

YOU

BELONGING TO

GOD IN AN

INHUMAN

WORLD

ARE

NOT

YOUR

ALAN
NOBLE

OWN



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I AM MY OWN AND I BELONG TO MYSELF

The milieu in which [man] lives is no longer his. He must adapt himself, as though the world were new, to a universe for which he was not created. He was made to go six kilometers an hour, and he goes a thousand. He was made to eat when he was hungry and sleep when he was sleepy; instead, he obeys a clock. He was made to have contact with living things, and he lives in a world of stone. He was created with a certain essential unity, and he is fragmented by all the forces of the modern world.

JACQUES ELLUL, *THE TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

ZOOCHOSIS is the common term for that thing that lions do at the zoo when they obsessively pace back and forth in their cages. The technical term is *stereotypies*: “repetitive, invariant behaviour patterns with no obvious goal or function,” which occur in “captive animals.”¹ But *zoochosis*, a portmanteau of zoo and psychosis, is much less euphemistic and sterile than *stereotypies*.² These are animals driven to *psychosis* from being in captivity.

Despite the best efforts of zookeepers to recreate the animal’s natural environment, a zoo is still a zoo. The lion is still caged. People still point, stare at it, and take photographs all day long. The lion still smells churros and hotdogs cooking. He still hears the cries of animals that belong on

entirely different continents. He still sleeps in what smells like an artificial cave. His meals, while scientifically engineered to meet all his dietary needs, never satisfy his desire to hunt. And with the noise of people and the sight of concrete, fences, and bars, he feels both exposed and alone. His anxiety is, really, quite natural.

The zoo exhibit was not built for the lion. Well, okay, technically it was made for him. In fact, some of the top African lion experts designed his habitat and diet. These scientists know more facts about lions than he knows about himself. He knows only the urgings of his own instincts, but the scientists know the history of his entire species, the intricate workings of his internal organs, and the latest research on the behavior of African lions.

And yet still he paces, back and forth. Day after day. Still the habitat does not feel quite right. Yes, this space was made for “a lion,” but not *this* lion, or even an African lion. It was made for a “lion” that probably doesn’t exist, one who is naturally at home in a cage. And no matter how the zookeepers modify and optimize the habitat, they will always assume that he is the kind of creature who can live a good life confined in the middle of a zoo in the middle of a city on a foreign continent—a tool to bring people entertainment and education.³

The lion’s best hope is to adapt to his new environment. This may not be possible in his lifetime, but if he is not too anxious or bored to have sex, he may start a line of lions bred in captivity who manage to feel more at home in an artificial habitat. Of course, even then two thoughts trouble us. The grandchild of our original lion has a note on his plaque that acknowledges that he was “bred in captivity,” and once you’ve read the plaque you can’t help but think that it is somehow less of a *real* lion. It’s a zoo lion. And then we feel sorry for him, sorry that our drive to capture and contain and understand and display all the wonders of the earth has perverted one of those wonders. Something has been lost. But that’s best-case scenario. It’s more likely that the zoochosis continues.

Strangely enough, almost everyone who visits the zoo recognizes that something is not right about the lion. His zoochosis is plain for anyone to see. You have almost certainly witnessed animals in the zoo with this behavior, even if you didn’t know the term for it. And perhaps you, like me,

have found yourself caught up short before the pacing animal, thinking, *This poor beast is mentally ill. He doesn't belong here. It's driving him mad, but there's nothing we can do for the poor fellow. Zoos will be zoos, and even if I boycott this place, I'm only one person. I hope they at least can give him something to settle his nerves.* The lion does not belong in the cage, but so long as people are fascinated by animals, zoos will exist. So the best thing we can hope for is progress in habitat design and maybe some animal pharmaceuticals. For most visitors to the zoo, determinism overcomes our discomfort at the sight of anxious, compulsive animals.



Although we are not caged in the same way as lions at the zoo, contemporary people in the West often suffer from our own kind of zoochosis. Just like the lion, our anxiety stems from living in an environment that was not actually made for us—for humans as we truly are. The designers (who happen to be us, by the way: only humans are capable of creating inhuman environments for themselves) had a particular idea of the human person in mind when they created the modern world. Before you can build a habitat for humans, you must have an idea of what humans *are*. What do they do? How do they live? Why do they live? What do they need? Where do they belong? When you can answer these questions, you can begin to design institutions, economies, practices, values, and laws accordingly—the building blocks of a society.

In some ways, history is the story of civilizations misunderstanding anthropology in one way or another, leading to terrible results. So my argument is not that the modern world has done something new by misinterpreting human nature. Instead, I'm asking *how* modern society has misinterpreted humans, and what are the implications of that false anthropology.

Let's consider a few examples of the way in which our human environment creates inhuman conditions.

INCELS

In 2014, a twenty-two-year-old man in Isla Vista, California, killed six people, wounded fourteen others, and then killed himself out of frustration over

his “involuntary celibacy.” Elliot Rodger targeted sorority women near the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara, who he blamed for not finding him sexually desirable. Rodger uploaded a “manifesto” to YouTube before launching his attack, in which he explained the great injustice of the world: that beautiful women chose stupid jerks over “supreme gentlemen” like himself. Since 2014, Rodgers has been cited as an inspiration in at least five more mass killings (with a total of forty people killed and forty-three injured), including the infamous Parkland High School shooting. These men either identified as “incels” (involuntarily celibate) or sympathized with the incel subculture. While there have always been some men who resent women for spurning their advances, the internet has created a space for these men to support one another, form a community, and develop their own vocabulary and philosophy.

Just outside of the incel subculture we find men’s rights activists and pickup artist subcultures, which share the incel culture’s obsession with sex and misogyny. Each of these internet communities is horrifying in its own way, but they are also following a vision of the good life fed to them by our culture through advertising, entertainment, and celebrities. How many commercials did these killers watch over the course of their lives that glorified the attainment of beautiful women? I suspect that many young men today—and to a lesser extent, women—walk around with a view of sex not far removed from Elliot Rodger’s thinking: “If someone beautiful, popular, desirable, and cool enough would give themselves to me sexually, I could know that I matter in the world.”

