MARK MANSON – EVERYTHING IS FUCKED

CHAPTER 6

The Formula of Humanity

Depending on your perspective, the philosopher Immanuel Kant was either the most boring person who ever lived or a productivity hacker's wet dream. For forty years he woke up every morning at five o'clock and wrote for exactly three hours. He would then lecture at the same university for exactly four hours, and then eat lunch at the same restaurant every day. Then, in the afternoon, he would go on an extended walk through the same park, on the same route, leaving and returning home at the exact same time. He did this for forty years. Every. Single. Day.[1]

Kant was efficiency personified. He was so mechanical in his habits, that his neighbors joked that they could set their clocks by when he left his apartment. He would depart for his daily walk at three thirty in the afternoon, have dinner with the same friend most evenings, and after working some more, would go to bed at exactly ten every night.

Despite sounding like a colossal bore, Kant was one of the most important and influential thinkers in world history. And from his single-room apartment in Königsberg, Prussia, he did more to steer the world than most kings, presidents, prime ministers, or generals before and since.

If you're living in a democratic society that protects individual freedoms, you have Kant partially to thank for that. He was one of the first to argue that *all* people have an inherent dignity that must be regarded and respected.[2] He was the first person ever

to envision a global governing body that could guarantee peace across much of the world (an idea that would eventually inspire the formation of the United Nations).[3] His descriptions of how we perceive space and time would later help inspire Einstein's discovery of the theory of relativity.[4] He was one of the first to suggest the possibility of animal rights.[5] He reinvented the philosophy of aesthetics and beauty.[6] He resolved the two-hundred-year-old philosophical debate between rationalism and empiricism in the span of a couple of hundred pages.[7] And as if all that weren't enough, he reinvented moral philosophy, from top to bottom, overthrowing ideas that had been the basis of Western civilization since Aristotle.[8]

Kant was an intellectual powerhouse. If Thinking Brains had biceps, Kant's Thinking Brain was the Mr. Olympia of the intellectual universe.

As with his lifestyle, Kant was rigid and uncompromising in his view of the world. He believed that there was a clear right and wrong, a value system that transcended and operated outside any human emotions or Feeling Brain judgments.[9] Moreover, he lived what he preached. Kings tried to censor him; priests condemned him; academics envied him. Yet none of this slowed him down.

Kant didn't give a fuck. And I mean that in the truest and profoundest sense of the phrase.[10] He is the only thinker I have ever come across who eschewed hope and the flawed human values it relied upon; who confronted the Uncomfortable Truth and refused to accept its horrible implications; who gazed into the abyss with nothing but logic and pure reason; who, armed with only the brilliance of his mind, stood before the gods and challenged them . . .

. . . and somehow won.[11]

But to understand Kant's Herculean struggle, first we must take a detour, and learn about psychological development, maturity, and adulthood.[12]

How to Grow Up

When I was, like, four years old, despite my mother warning me not to, I put my finger on a hot stove. That day, I learned an important lesson: Really hot things suck. They burn you. And you want to avoid touching them ever again.

Around the same time, I made another important discovery: ice cream was stored in the freezer, on a shelf that could be easily accessed if I stood on my tippy toes. One day, while my mother was in the other room (poor Mom), I grabbed the ice cream, sat on the floor, and proceeded to gorge myself using my bare hands.

It was the closest I would come to an orgasm for another ten years. If there was a heaven in my little four-year-old mind, I had just found it: my own little Elysium in a bucket of congealed divinity. As the ice cream began to melt, I smeared an extra helping across my face, letting it dribble all over my shirt. This was all happening in slow motion, of course. I was practically bathing in that sweet, tasty goodness. *Oh yes, glorious sugary milk, share with me your secrets, for today I shall know greatness.*

Then Mom walked in—and all hell broke loose, which included but was not limited to a much-needed bath.

I learned a couple of lessons that day. One, stealing ice cream and then dumping it all over yourself and the kitchen floor makes your mother extremely angry. And two, angry mothers suck; they scold you and punish you. That day, much like the day with the hot stove, I learned what *not* to do.

But there was a third, meta-lesson being taught here, one of those lessons that are so obvious we don't even notice when they happen, a lesson that was far more important than the other lessons: eating ice cream is better than being burned.

This lesson was important because it was a value judgment. *Ice cream is better than hot stoves. I prefer sugary sweetness in my mouth than a bit of fire on my hand.* It was the discovery of preference and, therefore, prioritization. It was my Feeling Brain's decision that one thing in the world was better than another, the construction of my early value hierarchy.

A friend of mine once described parenthood as "basically just following around a kid for a couple decades and making sure he doesn't accidentally kill himself—and you'd be amazed how many ways a kid can find to accidentally kill himself."

Young children are always looking for new ways to accidentally kill themselves because the driving force behind their psychology is exploration. Early in life, we are driven to explore the world around us because our Feeling Brains are collecting information on what pleases and harms us, what feels good and bad, what is worth pursuing further and what is worth avoiding. We're building up our value hierarchy, figuring out what our first and primary values are, so that we can begin to know what to hope for.[13]

Eventually, the exploratory phase exhausts itself. And not because we run out of world to explore. Actually, it's the opposite: the exploratory phase wraps up because as we become older, we begin to recognize that there's *too much* world to explore. You can't touch and taste everything. You can't meet all the people. You can't see all the things. There's too much potential experience, and the sheer magnitude of our own existence overwhelms and intimidates us.

Therefore, our two brains begin to focus less on trying everything and more on developing some rules to help us navigate the endless complexity of the world before us. We adopt most of these rules from our parents and teachers, but many of them we figure out for ourselves. For instance, after fucking around near open flames enough, you develop a little mental rule that *all* flames are dangerous, not just the stove ones. And after seeing Mom get pissed off enough times, you begin to figure out that raiding the freezer and stealing dessert is *always* bad, not just when it's ice cream.[14]

As a result, some general principles begin to emerge in our minds: take care around dangerous things so you won't get hurt; be honest with your parents and they'll treat you well; share with your siblings and they'll share with you.

These new values are more sophisticated because they're abstract. You can't point to "fairness" or draw a picture of "prudence." The little kid thinks, ice cream is awesome; therefore, I want ice cream. But the adolescent thinks, ice cream is awesome, but stealing stuff pisses my parents off and I'll get punished; therefore, I'm *not* going to take the ice cream from the freezer. The adolescent applies if/then rules to her decision making, thinking through cause-and-effect chains in a way that a young child cannot.

As a result, an adolescent learns that strictly pursuing her own pleasure and avoiding pain often creates problems. Actions have consequences. You must negotiate your desires with the desires of those around you. You must play by the rules of society and authority, and then, more often than not, you'll be rewarded.

This is maturity in action: developing higher-level and more abstract values to enhance decision making in a wider range of contexts. This is how you adjust to the world, how you learn to handle the seemingly infinite permutations of experience. It is a

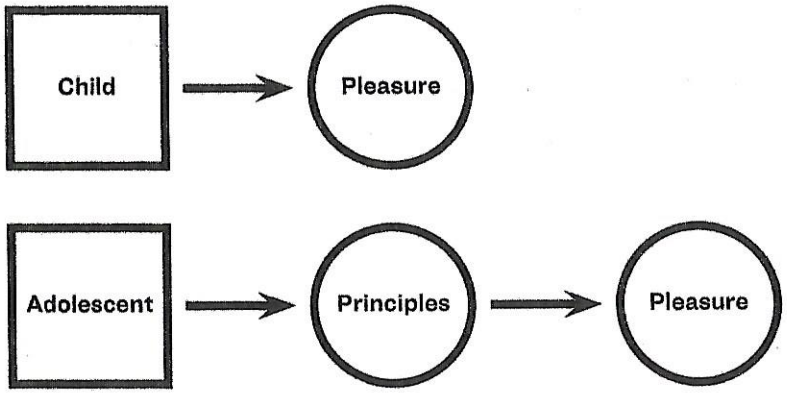


Figure 6.1: A child thinks only about his own pleasure, whereas an adolescent learns to navigate rules and principles to achieve her goals.

major cognitive leap for children and fundamental to growing up in a healthy, happy way.

Young children are like little tyrants.[15] They struggle to conceive of anything in life beyond what is immediately pleasurable or painful for them at any given moment. They cannot feel empathy. They cannot imagine what life is like in your shoes. All they know is that they want some fucking ice cream.[16]

A young child's identity is therefore very small and fragile. It is constituted by simply what gives pleasure and what avoids pain. Susie likes chocolate. She is afraid of dogs. She enjoys coloring. She is often mean to her brother. This is the extent of Susie's identity because her Thinking Brain has not yet developed enough meaning to create coherent stories for her. It's only when she's old enough to ask what the pleasure is *for*, what the pain is *for*, that she can develop some meaningful narratives for herself, and establish identity.

The knowledge of pleasure and pain is still there in adolescence. It's just that pleasure and pain no longer dictate most decision making.[17] They are no longer the basis of our values. Older children weigh their personal feelings against their understanding of rules, trade-offs, and the social order around them to plan and make decisions. This gives them larger, sturdier identities.[18]

The adolescent does the same stumbling around the young child does in learning what is pleasurable and what is painful, except the adolescent stumbles around by trying on different social rules and roles. If I wear this, will it make me cool? If I talk like that, will it make people like me? If I pretend to enjoy this music, will I be popular?[19]

This is an improvement, but there's still a weakness in this adolescent approach to life. Everything is seen as a trade-off. Adolescents approach life as an endless series of bargains: I will do what my boss says so I can get money. I will call my mother so I don't get yelled at. I will do my homework so I don't fuck up my future. I will lie and pretend to be nice so I don't have to deal with conflict.

