeroplanes or if it ignores the laws of nature. A technical analysis program is useless without a stock exchange or if its mathematically erroneous.

Yet, the two concepts are often confused because they are both mediated by and reside on computers. The computer is a self-contained (though not closed) Universe. It incorporates the hardware, the data and the instructions for the manipulation of the data (software). It is, therefore, by definition, a virtual reality. It is versatile and can correlate its reality with the world outside. But it can also refrain from doing so. This is the ominous "what if" in artificial intelligence (AI). What if a computer were to refuse to correlate its internal (virtual) reality with the reality of its makers? What if it were to impose its own reality on us and make it the privileged one?

In the visually tantalizing movie, "The Matrix", a breed of AI computers takes over the world. It harvests human embryos in laboratories called "fields". It then feeds them through grim looking tubes and keeps them immersed in gelatinous liquid in cocoons. This new "machine species" derives its energy needs from the electricity produced by the billions of human bodies thus preserved. A sophisticated, all-pervasive, computer program called "The Matrix" generates a "world" inhabited by the consciousness of the unfortunate human batteries. Ensnared in their shells, they see themselves walking, talking, working and making love. This is a tangible and olfactory phantasm masterfully created by the Matrix. Its computing power is mind boggling. It generates the minutest details and reams of data in a spectacularly successful effort to maintain the illusion.

A group of human miscreants succeeds to learn the secret of the Matrix. They form an underground and live aboard a ship, loosely communicating with a halcyon city called "Zion", the last bastion of resistance. In one of the scenes, Cypher, one of the rebels defects. Over a glass of (illusory) rubicund wine and (spectral) juicy steak, he poses the main dilemma of the movie. Is it better to live happily in a perfectly detailed delusion - or to survive unhappily but free of its hold?

The Matrix controls the minds of all the humans in the world. It is a bridge between them, they inter-connected through it. It makes them share the same sights, smells and textures. They remember. They compete. They make decisions.

The Matrix is sufficiently complex to allow for this apparent lack of determinism and ubiquity of free will. The root question is: is there any difference between making decisions and feeling certain of making them (not having made them)? If one is unaware of the existence of the Matrix, the answer is no. From the inside, as a part of the Matrix, making decisions and appearing to be making them are identical states. Only an outside observer - one who in possession of full information regarding both the Matrix and the humans - can tell the difference.

Moreover, if the Matrix were a computer program of infinite complexity, no observer (finite or infinite) would have been able to say with any certainty whose a decision was - the Matrix's or the human's. And because the Matrix, for all intents and purposes, is infinite compared to the mind of any single, tube-nourished, individual - it is safe to say that the states of "making a decision" and "appearing to be making a decision" are subjectively indistinguishable. No individual within the Matrix would be able to tell the difference. His or her life would seem to him or her as real as ours are to us. The Matrix may be deterministic - but this determinism is inaccessible to individual minds because of the complexity involved. When faced with a trillion deterministic paths, one would be justified to feel that he exercised free, unconstrained will in choosing one of them. Free will and determinism are indistinguishable at a certain level of complexity.

Yet, we KNOW that the Matrix is different to our world. It is NOT the same. This is an intuitive kind of knowledge, for sure, but this does not detract from its firmness. If there is no subjective difference between the Matrix and our Universe, there must be an objective one. Another key sentence is uttered by Morpheus, the leader of the rebels. He says to "The Chosen One" (the Messiah) that it is really the year 2199, though the Matrix gives the impression that it is 1999.

This is where the Matrix and reality diverge. Though a human who would experience both would find them indistinguishable - objectively they are different. In one of them (the Matrix), people have no objective TIME (though the Matrix might have it). The other (reality) is governed by it.

Under the spell of the Matrix, people feel as though time goes by. They have functioning watches. The sun rises and sets. Seasons change. They grow old and die. This is not entirely an illusion. Their bodies do decay and die, as ours do. They are not exempt from the laws of nature. But their AWARENESS of time is computer generated. The Matrix is sufficiently sophisticated and knowledgeable to maintain a close correlation between the physical state of the human (his health and age) and his consciousness of the passage of time. The basic rules of time - for instance, its asymmetry - are part of the program.

But this is precisely it. Time in the minds of these people is program-generated, not reality-induced. It is not the derivative of change and irreversible (thermodynamic and other) processes OUT THERE. Their minds are part of a

computer program and the computer program is a part of their minds.

Their bodies are static, degenerating in their protective nests. Nothing happens to them except in their minds. They have no physical effect on the world. They effect no change. These things set the Matrix and reality apart.

To "qualify" as reality a two-way interaction must occur. One flow of data is when reality influences the minds of people (as does the Matrix). The obverse, but equally necessary, type of data flow is when people know reality and influence it. The Matrix triggers a time sensation in people the same way that the Universe triggers a time sensation in us. Something does happen OUT THERE and it is called the Matrix. In this sense, the Matrix is real, it is the reality of these humans. It maintains the requirement of the first type of flow of data. But it fails the second test: people do not know that it exists or any of its attributes, nor do they affect it irreversibly. They do not change the Matrix. Paradoxically, the rebels do affect the Matrix (they almost destroy it). In doing so, they make it REAL. It is their REALITY because they KNOW it and they irreversibly CHANGE it.

Applying this dual-track test, "virtual" reality IS a reality, albeit, at this stage, of a deterministic type. It affects our minds, we know that it exists and we affect it in return. Our choices and actions irreversibly alter the state of the system. This altered state, in turn, affects our minds. This interaction IS what we call "reality". With the advent of stochastic and quantum virtual reality generators - the distinction between "real" and "virtual" will fade. The Matrix thus is not impossible. But that it is possible - does not make it real.

## *Appendix - God and Gödel*

The second movie in the Matrix series - "The Matrix Reloaded" - culminates in an encounter between Neo ("The One") and the architect of the Matrix (a thinly disguised God, white beard and all). The architect informs Neo that he is the sixth reincarnation of The One and that Zion, a shelter for those decoupled from the Matrix, has been destroyed before and is about to be demolished again.

The architect goes on to reveal that his attempts to render the Matrix "harmonious" (perfect) failed. He was, thus, forced to introduce an element of intuition into the equations to reflect the unpredictability and "grotesqueries" of human nature. This in-built error tends to accumulate over time and to threaten the very existence of the Matrix - hence the need to obliterate Zion, the seat of malcontents and rebels, periodically.

God appears to be unaware of the work of an important, though eccentric, Czech-Austrian mathematical logician, Kurt Gödel (1906-1978). A passing acquaintance with his two theorems would have saved the architect a lot of time.

Gödel's First Incompleteness Theorem states that every consistent axiomatic logical system, sufficient to express arithmetic, contains true but unprovable ("not decidable") sentences. In certain cases (when the system is omega-consistent), both said sentences and their negation are unprovable. The system is consistent and true - but not "complete" because not all its sentences can be decided as true or false by either being proved or by being refuted.

The Second Incompleteness Theorem is even more earth-shattering. It says that no consistent formal logical system can prove its own consistency. The system may be complete - but then we are unable to show, using its axioms and inference laws, that it is consistent

In other words, a computational system, like the Matrix, can either be complete and inconsistent - or consistent and incomplete. By trying to construct a system both complete and consistent, God has run afoul of Gödel's theorem and made possible the third sequel, "Matrix Revolutions".

[Return](#)

# *The Shattered Identity*

*Read these essays first:*

[\*The Habitual Identity\*](#)

[\*Death, Meaning, and Identity\*](#)

[\*Fact and Truth\*](#)

[\*Dreams - The Metaphors of Mind\*](#)

## *I. Exposition*

In the movie "Shattered" (1991), Dan Merrick survives an accident and develops total amnesia regarding his past. His battered face is reconstructed by plastic surgeons and, with the help of his loving wife, he gradually recovers his will to live. But he never develops a proper sense of identity. It is as though he is constantly ill at ease in his own body. As the plot unravels, Dan is led to believe that he may have murdered his wife's lover, Jack. This thriller offers additional twists and turns but, throughout it all, we face this question:

Dan has no recollection of being Dan. Dan does not remember murdering Jack. It seems as though Dan's very identity has been erased. Yet, Dan is in sound mind and can tell right from wrong. Should Dan be held (morally and, as a result, perhaps legally as well) accountable for Jack's murder?

Would the answer to this question still be the same had Dan erased from his memory ONLY the crime -but recalled everything else (in an act of selective dissociation)? Do our moral and legal accountability and responsibility spring from the integrity of our memories? If Dan were to be punished for a crime he doesn't have the faintest recollection of committing - wouldn't he feel horribly wronged? Wouldn't he be justified in feeling so?

There are many states of consciousness that involve dissociation and selective amnesia: hypnosis, trance and possession, hallucination, illusion, memory disorders (like organic, or functional amnesia), depersonalization disorder, dissociative fugue, dreaming, psychosis, post traumatic stress disorder, and drug-induced psychotomimetic states.

Consider this, for instance:

What if Dan were the victim of a Multiple Personality Disorder (now known as "Dissociative Identity Disorder")? What if one of his "alters" (i.e., one of the multitude of "identities" sharing Dan's mind and body) committed the crime? Should Dan still be held responsible? What if the alter "John" committed the crime and then "vanished", leaving behind another alter (let us say, "Joseph") in control?

Should "Joseph" be held responsible for the crime "John" committed? What if "John" were to reappear 10 years after he "vanished"? What if he were to reappear 50 years after he "vanished"? What if he were to reappear for a period of 90 days - only to "vanish" again? And what is Dan's role in all this? Who, exactly, then, is Dan?

## ***II. Who is Dan?***

Buddhism compares Man to a river. Both retain their identity despite the fact that their individual composition is different at different moments. The possession of a body as the foundation of a self-identity is a dubious proposition. Bodies change drastically in time (consider a baby compared to an adult). Almost all the cells in a human body are replaced every few years. Changing one's brain (by transplantation) - also changes one's identity, even if the rest of the body remains the same.

Thus, the only thing that binds a "person" together (i.e., gives him a self and an identity) is time, or, more precisely, memory. By "memory" I also mean: personality, skills, habits, retrospected emotions - in short: all long term imprints and behavioural patterns. The body is not an accidental and insignificant container, of course. It constitutes an important part of one's self-image, self-esteem, sense of self-worth, and sense of existence (spatial, temporal, and social). But one can easily imagine a brain in vitro as having the same identity as when it resided in a body. One cannot imagine a body without a brain (or with a different brain) as having the same identity it had before the brain was removed or replaced.

What if the brain in vitro (in the above example) could not communicate with us at all? Would we still think it is possessed of a self? The biological functions of people in coma are maintained. But do they have an identity, a self? If yes, why do we "pull the plug" on them so often?

It would seem (as it did to Locke) that we accept that someone has a self-identity if: (a) He has the same hardware as we do (notably, a brain) and (b) He communicates his humanly recognizable and comprehensible inner world to us and manipulates his environment. We accept that he has a given (i.e., the same continuous) self-identity if (c) He shows consistent intentional (i.e., willed) patterns ("memory") in doing (b) for a long period of time.

It seems that we accept that we have a self-identity (i.e., we are self-conscious) if (a) We discern (usually through introspection) long term consistent intentional (i.e., willed) patterns ("memory") in our manipulation ("relating to") of our environment and (b) Others accept that we have a self-identity (Herbert Mead, Feuerbach).

Dan (probably) has the same hardware as we do (a brain). He communicates his (humanly recognizable and comprehensible) inner world to us (which is how he manipulates us and his environment). Thus, Dan clearly has a self-identity. But he is inconsistent. His intentional (willed) patterns, his memory, are incompatible with those demonstrated by Dan before the accident. Though he clearly is possessed of a self-identity, we cannot say that he has the SAME self-identity he possessed before the crash. In other words, we cannot say that he, indeed, is Dan.

Dan himself does not feel that he has a self-identity at all. He discerns intentional (willed) patterns in his manipulation of his environment but, due to his amnesia, he cannot tell if these are consistent, or long term. In other words, Dan has no memory. Moreover, others do not accept him as Dan (or have their doubts) because they have no memory of Dan as he is now.