The way we understand sex, love, and meaning is sick.

STAY-AT-HOME MOMS

Imagine that you are a mother of two small children who wants to stay home and can afford not to work (an increasingly difficult choice in many cities). First, you have to get over a lifetime of cultural programming that has equated a meaningful life with a successful career. It’s not just that you’ve been taught that you have the freedom to work outside the home; from your earliest school memories every model of a successful person has been someone working outside the home, and every teacher has stressed the

importance of a college education to prepare you for the workforce. Maybe you were raised in a more conservative religious environment where there was social pressure to marry young and stay at home, but even then, that communal pressure works against the rest of culture, which continues to treat the good life as the career life. But maybe you are able to beat back this cultural programming and convince yourself that caring for young children is one of the most fulfilling and natural forms of human work. You don't judge your friends for having careers, but you feel that forgoing one for a time is the right decision for your family. In your better moments, you even realize that the entire idea that your income determines your worth as a person is utter nonsense that can't stand up to three minutes of scrutiny. But most of the time you feel both the pressure to stay home and the pressure to work outside it.

Second, you have to deal with the loss of close community. It is normal for young people to leave their hometown after graduating high school or college, separating themselves from family and friends in order to pursue a good job for themselves or a spouse. But doing so means you stay home with two small children and no family within three hundred miles. You have a few friends in the area, but because of urban and suburban sprawl, "getting together" is always an ordeal. In the day-to-day struggle of motherhood, you find yourself alone with the kids almost all the time. It begins to get depressing.

Third, when you do hang out with other adults, the topic of conversation almost always centers around their jobs, leaving you with little to contribute. You dread meeting new people because you know one of their first questions will be, "So, what do you *do*?" And you'll have to say, "I stay at home with my kids." Maybe they'll be nice and say, "I think that's great of you to sacrifice like that for them!" but it'll be hard to shake the feeling that they view you as living a purposeless life. Just like you, they were raised to think that accumulating wealth through a successful career is what makes a person valuable and interesting. And all you do is care for the minds, bodies, and souls of vulnerable human beings.

Fourth, even if you'd like to work part time to exercise some of your gifts outside the home, our economy makes it incredibly difficult to find meaningful, satisfying work. Companies either want to employ you full time as

a skilled worker, or part time in a largely mindless position (cleaning, taking orders, etc.)—the kind of repetitive labor you already do at home.

The way we treat mothers, careers, and work is sick.

THE MENTALLY ILL

Among young Americans, there has been a dramatic increase in mental illness diagnoses.⁴ College campuses have been ground zero for these issues, but most schools have failed to keep up. In my own experience as a professor, students suffering from mental illness are not “snowflakes.” On the contrary, many times I’ve had to urge students to take advantage of our school’s mental health services because they prefer to keep their problems to themselves and muscle through, even as their lives are falling apart.

Young people are torn up over broken families, childhood abuse, anxiety, depression, loneliness, dread that they will never amount to anything, impostor syndrome, choice paralysis, porn addiction, suicidal ideation, the death of parents—profound and extensive brokenness. One survey found that nearly 43 percent of undergraduates “felt so depressed that it was difficult to function” in the past year, and 64 percent said they “felt overwhelming anxiety.”⁵ Between scholarly research on the mental health crisis on college campuses and my own experiences, I’ve come to assume that in any given class, several students will be suffering from a diagnosed mental illness, others will be the survivors of sexual abuse, and many will struggle with depression, anxiety, and aimlessness. While the rise in mental illness diagnoses can be partially explained by heightened awareness and decreased taboos, that isn’t the whole story. Something has changed. Our kids are not all right—and the rest of us aren’t doing much better.

According to the CDC, “During 2011–2014, 12.7% of persons aged 12 and over . . . took antidepressant medication in the past month.”⁶ The widespread use of psychiatric medications led one historian of psychiatry to remark, “We’ve come to a place, at least in the West, where it seems every other person is depressed and on medication. You do have to wonder what that says about our culture.”⁷ More alarming is the trend of declining life expectancy in America. In November of 2018, the CDC director released a statement that said, “Tragically, this troubling trend is largely driven by deaths from drug overdose and suicide.”⁸

A significant segment of the American population finds life unbearable. Some cope with medication, but others turn to opioids or suicide. In their carefully researched study of declining life expectancy, economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton repeatedly point to the loss of *meaning* experienced by less educated Americans who have experienced the loss of fulfilling work, marriages, churches, and communities.⁹

One partial explanation for this despair is that many people are “burned out.” Author Anne Helen Petersen has explored the phenomenon, particularly as it affects millennials, which she calls the “Burnout Generation.” For many modern people, every moment of the day must be spent on work—self-improvement, personal branding, making connections, optimizing, and side-hustles. Financial crises, student loan debt, and economic uncertainty drive much of this obsession with working and self-improvement, but the effect is burnout, exhaustion, and an inability to handle simple life tasks.

Comparing historical examples of exhaustion with the experience of millennials, Petersen concludes, “Burnout differs in its intensity and its prevalence: It isn’t an affliction experienced by relatively few that evidences the darker qualities of change but, increasingly, and particularly among millennials, *the* contemporary condition.”¹⁰ Although she focuses on millennials, my guess is that both younger and older people share many of these experiences: the pressure to work longer hours, develop a social media brand, and constantly improve their lifestyle, all while being inundated with warnings about debts, injustices, crime, and health. A life of unending and unrewarded competition and self-improvement through increased efficiency and optimization is overwhelming, depressing, and unsatisfying. This is not what we were made for, and we know it, but rather than confront the problem, we blame ourselves and work harder.

The way we live together is sick.

UNSUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

One of the more convenient features of contemporary western life is that we don’t often have to acknowledge the way our actions affect the world.¹¹ A perfect example of this is our consumption of products—especially plastics.

Modern consumption has an almost supernatural quality to it. The products we find on the shelf in the market have almost no sense of being *made* by someone. They appear like manna, miraculously created, sealed, and delivered for our satisfaction. When we finish using the product, we merely throw the plastic container in a bin and it disappears, like magic.

If my daughter asks me where a toy came from, I can explain to her how it was designed by someone and manufactured and sent from overseas. And if she asks where the toy goes once it breaks and is thrown away, I can explain landfills or recycling plants. But my actual experience of the product's manufacture and disposal is entirely theoretical, even mythical. I don't know who made the toy or who bottled the water. I don't know exactly where they go after they are thrown out. I understand these things in principle but not in practice, which is why it can be so unsettling to visit a landfill and face the endless sprawl of waste I helped create.

Contributing to the magical feel of consumption is my supernatural faith in the capacity of landfills and recycling plants to absorb everything I dispose of. I never question whether my consumption might have a physical limit. I trust that as long as I pay my disposal fees, my trash and recycling will be taken from me. Like Mary Poppins's carpetbag, landfills are imagined to be infinite in capacity.

One way we justify believing that our consumption has no meaningful negative effect on the world is the massive systems of recycling to mitigate the use of landfills. But as it turns out, this, too, involves magical thinking.

Recently released documents from oil and plastics companies have shown that from the beginning of the push to recycle plastic in the 1990s, these companies have known that it was economically unsustainable. Recycling is complicated and costly. Plastics have to be cleaned and sorted, and every time plastic is recycled it degrades. It is cheaper to make new plastic. But because it helped us feel that we could consume plastic goods without consequences, corporations spent millions to promote recycling, and we believed the myth.¹² To make the myth work, we sent most of our recycling to China, until they stopped accepting it in 2018. With nowhere else to send their valueless plastic, some cities with mandatory recycling started dumping plastic bottles back into landfills. Others shipped their

recycling to South Asian countries that still accepted it, creating environmental problems in impoverished port cities.¹³ And while most consumers continue to believe that their consumption is safe because their water bottles are recycled, our landfills continue to grow.

The way we consume is sick.



While personal responsibility plays a role in each of these problems, none can be reduced to personal choice alone. The frustrated and bitter young man who cannot attain the sexual validation society has taught him to pursue can choose to love and respect women rather than hate them, but he can't change society's view of sex. The mother who struggles to live a fulfilled life at home can choose how she responds to societal pressure that denigrates her work and valorizes careerism, but she cannot change society's view of families and the workplace. Those suffering from mental health issues can (sometimes) choose treatments that lead to healing, but they can't fix the sources of anxiety in the modern world. Consumers can individually elect to use metal water bottles, but the majority of the products they buy will still contain or be packaged in plastic that has nowhere to go except the landfill. In each case, society—the human environment—is inhuman because it is opposed to the way humans ought to live.

And these are merely the tip of the iceberg. There's also endemic porn use, the rise of white nationalism and the alt-right, meaningless jobs, clergy sex abuse scandals, Hollywood sex abuse scandals, our disconnection from the natural world, declining birth rates, the intransigence of abortion, and escapism through addiction to technology. No single cause can explain the presence of these social ills, but they share important characteristics: they are systemic in nature, they are inhuman, and they all rely on a particular set of assumptions about what it *means* to be a human. The way we understand ourselves, the way we relate to and live with one another, the way we labor, and the way we rest all show signs of disorder.



Most people understand that society is inhuman in basic ways—that we live in a habitat ill-suited for us. But like the fate of the lion in the zoo, the progression of society feels determined. Even if we object to the way the lion is treated, what can we do to stop it?

- Self-checkout is a little less human than interacting with a cashier, but stores have to cut costs to remain competitive.
- Objectifying the human body is degrading, but you can't stop people from viewing pornography.
- Consuming poorly made products is depressing, but if they weren't poorly made we couldn't afford them.
- Filling our days with tedious labor soothed by streams of entertainment is boring, but what's the alternative?
- It's ridiculous to feel validated because an attractive person gives you attention, even more so when the "attention" is a like on Instagram, but it *does* feel affirming.
- The healthcare industry should want people to live healthy lives and get the care they need, but nobody blames them for primarily caring about profitability. That's the free market.
- The mechanization and standardization of education ignores the uniqueness of every student, but education is expensive enough as it is.
- It isn't natural to spend fifteen hours a day staring at a screen, but here we are.

And so we resign ourselves to the progress that we ourselves are designing.

We've created a society based on the assumption that we are our own and belong to ourselves. But if this anthropology is fundamentally wrong, then we should expect people to suffer from their malformed habitat. And that is precisely what we discover. The difference between us and the lion is that we are more successful at treating our zoochosis and adapting to our environment. We don't mind pacing back and forth, especially if we can listen to a podcast while we do.

THE BURDEN OF SELF-JUSTIFICATION

If I am my own and belong to myself, the first and most significant implication is that I am wholly responsible for my life. This is both an exhilarating and terrifying thought. And it's not just that I am responsible for my personal survival, for food and shelter and so on. I also need a reason to live. I need purpose and direction. I need some way to know when I am failing at life and when I am succeeding, when I am living ethically and when I am not. I must have some way of determining on my deathbed that I lived a good, full life.

Human life is simply too hard and too miraculous to lack a purpose.¹⁴ We need something to make sense of the fact that we are alive and to justify that life. Unlike animals, who can survive by instinct, humans have the capacity to question our own existence, to ask why we should live, and why we should put up with suffering. Mere survival isn't enough. Living for the sake of living and having children doesn't cut it for most people, so we adopt visions of the good life to work toward—reasons to live and ways to make sense of our life stories.