Nothing is done for its own sake. Everything is a calculated transaction, usually made out of fear of the negative repercussions. Everything is a *means* to some pleasurable end.[20]

The problem with adolescent values is that if you hold them, you never actually stand for something outside yourself. You are still at heart a child, albeit a cleverer and much more sophisticated child. Everything still revolves around maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, it's just that the adolescent is savvy enough to think a few moves ahead to get there.

In the end, adolescent values are self-defeating. You can't live your entire life this way, otherwise you're never actually living your own life. You're merely living out an aggregation of the desires of the people around you.

To become an emotionally healthy individual, you must break

out of this constant bargaining, endlessly treating everyone as a means to some pleasurable end, and come to understand even higher and more abstract guiding principles.

How to Be an Adult

When you google "how to be an adult," most of the results focus on preparing for job interviews, managing your finances, cleaning up after yourself, and not being a total asshole. These things are all great, and indeed, they are all things that adults are expected to do. But I would argue that, by themselves, they do not make you an adult. They simply prevent you from being a child, which is not the same thing.

That's because most people who do these things do them because they are rule- and transaction-based. They are a means to some superficial end. You prepare for a job interview because you want to get a good job. You learn how to clean your house because its level of cleanliness has direct consequences on what people think of you. You manage your finances because if you don't, you will be royally fucked one day down the road. Bargaining with rules and the social order allows us to be well-functioning human beings in the world.

Eventually, though, we realize that the most important things in life cannot be gained through bargaining. You don't want to bargain with your father for love, or your friends for companionship, or your boss for respect. Bargaining with people into loving or respecting you feels shitty. It undermines the whole project. If you have to convince someone to love you, then they don't love you. If you have to cajole someone into respecting you, then they will never respect you. If you have to convince someone to trust you, then they won't actually trust you.

The most precious and important things in life are, by definition, nontransactional. And to try to bargain for them is to immediately destroy them. You cannot conspire for happiness; it is impossible. But this is often what people try to do, especially when they seek out self-help and other personal development advice—they are essentially saying, "Show me the rules of the game I have to play, and I'll play it," not realizing that it's the very fact that they think there are rules to happiness that is preventing them from being happy.[21]

While people who navigate life through bargaining and rules can get far in the *material* world, they remain crippled and alone in their *emotional* world. This is because transactional values create relationships that are built upon manipulation.

Adulthood is the realization that sometimes an abstract principle is right and good for its own sake, that even if it hurts you today, even if it hurts others, being honest is still the right thing to do. In the same way that the adolescent realizes there's more to the world than the child's pleasure or pain, the adult realizes that there's more to the world than the adolescent's constant bargaining for validation, approval, and satisfaction. Becoming an adult is therefore developing the ability to do what is right for the simple reason that it is right.

An adolescent will say that she values honesty only because she has learned that saying so produces good results. But when confronted with difficult conversations, she will tell white lies, exaggerate the truth, and become passive-aggressive. An adult will be honest for the simple sake that honesty is more important than her own pleasure or pain. Honesty is more important than getting what you want or achieving a goal. Honesty is inherently good and valuable, in and of itself. Honesty is therefore an *end*, not a means to some other end.

An adolescent will say he loves you, but his conception of love is that he is getting something in return, that love is merely an emotional swap meet, where you each bring everything you have to offer and haggle with each other for the best deal. An adult will love freely without expecting anything in return because an adult understands that that is the only thing that can make love real. An adult will give without seeking anything in return, because to do so defeats the purpose of a gift in the first place.

The principled values of adulthood are unconditional—that is, they cannot be reached through any other means. They are ends in and of themselves.[22]

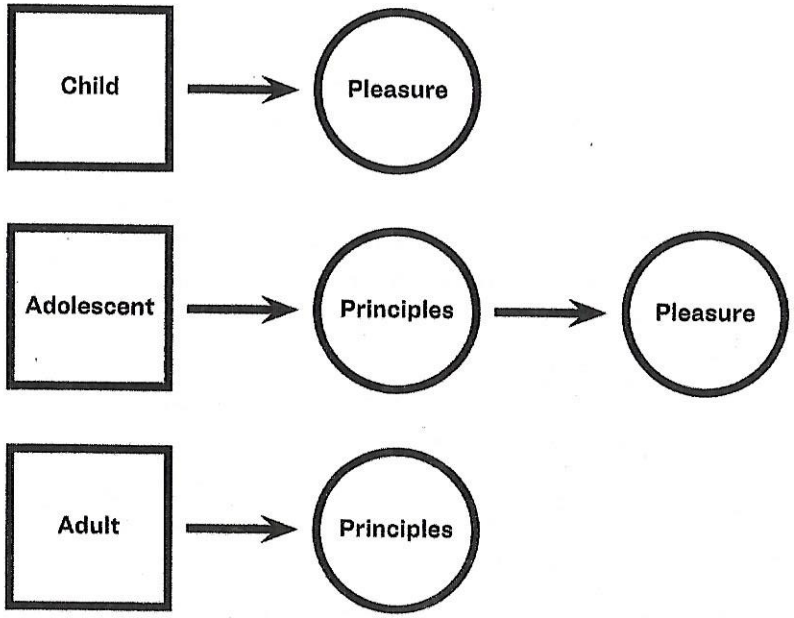


Figure 6.2: An adult is able to eschew his own pleasure for the sake of his principles.

There are plenty of grown-ass children in the world. And there are a lot of aging adolescents. Hell, there are even some young adults out there. That's because, past a certain point, maturity has nothing to do with age.[23] What matters are a person's *intentions*. The difference between a child, an adolescent, and an adult is not how old they are or what they do, but *why* they do something. The child steals the ice cream because it feels good, and he is oblivious or indifferent to the consequences. The adolescent doesn't steal because he knows it will create worse consequences in the future, but his decision is ultimately a bargain with his future self: I'll forgo some pleasure now to prevent greater future pain.[24]

But it's only the adult who doesn't steal for the simple principle that stealing is wrong. And to steal, even if she gets away with it, would make her feel worse about herself.[25]

STILL MEANS TO AN END

Why We Don't Grow

When we are little kids, the way we learn to transcend the pleasure/pain values ("ice cream is good; hot stoves are bad") is by pursuing those values and seeing how they fail us. It's only by experiencing the pain of their failure that we learn to transcend them.[26] We steal the ice cream, Mom gets pissed off and punishes us. Suddenly, "ice cream is good" doesn't seem as straightforward as it used to—there are all sorts of other factors to consider. I like ice cream. And I like Mom. But taking the ice cream will upset Mom. What do I do? Eventually, the child is forced to reckon with the fact that there are trade-offs that must be negotiated.

This is essentially what good early parenting boils down to: implementing the correct consequences for a child's pleasure/pain-driven behavior. Punish them for stealing ice cream; reward them for sitting quietly in a restaurant. You are helping them

understand that life is far more complicated than their own impulses or desires. Parents who fail to do this fail their children in an incredibly fundamental way because it won't take long for the child to have the shocking realization that the world does not cater to his whims. Learning this as an adult is incredibly painful—far more painful than it would have been had the child learned the lesson when he was younger. He will be socially punished by his peers and society for not understanding it. Nobody wants to be friends with a selfish brat. No one wants to work with someone who doesn't consider others' feelings or appreciate rules. No society accepts someone who metaphorically (or literally) steals the ice cream from the freezer. The untaught child will be shunned, ridiculed, and punished for his behavior in the adult world, which will result in even more pain and suffering.

Parents can fail their children in another way: they can abuse them.[27] An abused child also does not develop beyond his pain- and pleasure-driven values because his punishment follows no logical pattern and doesn't reinforce deeper, more abstract values. Instead of predictable failures, his experience is just random and cruel. Stealing ice cream sometimes results in overly harsh punishment. At other times, it results in no consequences at all. Therefore, no lesson is learned. No higher values are produced. No development takes place. The child never learns to control his own behavior and develops coping mechanisms to deal with the incessant pain. This is why children who are abused and children who are coddled often end up with the same issues when they become adults: they remain stuck in their childhood value system.[28]

Ultimately, graduating to adolescence requires trust. A child must trust that her behavior will produce predictable outcomes. Stealing always creates bad outcomes. Touching a hot stove also

creates bad outcomes. Trusting in these outcomes is what allows the child to develop rules and principles around them. The same is true once the child grows older and enters society. A society without trustworthy institutions or leaders cannot develop rules and roles. Without trust, there are no reliable principles to dictate decisions, therefore everything devolves back into childish selfishness.[29]

People get stuck in the adolescent stage of values for similar reasons that they get stuck with childish values: trauma and/or neglect. Victims of bullying are a particularly notable example. A person who has been bullied in his younger years will move through the world with an assumed understanding that no one will ever like or respect him unconditionally, that all affection must be hard-won through a series of practiced conversation and canned actions. You must dress a certain way. You must speak a certain way. You must act a certain way—or else.[30]

Some people become incredibly good at playing the bargaining game. They tend to be charming and charismatic and are naturally able to sense what other people want of them and to fill that role. This manipulation rarely fails them in any meaningful way, so they come to believe that this is simply how the whole world operates. Life is one big high school gymnasium, and you must shove people into lockers lest ye be shoved first.