Interim conclusion:

Having a memory is a necessary and sufficient condition for possessing a self-identity.

### ***III. Repression***

Yet, resorting to memory to define identity may appear to be a circular (even tautological) argument. When we postulate memory - don't we already presuppose the existence of a "remembering agent" with an established self-identity?

Moreover, we keep talking about "discerning", "intentional", or "willed" patterns. But isn't a big part of our self (in the form of the unconscious, full of repressed memories) unavailable to us? Don't we develop defence mechanisms against repressed memories and fantasies, against unconscious content incongruent with our self-image? Even worse, this hidden, inaccessible, dynamically active part of our self is thought responsible for our recurrent discernible patterns of behaviour. The phenomenon of posthypnotic suggestion seems to indicate that this may be the case. The existence of a self-identity is, therefore, determined through introspection (by oneself) and observation (by others) of merely the conscious part of the self.

But the unconscious is as much a part of one's self-identity as one's conscious. What if, due to a mishap, the roles were reversed? What if Dan's conscious part were to become his unconscious and his unconscious part - his conscious? What if all his conscious memories, drives, fears, wishes, fantasies, and hopes - were to become unconscious while his repressed memories, drives, etc. - were to become conscious? Would we still say that it is "the same" Dan and that he retains his self-identity? Not very likely. And yet, one's (unremembered) unconscious - for instance, the conflict between id and ego - determines one's personality and self-identity.

The main contribution of psychoanalysis and later psychodynamic schools is the understanding that self-identity is a dynamic, evolving, ever-changing construct - and not a static, inertial, and passive entity. It casts doubt over the meaningfulness of the question with which we ended the exposition: "Who, exactly, then, is Dan?" Dan is different at different stages of his life (Erikson) and he constantly evolves in accordance with his innate nature (Jung), past history (Adler), drives (Freud), cultural milieu (Horney), upbringing (Klein, Winnicott), needs (Murray), or the interplay with his genetic makeup. Dan is not a thing - he is a process. Even Dan's personality traits and cognitive style, which may well be stable, are often influenced by Dan's social setting and by his social interactions.

It would seem that having a memory is a necessary but insufficient condition for possessing a self-identity. One cannot remember one's unconscious states (though one can remember their outcomes). One often forgets events, names, and other information even if it was conscious at a given time in one's past. Yet, one's (unremembered) unconscious is an integral and important part of one's identity and one's self. The remembered as well as the unremembered constitute one's self-identity.

#### ***IV. The Memory Link***

Hume said that to be considered in possession of a mind, a creature needs to have a few states of consciousness linked by memory in a kind of narrative or personal mythology. Can this conjecture be equally applied to unconscious mental states (e.g. subliminal perceptions, beliefs, drives, emotions, desires, etc.)?

In other words, can we rephrase Hume and say that to be considered in possession of a mind, a creature needs to have a few states of consciousness and a few states of the unconscious - all linked by memory into a personal narrative? Isn't it a contradiction in terms to remember the unconscious?

The unconscious and the subliminal are instance of the general category of mental phenomena which are not states of consciousness (i.e., are not conscious). Sleep and hypnosis are two others. But so are "background mental phenomena" - e.g., one holds onto one's beliefs and knowledge even when one is not aware (conscious) of them at every given moment.

We know that an apple will fall towards the earth, we know how to drive a car ("automatically"), and we believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, even though we do not spend every second of our waking life consciously thinking about falling apples, driving cars, or the position of the sun.

Yet, the fact that knowledge and beliefs and other background mental phenomena are not constantly conscious - does not mean that they cannot be remembered. They can be remembered either by an act of will, or in (sometimes an involuntary) response to changes in the environment. The same applies to all other unconscious content. Unconscious content can be recalled. Psychoanalysis, for instance, is about re-introducing repressed unconscious content to the patient's conscious memory and thus making it "remembered".

In fact, one's self-identity may be such a background mental phenomenon (always there, not always conscious, not always remembered). The acts of will which bring it to the surface are what we call "memory" and "introspection".

This would seem to imply that having a self-identity is independent of having a memory (or the ability to introspect). Memory is just the mechanism by which one becomes aware of one's background, "always-on", and omnipresent (all-pervasive) self-identity. Self-identity is the object and predicate of memory and introspection. It is as though self-identity were an emergent extensive parameter of the complex human system - measurable by the dual techniques of memory and introspection.

We, therefore, have to modify our previous conclusions:

Having a memory is not a necessary nor a sufficient condition for possessing a self-identity.

We are back to square one. The poor souls in Oliver Sacks' tome, "The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat" are unable to create and retain memories. They occupy an eternal present, with no past. They are thus unable to access (or invoke) their self-identity by remembering it. Their self-identity is unavailable to them (though it is available to those who observe them over many years) - but it exists for sure. Therapy often succeeds in restoring pre-amnesiac memories and self-identity.

#### ***V. The Incorrigible Self***

Self-identity is not only always-on and all-pervasive - but also incorrigible. In other words, no one - neither an observer, nor the person himself - can "disprove" the existence of his self-identity. No one can prove that a report about the existence of his (or another's) self-identity is mistaken.

Is it equally safe to say that no one - neither an observer, nor the person himself - can prove (or disprove) the non-existence of his self-identity? Would it be correct to say that no one can prove that a report about the non-existence of his (or another's) self-identity is true or false?

Dan's criminal responsibility crucially depends on the answers to these questions. Dan cannot be held responsible for Jack's murder if he can prove that he is ignorant of the facts of his action (i.e., if he can prove the non-existence of his self-identity). If he has no access to his (former) self-identity - he can hardly be expected to be aware and cognizant of these facts.

What is in question is not Dan's mens rea, nor the application of the McNaghten tests (did Dan know the nature and quality of his act or could he tell right from wrong) to determine whether Dan was insane when he committed the crime. A much broader issue is at stake: is it the same person? Is the murderous Dan the same person as the current Dan? Even though Dan seems to own the same body and brain and is manifestly sane - he patently has no access to his (former) self-identity. He has changed so drastically that it is arguable whether he is still the same person - he has been "replaced".

Finally, we can try to unite all the strands of our discourse into this double definition:

It would seem that we accept that someone has a self-identity if: (a) He has the same hardware as we do (notably, a brain) and, by implication, the same software as we do (an all-pervasive, omnipresent self-identity) and (b) He communicates his humanly recognizable and comprehensible inner world to us and manipulates his environment. We accept that he has a specific (i.e., the same continuous) self-identity if (c) He shows consistent intentional (i.e., willed) patterns ("memory") in doing (b) for a long period of time.

It seems that we accept that we have a specific self-identity (i.e., we are self-conscious of a specific identity) if (a) We discern (usually through memory and introspection) long term consistent intentional (i.e., willed) patterns ("memory") in our manipulation ("relating to") of our environment and (b) Others accept that we have a specific self-identity.

In conclusion: Dan undoubtedly has a self-identity (being human and, thus, endowed with a brain). Equally undoubtedly, this self-identity is not Dan's (but a new, unfamiliar, one).

Such is the stuff of our nightmares - body snatching, demonic possession, waking up in a strange place, not knowing who we are. Without a continuous personal history - we are not. It is what binds our various bodies, states of mind, memories, skills, emotions, and cognitions - into a coherent bundle of identity. Dan speaks, drinks, dances, talks, and makes love - but throughout that time, he is not present because he does not remember Dan and how it is to be Dan. He may have murdered Jake - but, by all philosophical and ethical criteria, it was most definitely not his fault.

[Return](#)

## *Titanic, or a Moral Deliberation*

The film "Titanic" is riddled with moral dilemmas. In one of the scenes, the owner of Star Line, the shipping company that owned the now-sinking Unsinkable, joins a lowered life-boat. The tortured expression on his face demonstrates that even he experiences more than unease at his own conduct. Prior to the disaster, he instructs the captain to adopt a policy dangerous to the ship. Indeed, it proves fatal. A complicating factor was the fact that only women and children were allowed by the officers in charge into the lifeboats. Another was the discrimination against Third Class passengers. The boats sufficed only to half the number of those on board and the First Class, High Society passengers were preferred over the Low-Life immigrants under deck.

Why do we all feel that the owner should have stayed on and faced his inevitable death? Because we judge him responsible for the demise of the ship. Additionally, his wrong instructions – motivated by greed and the pursuit of celebrity – were a crucial contributing factor. The owner should have been punished (in his future) for things that he has done (in his past). This is intuitively appealing.

Would we have rendered the same judgement had the Titanic's fate been the outcome of accident and accident alone? If the owner of the ship could have had no control over the circumstances of its horrible ending – would we have still condemned him for saving his life? Less severely, perhaps. So, the fact that a moral entity has ACTED (or omitted, or refrained from acting) in its past is essential in dispensing with future rewards or punishments.

The "product liability" approach also fits here. The owner (and his "long arms": manufacturer, engineers, builders, etc.) of the Titanic were deemed responsible because they implicitly contracted with their passengers. They made a representation (which was explicit in their case but is implicit in most others): "This ship was constructed with knowledge and forethought. The best design was employed to avoid danger. The best materials to increase pleasure." That the Titanic sank was an irreversible breach of this contract. In a way, it was an act of abrogation of duties and obligations. The owner/manufacturer of a product must compensate the consumers should his product harm them in any manner that they were not explicitly, clearly, visibly and repeatedly warned against. Moreover, he should even make amends if the product failed to meet the reasonable and justified expectations of consumers, based on such warrants and representations. The payment should be either in kind (as in more ancient justice systems) or in cash (as in modern Western civilization).

The product called "Titanic" took away the lives of its end-users. Our "gut justice" tells us that the owner should have paid in kind. Faulty engineering, insufficient number of lifeboats, over-capacity, hubris, passengers and crew not drilled to face emergencies, extravagant claims regarding the ship's resilience, contravening the captain's professional judgement. All these seem to be sufficient grounds to the death penalty.

And yet, this is not the real question. The serious problem is this : WHY should anyone pay in his future for his actions in the past? First, there are some thorny issues to be eliminated. Such as determinism: if there is no free will, there can be no personal responsibility. Another is the preservation of personal identity: are the person who committed the act and the person who is made to pay for it – one and the same? If the answer is in the affirmative, in which sense are they the same, the physical, the mental? Is the "overlap" only limited and probabilistic? Still, we could assume, for this discussion's sake, that the personal identity is undeniably and absolutely preserved and that there is free will and, therefore, that people can predict the outcomes of their actions, to a reasonable degree of accuracy and that they elect to accept these outcomes prior to the commission of their acts or to their omission. All this does not answer the question that opened this paragraph. Even if there were a contract signed between the acting person and the world, in which the person willingly, consciously and intelligently (=without diminished responsibility) accepted the future outcome of his acts, the questions would remain: WHY should it be so? Why cannot we conceive of a world in which acts and outcomes are divorced? It is because we cannot believe in an a-causal world.

Causality is a relationship (mostly between two things, or, rather, events, the cause and the effect). Something generates or produces another. Therefore, it is the other's efficient cause and it acts upon it (=it acts to bring it about) through the mechanism of efficient causation. A cause can be a direct physical mechanism or an explanatory feature (historical cause). Of Aristotle's Four Causes (Formal, Material, Efficient and Final), only the efficient cause creates something distinguishable from itself. The causal discourse, therefore, is problematic (how can a cause lead to an effect, indistinguishable from itself?). Singular Paradigmatic Causal Statements (Event A caused Event B) differ from General ones (Event A causes Event B). Both are inadequate in dealing with mundane, routine, causal statements because they do not reveal an OVERT relation between the two events discussed. Moreover, in daily usage we treat facts (as well as events) as causes. Not all the philosophers are in agreement regarding factual causation. Davidson, for instance, admits that facts can be RELEVANT to causal explanations but refuses to accept them AS reasons. Acts may be distinct from facts, philosophically, but not in day-to-day regular usage. By laymen (the vast majority of humanity, that is), though, they are perceived to be the same.