That's another thing humans are uniquely capable of. We can choose our reasons to live. Some live to see their children grow up. Others live to conquer their fears or find happiness. And as we age, we often change our vision of a fulfilled life. When we were young, we might have believed that finding the "right one" would give our lives meaning and purpose and significance, but after fifteen years of being married to the "right one," we may find our purpose in a career or trying to find a new "right one."

We're all confronted with the challenge of justifying our lives at one point or another. Some are hit with this question following years of living on autopilot. After high school, college, marriage, kids, and the start of a good career, we wake up one morning unsure why we are doing anything at all. Yesterday was just like today, and tomorrow will be the same. You aren't going anywhere. And there doesn't seem to be much of a point to any of it. Life is stressful and exhausting, and despite moments of pleasure and a few notable successes, you can't shake the feeling that you've been just "going through the motions" your entire life. We sometimes call this a midlife crisis, but increasingly I encounter young college students who wrestle with these

same debilitating questions. My suspicion is that such moments come to almost everyone living in western society at one point or another.

For other people, the obligation to justify their life is an exciting challenge, like climbing Mount Everest, but for existence. They might describe their goal as to “feel alive,” which is a very odd phrase when you consider it. Only someone who’s alive can try to “feel alive,” and if they are alive, then whatever they feel is already what it feels like to be alive.

So what is behind this odd phrase? What do we mean when we say we want to feel alive? I believe there are two desires at work here. Sometimes it is a desire to tangibly feel our aliveness in a world that constantly mediates experience through technology and screens and busyness. Intellectually, we know we are not robots, but every once in a while, it’s good to jump out of an airplane because no robot would do something so absurd. We are more than cogs in a machine because we are capable of acting irrationally.

Alternatively, to “feel alive” is the desire to live our lives to the fullest. We are all going to die, and if we don’t do something meaningful and significant then we will have wasted the only thing that truly matters. We may write a bucket list of experiences we want to have before we die.¹⁵ We must climb this mountain, visit all fifty states, plant a thousand trees, or raise successful children before we die. Whatever our goals, we want to feel like we’ve done enough to make our lives worthwhile, to feel like we mattered. To feel alive.

We have many other ways we speak of justifying our lives. We want to know that our lives “made a difference,” “told a good story,” “meant something,” or that they were “full” or “rich” or had a “lasting impact.” However we frame the challenge, according to our contemporary anthropology, we each have to *find* some explanation for our life.



Justification also involves an explicitly moral dimension. We desire to know that we are righteous. In a few pages we will look at the question of values more broadly, but here I want to consider how morality and justification overlap. We have a sense of this connection when we ask ourselves, “Am I okay?” or “Am I a good person?” Some may experience this as feelings

of shame or guilt, a pervading sense that they are morally inadequate or corrupt. When these impressions become overwhelming, they rise to the level of justification: my life lacks value or purpose because I am not a good person.

The great difficulty is that if we are our own, then our moral horizons cannot be given, only chosen. And that means that the only assurance we can ever have that we are living morally must come from within ourselves.

No one can absolve you or pardon you. As we'll see in the next chapter, the best other people can do is offer their opinion. Similarly, no one has the right or ability to tell you what your life means, why it matters, or what your purpose is. Of course, a lot of people have suggestions. They may even be quite forceful in persuading you to devote your life to the environment or to healthy living or to some god, but these are always mere suggestions. If your life is your own, nobody can decide why your life matters except you. You have to live your truth.

Again, this is both exciting and frightening. It means we don't have to follow in our parents' footsteps. We don't have to adopt our community's values or its vision of the good life. We are free to discover the meaning of our own life—but we're also burdened to discover it. We can only ignore the question for so long before we break down. At one point or another life will become so difficult and painful that the only way we'll be able to keep going is by telling ourselves that we have a purpose. We are going somewhere with our life, and that matters.

THE WEARINESS OF BEING YOURSELF

If I am my own and belong to myself, then I must define who "I" am. My parents can name me, and the government can issue me a Social Security number, but only I can decide my identity. And much like the responsibility to justify ourselves, the responsibility to define ourselves is not something we can opt out of. To be human is to have an identity. And the contemporary understanding of humanity decrees that each of us has the freedom and responsibility to define that identity.

Think about this: the basic story we tell ourselves in the modern world is of self-discovery. Our films, novels, and TV shows repeatedly follow the

story of a protagonist who longs to know who they truly are, to uncover their authentic self, to throw off the expectations of fathers, teachers, and the rest of society in order to follow their own path. Pick virtually any Disney animated film of the last three decades, or any number of recent dramas about defying gender or sexual norms. In literature, many of the great novels of the mid-twentieth century are explicitly about self-discovery: *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, or *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko. We might even say that self-discovery is our contemporary hero's journey.

Who are you? What is your personality? What motivates you? What are you passionate about? How do you perceive yourself? How do you want the world to see you? These questions are not easily answered, and our answers often change during different seasons of our lives. But what doesn't change is the obligation to answer them, to define who we are—publicly. When that obligation feels overwhelming, we call it an “identity crisis.” Many people suffer from a chronic identity crisis, shifting from one identity to another throughout their life.

We take it as a matter of course that to be a teenager is to suffer through an identity crisis. Young adulthood is a period in which you find yourself, define yourself against your parents and your past, and explore different possible identities. And this crisis is distinct from the natural discomfort many teenagers feel as they go through puberty. Just as young people are learning to feel normal in a rapidly changing body, they are also under cultural pressure to discover who they are. Whatever identity they choose (which is almost always defined by the market) will be contested by those with other, different identities, so that they never quite feel secure.

Not that adults are any more secure in their identities. Although we are likely to frame it in language of growth rather than exploration (which is mostly for the young), the anxiety remains the same. When it manifests as a midlife crisis (which is still fundamentally about redefining *who* you are), the anxiety can lead people to make sudden and drastic life choices with profound consequences.

