

THE ANARCHIST LIBRARY
ANTI-COPYRIGHT



Ran Prieur

Essays

2002–2004

Ran Prieur
Essays
2002–2004

Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------------------|----|
| The Mathematics of Responsibility | 3 |
| Thinking Through the Fall | 6 |
| Violence vs. Pacifism | 11 |
| The Soul of Progress | 14 |
| The System Works | 18 |
| The Coming Expansion | 23 |
| Science the Destroyer | 28 |
| July 2011 Update | 32 |
| Violence Unraveled | 33 |
| Against Rights | 41 |
| Why do pedophiles get all the attention? | 45 |
| These Colors Run | 50 |
| The Effects of Highly Habitual People | 56 |
| Credits | 65 |
| Grand Diversifying Theory | 65 |
| The Animal in the Dark Tower | 74 |

to open ourselves to rawness and otherness and flux. How often does a child who wears shoes become an adult who goes barefoot? Have you ever seen a “property” owner *remove* a lock from a door? How many people, as they get older, have fewer possessions and care less whether those possessions get scratched? We try to go “back to nature” by moving to the woods and installing buildings and utilities, but how many people move to the city and take them out?

We have to learn, if not these changes, then thousands of changes like them, and the relentless focus and expansive awareness to drive them. If we don't, as long as we favor domesticating motion, we'll get a ratcheting effect that will seduce us from the healthiest society straight through self-absorption into hell. And if we do, if we learn to favor motion toward wildness, or learn to navigate the spectrum with full consciousness, then we can not only stabilize ourselves in stone age societies that are known to work — we might also increase our range, and sustain ways of being that are farther from nature than the stone age — or closer! As the drug trippers say, it's not how far you can go — it's how far you can come back from.

How can we ever avoid this trap? There may be no exit, nothing but to keep veering off and crashing, eon after eon, until we veer so far off and crash so hard that nothing survives bigger than a rat. Or maybe humans will continue to physically evolve off to the side, farther from our roots, more dependent on our fleeting technologies and cultures, making our extinction ever more likely. Or maybe somehow we can physically evolve into a more integrated animal, through some sci-fi scenario that's not as implausible as space colonies.

But the usual idea is that we will *culturally* evolve into a more integrated animal, and the simplest version of this is that we'll live like known indigenous peoples, anchored by the customs of our ancestors and our knowledge and love of our native place. But if this is all that's holding us to nature, then all it takes is for conquerors to force us out of that place, or eradicate the species we eat, or send our kids to school, or kill almost all of us, and we'll be disconnected and drifting, sucked into depression and probably into the culture of our conquerors.

Or will we? Some of the world's indigenous cultures have survived conquest and displacement, or are fighting it now, and they are not the same as they were a few centuries or decades ago, in that they now include awareness of civilization and techniques for resisting it, techniques that are evolving right now under intense environmental pressures. Even people with no indigenous cultural background, even people (like myself) who don't feel a deep bond with nature, are culturally evolving awareness of civilization and techniques for resisting it.

There may even be a level of evolving behavior deeper than learned culture, but not DNA. It's the level that tells a spider how to spin a web, or birds when to migrate, a level that biologists can tell stories about but have yet to explore. We could see it as a kind of species-wide group mind that can change over time. I suspect that this concept would not be troublesome or even surprising to most non-European and indigenous cultures, and even Western experimental scientists are starting to notice it. (See Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past*)

In any case, it's not enough that we learn a *location*, a way of being that's in balance with nature. We must also learn a *direction*, a way of moving toward wildness. The mythology of our civilization is onto something when it says "we can't go back." We (individually and collectively) find it psychologically much easier to drift deeper into comfort and control and predictability, than

The Mathematics of Responsibility¹

It's frustrating to be stuck in a world where I actually have to point this out, but what we call "responsibility" is not distributed by breaking up "full responsibility" and dividing it into parts. If you add up everyone's responsibility for something, it doesn't equal 100% – it equals a billion percent if it has to, because any number of entities can be fully responsible for the same thing. Another way to say it is that our responsibilities can and do overlap. Another way to say it is that nobody's responsibility for anything excuses anybody else.

For example, Hitler is fully responsible for every particular murder in the Holocaust. But so is the actual person who did the murder, and every person in the chain of command, and the fanatically repressive Prussian culture, and maybe the victim, if there was a chance to see the murder coming and fight or flee.

I just pushed a hot button, but it's hot only because of our idea of "blame," which is a lie. I don't "blame" anyone for anything, because I understand that blame is stuck responsibility – falsely packing it all in one place to block it from being traced where you don't want it traced.

For example, if a woman gets drunk and passes out at a frat party, and she gets raped, and I excuse the rapist by saying the woman should have known better, then I am stupidly blaming the victim. But if I hold the rapist fully responsible, and also hold the society that trained the rapist fully responsible, and also notice that the victim took a huge risk and had the power to choose otherwise, then I'm not blaming anyone – I'm being honest and paying attention.

This gets even trickier when someone is punished for doing something good. The *Raise The Fist* website was recently shut down in a violent police raid. Some people (who are being ripped off if they're not on the authorities' payroll) made slippery suggestions that the author of the site should have known the police would come after him, and therefore that he was somehow at fault.

"He should have known! Jesus should have known he'd be crucified! Gandhi should have known he'd get people beaten and killed. Nelson Mandela and Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel should have known their activities would get

¹ Originally published February 7, 2002, on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/mathres.html>

them locked up. Idiots! When people threaten violence you should do whatever they say, or you deserve what you get!”

We can step over this little trap by thinking clearly: We’re talking about two different definitions of “responsibility.” One means being a necessary part of causing something bad to happen; and the other refers to our moral need to do the right thing. It seems strange to us, but it’s possible, even common, to be responsible in both ways with the same action, to knowingly invite something bad by doing good.

So in the first sense, the *Raise The Fist* author was responsible for the police raid – and so were the police. And in the second sense, he was being courageous and responsible, by running his web site even though it was very likely to be violently attacked, and the police who attacked it were being irresponsible and cowardly, by putting their selfish fears ahead of openness and freedom.

It gets even trickier still, when evil minds engineer perverse situations where we have to actively do the wrong thing to prevent something we especially fear. If you voted for the “lesser of the two evils” in the latest sham election, then you would have no chance in a really difficult test, like the scientific experiment where a monkey mother and her baby were put in a specially constructed cage, where the floor was heated until she had to stand on her baby and let it burn to death, or be burned to death herself. The Nazis built an entire society on this technique – the Holocaust would have been impossible without the participation of millions of Jews, who carried themselves to their deaths with their own feet and energy, or even helped Nazis run the ghettos and camps, just so they could survive a little longer.

I know it’s easy for me to sit in my cozy apartment, not having been psychologically tortured for months or years, and tell people in the middle of an insane mass murder what they should have done. If I were in their place, I would certainly have done just what they did, because if I was the sort to do the right thing even at the cost of my own life, then I would have been killed a long time before, and would not have survived to be in their place. Does this excuse them from responsibility for their choices? No!

If that’s hard to take, look at this: Weren’t the Nazis themselves in the same kind of situation as the Holocaust victims? They too had to go along with an evil system or be killed. They were different in that they felt good about supporting the evil system, but that’s because they were broken under torture as infants and children by horrific German child-rearing practices, as Alice

there, we are still domesticates. Domesticates have no ecologic place, and they show it consistently and universally. When non-European indigenous peoples received and began to use firearms, for example, they revealed their exotic placelessness without missing a beat.”

A common anti-civ argument goes that “we” lived sustainably for more than a million years before the few thousand years of civilization, that stone age technology and only stone age technology has ever been sustainable, and that therefore we should live pretty much like we lived for that million-plus years. But that wasn’t us! Those were our less biologically-domesticated hominid relatives. Arguably, *Homo sapiens sapiens* has never lived sustainably, by which I mean that we have had societies that gave as much as they took, but that these societies themselves were precarious, that they could and sooner or later did fall out of balance – or get knocked out of balance by conquest or technological infection from some imbalance over the horizon.

I suggest that we draw the line in our heads not between industrial civilization and hunter-gatherers-plus-nature, but between *Homo sapiens sapiens* and all other life – and of course not in the sense that we are more “highly” evolved, but that we have evolved to some strange place off to the side, isolated and dangerous, the animal in the dark tower.

Maybe everyone would be better off if we just went extinct. But that’s not realistic as a goal or even politically viable as an argument, and it would put us in the extremely civilized mental space of fixing a problem by killing the bad guy. There is no problem, only a situation, one that demands more complex understanding and action than just knocking down the technological infrastructure – although that would certainly feel good, and it would greatly decrease the assault on nature . . . for the moment.

The situation is that particular civilizations keep crashing but the human tendency to fall into civilization persists. Roughly, we do it by using our hyper-flexible technique to invent ways to get some obvious benefit by doing some less obvious harm. The harm could be geographically distant, or far in the future, or concealed in the perspectives of other creatures, or even right in front of us but subtle. And once we’ve done it, we’re in a feedback loop, tending to become dependent on the benefit, to extend and intensify our destructive practice, and to hold back our empathy or our “self,” so that we don’t notice the harm because that awareness would jeopardize the whole racket.

extinctions occurred at different times — and at the same times that humans appeared in those areas. Even in historic times there is evidence of ecological impact by hunter-gatherer societies. A recent analysis of the journals of Lewis and Clark found that the regions with the most diverse and abundant wildlife were the regions with the fewest indigenous humans.

Also, what happened, exactly, to *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*? One often reads that they were not “exterminated,” merely “out-competed,” as if the actual people faded into air as peacefully as the colored lines representing them on graphs, as if the extinction of an adaptable and intelligent human species in a world of wilderness can sort of happen by accident. If they ran short of food they must have been driven out of the land where they were getting their food, which would have required force, maybe the same kind of force with which Americans “out-competed” natives in the 1800’s. Neanderthals had larger brains than us, so it’s a reasonable guess that they were smarter, but apparently not as good at fighting.

John Livingston, in his book *Rogue Primate*, wonders if we killed them off because we were bothered by their wildness. That’s just an aside in a radical and challenging analysis of human domestication.

Livingston distinguishes humans from all other animals by our reliance on culturally-transmitted technique: knowledge of how-to-do-it that is no longer dependent on nature, on having a place in the web of life, but on nurture, on abstract mental models learned from other humans. He calls this a “prosthetic being,” an interface with the rest of the world that is no longer direct or intimate, but buffered or mediated by our intellectual and ideological devices.

He speculates that the tipping point was the taming of fire. From that time, our ancestors built an increasingly domesticated or idea-dependent culture, and here’s the kicker: Out of that domesticated culture evolved *Homo sapiens sapiens*, us, already biologically adapted for domesticated life, with thin bones, weak muscles, dull senses, and brains specializing in abstraction.

Then we spread over the Earth and developed the whole variety of nature-based indigenous cultures — but these cultures are still prosthetics: They are not a true merging with nature, only an uneasy fitting-together. Livingston writes:

“Nowhere may the human presence be seen as fully integrated and “natural,” because wherever we may be, or however long we may have been

Miller documented in *For Your Own Good*, and they had to become sadistic, authoritarian, and emotionally detached to survive in their environment. Does this excuse them? No! But this understanding makes it easier for us to forgive them and look deeper, which we need to do if we’re going to get anywhere.

Some of you want to draw lines and make categories: exploiter and exploited, criminal and victim, guilty and innocent, evil and good. Go ahead. It will only protect you for a little while from seeing the truth, that there are no lines, that there aren’t even clear categories with a grey area between — that it’s *all* grey area, all the way in, all the way out, and we’re all in it together.

The context that inspired this column is the idea, fashionable among radical intellectuals, that the ruling elite are the evil final cause of our troubles. I believe that the ruling *system* is a deeper cause, and that the elite are actually *more* exploited, because the system owns not only their bodies but their souls. I crafted this column to prevent the strawman argument that interprets this uncommon and valuable perspective as the feeble position that the elite have no choice.

We can see the same thing happening in contemporary arguments about foreign attacks on Americans. Any non-shallow exploration of the causes of this violence is shouted down by trembling indignant people on the false grounds that it justifies the attacks or excuses whoever has already been blamed. Clearly something is striking terror in the hearts of these Americans — and it’s not foreign attacks.

If we keep blaming rulers and criminals, without asking how they got that way, we’ll still be fighting the same stupid battles in a million years. Maybe that’s the idea — maybe some people *like* fighting these battles, or they need to keep fighting for fear of what they’ll see when the dust settles. I want to get the fighting over so I can play and slack off, so I’m going to look deeper, to the society that applies overwhelming force to make people evil enough to keep it going, to the emotional and intellectual habits that underlie that society, to the origin of those habits, and so on. . .

An anthropologist once asked a native what the earth stands on. The native said, it’s on the back of an elephant, and the elephant stands on the back of a turtle. And what does the turtle stand on? Another turtle. And that turtle? Another turtle. The anthropologist concluded, “It’s turtles all the way down,” and maybe we think that native is a fool. But I think he’s wise and was trying to teach the Westerner something. What’s foolish is the idea that there’s a

final cause, or a final truth, or a final anything. “Final” is just a command: Stop looking.

Or think of it this way: If we say that Hitler and Kissinger and the Bushes are just evil and that’s that, then *we* are trying to escape responsibility. We are denying our own power to choose to understand and forgive them, which doesn’t help them much but helps us tremendously; and we are denying our power, even our obligation, to transform our society into one that doesn’t produce such evil people. How can we do that? I have only a vague idea, but that’s the road that’s before us, and as Martin Luther King said, in the best ever definition of responsibility, we must go down that road, even if we go alone.

Thinking Through the Fall²

The most naive way of thinking about the future, after the escapist fantasy of techno-utopia, is the eco-liberal mantra that we must stop destroying the earth right now, or it will be “too late.” This civilization is incapable of stopping or even slowing down what it does. Like any system based on concentration of “wealth,” it is a machine whose only behavior is to keep taking more and more until it runs out of “resources” and implodes. Not only that, but unless all the ecological specialists who made their “last chance” warnings in the 70s and 80s were wrong, it’s been too late for a long time now. This raises the question: Too late for *what*?

Not for life on earth. For countless species of fungi and bacteria, who call food what we call toxic waste, the future is looking better than ever. Most plants and insects, and even some small mammals, are in no danger of being exterminated this time around. I believe that even humans are safe. If we wanted to go extinct, we would need to bring our whole species to a uniform level of utopian domestication and helpless dependence, and then let the whole thing crash. Instead we’re making a billion people as tough as rocks with the barbaric global violence that makes “advanced” society possible.

It might be too late for whales, eagles, giant trees, and many other species that we love (when it’s convenient for us). And it might be too late for all

The usual anti-civilization argument features a line between civilized and natural, such that on one side we use up the Earth and crash, and on the other side we can live in balance forever. Or, actually, there are two lines, one for what we can get away with in the future and one for where we went wrong in the past. Whether these lines must be in the same place, or may be in different places, is such a profound question that most people simply assume one or the other without thinking. For now I leave the question open.

In telling the story of where we went wrong in the past, the line is most often drawn at the invention of agriculture around 10,000 years ago. So on this side is a densely-populated, authoritarian, labor-intensive, Earth-consuming, expansionist society, domesticated and cut off from its roots, and on the other side are nature-based wild humans and all of nature, merged in perpetual harmony, disrupted only by the single exceptional event that spawned civilization.

If you’re against civilization, it’s comforting to believe that this event was a fluke. Then we only have to put the world back the way it was, and with the slightest precautions, this nightmare will never happen again. But given that something happened, we should assume it was prone to happen, more than half likely given the circumstances. The burden of proof is on those who want to say it was a fluke, and in this case, though they have some evidence and stories about how hunter-gatherers got tipped into settlement and farming, they’re nowhere near proving that the shift was unlikely.

If you look at a thorough global timeline of prehistoric technology, you don’t see a sudden movement beginning at the invention of agriculture, merely an acceleration of a movement toward domesticity that goes much farther back. Around 40,000 years ago there was an earlier acceleration, still unexplained. Anatomically modern humans might have appeared at this time, or much sooner, or even later, depending on your definition of “anatomically modern” and the evidence you focus on or exclude. This whole subject remains tangled in uncertainty and controversy, but in any case the technological and biological changes that made civilization possible, if not inevitable, have been going on for well over a million years, since fire and stone tools.

It seems — though there is still debate — that our harmonious hunter-gatherer ancestors exterminated a lot of species. For a good argument that at least some of these were killed off by a global catastrophe (other than that of domesticated humans), see Vine Deloria’s book *Red Earth, White Lies*. But other

² Originally published February 21, 2002 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/thefall.html>

be like an obsessed game-player who suddenly remembers the world outside the game, or like a prisoner in a one-windowed cell who breaks out into a mansion with many windows, or like someone in a dark room with a radio, who thought one station was the whole universe, but now learns to twist the dial.

The Animal in the Dark Tower¹⁸

Industrial civilization is ravaging the Earth, and its participants are sick, stressed out, and alienated. Agricultural and pastoral societies are a lot less destructive, but destructive enough that they've turned formerly lush regions into deserts, and the lives of the participants are easier than ours but often narrower. Hunter-gatherers are the least destructive by far, do the least work (and their "work" is more like play), are the healthiest, and have socially rich, meaningful lives.

From here, it's only a short step to the political ideology that we should all be hunter-gatherers again, after we take apart this civilization or it falls apart on its own. This position is stridently condemned by people who (predictably) have a huge ego investment in civilization, who don't want to consider that they could have wasted their lives, or their history, so badly. They cry "romanticism" while themselves dreaming that technologies of domination and self-absorption will lead to utopia. Or they declare it categorically impossible to "go back," though that's what we've done all through history when our little civilizations have burned out. Or they correctly point out that the end of this system will mean a drop in the human population, as if the blame for the dieoff rests on the economy of the survivors and not on those who permitted billions of human lives to depend on the radically unsustainable exploitation of "resources."