Pairs of events that are each other's cause and effect are accorded a special status. But, that one follows the other (even if invariably) is insufficient grounds to endow them with this status. This is the famous "Post hoc, ergo propter hoc" fallacy. Other relations must be weighed and the possibility of common causation must be seriously contemplated. Such sequencing is, conceptually, not even necessary: simultaneous causation and backwards causation are part of modern physics, for instance.

Time seems to be irrelevant to the status of events, though both time and causation share an asymmetric structure (A causes B but B does not cause A). The direction (the asymmetry) of the causal chain is not of the same type as the direction (asymmetry) of time. The former is formal, the latter, presumably, physical, or mental. A more serious problem, to my mind, is the converse: what sets apart causal (cause and effect) pairs of events from other pairs in which both member-events are the outcomes of a common cause? Event B can invariably follow Event A and still not be its effect. Both events could have been caused by a common cause. A cause either necessitates the effect, or is a sufficient condition for its occurrence. The sequence is either inevitable, or possible. The meaninglessness of this sentence is evident.

Here, philosophers diverge. Some say (following Hume's reasoning and his constant conjunction relation between events) that a necessary causal relation exists between events when one is the inevitable outcome (=follows) the other. Others propound a weaker version: the necessity of the effect is hypothetical or conditional, given the laws of nature. Put differently: to say that A necessitates (=causes) B is no more than to say that it is a result of the laws of nature that when A happens, so does B. Hempel generalized this approach. He said that a statement of a fact (whether a private or a general fact) is explained only if deduced from other statements, at least one of which is a statement of a general scientific law.

This is the "Covering Law Model" and it implies a symmetry between explaining and predicting (at least where private facts are concerned). If an event can be explained, it could have been predicted and vice versa. Needless to say that Hempel's approach did not get us nearer to solving the problems of causal priority and of indeterministic causation.

The Empiricists went a step further. They stipulated that the laws of nature are contingencies and not necessary truths. Other chains of events are possible where the laws of nature are different. This is the same tired regularity theory in a more exotic guise. They are all descendants of Hume's definition of causality: "An object followed by another and where all the objects that resemble the first are followed by objects that resemble the second." Nothing in the world is, therefore, a causal necessity, events are only constantly conjoined. Regularities in our experience condition us to form the idea of causal necessity and to deduce that causes must generate events. Kant called this latter deduction "A bastard of the imagination, impregnated by experience" with no legitimate application in the world. It also constituted a theological impediment. God is considered to be "Causa Sui", His own cause. But any application of a causal chain or force, already assumes the existence of a cause. This existence cannot, therefore, be the outcome of the use made of it. God had to be recast as the uncaused cause of the existence of all things contingent and His existence necessitated no cause because He, himself, is necessary. This is flimsy stuff and it gets even flimsier when the issue of causal deviance is debated.

A causal deviance is an abnormal, though causal, relation between events or states of the world. It mainly arises when we introduce intentional action and perception into the theory of causation. Let us revert to the much-maligned owner of the sinking Titanic. He intended to do one thing and another happened. Granted, if he intended to do something and his intention was the cause of his doing so – then we could have said that he intentionally committed an act. But what if he intended to do one thing and out came another? And what if he intended to do something, mistakenly did something else and, still, accidentally, achieved what he set out to do? The popular example is if someone intends to do something and gets so nervous that it happens even without an act being committed (intends to refuse an invitation by his boss, gets so nervous that he falls asleep and misses the party). Are these actions and intentions in their classical senses? There is room for doubt. Davidson narrows down the demands. To him, "thinking causes" (causally efficient propositional attitudes) are nothing but causal relations between events with the right application of mental predicates which ascribe propositional attitudes supervening the right application of physical predicates. This approach omits intention altogether, not to mention the ascription of desire and belief.

But shouldn't have the hapless owner availed his precious place to women and children? Should not he have obeyed the captain's orders (=the marine law)? Should we succumb to laws that put our lives at risk (fight in a war, sink with a ship)? The reason that women and children are preferred over men is that they represent the future. They are either capable of bringing life to the world (women) – or of living longer (children). Societal etiquette reflects

the arithmetic of the species, in this (and in many another) case. But if this were entirely and exclusively so, then young girls and female infants would have been preferred over all the other groups of passengers. Old women would have been left with the men, to die. That the actual (and declared) selection processes differed from our theoretical exercise says a lot about the vigorousness and applicability of our theories – and a lot about the real world out there. The owner's behaviour may have been deplorable – but it, definitely, was natural. He put his interests (his survival) above the concerns of his society and his species. Most of us would have done the same under the same circumstances.

The owner of the ship – though "Newly Rich" – undoubtedly belonged to the First Class, Upper Crust, Cream of Society passengers. These were treated to the lifeboats before the passengers of the lower classes and decks. Was this a morally right decision? For sure, it was not politically correct, in today's terms. Class and money distinctions were formally abolished three decades ago in the enlightened West. Discrimination between human beings is now allowed only on the basis of merit (=on the basis of one's natural endowments). Why should we think one basis for discrimination preferable to another? Can we eliminate discrimination completely and if it were possible, would it have been desirable?

The answers, in my view, are that no basis of discrimination can hold the moral high ground. They are all morally problematic because they are deterministic and assign independent, objective, exogenous values to humans. On the other hand, we are not born equal, nor do we proceed to develop equally, or live under the same circumstances and conditions. It is impossible to equate

the unequal. Discrimination is not imposed by humans on an otherwise egalitarian world. It is introduced by the world into human society. And the elimination of discrimination would constitute a grave error. The inequalities among humans and the ensuing conflicts are the fuel that feeds the engines of human development. Hopes, desires, aspirations and inspiration are all the derivatives of discrimination or of the wish to be favoured, or preferred over others. Disparities of money create markets, labour, property, planning, wealth and capital. Mental inequalities lead to innovation and theory. Knowledge differentials are at the heart of educational institutions, professionalism, government and so on. Osmotic and diffusive forces in human society are all the results of incongruences, disparities, differences, inequalities and the negative and positive emotions attached to them. The passengers of the first class were preferred because they paid more for their tickets. Inevitably, a tacit portion of the price went to amortize the costs of "class insurance": should anything bad happen to this boat, persons who paid a superior price will be entitled to receive a superior treatment. There is nothing morally wrong with this. Some people get to sit in the front rows of a theatre, or to travel in luxury, or to receive superior medical treatment (or any medical treatment) precisely because of this reason. There is no practical or philosophical difference between an expensive liver transplant and a place in a life boat. Both are lifesavers.

A natural disaster is no Great Equalizer. Nothing is. Even the argument that money is "external" or "accidental" to the rich individual is weak. Often, people who marry for money considerations are judged to be insincere or worse (cunning, conspiring, evil). "He married her for her money", we say, as though the she-owner and the money were two separate things. The equivalent sentence: "He married her for her youth or for her beauty" sounds flawed. But youth and beauty are more temporary and transient than money. They are really accidental because the individual has no responsibility for or share in their generation and has no possibility to effect their long-term preservation. Money, on the other hand, is generated or preserved (or both) owing to the personality of its owner. It is a better reflection of personality than youth, beauty and many other (transient or situation-dependent) "character" traits. Money is an integral part of its owner and a reliable witness as to his mental disposition. It is, therefore, a valid criterion for discrimination.

The other argument in favour of favouring the first class passengers is their contribution to society. A rich person contributes more to his society in the shorter and medium term than a poor person. Vincent Van Gogh may have been a million times more valuable to humanity, as a whole, than his brother Theo – in the long run. But in the intermediate term, Theo made it possible for Vincent and many others (family, employees, suppliers, their dependants and his country) to survive by virtue of his wealth. Rich people feed and cloth poor people directly (employment, donations) and indirectly (taxation). The opposite, alas, is not the case. Yet, this argument is flawed because it does not take time into account. We have no way to predict the future with any certainty.

Each person carries the Marshall's baton in his bag, the painter's brush, the author's fables. It is the potential that should count. A selection process, which would have preferred Theo to Vincent would have been erroneous. In the long run, Vincent proved more beneficial to human society and in more ways – including financially – than Theo could have ever been.

[Return](#)

## *Being John Malkovich*

A quintessential loser, an out-of-job puppeteer, is hired by a firm, whose offices are ensconced in a half floor (literally. The ceiling is about a metre high, reminiscent of Taniel's hallucinatory Alice in Wonderland illustrations). By sheer accident, he discovers a tunnel (a "portal", in Internet-age parlance), which sucks its visitors into the mind of the celebrated actor, John Malkovich. The movie is a tongue in cheek discourse of identity, gender and passion in an age of languid promiscuity. It poses all the right metaphysical riddles and presses the viewers' intellectual stimulation buttons.

A two line bit of dialogue, though, forms the axis of this nightmarishly chimerical film. John Malkovich (played by himself), enraged and bewildered by the unabashed commercial exploitation of the serendipitous portal to his mind, insists that Craig, the aforementioned puppet master, cease and desist with his activities. "It is MY brain" - he screams and, with a typical American finale, "I will see you in court". Craig responds: "But, it was I who discovered the portal. It is my livelihood".

This apparently innocuous exchange disguises a few very unsettling ethical dilemmas.

The basic question is "whose brain is it, anyway"? Does John Malkovich OWN his brain? Is one's brain - one's PROPERTY? Property is usually acquired somehow. Is our brain "acquired"? It is clear that we do not acquire the hardware (neurones) and software (electrical and chemical pathways) we are born with. But it is equally clear that we do "acquire" both brain mass and the contents of our brains (its wiring or irreversible chemical changes) through learning and experience. Does this process of acquisition endow us with property rights?

It would seem that property rights pertaining to human bodies are fairly restricted. We have no right to sell our kidneys, for instance. Or to destroy our body through the use of drugs. Or to commit an abortion at will. Yet, the law does recognize and strives to enforce copyrights, patents and other forms of intellectual property rights.

This dichotomy is curious. For what is intellectual property but a mere record of the brain's activities? A book, a painting, an invention are the documentation and representation of brain waves. They are mere shadows, symbols of the real presence - our mind. How can we reconcile this contradiction? We are deemed by the law to be capable of holding full and unmitigated rights to the PRODUCTS of our brain activity, to the recording and documentation of our brain waves. But we hold only partial rights to the brain itself, their originator.

This can be somewhat understood if we were to consider this article, for instance. It is composed on a word processor. I do not own full rights to the word processing software (merely a licence), nor is the laptop I use my

property - but I possess and can exercise and enforce full rights regarding this article.

Admittedly, it is a partial parallel, at best: the computer and word processing software are passive elements. It is my brain that does the authoring. And so, the mystery remains: how can I own the article - but not my brain? Why do I have the right to ruin the article at will - but not to annihilate my brain at whim?

Another angle of philosophical attack is to say that we rarely hold rights to nature or to life. We can copyright a photograph we take of a forest - but not the forest. To reduce it to the absurd: we can own a sunset captured on film - but never the phenomenon thus documented. The brain is natural and life's pivot - could this be why we cannot fully own it?

Wrong premises inevitably lead to wrong conclusions. We often own natural objects and manifestations, including those related to human life directly. We even issue patents for sequences of human DNA. And people do own forests and rivers and the specific views of sunsets.

Some scholars raise the issues of exclusivity and scarcity as the precursors of property rights. My brain can be accessed only by myself and its is one of a kind (*sui generis*). True but not relevant. One cannot rigorously derive from these properties of our brain a right to deny others access to them (should this become technologically feasible) - or even to set a price on such granted access. In other words, exclusivity and scarcity do not constitute property rights or even lead to their establishment. Other rights may be at play (the right to privacy, for instance) - but not the right to own property and to derive economic benefits from such ownership.

On the contrary, it is surprisingly easy to think of numerous exceptions to a purported natural right of single access to one's brain. If one memorized the formula to cure AIDS or cancer and refused to divulge it for a reasonable compensation - surely, we should feel entitled to invade his brain and extract it? Once such technology is available - shouldn't authorized bodies of inspection have access to the brains of our leaders on a periodic basis? And shouldn't we all gain visitation rights to the minds of great men and women of science, art and culture - as we do today gain access to their homes and to the products of their brains?