One of the more demoralizing experiences of growing older has been witnessing so many couples end their marriage over a midlife crisis. One

spouse feels their identity is inadequate compared to other people (*I don't matter, or feel full or significant*), or perhaps they get lost in considering all the possible identities they could adopt (*What if I weren't married to a woman who leaves me sexually unfulfilled? What if my career wasn't held back by my children? What if I could live in a better city?*). In any case, one or both parties come to believe that their real, satisfying, authentic life can only be achieved by severing the marriage. Sometimes it involves an affair. Sometimes it involves abandoning their religious faith or political beliefs or sexual or gender identity. I have seen this take place with people close to me.¹⁶ We've all seen it occur publicly among Christian celebrities.

My point here is that married adults in the West have the relatively common experience of waking up one day and concluding the roles, relationships, obligations, and lifestyles that once defined their identity are no longer fulfilling. And in that moment, a modern person can come to feel that it would be immoral *not* to follow this new, truer identity—even if it hurts many people around them. Of course, if we really are responsible for discovering and expressing our identity, the moral pressure to be true to yourself regardless of how it affects others makes perfect sense.

People haven't always experienced identity crises as normal. In fact, where modern people suffer from identity crises, earlier societies suffered *spiritual* crises. The best example of this is Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, which famously begins: "Midway on our life's journey, I found myself / In dark woods, the right road lost."¹⁷ One reason these lines have resonated with readers for centuries is that the poet is describing a common human experience: waking up halfway into life only to discover you are lost. Perhaps you wake up one morning questioning whether your life is worth living. Or you might wake up wondering who you are. Regardless, the image of suddenly discovering that you are off the "right road" and lost in the "dark woods" is a resonate one. But the "right road" meant something different to Dante than it does to us today. Dante has not lost his identity; he is not confused about who he is. He has lost his spiritual vision.

Soon after he finds himself in the dark woods, Dante sees the sun rise over a mountain. He desperately tries to climb the mountain and get closer to the sun (which represents the Son of God and divine illumination), but

he is stopped by three animals representing his sins. At this point the poet Virgil appears and leads Dante through Hell and Purgatory and up to Paradise. For Dante in the fourteenth century, the question was not “Who am I?” but “Who is God?” and “How can I grow in Christlikeness?” *The Divine Comedy* describes one man’s efforts to know God, but it is also the poet’s way of describing the spiritual journey that everyone must take. In the process of knowing God, Dante learns more and more about himself, about his sins, and the ways God has blessed him. But self-knowledge is a byproduct of knowing God; it is not the goal. The goal is to know God and become like him.

If *The Divine Comedy* were written today, I think it would be the story of one man’s efforts to know and express himself—that’s the life journey that every modern person must take. The “right road” would not represent the way of Christ, but a process of self-revelation and actualization. The “dark woods” would represent an identity crisis, and the beasts blocking the way to self-actualization would be cultural expectations and self-doubt instead of sins. A modern *Divine Comedy* might still include religion or God, but only insofar as they help the protagonist discover their real, true self—a complete reversal of the Italian poet’s original vision. From Dante’s spiritual crisis to our modern identity crisis, the search moves from external to internal sources. One way to understand that shift is to recognize that unlike the fourteenth-century poet, contemporary people tend to believe that they are their own and belong to themselves, and as a result, their identities are in question. We can lose our “self” in ways that wouldn’t have made much sense to Dante.



Even when we discover our true self or create our own identity, we still need some kind of external validation, and so we must express ourselves—a process called “expressive individualism.” We are our own and belong to ourselves, but identity always requires the acknowledgment of other people. There’s a tension here, and you can find it all over our culture.

On one hand there is the pull of autonomy: “I am my own; only I can define myself; it doesn’t matter how other people see me, only how I see

myself.” But on the other hand, there is the pull for recognition that is inherently a part of identity: “People must acknowledge me for who I am and see me how I desire to be seen.” A teenager listens to music that reflects and expresses her personality to other people, even though the lyrics are explicitly about rejecting the judgments and opinions of other people. A middle-aged man wears a shirt that reads, “Only God can judge me,” but clearly wants you to judge him based on his shirt. We strive to independently define our identity, but we are always dependent upon others for the recognition of that identity.

The resolution of this tension is simple but idealistic: we want everyone to recognize and affirm our identity precisely as we define that identity at this moment in time. No one has the right to define me, but in order to have an identity, I need them to see and affirm me. And in order to get people to see me, I need to express myself—a lot. The more people who witness and affirm my identity, the more secure I feel. I believe this partially explains the glorification of fame (and infamy!) in our times. We are shaped by the logic of the attention economy, where attention to ads, apps, articles, images, videos, trending topics, and so on is a measure of value.

When your identity requires public recognition and affirmation, you can never really stop expressing yourself. No person is significant enough to permanently ground your identity with their gaze of approval, although we sometimes allow ourselves to think so. Particularly when we are young, insecure, and infatuated, we can easily imagine that if he or she would only look at us approvingly, then we’d feel secure as a person. Later in life, we might imagine a career or artistic achievement as the definitive grounding of our identity. But it is never enough.

And the terrifying thing is that everyone else in society is doing the exact same thing. Everyone is on their own private journey of self-discovery and self-expression, so that at times, modern life feels like billions of people in the same room shouting their own name so that everyone else knows they exist and who they are—which is a fairly accurate description of social media. To be recognized is to draw the gaze and the attention of others. To be affirmed is to draw their positive gaze. But if we are all responsible for creating and expressing our own identities, then everyone is in competition

with everyone else for our limited attention, and no one is secure enough in their own identity to ground us with their approval. How can we cope with such fierce competition?

THE UNCERTAINTY OF MEANING

If I am my own and belong to myself, then I am responsible for creating meaning in my life. No one else can decide what love means, what my experiences means, what the sunlight bursting through leaves on a tree means. Humans cannot live without meaning. We must interpret our world to navigate it. The only question is where that meaning comes from.