Adolescents need to be shown that bargaining is a never-ending treadmill, that the only things in life of real value and meaning are achieved without conditions, without transactions. It requires good parents and teachers not to succumb to the adolescent's bargaining. The best way to do this is by example, of course, by showing unconditionality by being unconditional yourself. The best way to teach an adolescent to trust is to trust him. The best way

to teach an adolescent respect is to respect him. The best way to teach someone to love is by loving him. And you don't force the love or trust or respect on him—after all, that would make those things conditional—you simply give them, understanding that at some point, the adolescent's bargaining will fail and he'll understand the value of unconditionality when he's ready.[31]

When parents and teachers fail, it's usually because they themselves are stuck at an adolescent level of values. They, too, see the world in transactional terms. They, too, bargain love for sex, loyalty for affection, respect for obedience. In fact, they likely bargain with their kids for affection, love, or respect. They think this is normal, so the kid grows up thinking it's normal. And the shitty, shallow, transactional parent/child relationship is then replicated when the kid goes out and forms relationships in the world, because *he* then becomes a teacher or parent and imparts his adolescent values on children, causing the whole mess to continue for another generation.

Once older, adolescent-minded people will move through the world assuming that all human relationships are a never-ending trade agreement, that intimacy is no more than a feigned sense of knowing the other person for the mutual benefit of each one, that everyone is a means to some selfish end. And instead of recognizing that their problems are rooted in the transactional approach to the world itself, they will assume that the only problem is that it took them so long to do the transactions correctly.

It's difficult to act unconditionally. You love someone knowing you may not be loved in return, but you do it anyway. You trust someone even though you realize you might get hurt or screwed over. That's because to act unconditionally requires some degree of faith—faith that it's the right thing to do even if it results in more pain, even if it doesn't work out for you or the other person.

Making the leap of faith into a virtuous adulthood requires not just an ability to endure pain, but also the courage to abandon hope, to let go of the desire for things always to be better or more pleasant or a ton of fun. Your Thinking Brain will tell you that this is illogical, that your assumptions must inevitably be wrong in some way. Yet, you do it anyway. Your Feeling Brain will procrastinate and freak out about the pain of brutal honesty, the vulnerability that comes with loving someone, the fear that comes from humility. Yet, you do it anyway.

	CHILDHOOD	ADOLESCENCE	ADULTHOOD
VALUES	Pleasure/pain	Rules and roles	Virtues
SEES RELATIONSHIPS AS...	Power struggles	Performances	Vulnerability
SELF-WORTH	Narcissistic: wide swings between "I'm the best" and "I'm the worst"	Other-dependent: externally validated	Independent: largely internally validated
MOTIVATION	Self-aggrandizement	Self-acceptance	*Amor fati*
POLITICS	Extremist/nihilist	Pragmatic, ideological	Pragmatic, nonideological
IN ORDER TO GROW, HE/SHE NEEDS...	Trustworthy institutions and dependable people	Courage to let go of outcomes and faith in unconditional acts	Consistent self-awareness

Adult behaviors are ultimately seen as admirable and noteworthy. It's the boss who takes the fall for his employees' mistakes, the mother who gives up her own happiness for her child's, the friend who tells you what you need to hear even though it upsets you.

It's these people who hold the world together. Without them, we'd all likely be fucked.

It's no coincidence, then, that all the world's great religions push people toward these unconditional values, whether it's the unconditional forgiveness of Jesus Christ or the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha or the perfect justice of Muhammad. In their purest forms, the world's great religions leverage our human instinct for hope to try to pull people upward toward adult virtues.[32]

Or, at least, that's usually the original intention.

Unfortunately, as they grow, religions inevitably get co-opted by transactional adolescents and narcissist children, people who pervert the religious principles for their own personal gain. *Every* human religion succumbs to this failure of moral frailty at some point. No matter how beautiful and pure its doctrines, it ultimately becomes a human institution, and all human institutions eventually become corrupted.

Enlightenment philosophers, excited by the opportunities afforded the world by growth, decided to remove the spirituality from religion and get the job done with ideological religion. They jettisoned the idea of virtue and instead focused on measurable, concrete goals: creating greater happiness and less suffering; giving people greater personal liberties and freedoms; and promoting compassion, empathy, and equality.

And these ideological religions, like the spiritual religions before them, also caved to the flawed nature of all human institutions. When you attempt to barter for happiness, you destroy

happiness. When you try to enforce freedom, you negate freedom. When you try to create equality, you undermine equality.

None of these ideological religions confronted the fundamental issue at hand: conditionality. They either didn't admit to or didn't deal with the fact that whatever you make your God Value, you will always be willing, at some point, to bargain away human life in order to get closer to it. Worshipping some supernatural God, some abstract principle, some bottomless desire, when pursued long enough, will always result in giving up your own humanity or the humanity of others in order to achieve the aims of that worship. And what was supposed to save you from suffering then plunges you back into suffering. The cycle of hope-destruction begins anew.

And this is where Kant comes in . . .

The One Rule for Life

Early in his life, Kant understood the Whac-A-Mole game of maintaining hope in the face of the Uncomfortable Truth. And like everyone who becomes aware of this cruel cosmic game, he despaired. But he refused to accept the game. He refused to believe that there was no inherent value in existence. He refused to believe that we are forever cursed to conjure stories to give our lives an arbitrary sense of meaning. So, he set out to use his big-biceped Thinking Brain to figure out what value without hope would look like.

Kant started with a simple observation. In all the universe, there is only one thing that, from what we can tell, is completely scarce and unique: consciousness. To Kant, the *only* thing that distinguishes us from the rest of the matter in the universe is

our ability to reason—we're able to take the world around us and, through reasoning and will, improve upon it. This, to him, was special, exceedingly special—a miracle, almost—because for everything in the infinite span of existence, *we* are the only thing (that we know of) that can actually *direct existence*. In the known cosmos, *we* are the only sources of ingenuity and creativity. *We* are the only ones who can direct our own fate. *We* are the only ones who are self-aware. And for all we know, we are the only shot the universe has at intelligent self-organization.

Therefore, Kant cleverly deduced that, logically, the supreme value in the universe *is the thing that conceives of value itself*. The only true meaning in existence *is the ability to form meaning*. The only importance is the thing that decides importance.[33]

And this ability to choose meaning, to imagine importance, to invent purpose, is the only force in the known universe that can propagate itself, that can spread its intelligence and generate greater and greater levels of organization throughout the cosmos. Kant believed that without rationality, the universe would be a waste, in vain, and without purpose. Without intelligence, and the freedom to exercise that intelligence, we might as well all be a bunch of rocks. Rocks don't change. They don't conceive of values, systems, or organizations. They don't alter, improve, or create. They're just *there*.

But *consciousness*—consciousness can reorganize the universe, and that reorganization can add upon itself exponentially. Consciousness is able to take a problem, a system of a certain amount of complexity, and conceive and generate *greater complexity*. In a thousand years, we went from twiddling sticks in a small cave to designing entire digital realms connecting the minds of billions. In another thousand, we could easily be among the stars, reshaping the planets and space/time itself. Each individual action may not matter in the grand scheme of things, but the preservation and promotion of rational consciousness overall matters more than anything.

Kant argued that the most fundamental moral duty is the preservation and growth of consciousness, both in ourselves and in others. He called this principle of always putting consciousness first "the Formula of Humanity," and it kind of explains . . . well, like, everything, ever. It explains our basic moral intuitions. It explains the classic concept of virtue.[34] It explains how to act in our day-to-day lives without relying on some imagined vision of hope. It explains how to not be an asshole.

And, as if that weren't enough, it explains all of it in a single sentence. The Formula of Humanity states, "Act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."[35]

That's it. The Formula of Humanity is the single principle that pulls people out of adolescent bargaining and into adult virtue.[36]

See, the problem with hope is that it is fundamentally transactional—it is a bargain between one's current actions for some imagined, pleasant future. Don't eat this, and you'll go to heaven. Don't kill that person, or you'll get in trouble. Work hard and save your money, because that will make you happy.

To transcend the transactional realm of hope, one must act *unconditionally*. You must love someone without expecting anything in return; otherwise it's not truly love. You must respect someone without expecting anything in return; otherwise you don't truly respect him. You must speak honestly without expecting a pat on the back or a high-five or a gold star next to your name; otherwise you aren't truly being honest.

Kant summed up these unconditional acts with one simple principle: you must treat humanity never merely as a means, but always as an end itself.[37]

But what does this look like in day-to-day life? Here's a simple example:

Let's pretend that I'm hungry and I want a burrito. I get in my car and drive to Chipotle and order my usual double-meat monster that makes me oh so happy. In this situation, eating the burrito is my "end" goal. It's ultimately why I'm doing everything else: getting in the car, driving, buying gas, and so on. All these things I do to get the burrito are the "means," i.e., the things I must do in order to achieve my "end."

Means are things that we do conditionally. They are what we bargain with. I don't want to get in my car and drive, and I don't want to pay for gas, but I do want a burrito. Therefore, I must do these other things to get that burrito.

An end is something that is desired for its own sake. It is the defining motivating factor of our decisions and behaviors. If I wanted to eat a burrito only because my wife wanted a burrito and I wanted to make her happy, then the burrito is no longer my end; it is now a means to an even greater end: making my wife happy. And if I only wanted to make my wife happy so I could get laid tonight, now my wife's happiness is a means to a greater end, which in this case is sex.

Likely that last example made you squirm a little bit, made you feel that I'm kind of a dirtbag.[38] That's *exactly* what Kant is talking about. His Formula of Humanity states that treating any human being (or any consciousness) *as a means to some other end* is the basis of all wrong behavior. So, treating a burrito as a means to my wife's end is fine. It's good to make your spouse happy sometimes! But if I treat my wife as a means to the end of sex, then I

am now treating her merely as a means, and as Kant would argue, that is some shade of wrong.