There is one hidden assumption, though, in both the movie and this article. It is that mind and brain are one. The portal leads to John Malkovich's MIND - yet, he keeps talking about his BRAIN and writhing physically on the screen. The portal is useless without JM's mind. Indeed, one can wonder whether JM's mind is not an INTEGRAL part of the portal - structurally and functionally inseparable from it. If so, does not the discoverer of the portal hold equal rights to John Malkovich's mind, an integral part thereof?

The portal leads to JM's mind. Can we prove that it leads to his brain? Is this identity automatic? Of course not. It is the old [psychophysical question](#), at the heart of [dualism](#) - still far from resolved. Can a MIND be copyrighted or patented? If no one knows WHAT is the mind - how can it be the subject of laws and rights? If JM is bothered by the portal voyagers, the intruders - he surely has legal recourse, but not through the application of the rights to own property and to benefit from it. These rights provide him with no remedy because their subject (the mind) is a mystery.

Can JM sue Craig and his clientele for unauthorized visits to his mind (trespassing) - IF he is unaware of their comings and goings and unperturbed by them? Moreover, can he prove that the portal leads to HIS mind, that it is HIS mind that is being visited? Is there a way to PROVE that one has visited another's mind? (See: "[On Empathy](#)").

And if property rights to one's brain and mind were firmly established - how will telepathy (if ever proven) be treated legally? Or mind reading? The recording of dreams? Will a distinction be made between a mere visit - and the exercise of influence on the host and his / her manipulation (similar questions arise in time travel)?

This, precisely, is where the film crosses the line between the intriguing and the macabre. The master puppeteer, unable to resist his urges, manipulates John Malkovich and finally possesses him completely. This is so clearly wrong, so manifestly forbidden, so patently immoral, that the film loses its urgent ambivalence, its surrealistic moral landscape and deteriorates into another banal comedy of situations.

[Return](#)

## *Dreamcatcher - The Myth of Destructibility*

*Read these essays first:*

[\*The Habitual Identity\*](#)

[\*Death, Meaning, and Identity\*](#)

In the movie "Dreamcatcher", four childhood friends, exposed to an alien, disguised as a retarded child, develop psychic powers. Years later they reunite only to confront a vicious extraterrestrial life-form. Only two survive but they succeed to eradicate the monster by incinerating it and crushing its tiny off-spring underfoot.

Being mortal ourselves, we cannot conceive of an indestructible entity. The artifacts of popular culture - thrillers, action and sci-fi films, video games, computer viruses - assume that all organisms, organizations and automata possess fatal vulnerabilities. Medicine and warfare are predicated on a similar contention.

We react with shock and horror when we are faced with "resistant stains" of bacteria or with creatures, machines, or groups able to survive and thrive in extremely hostile environments.

Destruction is multi-faceted. Even the simplest system has a structure and performs functions. If the spatial continuity or arrangement of an entity's structure is severed or substantially transformed - its functions are usually adversely affected. Direct interference with a system's functionality is equally deleterious.

We can render a system dysfunctional by inhibiting or reversing any stage in the complex processes involved - or by preventing the entity's communication with its environs. Another method of annihilation involves the alteration of the entity's context - its surroundings, its codes and signals, its interactive patterns, its potential partners, friends and foes.

Finding the lethal weaknesses of an organism, an apparatus, or a society is described as a process of trial and error. But the outcome is guaranteed: mortal susceptibility is assumed to be a universal trait. No one and nothing is perfectly immune, utterly invulnerable, or beyond extermination.

Yet, what is poison to one species is nectar to another. Water can be either toxic or indispensable, depending on the animal, the automaton, or the system. Scorching temperatures, sulfur emissions, ammonia or absolute lack of oxygen are, to some organisms, the characteristics of inviting habitats. To others, the very same are deadly.

Can we conceive of an indestructible thing - be it unicellular or multicellular, alive or robotic, composed of independent individuals or acting in perfect, centrally-dictated unison? Can anything be, in principle, eternal?

This question is not as outlandish as it sounds. By fighting disease and trying to postpone death, for instance, we aspire to immortality and imperishability. Some of us believe in God - an entity securely beyond ruin. Intuitively, we consider the Universe - if not time and space - to be everlasting, though constantly metamorphosing.

What is common to these examples of infinite resilience is their unbounded and unparalleled size and might. Lesser objects are born or created. Since there has been a time, prior to their genesis, in which they did not exist - it is easy to imagine a future without them.

Even where the distinction between individual and collective is spurious their end is plausible. True, though we can obliterate numerous "individual" bacteria - others, genetically identical, will always survive our onslaught. Yet, should the entire Earth vanish - so would these organisms. The extinction of all bacteria, though predicated on an unlikely event, is still thinkable.

But what about an entity that is "pure energy", a matrix of fields, a thought, immaterial yet very real, omnipresent and present nowhere? Such a being comes perilously close to the divine. For if it is confined to certain space - however immense - it is perishable together with that space. If it is not - then it is God, as perceived by its believers.

But what constitutes "destruction" or "annihilation"? We are familiar with death - widely considered the most common form of inexistence. But some people believe that death is merely a transformation from one state of being to another. Sometimes all the constituents of a system remain intact but cease to interact. Does this amount to obliteration? And what about a machine that stops interacting with its environment altogether - though its internal processes continue unabated. Is it still "functioning"?

It is near impossible to say when a "live" or "functioning" entity ceases to be so. Death is the form of destruction we

are most acquainted with. For a discussion of death and the human condition - read this [\*Death, Meaning, and Identity\*](#)

[Return](#)

## ***I, Robot – The Fourth Law of Robotics***

The movie "I, Robot" is a muddled affair. It relies on shoddy pseudo-science and a general sense of unease that artificial (non-carbon based) intelligent life forms seem to provoke in us. But it goes no deeper than a comic book treatment of the important themes that it broaches.

Sigmund Freud said that we have an uncanny reaction to the inanimate. This is probably because we know that – pretensions and layers of philosophizing aside – we are nothing but recursive, self aware, introspective, conscious machines. Special machines, no doubt, but machines all the same.

Consider the James bond movies. They constitute a decades-spanning gallery of human paranoia. Villains change: communists, neo-Nazis, media moguls. But one kind of villain is a fixture in this psychodrama, in this parade of human phobias: the machine. James Bond always finds himself confronted with hideous, vicious, malicious machines and automata.

It was precisely to counter this wave of unease, even terror, irrational but all-pervasive, that Isaac Asimov, the late Sci-fi writer (and scientist) invented the Three Laws of Robotics:

1. ***A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.***

2. *A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.*
3. *A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.*

Many have noticed the lack of consistency and, therefore, the inapplicability of these laws when considered together.

First, they are not derived from any coherent worldview or background. To be properly implemented and to avoid their interpretation in a potentially dangerous manner, the robots in which they are embedded must be equipped with reasonably comprehensive models of the physical universe and of human society.

Without such contexts, these laws soon lead to intractable paradoxes (experienced as a nervous breakdown by one of Asimov's robots). Conflicts are ruinous in automata based on recursive functions ([Turing machines](#)), as all robots are. Godel pointed at one such self destructive [paradox](#) in the "Principia Mathematica", ostensibly a comprehensive and self consistent logical system. It was enough to discredit the whole magnificent edifice constructed by Russel and Whitehead over a decade.

Some argue against this and say that robots need not be automata in the classical, [Church-Turing](#), sense. That they could act according to heuristic, probabilistic rules of decision making. There are many other types of functions (non-recursive) that can be incorporated in a robot, they remind us.

True, but then, how can one guarantee that the robot's behavior is fully predictable ? How can one be certain that robots will fully and always implement the three laws? Only recursive systems are predictable in principle, though, at times, their complexity makes it impossible.

This article deals with some commonsense, basic problems raised by the Laws. The next article in this series analyses the Laws from a few vantage points: philosophy, artificial intelligence and some systems theories.

An immediate question springs to mind: *HOW* will a robot identify a human being? Surely, in a future of perfect androids, constructed of organic materials, no superficial, outer scanning will suffice. Structure and composition will not be sufficient differentiating factors.

There are two ways to settle this very practical issue: one is to endow the robot with the ability to conduct a Converse Turing Test (to separate humans from other life forms) - the other is to somehow "barcode" all the robots by implanting some remotely readable signaling device inside them (such as a RFID - Radio Frequency ID chip). Both present additional difficulties.

The second solution will prevent the robot from positively identifying humans. He will be able identify with any certainty robots and only robots (or humans with such implants). This is ignoring, for discussion's sake, defects in manufacturing or loss of the implanted identification tags. And what if a robot were to get rid of its tag? Will this also be classified as a "defect in manufacturing"?

In any case, robots will be forced to make a binary choice. They will be compelled to classify one type of physical entities as robots – and all the others as "non-robots". Will non-robots include monkeys and parrots? Yes, unless the manufacturers equip the robots with digital or optical or molecular representations of the human figure (masculine and feminine) in varying positions (standing, sitting, lying down). Or unless all humans are somehow tagged from birth.

These are cumbersome and repulsive solutions and not very effective ones. No dictionary of human forms and positions is likely to be complete. There will always be the odd physical posture which the robot would find impossible to match to its library. A human disk thrower or swimmer may easily be classified as "non-human" by a robot - and so might amputated invalids.

What about administering a converse Turing Test?

This is even more seriously flawed. It is possible to design a test, which robots will apply to distinguish artificial life forms from [humans](#). But it will have to be non-intrusive and not involve overt and prolonged communication. The alternative is a protracted teletype session, with the human concealed behind a curtain, after which the robot will issue its verdict: the respondent is a human or a robot. This is unthinkable.

Moreover, the application of such a test will "humanize" the robot in many important respects. Human identify other humans because they are human, too. This is called [empathy](#). A robot will have to be somewhat human to recognize another human being, it takes one to know one, the saying (rightly) goes.

Let us assume that by some miraculous way the problem is overcome and robots unfailingly identify humans. The next question pertains to the notion of "injury" (still in the First Law). Is it limited only to physical injury (the elimination of the physical continuity of human tissues or of the normal functioning of the human body)?

Should "injury" in the First Law encompass the no less serious mental, verbal and social injuries (after all, they are all known to have physical side effects which are, at times, no less severe than direct physical "injuries")? Is an insult an "injury"? What about being grossly impolite, or [psychologically abusive](#)? Or offending religious sensitivities, being politically incorrect - are these injuries? The bulk of human (and, therefore, inhuman) actions actually offend one human being or another, have the potential to do so, or seem to be doing so.

Consider surgery, driving a car, or investing money in the stock exchange. These "innocuous" acts may end in a coma, an accident, or ruinous financial losses, respectively. Should a robot refuse to obey human instructions which may result in injury to the instruction-givers?

Consider a mountain climber – should a robot refuse to hand him his equipment lest he falls off a cliff in an unsuccessful bid to reach the peak? Should a robot refuse to obey human commands pertaining to the crossing of busy roads or to driving (dangerous) sports cars?

Which level of risk should trigger robotic refusal and even prophylactic intervention? At which stage of the interactive man-machine collaboration should it be activated? Should a robot refuse to fetch a ladder or a rope to someone who intends to commit suicide by hanging himself (that's an easy one)?

Should he ignore an instruction to push his master off a cliff (definitely), help him climb the cliff (less assuredly so), drive him to the cliff (maybe so), help him get into his car in order to drive him to the cliff... Where do the responsibility and obeisance bucks stop?

Whatever the answer, one thing is clear: such a robot must be equipped with more than a rudimentary sense of judgment, with the ability to appraise and analyse complex situations, to predict the future and to base his decisions on very fuzzy algorithms (no programmer can foresee all possible circumstances). To me, such a "robot" sounds much more dangerous (and humanoid) than any recursive automaton which does **NOT** include the famous Three Laws.

Moreover, what, exactly, constitutes "inaction"? How can we set apart inaction from failed action or, worse, from an action which failed by design, intentionally? If a human is in danger and the robot tries to save him and fails – how could we determine to what extent it exerted itself and did everything it could?