There is no shortage of interpretations to choose from. All art, religion, and culture are attempts at interpreting meaning in the human experience. The greatest minds in human history have helped us make sense of life. They have given songs that try to articulate our experience of loneliness and paintings that attempt to capture the beauty of nature. They have offered rituals solemnizing the sacred moments in our lives like marriage, childbirth, and death.

But if we are our own, then all these great minds like Plato, Jesus, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare can do is *recommend* certain interpretations. They are only ever options. We have to decide for ourselves what each moment of life means. And that, like every other part of our contemporary anthropology, is both a great freedom and a terrible burden.

No one really questions whether we can find meaning in life, or that finding meaning is one of the keys to a fulfilling life. In her book, *The Power of Meaning*, Emily Esfahani Smith studies some of the most respected sources of wisdom in the world to determine what they all agree on as ways to have a meaningful life. The subtitle of her book is *Crafting a Life That Matters*, which perfectly reflects the assumption that we are individually responsible for our life and whatever meaning we find in it. What she discovers is that the modern world is experiencing a “crisis of meaning,” and that belonging, purpose, storytelling, transcendence, and growth are the universal keys to experiencing a meaningful life.¹⁸

Johann Hari’s *Lost Connections* describes a slightly different kind of crisis, but offers a strikingly similar solution. For Hari the question is, why are

modern people so depressed? Rejecting the “chemical imbalance” explanation that has driven the sales of antidepressants and therapy, Hari argues that what we really need are deeper, more meaningful connections with other humans, with work that matters, and with values that motivate us.¹⁹

In both of these books the authors understand the nature of meaning in the same way. Both of them conclude that modern people in the West are experiencing a loss of meaning, and that meaning is essential to a good life, but how do we *get* meaning? For Smith, Hari, and Steven Pinker (who has written a book-length defense of the modern enlightened world) meaning is primarily something we *feel*, not something we discover or recognize.²⁰ It is a subjective, internal experience, not an external reality (or, more properly, an internal-external reality) that we acknowledge.

But if we are our own, meaning can only ever be internal because no one has the right or ability to impose meaning upon us. Artists, philosophers, and religious leaders can make recommendations about what things mean, but nothing more. And if I don't like their recommendation, I can shop elsewhere. If I like the meaning of sex conveyed in a particular romantic film, then I can choose to adopt it as my own. But if I find it too restrictive or emotionally intimate, I can find a different story, perhaps a pornographic one, that interprets sex purely as an act of personal pleasure or power. These are not just two different depictions of sex; they are claims about what sex *means*, its purpose, value, and significance.

Another way of understanding our predicament is that in the modern world, meaning cannot be imposed upon us from an outside source. Instead, our experience of life is something we impose meaning upon. The closest our society comes to imposing meaning on people is requiring us to act in certain ways. Politicians and other leaders can require us to act *as if* certain things have definite meaning. For example, national holidays are an effort to force citizens to act as if a date were sacred. Flag codes try to establish definite meaning to a flag by fining people for not treating the flag correctly. An employer may ask you to smile at each customer as if you were happy to see them. But to you, the Fourth of July means a backyard party with your family and friends, and the American flag means right-wing politics or freedom, and persuading yet another customer into buying something they

don't really need is depressing. We have the freedom and obligation to interpret our lives for ourselves, and "meaning" is the name we give to the subjective result of our interpretations of life.



The problem is that meaning doesn't *feel* subjective. In fact, what gives meaning its ability to carry us and make sense of the world is its weightiness outside of your head. When a loved one dies, your sorrow doesn't feel like a personal interpretation. Certainly, your relationship with them colors the meaning of their death for you, but the meaning of loss goes beyond your head. Or, at least, it *feels* like it goes beyond your head. The death of this person, the love of this man or woman, the beauty of this poem, the injustice of this event—all of these meanings seem to touch upon a reality that is independent of you. Whether you were to acknowledge it or not, the love a small child feels for his mother when he is held in her arms has a definite meaning. The very thing that makes such a hug so powerful and reassuring is that it seems to communicate something objectively true about existence; in this case, something like "You are safe and loved."

How can a modern person who is responsible for creating meaning for themselves deal with the sense that meaning really isn't something they create? For the existentialist philosophers of the mid-twentieth century, life is absurd and tragic precisely because meaning only *seems* to have some objective reality. We experience life as if it were meaningful, when in actuality, there is no meaning except what we impose. Life requires a great deal of courage to face, not just because it is hard and painful, but because it doesn't objectively mean anything, and to go on living requires us to choose to see meaning where there is none. According to this line of thinking, the task of each individual person is to reject the meanings imposed by tradition, authorities, and custom—which are all false—to acknowledge that life is meaningless, and to choose to create meaning anyway. Not everyone has the courage to live authentically, but for authors like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, living with the knowledge that life is meaningless and one day you will die is the only way to truly live. Everything else is self-delusion. Life may be absurd but knowing that it is absurd is better than living a lie.²¹

The existentialist answer to the problem of meaning might sound depressing to you, but it doesn't have to be. If you are your own, you can choose to see the inherent meaninglessness of existence as a kind of blank canvas. All you have to do is erase the drawings put there by tradition, tune out all the critics who want to tell you how to draw, box out the other artists who keep trying to draw on your canvas, and create your own masterpiece. Alternatively, you can choose to deny your freedom to draw. You can follow a highly detailed drawing tutorial on YouTube that produces something lovely and utterly inauthentic, but that would require you to deny that you are your own and are wholly responsible for creating a life of meaning.

THE QUANTIFICATION OF VALUES

If I am my own and belong to myself, then I'm also responsible for determining right and wrong for myself. No other person or institution has the authority to impose their morality on me. I may choose to abide by social norms and laws in order to make my life easier and more pleasant, but that's a choice I make for my own interests, not because there's anything inherently right about the social norms and laws. "Morality" turns out to be the assertion of someone's will upon someone else—an exercise of power, not truth.