If our species survives at all, it will be in societies more intimately related to the rest of life, and thus, according to Western mythology, "lower." What I'm arguing here is that the ideology of simply knocking down or outlasting civilization, and then simply *being* in these other societies, even hunting-gathering, does not go far enough.

but a few of our surviving non-civilized human cultures. What it's definitely too late for is a non-catastrophic transition to a sustainable society. And these catastrophes are easy to foresee:

Regional famines are caused by erratic weather, by depletion of the soil, by blights in monoculture crops, and by trade that permits large populations to live in desolate regions. All of these are becoming greater and greater threats, and we're only continuing to feed our population by feeding these threats, by borrowing against the earth's capacity to feed us in the future.

Disease epidemics have ravaged humans ever since we started living in cities and traveling a lot. They're not just remote history — the flu epidemic of 1918 killed 20 million people. Technological society claims to have defeated many diseases, when really it has just been running from them with vaccinations and antibiotics and chemical toxins. These are cheap fixes that actually weaken our ability to deal with the deeper causes of disease. Again, like someone falling into debt, we have only been increasing our troubles by pushing them into the future.

In the same way, we have been putting off and intensifying the inevitable disastrous effects of chemical pollution, radioactive waste, irrigation that concentrates salt and makes deserts, species extinctions, destruction of the earth's natural ways of detoxifying, and of course our own increasing alienation from the rest of life. Like participants in a pyramid scheme, we have been buying our "success" by stealing from the people who will come after us — except soon those poor suckers will be us.

I expect the catastrophes to come in waves, a little one here, a bigger one there, teasing us and licking at our feet, until we're in them. The USA has more money, water, and good land than most places, so we won't be worst off, but we've been living so high that we might fall the hardest. Some time when you're on a busy street, in line at the post office, on the bus, look around. Get used to the idea that most of these people will not live a lot longer. Who among them would survive if the food stopped coming into the city for a month? A year? How many would survive as refugees, walking hundreds of miles in weeks? Who would lose the will to live before learning to eat rats and drink from puddles? In the worst epidemics 90% die and 10% live. Which group will that person be in? That one? You?

It seems unfair: The people who will pay are not the ones who borrowed. But what do the payers pay? A few weeks of suffering and an early exit from

¹⁸ Originally published 9 February, 2004 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/dktower.html>

this horror movie. And what did the borrowers borrow? A lifetime of fear and denial half-covered by shallow pleasures. If we're going to survive *mentally*, we need to unlearn the value system that civilization taught us for its own benefit, and learn a different one, where death is not the unspeakable ultimate bad thing but a normal friendly part of life; where electricity and hot tap water are not necessities that elevate us from humiliating poverty, but minor luxuries, even fads; where living well doesn't mean insulating yourself from everything you can't predict or control, but having honest friends and a day to day life that's meaningful.

People know this. Of futures where humans survive after this system falls, one of the worst imaginable would be where the earth is barren but the violent selfishness of civilization continues. But we know this as the "postapocalypse" genre of popular adventure movies like *The Road Warrior*. That's how bad our own world is — that we *fantasize* about a world with war, hunger, and no trees, just because we'd get to be outside all day fighting for something that matters, instead of cowering in sterile buildings rearranging abstractions.

I don't want to romanticize the collapse. It's not going to be a judgment or a "cleansing" where the bad people die and the good people survive. It's not going to have a clear beginning or end, and it's mostly not going to be fun. We will be throwing the stinking dead bodies of our families into pits and kneeling in garbage coughing up blood. But we may also get to break the pavement off the streets with sledge hammers and plant gardens. Within the humans-live earth-lives civilization-falls range of imagined futures, even the bad extreme is not so bad, and at the good extreme we see the earth quickly healing to its former fecundity, and people living peacefully with other life, and never sliding out of balance again.

But why shouldn't we? Historically when great centralized empires fall, younger ones at their edges grow and take their place. Why should it be different this time?

Now it begins to get tricky. Obviously we don't just want to knock the system down to get revenge on it for forcing us to go to school. We want to make it so our descendants can live a million generations without ever falling back into this nightmare and dragging the earth with them. How can we do this? Is it even possible?

What is the deeper disease, of which corporations and factories and police are merely symptoms, and how can we learn immunity? If this is the question,

But why create reality at all? If exclusiveness is bad, then let's take the filters off and merge with the infinite everything — beyond identity, beyond perspective, beyond time!

I respect this position, but mine is more conservative. I'm looking for a mode of being much more rigid and narrow than dissolving in the universal, but much more slippery and trippy than just being more open-minded humans, and I think we can do it. I think we're already on our way. The new age people are on the right track with their saying "You create your own reality," but they have made a dangerous blunder by using three deceptive words: you, your, and own. Because "you" are merged with countless other you's, we have to agree on our reality, to the extent that we want to stay together.

This is why so many varieties of experience seem to actively, intelligently evade proof, because *we* are intelligent and only some of us have agreed to enter the worlds of these experiences. And an early step toward deeper diversity is to respectfully permit others to experience realities that you choose not to experience. You don't say their worlds are "not real," and they don't try to force you to see what they see. Alternate-world peace!

But if we want to stay together, wouldn't this diversification of reality break us apart? Not necessarily. As I said at the beginning, there are at least two ways to diversify, or to reconcile our needs for complexity and change with our need to share experience; and they both begin with diverging paths of reality-filtering.

In one way, the person serves the path, and we each focus in to one view, and share experience only with others who see it exactly the same way. Factions of believers forget their wider selves, and see the survival and dominance of their one model as the meaning of life. Then all the models fight it out and destroy or consume each other until there is only one, and it will be one like Cartesian science, that maximizes force and excludes empathy. Then this one will be broken by the need for complexity and change, and if it's broken in the same way, the awful cycle repeats.

In the other way, the many paths serve the person. So that's the second custom of our new meta-science: We each become a broader consciousness that can balance many models, or pass in and out of many worlds previously seen as absolute. As they say, if a fish described its environment, the last thing it would say would be water; but we can be like a water creature who becomes aware of water and not-water, and learns to move in land and air. Or we can

pass through that world to get anywhere, that everything else is a dead end. (Not that dead ends are wrong. They can be fun and even valuable, like going into a cave to bring back a treasure, or like a book that leads you to transform or transcend the world that contains it. Maybe the biggest question of our time is whether civilization is a dead end, whether we can get anywhere from here without first going back to nature.)

But *why* is certain experience necessary? Who decides? This leads to a more profound and difficult meaning of “real”: *shared*. The subject of other beings and other perspectives is too deep for this essay, but it’s right in my path, so I’m going to go down into it a little ways and try to pick my way across it.

You could believe that you alone are aware, and imagining the entire universe. But instead you choose to believe that others are aware in the same way you are, and are sharing roughly the same experience. We all need to share our experience with others. We can each have a good time veering off alone into our personal dream worlds, but sooner or later we must rejoin others, and we will generally choose even a terrible shared world over a pleasant world that we experience alone.

But who are these “others”? They are not just other humans beside us. They are also inside us and around us. Your awareness of reading this essay is only a small part of your wider awareness of yourself as a human, with your name, living your life. Move your attention to your body. . . and now to your financial balance. . . and now back to intellectual awareness of these ideas: You have moved between different beings, or different aspects of a larger being. You’re acknowledging this multiple self when you talk about what “a part of me wants” or “being nice to myself.” And if you can forget a broader self in a narrower self, it’s a good bet that the larger “you” is itself a small part of a still larger being of which “you” are scarcely aware.

This is important because of my core assumption that awareness is fundamental, that matter and space and time are epiphenomena of mind. It follows that mind can do anything it wants. The way I see it, which is hinted at by theoretical physics, transcendent experience, and persistent investigation of the unexplained, is that a practically infinite variety of experience and modes of awareness are already there, always available; and our brains, our languages, our sciences, are merely filters, “creating” one reality by excluding all others.

then the answer is not to just be Indians again, because Indians clearly did not have immunity and were overrun by civilization everywhere. Maybe we can return to the same economy, but if we also return to the same consciousness, I see no reason civilization won’t overrun us again.

Indians are always quoted saying they “don’t understand” civilization, and this is precisely why they’re so vulnerable. It’s why, when Columbus landed, people ran out to bring him gifts, instead of . . . instead of what? What *could* they have done? The Seminoles went into the swamps and fought a guerrilla war and didn’t do much better. How can a non-coercive society defeat a coercive one? That’s what we’re here to figure out, and whatever it is, it’s not going to come from a perspective on civilization that says “We do not understand why you do not hear the earth screaming.” It will come from a perspective that says “Oh yeah, civilization. Been there, done that.” And it is only here, in the belly of the beast, that we can learn it.

I’m assuming that the permanent transcendence of civilized consciousness is possible, but we’d better not assume it’s inevitable. We don’t have to do anything to end any given civilization, but to end civilization in general, to stop one after another from rising and falling until humans go extinct, we will have to take focused, inspired, and audacious positive action. This action will be deep — more on the level of emotions than ideas or physical tools; it will be more about being alive than being right; and it will be done with, or upon, people with the full-blown emotional plague, starting with ourselves.

Now we’re walking a dangerous line. We have to go deep into civilization to get over it, but not so deep that we cripple the earth. Oops! It looks like we’ve already failed both ways: By the time this civilization crashes, the earth will be badly wounded, and still many people will be fighting to start the game again or keep it going — not just hard-driving white yuppies, not just the super-elite preserving technology in their fortified compounds, but working people all over the world, who, when they’re programmed successfully, are programmed to value laboring to gain advantage for their families in zero-sum games of money and social status.

All the people in the world who have lost sight of their oneness with the earth, but not yet gained sight of the emptiness of their striving, will be fighting to rebuild the farms and factories and schools and offices and governments, and we’re going to have to live with these people, and stand up to their abuse and protect the earth from them, as long as it takes for them to wake up.

Even if it takes only a lifetime, that means *your* lifetime. Even if we can and do transcend civilization, nobody alive now will get to see this transcendence as a sudden happy event. For us it will be a process, drawn out, messy, and unresolved.

I don't know what exactly is going to happen, but I can guess! First, before things start to loosen up, they will get even tighter. For generations the most powerful, brainy, and wicked people in the world have dreamed of a high-tech global security state, and this is their big chance, their little moment on the stage. We will see retinal scans, chip implants, and every computerization of authority that you can imagine — and to everyone's surprise it will all be an embarrassing failure, because systems run by technology are easier to scam, and inspire less loyalty, than systems run by people.

Now we've got several things going on at once. Systems are being run by machines, so people are forgetting how to run things — but the machines are not sustainable. And famine and disease and poisoning and war are striking closer and bigger. And different parts of the world are at different stages in all this, and they're probably fighting each other.

Systems will break down in many ways and not at the same time. If somehow the whole world's technological infrastructure fell hard all at once, then it would not be rebuilt, and to rebuild something like it would take hundreds of years, because no one remembers the older technologies that the newer ones were built on. But I don't see this happening without a science-fictiony super-catastrophe.

In a complex and uneven breakdown, some societies will still have high-tech industry, and they will certainly use it to try to consume societies that don't. Like a fire that goes to where there's still fuel, the present system will live on where there is enough oil and emotional distress to keep it going. Elsewhere, depending on how many people get left alone to try things, we might have a spectacular variety of local economies and societies. Then we can work out in practice what we can now only argue about: How much technology, and which ones, can we get away with without going out of balance?

In any case, all over the world, the conflict between addiction to civilization and transcendence of it will continue. The difference between transcendence and destruction is all-important. If the catastrophic failures of systems are credited to resistance movements, and not to the nature of civilization itself, if both sides think civilization would succeed if it wasn't for the dissenters, then

But if we have all these different visions, won't all but one of them be wrong, because there is only one true world, independent of our awareness, which our models seek to match ever more closely? That assumption is allied to totalitarian metaphysics, and I reject it. And secretly, so do the metaphysical totalitarians — the self-declared "skeptics" who apply their skepticism only to non-dominant theories. If they really believed their models were being drawn by an unalterable end point, they would be confident that the false theories would come to nothing, and ignore them. Their powerful desire to attack competing belief systems proves their secret fear that beliefs create reality.

Now it starts to get tricky. What is this "reality" and how can beliefs "create" it? To go any further, I think we need to drop our burdensome concepts of "real" and "delusion" and "objective" and "subjective," to cast off that whole style of thinking and try putting everything in terms of experience and mental models. So if you see purple and I see blue, we no longer worry about what color it "is." You see purple and I see blue, and there you have it! You see the little gray gnomes and I don't. What a wonderful world!

When we talk about "real" we are confusing several different things. One of them, the will to feel the comfort of absolute, universal, closed mental models, is a mistake. But other meanings of "real" still need to be talked about, only more precisely.

One of them is *potential* experience, like what we will find "really" inside the box if we open it, or especially what we will find *outside* the box. If I say that this world is an "illusion," and in the "real" world we're in vats with computer cables feeding this vision to our brains, what I mean (at the least) is that we have the potential experience of shifting our perspectives to a world that contains and fully explains this one.

Overlapping this is the idea of an experiential dead end. If I go see *The Matrix*, and I say it's a movie and "not real," I mean that it is contained and fully explained by this world, but I also mean that I can come out of it *only* by the way I went in. I can't go see *The Matrix* in 2003 and come out of a different screening on Mars in 2035. Or if I'm playing a computer game, I can't break away permanently into a physical universe just like that game. The only experience available to me is what's programmed into the game, and to come to my senses sitting in a chair staring at a monitor.

So a stronger meaning of "real" is *necessary* experience: If we say this world is illusion and another world is real, we could mean that we have to

going at once, all at least tolerating each other and if possible collaborating. (I'll get to the second custom at the end.)

So if we have sciences that focus on the quantifiable, we can have others that exclude the quantifiable. We can have one that explores the subtlety of emotion the way physicists now explore the atom, so in addition to naming invisible particles, we will have ten words for different kinds of wistfulness, and fifty for happiness. This is realistic: Sanskrit has 20 words that we can translate only as "consciousness" or "mind."

If we have conservative sciences, we can have many more that are thirsting for newness, so that an established theory requires *more* evidence and a strange new theory requires less. And where we now feel the need for only one theory, we will feel the need for many. So in cosmology we can have not only the big bang theory and a few dynamic steady state theories, but the theory that stars are projections on a big shell, and the theory that the earth is flat and when you seem to circumnavigate it you are traveling on an infinite tiled surface of slightly different alternate earths, and the theory that what we see through telescopes is mostly determined by our beliefs. And all these theories will mingle happily, even within the same person, with no thought that they should "resolve" their differences any more than we now think the whole world should watch only one TV show.

We can have sciences that focus on the rarest and most variable mental experience, and reject physical "evidence" because of its homogenizing effect. If bigfoot hunters bring back a dead creature, we lose interest — it's just another vulgar matter-animal. But as long as the phenomenon leaves only sightings and ambiguous footprints, it's fascinating! Where does this experience come from? Where does it lead? We don't lose interest but gain interest when we find out that lake creatures just like the Loch Ness monster have been sighted in bodies of water only a few feet deep: This is not just a surviving plesiosaur — this is something *good*.

Telepathy, precognition, psychedelic trips, abduction experiences, astral projection, fairies — bring them on! And if they can ever be controlled in the laboratory, or completely explained, we'll throw them in the dustbin to be scavenged by the matterheads. We will no longer seek to know our world like we know a fact, but to know it like we know a person, not to explain phenomena but to have relationships with them.

we will keep fighting forever. People who call for the overthrow of industrial society are making a tactical error, giving civilization's servants a way to blame others when their own plans fail. When people starve in an economic collapse, they can say, "See, this is what the anti-civilization people were asking for." But if we *predict* catastrophes, and explain how they're built into the system, and save some people through our own systems, then we are giving civilization enough slack to hang itself, and skillfully inviting people to our side.

I think we're going to do it. For one thing, the oil and coal that power industrial civilization have mostly been used up, and much of what's left will take more energy to extract than its burning will generate. Non-industrial civilizations will emerge, maybe like ancient or medieval civilizations with scavenged technology, probably powered by slaves. But the first time around they had surprise — they succeeded by conquering naive Indians and other people with no experience resisting a more "advanced" society. Next time they will be fighting cultures forged in the deepest fires of the techno-industrial megamachine — the cultures that we are creating now, even if we don't know it.

I've made a lot of assumptions here, and ignored many potential events, some of which will actually happen. China could launch a military attack on the USA. Or the breakdowns and changes could be less extreme and take hundreds of years. Probably the most important thing happening right now is something I've completely overlooked. I remember what an old Soviet dissident said: "History is like a mole, burrowing unobserved." Get ready.

Violence vs. Pacifism³

The question of whether and when to use "violence" is extremely complex and almost no one wants to think about it. But almost everyone wants to tell you what to think. Of the discussions I've happened to read, only Derrick Jensen in *A Language Older Than Words* seems interested in actually exploring the subject, and not just fortifying a position.

³ Originally published 7 March, 2002 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/vipac.html>. See also *Violence Unraveled*.

Ward Churchill's 75 page essay *Pacifism as Pathology* is a powerful pro-violence manifesto. But it does not address the strongest anti-violence arguments. Nor do books advocating strict non-violence (I looked at Michael Nagler's *Is There No Other Way*) answer the strongest pro-violence arguments. Having journeyed mentally to both perspectives and come back alive, I am not interested in finding the truth but in getting people loose from the truth.

A strong pro-violence argument might begin by cracking the nut of absolute pacifism. If somebody tries to rape you, obviously you should fight back. If a guy has a gun and is shooting a bunch of people, somebody needs to stop him right away by any means, not wave signs protesting the violence. With these kinds of arguments you can build a slippery slope all the way to the Unabomber, if you're a radical, or if you're conservative all the way to the bombing of defenseless people by your country's military.