How much of the responsibility for a robot's inaction or partial action or failed action should be imputed to the manufacturer – and how much to the robot itself? When a robot decides finally to ignore its own programming – how are we to gain information regarding this momentous event? Outside appearances can hardly be expected to help us distinguish a rebellious robot from a lackadaisical one.

The situation gets much more complicated when we consider states of conflict.

Imagine that a robot is obliged to harm one human in order to prevent him from hurting another. The Laws are absolutely inadequate in this case. The robot should either establish an empirical hierarchy of injuries – or an empirical hierarchy of humans. Should we, as humans, rely on robots or on their manufacturers (however wise, moral and compassionate) to make this selection for us? Should we abide by their judgment which injury is the more serious and warrants an intervention?

A summary of the Asimov Laws would give us the following "truth table":

A robot must obey human commands except if:

1. Obeying them is likely to cause injury to a human,  
or
2. Obeying them will let a human be injured.

A robot must protect its own existence with three exceptions:

1. That such self-protection is injurious to a human;
2. That such self-protection entails inaction in the face of potential injury to a human;
3. That such self-protection results in robot insubordination (failing to obey human instructions).

Trying to create a truth table based on these conditions is the best way to demonstrate the problematic nature of Asimov's idealized yet highly impractical world.

Here is an exercise:

Imagine a situation (consider the example below or one you make up) and then create a truth table based on the above five conditions. In such a truth table, "T" would stand for "compliance" and "F" for non-compliance.

Example:

A radioactivity monitoring robot malfunctions. If it self-destructs, its human operator might be injured. If it does not, its malfunction will equally seriously injure a patient dependent on his performance.

One of the possible solutions is, of course, to introduce gradations, a probability calculus, or a utility calculus. As they are phrased by Asimov, the rules and conditions are of a threshold, yes or no, take it or leave it nature. But if robots were to be instructed to maximize overall utility, many borderline cases would be resolved.

Still, even the introduction of heuristics, probability, and utility does not help us resolve the dilemma in the example above. Life is about inventing new rules on the fly, as we go, and as we encounter new challenges in a kaleidoscopically metamorphosing world. Robots with rigid instruction sets are ill suited to cope with that.

### *Note - Gödel's Theorems*

The work of an important, though eccentric, Czech-Austrian mathematical logician, Kurt Gödel (1906-1978) dealt with the completeness and consistency of logical systems. A passing acquaintance with his two theorems would have saved the architect a lot of time.

Gödel's First Incompleteness Theorem states that every consistent axiomatic logical system, sufficient to express arithmetic, contains true but unprovable ("not decidable") sentences. In certain cases (when the system is omega-consistent), both said sentences and their negation are unprovable. The system is consistent and true - but not "complete" because not all its sentences can be decided as true or false by either being proved or by being refuted.

The Second Incompleteness Theorem is even more earth-shattering. It says that no consistent formal logical system can prove its own consistency. The system may be complete - but then we are unable to show, using its axioms and inference laws, that it is consistent

In other words, a computational system can either be complete and inconsistent - or consistent and incomplete. By trying to construct a system both complete and

consistent, a robotics engineer would run afoul of Gödel's theorem.

### *Note - Turing Machines*

In 1936 an American (Alonzo Church) and a Briton (Alan M. Turing) published independently (as is often the case in science) the basics of a new branch in Mathematics (and logic): computability or recursive functions (later to be developed into Automata Theory).

The authors confined themselves to dealing with computations which involved "effective" or "mechanical" methods for finding results (which could also be expressed as solutions (values) to formulae). These methods were so called because they could, in principle, be performed by simple machines (or human-computers or human-calculators, to use Turing's unfortunate phrases). The emphasis was on finiteness: a finite number of instructions, a finite number of symbols in each instruction, a finite number of steps to the result. This is why these methods were usable by humans without the aid of an apparatus (with the exception of pencil and paper as memory aids). Moreover: no insight or ingenuity were allowed to "interfere" or to be part of the solution seeking process.

What Church and Turing did was to construct a set of all the functions whose values could be obtained by applying effective or mechanical calculation methods. Turing went further down Church's road and designed the "Turing Machine" – a machine which can calculate the values of all the functions whose values can be found using effective or mechanical methods. Thus, the program running the TM (=Turing Machine in the rest of this text)

was really an effective or mechanical method. For the initiated readers: Church solved the decision-problem for propositional calculus and Turing proved that there is no solution to the decision problem relating to the predicate calculus. Put more simply, it is possible to "prove" the truth value (or the theorem status) of an expression in the propositional calculus – but not in the predicate calculus. Later it was shown that many functions (even in number theory itself) were not recursive, meaning that they could not be solved by a Turing Machine.

No one succeeded to prove that a function must be recursive in order to be effectively calculable. This is (as Post noted) a "working hypothesis" supported by overwhelming evidence. We don't know of any effectively calculable function which is not recursive, by designing new TMs from existing ones we can obtain new effectively calculable functions from existing ones and TM computability starts in every attempt to understand effective calculability (or these attempts are reducible or equivalent to TM computable functions).

The Turing Machine itself, though abstract, has many "real world" features. It is a blueprint for a computing device with one "ideal" exception: its unbounded memory (the tape is infinite). Despite its hardware appearance (a read/write head which scans a two-dimensional tape inscribed with ones and zeroes, etc.) – it is really a software application, in today's terminology. It carries out instructions, reads and writes, counts and so on. It is an automaton designed to implement an effective or mechanical method of solving functions (determining the truth value of propositions). If the transition from input to output is deterministic we have a classical automaton – if

it is determined by a table of probabilities – we have a probabilistic automaton.

With time and hype, the limitations of TMs were forgotten. No one can say that the Mind is a TM because no one can prove that it is engaged in solving only recursive functions. We can say that TMs can do whatever digital computers are doing – but not that digital computers are TMs by definition. Maybe they are – maybe they are not. We do not know enough about them and about their future.

Moreover, the demand that recursive functions be computable by an UNAIDED human seems to restrict possible equivalents. Inasmuch as computers emulate human computation (Turing did believe so when he helped construct the ACE, at the time the fastest computer in the world) – they are TMs. Functions whose values are calculated by AIDED humans with the contribution of a computer are still recursive. It is when humans are aided by other kinds of instruments that we have a problem. If we use measuring devices to determine the values of a function it does not seem to conform to the definition of a recursive function. So, we can generalize and say that functions whose values are calculated by an AIDED human could be recursive, depending on the apparatus used and on the lack of ingenuity or insight (the latter being, anyhow, a weak, non-rigorous requirement which cannot be formalized).

*Also Read*

[\*Intuition\*](#)

[\*On Empathy\*](#)

[\*On Being Human\*](#)

[\*The Interrupted Self\*](#)

[\*Narcissist, the Machine\*](#)

[\*Being John Malkovich\*](#)

[\*The Shattered Identity\*](#)

[\*The Chinese Room Revisited\*](#)

[\*Turing Machines and Universes\*](#)

[\*The Metaphors of the Mind - Part I \(The Brain\)\*](#)

[Return](#)

## *The Interrupted Self*

In the futuristic sci-fi film "Surrogates" (2009), people stay at home, their nervous system wired to allow them to remote control a robot, their surrogate. The robot and its operator, the human being, are an ontological unity: both share identical, objective experiences. There is one exception: when something bad happens to the robot, its owner is shielded from the consequences by some kind of "firewall", or in-built defense.

Inevitably, things go awry. The design of the robots is unwise: they retain the long-term memories of their masters, which renders them susceptible to malicious hacking; they possess superhuman faculties, which makes them resistant to law enforcement efforts; and in appearance, they are not clones of their owners, which results in mayhem.

The film also ignores the discontinuities of human life: the natural functions of eating, washing, and excretion, or the onset of boredom and attention deficits. It is not clear what the robots are supposed to do when nature calls and how their operators resume the session where it had stopped and pick up their ruptured train of thought.

The movie raises numerous fascinating questions, not the least of which is:

When the owner of a surrogate, cocooned in his den, uses his contraption to visit China, or to have sex, or to stroll

along a boulevard - who does the experiencing? Can one really say that one has been to China, or has had sex, or has strolled along a boulevard in autumn if one has never left the comfort of one's home? If one's body is stationary and only one's mind is wandering and acting through a technological extension, does this constitute "being there" and "doing it"?

In the film, it is not made clear whether the brains of the operators of the surrogates are induced to react as they would in "real"-life situations: as the surrogates go about their business, do their owners sweat, smell, and feel pressure, for instance? Do they experience non-life-threatening short breath and elevated heart rate? Do they truly ejaculate? Yet, having gone this far, it is easy to imagine a device that would stimulate the right brain centers to produce these reactions.

Once the experiences of having sex or touring China via such a machine become indistinguishable from the real thing, in which sense are they "less real"? Isn't it all in the mind, in any case? This is the famous "brain in a jar" conundrum: if one's brain were to be placed in a jar and sustained artificially, would one still be capable of experiencing life fully and in which sense would one exist in such "reduced" circumstances? Wouldn't then the brain-support apparatus constitute the full equivalent of one's erstwhile body, only far less fallible and prone to dysfunction?

The hidden and misleading assumption in all these thought experiments is that the brain and its flesh-and-blood container were once united, before science or technology had them sundered. But what about a human brain that has never had a body? A brain that was grown

in a jar or rigged to a surrogate from its very inception? Would such a "monstrosity" qualify as an individual member of the human species? In other words: how important is the body to the formation and operation of the mind?

The dualistic differentiation between mens and corpus may be entirely artificial. It seems to be the outcome of our ignorance and of the shortcomings of our language, both of which gave rise to the psychophysical problem.

In a series of experiments described in articles published in [Science](#) in mid 2007, British and Swiss researchers concluded that *"their experiments reinforce the idea that the 'self' is closely tied to a 'within-body' position, which is dependent on information from the senses. 'We look at 'self' with regard to spatial characteristics, and maybe they form the basis upon which self-consciousness has evolved'"*, one of them told the New Scientist ("Out-of-body experiences are 'all in the mind'", NewScientist.com news service, 23 August 2007).

The fundament of our mind and of our self is the mental map we create of our body ("Body Image", or "Body Map"). It is a detailed, psychic, rendition of our corporeal self, based on [sensa](#) (sensory input) and above all on proprioception and other kinesthetic senses. This model incorporates representations of other objects and results, at a higher level, in a "World Map" or "World Image". This World Map often does not react to actual changes in the body itself (such as amputation which results in the "phantom limb" phenomenon). It is also exclusionary of facts that contradict the paradigm at the basis of the World Map.

This detailed and ever-changing (dynamic) map constitutes the set of outer constraints and threshold conditions for the brain's operations. The triple processes of interaction (endogenous and exogenous), integration (assimilation) and accommodation (see here ["Psychophysics"](#)) reconcile the brain's "programmes" (sets of instructions) to these constraints and conditions.

In other words, these are processes of solving dynamic, though always partial, equations. The set of all the solutions to all these equations constitutes the "Personal Narrative", or "Personality". Thus, ["organic"](#) and ["mental"](#) disorders (a dubious distinction at best) have many characteristics in common ([confabulation](#), [antisocial behaviour](#), emotional absence or flatness, indifference, psychotic episodes and so on).

The brain's "Functional Set" is hierarchical and consists of feedback loops. It aspires to equilibrium and homeostasis. The most basic level is mechanical: hardware (neurons, glia, etc.) and operating system software. This software consists of a group of sensory-motor applications. It is separated from the next level by exegetic instructions (the feedback loops and their interpretation). This is the cerebral equivalent of a compiler. Each level of instructions is distinguished from the next (and connected to it meaningfully and operationally) by such a compiler. Here, again, the "body" is the mind!

Next follow the "functional instructions" ("How to" type of commands): how to see, how to place visuals in context, how to hear, how to collate and correlate sensory input and so on. Yet, these commands should not be confused with the "real thing", the "final product". "How-to-see" is not the same as "seeing". Seeing is a much more

complex, multilayered, interactive and versatile "activity" than the simple act of light penetration and its conveyance to the brain.