Similarly, lying is wrong because you are misleading another person's conscious behavior in order to achieve your own goal. You are treating that person as a means to your own end. Cheating is unethical for a similar reason. You are violating the expectations of other rational and sentient beings for your own personal aims. You are treating everyone else who is taking the same test or following the same rules as a means to your own personal end. Violence, same deal: you are treating another person as a means to some greater political or personal end. Bad, reader. Bad!

Kant's Formula of Humanity doesn't only describe our moral intuition into what's wrong; it also explains the adult virtues, those actions and behaviors that are good for their own sake. Honesty is good in and of itself because it's the only form of communication that *doesn't* treat people merely as a means. Courage is good in and of itself because to fail to act is to treat either yourself or others as a means to the end of quelling your fear. Humility is good in and of itself because to fall into blind certainty is to treat others as a means to your own ends.

If there were ever to be a single rule to describe all desirable human behavior, the Formula of Humanity would probably be it. But here's the beautiful thing: unlike other moral systems or codes, the Formula of Humanity does not rely on hope. There's no great system to force onto the world, no faith-based supernatural beliefs to protect from doubt or lack of evidence.

The Formula of Humanity is merely a principle. It doesn't project some future utopia. It doesn't lament some hellish past. No one is better or worse or more righteous than anyone else. All that matters is that conscious will is respected and protected. End of story.

Because Kant understood that when you get into the business of deciding and dictating the future, you unleash the destructive potential of hope. You start worrying about converting people rather than honoring them, destroying evil in others rather than rooting it out in yourself.

Instead, he decided that the only logical way to improve the world is through improving ourselves—by growing up and becoming more virtuous—by making the simple decision, in each moment, to treat ourselves and others as ends, and never merely as means. Be honest. Don't distract or harm yourself. Don't shirk responsibility or succumb to fear. Love openly and fearlessly. Don't cave to tribal impulses or hopeful deceits. Because there is no heaven or hell in the future. There are only the choices you make in each and every moment.

Will you act conditionally or unconditionally? Will you treat others as merely means or as ends? Will you pursue adult virtue or childish narcissism?

Hope doesn't even have to enter into the equation. Don't hope for a better life. Simply *be* a better life.

Kant understood that there is a fundamental link between our respect for ourselves and our respect for the world. The values that define our identity are the templates that we apply to our interactions with others, and little progress can be made with others until we've made progress within ourselves.[39] When we pursue a life full of pleasure and simple satisfaction, we are treating *ourselves* as a means to our pleasurable ends. Therefore, self-improvement is not the cultivation of greater happiness but, rather, a cultivation of greater self-respect. Telling ourselves that we are worthless and shitty is just as wrong as telling others that they are worthless and shitty. Lying to ourselves is just as unethical as lying to others. Harming ourselves is just as repugnant as harming others. Self-love and self-care are therefore not something you learn about or practice. They are something you are ethically called to cultivate within yourself, even if they are all that you have left.

The Formula of Humanity has a ripple effect: your improved ability to be honest with yourself will increase how honest you are with others, and your honesty with others will influence them to be more honest with themselves, which will help *them* to grow and mature. Your ability not to treat yourself as a means to some other end will in turn allow you to better treat others as ends. Therefore, your cleaning up your relationship *with yourself* has the positive by-product of cleaning up your relationships with others, which then enables them to clean up their relationships with themselves, and so on.

This is how you change the world—not through some all-encompassing ideology or mass religious conversion or misplaced dreams of the future, but by achieving the maturation and dignity of each individual in the present, here and now. There will always be different religions and different value systems based on culture and experience; there will always be different ideas about where we're going and where we've come from. But, as Kant believed, the simple question of dignity and respect in each moment must be universal.

The Modern Maturity Crisis

Modern democracy was invented under the assumption that the average person is a selfish and delusional piece of shit, that the only way to protect us from ourselves is to create systems so interlocking and interdependent that no one person or group can completely hose the rest of the population.

Politics is a transactional and selfish game, and democracy is

the best system of government thus far for the sole reason that it's the only system that openly admits that. It acknowledges that power attracts corrupt and childish people. Power, by its very nature, *forces* leaders to be transactional. Therefore, the only way to manage that is by enshrining adult virtues into the design of the system itself.

Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, guarantees of privacy and of the right to a fair trial—these are all implementations of the Formula of Humanity in social institutions, and they are implemented in such a way that they are incredibly difficult to threaten or change.

There's really only one way to threaten a democratic system: when one group decides that its values are more important than the system itself and it subverts the religion of democracy with some other, likely less virtuous, religion . . . and political extremism grows.

Political extremists, because they are intractable and impossible to bargain with, are, by definition, childish. They're a bunch of fucking babies. Extremists want the world to be a certain way, and they refuse to acknowledge any interests or values outside their own. They refuse to negotiate. They refuse to appeal to a higher virtue or principle above their own selfish desires. And they cannot be trusted to follow through on the expectations of others. They are also unabashedly authoritarian because, as children, they are desperate for an all-powerful parent to come and make everything "all right."[40]

The most dangerous extremists know how to dress up their childish values in the language of transaction or universal principle. A right-wing extremist will claim she desires "freedom" above all else and that she's willing to make sacrifices for that freedom. But what she really means is that she wants freedom from having

to deal with any values that do not map onto her own. She wants freedom from having to deal with change or the marginalization of other people. Therefore, she's willing to limit and destroy the freedom of others in the name of her own freedom.[41]

Extremists on the left play the same game, the only thing that changes is the language. A leftie extremist will say that he wants "equality" for all, but what he really means is that he never wants anyone to feel pain, to feel harmed, or to feel inferior. He doesn't want anyone to have to face moral gaps, ever. And he's willing to *cause* pain and adversity to others in the name of eliminating those moral gaps.

Extremism, on both the right and the left, has become more politically prominent across the world in the past few decades.[42] Many smart people have suggested many complicated and overlapping explanations for this. And there likely *are* many complicated and overlapping reasons.[43]

But allow me to throw out another one: *that the maturity of our culture is deteriorating.*

Throughout the rich and developed world, we are not living through a crisis of wealth or material, but a crisis of character, a crisis of virtue, a crisis of means and ends. The fundamental political schism in the twenty-first century is no longer right versus left, but the impulsive childish values of the right *and* left versus the compromising adolescent/adult values of both the right and left. It's no longer a debate of communism versus capitalism or freedom versus equality but, rather, of maturity versus immaturity, of means versus ends.

WHAT IS MEANT BY MULTIFRACTALITY?

CHAPTER 7

Pain Is the Universal Constant

One by one, the researchers shuttled the subjects down a hall and into a small room. Inside was a single beige computer console with a blank screen and two buttons, and nothing else.[1]

The instructions were simple: sit, stare at the screen, and if a blue dot flashes on it, press the button that reads, "Blue." If a purple dot flashes on the screen, press the button that reads, "Not Blue."

Sounds easy, right?

Well, each subject had to look at a thousand dots. Yes, a *thousand.* And when a subject finished, the researchers brought in another subject and repeated the process: beige console, blank screen, a thousand dots. Next! This went on with hundreds of subjects at multiple universities.

Were these psychologists researching a new form of psychological torture? Was this an experiment into the limitations of human boredom? No. Actually, the scope of the study was matched only by its inanity. It was a study with seismic implications, because more than any other academic study in recent memory, it explains much of what we see happening in the world today.

The psychologists were researching something they would call "prevalence-induced concept change." But because that's an absolutely awful name, for our purposes, I will refer to their discovery as the "Blue Dot Effect."[2]

Here's the deal with the dots: Most of them were blue. Some of them were purple. Some of them were some shade in between blue and purple.

The researchers discovered that when they showed mostly blue dots, everyone was pretty accurate in determining which dots were blue and which ones were not. But as soon as the researchers started limiting the number of blue dots, and showing more shades of purple, the subjects began to mistake purple dots for blue. It seemed that their eyes distorted the colors and continued to seek a certain number of blue dots, no matter how many were actually shown.

Okay, big deal, right? People mis-see stuff all the time. And besides, when you're staring at dots for hours on end, you might start to go cross-eyed and see all sorts of weird shit.

But the blue dots weren't the point; they were merely a way to measure how humans warp their perceptions to fit their expectations. Once the researchers had enough data on blue dots to put their lab assistants into a coma, they moved on to more important perceptions.

For example: next, the researchers showed the subjects pictures of faces that were some degree of threatening, friendly, or neutral. Initially, they showed them a large number of threatening faces. But as the experiment went on, as with the blue dots, they showed fewer and fewer—and the same effect occurred: the fewer threatening faces subjects were shown, the more the subjects began to misread friendly and neutral faces as being threatening. In the same way that the human mind seemed to have a "preset" number of blue dots it expected to see, it also had a preset number of threatening faces it expected to see.

Then the researchers went even further, because—fuck it, why not? It's one thing to see threats where there are none, but what

about moral judgments? What about believing there's more evil in the world than there actually is?

This time, the researchers had the subjects read job proposals. Some of these proposals were unethical, involving some shady shit. Some proposals were totally innocuous and fine. Others were some gradation in between.

Once again, the researchers began by showing a mix of ethical and unethical proposals, and the subjects were told to keep an eye out for unethical proposals. Then, slowly, the researchers exposed people to fewer and fewer unethical proposals. As they did, the Blue Dot Effect kicked in. People began to interpret completely ethical proposals as being unethical. Rather than noticing that more proposals were showing up on the ethical side of the fence, people's minds *moved the fence* itself to maintain the perception that a certain number of proposals and requests were unethical. Basically, they redefined what was unethical without being consciously aware of doing so.