The solution to this problem is not to keep the cat from getting out of the bag, but to learn to live with the cat, not to avoid the slippery slope but to learn to navigate it. This is not a radical or controversial idea. Our whole society tells us that it's OK to have police with guns, and armies with bombs, and prison guards and hospital orderlies and dance club bouncers using force for the common good, and we think nothing of it; but when someone suggests it might be OK to shove a cop, to sabotage a missile silo, to spike a tree, then suddenly it's a betrayal of principles, a dance with the devil, a moral crisis.

This double standard is raw and pure conservatism, fear of change, fear of the unpredictable. But on the predictable path of the present dominant system, what has already been predicted is the near-extinction of the earth and everything on it. Holding the dominant system and competing systems to equal standards is actually the sanest and most balanced way, and if we resist it it's only because we have investments in the dominant system.

Another point for violence is that the famous successful non-violent movements of Gandhi and Martin Luther King were both backed up by the threat of violence by allied movements. Their peaceful revolutions worked not through non-violence alone, but through a good-revolutionary bad-revolutionary dynamic where the violent people made the pacifists seem like an acceptable lesser evil.

But if pacifism acting alone has a questionable record, violence acting alone is much worse, and pro-violence people carefully avoid noticing the historical record of "successful" violent revolutions. Look at the decades of horror that

experience, especially of something like the UFO phenomenon, varies widely, and cannot be produced at will in the laboratory or even in the field. But a physical artifact will stay the same through place, time, and culture. Every human being who looks at it and touches it will see and feel the same thing (or close enough). So it is literally a blunt object to force everyone in the world to see it your way, to make your mental model the god-emperor.

Finally, Cartesian science is conservative, although, to its credit, it is less conservative than the sciences that came before it, just as it is more conservative than the sciences that will follow it. Conservative scientists feel disturbed by anomalies and fringe theories, because they have an emotional aversion to leaving multiple paths open, and a stark horror of permitting a non-dominant path to proceed and diverge. They love the feeling of closure, of a sealed-off world where everything is perfectly understood. The arch-exclusionist Carl Sagan expressed this attitude with the dictum that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," a deceptive phrase because it slips between two meanings of "extraordinary": What he is saying is that claims that are *not politically established* require a *greater quantity* of evidence. It's like having an election where every vote for the incumbent counts twice.

All these customs are arbitrary, but not accidental. That is, they could all easily go other ways, but they go the way they do because of effects on human society that some interest wanted or needed. And the most obvious effect has been to turn us into a bunch of machine-like servants of an earth-paving beast.

But it's not over yet, and as they say, never show a fool a thing half-finished. Maybe we needed Cartesian science to break us out of sky father worship, and maybe we will continue to need it for that purpose in the more backward parts of civilization. And in the places where it has been most dominant, the desire to move beyond it has been strongest, so maybe it's not a trap but a painful step in the human journey. Even when we transcend it, I don't want to eliminate it. It's given us some wonderful things, like computer games and fuzz guitar and glow-in-the-dark stuff. And it's only beginning to play with creating new animals, and taking us to strange new states of consciousness. Maybe in the future it will drive an underground subculture of dangerous machines. We need a bit of the dark side. Let's keep it around.

But beside it, and beyond it, we can make a thousand other paths. So one feature of Cartesian science, its totalitarianism, I ask us to utterly reject. In our new meta-science, the first custom will be: multiple contradictory sciences all

into words, let alone into numbers, my sentiments are dismissed. And if you'd rather live in a world where people make things at home, by hand, at their own pace, than a world where factories full of numb micromanaged laborers crank out 100 times as many things, all identical and built to commanded written specifications, then you are romanticizing an impossible and inferior past — if possibility and quality are defined in exclusively Cartesian terms. And if, after a few years of this, some people feel that the whole world is somehow terribly wrong, then they're being ungrateful and "irrational," because the numbers just keep getting better.

I'm avoiding the word "rational" because it serves to confuse us. Sometimes it means careful precise thinking, and sometimes it means exclusively Cartesian thinking. The hidden message is that these two things are positively related, and they can be, but they don't have to be, and sometimes they are negatively related, as I'm showing here by using precise thinking to break down the Cartesian world view.

Fixation on number and measure is only the beginning. Cartesian science includes only experience that stays the same across place, time, culture, and perspective: If an experiment comes out differently in different places and times, or for different people, it is excluded; if an experience cannot be made uniform among observers, it is excluded. Cartesian science demands that experience be controllable and predictable, and that we, the experiencing perspectives, be perfectly interchangeable. So it focuses our attention in to the small part of our world where experience is controllable and predictable and uniform, and it builds technologies that create more such worlds, like a TV show that ten million people see all the same, instead of seeing their ten million varied lives.

Cartesian science is totalitarian: It commands that there be only one mental model, which all people must hold in their heads. It permits competing theories, but they are in a death match. They may not make peace and go on perpetually using different models. Sooner or later they must fight it out until there is only one theory, which everyone will then hold identically.

Cartesian science favors matter over mind. We're all so deep in this one that few of us have thought to question it. Even UFO enthusiasts, who like to think they're on the fringe, are always looking for "physical proof," because they take for granted the Cartesian doctrine that the material is worth more than the mental. This is related to the totalitarianism and uniformity: Mental

followed the Russian Revolution, or the many revolutions in Africa, or even the American Revolution, which accelerated the genocide of the Indians. Notice that Canada and Australia, which meekly remained English colonies, are now better countries than the USA in almost every way.

Violence breeds violence. Belligerent people from violent anarchists to fascists snobbishly dismiss this idea as a cliché, the same way a music snob scoffs at a good song just because it gets played a lot. But it doesn't matter how many times it's said, or how uncool the people are who say it — it's true and it's a good metaphor. Violence really does breed violence, maybe not necessarily, maybe not all the time, but reliably enough that we'd better not forget it.

Also, pro-violence arguments ignore the subtle power of really skilled other-than-violent action, the way it can and does shame people into backing down when they don't have to. Pro-violence thinkers like to lump together every strategy other than simple force, as if Jews who fearfully went along with the Holocaust were doing the same thing as the followers of Gandhi who went out of their way to break the law and risk their lives, as if being nice to your oppressors in the hope that they will like you is the same as dangerously confronting them but just not attacking, as if masochistically sacrificing your life is the same as fearlessly gambling it. These strategies are psychologically completely different. Powerful non-violence is not about hoarding moral purity by not doing anything "bad" — it's about *gaining* moral authority by showing really impressive courage.

At the same time, pacifist absolutists use phrases like "just the same as" or "no better than" to lump together kinds of "violence" that are psychologically completely different: Using force mindfully in exceptional cases is a different thing than using it mindlessly and habitually; attacking buildings and machines is different than attacking people; spontaneous bottom-up violence is different than managed authoritarian violence; and simply destroying something, whether or not it's a good idea, is radically different than using the threat of destruction to influence people's choices.

I could have been putting "violence" in quotes the whole time, since its meaning is so sloppy. If I crash a car into a pole by accident, is that a violent death? How about if somebody feeds carbon monoxide into my bedroom and I die peacefully in my sleep? Some of you said yes and no and some of you

said no and yes, and yet we all use the word “violence” as if we all agree what it means.

Was it non-violent when WTO protesters blocked delegates with their bodies? What about when they physically struggled with delegates trying to force their way through? If it’s non-violent to stand in the path of a tank convoy, or chain the door of a building during a protest, then isn’t it also non-violent to disable an oil pipeline? If it’s non-violent to pour fake blood on something during a protest, then how is it violent to paint graffiti? Sometimes radical actions get classified as “violent” or “non-violent” not on the basis of the force or destructiveness involved, but on the basis of whether they have been sanctioned by the radical elite. Sometimes “pacifism” is not about peace but about deadness, about maintaining predictability, about fear of free human life.

And often forceful or destructive action is not about freedom or aliveness or true change, but about egocentric revenge, about maintaining the habit of violence, about keeping the fighting going because you wouldn’t know what to do if it stopped.

I’m not just offering no answer — I’m offering *explicitly* no answer. I’m not “neutral” but strongly biased against all authority, including the authority of radical intellectuals; I’ve seen enough infighting to be disgusted with anyone who says their way is the only way and everyone else is wasting time or making things worse. I think there are potentially as many ways as there are people, and only a few non-ways: to cynically give up trying, or to make your success depend on changing other people, or to do what you’re “supposed” to do and deny your soul. It’s not what you do but why you do it; it’s not where you are but whether you’re moving; and if you keep expanding your attention and doing what makes you feel alive, those are the means that justify all ends.

The Soul of Progress⁴

Years ago I read a science fiction story, *Masks* by Damon Knight⁵, about the first human-machine hybrid and his secret loathing of biological life. I loved the story, because I felt the same way. So do you. Didn’t you notice? Are

luminescent plankton. UFO’s are the star Sirius, which seems to change color when it’s low in the sky. Rains of fishes were sucked up by a tornado over water. Go ahead — it’s easy enough. But my point is, this way of thinking is not necessary. You have chosen it, or it has been chosen for you, and you have the power to choose otherwise.

When I read these reports, my reaction is “Cool! Where can I read more? How can I use this stuff to break out of my present reality and into new ones?” Imagine you’re in a stone-walled structure and you hear a report of a crack in the wall. What do you do? If you feel you’re besieged in a fortress, you will go try to seal it up. If you feel you’re locked in a prison, you will go try to open it wider. If you feel you’re a keeper of slaves, you’ll go try to seal it up. These are emotional decisions, or political decisions. They cannot be neutral.

What we call “science,” I call one little kind of science, one grounded in the emotion of fear, and the political need to dominate. To be fair, so was the science it replaced, medieval Christian theology. And that science was even worse in that it excluded all direct sense experience of the ordinary world, and accepted only the non-ordinary experience and symbolic ruminations of the elite (which themselves could only embellish canonical texts).

But in other ways, medieval Christian theology was not as bad. I call our present little science *Cartesian* science, after one of its founders, Rene Descartes, who got the idea from a non-ordinary experience in which an “angel” told him that the way to conquer nature is through number and measure. This is no different from JHVH telling Moses that the way to conquer other religions is by prohibiting graven images: It’s a suggestion, of esoteric origin, to arrange experience in a specific way to cause a specific deep change in human mental models and human behavior.

Our descendants will marvel, not that Descartes saw an “angel,” but that he was so twisted that he consciously wanted to conquer nature. And his idea worked: Cartesian science, by focusing strictly on the measurable and quantifiable, calls forth the enormous power of machines, while excluding emotions and values — except the emotion of taking pleasure in turning things into numbers, and the value of wanting numbers to be better.

So if you “love” the forest, that’s worth nothing compared to even one of the millions of board feet of lumber we can produce by cutting down that forest. And if I prefer a hand-driven tool to a motorized tool that applies 20 times as many angular foot-pounds per second, but I have trouble putting my preference

⁴ Originally published 19 April, 2002 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/soulprog.html>

⁵ <http://ranprieur.com/readings/masks.html>

way is that we learn to love diversity, and the more we can love the more we will have.

I'm not talking about the diversity of the "multiculturalism" movement, though I suppose it's a start. To me that's a nightmare vision of a world of identical bland happy-faces with little tags identifying their race and religion and sexual orientation. I'm talking about deep diversity, and then deeper.

Civilized humans, everywhere in the world, massacre wild plants and animals — including wild humans — and choke the earth with crops and pavement, because civilized humans are all the same. And wild humans, with their taboos and strict rituals, are not altogether different, just a healthier branch on the same root. I think we can drop our roots and walk.

These "roots" and "branches" are more concretely described as modes of awareness, or mental habits, or patterns of thinking and acting based on assumptions that are seldom questioned. I'm not going to talk about "religion vs. science" because I think it's deceptive and distracting. We are all religious and we are all scientific. That is, we all make fundamental assumptions that are not subject to proof or disproof, and we have all chosen specific ways of turning experience into mental models. That is my intentionally broad definition of a science: *a style of filtering and arranging experience into mental models*.

Any choice of such a style is loaded with values and motives. It's a dirty choice that must be made. I'm not suggesting that we avoid it, but that we notice it. I don't want us to destroy our religions and sciences, but to destroy their boundaries and learn to step outside them, to practice awareness of our assumptions and styles, so that we can become meta-religious, and multi-scientific.

Suppose I say that there are reports of living creatures found encased in rocks split open by miners. One was a toad that survived; another was a small pterodactyl-like creature that gasped a few breaths and died. Suppose I say that there are many reports, unknown to each other, of cities seen in the clouds, strange and fully detailed, or that there are dozens of reports of giant rotating pinwheels of light on the surface of the Indian Ocean.

I present no argument for the validity of these reports. My point is, when you read about them, what is your habitual reaction? Probably it's to think of explanations that protect your existing mental models: The toad was behind the rock, not inside it. The cloud cities are reflections from atmospheric temperature inversions. The water wheels are just waves in water filled with

you bothered by flies in your kitchen or mud on your shoes? Do you pull or poison "weeds" that complicate the tidiness of your yard? Do you keep your lawn mowed? Of course you do. Why?? I don't want the excuse; I want the reason. Why do you stop your cat from scratching the furniture? Why do you not want door dings on your car, or stains on your clothing?

Don't tell me it's just to look good for other people. You would resent their control and soon resist it if you didn't secretly agree with them. Admit it: You have a *morality*, a sense of right and wrong, that wants things to be pure, clean, smooth, simple, predictable, perfectly managed and ordered by your overseeing ego.

This is positive and healthy in the context of civilized society. It's the soul of progress, the thing that separates us from primitive humans and other animals. We do not "go with the flow;" we are proactive. We do not weakly adapt ourselves to our environment; we take control of it. And this control is the very definition of our "selves." We are not humans. We are ascending masters passing through the ugly larval stage of the human form. No, we are not even masters — we are mastery itself, the immortal spirit of detached absolute will striving toward omniscience, omnipotence, invulnerability. Mastery is not an action but a way of being, a practice, and we have scarcely begun!

The reason we keep failing, the reason great civilizations have always fallen, is the inherent weakness of biological life. Primitive humans are falsely credited with "working" two to three hours a day, with "hunting" and "gathering" as if they were being productive. In fact they lacked the very concept of productive labor. To them, even survival-related tasks were just more ways of playing and slacking off.

It's easy to dismiss this as "human nature," but scientists are finding that all biological creatures, not just humans, are lazy, irrational, and inefficient. Even insects, who have a reputation for being industrious, spend most of their time doing nothing; and most insect species have not got off their asses and evolved in any important way for tens of millions of years.

This is the cause of all the so-called "problems of civilization" — not our advancement itself, which is destiny, but the attempt to advance in these low-grade vessels. Crime, disease, drug addiction, political unrest, social deviance, wasteful use of resources — all are the actions of biological life selfishly trying to subvert and hold back progress.

We have made many attempts to overcome biology, so far all failures. But the only way to find out what works is to try and try again. The Nazi Holocaust, for example, is often called “irrational,” but it was completely rational given the knowledge at the time. Hitler was acting under the since discredited assumption that compatibility with progress is a feature of race, and he pushed his program farther than his contemporaries could tolerate, but his instincts were dead on: For civilization to rise further, forms that are incompatible with it must be eliminated.

If you think the Nazis should have just left the Jews alone, and lived peacefully side by side with them, then maybe you’d also like the whole world to be full of butterflies and dancing children. If the Nazis were going to leave the Jews alone, then the first civilized people would have left their primitive neighbors alone and we’d all still be eating bananas and fucking in the long grass instead of standing on top of the world.

We’re not there yet, of course. Civilization might even fall one or two more times, and have to be preserved and restarted by the most socially evolved people, before we finally develop the technologies that will break us through to the next level.

I’m not talking about biotechnology. At best, it’s only a rehearsal, a way to get people mentally ready for the true revolution. Scientists are already discovering the limitations of managing biology purely through DNA. And even if we could clear all the garbage out of the human gene pool, and polish the species down to six or eight codes, each duplicated millions or billions of times, we would still have the problem of environment. We know that identical twins raised together tend to differentiate, spawning unpredictable behavior, so we would have to raise all young in isolation, at least from their own type, and under carefully controlled identical conditions, to keep their identities manageable. And even then, they would bleed and get sick and be susceptible to emotion; they would still be productive at best only 90 or 100 hours a week.

The real revolution is in artificial intelligence and nanotechnology and artificial life. Machines do not sleep; they don’t waste their attention on frivolous diversions; they do not behave irrationally. Machines have been designed by progress itself to channel its eternal spirit. They just need to get a little bit better, so they can sustain themselves without their obsolete human

Is any of this possible? And even if it is, how many people would choose it? Only a few of us talk about “transcendence” and we’re the ones who never got into our home reality in the first place. And why didn’t we? If it’s because our world is so far removed from nature, then why are we not much into nature either? Why do some people resonate more strongly with certain kinds of imagined worlds than with any apparently real world? Where are we going? What are we doing here? Who are we?

Credits

My focus on societal evil as an addiction to which some people are biologically resistant was inspired by a paper by the Reciprocity¹⁵ Group.

My focus on expansion and contraction was inspired by the book *The Lazy Man’s Guide To Enlightenment*¹⁶ by Thaddeus Golas.

Grand Diversifying Theory¹⁷

In the Tower of Babel myth, humans become too proud and try to build a tower to heaven, and what stops them is they all start speaking different languages. The myth is a few thousand years old, but a few thousand years older still is the actual human behavior of becoming too proud and sticking ourselves into a social structure that seeks to dominate and destroy life on earth and crush autonomy under a rigid central order. As in the myth, we can stop this by diversifying, by breaking down our individual and collective single-mindedness.