Thus - separated by another compiler which generates meanings (a "dictionary") - we reach the realm of "meta-instructions". This is a gigantic classificatory (taxonomic) system. It contains and applies rules of symmetry (left vs. right), physics (light vs. dark, colors), social codes (face recognition, behaviour) and synergetic or correlated activity ("seeing", "music", etc.).

Design principles would yield the application of the following principles to the organization and architecture of the brain:

1. Areas of specialization (dedicated to hearing, reading, smelling, etc.);
2. Redundancy (unutilized over capacity capable to taking over functions from damaged centers);
3. Holography and Fractalness (replication of same mechanisms, sets of instructions and some critical content in various locations in the brain);
4. Interchangeability - Higher functions can replace damaged lower ones (seeing can replace damaged proprioception, for instance).
5. Two types of processes:
  - a. Rational - discrete, atomistic, syllogistic, theory-constructing, falsifying;
  - b. Emotional - continuous, fractal, holographic.

By "fractal and holographic", I mean:

1. That each part contains the total information about the whole;
2. That each unit or part contain a "connector" to all others with sufficient information in such a connector to reconstruct the other units if lost or unavailable.

Only some brain processes are "conscious". Others, though equally complex (e.g., semantic interpretation of spoken texts), may be unconscious. The same brain processes can be conscious at one time and unconscious at another. Consciousness, in other words, is the privileged tip of a submerged mental iceberg.

One hypothesis is that an uncounted number of unconscious processes "yield" conscious processes. This is the emergent phenomenal (epiphenomenal) "wave-particle" duality. Unconscious brain processes are like a wave function which collapses into the "particle" of consciousness.

Another hypothesis, more closely aligned with tests and experiments, is that consciousness is like a searchlight. It focuses on a few "privileged processes" at a time and thus makes them conscious. As the light of consciousness moves on, new privileged processes (hitherto unconscious) become conscious and the old ones recede into unconsciousness.

We tend to ignore the fact that the mind is somehow entangled with the brain and that the brain is "hardware", an integral part of the body. It is the body that gives rise to

the mind. Without it, the mind would be so different that it could scarcely qualify as human. We are human because we have bodies. In the rarefied atmosphere of academe, this crucial observation is often neglected or wilfully ignored.

*Also Read:*

[\*Psychophysics\*](#)

[Return](#)

## ***The Ecology of Environmentalism***

***"It wasn't just predictable curmudgeons like Dr. Johnson who thought the Scottish hills ugly; if anybody had something to say about mountains at all, it was sure to be an insult. (The Alps: "monstrous excrescences of nature," in the words of one wholly typical 18th-century observer.)"***

***Stephen Budiansky, "Nature? A bit overdone", U.S. News & World Report, December 2, 1996***

The concept of "nature" is a romantic invention. It was spun by the likes of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century as a confabulated utopian contrast to the dystopia of urbanization and Darwinian, ruthless materialism. The traces of this dewy-eyed conception of the "savage", his alleged harmony and resonance with nature, and his unmolested, unadulterated surroundings can be found in the more malignant forms of fundamentalist environmentalism and in pop-culture (the most recent example of which is the propaganda-laden cinematic extravaganza, "Avatar").

At the other extreme are religious literalists who regard Man as the crown of creation with complete dominion over nature and the right to exploit its resources unreservedly. Similar, veiled, sentiments can be found among scientists. The Anthropic Principle, for instance, promoted by many outstanding physicists, claims that the

nature of the Universe is preordained to accommodate sentient beings - namely, us humans.

Industrialists, politicians and economists have only recently begun paying lip service to sustainable development and to the environmental costs of their policies. Thus, in a way, they bridge the abyss - at least verbally - between these two diametrically opposed forms of fundamentalism. Similarly, the denizens of the West continue to indulge in rampant consumption, but now it is suffused with environmental guilt rather than driven by unadulterated hedonism.

Still, essential dissimilarities between the schools notwithstanding, the dualism of Man vs. Nature is universally acknowledged.

Modern physics - notably the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics - has abandoned the classic split between (typically human) observer and (usually inanimate) observed. Environmentalists, in contrast, have embraced this discarded worldview wholeheartedly. To them, Man is the active agent operating upon a distinct reactive or passive substrate - i.e., Nature. But, though intuitively compelling, it is a false dichotomy.

Man is, by definition, a part of Nature. His tools are natural. He interacts with the other elements of Nature and modifies it - but so do all other species. Arguably, bacteria and insects exert on Nature far more influence with farther reaching consequences than Man has ever done.

Still, the "Law of the Minimum" - that there is a limit to human population growth and that this barrier is related to the biotic and abiotic variables of the environment - is

undisputed. Whatever debate there is veers between two strands of this Malthusian Weltanschauung: the utilitarian (a.k.a. anthropocentric, shallow, or technocentric) and the ethical (alternatively termed biocentric, deep, or ecocentric).

First, the Utilitarians.

Economists, for instance, tend to discuss the costs and benefits of environmental policies. Activists, on the other hand, demand that Mankind consider the "rights" of other beings and of nature as a whole in determining a least harmful course of action.

Utilitarians regard nature as a set of exhaustible and scarce resources and deal with their optimal allocation from a human point of view. Yet, they usually fail to incorporate intangibles such as the beauty of a sunset or the liberating sensation of open spaces.

"Green" accounting - adjusting the national accounts to reflect environmental data - is still in its unpromising infancy. It is complicated by the fact that ecosystems do not respect man-made borders and by the stubborn refusal of many ecological variables to succumb to numbers. To complicate things further, different nations weigh environmental problems disparately.

Despite recent attempts, such as the Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI) produced by the World Economic Forum (WEF), no one knows how to define and quantify elusive concepts such as "sustainable development". Even the costs of replacing or repairing depleted resources and natural assets are difficult to determine.

Efforts to capture "quality of life" considerations in the straitjacket of the formalism of distributive justice - known as human-welfare ecology or emancipatory environmentalism - backfired. These led to derisory attempts to reverse the inexorable processes of urbanization and industrialization by introducing localized, small-scale production.

Social ecologists proffer the same prescriptions but with an anarchistic twist. The hierarchical view of nature - with Man at the pinnacle - is a reflection of social relations, they suggest. Dismantle the latter - and you get rid of the former.

The Ethicists appear to be as confounded and ludicrous as their "feet on the ground" opponents.

Biocentrists view nature as possessed of an intrinsic value, regardless of its actual or potential utility. They fail to specify, however, how this, even if true, gives rise to rights and commensurate obligations. Nor was their case aided by their association with the apocalyptic or survivalist school of environmentalism which has developed proto-fascist tendencies and is gradually being scientifically debunked.

The proponents of deep ecology radicalize the ideas of social ecology ad absurdum and postulate a transcendentalist spiritual connection with the inanimate (whatever that may be). In consequence, they refuse to intervene to counter or contain natural processes, including diseases and famine.

The politicization of environmental concerns runs the gamut from political activism to eco-terrorism. The

environmental movement - whether in academe, in the media, in non-governmental organizations, or in legislature - is now comprised of a web of bureaucratic interest groups.

Like all bureaucracies, environmental organizations are out to perpetuate themselves, fight heresy and accumulate political clout and the money and perks that come with it. They are no longer a disinterested and objective party. They have a stake in apocalypse. That makes them automatically suspect.

Bjorn Lomborg, author of "The Skeptical Environmentalist", was at the receiving end of such self-serving sanctimony. A statistician, he demonstrated that the doom and gloom tendered by environmental campaigners, scholars and militants are, at best, dubious and, at worst, the outcomes of deliberate manipulation.

The situation is actually improving on many fronts, showed Lomborg: known reserves of fossil fuels and most metals are rising, agricultural production per head is surging, the number of the famished is declining, biodiversity loss is slowing as do pollution and tropical deforestation. In the long run, even in pockets of environmental degradation, in the poor and developing countries, rising incomes and the attendant drop in birth rates will likely ameliorate the situation in the long run.

Yet, both camps, the optimists and the pessimists, rely on partial, irrelevant, or, worse, manipulated data. The multiple authors of "People and Ecosystems", published by the World Resources Institute, the World Bank and the United Nations conclude: "Our knowledge of ecosystems

has increased dramatically, but it simply has not kept pace with our ability to alter them."

Quoted by The Economist, Daniel Esty of Yale, the leader of an environmental project sponsored by World Economic Forum, exclaimed:

***"Why hasn't anyone done careful environmental measurement before? Businessmen always say, 'what matters gets measured'. Social scientists started quantitative measurement 30 years ago, and even political science turned to hard numbers 15 years ago. Yet look at environmental policy, and the data are lousy."***

Nor is this dearth of reliable and unequivocal information likely to end soon. Even the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, supported by numerous development agencies and environmental groups, is seriously under-financed. The conspiracy-minded attribute this curious void to the self-serving designs of the apocalyptic school of environmentalism. Ignorance and fear, they point out, are among the fanatic's most useful allies. They also make for good copy.

### ***A Comment on Energy Security***

The pursuit of "energy security" has brought us to the brink. It is directly responsible for numerous wars, big and small; for unprecedented environmental degradation; for global financial imbalances and meltdowns; for growing income disparities; and for ubiquitous unsustainable development.

It is energy *insecurity* that we should seek.

The uncertainty incumbent in phenomena such "peak oil", or in the preponderance of hydrocarbon fuels in failed states fosters innovation. The more insecure we get, the more we invest in the recycling of energy-rich products; the more substitutes we find for energy-intensive foods; the more we conserve energy; the more we switch to alternatives energy; the more we encourage international collaboration; and the more we optimize energy outputs per unit of fuel input.

A world in which energy (of whatever source) will be abundant and predictably available would suffer from entropy, both physical and mental. The vast majority of human efforts revolve around the need to deploy our meager resources wisely. Energy also serves as a geopolitical "organizing principle" and disciplinary rod. Countries which waste energy (and the money it takes to buy it), pollute, and conflict with energy suppliers end up facing diverse crises, both domestic and foreign. Profligacy is punished precisely because energy is insecure. Energy scarcity and precariousness thus serves a global regulatory mechanism.

But the obsession with "energy security" is only one example of the almost religious belief in "scarcity".

### *A Comment on Alternative Energies*

The quest for alternative, non-fossil fuel, energy sources is driven by two misconceptions: (1) The mistaken belief in "peak oil" (that we are nearing the complete depletion and exhaustion of economically extractable oil reserves) and (2) That market mechanisms cannot be trusted to provide adequate and timely responses to energy needs (in other words that markets are prone to [failure](#)).

At the end of the 19th century, books and pamphlets were written about "peak coal". People and governments panicked: what would satisfy the swelling demand for energy? Apocalyptic thinking was rampant. Then, of course, came oil. At first, no one knew what to do with the sticky, noxious, and occasionally flammable substance. Gradually, petroleum became our energetic mainstay and gave rise to entire industries (petrochemicals and automotive, to mention but two).

History will repeat itself: the next major source of energy is very unlikely to be hatched up in a laboratory. It will be found fortuitously and serendipitously. It will shock and surprise pundits and laymen alike. And it will amply cater to all our foreseeable needs. It is also likely to be greener than carbon-based fuels.

More generally, the market can take care of itself: energy does not have the characteristics of a public good and therefore is rarely subject to market breakdowns and unalleviated scarcity. Energy prices have proven

themselves to be a sagacious regulator and a perspicacious invisible hand.

Until this holy grail ("the next major source of energy") reveals itself, we are likely to increase the shares of nuclear and wind sources in our energy consumption pie. Our industries and cars will grow even more energy-efficient. But there is no escaping the fact that the main drivers of global warming and climate change are population growth and the emergence of an energy-guzzling middle class in developing and formerly poor countries. These are irreversible economic processes and only at their inception.

Global warming will, therefore, continue apace no matter which sources of energy we deploy. It is inevitable. Rather than trying to limit it in vain, we would do better to adapt ourselves: avoid the risks and cope with them while also reaping the rewards (and, yes, climate change has many positive and beneficial aspects to it).