As the researchers noted, this bias has incredibly upsetting implications for . . . well, pretty much everything. Governmental committees designed to oversee regulations, when provided with a dearth of infractions, may start to perceive infractions where there are none. Task forces designed to check unethical practices within organizations will, when deprived of bad guys to accuse of wrongdoing, begin imagining bad guys where there are none.

The Blue Dot Effect suggests that, essentially, the more we look for threats, the more we will see them, regardless of how safe or comfortable our environment actually is. And we see this playing out in the world today.

It used to be that being the victim of violence meant somebody had physically harmed you. Today, many people have begun to use the word *violence* to describe words that made them feel uncomfortable, or even just the presence of a person they disliked.[3] *Trauma* used to mean specifically an experience so severe that the victim could not continue to function. Today, an unpleasant social encounter or a few offensive words are considered "trauma," and necessitate "safe spaces."[4] *Genocide* used to mean the physical mass murder of a certain ethnic or religious group. Today, the term *white genocide* is employed by some to lament the fact that the local diner now lists some of its menu items in Spanish.[5]

This is the Blue Dot Effect. The better things get, the more we perceive threats where there are none, and the more upset we become. And it is at the heart of the paradox of progress.

In the nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim, the founder of sociology and an early pioneer of the social sciences, ran a thought experiment in one of his books: What if there were no crime? What if there emerged a society where everyone was perfectly respectful and nonviolent and everyone was equal? What if no one lied or hurt each other? What if corruption did not exist? What would happen? Would conflict cease? Would stress evaporate? Would everyone frolic in fields picking daisies and singing the "Hallelujah" chorus from Handel's *Messiah*?[6]

Durkheim said no, that in fact the opposite would happen. He suggested that the more comfortable and ethical a society became, the more that small indiscretions would become magnified in our minds. If everyone stopped killing each other, we wouldn't necessarily feel good about it. We'd just get equally upset about the more minor stuff.

Developmental psychology has long argued something similar: that protecting people from problems or adversity doesn't make them happier or more secure; it makes them more easily insecure. A young person who has been sheltered from dealing with any

challenges or injustices growing up will come to find the slightest inconveniences of adult life intolerable, and will have the childish public meltdown to prove it.[7]

What we find, then, is that our emotional reactions to our problems are not determined by the size of the problem. Rather, our minds simply amplify (or minimize) our problems to fit the degree of stress we expect to experience. Material progress and security do not necessarily relax us or make it easier to hope for the future. On the contrary, it appears that perhaps by removing healthy adversity and challenge, people struggle even more. They become more selfish and more childish. They fail to develop and mature out of adolescence. They remain further removed from any virtue. They see mountains where there are molehills. And they scream at each other as though the world were one endless stream of spilled milk.

Traveling at the Speed of Pain

Recently, I read a cool Albert Einstein quote on the internet: "A man should look for what is, and not what he thinks should be." It was great. There was a cute little picture with him looking all science-y and everything. The quote is poignant and smart-sounding, and it engaged me for all of a couple of seconds before I scrolled on my phone to the next thing.

Except there was one problem: Einstein didn't say it.

Here's another viral Einstein quote that gets passed around a lot: "Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

That's not Einstein, either.

Or how about "I fear the day when the technology overlaps with our humanity. The world will only have a generation of idiots"?[8]

Nope, not him.

Einstein might be the most ill-used historical figure on the internet. He's like our culture's "smart friend," the one we say agrees with us to make us sound smarter than we actually are. His poor mug has been plastered next to quotes about everything from God to mental illness to energy healing. None of which has anything to do with science. The poor man must be spinning in his grave.

People project shit onto Einstein to the point that he's become a kind of mythical figure. For example, the idea that Einstein was a poor student is bogus. He excelled at math and science from an early age, taught himself algebra and Euclidean geometry in a single summer at age twelve, and read Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (a book that present-day graduate students struggle to finish) at age thirteen. I mean, the guy got a PhD in experimental physics earlier in life than some people get their first jobs, so clearly he was kind of into the school thing.

Albert Einstein didn't initially have big aspirations; he just wanted to teach. But being a young German immigrant in Switzerland, he couldn't get a position at the local universities. Eventually, with the help of a friend's father, he got a job at a patent office, a position mind-numbingly dull enough for him to sit around all day and imagine wacky theories about physics—theories that would soon flip the world on its head. In 1905 he published his theory of relativity, which launched him to worldwide fame. He left the patent office. Presidents and heads of state suddenly wanted to hang out with him. Everything was Gucci.

In his long life, Einstein would go on to revolutionize physics multiple times, escape the Nazis, warn the United States of the oncoming necessity (and danger) of nuclear weapons, and be the subject of a very famous photo in which he's sticking out his tongue.

But today, we also know him for the many excellent internet quotes that he never actually said.

Since the time of (real) Newton, physics had been based upon the idea that everything could be measured in terms of time and space. For example, my trash can is here next to me now. It has a particular position in space. If I pick it up and throw it across the room in a drunken rage, we could theoretically measure its location in space across time, determining all sorts of useful stuff like its velocity, trajectory, momentum, and how big a dent it will leave in the wall. These other variables are determined by measuring the trash can's movement across both time and space.

Time and space are what we call "universal constants." They are immutable. They are the metrics by which everything else is measured. If this sounds like common sense, it's because it is.

Then Einstein came along and said, "Fuck your common sense; you know nothing, Jon Snow," and changed the world. That's because Einstein proved that time and space are *not* universal constants. In fact, it turns out that our perceptions of time and space can change depending on the context of our observations. For example, what I experience as ten seconds, you could experience as five; and what I experience as a mile, you could theoretically experience as a few feet.

To anyone who has spent a significant amount of time on LSD, this conclusion might kind of make sense. But for the physics world at the time, it sounded like pure craziness.

Einstein demonstrated that space and time change depending on the observer—that is, they are *relative*. It is the *speed of light* that is the universal constant, the thing by which everything else must be measured. We are all moving, all the time, and the closer

we get to the speed of light, the more time "slows down" and the more space contracts.

For example, let's say you have an identical twin. Being twins, obviously you are the same age. The two of you decide to go on a little intergalactic adventure, and each of you gets into a separate spaceship. Your spaceship travels at a pokey 50 kilometers per second, but your twin's travels at close to the speed of light—an insane 299,000 kilometers per second. You both agree to travel around space for a while and find a bunch of cool stuff and then meet back up after twenty earth years have passed.

When you get home, something shocking has happened. You have aged twenty years, but your twin has hardly aged at all. Your twin has been "gone" for twenty earth years, yet on his spaceship, he experienced only about one year.

Yeah, "What the fuck?" is what I said, too.

As Einstein once said, "Dude, that doesn't even make sense." Except it does (and Einstein never said that).

The Einstein example is important because it shows how our assumption of what is constant and stable in the universe can be wrong, and those incorrect assumptions can have massive implications on how we experience the world. We assume that space and time are universal constants because that explains how *we* perceive the world. But it turns out that they are not universal constants; they are variables to some other, inscrutable, nonobvious constant. And that changes everything.

I belabor this headache-inducing explanation of relativity because I believe a similar thing is going on within our own psychology: what we believe is the universal constant of our experience is, in fact, not constant at all. And, instead, much of what we assume to be true and real is relative to our own perception.

Psychologists didn't always study happiness. In fact, for most of the field's history, psychology focused not on the positive, but on what fucked people up, what caused mental illness and emotional breakdowns, and how people should cope with their greatest pains.

It wasn't until the 1980s that a few intrepid academics started asking themselves, "Wait a second, my job is kind of a downer. What about what makes people *happy*? Let's study that instead!" And there was much celebration, because soon dozens of "happiness" books would proliferate on bookshelves, selling in the millions to bored, angsty middle-class people suffering existential crises.

One of the first things psychologists did when they started to study happiness was to organize a simple survey.[9] They took large groups of people and gave them pagers—remember, this was the 1980s and '90s—and whenever the pager went off, each person was to stop and write down the answers to two questions:

1. On a scale of 1–10, how happy are you at this moment?

2. What has been going on in your life?

The researchers collected thousands of ratings from hundreds of people from all walks of life, and what they discovered was both surprising and incredibly boring: pretty much everybody wrote "7" all the time. At the grocery store buying milk? Seven. Attending my son's baseball game? Seven. Talking to my boss about making a big sale to a client? Seven.

Even when catastrophic stuff happened—Mom got cancer; I missed a mortgage payment on the house; Junior lost an arm in a freak bowling accident—happiness levels would dip to the two-to-five range for a short period, and then, after a while, would return to seven.[10]

This was true for extremely positive events as well. Getting a fat bonus at work, going on dream vacations, marriages—after the event, people's ratings would shoot up for a short period of time and then, predictably, settle back in at around seven.

This fascinated researchers. Nobody is fully happy all the time, but similarly, nobody is fully unhappy all the time, either. It seems that humans, regardless of our external circumstances, live in a constant state of mild-but-not-fully-satisfying happiness. Put another way, things are pretty much always fine, but they could also always be better.[11]

Life is apparently nothing but bobbing up and down and around our level-seven happiness. And this constant "seven" that we're always coming back to plays a little trick on us, a trick that we fall for over and over again.

The trick is that our brain tells us, "You know, if I could just have a little bit more, I'd finally get to ten and stay there."

Most of us live much of our lives this way, constantly chasing our imagined ten.

You think, hey, to be happier, I'm going to need to get a new job; so you get a new job. And then, a few months later, you feel you'd be happier if you had a new house; so you get a new house. And then, a few months later, it's an awesome beach vacation; so you go on an awesome beach vacation. And while you're on the awesome beach vacation, you're like, you know what I *fucking need*? A goddamn piña colada! *Can't a fucker get a piña colada around here*?! So, you stress about your piña colada, believing that just one piña colada will get you to your ten. But then it's a second piña colada, and then a third, and then . . . well, you know how this turns out: you wake up with a hangover and are at a three.