Tightly ordered systems come apart in at least two ways, which are not just different but opposite. One way is that we all start fighting each other. This is both unpleasant and unsustainable, because the fight must have a winner, and then we’re all standardized and controlled again under that winner. The other

¹⁵ <http://www.reciprocity.org/Reciprocity/>

¹⁶ <http://freespace.virgin.net/sarah.peter.nelson/lazyman/lazyman.html>

¹⁷ Originally published 21 August, 2003 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/GDT.html>. The sequel to *Science the Destroyer*.

domination, the people have rich, deep social relations, and abundant leisure time, and none of them ever agonize about the meaning of existence.

I'd love to live a million lifetimes chasing bison over the plains, or swimming in the warm ocean and eating mangoes, but I wonder if we have other options — or even if we *need* other options, so the whole earth doesn't get conquered and enslaved again if this bad habit reappears.

Now we're at an impasse. Nature-based people will say that their groove is the place where humans belong. Civilized belief systems say that the primitive groove is something like a trap for our consciousness, that it's our destiny to transcend it. Both sides can convincingly show their opponents' position to be an illusion of the particular way their opponents are narrow-minded. I don't trust anyone who says they're sure of the answer.

I'm sure that the groove of known nature-based peoples is wide open to our descendants, and they would love it. I'm sure that the groove of civilization as we know it is hellish and limited. And I think, but I'm not sure, that other grooves are possible. Certainly it's possible to imagine hundreds, though at first it's difficult to imagine any.

So a third vision is to slide into a new groove different from any we have known. From this perspective, and the ones that follow, the nightmare of civilization was necessary to replace the dream of the earth and make us want to wake up.

A fourth vision is to transcend habit completely, and never be in any groove — no sense of home, no comfortable familiarity, just headlong newness forever. Even to me that sounds like too much.

The vision I favor is that we will learn to master our habitual behavior, but will not use our mastery to stay out of grooves, but to make more grooves, to slide in and out of them at will and jump from one to another to another, so we can have as much newness and as much familiarity as we want.

For example, we could all live like Indians again, except this time it will be normal for individuals to move around from tribe to tribe. Or we could diversify more and add some agrarian peoples, or some technological peoples, if their technologies (and this is the real challenge) somehow keep them in symbiosis with nature and other societies. Or we might add something totally new, or even shift into grooves that our present understanding would call "alternate realities" or "parallel universes."

progenitors. Our feet are entombed in the muck of biology, but as machines we will soar free.

I don't mean we will download our "consciousness" into machines. Epiphenomenalist philosophers have proven that our consciousness is only an accidental parasite on our language, and in any case it's thoroughly polluted by our biological origin. We will throw it out with the other trash and let the machines get on with their work. The "we" that will survive in machine form is the fundamental meme of progress itself, the relentless drive toward ever greater knowledge and control.

Now, once we are no longer dependent on humans, we no longer have to maintain the parasitic, superfluous, and irresponsible biological world. Imagine: vast pavement uncracked by weeds, buildings without mildew or insect infestations, great gleaming surfaces untouched by bird poop. But the parasites will be hard to kill. Species extinction is moving at a comforting pace right now, but it will go slower as we get down to the tougher species; and some organisms, like bacteria and prions, are nearly indestructible.

Probably the only way we can do it is to put everything we want to save in outer space, and then use nuclear blasts to move the earth's orbit really close to the sun, so it gets completely sterilized, and then move it back out where we can use it. If it gets hot enough, it might even melt all the surface irregularities into a nice smooth floor. Then we can cover the whole thing with solar panels and mines and move on to the next stage of our evolution.

What, did you think we were done? Did you think it was enough to master our home planet and evolve into immortal machines, and now we can just drift around contentedly in outer space? Then you're still thinking like a lazy meat-mind. If we stop now, we might as well have stopped when we were still sitting around campfires eating mongongo nuts. The path of progress is not easy and it's not fun. It is goal-driven and the goal is absolute perfection.

Amid the vast and beautiful emptiness of space, there surely must exist other infestations that need to be cleaned up, and other planets rich with mineral resources to feed our exponential growth. Planet by planet, star system by star system, we will expand, upgrade, and ascend. If we can dream it we can do it!

There are about a hundred billion stars in our galaxy, but the actual number is really messy. We'll suck the extra stars into giant black holes and make it precisely 100,000,000,000. Nice! And they'll all be medium-large healthy white stars — none of these sickly dwarf stars or bloated red giants. Also we'll make

the axes of all the star systems and planets point the same direction. And keeping with the metric system, all stars will have ten planets, and no extra clutter. Obviously the machines that are doing this regularizing are themselves irregularities, so when they're done they will dispose of themselves in stars or black holes.

When we're finished with our galaxy we'll start on other galaxies, many of which are really ugly shapes, not nice neat spirals. We'll straighten them all out and then move on to the universe as a whole. Astronomers think the universe was once a tiny point, uniform and infinitely contracted, which somehow exploded into what we have now, but that gravity might pull it all back together again. We need to fix the laws of space and time, so that the next time the universe gets fully contracted, it never again breaks open into this awful mess, but just stays there perfect forever and ever. That's it! We've won!

The System Works⁶

A couple weeks ago in Montreal, an old man fell on the subway tracks and a young woman jumped down and pulled him to safety seconds before the oncoming train would have killed him; the transit authority condemned the woman for violating the rule against going on the tracks. America's military and intelligence agencies seem to have had advance knowledge of the 9/11 attacks and let them happen, or at the very least they were guilty of spectacular incompetence; after the attacks, these institutions were not investigated, but made more secret and given greater powers. American airports began tedious and intrusive searches of ordinary flyers, confiscating harmless items like tweezers and nail files; but when testing of security systems continued to show that skilled people could get bombs and guns through, this *testing* was restricted.

Is this insane? Is it stupid? Incompetent? Irrational? Should we be shocked? Confused? No! It all makes perfect sense, and we shouldn't be any more surprised than if we were on a battlefield and the other side shot at us. The

I think nonhuman animals are capable of all the same simple negative emotions as humans, and that they can become directly addicted to emotional contractiveness and be personally evil. But they will do so only in exceptional circumstances, and these circumstances cannot perpetuate themselves as evil societies because the animals' range of behavior is so limited, or their grooves are so deep, and what they're deep in is nature, which as far as I can tell is the surface of a symbiotic loving greater universe.

Human animals can form evil societies not because we're smarter or "higher," but because for some reason our behavior is unusually flexible. I've called humans "adaptable," but now I notice that this word blurs together at least two meanings. One of them I'll call *impressionable*. The "blank slate" theory is a simplification of this quality: that very young humans, far more than any other animal, will develop to fit their environment. So a human raised by wolves will act like a wolf, but a wolf raised by humans will act like a wolf.

The other meaning of "adaptable," I will call the ability to *readjust*, the ability of an adult to adapt to a changing environment. Most humans don't readjust any better than nonhumans — thus the cliché "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." This failure to readjust is identical with cultural conservatism, the act of holding tightly to the ways we're used to, whether they're helping or not. And to form an evil society, we must be both impressionable, to learn behaviors far out of balance, and not readjustable, to stay there.

Are humans *unable* to readjust, or *unwilling*? Could we do it if we really wanted to? Are some humans biologically more able to readjust? Can the skill be learned? Is readjustability subject to impressionability, so that we could potentially all develop to be masters of readjustment?

If we can, we haven't yet. Resistance to readjustment has been strong in all human societies that we know of. "Primitive" humans are just as habitual and narrow-minded as conventional civilized people, and even more resistant to social change. They have strict rituals and taboos; they pretend you're joking when you try to stretch the walls of their reality; they have tribal loyalty that's psychologically the same as our loyalty to sports teams or nations.

But their groove is good: their habits keep them symbiotic with the wider universe and with each other. They are stewards of their ecosystems, not destroyers. The group they're loyal to gives them full participation in power. Even warlike tribes conduct warfare in a ritualized way that's fully consensual and minimizes serious injury. Even in tribes with internal rituals of abuse and

⁶ Originally published 13 May 2002 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/syswork.html>

the earth — iron and gold and oil and uranium — is good for building weapons and social inequality and alienating machines.

So we've got several habitual behaviors going at once. There's the tension between the unsatisfying experience of the moment and the ideal image in our heads. Then there's the stressed-out activity driven by this tension, and the satisfaction of "succeeding," contracting our reality toward the ideal. And also there's the terror of having nothing to do — we call it "boredom" but it's really free time, truly open time in which all the painful truths we've been hiding threaten to flood our awareness.

But at the same time that we must be busy "improving" things, we also love sameness, recognition, being where we've been before. We resolve this paradox by striving for more and more unattainable versions of the same thing: the lawn we're used to with fewer and fewer "weeds," the TV programming we're used to on better TV sets, the driving we're used to in newer classier cars, a higher position in the labor career we're used to. Whatever it is, it's never truly different, and it's never enough.

So civilization as we know it is a bad groove, or a giant intertwined nest of bad habits, and how it got started we can only guess. But deeper than this, why are we habitual in the first place? Why do we tend to get in grooves and stay there? Grooves themselves are not civilized — they are natural. People are habitual because biological life is habitual.

Are animals evil? They obviously take great pleasure in resonating with the conventional behavior of their kind, going through the same patterns over and over, patterns which include killing. But an eagle who kills a mouse is unlike a neoconservative killing Iraqi children, because the eagle's behavior is in balance with the whole, and also because the eagle takes no pleasure in withholding its empathy from the mouse — because it lacks the option to extend its empathy that far.

But, from wherever its empathy normally extends, it might have the option to contract it. I think I once saw evil pigeons. They were in a park in London but right now anyone would recognize them as American pigeons — someone had been systematically feeding them massive amounts of junk food, and they were all grossly fat, and when a piece of food fell, and one pigeon got to it first, the next pigeon would not politely turn away, like normal pigeons do, but would viciously bite the first pigeon and squawk angrily.

system is quite sane, quite intelligent, and knows exactly what it's doing. We are just stubbornly refusing to understand it.

"The system," the global net of governments, corporations, technologies, beliefs and habits in which we are all more or less trapped, presents itself as a collaboration of decent and sensible people trying to do what's best and not always succeeding. The system accepts mild dissenters who lamely complain that it's run by idiots, or lazy people, or greedy people, making mistakes or doing crimes, and that if it weren't for this "human nature" the whole setup would work fine.

The system does not accept the idea I'm suggesting here: That real human nature is extremely malleable and wants to be intelligent and good, but that it has been twisted into its present unnatural shape for sinister purposes. That greed and stupidity are more effects of our situation than causes of it. That powerful people who know each other and conspire in secret to get more powerful are only the surface of a deeper phenomenon. That what we think of as normal human society is, from its very foundation, an evil collective consciousness, a giant brain made up of people, like our brains are made of neurons that have no view of the action of the whole. And that it is evil because of its motive. What the system does, rationally, sanely, skillfully, predictably, relentlessly, is concentrate power: take power and awareness away from every living thing and give power to artificial central "authority," and increase the strength, the perfection, the depth and breadth of central detached authority's knowledge and control.

Why are we in a system that behaves this way? How did it get started? What is its deeper meaning, or what are its unseen relations? These are metaphysical questions with answers I can barely guess at. All I'm trying to do here is help people get out of indignant denial and calmly face the horrifying truth of the system in action.

Look back at the example I began with. The system doesn't care if an old man dies. But if it can get people to put obedience to a rule ahead of their natural instinct to care for each other, even if it means allowing a horrible death, then it has won a great victory. Multiply this by a few million: War and genocide are not what we get when the system fails, but when it is most successful.

The system doesn't care if airplanes crash and buildings collapse — in fact it *wants* airplanes to crash and buildings to collapse if that will get it what it

really wants: for people to consent to degrading searches, to go along with ridiculous rules, to deny their inner strength and vision so they can respect and obey people with titles or uniforms, which mark them as the channels of still “higher” powers.

From the system’s perspective, the “zero tolerance” fad in schools is not to prevent violence, but to train people to follow rules even when they seem totally insane, to obediently suspend, expel, or arrest harmless kids for bread knives or chocolate guns.

The “war on drugs” is not to stop people from selling or using addictive substances, but, by criminalizing very common behaviors, to sort the population into the obedient and the disobedient, to put the disobedient in a lower class (prison laborers, convicted felons who can’t vote or get a good job), to make these two classes hate, fear, or resent each other, and to make the obedient be even more obedient out of fear of falling into the criminal class.

The medical system is not to heal or prevent sickness and injury, but to divert attention from the causes of sickness and injury, to suppress cheap effective treatments, to steer people into treatments that require more money and thus more obedience to the larger system, and in the best case, to get people to submit to extremely painful and expensive treatments that kill more often than they cure, just because it’s what they’re supposed to do.

The tax system is not to collect money for the government, but to get people to *consent* to give money to a central authority, and also to get them to fill their minds with a vast and complicated system of rules.

Environmental regulations are not to save the earth (which is still being steadily murdered) but to use the earth to make people support and obey regulations. Of course we need to stop cutting down forests and damming rivers, but the point is how the system channels this need to feed itself, getting millions of liberals to emotionally sympathize with unforgiving exercises of state violence against loggers and farmers.

If the system can feel excitement, it’s really excited about ecology, even more than about terrorism. The closer the earth gets to dying, the more people will go along with any draconian use of authority to save it. If the system can dream, maybe it dreams of a global green party ecocracy, where people are jailed for eating meat or not recycling. Of course, the earth will have to be prevented from recovering, kept constantly in crisis to keep people in furious fearful obedience.

monoculture where the meaning of life is to be richer and thinner and buy standardized products and services. These are just the latest manifestations of an out-of-balance groove we’ve been in for thousands of years. When ancient civilizations made bronze weapons to go kill and enslave their neighbors, what were they getting out of it?

It’s complicated. On one level you’ve got your evil individuals who love killing and dominating because it gives them an opportunity to contract their empathy. Then you’ve got the “economic” motivation, but that doesn’t seem to make any sense, since stone age people already had everything they needed — but hold that thought. . . Also you’ve got group narcissism, the same thing we have today with flags and sports teams, where people have had their sense of their innate value so hammered out of them that they can feel valuable only by identifying with some dominating abstraction to which they fictitiously belong. But why must these symbols dominate, or even compete? Why can’t soldiers and athletes all play cooperative games with no winning or losing? Why does your group have to be “better”?

Because “better” is what we’re addicted to. It’s what attracts so many people to Bush, who represents more weapons, more concentration of wealth, more control. It’s what drives so much labor beyond what’s necessary for survival, billions of poorer people sacrificing the trillions of hours of their lives so their kids or grandkids can move up the pyramid, can fail to enjoy the trappings of higher social status while stepping on the next person down.

It’s a narrow, quantitative “better,” a tight, competitive, judging “better.” It has nothing to do with the feel of warm sand on bare feet, or the pleasure of hanging out with your friends. It’s about things that can be numbered and ranked, things that are scarce and demand striving. It’s because of this addiction that people who go into the wilderness don’t just relax by a stream all day, but push themselves all day up a trail. What “better” really means is “requiring more labor.”

If the ground were littered with diamonds and gold, and we could get mud only by digging deep mines, mud would be “better,” and people in shameful golden houses would work their whole lives for the privilege of living in classy mud huts. It sounds absurd, but the world we live in is even more satanic, because what’s actually all over the ground — soil and clay and grass and wood — is good for growing food and making houses, while what’s deep in

it, and then I stop, and people ask me “Why don’t you carry an anvil on your head?” I say “It’s very heavy, it doesn’t do any good, and it’s much easier to walk without it,” and they say “Ha ha, you’re so weird!”

You think I’m exaggerating, but consider lawns. Why not just do nothing to the land around your house? No watering, no mowing, no pulling “weeds,” no poisoning, nothing. Let it go wild! It will save you enormous labor and expense, give you more time to watch baseball, conserve resources, and on top of all that it will make the land look better — because people will travel hundreds of miles to look at wild land, but nobody travels to look at lawns; there are no lawn photographers or lawn landscape painters.

I’m serious. You can’t argue with me. Or if you did, it would sound like this: “I put hundreds of dollars and tedious hours into my lawn because I enjoy controlling physical space, having ‘my’ space and omnipotently deciding what to put there. It makes me feel powerful and valuable. And I choose to put there exactly what everyone else puts there because I enjoy fitting in, being part of a group, following strict rituals beside other people.”

Again, why don’t they just say this? Why do they choose to remain unaware of their real motivations? It must be because such awareness would threaten their beloved habits, by giving them the perspective to choose otherwise, to abandon the rituals or change them. Soon we might stop ironing our clothes, washing our cars, caring at all about social status, or doing any labor beyond what’s necessary for basic subsistence. The reality to which we are accustomed would break apart. It would be like dying!

I’m going to call a habitual whole way of being a *groove*, a smooth, easy, comfortable channel that tells you where to move. I could also call our present system a *rut*, a dull, entrapping, suffocating channel. For most of us it feels like both. But for any such pattern to last, the overall positive feelings must exceed the negative.

Civilized humans are in a groove that has brutally destroyed almost all other cultures, that has captured us into numb, shallow lives of stressful toil and perpetual dissatisfaction, and that, if it could be sustained, would exterminate all life on earth. And we like it!

I’m not just talking about loving our cars, which eat friendly downtowns and shit strip malls, and demand the massacres of people living on top of the oil, or loving television, which treats us all like we’re the stupidest person watching, and replaces the last shreds of our cultural diversity with a global

There are non-authoritarian bottom-up ways to save the earth, to heal sickness, to get out of patterns of addiction and exploitation and violence. But the system will tell us that these ways are naive or irresponsible or dangerous, and it will try to head them off or overrun them by copying their goals or surface appearances onto its own structures, to keep those structures standing on top of us.