Climate change is not about the demise of the human species as numerous self-interested (and well-paid) alarmists would have it. Climate change is about the global redistribution and reallocation of economic resources. No wonder the losers are sore and hysterical. It is time to consider the winners, too and hear their hitherto muted voices. Alternative energy is nice and all but it is rather besides the point and it misses both the big picture and the trends that will make a difference in this century and the next.

## *Note on Adapting to Climate Change*

### **How must society adapt to rapid climate change to minimize severe upheaval?**

The question makes two explicit assumptions, both of which are controversial and disputed: that climate change is rapid and that it will result in severe upheaval.

Similarly, it is not clear whether the best reaction to global warming should be societal, or individual (or, perhaps, global).

That global warming is happening has now been established. Yet, such a forcing is likely to take centuries to induce any discernible climate change on the planetary level. Moreover: self-interested and well-paying hype aside, we know close to nothing about the hypercomplex set of interactions between various greenhouse gases, the atmosphere, the oceans, the Earth's orbit, volcanic eruptions, human activities, the unforeseen outcomes and by-products of well-meaning regulation and technologies (such as biofuels), solar dynamics, plate tectonics, and thousands of other factors, the vast majority of which are yet to be discovered.

Environmentalism is, therefore, poor science or pseudo-science: it is a pernicious and venal form of faddish hubris. In our current state of ignorance, the more ambitious variants of "solutions" such as geoengineering are far more dangerous than the threats of global warming.

Two things are clear, though: (a) Climate change had happened frequently and repeatedly, long before and ever

since humans strode the scene; and (b) Some regions of Earth will greatly benefit economically from global warming. Others, inevitably, will suffer and will have to adapt. None of this sounds like a "severe upheaval", let alone life-threatening as the more rabid and sensationalist environmentalists will have us believe.

We should take an inventory of what we know and act upon it resolutely (mitigation): emissions from fossil fuel combustion should be tamed, captured, stored, sunk, and sequestered (aerosols to be further studied in conjunction with global dimming and ozone depletion); measures for population control and family planning enhanced; alternative and renewable fuels should be studied and incentives provided to energy-efficient, clean and green technologies; cement manufacture should be tweaked; cap and trade (or tax) schemes implemented on the national, corporate, and individual levels; weather-resistant, energy-conserving, and green construction technologies pioneered; the diets of livestock should be adapted to restrict biological emissions; deforestation and reforestation should be rationalized as should be land use; drought-related indigenous agricultural and water management knowledge and crop varieties should be preserved; flood defenses erected or strengthened; and weather-monitoring capacity should be extended and modernized. These measures make good sense, whatever the urgency of the problem facing us.

But, we should invest the bulk of our scarce resources in research and innovation. We should accept that climate change is inevitable and work out ways of harnessing it to our benefit. We should come up with new agricultural methods and strains; new types of tourism; new irrigation techniques; water desalination, diversion, transport, and

allocation schemes; ways of sustaining biological diversity and of helping the human body adapt and cope; and global plans to cope with energy production problems, poverty, and disease triggered by global warming.

For the next few centuries, global warming is inexorable and largely irreversible (as the IPCC essentially admits). To think otherwise is completely delusional. Better to re-imagine our existence on this planet (adaptation). As temperatures rise in certain locales (and drop in others!), new economic activities and routes of commerce would be made possible or rendered feasible; new types of produce and forests will flourish; new technologies will be developed to cater to a novel and growing set of needs.

We would do well to not consider global warming as a crisis, but as a massive change. And even if we insist on regarding it as a cataclysm, as the Chinese saying goes, there are opportunities in every predicament. The initial costs of every transformation and transition in human history have been steep (recall the Industrial Revolution and, more recently, the transition from Communism to Capitalism). Climate change is not likely to be the only exception. Such a massive realignment implies severe disruption and great distress. But, invariably, tectonic shifts are followed by an extended period of creativity and growth. This time will be no different.

*Also Read:*

[\*The Misconception of Scarcity\*](#)

[\*The Self-Appointed Altruists\*](#)

*Burning the Oil - Development and Ethnic Tensions*

*The Emerging Water Wars*

*Negentropic Agents and the Increase of Entropy*

Return

## *Fact and Truth*

The extent of confusion that reigns when we discuss the concept of truth is evident in the film “The Invention of Lying”. The movie takes place in a world where people are genetically unable to lie. When one of them, presumably an aberrant mutant (his son inherits his newfound ability), stumbles across the art of confabulation, his life is transformed overnight: he becomes rich, a celebrity, and marries the girl of his dreams (who scorned him before).

But, this clever piece of comedy is philosophically muddled. The denizens of this dystopian cosmos (yes, the truth hurts) not only respond veraciously when prompted – they actually and often sadistically share their innermost thoughts, opinions, and observations. The film fails to realize that volunteering the truth is not the same as being truthful.

What’s worse, the characters in the movie take all statements about the future to be true. Yet, statements about the future can be and often are false even in a world where lying is unknown. As Aristotle has put it: nothing we say about the future has a truth value (can be confidently and rigorously determined to be true or false). We can lie only by making statements that we know with certainty to be false, but such certainty exists only with regard to the past and the present. We can make statements about the future that may be false, or that are probably false, or that we believe to be false – but we can

never be sure that they are false. Therefore, we can never lie (or tell the truth!) about the future.

Still, it is not as simple as that. Truth must also be possible (there is no such thing as an impossible truth, though, of course, there are many improbable truths). Yet, the very concept of possibility has to do with the future. Moreover: only facts are possible. If something is not possible it is also not factual and nothing that is a fact is impossible.

Consider the following:

Thought experiments (Gedankenexperimenten) are "facts" in the sense that they have a "real life" correlate in the form of electrochemical activity in the brain. But it is quite obvious that they do not relate to facts "out there". They are not true statements.

But do they lack truth because they do not relate to facts? How are Truth and Fact interrelated?

One answer is that Truth pertains to the possibility that an event will occur. If true – it must occur and if false – it cannot occur. This is a binary world of extreme existential conditions. Must all possible events occur? Of course not. If they do not occur would they still be true? Must a statement have a real life correlate to be true?

Instinctively, the answer is yes. We cannot conceive of a thought divorced from brainwaves. A statement which remains a mere potential seems to exist only in the nether land between truth and falsity. It becomes true only by materializing, by occurring, by matching up with real life. If we could prove that it will never do so, we would have

felt justified in classifying it as false. This is the outgrowth of millennia of concrete, Aristotelian logic. Logical statements talk about the world and, therefore, if a statement cannot be shown to relate directly to the world, it is not true.

This approach, however, is the outcome of some underlying assumptions:

First, that the world is finite and also close to its end. To say that something that did not happen cannot be true is to say that it will never happen (i.e., to say that time and space – the world – are finite and are about to end momentarily).

Second, truth and falsity are assumed to be mutually exclusive. Quantum and fuzzy logics have long laid this one to rest. There are real world situations that are both true and not-true. A particle can "be" in two places at the same time. This fuzzy logic is incompatible with our daily experiences but if there is anything that we have learnt from physics in the last seven decades it is that the world is incompatible with our daily experiences.

The third assumption is that the psychic realm is but a subset of the material one. We are membranes with a very particular hole-size. We filter through only well defined types of experiences, are equipped with limited (and evolutionarily biased) senses, programmed in a way which tends to sustain us until we die. We are not neutral, objective observers. Actually, the very concept of observer is disputable – as modern physics, on the one hand and Eastern philosophy, on the other hand, have shown.

Imagine that a mad scientist has succeeded to infuse all the water in the world with a strong hallucinogen. At a given moment, all the people in the world see a huge flying saucer. What can we say about this saucer? Is it true? Is it "real"?

There is little doubt that the saucer does not exist. But who is to say so? If this statement is left unsaid – does it mean that it cannot exist and, therefore, is untrue? In this case (of the illusionary flying saucer), the statement that remains unsaid is a true statement – and the statement that is uttered by millions is patently false.

Still, the argument can be made that the flying saucer did exist – though only in the minds of those who drank the contaminated water. What is this form of existence? In which sense does a hallucination "exist"? The psychophysical problem is that no causal relationship can be established between a thought and its real life correlate, the brainwaves that accompany it. Moreover, this leads to infinite regression. If the brainwaves created the thought – who created them, who made them happen? In other words: who is it (perhaps what is it) that thinks?

The subject is so convoluted that to say that the mental is a mere subset of the material is to speculate

It is, therefore, advisable to separate the ontological from the epistemological. But which is which? Facts are determined epistemologically and statistically by conscious and intelligent observers. Their "existence" rests on a sound epistemological footing. Yet we assume that in the absence of observers facts will continue their existence, will not lose their "factuality", their real life quality which is observer-independent and invariant.

What about truth? Surely, it rests on solid ontological foundations. Something is or is not true in reality and that is it. But then we saw that truth is determined psychically and, therefore, is vulnerable, for instance, to hallucinations. Moreover, the blurring of the lines in Quantum, non-Aristotelian, logics implies one of two: either that true and false are only "in our heads" (epistemological) – or that something is wrong with our interpretation of the world, with our exegetic mechanism (brain). If the latter case is true that the world does contain mutually exclusive true and false values – but the organ which identifies these entities (the brain) has gone awry. The paradox is that the second approach also assumes that at least the perception of true and false values is dependent on the existence of an epistemological detection device.

Can something be true and reality and false in our minds? Of course it can (remember "Rashomon"). Could the reverse be true? Yes, it can. This is what we call optical or sensory illusions. Even solidity is an illusion of our senses – there are no such things as solid objects (remember the physicist's desk which is 99.99999% vacuum with minute granules of matter floating about).

To reconcile these two concepts, we must let go of the old belief (probably vital to our sanity) that we can know the world. We probably cannot and this is the source of our confusion. The world may be inhabited by "true" things and "false" things. It may be true that truth is existence and falsity is non-existence. But we will never know because we are incapable of knowing anything about the world as it is.

We are, however, fully equipped to know about the mental events inside our heads. It is there that the representations of the real world form. We are acquainted with these representations (concepts, images, symbols, language in general) – and mistake them for the world itself. Since we have no way of directly knowing the world (without the intervention of our interpretative mechanisms) we are unable to tell when a certain representation corresponds to an event which is observer-independent and invariant and when it corresponds to nothing of the kind. When we see an image – it could be the result of an interaction with light outside us (objectively "real"), or the result of a dream, a drug induced illusion, fatigue and any other number of brain events not correlated with the real world. These are observer-dependent phenomena and, subject to an agreement between a sufficient number of observers, they are judged to be true or "to have happened" (e.g., religious miracles).

To ask if something is true or not is not a meaningful question unless it relates to our internal world and to our capacity as observers. When we say "true" we mean "exists", or "existed", or "most definitely will exist" (the sun will rise tomorrow). But existence can only be ascertained in our minds. Truth, therefore, is nothing but a state of mind. Existence is determined by observing and comparing the two (the outside and the inside, the real and the mental). This yields a picture of the world which may be closely correlated to reality – and, yet again, may not.

[Return](#)

## *The American Hostel*

The movie "Hostel" (2005) is a potent depiction of gore and graphic horror. More subtly, it is also a counterfactual and jingoistic political allegory for the post 9-11 age.

A couple of wholesome American youths (one of them a [Jew](#)) are nabbed by a ring of east Europeans who cater to the depraved needs of sadists by providing them with fresh supplies of torture victims. The good guys are invariably American (or mistaken for Americans, or the allies of Americans, Japanese). The bad guys are invariably European; a decadent and unfaithful Icelandic, seductive Czech and Russian women, a Dr. Mengele type German, a Ukrainian pimp. The torture chambers are located in a small village in the outskirts of Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia in Central Europe. Everyone is in on the take, the police especially.

The events depicted in the film are not without historical precedent, but the moviemakers got the locations all wrong: nine of ten serial killers worldwide are born and bred in the United States. Born Killers is an American phenomenon, not a European one.

Moreover, the New Europe (to borrow the American Secretary of Defense's unforgettable coinage) - namely, the countries of eastern and central Europe - are obsequious vassals of the United States. It is the Old Europe that regards the United States and its inhabitants

as a menace to world peace and stability and a clear and present danger to us all.