In such a society, the basis for our moral positions is ultimately personal preference or deep feeling, something internal and private. We may use terms like "equality" or "justice" as we argue for a law or criticize the behavior of others, but if we are our own, then the only thing underneath those values is our preference for certain ideas of equality or justice. In *After Virtue*, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has described this perspective on values as "emotivism":

The specifically modern self, the self that I have called emotivist, finds no limits set to that on which it may pass judgment, for such limits could only derive from rational criteria for evaluation and . . . the emotivist self lacks any such criteria. Everything may be criticized from whatever standpoint the self has adopted, including the self's choice of standpoint to adopt.²²

You have probably heard someone make a moral claim based explicitly on the way it makes them feel, and perhaps you thought they were being overly sensitive or emotional. But MacIntyre argues that most of us are operating as emotivists; even when we appeal to “impersonal criteria,” it is a mask to cover our personal preferences. And if we belong to ourselves, all we ever have is our own perspective, whether expressed explicitly or behind a mask of objective standards.

I am my own, therefore, I owe no obedience or submission to anyone. It sounds like a perfect recipe for anarchy. As Mitya says in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “Without God . . . everything is permitted.”²³ A few pages later, Mitya notes, “If he does not exist, man is chief of the earth, of the universe.”²⁴ We find a similar thought in Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch*: the man who accepts the death of God and chooses to establish a new morality by his own will.²⁵ Or we can look at Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*. When Mr. Kurtz journeys into the heart of the Congo looking for ivory, he discovers that without the constraints of society and the church, all he has left to guide his morality is his personal conscience, which turns out to be a paltry substitute. He is radically free to be a cruel oppressor. Religious critics and even some pragmatic agnostics have argued that we need to believe in God in order to live morally because we will only have a reason to deny our selfish and destructive impulses if we believe in a moral source outside of ourselves. And yet, over a hundred and thirty years after Nietzsche declared the death of God, Western civilization has not actually fallen into chaos and anarchy. Why is that?

From a historical perspective, modern liberal democracies are actually quite orderly. Western democracies are incredibly safe compared with other periods of history. We almost never worry about bandits when we travel. Political corruption and the abuse of power are relatively restrained. And we enjoy more basic human rights than at any other time in history. This raises an important question: If we all choose our morality for ourselves, why hasn’t the West fallen into utter chaos?

I think there are two primary reasons why our contemporary anthropology doesn’t lead directly to anarchy. The first is that with the loss of a moral order established through religion, modern people are left with

“human concerns” and gravitate toward universal benevolence, as the philosopher Charles Taylor has described.²⁶ With a vision of human solidarity, we feel an obligation to improve all human welfare. Society then becomes a space for “mutual benefit,” where we help each other by helping ourselves.

Not everyone feels this sense of human solidarity. Like all other modern moralities, it is optional. And as Taylor points out, there is nothing that requires me “to take universal human welfare as my goal; nor does it tell me that freedom is important, or fulfillment, or equality. Just being confined to human goods could just as well find expression in my concerning myself exclusively with my own material welfare.”²⁷ Indeed, some people do deny that universal human welfare is their problem. They remain focused on their own, individual happiness. And if they are their own, why shouldn’t they? But for the most part, modern people have a vaguely defined sense that they ought to leave the world better than they found it, that they should relieve suffering and fight injustice wherever it is found. When we participate in such activism, it is easier to convince ourselves that our lives matter. We are valuable and significant because we make the world a better place.

The second reason we don’t live in a post-apocalyptic wasteland is that even when you give people freedom to determine morality for themselves, they generally choose to live peaceful, orderly lives. The loss of objective morality does not lead to violence, but it does lead to consequentialism. Following the Golden Rule makes life easier and more pleasant for everyone. Being faithful to your wife improves your quality of life. Paying for a music streaming service is simpler than pirating music. On the whole, being evil is a terrible way to live, and pragmatic humanism is beneficial.

But while we can trace a reduction in certain crimes in the past few centuries, that does not mean that contemporary people are more moral than those in the past. Perhaps it’s true, but I’m not sure how anyone could prove it. The prominent humanist Steven Pinker has used statistics on falling crime to argue for the success of the Enlightenment project (which includes the belief that we are our own and belong to ourselves).²⁸ This contemporary anthropology doesn’t only affect whether or not people act morally. It also changes the way we understand moral laws and our motives for acting morally.

Once we accept that morality has no objective existence, we tend to privilege moral judgments that can be supported by data because data (and specifically “efficiency”) are the closest things we have to universal values or a common good. For us, a moral law is an evidence-based law that has been proven to reduce suffering or increase human flourishing. For example, some argue that regardless of questions of human dignity, prostitution should be legalized, because legalization will reduce violence and venereal diseases. As Steven Pinker has argued, “human dignity” is a squishy phrase used to smuggle in all kinds of baseless taboos and prohibitions.²⁹ We can count the number of victims of sexual violence, but we can’t measure the loss in human dignity that occurs when a person sells their body. We can’t even agree that human dignity is a thing, or that prostitution is an affront to that dignity. If we are each responsible for our own moral laws, then we have no right to impose a value like “human dignity” on another person, even if we believe it’s for their own good. But measurable harm is a different matter altogether. Once you can quantitatively demonstrate the harmfulness of a behavior, then you can regulate it.

I suspect that it is precisely the measurability of “universal benevolence” that modern people find so reassuring. We want to know how many malnourished children we can feed for twenty-five dollars a month, how many lives were saved through international medical aid, how effectively education can improve social mobility, and so on. Reducing measurable harm is the overarching goal, and measurability is the key. We might not agree on what counts as “human welfare,” but we can agree that decreasing harm is good.

All across the political spectrum you will find experts making primarily data-driven moral arguments for policies or social norms. Even Christians, who ought to believe in an objective moral law revealed by God, tend to rely heavily on data and evidence-based arguments. It just feels natural in our society. And I think it feels natural because Christians, like everyone else, tend to think of themselves as autonomous. And among autonomous individuals, the language of numbers is the surest foundation for morality.