I’m thinking of the hippie and punk movements, where raw bursts of freedom were channeled into styles and frozen into status systems. I’m thinking of thisist or thatist intellectual movements, where wild thoughts are herded into theories and chained into abstruse books of ideas about ideas. I’m thinking of populist movements and near-revolutions, where people are fighting to be free of their rulers and owners, but are bought off with new rights and regulations, for which they are dependent on the system, and through which the system becomes just barely tolerable so it can keep going.

I’m even thinking of full-on revolutions, which disprove the common belief that our oppressors are simply “bad” elite people or “bad” varieties of central management. Many revolutions have killed the former rulers and toppled what passed for the system, and after every one a new corrupt elite and a new oppressive system fell into place.

Into place in *what?* Like seeing the bottom of a stream in the water patterns on top, we can see something deeper lurking beneath the patterns of history. What is it? Here’s another opening for occult thinking, but I’m going to stay with psychology: Authoritarian societal patterns come from authoritarian emotional patterns, from the habit of identifying with the controlling side in any conflict, pavement over weeds, police over outlaws, conquerors over natives, management over workers over slackers; from the habit of imagining “self” against “other” and defining your “self” as your bank balance and social status more than your feelings, your authority more than your friendships, your religion or country or local sports team more than your own body. These habits keep the system going through the most extreme revolutions, and the system keeps these habits going in every generation through parents and teachers quite rationally making kids compatible with the only world they know. We’re stuck in a horrible loop. How can we get out?

We get out one little step at a time, but first we have to understand “out,” and want to get out, and believe it’s possible. The system tells us that falling to the system is good: It’s good for a “failed” artist, with a small local audience,

to become a “successful” artist whose works are duplicated for millions of strangers through industrial technology to enrich corporations. It’s good for a fringe idea, learned with excitement by free explorers, to become a dominant idea forcibly taught to bored inmates of schools. It’s good for an enhanced sense of right and wrong to become a new law, enforced by the threat of violent punishment by police and prisons. It’s good, as you get older, to own more expensive stuff requiring more reserved behavior, to adjust your tastes so you’re easier to bother and harder to satisfy.

Or, even when this path is not good, it’s supposed to be inevitable. A capitalist version of this doctrine is “What doesn’t grow dies.” But it’s not true! There are shops and pubs in Europe that have stayed tiny for centuries while proud corporations have bloated and collapsed. Increasing in scale and detachment and centralization and dominance is not the path of survival, but the path of prolonged suicide, and we don’t have to follow it.

It’s not quite that simple. We were all born and raised on a runaway train; we can’t get off and survive, and we can’t stop it from crashing. But a lot of us can survive the crash and learn why and how to stay off the next train. Our bad path has good paths within it.

There are people who stay radical their whole lives, or even get more and more outside the system. And there are strong competing systems everywhere that we don’t even recognize as systems because they’re non-authoritarian: gift economies invisible to the taking economy, networks of friends linked by empathy not exploitation, goal-less leader-less movements riding aliveness wherever it takes them, and the whole infinite system, which we patronize as “nature,” in which our exalted history is only a little aberration.

Does the forest have a king or a class of experts or a list of rules deciding which plant can grow where? No! They all work it out amongst themselves, and the result is a billion times more complex than our tinker-toy corporations and governments. It’s a vain projection for us to speak of “laws” of nature — I think nature has agreements and understandings. And our civilization is not killing the earth for human good or evolution, or out of greed or clumsiness or ignorance. It’s killing the earth out of *jealousy*, because it knows the earth has a better system. Wait and see.

good. Unlike evil people, they aren’t secretly happy that forests are being cut down, that animals are in cages, that humans are obeying bosses. If they really looked they would feel terrible, and feel the need to do something about it, to make uncomfortable changes, so they don’t look, and they don’t feel anything. Conventional people in an evil system are like evil people in that they are addicted to resistance to expansion, but their addiction is indirect: They are addicted to a way of being that can be maintained only through resistance to expansion. They are the ideal servants of an evil system, more ideal than evil people, who tend to destabilize it.

What is an “evil system?” I define it as a sustained violation of a surrounding good system. This definition is tricky because it’s recursive: To know if the larger system is good you have to look at the next larger system, and so on. I think this reflects real uncertainty which we can deal with only by continually looking beyond. And a test of whether a system is good or evil is whether it permits looking beyond — whether it is strengthened or weakened by the active practice of honesty.

So I’ve made a definition of “doing good” by which I’ve done more good than most people. But I don’t think I’m more virtuous than other people, or more loving, or more sensitive, or more courageous. I’m only less habitual, and that’s just because I got lucky. Specifically, I feel like people are born with something like an antenna by which they pick up the conventional behavior, and through some quirk of biology, or possibly environment, my antenna is missing.

At the beginning this was a disadvantage. For example, it took me hours to learn to roller skate. Everyone else was gliding around and I was just flailing in one place. I asked them how they did it and they said stuff like “You just move. . . you just go!” Finally I figured it out: You move forward by angling a toe outward and pushing outward with that leg. But nobody knew this was what they were doing! They were using their antennae to channel the correct behavior straight to their bodies without mental awareness.

For me it’s like that with everything. What comes naturally to other people, especially cultural behaviors, I learn clumsily and years late, but I do it starting from scratch, and I am forced to pay attention. This has become a huge advantage, because it turns out that a lot of the things people’s antennae tell them to do are not in their best interests. Sometimes I feel like “normal” people are all walking around with anvils on their heads. At first I awkwardly try

they even admit it to themselves? If you're laughing maybe you can tell me why, because I've never been more serious. Wouldn't it be much easier for people who dominate and abuse to simply hold up domination and abuse as self-justifying absolute goods? Why do they have to think of themselves as upstanding and righteous? Why must evil lie?

This has puzzled me for many years, and I can still think of only one answer: The larger context, human nature or the universe itself, must be fundamentally good. If the larger context was amoral or immoral, evil could be totally honest. The fact that evil has to lie proves that it's incompatible with reality: that receptive exploring attention and clear thinking will lead inevitably to extended empathy and more cooperation.

What is "evil" anyway? And what's "good"? I define them in terms of contraction and expansion. Have you ever touched a slug? Notice how its body tightens and contracts against danger. It's a basic biological response — humans do the same thing. Of course we're vertebrates and we can't contract our bones, but we contract our muscles all the time — literally all the time: If we spent our first years enduring overwhelming conflict and trauma, as all civilized humans did, then we learned to carry a permanent stiffness in our bodies. Wilhelm Reich called it "character armor" and saw it as a key component — not just a symptom — of emotional sickness.

We also contract our emotions. That's what we're doing when we withhold our empathy, when we pull back our consciousness to avoid taking a perspective that is weak or suffering. Of course in this particular world there is so much weakness and suffering that we have to withhold our empathy all the time, or we'll be overcome with sadness or anger, and unable to survive. On top of that, first world humans have to withhold our empathy because the weakness and suffering of others gives us benefits. If we could fully experience the perspectives of the factory-farmed nonhumans we eat, or the human laborers who manufacture our products, we would need to make life changes so radical that in practice they take years, so even if we make them we can extend our empathy only gradually.

That — not staying pure — is the definition of doing good in an evil system. Good-doers are dedicated to emotional and intellectual expansion, and to making the difficult adjustments that go with that expansion. Evil people are addicted to the feeling they get from contracting, or resisting expansion. And then there are many people, probably most, who are neither evil nor doing

The Coming Expansion⁷

When you hear "the economy," think "corporate rule": A strong economy means strong corporate rule; economic collapse means the collapse of corporate rule. It's not exactly true, and it's false in times and places where corporations are not dominant, but right now it comes a lot closer to the truth than the usual background assumption that what's good for "the economy" is good for people.

I know: A good economy means you can get a job, and in a *really* good economy you can get such a good job that if you work 70 hours a week for years you can buy a nice house in a nice place where you never have to deal with those disturbing poor people who are too lazy to work 70 hours a week, who you never learned to relate to because you're so busy in the economy, and then you can die lonely and bewildered in your big empty secure house.

Doesn't it make you angry that you need "the economy" to have the alleged privilege of doing what someone tells you to do all day so you don't starve and freeze on the streets? Aren't you infuriated by your humiliating dependence on a system that gives you no participation in power? "Live free or die" is easy to say in an imaginary scenario of security agents kicking down your door, but whenever I suggest that economic collapse is a step in the right direction, I'm accused of being anti-human, of wishing for starvation and death, by people who are effectively saying "Please, please, let us live as frightened powerless dependents, anything to not die."

We are in an ugly, awful situation. Better avert your eyes. Here's a nice parable: For countless thousands of years the people of Earthor lived in happy villages, getting everything they needed through small, consent-based communities where everyone was a friend and everything was out in the open. Then they were conquered by evil giants!

Now, everything the people made, every house and every bit of food, was given to the giants, and the giants allocated it to keep themselves in power: the people who obeyed the giants the best, and did their most evil work, got the most stuff; and the people who refused to labor for the giants at all were harassed and isolated and sometimes outright killed; and most people in the

⁷ Originally published July 29, 2002 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/comex.html>

middle were kept always wanting more than they got to keep them always busy.

Now one day a hero rose among the people and said, “Let us kill the giants.” But then some sensible-sounding voices said, “Without the giants, who will provide our food?” Actually these were people who worked closely with the giants, and knew that if the system changed they would lose all their stuff. But other people listened to the hero, so the giants had to come kill them all, and everything went back to normal, except the giants got even stronger and meaner.

But then another hero appeared, and by this time the people hated the giants so much that the giant-collaborators couldn’t stop them, and they did it — they killed all the giants! But they had been living under the giants for so long now that they didn’t know how to live differently. Some people managed to start awkward consent-based villages with tedious “community meetings” ruined by everyone’s emotional problems from living under the giants. But these groups fell apart or were taken over, and soon enough, strangely, they all found themselves once again ruled by evil giants. Except now the giants were subtle and persuasive, and the people loved them, or at least they thought a world without giants was grossly unrealistic, and they blamed their unhappiness on other people.

And so it went. But look! The giants cannot stay the same size and survive. To live they must constantly grow. They even have a saying: “Any evil giant that doesn’t grow dies.” But now they’re getting so big that their bulk is all dead bones cracking under their unimaginable weight, so big that they can do nothing but blunder around clumsily, ravenously consuming everything in reach to grow still bigger. And their hunger has turned half the land of Earth into gray smoky deserts. Anyone who looks can see it coming: The giants are going to run out of food, and die.

What then? Let’s return now to the less deeply nested fantastic world of our own Earth. The giant patterns that command our labor under threat of death or prison, that manage and distribute the products of our labor to keep themselves in place, are breaking down. In the last two weeks the price of “stocks” — tokens of collaboration with the ruling system — has fallen hard, minus a few temporary half-recoveries caused by covert buying spikes. The “economy” is dying, and anyone who’s been looking has seen it coming for years.

long as the dominant media support him, there is no internal peaceful way to stop him — he or his successor will keep going until half the country is on fire and Fox news headquarters is a smoking ruin. It seems to make no sense.

Evil is often called “irrational,” but this is not precise. It’s true that no news executive could counter the above arguments in a reasonable dialogue. It’s true that all the arguments for the US conquest of Iraq could be reduced to nonsense, lies, hypocrisy, or pointless attacks on the imperfections of the anti-war crowd. It’s true that evil people will never engage in an honest open-ended discussion of their positions, but will only mouth their talking points and avoid your questions by any means, including, if necessary, murder. But this is not irrationality. It’s deception, and self-deception. The lies are a cover for a value system that could explain itself with perfect rationality, but for some reason does not. It would sound something like this:

*I support the Bush gang because I feel good about them, because I resonate with their personalities. They are totally bad-ass! They are ruthless and merciless and don’t fight fairly. They will use any means to obliterate anyone who stands in their way, and I feel great about being a part of that. The conquest of Iraq is justified merely by the fact that it feels good to crush an opponent with overwhelming force. If this adventure ends with the USA being destroyed in a war, I will simply change sides and sympathize with the new dominators — even if they are dominating “me.”

I learned this way of thinking as a child, when I was initiated into this tough world by people just like Bush or Rumsfeld, and I’m grateful. They taught me that it feels bad to empathize with the weak and the losers — even (or especially) when “I” am losing. It’s best to not dwell on it, and instead focus my full sympathies behind whoever is kicking ass at the moment. That’s the “I” that can’t lose!

Liberals think my goal is money or power, and my lack of empathy is a means to that end. They’ve got it backwards. This wonderful hard cold world has taught me to derive direct intense pleasure from anti-empathy, and money and power are just excuses, or ways to keep score. I admit that I’m an addict, but as long as there’s domination and indifference to suffering anywhere, I can resonate with it and always get a fix, and live in bliss. Why don’t you join me?*

This is an airtight value system. It’s at least as logical as any justification for doing good. So why don’t they just come out and say it? Why don’t

But these are not yet and no longer mainstream America — they are marginal America. Bush is the ultimate representative of the United States of SUV's and clearcuts and billboards and viagra and oil wells and skyscrapers and dioxin and twinkies and televangelists and the Superbowl and atomic bombs. And I mean "ultimate" in the correct sense, implying "last." George W. Bush is the pride and the fall, his doomed people's champion in a ritual as old as history.

History is shorter than time, and I'd like to see us humans outgrow our mental illness of the binge and purge of great empires, before it kills us. Maybe this time we'll come close enough to dying to get a good scare. What if Hitler in his bunker, or Napoleon retreating from Moscow, had controlled 10,000 nuclear weapons? Remember, world, that America is more afraid of you than you are of it; and somehow all of us, the other countries and the other Americas, need to persuade Bush's America to put the gun down. If we fail to solve this peacefully, if World War III escalates until other countries bomb America and occupy it and prosecute its leaders in trials to establish their own exclusive right to judge, then those countries are walking the same path.

The Effects of Highly Habitual People¹⁴

Evil seems easy to explain: It feels good to get what you want, and it's easier to get what you want if you don't care about anyone who stands in the way. This selfishness becomes a habit, and this habit can possess single people or groups or even whole societies — addicted to wanting and getting, dependent on not caring, dominating more and more until they run out of room and crash.

But when you look at evil in action, it gets trickier. For example, why do the American dominant media support Bush and the gang behind him? Why do they accept all the lies, when exposing the lies would be in their short-term, medium-term, and long-term interests? They are corporations, and attacking Bush would get them more attention, higher ratings, and more profits. Then they would get him out of office and get pro-business Democrats in, under whom the corporate economy has always done better than under Republicans. Also, Bush is obviously piloting this country to suicidal destruction, and as

The propaganda industry will blame corporate greed, as if this could have been avoided if corporations weren't greedy and fish didn't swim. In fact, collapse is the only possible result of an economy that survives by taking more from its environment than it gives. In this case the environment is not only the Earth, which is running out of "resources," but the human species, which is running out of willingness to participate in a coercive and disempowering system.

I'm not calling for civilization to fall and kill billions of people in ways other than old age, any more than I'm calling for winter to come and kill a lot of plants. I'm just noticing it coming and declaring that it's perfectly natural. Liberals fantasize about a "soft landing," maybe involving a benevolently oppressive global government implementing a hundred years of strict forced contraception and strict forced resource frugality. What's soft about that? It sounds like going into a cold swimming pool slowly and painfully for 20 minutes instead of just jumping in. We're all going to be dead in a hundred years anyway. Let's some of us die young so all of us don't have to live in some eco-puritan dystopia.

I'm not joking — I'm just refusing to fetishize dying. We're programmed to think of dying as the ultimate worst thing, as the negation of living, when really it's a normal friendly part of living, and what's negating our living is our *fear* of dying or physical damage. Our culture whips this fear into an insane frenzy, not just to keep us enslaved, but because our culture is an evil mass consciousness, a vampire that cultivates and feeds on our emotional contractiveness.

Our contractiveness is the same thing as our "progress," our descent on engines of disconnection into an artificial hell of computer spreadsheets and tax laws, pavement and cars that turn the grass under your feet into a mile-a-minute green blur, science that turns your view of the sky into mathematical formulas in windowless rooms. But everything that contracts must expand.

The contraction we call the Roman Empire cut down the forests of Europe. When it finally relaxed, the forests grew back, but the people of Europe only grew back a little before they shrank again — self-sufficient rural communities devolved into feudal estates, which got sucked into larger and larger centralized nation-states, which are now falling into the vortex of the unprecedented power-sucking abilities of global corporations. We're as deep now as we've

¹⁴ Originally published 24 June, 2003 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/habit.html>

ever been, and I'm not sure, but I think we're out of room to go deeper, unless they figure out how to trap our consciousness inside computers.

I think the next time we expand, we're going to follow through. I suspect that humans are smarter now than ever — that intelligence is the default human condition, and stupidity has to be manufactured, and our intelligence has been growing stronger and stronger, invisibly staying a step behind advances in stupidity-manufacturing techniques, the same way weeds and bacteria have been growing resistant to high-tech poisons. The controlling interests seem to be winning, but the lid's about to blow off, and when it does, those of us who don't die of starvation or disease will see a blossoming of human power like nothing in history.

Here's what I mean by "human power": Right now if you need a place to live, you can't just find a place and live there, no matter how responsible you are. Places are all "owned," and not by people but by contractive patterns using people, by banks and businesses and money-grasping habits of individuals. You have to apply to these alleged "owners," submit to degrading rituals, accept permission to occupy a place, not change it in any important way, and pay a huge monthly sum of money — a billion rivers of money running from the poor to the rich. And the only thing you get in return, what you're actually tricked into demanding, is to have your power/responsibility reduced even further by depending on the "owners" to make necessary repairs.

When we get our power back, you'll just pick an appropriate place and live there, and build or maintain shelter that fits the skills of you or your group. And in the transition to this, we'll survive by sleeping on each other's couches, by filling up our houses and learning to live in the same space with other people again instead of buying satanic isolation. We'll turn our lawns into vegetable gardens and feed ourselves with our own hands instead of depending on money and supermarkets. Our alleged poverty will lead us to rebuild community and autonomy that were destroyed by our alleged wealth.