It's like Einstein once advised, "Never get wasted on cocktails with sugar-based mixers—if you need to go on a bender, may I recommend some seltzer, or if you're a particularly rich fuck, perhaps a fine champagne?"

Each of us implicitly assumes that *we* are the universal constant of our own experience, that *we* are unchanging, and our experiences come and go like the weather.[12] Some days are good and sunny; other days are cloudy and shitty. The skies change, but *we* remain the same.

But this is not true—in fact, this is backward. Pain is the universal constant of life. And human perception and expectations warp themselves to fit a predetermined amount of pain. In other words, no matter how sunny our skies get, our mind will always imagine just enough clouds to be slightly disappointed.

This constancy of pain results in what is known as "the hedonic treadmill," upon which you run and run and run, chasing your imagined ten. But, no matter what, you always end up with a seven. The pain is always there. What changes is your *perception* of it. And as soon as your life "improves," your expectations shift, and you're back to being mildly dissatisfied again.

But pain works in the other direction, too. I remember when I got my big tattoo, the first few minutes were excruciatingly painful. I couldn't believe I'd signed up for eight hours of this shit. But by the third hour, I'd actually dozed off while my tattoo artist worked.

Nothing had changed: same needle, same arm, same artist. But my perception had shifted: the pain became normal, and I returned to my own internal seven.

This is another permutation of the Blue Dot Effect.[13] This is Durkheim's "perfect" society. This is Einstein's relativity with a psychological remix. It's the concept creep of someone who has never actually experienced physical violence losing their mind and redefining a few uncomfortable sentences in a book as "violence." It's the exaggerated sense that one's culture is being invaded and destroyed because there are now movies about gay people.

The Blue Dot Effect is everywhere. It affects all perceptions and judgments. Everything adapts and shapes itself to our slight dissatisfaction.

And *that* is the problem with the pursuit of happiness.

Pursuing happiness is a value of the modern world. Do you think Zeus gave a shit if people were happy? Do you think the God of the Old Testament cared about making people feel good? No, they were too busy planning to send swarms of locusts to eat people's flesh.

In the old days, life was hard. Famines and plagues and floods were constant. The majority of populations were enslaved or enlisted in endless wars, while the rest were slitting each other's throats in the night for this or that tyrant. Death was ubiquitous. Most people didn't live past, like, age thirty. And this was how things were for the majority of human history: shit and shingles and starvation.

Suffering in the pre-science world was not only an accepted fact; it was often celebrated. The philosophers of antiquity didn't see happiness as a virtue. On the contrary, they saw humans' capacity for self-denial as a virtue, because feeling good was just as dangerous as it was desirable. And rightly so—all it took was one jackass getting carried away and the next thing you knew, half the village had burned down. As Einstein famously didn't say, "Don't fuck around with torches while drinking or that shit will ruin your day."

It wasn't until the age of science and technology that happiness became a "thing." Once humanity invented the means to improve

life, the next logical question was "So what should we improve?" Several philosophers at the time decided that the ultimate aim of humanity should be to promote happiness—that is, to reduce pain.[14]

This sounded all nice and noble and everything on the surface. I mean, come on, who doesn't want to get rid of a little bit of pain? What sort of asshole would claim that *that* was a bad idea?

Well, *I* am that asshole, because it *is* a bad idea.

Because you can't get rid of pain—pain is the universal constant of the human condition. Therefore, the attempt to move away from pain, to protect oneself from *all* harm, can only backfire. Trying to eliminate pain only increases your sensitivity to suffering, rather than alleviating your suffering. It causes you to see dangerous ghosts in every nook, to see tyranny and oppression in every authority, to see hate and deceit behind every embrace.

No matter how much progress is made, no matter how peaceful and comfortable and happy our lives become, the Blue Dot Effect will snap us back to a perception of a certain amount of pain and dissatisfaction. Most people who win millions in the lottery don't end up happier in the long run. On average, they end up feeling the same. People who become paralyzed in freak accidents don't become unhappier in the long run. On average, they also end up feeling the same.[15]

This is because pain is the experience of life itself. Positive emotions are the temporary removal of pain; negative emotions the temporary augmentation of it. To numb one's pain is to numb all feeling, all emotion. It is to quietly remove oneself from living.

Or, as Einstein once brilliantly put it:

> *Just as a stream flows smoothly as long as it encounters no obstruction, so the nature of man and animal is such that we never really notice or become conscious of what is agreeable to our will; if we are to notice something, our will has to have been thwarted, has to have experienced a shock of some kind. On the other hand, all that opposes, frustrates and resists our will, that is to say all that is unpleasant and painful, impresses itself upon us instantly, directly and with great clarity. Just as we are conscious not of the healthiness of our whole body but only the little place where the shoe pinches, so we think not of the totality of our successful activities but of some insignificant trifle or other which continues to vex us.*[16]

Okay, that wasn't Einstein. It was Schopenhauer, who was also German and also had funny-looking hair. But the point is, not only is there no escaping the experience of pain, but pain *is* the experience.

This is why hope is ultimately self-defeating *and* self-perpetuating: no matter what we achieve, no matter what peace and prosperity we find, our mind will quickly adjust its expectations to maintain a steady sense of adversity, thus forcing the formulation of a new hope, a new religion, a new conflict to keep us going. We will see threatening faces where there are no threatening faces. We will see unethical job proposals where there are no unethical job proposals. And no matter how sunny our day is, we'll always find that one cloud in the sky.

Therefore, the pursuit of happiness is not only self-defeating but also impossible. It's like trying to catch a carrot hanging by a string tied to a stick attached to your back. The more you move forward, the more you have to move forward. When you make the carrot your end goal, you inevitably turn yourself into the means to get there. And by pursuing happiness, you paradoxically make it less attainable.

The pursuit of happiness is a toxic value that has long defined our culture. It is self-defeating *and* misleading. Living well does not mean avoiding suffering; it means suffering for the right reasons. Because if we're going to be forced to suffer by simply existing, we might as well learn how to suffer well.

The Only Choice in Life

In 1954, after nearly seventy-five years of occupation and twenty years of war, the Vietnamese finally kicked the French out of their country. This should have been an unequivocally good thing. The problem was that that pesky Cold War was going on—a global religious war between the capitalist, liberal Western powers and the Communist Eastern Bloc. And when it turned out that Ho Chi Minh, the guy who gave the French the ass-kicking, was a Communist, well, everyone kind of freaked out and thought this could spark World War III.

Terrified of a major war, a bunch of heads of state sat down at a fancy table somewhere in Switzerland and agreed to skip the nuclear annihilation part and go straight to slicing Vietnam in half. Why a country that didn't do anything to anybody deserved to be cut in half, don't ask me.[17] But apparently everyone decided that North Vietnam would be Communist, South Vietnam would be capitalist, and that's that. Everyone would live happily ever after.

(Okay, maybe not.)

Here was the problem. The Western powers put a man named Ngo Dinh Diem in charge of South Vietnam until proper elections could be held. At first, everyone seemed to like this Diem guy. A devout Catholic, he was French educated, had spent a number of years in Italy, and was multilingual. Upon meeting him, U.S. vice president Lyndon Johnson called Diem "the Winston Churchill of Asia." He was practically one of us!

Diem was also charismatic and ambitious. He impressed himself not only on the Western leaders but also on the former Vietnamese emperor. Diem declared confidently that he would be the one to finally bring democracy to Southeast Asia. And everyone believed him.

Well, that's not what happened. Within a year of taking power, Diem outlawed every political party in South Vietnam other than his own. And when it came time for the country to have its referendum, he put his own brother in charge of managing all electoral sites. And you'll never believe this, but Diem won the election! With a mind-blowing 98.2 percent of the vote!

It turned out this Diem guy was a total piece of shit. Ho Chi Minh, the leader of North Vietnam, was a total piece of shit, too, of course. And if I learned anything in college, it's that the first rule of geopolitical theory is that when you have two total pieces of shit living next door to each other, millions of people die.[18]

And just like that, Vietnam spiraled back into civil war.

I'd love to tell you something surprising about Diem, but he kind of became your run-of-the-mill tyrant. He filled his administration with family members and corrupt cronies. He and his family lived in opulent luxury while famine swept across the countryside, causing hundreds of thousands to either defect or starve to death. He was so smug and incompetent that the United States would have to gradually start intervening to prevent South Vietnam from imploding, thus starting what Americans now know as the Vietnam War.

But despite how fucking awful Diem was, the Western powers stood by their man. After all, he was supposed to be one of them,

a disciple of the liberal capitalist religion, standing strong against the Communist onslaught. It would take years and countless deaths for them to realize that Diem was not interested in their religion as much as his own.

As with many tyrants, one of Diem's favorite pastimes was oppressing and killing people he disagreed with. In this case, being a devout Catholic, Diem hated Buddhists. The problem was that Vietnam was roughly 80 percent Buddhist at the time, so that didn't exactly go over well with the population. Diem banned Buddhist-related banners and flags. He banned Buddhist holidays. He refused to provide governmental services to Buddhist communities. He raided and destroyed pagodas across the country, forcing hundreds of Buddhist monks into destitution.

The Buddhist monks organized and staged peaceful protests, but these were shut down of course. Then there were even bigger protests, so Diem made protesting illegal. When his police forces ordered the Buddhists to disperse, and the Buddhists refused, the police began to shoot protesters. At one peaceful march, they even hurled live grenades at groups of unarmed monks.