Which brings us to another implication of our contemporary anthropology on morality: everything is in flux. Once you begin grounding morality on data, you must be ready to change moral norms and laws when the data

calls for it. For some thinkers (and I suspect Steven Pinker would fit here) this is a great advantage of utilitarianism.³⁰ It is a moral system that operates more like science than religion. We update and modify our morality based on new information.

While quantified morality is the closest thing we can have to a shared morality, even it remains optional. Even when we know the evidence-based reasons to behave in a certain way, there's nothing objectively requiring you to accept the conclusions of data. You are free to litter or hold bigoted views. It's just that it's much easier and less costly to follow the data. One reason you may choose to adopt a moral position that contradicts our best data is that it is useful in expressing your identity. When morality becomes a matter of personal perspective, individuals can make moral arguments in order to show the world the kind of person they are. You don't have to oppose war or global warming because they are objectively wrong, or because we can quantify the harm they cause. You can oppose them because it feels right and reflects your brand or personality. Later, when your values change, the causes that define you can change as well.

THE INSECURITY OF SELF-BELONGING

If I am my own and belong to myself, then any and all associations, ties, and relationships I have are voluntary. I might lend myself out for forty, fifty, or eighty hours a week in exchange for pay. And I might figuratively “belong” to my spouse or kids or my community. But in the end, these are choices I've made about how I want to live my own life, which belongs only and ever to me.

I might just as well not lend myself out to a particular employer, or I could choose to not work at all, keeping all of my time for myself. Ideally, I'd find a job that allows me to *feel* as if I were free, even though I have promised myself for eight hours of labor per day, five days a week. If I have choices, I am still, basically, essentially, my own, and I don't belong to anyone—not even, really, to my family.

I “belong” to my wife only to the extent that I choose to belong to her. I owe her some fidelity, but it's a negotiated, contractual fidelity. I promise not to sleep with other women so long as she promises not to sleep with

other men, but fantasies can't really be policed, and if for some reason one of us decides that our belonging together is not as fulfilling as we hoped, we are legally free to separate. I may even feel a kind of moral obligation to leave my wife to be with someone more fulfilling, perhaps a more authentic relationship. After all, if I am completely responsible for my life, then the greatest moral failure would be for me to fail to pursue what I desire most. I owe it to myself to be happy, and I cannot rely on anyone else to provide that happiness. So I can only belong to my wife tentatively.

Likewise, I belong to my kids in a narrowly defined legal and biological way, but both law and biology are fluid. I'm legally responsible for feeding and caring for my children, but they don't have any hold on my *identity* unless I want them to. I can love them and provide for them, but I can also allow them to grow up to be free individuals, just like myself. If they choose to visit me in my old age, that will be nice, but I'll understand if they're too busy. I wouldn't want to be a burden to them as my parents were to me.

My biological connection to my children is stronger than the legal obligation, but properly understood, biology merely explains why things are. It can't tell us how things ought to be. And in fact, most of the greatest achievements in human history have involved humanity's refusal to accept the physical world as it is: vaccines, genetically modified food, wind turbines, the airplane. I may not be able to undo the fact that my children share my DNA, but I don't have to accept that our shared genes *mean* anything. They are an accident of biology. The coincidence of genetic similarity.

I may also choose to associate myself with a specific community, but even if I was born and raised in one city, that place has no formal hold on me, neither the people who live there or the natural environment. Sometimes it can be hard to shake the emotional baggage of the place you grew up. It feels like it is a part of you, even if you don't want it to be. But that can't be objectively true if I am my own. It is only a feeling. With enough determination, I can leave my hometown behind. Leaving home to follow our vision of the good life is an essential part of our modern hero's journey. In a traditional hero's journey, the hero returns home after a period of testing and growth so that he can liberate or cure his home. But I don't think we need to come home anymore. And if we do come home—if we do allow our community or hometown to have some pull on us—it's only because we choose to let it.



The modern person belongs everywhere and nowhere at once. In her bestselling book *Braving the Wilderness*, popular author Brené Brown advocates for just this idea of belonging: “True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness.”³¹ For the mature person who accepts that they belong to themselves, Brown declares that they will be free to be completely alone or completely committed to wherever they are, because true belonging is inside them. And according to Brown, the freedom to belong wherever you choose to be (because you belong to yourself) requires serious courage. As we saw before, the defining dynamic of our modern anthropology is the tension between the excitement and terror of radical freedom.

We are free to join and leave our communities, to live in one place and adopt a digital community completely divorced from that place, to dwell in a city but never inhabit it. But we also have no place to ground us, no relationships that can make demands on us. Neither our bodies nor the Earth can contain us, because our bodies can be transformed, and the Earth is not our responsibility.

When they are asked to define freedom, contemporary people usually imagine the absence of constraints. In many ways, liberal democracy is premised on this conception of freedom. Humans cannot be truly human without freedom, and freedom means that no one can control me, coerce me, obligate me, or limit me. As we shall see in the following chapters, this understanding of freedom as limitlessness has shaped the way our society structures itself.



What these implications have in common is that they all come with a responsibility: the responsibility to justify our existence, to create an identity, to discover meaning, to choose values, and to belong. We might collectively refer to these as the *Responsibilities of Self-Belonging*. Of course,

not everyone feels each of these responsibilities in the same way to the same extent or at the same time. You may feel tremendously burdened to live a significant life, while your neighbor may be quite obsessed with his identity. And over the course of a lifetime, we prioritize different responsibilities. I am not describing a monolithic experience of the modern world that is necessarily caused by a particular anthropology. Humans are rarely that simple, and whole societies never are. But this much I believe to be true: to the degree that our society has largely adopted the belief that we are our own and belong to ourselves, we all feel the Responsibilities of Self-Belonging. This is also true: there is another to whom we belong, and living before Him frees us from the unbearable burden of self-belonging.

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