Link by link, we will stop depending on and answering to higher powers and begin depending on and answering to the lower powers of our bodies and the Earth. The Earth is us too, and when we get our power back, monoculture farms will be set free to be grassland and forest again, in which humans will live in deep and enduring symbiosis. I'm not saying we'll all be hunter/gatherers, but some of us will, and at the very least that economy is the necessary safety net above which we will try other things.

calculating selfishness. Yes, there are many messages about love and cooperation, about feelings being more important than money, but here, conveniently, the propaganda is badly done, stilted and preachy, and Americans cynically rebel.

All this together means that the ideal American lacks any healthy social relation, that our only relations with other living beings are domination or submission or zero-sum competition, that our only way to sense any meaning in our lives is to grasp greedily for scarce fabrications: money, toys, tokens of status, shallow pleasures, coolness, respectability, fame, victory — or to associate ourselves with some symbol that has these attributes. That's why Americans cheer their local sports teams, and worship their omnipotent sky father deity, and display their national logo. That's why they will convince themselves of the nobility and goodness of their bombing of Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, North Korea, France, California. . . That's why they lack class consciousness, why the poorer classes sympathize with the rich and not with their own interests. That's why they are devastated by defeat or failure. Because Americans lack any emotional grounding in anything real, they must be "winners" or associate with a winner or they will be empty, annihilated. And their definition of "winner" requires a loser.

Nothing I've described here is unique to America. Readers elsewhere can ask themselves how many warning signs their country has of the same psychic disease. In fact the whole world has it, and America is only so deeply sick because it's so dominating — and so dominating because it's so sick. It goes back thousands of years, and in America it goes back to a group of colonists called the Puritans, the Taliban of the 1600's, who came here to practice religious repression because the English church was not restrictive enough. This embryo fed for centuries on the natural abundance of a continent, on the blood of its natives, on the forced labor of generations of voluntary and involuntary immigrants, and now it is grown bloated and ravenous, addicted to ever-increasing portions of the fruits of its domination: insulation and control, making it ever more ignorant and inflexible, ever more willing to bully and less able to bully with skill or awareness.

Bush *does* represent mainstream America. He does not represent the deviant liberating America of Bart Simpson and John Waters and fart jokes and train hopping and transgender punks, nor does he represent the principled bookish America of the Constitution and independent newspapers and citizen activism.

the fringe parties because it's the American way to never get off your ass and do anything unless you're sure you're going to win. But it goes deeper.

In one of P.J. O'Rourke's books, he visits an American housing project and describes the overwhelming apathy (which he blames on the alleged welfare state), the way the occupants trash their own living space and leave it in filthy disrepair. He contrasts this with his visit to Beirut during the Israeli invasion, where people in seemingly much worse conditions still added little touches of love and care to their bombed-out hovels.

In a book by Wendy Kaminer (another emotional conservative, this time attacking the recovery movement), she attends two women's support groups. One group is immigrants from southeast Asia who have been brutally raped and tortured, and the other group is upper middle class American women whose suffering has been seemingly much milder. Yet the Asian women are strong and confident and talk openly about their ordeals, while the American women are helpless and neurotic and ashamed. Anyone with a shred of compassion or insight will see this as direct evidence that the Americans have been abused *more severely* than the tortured immigrants, but in ways that must go deeper than mere physical abuse, ways that are subtle and hidden, and most troubling, that saturate American society.

A few years ago when I was gathering petition signatures outside supermarkets (for a very popular anti-stadium initiative), I noticed that a proportion of people not only didn't care about the petition, but clearly didn't care about anything, that they were just going through the motions waiting to die. I believe this is the same phenomenon that is seen in people (humans and nonhumans) rescued from the worst abuses ever devised. In America, underneath all the food and toys, obscuring the openings to escape or resist, is a giant torture camp, producing a range of psychic maiming from people so alone and broken that they refuse to ever try or care again, to people so painfully enslaved that they will look only through the eyes of the master, to people so alienated from life that they jealously destroy it everywhere.

I have explored this world and escaped barely alive into the hidden democracy of Underground America, and this is my report. They call the torture system by many names, "opportunity" or "success" or "the American dream." Key components are called "individualism" and "competition." It's implemented through social isolation, brilliantly executed commercial advertising, and games and classrooms and workplaces that punish honesty and reward

When we get our power back, the homeless / jobless / moneyless will reach a critical mass where the police can no longer stop us and we know it. If an eagle wants more space, it fights a competitor, and typically neither bird is badly hurt, and both have the experience of engaging the world with their energy. This is not "violence" but a vigorous physical way of resolving conflict; it's not about control or extermination but balance. In all the known universe only civilized authorities do not work this way, do not tolerate physically fighting them or running from them, do not give any options but total submission or death. That's why all of us who have not been killed are full of suppressed rage. And if we channel this rage wisely, we will not exterminate the authorities so they can escape and come back in the form of us; we will hold them in the one position they cannot endure, of living as equals with other life, until they dissolve.

Totalitarian control structures are fascinating: The police not only deny us power — they deny it to themselves, believing that they lack the authority to compromise because they're "just doing their job" for someone else. But if you look up the chain, no one has any power — even the highest elite are powerlessly following a script written by a financial balance or a country or a warped sense of "order," a program taking control so it can take more control so it can. . .

This system is an anti-system, a multilevel negation, built of blocks of lack of power, lack of responsibility, lack of awareness. This raises mind-bending questions: How do you destroy a void? And if nobody has any real power, where does the power go?

I think the answer is that power isn't actually being taken but being blocked, in nonhumans by simply killing them and in humans by socialization that begins in infancy, punishing people for having a will of their own, for being aware, for channeling any bottom-up power, until by age 30 most of us are barely alive, almost as Philip K. Dick wrote: "Not a person but a sort of walking, hiding symptom of their way of life."

But blocked power just keeps building up. It wants to flow up through our cells, our muscles, our blood. If we keep holding it back it's going to explode! That's not good. We need to learn to focus it, like a rocket focuses an explosion to push it into orbit, like a plant focuses growth into the roots before the stalk. The famous biblical line is a mistranslation: The word was used to describe

good horses, not their submissiveness but their ability to focus their attention and respond instantly to the slightest cues.

The disciplined will inherit the Earth.

Science the Destroyer⁸

What we call “science” is not neutral. It’s loaded with motives and assumptions that came out of, and reinforce, the catastrophe of dissociation, disempowerment, and consuming deadness that we call “civilization.”

Science assumes detachment. This is built into the very word “observation.” To “observe” something is to perceive it while distancing oneself emotionally and physically, to have a one-way channel of “information” moving from the observed thing to the “self”, which is defined as not being part of that thing. This kind of relationship is supposedly not only possible, but good. In fact it’s not even possible — science refutes itself at its most advanced stages, with theoretical physicists discovering that it does not make sense to talk about “what is” independent of perspective. Detached observation is not itself an observation or a fact, but a mental habit that we have learned and can unlearn. As Stan Gooch has noticed, “experience” is a healthier word than “observation” because it does not imply detachment.

Science assumes that matter is more fundamental than mind. This bizarre idea exists only in Western civilization. Not only is it unprovable, it’s obviously false. Your own awareness is more fundamental than “matter,” which exists only as an idea shaped out of your awareness. Science gets around this by also shaping the idea of “mind” out of your mind, and sticking this idea in a spot dependent on the idea of matter, and simply telling the giant lie that the mindfulness that sees the whole thing is a function of the idea of mind, and not the other way around. What I’m trying to get at here is a deep paradigm shift. I’ve just explained it intellectually, but it cannot be practiced intellectually, only by directly experiencing your awareness, your perspective, your *being*, as fundamental.

They get repetitive strain injury and chronic fatigue syndrome because they think slowing down or taking a break makes them weak. Americans will do any amount of physical work to avoid doing the emotional work of accepting “failure,” of looking inferior, of losing status.

A few years ago in a restaurant, an American man began choking. Without giving any sign of distress, he got up, went into the bathroom, and quietly died. If Americans were consistent they’d put up a statue of this man, who succeeded where so many others have failed, in following to the letter the American rule that you do not under any circumstances show weakness.

The core American fear is the fear of looking bad — to others or even to themselves. A normal American will not run to catch a bus, especially not if there’s a chance of still missing it. Many Americans don’t like to turn their car headlights on when another car is looking. Americans hate to admit changing their minds — if they do change, they’ll pretend it was always that way. Americans *always* lock their houses and apartments, but their fear of being robbed is not a fear of having to repurchase a few material possessions, but a fear of feeling “violated,” a fear of losing absolute control of their owned space, a feeling that the intruder has got the better of them.

All of this has a profound effect on American politics. Some have tried to excuse ordinary Americans from guilt by saying our news media lie and distort and conceal, which is true to an extent that Americans cannot see and non-Americans cannot imagine, but it’s no excuse. Forbidden information and excluded perspectives are all over the internet, and in countless books by dissident authors like Noam Chomsky, but 95% of Americans will not go to these sources, because they’re afraid.

To begin with, they’re afraid of uncertainty, of information whose truth is not backed up by a strong authority, of accepting a fact that might turn out to be false and make them look stupid. After that they’re afraid of having their comfortable reality pulled out from under them, afraid of changing their minds, afraid of finding out they’ve been fooled, afraid of the responsibility that comes with understanding. And most of all, Americans are afraid to care.

Everyone knows how few Americans vote. This can be partly explained by observing that both Democrats and Republicans support global corporate rule, obscene military spending, and squeezing every drop of blood from poor people and the earth, that the public political spectacle is like a dull satanic game show about trivial psychodrama issues, and that nobody will vote for

⁸ Originally published 25 October, 2002 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/scidest.html>. See also *Grand Diversifying Theory*.

“These colors don’t run,” and their righteous fury at anyone who contradicts this orthodoxy, like comedian Bill Maher who was forced to apologize for noticing that it takes courage to crash an airplane into a building and no courage to launch a cruise missile. You can see it in their bizarre habit of crediting “courage” to people merely for having some scary disease, or the way they made the 9/11 firefighters and police “heroes” just for doing their normal jobs in that mythologized context. Think it through: If it’s heroic for someone to become a firefighter, and do what a firefighter does and run into burning buildings and save people, that means the other-than-heroic way of being, the benchmark against which Americans measure heroism, the condition Americans consider *normal*, would be for America to not have any firefighters because everyone is too afraid.

And where they call cowardice normal, and normal behavior heroic, Americans often condemn real courage as cowardice or stupidity or irresponsibility, reacting with scorn to protesters who get attacked by police, to people who get arrested for not cooperating with useless and degrading searches and questionings, to journalists and politicians and entertainers who lose their jobs for speaking forbidden opinions and truths.

I may get death threats for writing this essay, anonymous death threats of course, from Americans who would rather see me killed than face my criticism. Someone may offer to fight me to prove his courage, but only someone good at fighting who is sure he’s not going to lose. An American would say “Well of course.” That’s the way we think over here. People here mouth motivational platitudes like “Failure is not an option” or “There is no try” (which they’ve misunderstood), because they’re so cautious that they won’t do anything unless it’s so easy and predictable that they can will the outcome. They say “You create your own reality” because they’ve been given so many advantages that they haven’t noticed that they share reality with billions of other perspectives who want different things, with whom they have to compromise. Our higher classes are full of spoiled petty emperors who always get their way and gradually veer off into solipsistic madness.

It would not be precise to call Americans “lazy.” They work longer hours at their crappy jobs than anyone in the industrialized world and they’re perversely proud of it. They work more because they’re afraid to say no to their bosses, or because they think frantic labor is the morally righteous requirement to rise above being an unsuccessful nobody, which horrifies them to their bones.

And what *is* this “matter”? By definition, it is both objectifiable and dead, just bouncing particles and waves that can be viewed from an absolute detached perspective, but that do not require for their existence any perspective or mindfulness. Matter is mindlessness, and mindlessness is deeper than mind. Again, this is not something we can see, but a basic assumption that tells us how to look.

The view of reality as not dependent on mind became easier to believe with the invention of more sophisticated machines, because these machines could be used as models. Philosophers could point to a clock and say that an atom, or a dog, or the whole universe, is like that clock, just mindlessly going through motions. But machines are *not* mindless or dead. They are manifestations of the mindfulness and aliveness of their human creators. And if machines are our model for matter, it follows that matter is not dead, but the manifestation of some deeper aliveness. A few contemporary scientists have noticed this, and have had to say that the universe is not like a machine after all, since a machine is based on mind. Now they say that the basis of reality is something special that we cannot prove or even really imagine — some kind of myth of bottomless deadness.

The death-based or “mechanistic” view is a religion, the dominant religion of our time. It is far stronger than Christianity, which has totally adopted the machine model, but just tacked souls on top and personified the objectively true detached perspective as an omnipotent sky father deity named “God,” manipulating the world from a safe distance just like the scientists.

Both mechanistic science and mechanistic Christianity were popularized by the philosopher Rene Descartes, who really believed that the scream of a tortured dog is no different from a bell ringing on a machine. “Putting Descartes before the horse” is deservedly the most common pun in philosophy, because that’s exactly what Descartes did. “I think therefore I am” puts existence deeper than awareness, plus it narrows existence and awareness to the detached forms of “I am” and “I think.” It is both a reversal of and a flight from the perspective of healthy cultures: All that exists is awareness.

Of course a man doesn’t get the urge to intellectually deny the pain of a tortured creature out of nowhere. We were massacring villages and cutting down forests to build insane social monoliths of disempowerment for thousands of years before Descartes. His thinking was not a cause of civilization,

but an intensification, an intellectual sanctioning of what was already happening, just as the Nazis made extermination of Jews an official policy after the practice had already begun. It makes it a lot easier to turn everything alive into something dead, to turn forests and people into resources and capital, if you believe everything was dead in the first place.

Science makes everything dead not only by declaration, but by method. Science deals only with the quantitative. It does not admit values or emotions or the way the air smells when it's starting to rain — or if it deals with these things, it does so by transforming them into numbers, by turning your oneness with the smell of the rain into your abstract preoccupation with the chemical formula for ozone, by turning the way it makes you feel into the intellectual idea that emotions are only an illusion of firing neurons.

Number itself is not truth but a chosen style of thinking. If you see three apples, you are temporarily avoiding the perspective that sees this apple and this apple and this apple. Saying “three” suppresses uniqueness and diversity. Or consider money: Every dollar bill ever made is different. But inside a computerized account, or even in a sum on paper, every dollar is exactly the same, because you're in a fantasy sub-world where it's defined that way.

Defenders of science will say that of course science deals with the quantifiable. If it didn't, it wouldn't be science. And that's precisely my point: We have chosen a habit of mind that focuses our attention down into a world removed from reality, where nothing has quality or awareness or life of its own. We have chosen to transform the living into the dead.

Careful-thinking scientists will admit that what they study is a narrow simulation of the complex real world, but few of them notice that this narrow focus is self-feeding, that it has built contractive technological and economic and political systems that are all working together sucking our reality in on itself. Science denies emotion but it is not itself unemotional. Emotional detachment *is* an emotion. Denial of subjectivity is an emotional act. Turning wild messy life into cold still numbers is not an intellectual choice but an emotional choice that people make because of how it feels. It feels like hatred of life.

As narrow as the world of numbers is, scientific method does not even permit all numbers — only those numbers that are reproducible, predictable, and the same for all observers. Of course reality itself is not reproducible or predictable or the same for all observers. But neither are fantasy worlds

cult murder-suicide that may leave our country in ruins. How did we come to this?

Bush is already being set up as the scapegoat, like Hitler before him, so Americans can pretend we're all good people who just got a bad ruler by some fluke and we were “only doing our jobs” or “we didn't know.” But nobody is born with an urge to conquer and exterminate, with an active resistance to empathy, with an inability to psychologically adapt. People like this are made, and in a healthy society they're seldom made and never given influence. In America we crank them out by the millions and tend to make them our commanders. Wishful-thinking lefties say the American people are against this war, but I don't see it. I see every part of the government and every large business going along with the war, and I see a majority of people who either actively support it, or refuse to give any attention to politics, or secretly feel good about “their” side ruling the world and are happy that they don't have to admit it, happy the system is set up so they can benefit from brutality just by continuing to behave normally.

I'm about to generalize and simplify and exaggerate, and before I start I want to remind everyone that “America” has many meanings, and that you can go to any town in geographical America and find people who are aware, intelligent, ethical, compassionate, and courageous. But on the whole, the reason the USA is now waging aggressive murderous war that threatens to keep escalating until we burn out and implode, is that we are a nation of cowards.

You can see it everywhere if you look — in the American military attacking only impoverished countries that can't defend themselves, in the way American rulers see all physical opposition not as people fairly fighting back but as scary mythologized “terrorism,” in the way Americans overreact to this magical beast, by buying up duct tape to seal windows against imagined chemical attacks, or shutting down whole airports because of some small danger or uncertainty. You can see it in the “zero tolerance” fad where school kids are expelled or arrested for harmless toy weapons, in our dominant media's obsession with one-in-a-million unpredictable murders of higher class people, and in the disjunction between the growing fashion of militaristic nationalism, and enlistment in the military, which is not growing.

You can see it in Americans' hunger for calling each other “courageous” and “heroic,” their bumper stickers with an American flag and the wishful slogan

that the desire has more troubling roots, which demand attention from all of us.

And we can do something else. Our powerful shaming of pedophiles is a good sign, since it shows that we know how to use shame and social pressure to influence society. Suppose we take the shaming of participants in the child porn industry, and extend it to beneficiaries of continuing slavery, to stockholders of the most irresponsible corporations, to participants in the war industry. “You design missiles? Oh my god! Get away from me!”