Western reporters knew this religious suppression was going on, but they were concerned primarily with the war with North Vietnam, so it wasn't really a priority. Few knew the extent of the problem, and fewer even bothered to cover the confrontations.

Then, on June 10, 1963, reporters received a cryptic message claiming that "something important" would occur the next day in Saigon, at a busy intersection just a few blocks from the presidential palace. The correspondents didn't think much of this, and most decided not to go. The next day, among a few journalists, only two photographers bothered to show up. One of them forgot his camera.

The other would win a Pulitzer Prize.

That day, a small turquoise car festooned with banners demanding religious freedom led a procession of a few hundred monks and nuns. The monks chanted. People stopped and watched the procession and then returned to their business. It was a busy street on a busy day. And by this point, Buddhist protests were nothing new.

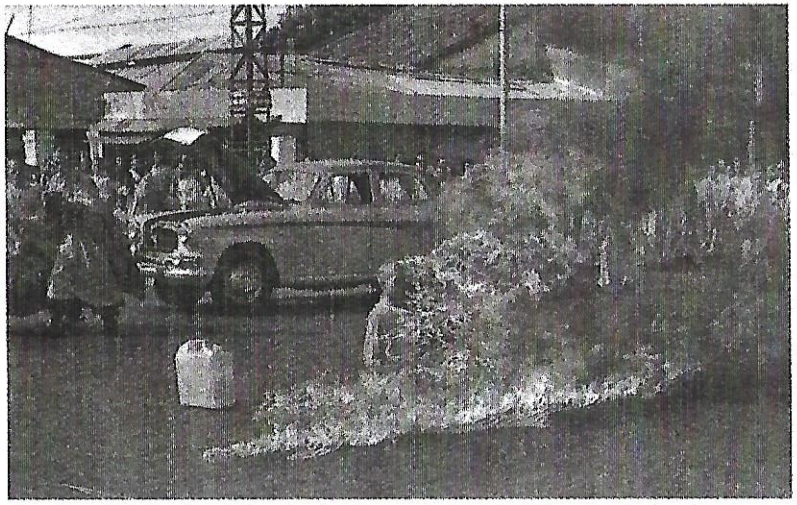
The procession reached the intersection in front of the Cambodian embassy and stopped, blocking all cross traffic. The group of monks fanned out into a semi-circle around the turquoise car, silently staring and waiting.

Three monks got out of the car. One placed a cushion on the street, at the center of the intersection. The second monk, an older man named Thich Quang Duc, walked to the cushion, sat down in the lotus position, closed his eyes, and began to meditate.

The third monk from the car opened the trunk and took out a five-gallon canister of gasoline, carried it over to where Quang Duc was sitting, and dumped the gasoline over his head, covering the old man in fuel. People covered their mouths. Some covered their faces as their eyes began to water at the fumes. An eerie silence fell over the busy city intersection. Passersby stopped walking. Police forgot what they were doing. There was a thickness in the air. Something important was about to happen. Everyone waited.

With gasoline-soaked robes and an expressionless face, Quang Duc recited a short prayer, reached out, slowly picked up a match, and without breaking his lotus position or opening his eyes, struck it on the asphalt and set himself on fire.

Instantly, a wall of flames rose around him. His body became engulfed. His robe disintegrated. His skin turned black. A repulsive odor filled the air, a mixture of burnt flesh and fuel and smoke. Wails and screams erupted throughout the crowd. Many fell to their knees, or lost their balance entirely. Most were just stunned, shocked and immobilized by what was occurring.



(Copyright AP Photo/Malcolm Browne. Used with permission.)

Yet, as he burned, Quang Duc remained perfectly still.

David Halberstam, a correspondent for the *New York Times*, later described the scene: "I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think. . . . As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him."[19]

News of Quang Duc's self-immolation quickly spread, and angered millions all across the planet. That evening, Diem gave a radio address to the nation during which he was audibly shaken by the incident. He promised to reopen negotiations with the Buddhist leadership in the country and to find a peaceful resolution.

But it was too late. Diem would never recover. It's impossible to say exactly what changed or how, but the air was somehow different, the streets more alive. With the strike of a match and the click of a camera shutter, Diem's invisible grip on the country had been weakened, and everyone could sense it, including Diem.

Soon, thousands of people poured into the streets in open revolt against his administration. His military commanders began to disobey him. His advisers defied him. Eventually, even the United States could no longer justify supporting him. President Kennedy soon gave his nod of approval to a plan by Diem's top generals to overthrow him.

The image of the burning monk had broken the levee, and a flood ensued.

A few months later, Diem and his family were assassinated.

Photos of Quang Duc's death went viral before "going viral" was a thing. The image became a kind of human Rorschach test, in which everyone saw their own values and struggles reflected back at them. Communists in Russia and China published the photo to rally their supporters against the capitalist imperialists of the West. Postcards were sold across Europe railing against the atrocities being committed in the East. Antiwar protesters in the United States printed the photo to protest American involvement in the war. Conservatives used the photo as evidence of the need for U.S. intervention. Even President Kennedy had to admit that "no news picture in history has generated so much emotion around the world."[20]

The photo of Quang Duc's self-immolation triggered something primal and universal in people. It goes beyond politics or religion. It taps into a far more fundamental component of our lived experience: the ability to endure extraordinary amounts of pain.[21] I can't even sit up straight at dinner for more than a few minutes. Meanwhile, this guy was fucking *burning alive* and he didn't even move. He didn't flinch. He didn't scream. He didn't smile or wince or grimace or even open his eyes to take one last look at the world he had chosen to leave behind.

There was a purity to his act, not to mention an absolutely stunning display of resolve. It is the ultimate example of mind over matter, of will over instinct.[22]

And despite the horror of it all, it somehow remains . . . inspiring.

In 2011, Nassim Taleb wrote about a concept he dubbed "antifragility." Taleb argued that just as some systems become *weaker* under stress from external forces, other systems *gain strength* under stress from external forces.[23]

A vase is fragile: it shatters easily. The classic banking system is fragile, as unexpected shifts in politics or the economy can cause it to break down. Maybe your relationship with your mother-in-law is fragile, as any and every thing you say will cause her to explode in a fiery plume of insults and drama. Fragile systems are like beautiful little flowers or a teenager's feelings: they must be protected at all times.

Then you have robust systems. Robust systems resist change well. Whereas a vase is fragile and breaks when you sneeze on it, an oil drum—now that's fucking robust. You can throw that shit around for weeks, and nothing will happen to it. Still the same old oil drum.

As a society, we spend most of our time and money taking fragile systems and trying to make them more robust. You hire a good lawyer to make your business more robust. The government passes regulations to make the financial system more robust. We institute rules and laws like traffic lights and property rights to make our society more robust.

But, Taleb says, there is a third type of system, and that is the "antifragile" system. Whereas a fragile system breaks down and a robust system resists change, the antifragile system *gains* from stressors and external pressures.

Start-ups are antifragile businesses: they look for ways to fail quickly and gain from those failures. Drug dealers are also antifragile: the crazier shit gets, the more fucked up people want to get. A healthy love relationship is antifragile: misfortune and pain make the relationship stronger rather than weaker.[24] Veterans often talk about how the chaos of combat builds and reinforces life-changing bonds between soldiers, rather than disintegrating those bonds.

The human body can go either way, depending on how you use it. If you get off your ass and actively seek out pain, the body is antifragile, meaning it gets stronger the more stress and strain you put on it. The breaking down of your body through exercise and physical labor builds muscle and bone density, improves circulation, and gives you a really nice butt. But if you avoid stress and pain (i.e., if you sit on your damn couch all day watching Netflix), your muscles will atrophy, your bones will become brittle, and you will degenerate into weakness.

The human mind operates on the same principle. It can be fragile or antifragile depending on how you use it. When struck by chaos and disorder, our minds set to work making sense of it all, deducing principles and constructing mental models, predicting future events and evaluating the past. This is called "learning," and it makes us better; it allows us to gain from failure and disorder.

But when we avoid pain, when we avoid stress and chaos and tragedy and disorder, we become fragile. Our tolerance for day-to-day setbacks diminishes, and our life must shrink accordingly for us to engage only in the little bit of the world we can handle at one time.

Because pain is the universal constant. No matter how "good" or "bad" your life gets, the pain will be there. And it will eventually

feel manageable. The question then, the *only* question, is: Will you engage it? Will you engage your pain or avoid your pain? Will you choose fragility or antifragility?

Everything you do, everything you are, everything you care about is a reflection of this choice: your relationships, your health, your results at work, your emotional stability, your integrity, your engagement with your community, the breadth of your life experiences, the depth of your self-confidence and courage, your ability to respect and trust and forgive and appreciate and listen and learn and have compassion.

If any of these things is fragile in your life, it is because you have chosen to avoid the pain. You have chosen childish values of chasing simple pleasures, desire, and self-satisfaction.

Our tolerance for pain, as a culture, is diminishing rapidly. And not only is this diminishment failing to bring us more happiness, but it's generating greater amounts of emotional fragility, which is why everything appears to be so fucked.

Which brings me back to Thich Quang Duc setting himself on fire and then just sitting there like a boss. Most modern Westerners know of meditation as a relaxation technique. You put on some yoga pants and sit in a warm, cushy room for ten minutes and close your eyes and listen to some soothing voice on your phone telling you that you're okay, everything's okay, everything's going to be fucking great, just follow your heart, blah, blah, blah.[25]

But actual Buddhist meditation is far more intense than simply de-stressing oneself with fancy apps. Rigorous meditation involves sitting quietly and mercilessly observing yourself. Every thought, every judgment, every inclination, every minute fidget and flake of emotion and trace of assumption that passes before your mind's eye is ideally captured, acknowledged, and then released back into the

void. And worst of all, there's no end to it. People always lament that they're "not good" at meditation. There is no getting good. That's the whole point. You are supposed to suck at it. Just accept the suckage. Embrace the suckage. Love the suckage.