Indeed, the United States, as Nobel prize winner Harold Pinter recently pointed out in his acceptance speech, is an evil and psychopathic polity. Niall Ferguson, the renowned historian, claims that from its very inception, the USA set out to cannibalize its neighbors and prey on the weak while amassing wealth and territories in the process.

Like any psychopath, the USA believes that it should be immune to the consequences of its misconduct abroad. Hence its shock when al-Qaida brought the blazing message home: you are not beyond reach. Hence America's insistence that its military and intelligence services - frequently busy raping (Japan, the Philippines), [murdering](#) (Vietnam, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan), and pillaging (Iraq) - be exempted from international law and the remit of the International Criminal Court.

The (American) protagonist in the movie gets sliced up but, against all odds, succeeds to extract the badly mutilated Japanese from her hellish cell and escape. Catching a glimpse of her eyeless self, she later commits suicide. Indomitable, he then proceed to torture and amputate the sinister ringleader, a Central European-vaguely German, respectable-looking, middle-class type. He is too late so save his Jewish friend, though (a not so veiled reference to the Holocaust).

This is how Americans view themselves: as good-hearted, good-natured, naive, somewhat gullible, fun-loving, and generous people universally victimized by inscrutable and malevolent foreigners, bent on sadistic and needless

destruction. Denial is a defense mechanism very common among [narcissists](#) and [psychopaths](#). The truth is, of course, radically different.

With the exception of World War II, the United States has acted as a rapacious conqueror of other peoples' lands under the flimsiest of pretexts. Its expansion was always violent and involved numerous acts of genocide and warfare. Now it is gradually eroding its only redeeming feature: its democracy. It is slowly being transformed from republic to empire, as did Rome two thousand years ago.

The USA is a terrorist state. While there is no disputing that the abhorrent al-Qaida network of murderers should be hunted down and exterminated mercilessly - it is equally morally commendable to wish for the dissolution of the United States and for its disintegration into its constituent states. Pax without Americana is the best of all worlds.

*Also Read*

[\*The Roots of Anti-Americanism\*](#)

[\*The Semi-failed State\*](#)

[\*The Second Civil War\*](#)

[\*The Reluctant Empire\*](#)

[\*To Give with Grace\*](#)

[\*In God We Trust\*](#)

[\*The Sergeant and the Girl\*](#)

*Containing the United States*

*Democracy and New Colonialism*

*Add Me to the List, Mr. Blair*

*Narcissism, Group Behavior, and Terrorism*

*The Iraqi and the Madman*

*Islam and Liberalism*

Return

# ***T H E   A U T H O R***

**SHMUEL (SAM) VAKNIN**

## **Curriculum Vitae**

Born in 1961 in Qiryat-Yam, Israel.

Served in the Israeli Defence Force (1979-1982) in training and education units.

### **Education**

Completed nine semesters in the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa.

Ph.D. in Philosophy (dissertation: "[Time Asymmetry Revisited](#)") – [Pacific Western University, California, USA](#).

Graduate of numerous courses in Finance Theory and International Trading.

Certified [E-Commerce Concepts Analyst](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Certified in [Psychological Counselling Techniques](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Certified [Financial Analyst](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Full proficiency in Hebrew and in English.

## **Business Experience**

### ***1980 to 1983***

Founder and co-owner of a chain of computerised information kiosks in Tel-Aviv, Israel.

### ***1982 to 1985***

Senior positions with the Nessim D. Gaon Group of Companies in Geneva, Paris and New-York (NOGA and APROFIM SA):

- Chief Analyst of Edible Commodities in the Group's Headquarters in Switzerland
- Manager of the Research and Analysis Division
- Manager of the Data Processing Division
- Project Manager of the Nigerian Computerised Census
- Vice President in charge of RND and Advanced Technologies
- Vice President in charge of Sovereign Debt Financing

### ***1985 to 1986***

Represented Canadian Venture Capital Funds in Israel.

### ***1986 to 1987***

General Manager of IPE Ltd. in London. The firm financed international multi-lateral countertrade and leasing transactions.

### ***1988 to 1990***

Co-founder and Director of "Mikbats-Tesuah", a portfolio management firm based in Tel-Aviv.  
Activities included large-scale portfolio management, underwriting, forex trading and general financial advisory services.

### ***1990 to Present***

Freelance consultant to many of Israel's Blue-Chip firms, mainly on issues related to the capital markets in Israel, Canada, the UK and the USA.

Consultant to foreign RND ventures and to Governments on macro-economic matters.

Freelance journalist in various media in the United States.

### ***1990 to 1995***

President of the Israel chapter of the Professors World Peace Academy (PWPA) and (briefly) Israel representative of the "Washington Times".

### ***1993 to 1994***

Co-owner and Director of many business enterprises:

- The Omega and Energy Air-Conditioning Concern
  - AVP Financial Consultants
  - Handiman Legal Services
- Total annual turnover of the group: 10 million USD.

Co-owner, Director and Finance Manager of COSTI Ltd.  
– Israel's largest computerised information vendor and developer. Raised funds through a series of private placements locally in the USA, Canada and London.

### ***1993 to 1996***

Publisher and Editor of a Capital Markets Newsletter distributed by subscription only to dozens of subscribers countrywide.

In a legal precedent in 1995 – studied in business schools and law faculties across Israel – was tried for his role in an attempted takeover of Israel's Agriculture Bank.

Was interned in the State School of Prison Wardens.

Managed the Central School Library, wrote, published and lectured on various occasions.

Managed the Internet and International News Department of an Israeli mass media group, "Ha-Tikshoret and Namer".

Assistant in the Law Faculty in Tel-Aviv University (to Prof. S.G. Shoham).

### ***1996 to 1999***

Financial consultant to leading businesses in Macedonia, Russia and the Czech Republic.

Economic commentator in "[Nova Makedonija](#)", "[Dnevnik](#)", "Makedonija Denes", "Izvestia", "Argumenti i Fakti", "The Middle East Times", "[The New Presence](#)",

"[Central Europe Review](#)", and other periodicals, and in the economic programs on various channels of Macedonian Television.

Chief Lecturer in courses in Macedonia organised by the Agency of Privatization, by the Stock Exchange, and by the Ministry of Trade.

### ***1999 to 2002***

Economic Advisor to the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and to the Ministry of Finance.

### ***2001 to 2003***

Senior Business Correspondent for [United Press International \(UPI\)](#).

### ***2007 -***

Associate Editor, [Global Politician](#)

Founding Analyst, [The Analyst Network](#)

Contributing Writer, [The American Chronicle Media Group](#)

Expert, [Self-growth.com](#)

### ***2007-2008***

Columnist and analyst in "[Nova Makedonija](#)", "Fokus", and "[Kapital](#)" (Macedonian papers and newsweeklies).

**2008-**

Member of the [Steering Committee for the Advancement of Healthcare in the Republic of Macedonia](#)

Advisor to the Minister of Health of Macedonia

Seminars and lectures on economic issues in various forums in Macedonia.

### **Web and Journalistic Activities**

Author of extensive Web sites in:

– Psychology ("[Malignant Self Love](#)") - An [Open Directory Cool Site](#) for 8 years.

– Philosophy ("[Philosophical Musings](#)"),

– Economics and Geopolitics ("[World in Conflict and Transition](#)").

Owner of the [Narcissistic Abuse Study Lists](#) and the [Abusive Relationships Newsletter](#) (more than 6,000 members).

Owner of the [Economies in Conflict and Transition Study List](#), the [Toxic Relationships Study List](#), and the [Links and Factoid Study List](#).

Editor of mental health disorders and Central and Eastern Europe categories in various Web directories ([Open Directory](#), [Search Europe](#), [Mentalhelp.net](#)).

Editor of the [Personality Disorders](#), Narcissistic Personality Disorder, the [Verbal and Emotional Abuse](#), and the [Spousal \(Domestic\) Abuse and Violence](#) topics on Suite 101 and [Bellaonline](#).

Columnist and commentator in "The New Presence", [United Press International \(UPI\)](#), InternetContent, eBookWeb, [PopMatters](#), [Global Politician](#), The [Analyst Network](#), Conservative Voice, The [American Chronicle Media Group](#), [eBookNet.org](#), and "[Central Europe Review](#)".

### **Publications and Awards**

"Managing Investment Portfolios in States of Uncertainty", Limon Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1988

"The Gambling Industry", Limon Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1990

"[Requesting My Loved One – Short Stories](#)", Yedioth Aharonot, Tel-Aviv, 1997

"[The Suffering of Being Kafka](#)" (electronic book of Hebrew and English Short Fiction), Prague, 1998-2004

"The Macedonian Economy at a Crossroads – On the Way to a Healthier Economy" (dialogues with [Nikola Gruevski](#)), Skopje, 1998

"[The Exporters' Pocketbook](#)", Ministry of Trade, Republic of Macedonia, Skopje, 1999

["Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited"](#), Narcissus Publications, Prague, 1999-2007 (Read excerpts - click [here](#))

[The Narcissism Series](#) (e-books regarding relationships with abusive narcissists), Prague, 1999-2007

[Personality Disorders Revisited](#) (e-book about personality disorders), Prague, 2007

["After the Rain – How the West Lost the East"](#), Narcissus Publications in association with [Central Europe Review/CEENMI](#), Prague and Skopje, 2000

Winner of numerous awards, among them [Israel's Council of Culture and Art Prize for Maiden Prose](#) (1997), The Rotary Club Award for Social Studies (1976), and the Bilateral Relations Studies Award of the American Embassy in Israel (1978).

[Hundreds of professional articles](#) in all fields of finance and economics, and numerous articles dealing with geopolitical and political economic issues published in both print and Web periodicals in many countries.

[Many appearances in the electronic media](#) on subjects in philosophy and the sciences, and concerning economic matters.

**Contact Details:**

[palma@unet.com.mk](mailto:palma@unet.com.mk)

## **My Web Sites:**

### ***Economy / Politics:***

<http://ceeandbalkan.tripod.com/>

### ***Psychology:***

<http://samvak.tripod.com/index.html>

### ***Philosophy:***

<http://philosophos.tripod.com/>

### ***Poetry:***

<http://samvak.tripod.com/contents.html>

[Return](#)

# *After the Rain*

*How the West  
Lost the East*

## **The Book**

This is a series of articles written and published in 1996-2000 in Macedonia, in Russia, in Egypt and in the Czech Republic.

How the West lost the East. The economics, the politics, the geopolitics, the conspiracies, the corruption, the old and the new, the plough and the internet – it is all here, in colourful and provocative prose.

From "The Mind of Darkness":

"The Balkans' – I say – 'is the unconscious of the world'. People stop to digest this metaphor and then they nod enthusiastically. It is here that the repressed memories of history, its traumas and fears and images reside. It is here that the psychodynamics of humanity – the tectonic clash between Rome and Byzantium, West and East, Judeo-Christianity and Islam – is still easily discernible. We are seated at a New Year's dining table, loaded with a roasted pig and exotic salads. I, the Jew, only half foreign to this cradle of Slavonics. Four Serbs, five Macedonians. It is in the Balkans that all ethnic distinctions fail and it is here that they prevail anachronistically and atavistically. Contradiction and change the only two fixtures of this tormented region. The women of the Balkan - buried under provocative mask-like make up, retro hairstyles and too narrow dresses. The men, clad in sepia colours, old fashioned suits and turn of the century moustaches. In the background there is the crying game that is Balkanian music: liturgy and folk and elegy combined. The smells are heavy with muskular perfumes. It is like time travel. It is like revisiting one's childhood."

## The Author

[Sam Vaknin](#) is the author of [Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited](#) and [After the Rain - How the West Lost the East](#). He served as a columnist for [Central Europe Review](#), [PopMatters](#), [Bellaonline](#), and [eBookWeb](#), a [United Press International](#) (UPI) Senior Business Correspondent, and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in [The Open Directory](#) and [Suite101](#).

Until recently, he served as the Economic Advisor to the Government of Macedonia.

Visit Sam's Web site at <http://samvak.tripod.com>