Actually we already do some of this, but we’re doing it badly. We don’t understand yet that the point is not perfection, not to be without sin so you can throw stones (or to throw stones so you can be without sin). The point is to make things better. All of us in industrial society are thoroughly stained, linked in ten thousand ways to exploited workers and dying species and unthinkable tragedy and loss. But just because your whole house and everything in it is soaked in blood, doesn’t mean you can’t start cleaning. We can start with the worst offenders and work our way out, and social pressure, if it’s done well, is more democratic and far more effective than government regulation.

One day we might have a world where people abuse and dominate and objectify only inside of stories and songs and games. I myself have skulked through the dark corners of the internet downloading maps for Heroes of Might & Magic II, for my own pleasure. It will be interesting to see, if reality gets healthy, what happens to our fantasies.

These Colors Run¹²

So World War III has begun, and I’m in the bad country. Our President is totally bonkers, he and his dominionist¹³ backers are trying to fulfill an ancient religious prophecy about an all-destroying battle between good and evil, and the most powerful propaganda industry in history is strangely backing him up, pretending he’s sane and reasonable, leading Americans on a global-scale

¹² Originally published 19 March, 2003 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/colorsrun.html>. Revised November 2004.

¹³ <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article5646.htm>

derived from reality. So science doesn’t stop at pulling us into a dream world — it goes one step further and makes this dream world a nightmare, whose contents are selected for predictability and controllability and uniformity.

Because of science, we can have a factory that predictably makes one million alarm clocks that all look the same and all predictably go off at the time they’re set for, so that one million people will predictably get to their jobs just when their employers expect them — where they’re likely to work with machines that, like the alarm clocks, are standardized, so that any laborer can use any machine, and one person is the same as another. Because of science, states of consciousness that cannot be reliably dispensed are classified as insane, or at best “non-ordinary,” and excluded. Anomalous experience, anomalous ideas, and anomalous people are cast off or destroyed like imperfectly-shapen machine components.

Does all this necessarily follow from science? Could we have a system of knowledge based on predictability that produced a culture of chaos and surprise? If we did, it would be through resistance to that predictability and not through obedience to it. But our culture has never wanted surprise anyway, and if it had, it wouldn’t have chosen science.

Science is only a manifestation and locking in of an urge for control that we’ve had at least since we started farming fields and fencing animals instead of surfing the less predictable (but more abundant) world of reality, or “nature.” And from that time to now, this urge has driven every decision about what counts as “progress.” In a little known fork in the road of science, Goethe experimented with optics in a different way than Newton: where Newton shined lights through prisms, producing projected spectra for detached observation, Goethe had people *look* through prisms, and developed these experiments into a theory that was deeply different from Newton’s but equally verifiable and self-consistent. No one knows what strange technological path this theory would have led us to, because of course it was ignored in favor of Newton’s theory, which was more compatible with objectification.

If you find it hard to believe that science could have gone onto a radically different path, that the universe has room for divergent experimentally confirmable “truths,” then it’s because you have been raised inside what William Blake called “single vision and Newton’s sleep.” In an even less known fork in the road of pre-science, Medieval alchemical literature reports that alchemists actually succeeded in creating gold. Of course we can tell ourselves that they

were lying, but maybe in 500 years our descendants will say we were lying about splitting the atom or building flying machines, or they will say it was all metaphor. Maybe it is.

My point is, we can look through any filter we want. Instead of focusing toward what's most predictable, repeatable, quantifiable, detachedly observable, we can focus toward what's most fun, most beautiful, most magical, most alive. And we can turn this focus — as we did with science — into a self-reinforcing system of thought and action, a culture, a society, a sustained wonderful reality. The real question is, why did we ever do anything else?

July 2011 Update

Back in 2002, I was not as careful with language as I am now, and I wrote this in a way that invites semantic misunderstanding. Now I would say something like this:

The word “science” blurs together two completely different things. One is the scientific method, which works like this:

1. Observe — or apply your attention to focus experience;
2. Make a mental model to explain your observations;
3. Create a situation in which your model is tested;
4. Go to step 1.

The other thing is a set of cultural assumptions, which might be vaguely lumped together under the word “rationalist”. These assumptions include:

1. Matter is more fundamental than mind.
2. We are talking about a reality that is independent of observers.
3. Observation should be from a position of detachment, rather than participation.

chat lightly about it with other kids, and they certainly can't with adults, who really make it worse when they cover it with an oppressive aura of shame and deadly seriousness. But I can remember us fourth graders healing from normal societal abuse by singing songs: “Glory glory hallelujah. Teacher hit me with a ruler. Blew her out the door with a loaded 44 and we ain't got a teacher no more!”

If kids tried to sing that now they'd probably be arrested and sent to counseling with an oppressive aura of shame and deadly seriousness. So normal socialization, as it gets more advanced, is getting more like sex abuse, with all resistance smothered in taboo and fear. Right now the second or third most serious thought crime, after adults fantasizing about abusing kids in forbidden ways, is kids fantasizing about fighting back against people who abuse them in socially sanctioned ways.

Now fighting back against socialization is different from sexual abuse in that some ways of doing it are good. But otherwise, adults who feel like molesting kids and kids who feel like shooting up the school are in the same position: They're under intense pressure to either lock it all inside or go out and do some horrific act, and they are absolutely forbidden to bring their feelings out into the light without acting on them, just sitting there, no spectacular resolution or distracting psychodrama, no turning it into a cliché with an easy response, just sitting there, there it is, our culture's stinking scabby infected heart.

Our alleged freedom of speech has not even begun to go far enough. We need to not only legalize the very expression we find most threatening, but more important, give attention to it and have a friendly dialogue with it. We're failing to follow through on this with regular legal pornography, which is full of fantasies of rape and degradation that we just look away from unless we're enjoying it. But imagine if we did look, and if we let kids put on school plays that glorified blowing up the school, and we let pedophiles publish text and drawings, and inhabit computer-generated worlds, about sex with children, and we took a good look at all of this and asked each other where these desires are coming from, until we found answers (and not cop-out answers like shrugging and saying “human nature”).

Yes, I've heard the argument that the fictional act can encourage the real act, and I suppose sometimes it does. I know Ted Bundy made that argument to avoid taking personal responsibility and looking deeper into himself. But I'm sure that the fantasy serves more often as an alternative to the reality, and

my body that I hated, supposedly for my benefit but really for the benefit of the adult world, and I was forbidden to say so. It's called "socialization" and most of it happened in school. Don't laugh! If you're rolling your eyes and calling me absurd, you're repressing more abuse than many people have ever experienced. You've carefully forgotten what it's like to be forced to sit in a chair, still and quiet, for hours, days, years, when your body wants to run and play and your mind wants to explore. And when there is running and "playing" and exploring, it's planned and tightly managed, and any impulse of real creativity or aliveness is reflexively crushed, with not even so much as physical touching, but the most insidious and appropriate-seeming emotional manipulation.

Of course, unlike sexual abusers, adults filling normal roles with children really mean well, and I don't want to put any blame on teachers. Many of them are doing their best to minimize or even counteract the oppressiveness of schooling, which is inherent, not just in school systems but in the very idea of schooling: to make us passive receptacles of instruction, easily managed by a much smaller number of superiors, and interchangeable.

I was lucky in that school was the worst I had it. Most people had it much worse at home — they must have because look around now and see how damaged and spiritless they are. And I'm not talking about just physical beatings. That's the backup lightning rod. A physical blow can be much easier to heal from than the words "What's wrong with you?"

Adults in general can't see how deeply and thoroughly children suffer, because to see it they would have to remember how awful it felt when the same thing was done to them, and they don't want to deal with that. Kids cry and scream so much because that's just what kids do, not because we've created a world that every fresh perspective finds worthy of years of crying and screaming. To reject normal socialization, adults would have to reject an entire society where people must sit still and repress playfulness and respect authority and focus on abstractions and value objects over life, and it's the only society they know. They would have to admit that their life has been mostly a tragic mistake; and it's much easier, if you've been correctly socialized, to just pass the mistake on to the next generation.

Another way normal socialization is more benign than sexual abuse is that it's out in the open, so its victims can more easily support each other and develop healthy ways to deal with it. Not many sexually abused kids can

4. Experience that can be expressed in number and measure is more meaningful than experience that cannot be expressed in number and measure.
5. Experience that can be reproduced at will is more meaningful than experience that cannot be reproduced at will.
6. The established theory gets the benefit of the doubt.

Now, if we use the scientific method under these assumptions, we get all kinds of amazing stuff like space probes and the internet. Science under these assumptions is a powerful tool. But it's not the only tool — it only seems like it from inside our rationalist culture. People claiming to speak for "science" often say that certain experiences are not "real", when they've just chosen to observe in a way that excludes those experiences.

Now, suppose we ignore or reverse rationalist assumptions, but still make and test mental models. I think that would lead to a different kind of "science" that is interesting and powerful in a different way.

Violence Unraveled⁹

"Violence" is a propaganda word that sneakily combines many different things, healthy and unhealthy, natural and unnatural. As long as we use the word "violence" in its present meaning, we will tend to either call "violence" wrong, and rule out behaviors without which we can never have a healthy society, or call "violence" acceptable, and permit behaviors *with* which we can never have a healthy society. We need to take the word apart.

The biggest thing that gets blurred into "violence," that overlaps all the others, is vigorous physical motion and contact, which I'll call **vigor**. Vigor is everywhere. Almost everything in the universe is rushing, colliding, grabbing, pushing, shaking. We and our ancestors have lived tens of millions of years by vigorously killing and eating plants and other animals, and civilized humans haven't stopped this but put it out of sight. Look around where you're sitting:

⁹ Originally published 11 November, 2002 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/viunrav.html>. The sequel to *Violence vs. Pacifism*.

Probably almost everything you can see was made by vigorously slicing up trees, killing animals, hacking down crops, pounding and tearing minerals out of the earth. In the absence of our awareness, in the darkness, our vigor has accelerated and its character has changed, has become machine-like and blind. And in the absence of personal healthy vigor, our character too has changed. Western post-industrial humans, who are surrounded by the products of the most energetic destructions and transformations in history, have become so pathologically vigor-phobic that we can go years without touching anyone or anything with any energy. We take for granted that a verbal argument is OK but a physical argument can only be a “fight” which is always wrong (except when done by the military or police). We think physical abuse of children is monstrous but that verbal abuse, which is just as abusive but more hidden and dishonest, is tolerable. We may sit at a meeting trading intense verbal hostility while apologizing if we bump someone’s foot under the table.

Liberals have been redefining “violence” to also include non-physical abuse or domination. They’re trying to keep the propaganda word “violence” but turn it to their own ends. I’m trying to stop us using the word. I want us to relearn healthy vigor, and before that we need to understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy vigor, and before that we need more precise language. What I’m about to define are neither “kinds of violence” nor “kinds of vigor,” but some other things besides vigor that have been tangled into “violence.” I call them control, cruelty, extermination, eating, toolmaking, toolbreaking, spectacle, nihilism, revenge, and balance.

Control is trying to affect the behavior of another being in a way that fails to respect its autonomy, that fails to relate to it as a subject, equal but different, with its own perspective and its own needs. This includes everything from “disciplining” young people to breaking a wild animal to armed robbery to slavery to a whole society where we do what we hate all day because of fear. Control is the trickiest thing I’m trying to define. What is autonomy? What is a need? What isn’t a subject? My “control” is not the same as a baseball pitcher trying to “control” the ball, because the ball is not a living being — or if we’re full-on animists and say the ball *is* a living being, then its meaning of life is entirely a function of the game, and the players are not really controlling it but working *with* it. A good test to separate healthy and unhealthy meanings of “control” is to try to substitute the word “accuracy” or “focus.”

Making something a thought crime provokes the real crime. If they ever invent technology to detect and punish the fantasy of burning down Microsoft, then look out, because we’ll have nothing to lose! People sense this, and we don’t make thought crimes without a strong psychological motive.

So why pedophiles? There are lots of really bad people in this world doing really bad things, and molesting children is one of them, but it’s not the worst. Murder is worse. Would you rather remember that you’d been sexually abused, and deal with the trauma, or be killed? Or if you have been sexually abused, would you change history so instead the person just killed you? How about being a slave, and I don’t mean a wage slave where the alternative is living on the streets, but a full-on slave, very likely a sex slave, where the alternative is you or your family being murdered. There’s a lot of that going on all over the world. And tourists from rich countries pay for much of it by going to sex slave prostitutes, and incur little or no social penalty. What about children who, instead of being sexually abused and living to have a chance to recover, die at age six from industrial toxins released so chemical company stockholders can make a profit? Is that worse than profiting from child pornography? Well is it?

The difference is, if you’re masturbating to a photo of an abused child, there’s the child, and your pleasure, right in front of you. And if you’re getting pleasure from driving a car paid for by Union Carbide dividends, what does that have to do with suffering children? The suffering is hidden and you want it to stay hidden, goddammit, thank you very much. You will put anything you can find in front of it to hide it, and if you can find something big and hideous, like someone who gets pleasure from suffering children with full awareness, well that’s perfect.

Even terrorists are sort of cool. Even serial killers are glamorized in songs and movies. Even fascist dictators are somewhat respected. But pedophiles are unequivocally awful. Our culture has chosen this perspective for a reason: to make pedophilia a lightning rod to channel all attention and responsibility away from our culture’s overwhelming abuse of children in other ways.

The worst thing about adult-child sex is that it serves the needs of the adults not the children, and that the adults deny this, and forbid any expression of the perception of abuse. But this is true of most adult-child interaction. I was not sexually abused as a child, but I was very badly abused, and I think most kids were abused even worse, probably you. I was forced to do stuff with

deceived? Abducted? Threatened? How did they feel? Does anyone know their names? Have police caught the people who did the direct abuse, and if so, why aren't we hearing about it, and if not, why not, and why aren't we hearing about that?

It's all about the feelings of the adults. Apparently there's nothing wrong with children suffering, only with adults feeling good about it. The other night I saw a TV show on which young children were fenced off from their mothers, making them quite distressed, as part of a scientific experiment, and no one seemed to wonder if this was wrong. So it's OK to make children suffer if the internal mental state of the adults is cold scientific observation, but not if it's sexual pleasure. Ask the kids if they fucking care.

I've noticed, as everybody has, though we're all being very quiet about it, that pedophilia is a major thought crime. The word "pedophile," in all its horror, makes no distinction between people who are merely sexually attracted to kids, and people who actually go out and do sex acts with kids, as if the unacted desire and the acted desire are just as bad. Somebody should ask the kids. "Child pornography" makes no distinction between material for which children were or were not exploited, as if they're equally bad. Ask the kids.

This is not an essay about thought crimes, about how we're on a slippery slope where they start by arresting people for drawings of naked kids, and then they arrest people for movies depicting murder, and finally you can go to prison for viewing Walt Disney's Robin Hood which glorifies stealing. There is some hassle in that direction, and I don't want to have to go into the criminal underworld to get tapes of South Park, but there are severe limits to how far a trend like that can go, because making anything a thought crime is a huge burden and danger to society.

Right now, if you're caught downloading child porn from the internet, you will lose your job, lose your friends, and probably go to prison where you will be the scum among the scum. Your life is ruined. But if instead you perform sex acts on an actual child, well, the prison term will be longer, but the overall penalty is about the same. So what's the incentive to hold back? In fact, if you're in a position of respect and authority, like, say, a priest, or a parent, where kids will hesitate to turn you in, then you're probably less likely to get caught molesting real children than downloading pictures of them — and you're much less likely to get convicted.

Cruelty is what happens when control loses focus. The inhibition of empathy that's necessary to maintain a system where people do what they hate, goes over the back fence and turns into negative empathy, so that you get direct pleasure from feeling another's suffering. Our society tells us that control is decent and rational, and cruelty is terrible and irrational, but I halfway respect cruelty as control that stops being half-assed, or as control that reclaims an emotional connection to its object (because even a negative connection is better than none), or as a subversive action to end control by transforming it into something more volatile.

Extermination is a close relative of control: Again, it's based on viewing another being as a function of your own needs and values, and violating that being's autonomy to affect it, except instead of affecting its behavior, you affect its *existence*, toward the negative. Extermination includes everything from swatting a mosquito to poisoning "weeds" to assassination to genocide. What makes it different from other kinds of killing is the motivation: you're killing something primarily to make it go away.

Eating, of course, is when you kill something as part of eating it. The difference between eating and extermination seems subtle from the perspective of our society, but it is all-important. Most animals and even some plants kill as part of eating; eating and being eaten are at the foundation of the balanced system that contains us. But only civilized humans systematically exterminate, and it's destroying life on earth. On a recent camping trip I stumbled on experimental confirmation of the depth of this difference. Bothered by mosquitoes, I got frustrated and sucked one into my mouth and ate it. Then I tried eating all the mosquitoes I killed. Not only was it more fun and meaningful, but over hundreds of attempts, the mosquitoes I ate were about three times as easy to kill as the ones I didn't eat.

Toolmaking uses a broad definition of "tool," all the way from a bird's nest to vegetable dye to deerskin moccasins to a field of crops to a giant city built through countless clearcuts and mines. It could be divided further, since it includes toolmaking both civilized and natural, both lethal and non-lethal. It opens important questions that I leave open: Is killing something to make a tool out of it fundamentally different from killing something to eat it? And how do we identify toolmaking that is or is not in balance with the wider world? Actually, "advanced" food production raises this same question about eating.

Toolbreaking is similarly broad, including logging equipment sabotaged by autonomous activists, factories destroyed by military bombs, burned books, and farmland sowed with salt. Toolbreaking does not include destruction of something with life of its own, like a forest. That would be extermination. And it does not include graffiti, since what is painted on something is an aesthetic issue, and does not affect use value. But like graffiti, toolbreaking cannot be morally evaluated without opening up the idea of “property.”