When one meditates for long periods of time, all sorts of wacky shit comes up: strange fantasies and decades-old regrets and odd sexual urges and unbearable boredom and often crushing feelings of isolation and loneliness. And these things, too, must simply be observed, acknowledged, and then let go. They, too, shall pass.

Meditation is, at its core, a practice of antifragility: training your mind to observe and sustain the never-ending ebb and flow of pain and not to let the "self" get sucked away by its riptide. This is why everyone is so bad at something seemingly so simple. After all, you just sit on a pillow and close your eyes. How hard can it be? Why is it so difficult to summon the courage to sit down and do it and then stay there? It should be easy, yet everyone seems to be terrible at getting themselves to do it.[26]

Most people avoid meditation the same way a kid avoids doing homework. It's because they know what meditation really is: it's confronting your pain, it's observing the interiors of your mind and heart, in all their horror and glory.

I usually tap out after meditating for around an hour, and the most I ever did was a two-day silent retreat. By the end of that, my mind was practically screaming for me to let it go outside and play. That length of sustained contemplation is a strange experience: a mix of agonizing boredom dotted with the horrifying realization that any control you thought you had over your own mind was merely a useful illusion. Throw in a dash of uncomfortable emotions and memories (maybe a childhood trauma or two), and shit can get pretty raw.

Now imagine doing that all day, every day, *for sixty years*. Imagine

the steely focus and intense resolve of your inner flashlight. Imagine your pain threshold. Imagine your antifragility.

What's so remarkable about Thich Quang Duc is not that he chose to set himself on fire in political protest (although that is pretty damn remarkable). What's remarkable is the manner in which he did it: Motionless. Equanimous. At peace.

The Buddha said that suffering is like being shot by two arrows. The first arrow is the *physical* pain—it's the metal piercing the skin, the force colliding into the body. The second arrow is the *mental* pain, the meaning and emotion we attach to the being struck, the narratives that we spin in our minds about whether we deserved or didn't deserve what happened. In many cases, our mental pain is far worse than any physical pain. In most cases, it lasts far longer.

Through the practice of meditation, the Buddha said that if we could train ourselves to be struck only by the first arrow, we could essentially render ourselves invincible to any mental or emotional pain.

That, with enough practiced focus, with enough antifragility, the passing sensation of an insult or an object piercing our skin, or gallons of gasoline aflame over our body, would possess the same fleeting feeling as a fly buzzing across our face.

That while pain is inevitable, suffering is always a choice.

That there is always a separation between what we experience and how we interpret that experience.

That there's always a gap between what our Feeling Brain feels and what our Thinking Brain thinks. And in that gap, you can find the power to bear anything.

Children have a low tolerance for pain because the child's entire ethos revolves around the avoidance of pain. For the child, a failure to avoid pain is a failure to find meaning or purpose.

Therefore, even modest amounts of pain will cause the child to fall into fits of nihilism.

The adolescent has a higher pain threshold because the adolescent understands that pain is often a necessary trade-off to achieve his goals. The notion of enduring pain for some sort of future benefit thus allows the adolescent to incorporate some hardships and setbacks into his vision of hope: I will suffer through school so I can have a good career; I will deal with my obnoxious aunt so I can enjoy my holiday with the family; I will wake up at the ass-crack of dawn to work out because it will make me look sexy.

The problem arises when the adolescent feels that he got a bad bargain, when the pain exceeds his expectations and the rewards don't live up to the hype. This will cause the adolescent, like the child, to fall into a crisis of hope: I sacrificed so much and got so little back! What was the point? It will thrust the adolescent into the depths of nihilism and an unkindly visit with the Uncomfortable Truth.

The adult has an incredibly high threshold for pain because the adult understands that life, in order to be meaningful, requires pain, that nothing can or necessarily *should* be controlled or bargained for, that you can simply do the best you can do, regardless of the consequences.

Psychological growth is an escape from nihilism, a process of building more and more sophisticated and abstract value hierarchies in order to stomach whatever life throws our way.

Childish values are fragile. The moment the ice cream is gone, an existential crisis sets in—followed by a screaming shit fit. Adolescent values are more robust because they include the necessity of pain, but they are still susceptible to unexpected and/or tragic events. Adolescent values inevitably break down in extreme circumstances or over a long enough period of time.

Truly adult values are antifragile: they benefit from the unexpected. The more fucked up a relationship gets, the more useful honesty becomes. The more terrifying the world is, the more important it is to summon up the courage to face it. The more confusing life becomes, the more valuable it is to adopt humility.

These are the virtues of a post-hope existence, the values of true adulthood. They are the North Star of our minds and our hearts. No matter the turbulence or chaos taking place on earth, they stand above it all, untouched, always shining, always guiding us through the darkness.

Pain Is Value

Many scientists and techno enthusiasts believe that one day we will develop the capabilities to "cure" death. Our genetics will be modified and optimized. We will develop nanobots that monitor and eradicate anything that could medically threaten us. Biotechnology will enable us to replace and restore our bodies in perpetuity, thus allowing us to live forever.

It sounds like science fiction, but some even believe that we could achieve this technology in our lifetime.[27]

The idea of removing the possibility of death, of overcoming our biological fragility, of alleviating all pain, is incredibly exciting on the surface. But I think it could also be a psychological disaster in the making.

For one, if you remove death, you remove any scarcity from life. And if you remove scarcity, you remove the ability to determine value. Everything will seem equally good or bad, equally worthy or unworthy of your time and attention, because . . . well, you would have infinite time and attention. You could spend a hundred years watching the same TV show, and it wouldn't matter.

You could let your relationships deteriorate and fall away because, after all, those people are going to be around forever—so why bother? You could justify every indulgence, every diversion, with a simple "Well, it's not like it's going to kill me," and get on with it.

Death is psychologically necessary because it creates stakes in life. There is something to lose. You don't know what something is worth until you experience the potential to lose it. You don't know what you're willing to struggle for, what you're willing to give up or sacrifice.

Pain is the currency of our values. Without the pain of loss (or potential loss), it becomes impossible to determine the value of anything at all.

Pain is at the heart of all emotion. Negative emotions are caused by experiencing pain. Positive emotions are caused by alleviating pain. When we avoid pain and make ourselves more fragile, the result is our emotional reactions will be wildly disproportional to the importance of the event. We will flip our shit when our burger comes with too many leaves of lettuce. We will brim with self-importance after watching a bullshit YouTube video telling us how righteous we are. Life will become an ineffable roller coaster, sweeping our hearts up and down as we scroll up and down on our touchscreen.

The more antifragile we become, the more graceful our emotional responses are, the more control we exercise over ourselves, and the more principled our values. Antifragility is therefore synonymous with growth and maturity. Life is one never-ending stream of pain, and to grow is not to find a way to avoid that stream but, rather, to dive into it and successfully navigate its depths.

The pursuit of happiness is, then, an avoidance of growth, an avoidance of maturity, an avoidance of virtue. It is treating ourselves and our minds as a means to some emotionally giddy end.

It is sacrificing our consciousness for feeling good. It's giving up our dignity for more comfort.

The ancient philosophers knew this. Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics spoke of a life not of happiness, but of character, developing the ability to sustain pain and make the appropriate sacrifices—as that's really what life was in their time: one long, drawn-out sacrifice. The ancient virtues of bravery, honesty, and humility are all different forms of practicing antifragility: they are principles that gain from chaos and adversity.

It wasn't until the Enlightenment, the age of science and technology and the promise of never-ending economic growth, that thinkers and philosophers conceived of the idea summed up by Thomas Jefferson as "the pursuit of happiness." As the Enlightenment thinkers saw science and wealth alleviate poverty, starvation, and disease from the population, they mistook this *improvement* of pain to be the *elimination* of pain. Many public intellectuals and pundits continue to make this mistake today: they believe that growth has liberated us from suffering, rather than merely transmuting that suffering from a physical form to a psychological form.[28]

What the Enlightenment *did* get right is the idea that, on average, some pain is better than others. All else being equal, it is better to die at ninety than at twenty. It's better to be healthy than it is to be sick. It's better to be free to pursue your own goals than to be forced into servitude by others. In fact, you could define "wealth" in terms of how desirable your pain is.[29]

But we seem to have forgotten what the ancients knew: that no matter how much wealth is generated in the world, the quality of our lives is determined by the quality of our character, and the quality of our character is determined by our relationship to our pain.

The pursuit of happiness plunges us head-first toward nihilism and frivolity. It leads us toward childishness, an incessant and intolerant desire for something *more*, a hole that can never be filled, a thirst that can never be quenched. It is at the root of corruption and addiction, of self-pity and self-destruction.

When we pursue pain, we are able to *choose* what pain we bring into our lives. And this choice makes the pain meaningful—and therefore, it is what makes life feel meaningful.

Because pain is the universal constant of life, the opportunities to grow from that pain are constant in life. All that is required is that we don't numb it, that we don't look away. All that is required is that we engage it and find the value and meaning in it.

Pain is the source of all value. To numb ourselves to our pain is to numb ourselves to anything that matters in the world.[30] Pain opens up the moral gaps that eventually become our most deeply held values and beliefs.

When we deny ourselves the ability to feel pain for a purpose, we deny ourselves the ability to feel any purpose in our life at all.