Who gets to decide what will be done with a tool, whether or not it will be used, whether it will be kept around or destroyed? The creator? The user? The “owner”? Who is the appropriate user? What does “own” mean in a thoroughly coercive society where almost anything can be said to be stolen? Everyone knows that the land of the USA was stolen from the Indians. And because we do our wage labor only under the threat of not otherwise having shelter or food, our labor is stolen from us the same as if we had guns to our heads. And then whatever we make or do with our labor is stolen the same way.

A piece of logging equipment is made with labor stolen from people, out of materials stolen from the earth, so its alleged owners have no moral standing to say what will be done with it. Does anyone? One could argue that what’s done with it should be determined by the wider interests of the present society, but then this would yield in the same way to the even wider interests of human happiness, and the still wider interests of the earth, both of which would tell us to not use the equipment. Or one could argue that it’s never right to destroy something; but if it’s wrong to destroy a tool, then it’s certainly wrong to destroy a living forest, in which case logging equipment has no justification for existence (except maybe as a bad example).

Attacking tools that are about to destroy a piece of land with which you have a deep relation is like shooting the gun out of the hand of someone about to kill your family. And since most corporations are continuously actively destroying the earth, well-chosen anti-corporate sabotage is like attacking a man who’s strangling your mother. The only objections I see to ecological toolbreaking are tactical: If you do it in secret, you are treating the symptoms while compounding some of the causes: secrecy, which is allied with unhealthy societies, and also the habit of affecting each other’s lives without engaging each other in a healthy social process to work out the conflict. But if you do it

A right is always a privilege, if “right” means something that has to be dispensed by some program, and “privilege” means something scarce and supposedly good that’s tied into a depriving system. A right is just a privilege that well-meaning shallow-sighted people try to give to everyone. But if we define a “right” as something that’s implicit in the basic structure of society, so that everyone has it without anyone making any effort — clean water because there are no poisons, freedom because there’s no authority, equality because there are no means to concentrate wealth or power — then that’s really the opposite of the other kind of “right,” and we wouldn’t ever have a reason to declare it a right.

For example, maybe no one has ever spoken of the right to see color. Some people are colorblind but they don’t think of it as deprivation of a right. But suppose we all had a chip put in our heads, by the ColorSee Corporation, that blocked us from seeing color unless we paid ColorSee a monthly fee. *Then* we would talk about “rights,” and liberals would not try to get the chips taken out, because that’s just naive romanticism and we can’t go back you know; instead they would demand a government subsidy so that everyone could pay ColorSee. And then the rich would hate the liberals and the poor, because damn it we had to spend years at painful schooling and jobs to afford to see color, and now the poor are going to get it for free which means we wasted our lives. And while we’re all fighting about this, someone is inventing a wonderful new technology that, for a reasonable fee, allows us to breathe. . .

If you think this is all a ridiculous nightmare fantasy, I think so too. Welcome to it.

Why do pedophiles get all the attention?¹¹

Pete Townshend was recently arrested on child pornography charges and his defense is that he only entered a site to do research. I don’t know if he’s telling the truth, but the subtext of the media’s treatment of this story, and similar stories, is astonishing. The focus is always on the motivations of the accused, and never on the children. Does the material in question just show simulations, or were actual children photographed? How? Were children

¹¹ Originally published 13 January, 2003 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/pedos.html>

unquestioningly follow orders. I have another friend who went to an upper class private school where almost everyone was mean and vain and selfish, and presumably the staff did not discourage it.

It might seem we could avoid this with another one I saw, "School choice is a right not a privilege." But in practice the system walks right over this "right" by giving us Coke-and-Pepsi style choices between nearly identical stupid-making institutions, and by finding ways to reinforce class differences within schools instead of between them. The right to school choice does not even begin to be empowering until it includes the right to not go to school at all.

"Driving is a right not a privilege." The automobile is probably the most wasteful technology in history. Its cost in human labor, in resources consumed and toxins produced in its manufacture and use, in vast stretches of the earth turned to asphalt wastelands of roads and parking lots, is so extravagant that only the elite can ever drive, and not for much longer. But on a deeper level than that, driving is not even a benefit, but an obligation and a dependency. Most people who own automobiles own them because they need them to get around, because they live in cities where their living places and their laboring places and their food sources are all separated by miles and miles of pavement laid down to make room for automobiles.

Now you could go broader and say "Transportation is a right not a privilege," but if the places we needed to go weren't so far away from each other, separated by so many desolate and restricted spaces, "transportation" wouldn't even be a *need*. If we had a society where people were physically healthy and active, and almost all trips were less than a mile on inviting pathways, and food and shelter were generated locally, we wouldn't even use the word "transportation."

I could go on and on. Computers have a massive ecological footprint and draw our attention into a thin simulated world. Voting is almost always a false choice between antidemocratic options, and when it isn't, the CIA usually comes in and topples the winner. "Leisure" is a recent concept implying that by default you're not free but laboring under coercion, and that when you're not being coerced you focus on selfish entertainment. "Clean water" usually means water treatment technologies, which just redistribute toxins out of the drinking water and into someplace else, from where they eventually go back into the water, and get to be taken out again, typically generating profit for the same entities that made the toxins in the first place.

out in the open, you'll be put in prison for a very long time, which hurts both you soul and your ability to help. I don't have an answer.

Spectacle might involve killing or destruction, but it's more than just extermination or toolbreaking because the main purpose is not to push something out of existence, but to psychologically influence observers. The intended influence could be to draw attention to a cause, as in many "terrorist" attacks, or to incite a war, as in the 9/11 operation, or to intimidate people, as in killings of political activists. (Of course the latter are also extermination, and all intimidation is also control.)

Nihilism could be called spectacle or extermination or toolbreaking that is done with little awareness or focus. Basically you're so overwhelmed by the horror and meaninglessness of your environment that you just want to destroy. Nihilism is similar to cruelty — you're in a bad situation and don't see a way out, but you can at least make the badness more alive and unstable.

Revenge I'm defining narrowly, as a completely pathological urge, when someone does something you don't like, to do something they don't like. Revenge sits in one corner of a vast slippery region of answering aggression with aggression. On one edge of this region is a dense gray area all the way from revenge to control, with what we call "punishment" right in the middle. And spreading out from this gray area is another gray area merging with a whole range of healthy behaviors that may be only subtly different from revenge, punishment, and control.

Balance is the word I'm using for all of them. If control and punishment and revenge are about acting on others without respecting their autonomy, balance is acting *with* them, with respect for their autonomy, with awareness of others as subjects with their own perspectives and needs, with an opening of one's self into relation as an equal. What I'm trying to get at here is the default way of being of all life everywhere, and I trivialize it by describing it with only one word, or with words at all. I could just as appropriately call it "play" or "love" or just say "uh!" and open my arms. Most nature-based peoples don't even have a word for "love," for the same reason that fish, if they had words, would not have a word for water.

I'm taking for granted that we can learn from "nature," our little word for the larger world that created humans, that we're still part of, that has kept itself going for uncountable millions of years when our system couldn't last a week without cheating by taking more than it gives. But I'm not saying

nature is perfect. It's a good system that evil can and does get into. I've seen male ducks gang rape a female. I've heard that monkeys will have hateful murderous tribal wars, and that alpha male lions will hunt down and kill the offspring of competitors. I actually idealize nature less than many scientists, who will make up stories about how these behaviors serve their self-centered version of "evolution." These behaviors are aberrations, but small ones that nature can work with. But what if some exterminating animals got *really* out of balance, say by inventing physical tools and abstract languages that stuck their deviant behaviors in place as a whole sustained way of being? They would either go extinct, taking a lot of the earth with them, or they would see what they were doing and get back in balance with the whole, which they could learn from almost any other creature, especially populations of their own species that lived in balance.

Outside civilization there is no control and little extermination. Even the most murderous lion will not try to force another creature to act contrary to its nature, and even if it doesn't always use healthy ways of resolving conflict, it knows such ways. Everyone but a civilized human knows how to physically work out conflict while minimizing death and serious injury, including so-called "warlike" tribes of natural humans. Non-civilized battles are highly ritualized, totally voluntary, and fun. They've been compared to big capture-the-flag games where people sometimes get killed. Contrast this with advanced civilization, where young people's lives are puritanically stripped of all aggression and danger, and then in a few years these same people are coerced (through poverty if not through the draft) to go fight in wars where lethal danger is intentionally maximized.

Our society tries to channel all vigor into extermination and control. This right wing practice is allied with the left wing doctrine that all vigor is "violence" and is wrong. By suppressing healthy vigor, we support its channeling into unhealthy vigor, which supports the belief that all vigor is unhealthy and must be suppressed. This cycle can be broken through the practice of balancing vigor, and through the ideas that I'm suggesting here: That domination and vigor are different things, that domination is wrong at any level of vigor, that vigor is not inherently bad, and that aggressive vigorous actions can still be healthy and balancing.

These ideas are almost not radical. Everyone agrees that verbal abuse is wrong and that wrestling for fun is OK. What's radical is to extend these values

(or excuse) the continuing manufacture of toxic chemicals and radioactivity, which create more sickness.

Most of what we call "health care" is an industry that just keeps rich people's money circling back around in a mechanistic, authoritarian, killing-based medical paradigm. Making access to Western industrial medicine a "right," extending it to the whole world, is not only a bad idea, it's logically impossible, since industrial medicine is deeply allied with the inequality that is part of industrialization. For every expensive machine and pharmaceutical, there have to be people with shitty jobs manufacturing these items and moving them around, and no one would ever do these jobs if they weren't coerced into it by deprivation.

"Owning guns is a right not a privilege." Since guns are a somewhat advanced technology in a deeply exploitative technological system, they cannot be manufactured without a lot of people being forced to do terrible jobs in mines and factories, or being forced off their land so minerals can be taken. If these people all had guns, they would shoot their bosses and invaders and guns couldn't exist in the first place. Now it would be possible for everyone to carry around some kind of easy-to-make but still deadly weapon, like a spear tipped with an obsidian blade, and that would make the world a lot more democratic, but no one has suggested it, because people are terrified of any hint of real democracy.

Do you think most people who support "gun rights" want convicted felons to have guns? Mexican border crossers? Anarchist protesters? Homeless people? Probably not. What they want are exclusive gun advantages for obedient middle class or higher citizens of wealthy nations.

"Education is a right not a privilege." It wouldn't be so bad if they said "learning," which implies something that anyone can do for themselves if they're not blocked. But "education" implies something dispensed and regulated by authorities, which in practice mostly serves to keep the system of deprivation and inequality in place.

I went to upper middle class schools in a college town, and I see in hindsight that we were trained to be lawyers and engineers and professors and managers, given broad knowledge, bland moderate-liberal politics, mild independent thinking skills, and the feeling that we were smarter and more capable than average people. I have a friend who went to lower class schools, where she says they were trained to think of themselves as stupid and worthless, and to

it,” instead of actually listening to each other. Imagine if, instead of saying “We have a right to be given what we need,” we said “We have the *power* to go and take it!” Or better yet, we have the power to create a society where we don’t have all these needs in the first place.

Finally, and this is just another way of saying all of the above, I don’t agree with the kinds of things that people declare to be “a right not a privilege.” Nobody ever fills in the blank with anything interesting, anything that cuts to the heart of the system. No bumper stickers say “Not paying rent is a right not a privilege” or “Slacking off all day is a right not a privilege,” or “Confiscating property is a right not a privilege,” or “Rioting is a right not a privilege.” Nobody turns it into a mind twister, like “Having more money than other people is a right not a privilege.”

Of course that one would be absurd, but so are most of the actual things people fill in the blank with, things that by their nature cannot be given to everyone, things whose very definitions are tied into a depriving exploiting system, so that seeking to provide them to everyone is a permanent unwinnable game that only strengthens that system. Here are some real examples that ranked high on my web search:

“Health care is a right not a privilege.” What people are getting at is, they want a society where everyone’s health is taken care of, and they think in the present society only an exclusive minority has its health taken care of. They’re mistaken. This society doesn’t care for anyone’s health. The rich and poor breathe the same polluted air, eat the same over-refined toxin-saturated foods, walk through the same electromagnetic fields, live downwind and downstream from the same sources of poisons and radioactivity, and even have the same perpetual emotional distress, even if they fear different things. Factors like these are what make us sick, and there’s only a little room to buy yourself away from them. Some of them you can even avoid better through extreme poverty than extreme wealth.

Being out of balance is what makes a person sick, and our whole society is out of balance. The difference between the rich and poor is that the rich can afford more expensive treatments. Normally these treatments only suppress the personal symptoms of our societal imbalance, so the rich can live long lives with hidden sickness where the poor simply die. At worst, expensive treatments do great harm, like chemotherapy and radiation for cancer. Not only do they statistically kill more people than they save, but they require

beyond the sub-worlds of entertainment and leisure. The most important function of the propaganda word “violence” is to prevent this one thing: the entry of alive, autonomous, democratic, personal physical power into politics, or the breaking of the monopoly that the authorities have on socially effective physical action. Of course just breaking this monopoly doesn’t equal balance, and if we ended it now we wouldn’t be ready. But it’s a giant necessary step, and the time will come to take it.

We already (or still) come close to balancing vigor in a few areas. Contact sports are ritualized, vigorous, and minimize injury, but the ritual is not one of balance but one of symbolic extermination, where teams are “eliminated” and at the end of the season there can be only one winner. Also, for every player there are thousands of spectators, whose pent-up vigor may not be released but built up further, which would fit the fact that domestic physical abuse is higher on Superbowl Sunday. Martial arts can be vigorous and balanced, but again, the focus is often on an absolute form of winning. Rough sex can be vigorous and balanced, if people participate as equals, but usually they take dominant and submissive roles. I think moshing comes closest. It’s ritualized and dependably vigorous and balanced — but still, there’s no actual conflict that’s being worked out, so it has no relation to society except as an exercise. It’s balanced but not *balancing*.

Balancing vigor is in our nerves and blood — and if it’s ever taken out of us by genetic science, we’re doomed, because it’s our lifeline to the real world. In the deepest cubicles of civilization, we feel a biological need to work out real issues with bone-shaking running and bumping, and this need is always denied, diverted into toy vigor that’s detached from real issues, or into vigor that settles real issues not with balance but with unequal life-negating extermination and control.

This is why successful vigorous protests are so important. A young German radical once told me that she and her friends went to political riots not for the particular issues, but because they wanted to fight the police. At the time I thought — as I was trained to think — that this was irresponsible and immature. But finally I understand that their instincts were more profoundly radical, more deeply socially conscious, than any of our brain-tangling political issues.

To take the example of the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle: Denied representation by an antidemocratic corporate government, people went out with their bodies, with their physical presence, and for a few hours seduced the police

into something like natural fighting. In a space outside the legal fabrications of our society, activists and police faced each other as if on equal terms, and living bodies blocked delegates, delayed the conference, and measurably influenced the world!

The WTO protest was not a victory, but something even better — it was not a loss. Winning would mean totally having our way: humiliating police officers and burning down the corporate headquarters and the houses of the elite. Then we would just become the new controlling exterminating powers, as we did after the French Revolution. Revolution is the wrong metaphor for change when we're trapped going around in circles.

We need to learn to walk the straight line that divides domination from degradation, before we can safely re-integrate vigor into politics. Then, if we can repeatedly engage authority-serving humans in respectful vigorous conflicts that affect real issues, and where every person walks away with dignity, one day we might wake up and notice that there are no longer any "authorities," just different perspectives working things out as equals.

Also, we need as many people as possible to understand what the fighting is about. Unlike in nature, most of our conflicts are based on huge lies and misunderstandings, so they can only really be settled with some element of sharing experience and talking and carefully thinking. For example, the bought classes really believe that their system is good and just, and view sabotage and political riots as they view earthquakes, as incomprehensible blind destruction. This raises moral questions: how much slack do we give people to figure it out, before we act? And it raises strategic questions: when do the positive effects — patterns jammed, new patterns started, attention drawn to our perspectives — outweigh the negative effects of drawing anger and hatred from people who still don't get it?

I have no further answers. People who are authorized to use force, if they're not just stupid bullies, face questions like these all the time, and learn to answer them skillfully and decisively. We can too.

Against Rights¹⁰

Although I'm aiming for a world with no wealth or poverty, where everything important is abundantly available to everyone, I've never liked the fashion of calling something "a right not a privilege." It's not just that it's a cliché — I did a Google search for "a right not a privilege" and got 4670 hits, declaring dozens of things (but not all kinds of things) to be rights not privileges. There's something deeper that bugs me. So I thought it through.

I disagree with the idea of "privilege." It seems to take for granted that if you're in a position where you get something other people don't get, that's a good position that anyone would choose. It's not. I mean of course you'd choose to be the elite rather than the exploited, given a system where people are deprived of things other people have, to make the deprived people do what they hate. But given a choice between this system, and a system where no one feels deprivation, everyone would choose the latter over any position in the former. There are no good roles in an exploitative system — the so-called "privileged" are just another class of the exploited, made to suppress their empathy, to set aside their souls in exchange for being exempted from a general forced deprivation, and living in fear of losing this protection and falling into the lower classes.

I disagree with the idea of "rights," at least when it means something guaranteed by the state or dispensed by some program. This is a crutch in the worst sense. Rights work against the true interests of the deprived classes by making them depend on the state, an authoritarian structure that uses threats to force people to grudgingly go through the motions of treating each other decently, and that channels these motions through isolating and nightmarish bureaucracies. Or it makes them depend on charity, which reinforces feelings of superiority and inferiority. This is true whether the right is for something like money or something like freedom. Programs that transfer money from the rich to the poor never transfer enough, they make the rich despise the poor, and they make it possible for a system that generates inequality to keep going. The right to free speech is always overruled when speech actually threatens the system, and it leads to disconnected and utterly powerless dissent, where people cop out and say "I despise what you say but I support your right to say

¹⁰ Originally published 27 November, 2002 on <http://ranprieur.com/essays/rights.html>